

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EPISTOLARY NARRATIVE IN THE NIGERIAN SHORT STORY

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the significance of the epistolary short story within the cultural backgrounds of the various settings in the stories selected for the study. The short stories deployed in this essay are Karen King-Aribisala's 'Dear Okonkwo,' Dul Johnson's 'Cinders of the Volcano,' Kasimma Chinelo Okani's 'A Letter to the Dead,' and Chuma Nwokolo's 'The Ransom Letters of Sisi Eko.' The methodology adopted in this study is textual and qualitative deployed through an in-depth study of the selected stories and a literary analysis of the data obtained thereafter. This study adopts the new formalism critical approach with the belief that literature should be studied as a combination of the artistic content and the society that produces it. This essay finds that the Nigerian epistolary short story is significant in the promotion and enablement of necromancy, provision of emotional and psychological therapy and promotion of moral rectitude in the society.

Keywords: ●Cultural Affirmation ●Short Story ●Emotional and Psychological therapy ●Necromancy

Introduction

The epistolary technique is one of the many approaches to narrating a story. The technique involves the deployment of a letter or strings of letters to tell a story. Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz posit that the epistolary is

a narrative in the form of letters. Popular in the 18th century, the epistolary device was notably successful in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa Halowe* (1747-48). The form enabled Richardson conveniently to reveal his heroine's private thoughts and feelings while advancing the plot. The reader, in the role of literary voyeur could then see the shifting points of view without the intrusion of the author. (79)

The excerpt above, like many other entries in literary dictionaries, associates epistolary writing to the novel essentially. Although it says it is a narrative in the form of letters, it goes ahead to give examples with Richardson's two novels. The epistolary form of narrative, though made popular by the novel, exists also in the short story, even though it is less deployed by writers. Its uncommonness is partly responsible for the current enterprise which chiefly, attempts to show its existence and significance, especially in portraying the thoughts and actions of the cultural aspects of the characters' lives within the society. In the short story genre, the technique requires a more tactical handling because of the smallness of space.

The short story is well disposed to illustrating themes that effectively portray the social-cultural experiences of man within its short space. A brief examination of the features of the short story which follows sheds light on its suitability in highlighting the cultural significance of the short story to man. By its features of tight narrative framework, conciseness and pointedness, brevity and authorial distancing, successful short story writers often highlight, and effectively too, curious human predicaments in their narratives. The genre is credited with possessing a tight narrative framework which enhances the aesthetic value of the short story. Valerie Shaw says of this feature thus:

[It]Combines a tight narrative framework with the apparently casual effect of colloquial dialogue, or enhancing a sense of organic unity by highlighting a single sense of detail which seems gratuitous, but which yet has a tightness that makes it indispensable, part of a design and at the same time entirely natural and unforced. (24)

The short story is indeed marked by a tight narrative framework which gives a measure of urgency, leading to a speedy revelation of the experience intended to be wrought off.

The short story is an under studied genre. There are not many critical works on the epistolary short story in particular. However, Audrey Giboux in an essay on Edith Wharton's epistolary short stories, published in *the Journal of the Short Story in English*, makes some pungent statements on the epistolary short story thus:

Wharton emphasizes the need to reduce the narration to a single focalizer: "The effect of compactness and instantaneity sought in the short story is attained mainly by the observance of two 'unities'—the old traditional one of time, and that other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes" (43). The use of the letter motif is a good example of this quest for narrative efficiency. Wharton resorts to this device in three stories—whose characters are all writers—and which connect the epistolary motif with a reflection on literature, a clear attempt on Wharton's part to examine letter writing both as a narrative process and a literary topic. (1)

Wharton, in her essay, pushes the case for the epistolary short story in that in aid of the brevity of the short story, the letter motif assists in achieving compactness as well as a presentation of the narrative through a single narrative point of view. She deploys this motif in many of her own short stories to a beautiful end.

In one of her analysis of Wharton's short story—"The Muse", Giboux demonstrates that the epistolary short story functions as a revealer of character and feelings. The argument is analytically presented thus:

The letter motif is central in "The Muse's Tragedy," the opening story of the collection *The Greater Inclination*, published in 1899. The main character, Danyers, is a young critic who has written an essay on Vincent Rendle, a deceased poet. The canonized poet happens to have dedicated his verse to a married woman called Mary Anerton, who goes by the bucolic name of

“Silvia” in his works. Danyers and Anerton first develop a friendship, based on their common admiration for the poet and on an intellectual collaboration in the writing of the definitive critical study of Rendle’s aesthetic—or at least until Danyers grows jealous of the past love between the poet and his muse... The missive plays an epiphanic and subversive role that sheds new light on the whole story: Anerton reveals she was never loved by Rendle “as a woman” (62) and that their relationship was a mere pretext for his poetic creation; with Danyers, she was only trying to find out if another man could sincerely love her for herself and not only as an Egeria.

From the foregoing, an epistolary short story is able to reveal a character through his or her feelings and words as put in the letter. This is exactly what Wharton achieves in “The Muse’s Theory” through Anerton’s revelation in a letter that she was not in love with Danyers, contrary to his long-held belief.

Clare Beams, in her essay ‘Dear, Dear: The Intimacy of Letters’ posits that the epistolary letter gives the reader a sense of intimacy with the character. Clare writes thus:

In epistolary-form stories, this sense of intimacy is part of what writers are after. Actual handwriting is of course not in play in a typeset story or novel, but the sense of a written voice is. Fictional letters, when done well (and it is so very hard to do them well), give the reader a wonderful little jolt of recognition—a sense that we’re actually meeting the character who’s written the letter for ourselves, unmediated. In stories that present us with letters from multiple characters, we also get the pleasure of assembling the narrative from these parts, arbitrating amongst these voices. As Ross Mc Meekin shows in his great review of Ashley Davidson’s epistolary story “A Daring Undertaking,” a story told in letters lets us feel that we’re snooping and then making up our own minds.

The epistolary short story facilitates a close relationship between the reader and the writing character through shared knowledge and intimacy. It is, therefore, a sub-genre that enhances character revelation and an effective plot development.

Our present enterprise, however, is to examine the various ways by which the epistolary narration has shown significance in the cultural lives of the people as individuals and the society at large. A close reading of the selected stories reveals a line of interconnected functions of the Nigerian epistolary short story as the analysis that follows will show. The short stories selected for this essay are King-Aribisla’s ‘Dear Okonkwo’ in *Bitter Leafing Woman*, Johnson’s ‘Cinders of the Volcano’ in *Shadows and Ashes*, Okani’s ‘A Letter to the Dead’ in *Housemates* and Nwokolo’s ‘The Ransom Letters of Sisi Eko’ in *How to Spell Naija in 100 Short Stories*. The Nigerian epistolary short story is significant by being necromantic, therapeutic and judicial in upholding moral rectitude in the service of the cultural lives of the people.

The epistolary short story enables effective therapy to the traumatised and hurting character when it provides an avenue for the release of pent-up feelings. The grieving character puts his or her thoughts and feelings in a letter which are usually and primarily meant for the addressee. But the reader emotionally gets involved as he or she reads the letter. This is the pitiable case of Angela in Johnson's 'Cinders of the Volcano.' In the story, Angela is raped by her father. She is in deep anguish and contemplates suicide. She feels very filthy, eternally violated and inconsolable in her hurt. She wishes that the incestuous incident would remain forever unknown to anyone else, but she is dying from the pressure of being unable to share her experience with anybody—including her mother as the threat of death from her father, should she ever tell her mother, restraints her from unveiling the gruesome experience to her. Being one without sisters, and one who is under intense pressure to unburden her heart by sharing her hurt, she decides to write a letter to her best friend—herself, the victim.

What results from her choice is an effective expiation of her weighty heart. The popular saying that a problem shared is half solved plays out in her decision to put her pains on paper to her best friend, who in this case, is herself. The letter, as a consequence, is a detailed, no holds barred blow by blow narration of the entire incident of incestuous rape. This done, there is a great measure of relief, as she feels she has revealed by confession, her sin against the cultural norm of her society. Even though she is a victim, she feels herself enmeshed in the discomfort of the cultural taboo that confronts her. Her action can be seen as therapeutic as it is meant to heal her of the burden of cultural shock. It must be told that in Africa, incest is a sin that no ear, no matter how intimate with the family must hear. As an unconfessed sin, incest is capable of holding its victim in bondage for life. What Johnson has done here with the epistolary form is it to help the character shed her burden through the detailed letter she writes to her confidante and best friend with whom she can share every secret, even though she is the receiver of the letter that contains the gruesome details of her violated self.

Johnson's craft in this short story demonstrates the endless possibilities inherent in the short story genre. The beauty of his rendition runs through the plot and climaxes with the revelation that the writer of the letter, the hurting Angela is the ultimate receiver when the letter/story closes thus:

The water had turned bloody. Lord! This man has violated me! I jumped out of the tub and bolted the door. No, I must spare Mum not only the shame, but the pain also. Angela, what word would I have used to tell my mum what happened? My own father! Angela, my father RAPED ME. I cannot say more, Angela. I cannot say more. Pray for me Angela.

Pray for me.

The shadow of your friend

“The shadow of yourself”

Angela! (93)

Johnson artistically unveils that which he held back from the reader from the beginning. It comes without any foregrounding that the writer is writing to herself until he begins a count down from 'pray for me' that ends in a surprise that the letter is indeed written by Angela to same Angela. But having poured out the pains in her heart, she has unburdened her soul and certainly feels better. Johnson's technique in this ingenuous piece marked by an adroit use of language and the surprise device sets this epistolary short story apart from many others, and demonstrates the significance of the epistolary short story as therapeutic art.

King-Aribisla explores the significance of the epistolary short story as an inquisition, a necromantic exercise where answers are provided by the dead to questions raised by the living. The art of necromancy is a regular cultural practice in Africa during which deceased persons are asked questions bothering essentially on the cause of their death where uncertainties arise. In the Afemai region of Edo State, Nigeria, for instance, through certain rituals, the spirit of the dead answers the questions by physically mobilising the men-agents of the gods assembled by the officiating priest for all observers to see. Where it is established that the deceased died of unnatural causes, his or her spirit is invited by invocation to show the killer or killers. The men-agents of the god of justice who bear upon their heads, a well knit symbolic casket made of palm fronds often tear down the narrow alleys of the unplanned settlements to strike repeatedly, the pointed end of the fronds against the wall of the house of the accused killer of the responding deceased. It is a part of the culture of the people and it serves the purpose of providing justice to those who feel aggrieved over the killing of their relations.

In King-Aribisala's 'Dear Okonkwo,' a similar exercise takes place. But, in this story, there is no response from the deceased, perhaps because of the mode of the inquisition. No agents of the gods are employed as this inquisition appears to be conducted by agents of the legal system, as the narrator tends to portray. 'Dear Okonkwo.' is a meta-fictional piece, in which the narrator engages Okonkwo the protagonist and fictional character in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in a necromantic trial/inquest. The narrator accuses Okonkwo of an over demonstrated masculinity and male dominance and oppression of the female folk and informs him of a changing world addressing gender imbalance, even though in Nigeria, there is some resistance to this change. The hard posture of the narrator, who deploys a harsh tone and plays the multiple roles of judge and lawyer in the story right from the opening to the close of the story shows that Okonkwo is before an unfriendly judge and lawyer and should, therefore, not expect a friendly or favourable judgment. Okonkwo is severely berated for subduing his feminine part and promoting only the masculine side of him as the society is dominated by males. The narrator symbolises this male power with yam seen as a masculine crop and taunts Okonkwo as a failure because he relied on his maleness in his actions while alive in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. King-Aribisala adopts the rhetorical question technique to hint at Okonkwo's expected responses, but proceeds to hit the respondent harder with more questions and answers to thoroughly nail him. The necromantic session, initiated by the narrator through a letter essentially exists to intimate Okonkwo with cultural developments in the society, which are also shared by the reader as statements on the struggles for the empowerment of women in the society.

The writer and originator of the letter considers it necessary to inform Okonkwo of the cultural development in male/female relationships when King-Aribisala writes thus:

Since you were last here, much has happened in this country. Of course, colonialism and the British colonists have gone for good and Nigeria is an independent nation. But some things are still falling apart. And at the very centre is you. The same old yam and yamming. You see Okonkwo, your brand of colonialism (I am talking about male/female relationships) is still going on today. It has to do with male hegemony and patriarchy and with there being little or no female power... Meanwhile, female retaliation crimes are on the rise. Women, Okonkwo are angry with men and what men have done to them. All this is to explain to you another reason why I'm writing this letter, Okonkwo. (3)

This story takes a swipe at the culture of male domination. It exposes the weaknesses of a society that places the female folk under foot. The writer advocates a society where both the feminine and masculine genders would cooperate to ensure a balanced and tempered society. The writer observes that an excessive show of masculinity is responsible for the fall of Okonkwo, who veiled his feminine-feeling part to partake of the killing of Ikemefuna, as he battled hard to avoid the trappings of failure demonstrated by his father, Unoka who was rated a female.

The writer says further in justifying the need for gender balancing and the subsequent development of society that

I just feel that you should have sort of balanced your masculine side with your feminine side; but I fear that you had successfully yammed your feminine side out of existence. Don't sulk, Okonkwo. I think that each of us has both feminine and masculine attributes and we've got to reconcile them both with each other, within ourselves... Seriously speaking, Okonkwo, if we don't accommodate our differences then it's going to be for us like it was for you—wahala, trouble, like we've never seen before. I say this of course, with female humility. To me, your society, as epitomised by you, was male. (4-5)

Aribisala's call for gender balancing in the society is a clarion call for an alteration of a male-centered and dominated society. She uses necromancy in the epistolary form to express her views through the actions of Okonkwo to highlight the unpleasant consequences that leave society in deep trouble. By this medium, epistolary short story, she is able to sensitise the reader, not only Okonkwo, but all who read the story on the need for gender balancing in the society.

“Dear Okonkwo” is one of the foremost Nigerian short stories to be rendered as meta-fiction. It is a welcome relief from the usual Nigerian short story cast in the mould of realism. It would, therefore, task readers who are new to the features of meta-fiction. However, the gripping effect of the story lies in the free interrogation by a prosecutor who also sits in

judgement over a hapless suicide-committing Okowonko, a character in a fictive novel written by some other writer. One can only expect a harsh sentencing from the harsh bench.

Okani in 'A Letter to the Dead,' engages in necromancy with a view to proffering a solution to a problem. The story affirms the belief in the efficacy of necromancy as a cultural guide of individuals and the society. In the story, Jemila is about to marry her long-standing fiancé, Ekanem when tragedy strikes. Aisha, her twin sister comes visiting. Aisha persuades her to accompany her to a near-by shop to buy farm-fresh yoghurt, claiming that since they came to the world together, they must also go out together. Her sister, Jemila, is perplexed at this and refuses to go with her. Aisha goes out alone to buy her yoghurt only to be struck down by a vehicle. She dies and is buried. Thereafter, Jemila has some misunderstanding with Ekanem and is not sure whether to marry him or not. She writes to her late sister, recounting the entire incident, which also intimates the reader with the events, before proceeding to seek her sister's counsel on whether to proceed with her marriage to Ekanem or not. She concludes her letter by expressing her love and imploring her sister to provide her with the needed advice when she writes thus:

Aisha, I miss you. I am in a serious dilemma here. It has been two weeks since you died, I cannot help myself still. Please tell me what to do. You have been my closest friend since I was born and I cannot do without your company even now that you are gone. I do not know who else to talk to. Please, help me. I have seen you once and I can see you again if you want me to. Please, help me out. (125)

Okani's art in this story speaks volumes of the cultural dispositions of Nigerians. Despite the fact that the twins are devout Muslims, they believe in the communion of the living and the dead as well as the inseparability of twins. Aisha's insistence on her sister's company to buy yoghurt is an invitation to death as she has fore-knowledge of her death, and is in dire need of her sister's companionship to the great beyond. The epistolary form, in this case, reveals the cultural beliefs of the characters, even though their religion forbids them. It adroitly reveals their true minds through the use of the letter technique and the art of necromancy.

Nwokolo's "The Love Letters of Sisi Eko" in *How to Spell Naija in 100 Short Stories* is a rendition of the story of a kidnap that goes sour through a string of short letters written by the wife of the kidnap victim and the kidnap kingpin in the course of negotiating the ransom. Through her letters, we read the responses of the leader of the kidnap gang, and by her interpolation, the reader of the story has access to the full narrative. Nwokolo's epistolary short story stresses the need for justice in the society as a necessary component of the cultural disposition of a people towards upholding moral rectitude in the society. Despite Sisi Eko's initial commitment to the release of her husband and her desperate moves to ensure his release, she is mindful of her status as a married woman and her cultural commitment to it in a society that is culturally conscious. This is evident in one of the encounters with the errand boy who bears the letters from the kidnap gang. The boy is to identify her in a moving mass of bodies in a busy street by calling out the culturally detestable word 'ashawo.' Sisi Eko registers her displeasure and rage at the word she is to be identified with, reminding the

criminal gang that she is a respectably married woman who should not be insulted, even though she desperately wants her husband released by his kidnappers. A part of the letter reads thus:

My husband is a good and a faithful man. We don't have any children and he is all I have. As you instructed, I will stroll down Toyin Street at exactly 9 pm, wearing a yellow head tie, and I will give this letter to the first beggar boy that comes carrying a yellow bowl and calls me 'Ashawo'. But please now, can you choose another password next time? I don't see the point of being insulted for nothing's sake. (29)

To be called 'Ashawo,' a derogatory term, which addresses her as a prostitute, draws Sisi Eko's ire as she sees it as an insult. This is because, culturally speaking, in Africa, it is despicable for a woman to be identified as a prostitute, and even worse for a married woman to be so addressed even for the sake of her husband's release. She takes exemption to it, despite her tasking situation. Nwokolo depicts the societal resentment of prostitution, seen as a cultural taboo, by Sisi Eko's timely rejection of the word even as a temporary password. Nwokolo writes to ensure that the society keeps a proven commitment to moral rectitude.

In her second letter, the next day to the kidnap gang, she also shows resentment to the new password— 'Mugu,' which the kidnappers believe is a better password than 'Ashawo.' But she, again, shows her disapproval when she writes back thus:

By the way, Mugu is not much better than Ashawo. I will answer Mugu this time, but for next time, let the password be Sisi Eko. This is not a good home-training you are giving your apprentices; I have to tell you: teaching them to be calling respectable women bad names like that. (31)

Sisi Eko goes beyond the preservation of her own dignity to show interest in the wellbeing of the society at large. She calls the kidnappers to order, as she charges them to stop corrupting the youth, who will certainly grow in the vices they are being taught, especially in addressing respectable women in the society with disrespectful names. The concern for sensitivity for cultural realities, as it affects the need to uphold moral rectitude in the society, in this letter goes beyond the kidnap encounter. A woman who is hysterical and wants the release of her husband would overlook the issue of transient nomenclature. But the writer uses the story to dramatise the presence of cultural awareness among the characters in the story. The characters are, therefore, stylized, created to fit into the writer's need to illustrate the theme of his narrative even though their actions may look unbelievable. He however, succeeds in showing the cultural awareness, beliefs and practices of the people who inhabit the locale of his story—Eko.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the ability of the epistolary short story to comment on the cultural aspects of the society through its features of brevity and pointedness. The essay has also extended the epistolary technique, often considered an appendage of the novel to the

short story and exemplified its significance in cultural exposition by its successful inquests in necromancy, emotional and psychological therapy and preservation of the cultural beliefs of a people. The writers whose works have been examined in this essay, have shown a good mastery of the epistolary technique in their renditions.

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