

Deconstruction and Construction—A Narrative Study of Tutuola's Novels

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Abstracts—Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, as one of the first generation of native African writers who write literature works in English, has received much attention since the very beginning of his publishing of works. This article explores the narrative strategies used by Tutuola in the process of constructing his cultural identity, which was partly neglected by critics. The special narrative and expressive cultural identity, narrative mode and identity establishment, and nostalgic representation were just Tutuola's strategies that formed the procedure of the deconstruction of colonial power and the construction of national identity.

Index Terms—narrative, deconstruction, identity, Tutuola

African literature is much more complicated because of the complexities of the history and various languages used in creating literature works, as well as the writers from different culture background. The literature created in English by native African writers has an obvious splitting characteristic, which has raised theoretical argument constantly on the language and identity of African literature. African literature written in English has the natural connection with some other English literature, so it is easy for it to absorb nutrients from English literature and to spread out of Africa to the world because of its language properties. But at the same time it is inevitably branded with federal literature, which blurs its cultural identity. Amos Tutuola (1920-1997), as one of the first generation of native African writers who write in English, had been controversially evaluated since the first publication of his work. The focus of the controversy is whether Tutuola expanded the extension of African literature. He raised the sharp issues, like who is qualified to tell stories in Africa? What language should be used? How to tell? (Booker, 1998, Owomoyela, 1999, Kamau & Mitambo, 2016). This article will focus on the narrative strategies of Tutuola's works and explore three ways he used to complete the construction of his cultural identity. These three methods developed almost in parallel and interacted with each other. All of them reflected the deconstruction of the colonial power and the construction of the national cultural identity.

Identity has been a hot issue in international cultural studies along with the concept of globalization since the end of the 20th century, and the core is the issue of self-identification. Regarding the concept of "identity", academics have multiple definitions, such as "identity" or "cultural self-identification" and so on. British scholar Stuart Hall, in his article *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, defined "cultural identity" as "a shared culture" and the collective "a true self" under the framework of a stable and continuous meaning, which reflects the common historical experience and the common cultural code, and provides the collective with a changing historical experience (Zhen H.J., 2018, p.11). Homi Bhabha distinguished two different ways of expressing national identity—instruction and performance (Sheng A.F., 2011). In the process of national narrative, there is continuous repetitive and cumulative instruction time, and also a break between the performance strategies. Through the rupture the conceptual ambiguity of modern society becomes the field for national narrative. This article just explores the narrative strategies in Tutuola's works and believes that his works embody a relatively strong introspective cultural identity.

I. NARRATIVE AND EXPRESSION OF THE CULTURAL IDENTITY

Cultural identity usually refers to a series of characteristics that are unique to a particular culture and inherent to a particular nation as well. For the vast majority of Africans, the tribal identity precedes the national identity. The cultural identity discussed in this article also mainly refers to the tribal identity, which will no longer be specifically modified.

Tutuola was from Yoruba, one of the three main tribes of Nigeria. His mother tongue was Yoruba. He received no much education in school. He wrote many novels in English that were simple, naive, and even somewhat substandard. The English used in Tutuola's works was one of the main reasons for the critics to dispute hotly.

My name is Adebisi. I am an African huntress from Nigeria. My father was a hunter too. He hunted in the jungle and killed thousands of wild animals. My father was so brave that he went deep into the jungle where all other hunters were afraid to go. They respected him so much for his bravery that they made him chief of the village.....My father's eyes filled with tears when he said this. I was very sorry for him..... "You are very young, my daughter", He said. "But you go to the jungle because you want to help your people. We thank you, brave huntress. May you return safe and sound to us."

.....When they heard these words, four of the hunters came forward.

....."Adebisi," they cried. "We are your thankful brothers." (Tutuola, A., 1961, p5)

In the above description, there are some obviously irregularities in vocabulary, grammar and writing logics, and such kind of expressions are filled with Tutuola's works. Robert Elliot Fox(1998) mentioned in Tutuola's memoir interview

that when Tutuola sent the manuscript to *Ijala*, a literary magazine edited by a group of colleges students, these students thought the content of the manuscript was acceptable, but there were so many language errors. So they began to modify Tutuola's English expression, based on their knowledge and language rules. They concluded that a large number of English in Tutuola's works were improperly or incorrectly used, so they had to change to the proper English. However, they were stopped by the magazine consultant who arrived in time and changed it back to the original state. Because the consultant believed that only such an expression can better match the content of the work. According to Robert's recollection, Tutuola admitted that he had used the grammar and part of the word formation of his tribal language Yoruba to complete the writing. Tutuola produced a kind of "converging culture" through the fusion of two language structures to highlight the differences between the two different cultures. When his works are placed in a broader context, the appropriation of this language rewrote and reformed a purposed culture in author's mind, which has the characteristics of cultural identity.

Meanwhile in Tutuola's narrative, the narrators take either direct imitation or indirect simple description. The tense in the sentence does not follow the grammatical principle, but is changed according to his own culture habit, thus blurred the boundary between the discourse of the characters and the narrators. Just like Genette (1990) pointed that the effect of the arbitrary change of tense and the way of imitation is to tell the story in the narrator's own words. But he is neither completely involved nor completely outside. By appropriating and deconstructing the blurring of narrative discourse boundaries and the inherent forms of English, Tutuola had formed a rebellious language extension in his works. Obviously, during the colonial period, the discourse power and cultural norms of the colonists were absolutely privileged and controlled by the colonized countries, and Tutuola's deconstruction of language itself had profound implications for the expression of the cultural identity of African writers.

Although the critics from both western world and African continent have different comments on Tutuola since his first work was publicized, it is an undisputable fact that Tutuola had created his own style. Ugandan writer Taban lo Liyong called Tutuola a "genius". Chinua Achebe, the father of modern literature, also praised Tutuola's novels. Achebe once recalled that when he was teaching at an American university in the 1970s, an African girl who was receiving college education in the United States questioned Tutuola in a condemning tone because she thought Tutuola's work was naive and rude, not what a patriotic Nigerian should show to the world. (Arana R. V., 2002)

If African literature is not placed in the context of the post-colonial era, only the language alone is discussed, the cultural and social functions of language appropriation discussed here have no any meaning. Tutuola just broke and rewritten the language by destroying the traditional meaning and grammatical rules of the language set by the English world, so as to complete the subversion of the English subject and the reconstruction of the cultural identity. Although Tutuola's original intention of creation had not been determined in academic fields, the objective effects had been achieved, which was the deconstruction of the authority of the English language and formulation of the new rules in accordance with the language of his own culture.

To some extent, the creative idea of Tutuola's literature works seem to be unrepeatable, but the core spirit of his novels has been extended by other native writers. Ben Okri, also a Nigerian writer, has absorbed Tutuola's elements, especially in his novels of *Stars of New Curfew*, *The Hunger Road*. From the perspective of Tutuola's attention taken from the western world, Tutuola deconstructed the authority of English in his native language and expanded the connotation of the work with a mixed narrative language. There was no doubt that the culture itself had been brought from the margins to the vision of world culture.

II. NARRATIVE MODE AND ESTABLISHMENT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Tutuola mostly took an internal point of view in his novels, using the first person "I" as a narrator to create a combination of freedom and grotesque in the imaginative world. The protagonist's narrative would neither be simply regard as an autobiography, nor completely taken as a fictional novel. The bizarre atmosphere of the Yoruba culture burst out with the unrestrained human nature of "I" between the fiction and reality.

The same day that the father of my wife told me the place that my tapster was, I told my wife to pack all our belongings and she did so, then we woke up early in the morning and started to travel to an unknown place, but when we had travelled about two miles away to that town which we left, my wife said that she forgot her gold trinket inside the house which I had burnt into ashes, she said that she had forgotten to take it away before the house was burnt into ashes. She said that she would go back and take it, but I told her that it would burn into ashes together with the house. She said that it was a metal and it could not burn into ashes and she said that she was going back to take it, and I begged her not to go back, but she refused totally, so when I saw her going back to take it, then I followed her. When we reached there, she picked a stick and began to scratch the ashes with it, and there I saw that the middle of the ashes rose up suddenly and at the same time there appeared a half-bodied baby, he was talking with a lower voice like a telephone. At the same time that we saw the ashes rise up and change into half-bodied baby, and he was also talking with a lower voice, then we started to go. Then he was telling my wife to take him along with us, to wait and take him, but as we did not stop and take him with us, he then commanded that our eyes should be blinded and we became blinded at the same moment as he said it; still we did not come back and take him, but we were going on, when he saw that we did not come back and take him, he commanded again that we should stop breathing, truly speaking we

could not breathe. When we could not breathe in or out, we came back and took him along with us. (Tutuola, A., 1952, p.39)

In the novel *The Palm-wine Drinkard*, the protagonist "I" and "my wife" go to an unknown place in order to find the dead tapster. "My wife" refused to follow "my" advice and insisted on going back to retrieve the forgotten gold ornaments from the ashes of the burnt house. So "we" returned home to find it. When "we" got home and saw a half-bodied baby talking like a ringing phone popping out of the ashes. This baby had super powers and was so strong that he began to control "me" and "my wife". It seems weird from the narrative mode alone, but the cultural interpretation of the deceased's belonging in Yoruba culture makes this plot possible. The strong and super-powered baby spoke like telephone ring, which is obviously a metaphor of foreign civilization. The colonial behavior objectively and subjectively made the foreign culture invade the ancient land with the strong power and caused the inevitable changes to the native people's life. The whole event of "I" and "my wife" left "our home" to search for the dead tapster was just a metaphor to imply the constrained abandon of their familiar environment and an unwilling march on an unknown journey. When they found something valuable that was forgotten to take with, they decided to return to find it. The traditional culture, invaded by the western culture which is like the fire to burn the old building down to the ash, was just the metaphoric treasure in the ash. People in the changing society had to leave their home willingly or constrainedly to search for their purpose so as to bring back what they valued.

In *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town*, there is also a narrative mode that blends reality and imaginative world.

But as soon as the Mother had remarked like that, and hesitated, the woman told the Mother how she got one big ear instead of two. She explained to the Mother that she was a merciless "born and die baby". She said that at first, she died three years after her mother bore her. She told the Mother further that it was so she died every three years since she was born. But when she died for the sixth time her mother and father understood that she was a "born and die baby", and before they buried her false body this time, they cut off her left ear. But as soon as she returned to her company with only one ear, they drove her from their company because a "one-ear spirit" like her could not live with them any more. So this forced her to return to her mother in order to re-bear her. But unfortunately she was reborn this time with one big ear! (Tutuola, A., 1981, p.279)

As one of the traditional symbols of the tribes, a witch doctor was usually regarded by the clan folks as the "omniscient mother" in the traditional culture. They believed that she had the ability to control other people mentally and physically. She was also able to grow her organs as needed, and decided her own birth or even death according to her wishes. Death couldn't even imprison her. In some extent, she was eternal.

Through the narrative, Tutuola subverted and destroyed the legal status of foreign culture in traditional society changed by colonial rules. All the privileges, norms, and prohibitions in the real society would be subverted and changed in the weird world. "I", as the protagonist in the whole story, got lost in an unfamiliar environment, which also signified the general psychology status of the colonized people. Then through continuous exploration and searching, the establishment of cultural identity was completed.

Many critics pointed out that nearly all of Tutuola's works just repeated the traditional folk tales of his tribe. *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* seems like a mythical story at the very beginning of reading. A tramp-like protagonist was looking for his dead tapster through a fantasy world. But it was in a series of grotesque explorations in tribal traditions that the writer finished the subversion of time, place and natural laws in all reality. In Tutuola's narrative, the timing of the story and the timing of the narrative were always in a state of complete confusion. There was neither an obvious chronological sequence nor a narrative sequence. Although on the same narrative level, time could be reversed, crossed, blanked or even stagnated at will.

So my father gave me a palm-tree farm which was nine miles square and it contained 560,000 palm-trees, and this palm-wine tapster was tapping one hundred and fifty kegs of palm-wine every morning, but before 2 o'clock pm, I would have drunk all of it; after that he would go and tap another 75 kegs in the evening which I would be drinking till morning. So my friends were uncountable by that time and they were drinking palm-wine with me from morning till a late hour in the night. But when my palm-wine tapster completed the period of 15 years that he was tapping the palm-wine for me, then my father died suddenly, and when it was the 6th month after my father had died, the tapster went to the palm-tree farm on a Sunday evening to tap palm-wine for me. (Tutuola, A., 1952, p.3)

In the narrative, the time was particularly prominent. My tapster could make 150 barrels of toddy in the morning, and "I" would drink them all before 2 pm, and then the tapster continued to make 75 barrels of wine, and then "I" drink them all again. The tapster's 15-year period was completed in one-sentence description. Six months later, "my" father died, and the tapster accidentally fell to death, so "I" started the adventure of finding the soul of the tapster.

In addition to the variability of time and space, the characters were also vague and changeable in Tutuola's novels. The protagonist had power to change his body into different shapes at his will, changing back and forth effortlessly. The various wonderful creatures he encountered were also unattainable in the real world. It was true that the materials of these novels were Yoruba folklores, but Tutuola had a strong personal touch when processing them.

Some critics pointed out that a distinctive feature of post-colonial literature is the attention and displacement of places. Tutuola used his super imagination to materialize the people, losing their humanity so that the subjectivity was lost. The description of the environment in the process of exploration also reflected the dilemma of the loss of the

self-identity. When "we" escaped from "the white creatures" in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, "I" made "my" friend immediately turn "I" into a big canoe. Then "my wife" carried passengers across the river in a canoe. When "we" arrived in a completely unfamiliar environment, "we" totally lost. Either the loss of the subjectivity of human being since "I" became a canon, or the unrecognizable location was all metaphors for the loss of the cultural identity during the colonial period.

But in the following plot, the protagonist "I" had been fighting against the ghosts on the journey. After experiencing hardship, he finally defeated death and found a way out.

After they had pushed us to him and gone back to the market and as the 'god' could talk and I myself was 'Father of gods' also and I had known the secrets of all 'gods', so I talked to this god with a kind of voice, then he did not harm us, instead he led us out of that field. (Tutuola, A., 1952, p.43)

The process of "I" defeating death and finding a way out was also the procedure of the author's searching and establishing his cultural identity.

Tutuola evoked the memories of the past life through the description of traditional culture so as not to achieve the purpose of establishment of his own cultural identity.

When I was seventy-six years old, the chief of my village died. But as I was the oldest man in the village that time, therefore, I was chosen by the rest people in the village to be their new chief.

After the sixth month that I had become the chief, and as my people were always anxious to hear my past adventures before I had become a rich man. Therefore, one night, I invited all the people to my house. All sat in front of my house. The woman sat in the left of the circle while the men sat in the right and I sat on my usual old high armchair a little distance in front of them. Then I supplied each of the people with a keg of palm-wine, and the biggest keg was in front of me. (Tutuola, A., 1962, p.8)

In this story, Tutuola established the cultural identity as a member of the tribe through the first-person narrative, and at the same time he strengthened the authenticity of the story. Meanwhile, the way of succession of tribal chiefs mentioned in the story was also very different from the ways in the colonial period, which helped his people to recall the cultural traditions of the pre-colonial period. In the description above, the chief of the clan was elected by the members from the respected elders. During the colonial period, the appointment and removal of chiefs was largely restricted and dominated by the colonial government. In addition, the story showed the vivid picture of traditional culture life of the clan members sitting in a circle and listening to the stories told by the elders. The men and women were separated on both sides and had fixed positions. The scene of the clan members sharing happy moments was much more like Tutuola's aftertaste and memory reconstruction of the tribal traditions. It was the recurrence of the authenticity scene raising the general sense of national identity among other clan members.

III. NOSTALGIC REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

In Tutuola's literary world, there has always been an aftertaste of tradition and doubts about modern civilization. Tutuola once said in an interview with Robert: "I don't condemn civilization. I just don't want our people to forget the past." (Fox R. E., 1998, p.203) But the confrontation between tradition and modernity still permeated his works. In *The Feather Witch in the Jungle*, *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, *The Brave Huntress*, *My Life in the Ghost Jungle*, not only the airtight, endless dangerous jungle, but also the cruel monsters using modern tools and the half-bodied baby talking like telephone ringing, all those factors signified the confusion of the existing environment and the nostalgia for the spiritual home that had passed away.

In Tutuola's novels, the protagonist "I" experienced an extremely distorted and illogical world through adventure. Through the re-creation of Yoruba folk tales, Tutuola gave the works a nostalgic taste. Keith Tester (2010) mentioned that nostalgia is a feature of modernity. It not only lays a solid foundation for certainty, but also provides fertile soil for deconstruction. It is a response to the cultural conflict in modernity. Nostalgia for the traditional life of the tribe is accompanied by doubts about modern civilization. The scenes of a cruel female monster with a TV-like palm riding an automatically-running bird were seemingly absurd which was telling the reasons for the disappearance of traditional culture. Through nostalgia for tribal life in the past, Tutuola completed the deconstruction of foreign culture. Meanwhile he was searching for the tradition shattered by contemporary civilization. When the traditional society became fragmented, those familiar missing things would become a desire to pursue. Keith Tester (2010) also pointed out that nostalgia implies a double longing, and its core is the desire for something missing. Nostalgia implies a certain thing that belongs to a distant place or the past. The present is considered to be qualitatively different from the past. When the past missing world was replaced by modern society, chaos and meaninglessness world became the norm. On the contrary the orderly situation became weird instead. Through this deconstruction, Tutuola overturned the colonial power structure and found a foothold for himself and his cultural identity.

The national identity in Tutuola's novels was clearly reflected in his literary motivation. As a native African writer, he objectively completed the construction of his cultural identity under the combination of the effect of the colonial context and his own ethnic culture background. In his imaginative world, Tutuola presented a clear identity in the works. For Tutuola, the changes in the connotation of his life caused by colonization made nostalgia through his literary works. Just through his effort of narrative of past traditions, he metaphorically prompted his people to recall and research their past and finally completed the rebuilding of the identity. The social and cultural functions of a large number of

metaphors in Tutuola's works were self-evident, which still has an important metaphorical significance even in the context of globalization today.

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