

The Use of Orality to Invoke Setting and Thematic Aspects in Children's Stories

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Abstract

*This study aims at examining how orality is utilized in children's stories. The study argues that orality as a stylistic device in children's texts not only helps in creating the narrative structure but it also helps in revealing the setting and themes of children's stories. The essay uses close textual reading to examine how orality interacts with the written form in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's children's text *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*. I argue that the amalgamation of oral features like songs, poems, proverbs and other oral art forms from oral tradition, into the text situates the narrative in specific set ups, and to bring out cultural identity, among other themes visible in the narrative. Inclusion of such oral features in stories for children in the twenty first century, not only helps children to think about the rich African oral tradition, but these oral features also help in shaping the imagination of young readers.*

Key Words: Children's Literature, Cultural Identity, Oral Art Forms, Kenya

Introduction

Many writers in Africa have often appropriated oral aspects into their creative endeavours. According to Ruma (2015), appropriation of oral aspects from the African traditional society is not surprising because "the writers of these texts are important members of their respective traditional societies" (p. 196). Ruma reiterates that whenever African writers communicate their experiences to the world through the medium of literature, they might fall back on the rich repertoire of oral tradition that exist in their societies. Julien (1992) argues that as readers and critics, we should not aim to isolate orality, to see it as singular, or as inherently "first" or "other" in opposition to writing, because the two are modes of language and are ours when we have the means to produce them. Therefore, when critics examine the manifestations of the oral in the written it should be to appreciate literature as a social and an aesthetic act. According to Ong (1982) oral cultures used stories to organize and communicate much of what they knew. Ong sees writing as a residue for orality; a manifestation of oral art form through modern technology because writing makes words appear similar to things.

This paper examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o falls back on oral traditions in writing *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*. While this text is a compressed way of showing the early characteristics and the effect of the colonial system in Kenya, Ngugi appropriates aspects of fantasy, songs, proverbs and dialogue, which fall under orality, to narrate the

story to the young readers. I argue that appropriation of such oral aspects helps to reveal setting and themes in the text. I use the term oral in Craig Mackenzie's sense – the mode of expression, which has kinship with cultural interaction transacted by the word of mouth; a story that simulates the dynamics of the spoken word on the printed page (1997: 541, fn 3). Julien's (1992) argument that orality and writing are mutually interdependent modes existing in perpetual interaction is also crucial in this discussion because this interaction helps to place this narrative in specific settings and bring out specific themes in the story.

Ngugi's appropriation of oral art forms from the Kikuyu community echoes Quayson's (1997) supposition that every work of art has a cultural dimension, which discursively interacts with other aspects of the literary text to locate it in a particular field of relevance instead of another. The interaction of the Kikuyu oral aspects and the written piece situates this narrative into a specific background – the Kikuyu traditions. These oral elements are also important in children's books because they work to shape the imagination of the young readers (Muriungi, 2011).

Although Ngugi uses English in this text, he appropriates folkloric elements from the Kikuyu community which renders orality into the text. Ngugi uses children's literature and the oral art forms as platforms for interrogating African values, beliefs, and to question colonial ideologies through the character of Njamba Nene, who is pitted against other characters in the text, like John Bull and teacher Kigorogoru, who seem to lean towards the acceptance of western ideologies. As a young boy, Njamba Nene exudes African wisdom seen in the songs, sayings and the proverbs he uses, which he apparently got from his mother Wacu.

Ngugi's text was first written in the Kikuyu language as *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi Iri Mathagu* and later translated into English probably to appeal to more audiences. Despite this translation however, the African oral elements still remain visible in the translated text, which reflects Irele's argument that "European conventions of literate expression" are used to accommodate "the indigenous tradition of orality." (1990:61).

This discussion proceeds under close textual analysis of the text while showing how aspects of orality utilized in the text help to reveal the setting and themes. Such aspects include: songs, proverbs, dialogue and the fantastic. Towards the end, the essay draws conclusions on the use of orality in children's narratives.

Oral Elements in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus Songs*

Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus is a text set in the period during the early days of the colonial system in Kenya. We are introduced to a classroom situation where only Njamba Nene seems to come from a very poor background and he is often ridiculed by the class teacher (teacher Kigorogoru) and a few other pupils led by John Bull. The school, we are told, only admitted children from wealthy or from homes with reasonable incomes, reserving only one or two spaces for children from poor homes, like Njamba Nene. Generally, the text examines the aims of colonial education in Kenya and supposedly elsewhere in Africa, which Ngugi shows, was, aimed at making Africans despise their culture:

The school, Tie and Tie African Primary School (TAPS), was started by a white settler called *Pious Brainwash*. He was commonly known as Hangbelly because he had a hanging belly... It was said he started that school to develop Africans who would think like Europeans and hold the same views of the world as they held.

His aim was to cultivate a small group of Africans who had mouths, legs, arms, hearts, everything like those of white people, so that if freedom fighters ever won the war, this group would act as the eyes, the ears and the feet of the white people (P.5 [emphasis added]).

This explanation about the colonial school, which comes at the beginning of the narrative prepares the reader to understand the context within which action is taking place. The name “Brainwash” in the above quotation points to the aim of the school; to brainwash Africans’ minds. And while most pupils in the class are pro-European, led by the notorious John Bull, Njamba Nene represents the leftist; with his talk often drawing from the Kikuyu wisdom and ideologies of his mother Wacu.

Julien (1992) argues that aspects of oral tradition, as of the prose tradition, are not simply given, they are chosen. Julien says these aspects are present in African writing, not because they are essentially African but because they offer possibilities to achieve specific ends. In *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*, Ngugi utilises songs drawn from the Kikuyu community through the character of Njamba Nene. We are told mother Wacu “used to teach him a lot of songs about birds, rain, seasons, traditions, culture, as well as others about war and politics” (9). These songs are read in this essay as demonstrating the interaction of oral art forms with the written text and also as a link between the narrative and its setting. In addition, these songs help to shape the narrative structure and reveal specific themes. For Instance, when the pupils in Njamba Nene’s class are waiting for the bus to arrive during their trip to the museum, teacher Kigorogoru ask Njamba Nene to sing and he sings:

*Ndathire na guuku ruguru
Ngikora Njeri akirira
Ngimuurio ukiririo ni kii?
Ni Gicuru gwakwa uukundiria
Gichuru athiire Mang’u
Nani akandiga Mwimbi
Nguucagia mukingo
Ta murugu ta murugu
Ukwera ukwera turima*

Once I went to the west
And found Njeri weeping
I asked her, why do you weep?
It’s Gicuru
It’s Gicuru, my love, who makes me
weep.
Gicuru went to Mang’u
And left me behind here at Mwimbi
Stretching my neck
Like a long necked bird
Trying to see over the hills (P. 9-11).

This song does not please teacher Kigorogoru who asks Njamba Nene to sing a different one which turns out worse than the first:

*Bururi uyu witu wa andu airu
Ngai niaturathimire
Na akiuga tutikoima kuo*

God gave us this land
We black people
And said it was ours forever. (P.11)

The first song is appropriated from the Kikuyu traditional reservoir of songs. It is about love and loneliness that results from a loved one being left alone. The message in the song is about a boyfriend or husband (Gicuru) who has gone to a faraway town (Mang'u), probably to look for a job or other fortunes, leaving his lover or wife (Njeri) lonely. That is why she stretches her neck "Like a long necked bird" in anticipation to see her lover. This song could be read as pointing to aspects of long travels in the traditional Kikuyu community where men often went away to look for food. It could also be read as showing the coming of the colonial system, which came along with establishments of urban centres (like Mang'u), where young men disappeared to look for jobs. The Kikuyus composed such songs to communicate such changes in people's lives. In *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*, perhaps, the song helps to break the monotony of narration, thus shaping the narrative structure, and also brings out themes of love, loneliness and change.

The second song, we are told, made teacher Kigorogoru even more angered, because in the doctrines of Pious Brainwash, the school was supposed to have children who would "grow up like civilized" persons (P. 11). This second song is borrowed from the freedom fighters (Mau Mau). The Mau Mau often sung these songs to assure themselves that they would win the war against colonialism and get their land back. In this context, when Njamba Nene sings the song, it can be assumed; first, Ngugi supposes that naturally, as a child, Njamba Nene who came from a home that believed in the freedom fighters course knew these songs. Second, we can read the insertion of such a song in children's books as the author's own way of using the written format to resist the ideology of the colonial system of land alienation and the alienating education system. Njamba Nene sings this freedom song later in the narrative after he is sent away from school after Brainwash falsely accuses him for misleading other pupils when they get lost in the forest, therefore causing the death of John Bull and two other pupils (see page 41). From this song we read the theme of patriotism, resistance and hope for freedom from the imperial system. The song also helps to place the narrative within the context of colonialism in Kenya.

Njamba Nene's songs are superimposed with the song sung by John Bull about London's burner and he is joined by other children (see page 12). These two sets of songs bring in contrast and helps to show how oral traditions exuded wisdom as compared to the western based songs that institutions taught school children. Such songs were often alien to African children.

Njamba Nene's knowledge of the Kikuyu songs is further seen when the children get lost in the forest and he teaches the other pupils songs to while away the evening in the forest (page 27):

<i>Kanyoni ka nja</i>	A little bird
<i>Kanyoni ka nja</i>	A little bird
<i>Gakigwa nthii na mitheko</i>	Dropped own laughing in the yard
<i>Ndakoria atiri</i>	Then I asked the bird
<i>Ndakoria atiri</i>	Then I asked the bird
<i>Nyamico watinda ku?</i>	Where have you been you strippy one?
<i>Ndatinda kairi</i>	I spent the whole day in Kairi
<i>Ngiaragania mbirigiti</i>	I spent the whole day in Kairi

*I mbirigiti I mbirigiti
Na ndianukia magoto
Maagua iria-ini maagua iria-ini
Gwa cuucu wa kamiruko
Miru miru*

Doing this and that
But I brought no banana leaves
Because they fell into the sea
At granny gran's
Plonk plonk (pp 27-28).

Another song by Njamba Nene that conjures a set-up of the evenings in the traditional African society is seen on page 28:

*Njogu mwathiire munyu
Murookua murothira
Mwatigire iria ingi
Micu-ini ya mbiti
Mwana akarira akeerwo
Wee
Nyina akarira akeerwo
Wee
Nduthii ukarume utende wa
njogu
Ukiriririe*

He elephant you went to the salt lick
And left the others in hyena's lair
When the young one cries it's told
Shut up!
When its mother cries she is told
Shut up!
Why don't you eat elephant dung
And content yourself with that. (pp. 28-30).

While these two songs help in shaping the structure of the narrative as argued earlier, bringing them into the narrative at this point can be read as a sign of resisting modernity. The songs invoke the traditional set up, where the children are spending their night by the fireside in the forest, thus removing the narrative from the modern set up. The singing in the forest conjures common sessions of traditional communal oral entertainments in the evening as children wait for the evening meals. Agatucci (1988) argues that oral African storytelling is essentially a communal participatory experience. Such participation, Agatucci adds, is an essential part of children's traditional indigenous education on their way to initiation to full humanness. In this instance, the fireside singing has some affinity with the storytelling that Agatucci refers to. This evocation of the natural setting is a form of resistance to the colonial modern environment and Ngugi maintains this resistance when the pupils miraculously share a sleeping place with animals in the forest and the animals do not hurt them.

Mother Wacu Figure and the Use of Sayings/Proverbs

Julien (1992) argues that to some scholars, the oral nature of African novels refers to the representation of everyday conversation or including proverbs, tales, riddles, praises and other oral genres. According to Muriungi (2011), proverbs and sayings contain condensed experience of a society's past generations and they can be defined as messages coded by tradition and transmitted to evaluate and/or affect human behavior. The character of mother Wacu is shown to be representative of the knowledgeable grandmother figure in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*. She is the reservoir of knowledge and wisdom that Njamba Nene often displays in the narrative, especially when he wishes to strengthen his point. Njamba Nene prefaces his sentences with the phrase; "mother Wacu says" which not only authenticates the oral nature of what he is about to say, but also situates his assertions within the reservoir of traditional Kikuyu wisdom and presumably makes them more authentic. The use of such proverbs and/or

sayings evokes the traditional Kikuyu set up into the narrative and also projects the theme of wisdom.

When teacher Kigorogoru challenges Njamba Nene on why he had refused to take Christian names as expected by the school and the colonial system, Njamba says: “Mother Wacu says that any name will do for a child. Names like Kamau, Onyango, Mutiso, are also good” (pp. 2-4). Njamba Nene’s response here points to the theme of resistance to imperialism and brings in undertones of Ngugi’s resistance to European names, and also places the narrative within the colonial set up. While it is possible to argue that Ngugi uses children’s literature to voice his own sentiments, the narrative can also be read as demonstrating that adult issues are also children’s issues.

Later in the narrative when the pupils are worried after their bus develops wings and disappears into the forest, Njamba Nene comforts them with his mother’s wisdom: “Let us not be afraid. My mother Wacu says that life is full of ups and downs. One minute you are happy, the other minute you are very sad” (p.16). However, while Njamba Nene’s words here bring out the theme of hope, desperation sets in when they discover that there is nothing to feed on in the forest and that the money many pupils had carried to spend during the trip has no use in the forest. This theme of desperation is brought out by Njamba Nene when he further draws from his mother’s wisdom that “an empty stomach does not say no even to an appetizer” (p.22). All the children therefore share Njamba Nene’s *Githeri* (mixture of maize and beans) in the forest; including those like John Bull, who had thought Njamba Nene would fart after eating his *Githeri* and sat far away from him in the bus. Njamba Nene further encourages the rest to reason together and see how they can get out of the forest, because in mother Wacu’s words, “you can’t kill a flea with one finger” ... and that “to keep the fire ablaze, you need more than one log” (p. 22). This meant that the pupils needed to work together and get themselves out of the forest because, as Njamba Nene reiterates: “mother Wacu tells me that God helps those who have helped themselves” (p.24). The above sayings bring out themes of cooperation, hard work, persistence and hope.

As noted earlier, the disappearance of the bus into the forest removes the narrative from the setting of the school into the raw natural set up. In this wild set up, Njamba Nene lights a fire using mother Wacu’s wisdom by using two pieces of stick (P. 27). It can therefore be argued that Ngugi therefore draws from the Kikuyu traditional reservoir consciously, by using characters of Njamba Nene and the mother, and places the traditional wisdom squarely into the written mode to keep such selected oral aspects alive.

The Fantastic

According to Mathew (2002) it is difficult to precisely define literary fantasy but most critics agree that it is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live. Mathew reiterates that as a literary genre, fantasy is best thought as a fiction that elicits wonder through elements of the supernatural or the impossible, consciously breaking free from mundane reality. Fantasy therefore accepts the magical, non-rational, and the impossible world of imagination. When used in children’s fiction, the fantastic

helps children to imagine situations far removed from realism. This happens when the bus that takes the pupils to the museum develops wings:

The children suddenly felt the bus begin to gallop like a horse. Clopity clop, Clopity clop, Clopity clop, Clopity clop, Clopity clop.

One of the pupils who was sitting next to the window screamed: “It’s a horse! It’s a horse! Our bus has become a horse!”

Another joined in: It’s a winged bus! It’s a winged bus!

And indeed it was so. The bus became a winged bus. It lifted off the ground, and flew in the air like a bird, or an aeroplane (pp. 14-16).

Such episodes help shape the readers’ imaginations and remove them from the mundane reality. The flying bus therefore removes the narrative from the known environment to the strange environment of the forest. The flying of the bus also conjures the themes of excitement and fear, which turn to desperation at the end. The above description is supplemented with illustrations which help the readers to visualize the flying bus:



Fantasy is also witnessed where the children spend the night amongst animals in the forest (p.30) and when they find trees in the forest crying and valleys laughing (p. 32). It can therefore be argued that relocation to the forest enhances fantasy in the text.

Dialogue/Conversation

According to Muriungi (2006) the use of dialogue in children’s books often makes episodes livelier and accessible to children. It renders the story oral, therefore breaking the monotony of narration. There is a conversational tone between different characters in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*, which helps the reader not just to understand Ngugi’s characters but also the themes he puts forward as argued earlier. For instance,

Teacher Kigorogoru inquires from Njamba Nene whether he could afford the five shillings fare required for the trip as seen in the following dialogue:

“Can you afford five shillings?” the teacher asked him.

“I don’t know”

“Why, has your mother Wacu stopped supplying manual labour to the large farm owners?” Kigorogoru asked sarcastically.

“She still does, but the selfish rich men that she works for do not pay her enough for food and clothes”, he answered ignoring the sarcasm in the teacher’s voice.

“Is that why you come to school with shorts that are covered with patches?”

“Mother Wacu says that you can’t hate a person just because they are poor.”

“You really know how to speak Gikuyu! When will you learn to speak English? When hyenas grow horns?”

“Language is language,” ... No language is better than the other”.

“... Who taught you such rubbish? No doubt your mother Wacu! Go tell her that she should go and collect more patches so that you can cover that bum of yours to stop it sticking out like potatoes out of a sack.” (1-2).

In this dialogue which comes at the beginning of the text, the ground is set for the conflict that ensues between teacher Kigorogoru and Njamba Nene throughout the text. While the teacher here is out to ridicule Njamba Nene, we can argue that the lengthy conversation mode lends orality to the text and helps in bringing out themes of conflict between the collaborators and those on the freedom fighters side like Njamba Nene and his mother. The conversation also brings out the theme of land alienation which begat poverty and suffering, the more reason Njamba Nene cannot afford good clothes and is not likely to get the five shilling needed for the trip.

Additionally, the above conversation brings out the theme of exploitation exposed by Njamba Nene when he says the mother is paid poorly. This standoff between teacher and pupil also communicates the setting of the narrative as it gives the background of colonial manual labour in Kenya.

Another thing we can decipher from this quotation is Ngugi’s own voice in children’s stories: the agency he has persistently emphasized should be given to African languages in an environment where they are at a risk of getting overshadowed by prominence of foreign languages. This is seen in Njamba Nene’s assertion that “language is language. The insistence of teacher Kigorogoru that Njamba Nene speaks in English presents the constant alienation that was prompted by foreigners in colonial Africa, so that the colonized person would despise not just their language but also the whole of their culture. This situation of European influence on the native was not unique to Kenya but was common in many colonized African states (See Mhlophe 2003, p.7, where she argues that their teachers made them believe that Afrikaans and English books were more important than books in Xhosa or grandmother’s stories). In this way we can say, children’s stories are important channels to narrate the colonial experiences to young readers

Conversations between the pupils while in the forest also help us discover different opinions from the pupils, and, helps to bring out themes of regret, helplessness, resistance and modern religion:

“If only there was a phone nearby! We would phone Hangbelly so that he may come for us.”

“If only Mr. Kigorogoru was here with us! He would have shown us what to do,” John Bull said

“Since he isn’t here, what do you want us to do?” Njamba Nene asked. “Good education should help us even in the absence of a teacher. Learning should help a person to be independent.”

“I know what we will do!” John Bull said. Let us pray and God will show us the way.”

“Yes he might even move this mountain for us!” another said.

“Or this forest.”

“He might even send us a plane here.”

“Or even send angels to carry each of us to his own home.” (p.22).

The above quotation brings out the idea that the pupils are already well schooled in modern religion which is contrasted with Njamba Nene’s traditional wisdom. The alienating tendency of western education is seen through the dialogue on page 24:

“How can we know where we came from, and where we are? Someone asked. “I don’t even know what the map of this country looks like,” he said.

“If we were in England, I would tell you where we are,” John Bull said. I know the map of England like the palm of my hand!”

To this Njamba Nene answers: “...but we are not in England. We are in Africa, and we must know Africa. We are in Kenya, and it is our country Kenya we must know.” This alienation is further shown when John Bull keeps asking Njamba Nene what specific places and rivers in the forest are called in English since he does not believe in the Kikuyu names (see page 32 and 35).

Surprisingly when the children are rescued from the forest by Njamba Nene’s wisdom, many of those who glorified westernization get converted to a resistance mood which can again be read as Ngugi’s intrusion into the text to show children’s role in resistance movements. This is seen in a conversation between Teacher Kigorogoru and the pupils who arrive at school after John Bull and two others are shot dead by white soldiers. The children seem to have agreed with Njamba Nene and his mother’s wisdom and are ready to resist teacher Kigorogoru’s ideology that wisdom only comes through western education, therefore bringing the theme of resistance:

“...who is the cleverest of all pupils?”

“...he who knows about his country, and its patriots, like Njamba Nene”.

“What did you say?”

“It is he who knows his country and his patriots!” (P.40)

Unfortunately, this show of solidarity is a disadvantage to Njamba Nene because he is sent away from school by Pius Brainwash, labelling him terrorist (p. 41). From the story, Njamba Nene’s expulsion can be read as bringing the theme of oppression often characterized the colonial system in Kenya.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed how orality is utilized in children’s stories to bring out the themes and setting. In addition, the aspects of orality discussed here are seen as playing an important role in unfolding narrative structure. The essay has examined songs, sayings, the fantastic and dialogue as features that evoke orality in the text, and argued that these features help place the setting of the narrative within the colonial context of the school, while at the same giving background information on colonial institutions like farms. The use of fantasy also moved the narrative setting from the school to the raw environment of the forest. Through these orality features, various themes have been exposed; for example resistance, land alienation, exploitation, poverty, hope, hopelessness, wisdom and patriotism to mention only a few. The interaction between orality and the written form in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* therefore demonstrates that “written literature in Africa adopts and integrates the oral (Ruma, 2015) to make meaning. This means that oral features are important in modern children’s literature, because they not only help in shaping the structure of the narrative but these features also help in shaping the imagination of young readers as they go through the narrative.

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