African Literature: A Child of Three Worlds

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Abstract
Dominant scholarship on contemporary African literature holds that its Euro-Atlantic "indebtedness" and present planetary articulations reside within a "two-world" imaginative space whose hybrid composition and dynamics are culturally and intellectually African (basically understood as Sub-Saharan "Black") and European (or more broadly, Western).While this conventional opinion has largely privileged African literary visibility in the arena of World Literature, there is a mainstream critical silence on how Oriental imaginative inputs have been crucial in its dynamic transcultural production and range, though some apt and welcome counter-hegemonic Afrabian/Afrasian responses have intervened in redressing this perceived incident of "Sub-Saharan African(ist) Orientalism" (see Omotosho 1986; Harrow 1991; Bentahar 2011; Donaldson 2020, for instance). In this paper, adopting a postcolonial/decolonial theoretical stance, I aim at extending the frontiers of this laudable "post-Atlantic" African critical scholarship by especially arguing that a number of Oriental (both Near and Far) cultural and textual resources, including *The Arabian Nights* (a historic pan-Oriental literary legacy), have been crucial in engraving hybrid Afrabian/ Afrasian/Eurafroriental intertexts in the African literary imagination, thereby contributing to a "three-world," rather than "two-world" phenomenon of African literary expression.

Introduction: African Literature and the Politics of "Worldly" Affiliation

Within the universe of most critical debates on the nature and provenance of written African literature, the unfortunate incident of sustained perceptual confinement has often betrayed itself in the rather uncritical location of this literature as being "a child of two worlds": European (or, more broadly, Western) and African (basically understood as Sub-Saharan "Black"). This parochialism, arguably, is an extension of the almost ageless programme of cultural and epistemological imperialism initiated during the tenure of European colonialism on/in Africa, a feature which ensured the eternal dislocation of several traditional African cultural and socio-political structures. The re-fabrication of society affected every aspect of African life, from politics to economy, to the very private confines of culture and arts. A new class-oriented establishment of society evolved, in which the new African elite was proud to be called "Victorian'' or "Modern," being made through the factory of colonial education and manipulated Christian religion (Chinweizu et. al. 1980; Wa Thiong'o 1986; Mbembe 2001). As regards literature (in the Nigerian case), G.G. Darah notes that "[t]his elite is credited with the inauguration of a written tradition of literature which colonialist criticism erroneously takes as the genesis of literature in Nigeria" (Darah 1). It is in this largely distorted sense that African literature is popularly described as a "mulatto," or "a child two worlds."

This paper attempts a critical interrogation of the Euro-Atlantic "two-world-identity'' theory of the provenance, nature and tradition of contemporary African literature which has been

largely circulated by Western-oriented scholarship to subtly immortalise the colonialist myth of Western cultural hegemony at the expense of "Other worlds," the pejorative label assigned to the mass of dominated cultures and peoples under European colonialism, and in recent neoliberal times, the Global South. Along this line, I shall advance the argument that much before the emergence of the European and their "civilising" literary culture and traditions in Africa, an earlier foreign influence, the Oriental, had found its way into the heart of the African cultural and artistic experience with such monumental emphasis whose colossal bearing endures till today. Indeed, Kenneth Harrow, in his introduction to *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, avers that "[t]he objectives of this volume is to lift the veil of silence that has been imposed by a europhone critical pattern. So the future volumes of African literature can have no excuse for omitting all references to Islam'' (18). While I project that Oriental inputs in African literature go beyond the Islamic, I shall proceed to show the individual contributions of European, Oriental and African creative oeuvres as intertextual sites that have made the literature dynamic in extant global literary history. I shall however dwell more on the Oriental influences on African literature, particularly unpacking the purchase of a much neglected resource, *The Arabian Nights*, in its historic and still evolving dynamics.

Perceptions of Africa in Discourses of "Africa"

Africa, as the continental entity Achille Mbembe describes as the site where "the notion of 'absolute otherness' has been taken farthest" (2), may be described as a serialised fiction of Western contraptions making it to be in elliptical strangeness to itself. Thus, defining Africa in geographical, cultural or ecological terms has often proven slippery. Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, for instance, support the view that the name "Africa" derived from a Latinate source that referred to the region around Carthage (447), while Langston Hughes suggests that Africa as a word "probably comes from the Latin *aprica* (sunny) or from the Greek *aphrike* (without cold)" (cited in Agbo, 21). V. Y. Mudimbe opines that "...Libya in ancient Greek geography designates the African continent" (1), and Joshua Agbo, like a number of Africanists, proposes that "Africa" connects to an Egyptian etymology, suggesting that since *Afri* meant "*heat*" and *ka* meant "*soul*," Africa referred to where the soul is "heat" (a place of origin) (21). Obvious Eurocentric opinions of Africa have had the most "scholarly" impressions about the continent, one of which evolved from Georg Hegel, one of the West's most respected intellectuals. Britta Frede notes that in his lecture, *Philosophy of World History*,

> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) concluded that Africa constitutes the part of the globe without history, though he excluded the northern parts of the continent. From his point of view, the regions north of the Sahara were different from the rest of Africa due to some civilization and history-making that occurred there, especially during the heyday of ancient Carthage (4–3 century bc). He continued to argue that Egypt cannot be classified as African, but constitutes the transition between the 'West' and the 'East'. In the same context, he claimed that the Sahara created a geographically strict boundary, separating the southern regions that remained closed and static, with the only exceptions being the small locations on the coast where European trading points were already established (59).

These varying intellectual ideas about Africa notwithstanding, the incursions of imperialist Western influences on the geographical, political and cultural arrangements of Africa may be said to be the major fragmentising effect the continent has suffered till now. The dominant factor of these encounters was apparently the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 which dissembled the conventional political, ethnic, socio-cultural and epistemological structures of African societies, forging artificial alternatives to their original formats of group belonging, geo-cultural affiliation, political relations and economic projections. The arbitrary *mapping* of Africa in this event effectively began the modern "scramble" for the continent and her productive resources by the dominant capitalist powers of Europe/the West. Ever since, Africa has been a routinely designed imaginary of dominant Western machinations, a reality which has been felt in the Euro-Atlantic determinations of "African literature," a factor also excluding certain regions or literary projections within the continent as being not "African." Ralph Austen indicates this in the following:

> Africa is perhaps the most "mapped" of the world's major regions…In its most basic cartographic representation, Africa is a well-defined geometric entity: a continent surrounded by natural bodies of water on all sides except for a small isthmus in the extreme northeast joining it to Western Asia…There is, however, a geographic convention of dividing Africa into Mediterranean and sub-Saharan zones, with the former treated as an extension of the Middle East ("Maghreb" the Arabic term for North Africa means "West") while the latter is the "true" Africa. Another division distinguishes tropical and temperate zones, with the latter category including not only the Maghreb but also South Africa, whose relative hospitality to European settlement is thus explained. Such distinctions are not politically acceptable in present-day Africa (the Organisation of African Unity includes States from all portions of the continent) but maps can help us decide whether they have any geographical and historical justification (1).

The imaginary geographies of Africa such as depicted above informed a Euro-Atlantic normalisation of African literature, African literary criticism and the idea of Africa/Africanness as being "Black." Indeed, the major Afrocentric decolonisation movements of international repute like Pan-Africanism and Negritude followed this cartographic "logic" of excising cultural and textual contents of non-Black identities from their African imaginary (Bentahar 2011; Andrade 2011). Thus, Oriental (Arab/Asian) racial or cultural identifications with Africa that forged such hybridities identifiable as "Afrabian" (Afro-Arab) or "Afrasian" (Afro-Asian) were unrecognised. Ziad Bentahar aptly observes that

> From the outset, Negritude was shaped by an idea of the black race. It was the Harlem Renaissance and black writers of the United States who initially influenced founders of Negritude, such as Senghor, Cesaire, and Damas, providing them with a sense of awareness and recognition of a black racial identity that binds African and Caribbean people…The origin of African literature as the subject of an

> academic discipline was therefore construed initially along racial terms, with ‘‘blackness’’…as a literary category (4).

The Black racial politics of Afrocentrism as highlighted by Bentahar above largely conditioned the Sub-Saharan culturalisation of African literature and African literary criticism. In writing *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1974), O.R. Dathorne confesses that “the basis for excluding North Africa lies partly, although not wholly, in ‘tribe’- in what I prefer to call the group concept. The group concept in the literature accounts for the fertile enclosures of culture and the artist’s (in every sense of the word) specific responsibility to these” (x). In “Critical Procedures and the Evaluation of African Literature,” Edgar Wright unapologetically identifies African writers in the following: “For the purpose of this discussion I shall say within the limits that I have proposed elsewhere and confine the term to writers from the non-Arabic countries of the African continent, excluding those who are of European descent” (6).

The arguable “Sub-Saharan Black Orientalism” of Wright’s frame of mind and submission above represents what decolonial scholars would refer to as the product of “coloniality of knowledge” and “coloniality of being” which have historical reference to, and are part of, the performance of the “colonial matrix of power” (see Quijano 2010; Mignolo 2010). This matrix of power began with the material unleashing of the “coloniality of power” which effected the territorial annexation and suppression of colonised people. The naturalisation and normalisation of this colonially-inflicted otherness, in psychological terms, would translate to the condition in which the Other “commonsensically” imbibes the epistemic codes designed by the coloniser and cherish it as universalist or transculturally tenable. On this note, it would seem absurd that Oriental African identities like the Arab would not qualify as African in Wright’s imagination of African literature while European or settler-colonial identities would. A more schizophrenic mental landscape of the Other is probably not imaginable.

In the following, I would pursue the critical thesis that the historic and vastly transcultural reality of African literature competently subverts the Euro-Atlantic installation of the two-world agenda and pragmatically signifies an alliance with a three-world trans/cultural textual reality.

The Three-World Intertextuality of The African Novel

If our understanding of the present geo-cultural spread and interwovenness of the African continent would not be overthrown by a vicious Eurocentric intellectual regime for the mere sake of a Euro-Atlantic imperial pride, then it stands to reason that Afrabian/Afrasian identities and the world of Africa North of the Sahara remain validly African, even though much Europhone intellectual aggression has often tended to either exclude or veil them from this fact. For instance, even though much of North African writing is Arabic, it bears reiterating that translations of the works of North African writers such as Driss Chraibi, Naguib Mahfouz and Tayeb Saleh, to mention but a few, reveal a culture of rich and resilient poignancy in their narrative textures and thematic concerns, whose origins are shod in a vibrant African(ist) sensibility.

The thrust of Arabic influence on the African socio-political and literary canvass is realised when one considers its initial historic encounters with Africa. The incursion of the Arab into Africa as an event of Islamic and commercial expansion before the nineteenth century brought with it both cultural and literary implications on the communities involved (Hunwick 2005). Culturally, there was a ruthless aggression against indigenous African religions and belief systems which extensively displaced and deracinated the people. The obviously most affected African region was the North, where the Islamic religion has thrived for several centuries to the extent of the virtual annihilation of the indigenous people's loric heritages.

The kinetic force of Islam as an Arabic ideo-cultural force translated into Jihad, a religious war whose fervency assumed a combustive zeal with the aim of extirpating any group of people which would not embrace the tenets of Islam (Falola 1988; Hunwick 2005). The spate and success of Jihads in North Africa historically explains the entrenchment of the Arabic culture and language in that region till date. A notable Jihad in Nigerian history was the one engineered in the nineteenth century by Uthman Dan Fodio in the North, and the establishment of Islam there today explains the bulk of the people's gravitation to the Arabic culture and to Mecca.

Arabic cultural imperialism benefitted literary activity in the places in which it took roots in Africa (Falola 1988). This is expressed in the romanticisation of a large number of literary artists from these areas with the Arabic language, a feature which is ensconced in East Africa, North Africa and rife in the Northern part of Nigeria till date (Falola 1988; Darah 1988; Hunwick 2005; Donaldson 2020). In his study of the development of creative literature among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, Darah notes that "being a political, religious and intellectual movement the Jihad fathered considerable literary efforts" (1) and that "[a]n attempt to indigenise the Arabic scripts produced a fusion of Arabic and Hausa known as Ajami" (2). Darah however maintains that "the literary tradition that resulted remained essentially Islamic, with models drawn from classical Arabic prototypes" (2).

In a similar vein, Kole Omotosho foregrounds the Arabic impression on mainstream North African literature in the following:

> The discussion on language in African literature has usually ignored the situation in Africa North of the Sahara where African writers have expressed themselves in an imposed language, Arabic, for the last one thousand or so years. This use of Arabic as the medium of literary expression has been to the exclusion, except in a few pockets, of indigenous African languages. (17).

John Hunwick records one of the most absorbing findings on pre-colonial African literature in Swahili in the following:

> East Africa (here meaning Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania), particularly the coastal region, is home to a literary tradition that is unique in Islamic Africa, namely a

> highly-developed literature in a living African language, Swahili, written for centuries in the Arabic script. Swahili is the most widely spoken African language in Africa with an estimated 100 million speakers. Swahili is also the Islamic African language with the most highly developed literary tradition, inviting comparison, particularly in regard to its poetry, with Farsi (Iran), Urdu (India) and Turkish. Presently, how old the Swahili poetic tradition is, is difficult to say… however, the poetic tradition, which may well incorporate pre-Islamic elements, must, on linguistic grounds, be much older. Such poetic cycles as Fumo Liongo (comparable to the Sundiata cycle in West Africa) probably have their roots in the 13th and 14th centuries. Characteristic of Swahili literature are the tendi (tenzi), epics, often of 5,000 quatrains or more, on themes drawn from episodes in early Islamic history, themes common to several cultures around the Indian Ocean, reflecting Swahili's unique position as Africa's only urban maritime culture (14).

A cursory look at the nature of the literary developments outlined by Darah and Omotosho strike certain familiar chords as we contemplate the manner of the rise and establishment of the European-language creative literature in Africa. First, there is the marginalisation of indigenous languages and the traditional African aesthetic sensibility, a factor informed by an imperial (Arabic) alien culture other than the Western. This particularly reminds us of the much later French cultural policy of assimilation which aimed at "Frenchifying" the dominated peoples under the French colonial regime, a development that eventually provoked the outburst of the Negritude movement. In a similar way, the near strangulating hold of the Arabic culture and language on the North African socio-cultural hemisphere informed a spirited cultural nationalism among some artistes of North African extraction. Omotosho intones that "Mahmud al Fayturi, a Sudanese poet, is one of the few writers in Arabic who have seen Arabic as a language of enslavement and continued subjugation of the Black Africans of Africa North of the Sahara" (17).

Second, as richly portrayed in Hunwick's comments above, the hybrid aesthetic possibilities of Arabic and traditional African linguistic/artistic forms comment on the creative resourcefulness of African writers in pre-colonial times. The tendency for African creatives to appropriate Arabic to "bear the burden" of their indigenous imaginative expressions, such as in Swahili, forged and groomed some of the first cases of "mulatto" African literature, the European variety coming much later. From Darah's, Omotosho's and Hunwick's submissions above, it goes without saying that Africa had witnessed robust indigenous, hybrid and discursively virile experiences of literature long before the coming of any European intertextual correspondence.

There is no gainsaying the place of Europe/the West in the history of contemporary African literature. Her colossal stature in the negotiation of the present-day form and content of the African literary practice stands as a major reference point when the question of the latter's "modern" identity is raised. With reference to prose narrative, European orchestration of the birth, motion and direction of the African novelistic experience was appreciably enormous. It

is no wonder, therefore, that much reference to Europe is made or insinuated when the discursive terrain of Afican(ist) literary or critical theorising is set.

The influence of the European novel on the ideo-aesthetic ambience of its African counterpart branches into several noteworthy directions which record its indelible print in the annals of African literary history. The first most-obvious contribution to the African novel is the European language, either left to thrive in its natural linguistic essence, or appropriated to the African socio-linguistic taste. The second easily decipherable input of the European novel is the adherence to the tenets of formal realism in its emphasis on the portrayal of empirically observable events, individuals, and things in a reportorial day-to-day language that shuns itself of the pomposity of inaccessibility, ornateness, and obscurity. This realistic tradition in European history was the child of the discontent with Romanticism, considered to be overly "idealistic," unscientific and unreflective of the tensions and contentions in the society. Realistic colourings of this mode pervade most African novels and could be amply seen in first and second generation examples such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964); Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965); Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1966); Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1953); and Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974).

Another seminal literary convention of the European novel that informed the African novel at its inception, closely associated to formal realism, was the naturalistic deployment, which, above other things, delineated the associative relationship of the environment (societal or familial) with the individual. This literary technique particularly flowered during the phase of cultural nationalist writings by African novelists demanding cultural respectability and political independence from the European colonial master. In this regard, the writers took great pains to describe the environment, especially the fauna and flora of the African society, as they explicated peculiar behavioural patterns of the imagined traditional African individual which were in accordance with their cosmic vision and epistemological projections. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) are noteworthy examples.

Of great importance to the narrative repertory of the African novel is the European counterpart's input of characterisation that emphasised the individual portrayal of the character. A vital historical moment that began to shape this tendency, which also played a major role in the rise of the European novel, was the renaissance which saw to the collapse of the Mediaeval socio-political establishment in Europe and witnessed the liberation of the individual. The individual's liberation was from the epistemological control of the doctrine of the Great Chain of Being, a philosophy which confined them to their fate, being required to accept their fate as a token of divine premeditation (Ngwaba 1986). Francis Ngwaba intimates that "[t[he individual was content to accept his place, whether high or low in society, because he was in no doubt that it was so ordained from the beginning of things" (8). The radical deliverance of the individual during the moment in focus explains the logic of the obsessive concentration on them in early English novels, such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722); Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the*

D'ubervilles (1891). The device has been particularly helpful in portraying the psychological realism (such as loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, trauma, hopefulness) of characters.

The appropriation of individual characterisation in the African novel has been particularly crucial in exploring and depicting the psychological trauma unleashed on Africans due to post-independence neo-colonial betrayals of the new African elite in government, arising from their corrupt, unpatriotic, "unwelfaristic," avaricious, irresponsible and callous acts. Ayi Kwei Armah's protagonists in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1966) and *Fragments* (1969)—the Man and Baako Onipa, respectively—are focused on in the plot to illustrate the tormenting psycho-spiritual possibilities that a recklessly materialistic and officially corrupt African state, in this case Ghana, could unleash on a rather spiritually-motivated, integrity-prone humanity. Driss Chraibi's main character in *Heirs to the Past* (1971), Driss Ferdi, experiences mental disorientation because he feels torn apart by the imposing demands of Western imperialism and the legalistic dictates of the Arabic world-view in his North African country. James Ngugi's (Ngugi wa Thiong'o's) drawing of the character of Njoroge, his child-protagonist in *Weep Not, Child* (1964), is also in the convention of the individual character portrayal of the European novel. In this novel, Ngugi helps the reader to understand the deep emotional crisis that attends the individual's encounter with the multiplex monstrosities of European colonialism, the fore-runner of the grim neo-colonial post-independence Kenyan realities he highlights in subsequent novels such as *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1980) and *Matigari* (1987). We may hazard to say that other inheritances of the African novel from the European include inorganic arrangements of the plot; modernist complexifications expressed in jarring phrasal/clausal formations as in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965); novelistic sub-genres such as the epistolary (Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* [1981] and Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* [1993]); the historical (Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* [1973]); and the psychological (as in Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims* [1970]).

The Western world's (not only Europe's) present-day offering to the expansion of the African novel cannot be underestimated. The impact of technological postmodernism, mainly projected through the medium of film/television, announces itself in the contemporary African writer's tendencies towards the complicating of the plot and the cinematic sudden shift from one event to another to suggest simultaneous occurrence (H.J. Golakai's *The Score* [2015]; Toni Kan's *Carnivorous City* [2016]; Leye Adenle's *Easy Motion Tourist* [2016]; Yasmina Kadra's *Khalil* [2018]). Postmodern artistic signposts, especially explicit sexual detailings are almost unmistakably present in most contemporary African novels, either selectively or wholly, courtesy of contemporary Western neoliberal/late capitalist indices (NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* 2013; H.J. Golakai's *The Score* [2015]; Toni Kan's *Carnivorous City* [2016]). The ferment of feminist/LGBTQI writings has also tended to revolutionise the conceptual definition of not only the African novel, but African literature as a whole.

Likewise, the Arabic/Oriental world has made its indelible mark on the turf of the African novel. A major site of Arabic influence is the language. Second is the urge to reflect the ideals of the Arabic culture (either sympathetically or confrontationally). This is seen in religious

metaphors, prayer, speechifying and patterns of the Arabic communal co-existence which aim at capturing dramatic moments in the plot or help in the process of its gradual unfolding. Some aspects of the Arabic cultural projections outlined above are noticed in Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1973) and Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987). Third, the Arabic factor has helped to preserve the tradition of the quest motif in traditional Arabic narratives of the mysterious and supernatural. Kole Omotosho intones that "Tayyib Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North* comes from the Arabic literary tradition of the pursuit of the mysterious and the enigmatic, the seeking after the entrapment of what is a mirage" (58). Along this line, it may be instructive to point out that even though the European novelistic convention of the portrayal of the individual character must have highly crystallised the consciousness of the African novelist to the same bent, heroic epic narratives of traditional African or other non-European cultures must have highly informed portrayals of individual quest characters. Thus, to argue that novels by some African writers who might not have had formal university training, such as Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1953) or D. O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* ([1938]1982) (translated by Wole Soyinka), necessarily aped the European individual quest-character prototype is highly questionable.

Having outlined the contributions of both Europe and the Arab world to the African novel, a pertinent question needs to be raised. If the novel written in Arabic by North Africans today is a possible marriage of European novelistic forms with the Arabic (at least, Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North* strongly suggests such a scenario), how is this novel possibly "mulatto" in the sense of the fusion of traditional African ("Sub-Saharan") and European literary landmarks since the non-European identity here is not African? In what seems to be a response, Janheinz Jahn volunteers that:

> Africa's written literature originated in the overlap area of three cultures: the African, the Islamic-Arabic and the Western. The literature from the area where the African and Islamic cultures overlap, I shall call Afric-Arab; the Literature from the area where the African and Western cultures overlap, I shall call neo-African. (22).

His statement notwithstanding, Jahn's hybridist intervention on "Africa's written literature" creates vacuums, one of which still evades the question posed. It is obvious that he is thinking here about the dominant literary development in North Africa as being separate from those of the rest of the continent, mainly on linguistic lines. But how does he also categorise Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981) or Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), which mirror communities where the three cultures overlap? In fact, Gurnah's *Paradise* projects an intricate transcultural subtlety in which Muslim Africans, European Christian missionaries and Indian immigrants cohabit in hierarchical and negotiatory communal exchanges. Perhaps the easy way out of this mesh is to identify the essential African(ist) voice of the African novel coming from a writer that cannot be denied their African identity, despite existing disparities in linguistic, cultural or cosmic relations.

The African novelist's deployment of orality (the resources of their traditional oral heritage) informs an all-embracing site of reference to the Africanness of the African novel, and to a large extent, acts as a tacit ideological umbrella under which the African novelist seems to define the commitment of their artistic vision to their society. In the pre-colonial African setting, it was "the means by which societies … regulated themselves, organized their present and past, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced on power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to 'the word' language, as the means by which humanity was made and constantly refashioned" (Gunner 67). Orality, thus, has proven crucial to the African novelistic experience. A significant expression of orality in the relation of the non-African language African novel (especially that of the European language) is the conscious intervention of indigenous African cultural elements in it. This is realised by bending the grammatical or semantic conventions of the foreign language to reflect local colour. In other cases, a wholesale interjection of the native language is employed. By bending the grammatical convention of the foreign language, the novelist imposes on the foreign language the peculiar speech pattern of their native community. An illustrative example is seen in Armah's *Fragments* (1967) when Naana, the grandmother of Baako, the protagonist, prays for his protection from death as he journeys to France: "Nanayom, you who have gone before, see that this body does not lead him into snares made for the death of spirits" (4). In this statement, the transliteration of the speaker's local language is derived to enact acknowledgeable traditional African speech aura. The statement above is also an example of prayer, an oral African marker which projects Africanness copiously in the novel.

The rupturing of the semantic conventions of the European language by the African novelist is also a case in point of the influence of orality. This is particularly noticed where an idea in the European language is given extended meaning in the handling of the novelist. Driss Chaibi's *Heirs to the Past* (1971) which was translated into English from Arabic, serves as a handy case in point in the extension of the meaning of the word "family" from its denotative sense of a nuclear unit: "Then she introduced me. To my paternal uncle, my maternal uncle, and my uncle by marriage, to my uncle five times removed, to all my aunts, my cousins even remote degree…to everybody considered to be members of the family who were present." (37)

Another marker of orality in the African novel is collective characterisation as against the emphasis on the individual in the European counterpart. This handling rehashes the traditional African idea of community in which the individual was considered as an integral part and was thus required to "give up" their "right" for the better alternative of communal co-existence. This tenet was realised in joint activities such as festivals; and the semantic extension of words such as "father," "mother," "brother" to suggest an arrangement in which there was the involvement of the larger society in one's existence was the function of the traditional African oral communalistic ethos. This factor is lent more weight because the individual was acknowledged to be accountable for all their actions which were considered to have social and spiritual implications within a cosmic view that made constant reference to the extra-terrestrial.

Other features of orality in the African novel include songs, myths, legends, invocations, marvellous realism (nomenclature of South American origin), the story-in-the-story device, the celebration of the traditional fauna and flora, and a myriad of other details that may exist in the traditional African imaginary.

A Silenced Oriental Voice: *The Arabian Nights* in African Literature

A major imaginative oral intertext in African literature which has been repeatedly ignored in African literary scholarship or discussions on African literary orality is *The Arabian Nights*. *The Arabian Nights*, otherwise known as *The/A Thousand and One Nights*, may be described as a pan-Oriental literary legacy with diverse cultural inputs including Indian, Persian, Turkish, Arab, Chinese, Jewish, Egyptian imaginative texts malleable enough for the use of several global cultural and creative purposes (see Haddawy 1995; Marzolph 2004; Irwin 2006). Though the origin of its oral beginning is not known, its earliest oral tradition is said to have emerged from certain Indian, Persian and Chinese merchants who travelled through the Chinese silk route, extending from Northern China to the Middle East, extending as far as Egypt (Crocker 1). Its earliest written version is reputed to a book of Persian tales entitled *Hazar Afsanah* (*A Thousand legends*), translated into Arabic around AD 850 with the title *Alf-Layla* (*Thousand Nights*) (see Haddawy 1995; Marzolph 2004; Irwin 2006). This Arabic version was greatly popularised in Iraq, Syria and Egypt, and around the twelfth century, it became known as *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah* (*A Thousand and One Nights*), its present-day label.

Its European entry occurred between 1704-1705, courtesy of its French translation by Antoine Galland, a French Orientalist (Haddawy 1995; Marzolph 2004). Indeed, Galland's translation triggered a series of other European versions to the extent that it became so popular as to assume its "imperialist" annexation by Europe, and indeed, the West. In writing *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994), Robert Irwin notes that "it might have been an easier, shorter chapter if I had discussed those writers who were not influenced by the *Nights*" (ix). In referencing this immense influence on European writing, Naji B. Oueijan proposes that "[a]bove all, their structure, the frame-tale including many stories within a tale, attracted the attention of the writers; it allowed them to add color and variety to their works, and it laid the bases of a new literary genre in the West, the novel" (4). Along this line, it could be argued that even if the only foreign influence on African literature was Western, this experience had its Oriental gene indirectly through *The Arabian Nights*.

The Arabian Nights however had its direct travel into African literature in pre-colonial times and through European importation into Africa during European colonialism. Thomas Geider points out that "the world of the *Nights* also includes those African cultures that were islamized centuries ago and that have remained in close contact with Arabic culture and literature ever since" (246), maintaining that as far as East Africa is concerned in this context, "[i]t is quite certain that the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* and other Oriental stories reached the Swahili-speaking world by sea" (247). Geider also gives indication of the *Nights*' written presence in Arabic among the Swahili in the following:

> Literacy was a constituent feature of the Swahili learned class of the nineteenth Century... In 1909 this fact was documented in a peculiar way when the German administration at that time confiscated the private libraries of six Swahili political opponents, whose holdings the German scholar Carl Becker undertook to register. Besides books on religion, law, grammar and astrology, Becker encountered booklets with stories and tales, among them single tales from the Nights such as the stories of Tawaddud, Ajîb and Gharîb, and Hasan of Basra...Though Becker neither specified which editions he saw, nor where they came from, an import of Arabic books from Cairo is generally indicated. At any rate, this incidence proves that the Nights could have reached the East African coast not only by oral communication but also by way of Arabic books (248).

Of the regions in Africa that came in contact with *The Arabian Nights* however, apparently the most impacted was North Africa whose Arabic culture and dominant Islamic religion provided a natural habitat for Arabic literature in diverse textual forms (Omotosho 1986; Talahite 1997). This reality allowed straightforward experimentations with classical Arabic or folkloric elements even in modern Arabic literature. Aside from the Quoran and classical Arabic imaginative forms such as poetry, Kole Omotosho notes that

> The other major influence on the literary tradition of Arabic is the collection of stories from the time of Harun ar-Rashid, *A Thousand and One Nights…* On the one hand is the Western attitude of the exuberance, the fabulous wealth, the limitless imagination made possible by the limitless desert and sometimes mindless, mysterious brutality of a mysterious and brutal environment… On the other hand, the stories, which survive as the Arabian Nights, crowned the development of Arabic prose (24-25).

This development is obvious in the structural and thematic developments of novels such as Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982) and Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987).

The indebtedness of African prose fiction to *The Arabian Nights* permeates a number of serially unacknowledged aesthetic experimentations that often come up as "striking," "shocking" and "unusual," equating the same imaginative effects the *Nights* rubbed on the Western narratives. Some "Sub-Saharan" prose fictions that have clearly benefitted from *The Arabian Nights* include D.O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (translated by Wole Soyinka as *Forest of A Thousand Daemons*) ([1938]1982); Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1952), *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (1964); Cyprian Ekwensi's *Samankwe in the Strange Forest* (1975), *Samankwe and the Highway Robbers* (1975), *Restless City and Christmas Gold* (1975); and André Brink's *Other Lives* (2008). In exploring his utilisation of imaginative resources from traditional Yoruba folktales, Bernth Lindfors recognises Fagunwa's quest-motif's intertextuality with non-African cultural texts like "*The Odyssey*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and certain episodes in the *Arabian Nights*" (12). Anthony Obilade's engagements with some

of Cyprian Ekwensi's prose narratives also reveal a series of the interconnections of *The Arabian Nights* with African literary expressions. In reading *Samankwe in the Strange Forest*, Obilade observes "the 'Arabian Nights' aura of the whole story" (128), and in unpacking the quest/"crime thriller" of *Samankwe and the Highway Robbers*, he contends that "[t]he story has all the flavor of 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' and Samankwe's feats would delight every school boy" (128). Still tracing Ekwensi's narratives' seemingly resigned indebtedness to *The Arabian Nights*, Obilade makes the following remark on *Restless City and Christmas Gold*: "This is a new direction in Ekwensi; the nearest thing to this in his writings appeared a long time ago in *An African Night's Entertainment*-a sober story of love filled with guests, and set in an 'Arabian Nights' type of environment" (129).

Amos Tutuola's *Feather Woman of the Jungle* is unambiguous about its structural reliance on *The Arabian Nights*. The sequential arrangement of the stories over the period of ten nights appropriates the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* in which Queen Scheherazade had to deliver herself from imminent death from Sultan Shariyah after the consummation of their marriage on their wedding day through suspenseful and awe-inspiring tales. Tutuola's quest-filled fiction which centralises the feather woman as its dominant narrative gaze recalls "The Adventures of Sindbad the Sailor" which depicts a folk-tale setting, the storyteller's need to travel so as to address an existential concern, allusion to his father as a narrative strategy necessitating travel, and the several strange encounters of the traveller. It is remarkable that novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* notably aped this *Nights*' plot structure, and this singular story might have also fed the quest imagination of contemporary African prose narratives (albeit in some other innovative ways) such as Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* (2004), and Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2010).

Conclusion

It goes without saying that African literature is an exhibition and dramatisation of aesthetic and ideological details whose vibrancy has been functional through the colour and culture of contributions which give no credit to a singular "Master" donor, but thrives in the collective embrace of history in which the Occident, Orient and the indigenous African have played their parts. African literature is an imaginative universe whose far-reaching range might never be fully covered through research. However, decolonial scholarly responsibility demands that such an arrant "scholarly" claim as the age-long Eurocentric two-world confinement of African literature be frontally and affirmatively contested, ruptured and reset.

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