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ORAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *LES SOLEILS DES INDEPENDENCES* AND *ALLAH H'EST PAS OBLIGE*

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Introduction

The study of oral narrative techniques is a stylistic exercise; a study of style. The usage of some narrative techniques whether oral or literary by an author in preference to other ones, is a stylistic choice. Each writer chooses devices from a set of alternatives. Style is according to Marouzeau (1963:9-10)." The attitude the writer adopts vis-à-vis the material that language supplies to him…. a preference given to this or that expression."

Style is further defined as:"The way in which the action is handled at any given point, the selection and arrangement of words, images, sentences, paragraphs, larger unit, so as to simultaneously define and enrich the action as it is unfolding" (Daiches, 1984:34).

Stylistics according to Leech and Short (1981:13) is the "exhaustive study of the use of the language in literary works", while Turner (1973:7) sees it as ″that part of linguistic which concentrates on the variation in the use of language″.

Stylistics has over the years looked at the ″what″, the ″how″ and the ″why″ of the work of literature. Two broad areas of stylistic analysis have come to stay which are literary stylistics and linguistic stylistics. Literary stylistics is the older and traditional form of literary criticism, while linguistic stylistics is relatively new. The latter looks more at the "how" while the former looks more at the "what" in a literary text. But Osundare (2003:36) rightly agrees that the two, in essence:

> *Have the common goal of boosting comprehension*
> *by promoting the text as transitive phenomenon*
> *and language as a rich and enriching activity.*

This is because the ″what″ and the ″how″ and the ″why″ can hardly be separated. What an author is saying goes together with how he says it and why he says it. Indeed, as message and medium are complementary, so are also literacy stylistics and linguistic stylistics intimately interwoven. For as Osundare (2003:36) puts it:

> *How much of a linguistic can a good literary critic afford*
> *not to be? How deep is the insight of linguistic analysis*
> *devoid of the benefits of literary criticism?*

In the light of all this, this paper which seeks to unravel the sundry oral narrative devices used by Kourouma in *Les Soleils des indépendences* (LSI) and Allah n'est pas obligé (ANO) falls within the search for the "how" and "why" of stylistics. Oral narrative techniques as used in this paper do not fall within the area of narratology as expounded by Gerard Genette(1972, 1983) which is a theory that seeks to unravel in texts the modes, the instances, the levels and the time of narration in order to establish the distance the narrator takes vis-à-vis his story, the functions of the narrator, as well as the order and speed of the narration, among other things. The unraveling of the oral narrative techniques in this paper is aimed at establishing the level of African oral influence in the narration of the stories in the affected texts. The paper will study each novel in turn before attempting a comparative analysis.

***Les soleils des indépendences* (LSI)**

In the capital of the Republic of Ebonies Coast, Fama, a Malinké prince "born in gold, food honour and women, educated to prefer gold from gold…" (p.12) leads a life of barrenness with his wife Salimata, and is reduced to begging by "the era of independence". In this miserable situation, Fama learns about the death of his cousin Lacina in Togobala, his native village. Togobola is in the neighbouring People Republic of Nikanai.

Fama goes there for the fortieth day funeral ceremony. After the ceremony he returns to the capital in Ebonies Republic with the youngest of the wives of the late Lacina. Fama has the

intention of just saying goodbye to friends and relations in the capital before going back to Togobala to settle down and live the rest of his life as a customary chief.

But in the capital, an assassination plot is uncovered by the state and Fama is arrested and put in cell along many other persons. He is later sentenced to 20 years in jail for failing to narrate a dream he had which endangered the security and the future of the country. But he is released earlier than anticipated. And though money, honour and promises are showered on him, Fama rejects all and decides to go to Togobala. But at the border of the two Republics, Fama is wounded by a sacred crocodile and dies without realizing his dream of restoring the Horodougou kingdom.

LSI is a satire on the disillusionment of post-colonial Africa. It is a ridicule of the failures of the era of independence as well as a ridicule of the retrogressive features of traditional feudal Africa.

Allah n'est pas obligé

Allah n'est pas obligé (ANO) is the self-related story of young Birahiman, who dropped out of school in primary four. His ambition to become rich and the search for an aunt of his, Maha, leads him out of home. Birahima leaves Ivory Coast and goes into adventure in Liberia. Yacouba, a fetish-priest, who later becomes his friend, leads him into this adventure with the promise of assisting him to meet his aunt in Liberia. Once in Liberia, Birahima is recruited as a child-soldier in order to survive.

The author uses journalistic style via Birahima to talk about the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone with all the attending violence, disruptions, killings, debauchery, amputations, and lawlessness which characterize war situations. Birahima eventually escapes and returns to Ivory Coast empty-handed but at least alive to tell his long story. In ANO, Kourouma gives a sad picture of recent tribal civil wars in Africa which are inevitable corollary implications of decades of misrule, injustice, corruption and fruitlessness, characteristic of independent Africa.

Oral Narrative Techniques in Les *Soleils des Indépendences (LSI)*

***** ***The Author as Story Teller***

In LSI, Kourouma writes giving words to a protagonist and other characters.

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He writes as if he were part of the unfolding story.

"Disons le plutôt en malinké – " p.9 (Lets rather say it in malinké)

"Parlons en rapidement plutôt (Let's rather say it rapidly).

The expression "let us" in these and other statements in the work makes the reader to feel as if he had before him a person telling the story.

He also asks questions as if inviting the reader to contribute to the intrigue.

"Savez-vous ce qui advient?" (p.13) (Do you know what followed?).

These statements are not credited to any of the characters in the work but used by the author as part of his narrative technique. The technique consists in engaging the reader, the audience in the unfolding drama.

The use of dialogue

Dialogue is one of the narrative techniques used in conventional novel. It makes reading and understanding easier, by making the paragraphs and pages less stuffy and allows the author to speak his mind and pass his message through the characters. For instance, when Fama says "Tous les riches, les gros toubabs et Syriens, les Présidents, les Secrétaires Généraux, auraient dû donner à manger aux chômeurs…" (pp 61-62), (All the rich people, the big toubabs and Syrians, the Presidents, the Secretary Generals, ought to feed the jobless), one knows that it is the author who is criticizing the socio-economic and political situation of his time and milieu. Kourouma uses this technique of dialogue in LSI between two or more characters:

> *"Maître et fils, je t'abandonne là Euh! Euh!*
> *Nul ne connaît tous les dessous de ce monde des soleils*
> *des indépendences. Un jour c'est trop long.*
>
> *-mais, Balla, tu es encore très loin de la mort, retorqua*
> *Fama.*
>
> *_Laissez-moi parler; le soleil commence à monter.*
> *Euh! Euh! Qui une fois t'a dit s'être entendu avec la*
> *Mort sur un terme?" p. 147*
>
> *(-Master and son, I abandon you there, Euh!Euh*

nobody knows the hidden intrigues of this era of independence. A day is too long…

-But, Balla, you are still far from death. Fama retorted.

-Let me talk; the sun is rising. Euh! Euh! Who has ever told you that he has once agreed with death on a term).

This dialogue took place between Fama and the aged fetishman Balla in Togobala when Fama went there for cousin Lacina´s burial. In the scene, Balla, tired of living because of the independence and its daily challenges and pains, expressed his desire to die. Kourouma is hereby picturing the era of independence as so bad and so hopeless that citizens prefer to die rather than continue to suffer insults, denial and degradation of life. The dialogue is a sort of mise-en scène which reduces the distance between the reader and the writer.

****** ***Use of Suspense***

Another narrative device used by Kourouma in LSI is that of ″trois points de suspension″. It is an oral technique which keeps the reader in suspense and gives him the assignment of filling-in the gap in his mind.

It consists in suspending abruptly the flow of ideas in a statement in order to create the effect of suspense. In the following example, the author relates how Fama was denied ascendance to the throne of his fathers by a distant cousin who knew how to ″play the game″ with the colonial administrators.

″Un cousin lointain qui pour réussir marabouta, tua sacrifices sur sacrifices,, intrigua, mentit et se rabaissa à tel point que…″p. 22.

(A distant cousin who in order to succeed consulted oracles, killed sacrifices upon sacrifices, made intrigues, lied and humiliated himself to the extent that…)

Here, the author is criticizing the injustice and favouratism on the part of leaders, but also the extent of debasement and lobbying Africans can indulge in to get favour and cheat fellow countrymen.

The fact that the first and the last sentences of the novel end with these ″trois points de suspension″, makes the use of this technique very striking. (p. 9 and p. 196).

****** ***Division of the novel in chapters***

Kourouma departs from the conventional way of writing novels by dividing LSI into parts and chapters. The chapters bear titles. These titles are sentences culled from the body of the story in the chapter. Some of the titles are as long as four lines. Some are in form of questions.

Examples:

- *Les soleils sonnant l´harmattan et Fama, avec des nuits herissées de punaises et de Mariam, furent tous pris au piège; mais la bâtardise ne gagna pas˝ (Part II chapter IV)*

  The suns sounding harmattan and Fama, with nights ruffled by bed bugs and Mariam, were all trapped up; but the bastardness did not win) (Part II chapter IV).

- *˝Où a-t-on vu Allah s´appitoyer sur un malheur? (Part 1 Chapter IV)*

  (Where have you seen Allah showing pity over a misfortune)?

(Part I Chapter IV)

This narrative technique is interesting as it makes the reader eager to discover the very spot where the statement in the title is drawn from. This technique also makes the presentation of the novel less stuffy and the reading more inviting.

******* ***Detailed description of setting***

Vivid description of physical settings and sceneries is one other narrative device used by Kourouma in LSI. The author has a way of inviting the natural surroundings, and phenomena such as sun, trees, hills, valleys, birds, wind, harmattan, building, road, night, day and morning, to be part of the intrigue.

Here is a typical paragraph on p. 106.

- *Les aurores d'harmattan sont toujours longues à cause du froid du brouillard persistants et calmes aussi,….. Fama ne l'écoutait pas, les pensées du prince sont ailleurs*

  (Daybreaks in harmattan are always long because of cold, and fog which are persistent and calm also……

Fama was not listening to it all, the thoughts of the prince were elsewhere)

* ***Narrative sequences***

Fama's story was caught somewhere relatively deep into the drama. He was already reduced to begging by the socio-political situation of his time. It all actually started with colonization, but the author prefers to focus on the post-independence era. And from where the story started, the sequences followed up in a progressive manner until the tragic end of the protagonist, Fama Doumbouya.

Here, it is not a hero that survives the troubles of life to tell his story like in ANO; rather, it is the case of a victim of circumstances that was consumed eventually by these circumstances.

Kourouma certainly, uses and dumps Fama not only to prove that the independence so much celebrated by Africans was barren, but also to preach that a return to either the colonial era or to the outright pre-colonial traditional Africa is impossible.

Oral Narrative Techniques in *Allah n´est pas obligé* (ANO)

The narrative techniques in ANO are a bit different from those of LSI, but the two novels are influenced by the African oral rhythm and so share some common features. The choice of the techniques in ANO must have been influenced by the theme, the setting and the characters involved. ANO is about civil war in an Anglophone country and the protagonist is a semi-literate francophone boy.

* ***The Use of protagonist-story teller***

In ANO, the story is written in the first person singular with the use of the pronoun ″je″ (I), in the novel, credited to Birahima who relates his personal life experience.

Even though the ″je″ is swallowed here and there in Birahima's statements, one is still aware that the story is said in the first person singular.The instances where the pronoun ″I″ is omitted are where Birahima, the Primary three drop-out, speaks pidgin French, ″le petit nègre″ or is mimicking the urban metropolitan French:

´M´appelle Birahima″ p.9 (am called Birahima)
″Suis p´tit nègre″ p.9 (am small negro).

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So, in ANO, Kourouma gives utterance to Birahima through whom he reveals the consequences of tribal wars characteristic of post-independence Africa. It is a story-telling device which captivates the reader´s attention and gives force to the message.

* *Narrative Brackets and Episode Boundaries*

The story in the novel is narrated as if it were packaged together between two brackets, the brackets being a statement-paragraph with which the story is started and is ended. The protagonist story-teller begins on p.9 and ends on p.224 with the same statement:

> *"Je décide le titre définitif et complet*
> *de mon blablabla est Allah n´est pas obligé*
> *d´être juste dans toutes ses choses ici bas…*
> *Et d´abord…. Et un… M´appelle |Birahima*
> *Suis p´tit nègre…*
> *Et deux… Mon école n´est pas arrivé*
> *Loin; j´ai coupé cours élémentaire deux…"*
> *(p.9 and p.224).*

> *(I decide the definite title of my blablabla*
> *is Allah is not compelled to be just in all*
> *his things on earth…*
> *Firstly…and one. Am called Birahima*
> *Am small Negro…*
> *And two…my school did not go far;*
> *I dropped out in Primary Four…)*

It is as if the author opened a bracket at the beginning of the story which he closes on the last page of the narration. The effect is to remind the reader of how the story began, and of the fact that the reader should not express any chock at the level and crudity of language since the protagonist did not go beyond primary four, and since he was just a little boy, a victim of circumstances.

- **Engaging the Audience – a story telling device**

The author, via the story- teller Birahima, engages the reader as if in a true face-to- face story-telling situation. For instance one can read on page 10:

> *"Et quatre- je veux bien n'excuser de*
> *vous parler vis-à-vis comme ça. Parce que*
> *je ne suis qu'un enfant. Suis dix ou*

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douze ans… et je parle beaucoup".

Apart from presenting Birahima as a story-teller, conscious of the fact that in Africa it is the elders that tell stories while young ones listen and learn, Kourouma makes him to apologize for the "effrontery".

Moreover, the first three chapters are ended with similar statements in the like of the following:

"Je m'arrête ici aujourd'hui, j'en ai marre"
(I am stopping here today, I am fed up)

The statement is so placed as if to tell a listening audience to adjourn till the following day for the continuation of the story. It is a sort of narrative episode boundary used by the author to mark the end of episodes in the novel.

The essence of these techniques is to captivate as much as possible the attention of the reader and to make the story as lively and as inviting as possible. It is a device which gives the novel a flavour of orality.

* **Narrative Sequences**

The sequences of the narration in ANO follow a straight-line feature. The story is taken from when the protagonist dropped out of school, then followed by the events that led to his going to Liberia and how he became engulfed in the civil war as a child-soldier. Like the protagonist rightly says on p. 224, the narration flows from A to Z, not in any other sequence, until his survival to tell his story.

"C'est alors qu'a germé dans ma
caboche (ma tête) cette idée mirifique de
raconter mes aventures de A à Z p. 224

(Then grew in my caboche (head) that marvelous
idea to relate my adventures from A to Z)

This makes for a smooth reading. The reader is able to follow the sequences of events without having to labour on reconstructing the natural flow of the intrigues in his mind. Some narrative styles do start from the pick of intrigue and later take the pain of taking readers back to the

beginning of event, before coming back for the epilogue and denounement. Here, it is a straight-forwardly related story.

*** The Use of Four Dictionaries**

The fact that Birahima holds four different dictionaries and swims through four languages or levels of language is a narrative device used by the author. The essence may be to facilitate the position of Birahima as a translator story-teller and also to ease the efforts of the reader at deciphering the mixture of languages and levels of language.

> *Le Petit Robert pour le Français: L`Inventaire des Particularités Lexicales du Français en Afrique Noire, Le Harraps pour le pidgin. Ce sont ces dictionnaires qui me servent pour Ce bla bla bla" pp. 221-222.*

The author uses the four dictionaries as an effective narrative device. Each new word or perceived hard expression is explained in brackets from the appropriate dictionary, and indication is given in most cases to the dictionary used:

Examples

- *It`s sont arrivés avec un brancard de fortune*
- *Pour prendre le bébé (on dit de fortune quand le brancard a été fait vite et par manque. C`est dans le Petit Robert)" p. 60*

- *"Plusieurs lampes-tempêtes éclairaient. C`était féerique. (Féerique, grot mot de Larousse, Signifie tient du merveilleux)" pp. 62-63*
  "II envoyait de l'argent au village de Togobala, à ses parents, aux griots, et à l`almany (D`après Inventaire des particularities, chef religieux)" p. 75.

  (They arrived with an emergency stretcher to carry the baby (we say emergency stretcher when the stretcher is hurriedly made and for lack. It is in Le Petit Robert).

  Several hurricane-lamps provided light. It was fairy -like (Fairy –like, big word of Larouse, means marvelous)

  He was sending money to Togobala village, to his parents, to the griots and to the almany, religious leader (According to

Inventaire des Particularités).

Birahima even refers to a word or expression already explained earlier in his story by explaining it again in brackets as in the following example:

> *…on tuait les gens comme si personne ne valait le pet d`une vielle grand-mère. (Au village, quand quelque chose n`a pas d`importance, on dit qu`il ne vaut pas le pet d`une vielle grand-mère. Je l`explique encore" p.63.*

> *(…People were being killed as if nobody was worth more than the fart of an old grand-ma (in the village we say something is not worth than the fart of grand mother when it has no importance. I have explained it before. I'm explaining it again).*

He also refers to already mentioned words by simply saying "I have already explained it". This is what he says about the body of a fellow child soldier killed in the war:

> *"Le corps du kid fut exposé sous l`appatam tout le reste de la journée. (Appatam existe dans Investaire des particularités. Je l` ai déjà expliqué)" p. 62*

> *(The kid's corpse was exposed under the hut for all the rest of the day (hut exists in Inventaires des particularités. I have already explained it).*

*** Division into Chapters**

ANO is sub-divided into chapters numbered I to VI without any title attached to them. This device lightens up the write up, as the reader is able to pause at intervals demarcated by these chapters. This technique also makes the book inviting and less scaring.

Remarks and Conclusion

Oral narrative techniques in LSI and ANO show many areas of similarity as well as areas of dissimilarity. Both novels are divided into chapters, but while LSI's chapters bear title, the chapters in ANO do not. In both novels Kourouma uses various story-telling devices. ANO is written in the first person, where the protagonist posits as the story-teller, whereas LSI is written

in the third person, where the author himself is the narrator. But in both cases the oral device of engaging the audience (readers) is richly used.

The use of dialogue is more prominent in LSI than it is in ANO. Indeed, while in LSI the author uses dialogue to bridge the gap between himself and the reader, in ANO, it is the protagonist story teller that does the bridging for him.

Also, the narrations in the two texts do not follow the same sequence patterns with the way the stories unfold. The story and the narration in ANO follow the same linear sequence, but in LSI, Kourouma catches up with the story of Fama deep into the flow of events. So, while in ANO the author needs not make any retrospective reference to Birahima's life, in LSI, references to Fama's past are needed to illuminate issues, in the course the narration of the intrigues.

The use of four dictionaries by young Birahima in ANO marks a departure from the style in LSI. This device is necessary in ANO to explain the many loan words, Malinké words and Petit-nègre used in the text.

To note in conclusion that the highlighted devices show that Kourouma's narrative style is highly influenced by oral African literature and that the style rooted in African orality introduced by Kourouma in his first novel LSI in 1970 found its ripest expression in ANO, the last novel he published in 2000, before his death in 2003.

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