Chapter 2

Narrative and the Novel: Oral-Written Continuum

Many African novels offer us a glimpse of the interface where orality and literacy appear as coeval dimensions of modern African reality.— Olakunle George (*The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, 17).

2.1 Introduction

This chapter lays the groundwork for the argument that in the construction of the literary narrative, Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri appropriate the resources of an oral culture and life. Construction of the written narrative is a blending of the elements taken from the 'oral' and the 'literary' thereby creating a new framework for novel writing. The beginning of 'literacy' does not suggest the end of 'oral culture'. With reference to the African societies it could be said that the latter is a vital force in shaping the literary. The written narrative is a continuation of the oral narrative under changed circumstances in a different form and shape with different nuances. In the context of traditional African societies, the changes brought about by time have resulted in the replacement of face-to-face contact by impersonal relations and speech by writing. Instead of two exclusionary practices this chapter posits the 'oral' and the 'literary' as complementary to each other (with reference to the novel in Africa). The literary is often derived from the oral and also preserves it by serving as an encoded repository. It is not the primacy of 'scripture' over 'orature' and vice-versa but the continuation of the latter in a codified from. In the process of transmission of the resources of an oral culture through the literary, several oral features, such as, sounds and rhythm of particular cultures are lost. As Gera says, "transferring oral experience into a written mode, and that too in an alien language is not just a simple technical process. It is an extremely complex event, in the process of which there is a loss of 'innocence' and 'desecration'" (Gera 127). Therefore it needs to be realised that the literary transcription of oral cultures is not an easy or simple process. It has its own complexities and limitations.

2.2 Implications of 'Narrative'

Any study of narrative has to begin with the acknowledgement that it is impossible to compress this amorphous term within the boundary of a definition. There are diversified as well as interrelated notions of what a narrative is. The word 'narratology' is used to imply a systematic knowledge of narration or narrative. To narrate is to give an account or to tell the story of events or experiences, and so on, in speech or in writing. Narration or narrative refers to the act or process of narrating. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan suggests that the term 'narration' first and foremost implies a "communication process in which the narrative as a message is transmitted by addresser to addressee" (Rimmon-Kenan 2). For Robert Scholes, James Phelan and Robert Kellog, narrative is a major kind of literature and comprises of all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 4).

This study adopts a schematic definition of 'narrative' from Ato Quayson who sees a narrative as "constituted of a story (expressible in different plot structures), by the presence of characters (life-like or otherwise), of setting or spectacle (acting as mere historical/sociological/economic background or animated and adapted as part of characterisation), and of a narrator who strikes up various types of relationships with the characters and the reader" (Quayson 1997b: 140). Critics like Gerard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon Kenan have identified 'story' as one of the basic aspects of narrative fiction. What Genette labels as 'historie', 'recit', and 'narration' (Genette 1980: 71-76) of a narrative are respectively labelled by Rimmon Kenan as 'story', 'text' and 'narration' (Rimmon Kenan 3). If the story is an integral aspect of a narrative (both 'oral' and 'literary'), the elements which shape the story are also central in shaping the narrative. It is with this premise in mind that this thesis makes a comparative study of the strategies of narrative construction in the selected novels of Tutuola and Okri.

The knowledge of narrative forms is crucial in contemporary times when scholars, academicians and critics are preoccupied with learning the traditional modes of narrative that are available in the erstwhile colonies of Europe, now labelled as the Third World. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, a prominent Indian novelist writing in Assamese, holds that during the last two centuries, the influence of the western narrative forms made the Third World writers

adopt them for narrating their own events or experiences. But after these forms have been naturalised and assimilated into the native literary environment, "the sensitive writers and critics, caught in a wave of new awakening, following the national freedom movements, began to discover hitherto inconspicuous features in their respective traditions" (Bhattacharyya 31). Asian countries like India, China, Japan, and others possess rich oral and written traditional forms of narration which can be reassessed for the purpose of narrating events and experiences of the modern age. While Basho's *Haiku* and Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*[1] depict the uniqueness of the Japanese tradition, the poems of Li Bai and Tu Fu and Cao Xueqin's fiction[2] *Dream of the Red Chamber* give an insight into the classical Chinese literary achievement. The epic tradition of India is exemplified by the epics of Valmiki, Vyasa, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti[3]; and the tradition of incorporating elements of fiction in prose-writings is embodied in the works of Banabhatta, Dandin and Subandhu[4]. Dseagu says that, "There are records to show that the novel was already well known in India before AD 1000. According to most scholars the Vedic Period was when the best Indian novels appeared" (Dseagu 586). In the regional vernacular and oral folk traditions there are a number of narrative forms practiced all over India.

The historian Hayden White has given special emphasis to the fact that history is written in the form of certain kinds of narrative and that the task of the historian is to "charge...events" with a "comprehensible plot structure" (White 1978: 92). Science is also composed of stories; astronomy attempts to narrate the beginnings of the universe while geology seeks to tell the story of formation of mountains, hills, rivers, valleys and so on. It could be said that the simplest way to define a narrative is as a series of events in a specific order—with a beginning, middle, and an end[5]. But narratives also involve what the narratologist Gerard Genette has called anachronisms—flashbacks, jumps forward (prolepses), the slowing down and speeding up of events and other distortions of the linear time sequence (Genette 1988: 48-52).

Ross Chambers claims that, "to tell a story is to exercise power" (Chambers 1984: 50). Chambers argues that storytelling is often used, as in the case of Scheherazade (the narrator in *The Arabian Nights*), as an 'oppositional' practice, a practice used by the weak against the strong: 'oppositional narrative', he claims, "in exploiting the narrative situation, discovers a

power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations but to change its other (the narratee), through the achievement and maintenance of authority, in ways that are potentially radical" (Chambers 1991:11). The social and political importance of stories is eloquently expressed by the old man in Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, "The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards—each is important in its own way" (Achebe 1987: 123-4). But, the man says, "the story is chief among his fellows":

> The story is our escort; without it we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we owe the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from the cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours Achebe 1987: 124).

Stories own us, and tell us, Achebe suggests (in the extract above), as much as we own or tell stories. There are many questions of narrative, then, which may be considered in relation to literature: temporality, linearity and causality, so-called omniscience, point of view, desire and power. Narrative down the ages has been a series of innovations and writers have experimented, moulded and cast it into new shapes rendering it in new patterns[6]. These kinds of renderings are generically more complimentary to the novel, which is regarded as the most protean of literary forms. Of the many genres of literature, the novel is an extended narrative. In the gamut of postcolonial writings cutting across the countries that were erstwhile colonies, one could say, that the narrative has been used as a vehicle for self-expression that challenges the fabricated images of these countries imposed by a Eurocentric world-view. However, instead of countering the fabrications of a Eurocentric perspective in the manner of Achebe or Ngugi, Tutuola and Okri depict the workings of an African ontological and cosmological system in their written narratives which serve as a tool to critique the Eurocentric perspective[7].

2.3 Oral Pedigree of Literary Narrative: A Continuum

This section shows that the literary narrative has its antecedents in its oral counterparts. Even in literary cultures, the emergence of the written narrative has its roots in the oral.

Ato Quayson's enlightening scholarship in *Strategic Transformations* points out that one of the most abiding interests of African literary criticism has been to demonstrate the continuity that African literature written in Europhone languages has with indigenous sources (Quayson 1997a: 1). He says that "the peculiar configuration of orality and literacy in African contexts lends a special quality to African literature" (Quayson 1997a: 2). In the essay "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka", Abiola Irele examines the ways in which these writers make use of Yoruba oral traditions in their work and intimates that their writings establish a bridge between the traditional cultural heritage and the culture of a Western metropolis. With reference to the West African novel, Emmanuel Obiechina in *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* shows how the socio-cultural factors of an oral society leads to the conditioning of the novel in that particular region.

Tension between the written letter and the spoken word has a long history. The Greek philosopher Plato in his *Phaedras* locates the beginning of writing—the art of letters not in Europe but in Africa. In this philosophical treatise Plato invents the myth of Thamus and attributes the invention of the art of letters to the Egyptian God Thoth. Thamus sees the invention not as a "medicine to strengthen memory but an inferior substitute for it" (Plato 67). It is in Plato's *Phaedras* that Derrida locates the beginnings of the phonocentric moment to establish the natural priority of speech. (Derrida 6-26). Most of the ancient cultures, even those that possess a written script, have displayed a phonocentric preference. If Indian *shruti* texts deify speech, African oral traditions invest sound with magical qualities (O' Flaherty 62). In the first chapter of *Three Great African Novelists* titled "Writing as Pharmakon: Reinscribing Orality", Anjali Gera makes a case for speech over writing. Gera urges that until Derrida established writing as the natural condition of language, European thought too had harboured a phonocentric bias. This resulted in writing's being relegated to a secondary derivativeness (Gera 11). Walter J. Ong in *Interfaces of the Word* opines that writing is "a technology consciously and reflectively contrived" (Ong 1977: 130). He insists that "in all human cultures the spoken word appears as the closest sensory equivalent of fully developed interior thought. Thought is nested in speech" (Ong 1977: 138). Writing is a "matter of tools outside us and seemingly foreign to us" (Ong 1977: 139). In all these, speech is posited on the side of truth, self-presence, and authenticity; whereas writing is associated with all things

negative. The natural priority of speech is "arranged on a privileged relation between the spoken word and meaning that writing is believed to violate" (Norris 31).

Henry Louis Gates Jr. in "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes" examines the process by which European cultures subvert the privileged position of speech set up by Plato to establish a logocentrism in order to make writing a weapon and to belittle the culture of the 'other'. The word on paper becomes the tangible sign of reason which is used to establish the superiority of a literary culture:

> Without writing no repeatable sign of the working of reason or mind could exist. Without memory no mind, no history could exist. Without history no humanity, no thought consistently from Vico to Hegel could exist (Gates Jr. 11).

The stalwarts of European philosophy viz. Hegel, Hume, Locke, Voltaire and Kant have used writing as a benchmark to denigrate the orality of 'other' cultures. For Hegel, Africa did not exist as Europe did; nor could it claim to have a past:

> In this main portion of Africa there can really be no history. There is a succession of accidents and surprises….There is no goal, no state there that one follows, no subjectivity, but only a series of subjects who destroy each other. There has as yet been little comment upon how strange a form of self-consciousness this represents (Hegel 91).

Postcolonial critics like Edward Said see the written text as an extension of imperial ideology and a medium of silencing and control. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said uncovers the workings of power/culture nexus in the production of knowledge by examining the canonical texts of Europe. He traces in Western representations "a systematic language for dealing with and studying Africa for the West" (Said 1993: 233)[8]. Gauri Viswanathan's examination of the coloniser's literary culture in *Masks of Conquest* reveals the gradual constitution of English literature as the repository of humanist values that the native is encouraged to cultivate. In tune with Said, Elleke Boehmer argues that "to assume control over a territory or a nation is not only to exert political or economic power; it was also to have imaginative command" (Boehmer 5). Achebe admits of writing back to the canonical texts of the Empire when he speaks of replying to representations of Africa such as Cary's *Mister Johnson* (Achebe 1975: 70). As postcolonial writers redo the tropes of the West, they restore,

in Said's words, an "African Africa" (Said 1993: 255). On the top of the postcolonial agenda, therefore, is to tell a story "that could not be told for us [Africans] by anyone else" (Achebe 1975: 70).

An influential book in the study of narrative literature is *The Nature of Narrative* authored by Scholes, Phelan and Kellog. These critics argue that an absence of written documentation does not necessarily imply the absence of culture:

> In an age such as ours, when the ability to read and write is common and the illiterate are the culturally and economically deprived, experience would seem to confirm an association of illiteracy with cultural impoverishment. But to generalize solely from our modern experience, to imagine that all unlettered individuals have in every age been the culturally deprived, is illogical and untrue….not every age has…idealized the inked shapes of the scribes's and the compositor's craft (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 18).

Problematising the encounter between 'African storytelling' and 'Western writing', Anjali Gera says, "If scribal idiom translates orality negatively as the non-written, a similar othering occurs in orality's attempt to domesticate the written to its mythopoeic frame. The juxtaposition of the oral and the written, more than reiterating the colonial glottophobia swallowing native 'oral aural' cultures, establishes 'othering' as a function of language" (Gera 17). She argues that in Nigerian fiction, a lament for the wisdom of orality overtaken by the conquering drive of writing coexists with the recognition of the necessity for writing, "After the initial stage of fanatical resistance to scriptocentric violence, there is a recognition of the necessity of writing if one is to participate in the new aristocracy of power" (Gera 19). Thus, Gera insists that "the first task of postcolonialism is to wrest the right to self-representation by seizing the coloniser's tools of distortion [i.e. writing]…to turn his tools against himself (Gera 15).

Kofi Awoonor states in an interview:

> I've always felt perhaps involuntarily I should take my poetic sensibility…from the tradition that sort of feeds my language because in my language there is a lot of poetry, there is a lot of music and there is a lot of literary art even though not written and so I take my cue from the old tradition and begin to break it into English, to give it a new dimension as it were (Awoonor qtd. in Duerden & Pieterse 30).

This statement by Awoonor displays "the attitude of the major African writers to African traditional life and culture and its documentation in literature" (Gera 26). Tutuola and Okri do not represent a protest tradition in the way writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Sembene Ousmane and others do. Tutuola sees the literary narrative as a fit medium for the transmission, propagation and preservation of his oral culture vis-à-vis a changing society. As a "teller of tales", Tutuola is "the instrument through which the tradition takes on a tangible shape" (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 53). Okri uses the literary narrative as a medium of self-introspection to look at a Nigeria under a new system of governance. In his task of presenting a critique of contemporary Nigerian reality, Okri's work remains steeped in indigenous images and traditional oral culture. By weaving the folktale (oral) tradition into a literary tradition, Tutuola synthesises the features of both modes. The stylistic sophistication and linguistic complexity of Okri's novels show his close association with a literary culture. However, his credit as a novelist lies in the way in which he assimilates the timelessness of oral cultures and rituals by making them an indispensable part of the structural and symbolic design of his novels. Stressing on the nuances in the relationship between 'oral' and 'written', Ato Quayson says:

> it is clear that to speak of the oral background to literary writings is to implicitly invoke a notion of the intervention of writing in a conceptual arena of flux…it is useful to conceptualise this as a process by which writing attempts a stabilisation of flux in oral traditions. This process is by no means a one-way street. It may be shown that the configurations in literary writings also feed back into the oral context even if not to the same degree" (Quayson 1997a: 13).

Olakunle George opines that literacy is a correlate of orality. He points out that the orality-literacy dyad is a central trope in the work of artists and a recurrent category in the analyses of African literatures:

> Many influential writers acknowledge the importance of orature as background and context of their creative work within the culture of print. The oral-literate dyad invites our attention, then, as the site of deep existential investment for African peoples, and an analytical category in literary studies (George 15).

In their comprehensive study of narrative literature of the West, Scholes, Phelan and Kellog posit that in the Western world written narrative literature "emerges from an oral tradition, maintaining many of the characteristics of oral narrative for some time" (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 12). Instead of categorical classifications between 'orature' and 'literature' they use the word 'literature' in a broad sense, without regard to its etymology, to mean "all verbal art, both oral and written" (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 18). They argue that "oral and written narratives are formally distinct, and profoundly so, but they are not culturally distinct in any meaningful way" (Scholes, Phelan Kellog 18). Making a study of Milman Parry[9], they point out that literature falls into two great parts not so much because there are two kinds of culture, but because there are two kinds of form: one part of literature is oral, the other written (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 18). They insist that, "the emergence of the written narrative in the West from an oral tradition often takes the form of heroic poetic narrative which we call epic— an amalgamation of a variety of narrative forms, viz. myth, quasi-historical legend and fictional folktale" (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 12). Again, Olakunle George opines that a certain relationship to the domain of orality also governs established accounts of the emergence of the novel in Western European literary history. He observes that as a literate mode, the novel evolved from the domain of orature, which is the domain of folklore, epic, and romance[10] (George 15). African novels, George claims, enact the transition between orality and literacy in contemporary African societies (George 28). The link with orality often serves writers as a "rhetorically effective authentication of the labour of novelistic representation. Indeed, it is as though to stray too far from orality and its connotations is to give up a category that should ground modern African literary creativity" (George 16). Orality in African novels operates as sign of a "continuing interaction between tradition and modernity" (George 17).

Narrative in its 'oral' form has always existed in the African societies. With respect to the oral cultures of the traditional African societies, Abiola Irele points out the centrality of the mythical tale of the oral epics viz. the Sundiata epic of Mali and the Ozidi saga of the Ijaws. Again, folktales and fables have a didactic and reflexive purpose that informs the sensibility of a pre-literate oral society and indicates a primary level of the imaginative faculty of the people belonging to an oral culture. Irele argues that the appeal of the novel as a written narrative has to do with the "integrative function" that these oral narratives have always

played in the traditional African societies (Irele 2009:1). Literary writing in Africa performs an integration of "aesthetic traditionalism" (Irele 2001: 58). Ato Quayson asserts:

> Orality in Africa is not just a mode of speech different from writing, but undergirds an entire way of life. The traditional esthetic forms that abound within African orality impact upon everyday environment…African writing takes inspiration from these resources of orality in order to establish a distinctive account of the African world (Quayson 2009: 159).

To quote Irele again, "the world [in the novel] being represented and the characters who populate that world are to various degrees formed by an order of life that is still overwhelmingly grounded in dimensions of orality" (Irele 2001: 39-66).

The essay "Orality in Literacy: Some Historical Paradoxes of Reading" by Matei Calinescu argues that literacy (both reading and writing) have always relied on resources of orality. In the history of the evolution of literacy, these have sometimes been quite explicit, as in the early Latin and Greek scripts which did not have spaces between words and so perforce had to be read aloud to make sense of their meanings. In more modern times, he argues, it is important to note the degree to which literacy always depends on the possibility for oralisation. This is because processes of verbal recall, either in the form of paraphrasing, summarising, rephrasing or oral commentary are a valued part of any literate culture. It is not idle to note, in addition, that dictionaries often have phonetic transcriptions of words as if in a permanent mnemonic effort to remind people not to forget how to pronounce them. As he confirms, "Oral-cultural memory is deeply involved in both writing and reading" (Calinescu 178).

With reference to Tutuola and Okri, it could be said that a reading of their novels demonstrates their indebtedness to an indigenous resource-base in the construction of the written narrative. As Lindfors points out, "A reader who is familiar with oral literature from Africa or elsewhere will immediately recognise points of similarity between Tutuola's writing and oral narrative art" (Lindfors 1980: 229). He opines, "The style of *The Palm Wine Drinkard* is essentially an oral style. The story is told by the drinkard himself, and right from the beginning we sense that he is speaking, not writing, of his experiences (Lindfors 1980: 233). As a writer representing the Nigerian diaspora, Ben Okri expresses his filiation with a

discernable Yoruba cultural resource-base a "preparedness to take the conceptual resources made available by Yoruba writers as a means of expressing a sense of identity embracing all available indigenous resources" (Quayson 1997a:13).

2.4 'Narrative' and the 'Novel' in an expression of African Ethos

This section shows that the novels of Tutuola and Okri as objects of critical inquiry highlight and project the production of a different kind of narrative in which the conventional terms of novelistic discourse are reconceptualised and reconfigured with recourse to elements from oral narratives and traditional culture.

With reference to the Yoruba oral narratives, Ato Quayson points out that these forms, as in most contexts of orality, "exhibit a high level of polysemy in terms of the materials employed in each genre. The notion of 'genre' as employed by Western critical theory can only serve as a heuristic device due to the high levels of interchange and transference of materials between the various discernible traditional modes….The discernible incorporativeness and porosity inherent in traditional culture have important implications for the exact methods of relating them to literary writings" (Quayson 1997a: 13). Scholes, Phelan and Kellog in their comprehensive study of narrative as a genre maintain that "instability is the general nature of narrative. They say that narrative theory has expanded its scope to include non-literary narratives of all kinds and that this expansion has consequences for work on literary narrative (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog xiv). Tracing the development of narrative literature in the West they observe:

> It [narrative literature] has been, historically, the most various and changeable of literary disciplines, which means that it has been the most alive. For all its imperfections it has been—from the epic to the novel—the most popular and influential kind of literature, seeking the widest audience in its culture and being more responsive to extraliterary influences than other kinds of literature (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 16).

The novel which has enjoyed the status of the dominant form of narrative literature in the West since its inception, as Scholes, Phelan and Kellog maintain, is

> only one of a number of narrative possibilities…the greatest obstacle to an understanding of narrative literature in our day is the way notions of value have clustered around the word 'novel' itself.…The expectations which readers bring to narrative literary works are based on their experience with the novel. Their assumptions about what a narrative should be are derived from an understanding of the novel" (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 3-8).

They further say that, "the novel centered view of narrative literature is an unfortunate one for two important reasons. First, it cuts us off from the narrative literature of the past and the culture of the past. Second, it cuts us off from the literature of the future and even from the advance guard of our own day" (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 8). They argue in support of an alternative to the novelistic approach to narrative in the study of prose fiction[11]:

> In order to provide a broader alternative to the novelistic approach to narrative, we must break down many of the chronological, linguistic, and narrowly conceived generic categories frequently employed in the discussion of narrative. We must consider the elements common to all narrative forms—oral and written, verse and prose, factual and fictional… (Scholes, Phelan, Kellog 6).

Taking a cue from this stance, it could be argued that in the case of the novel in Africa, the literary narrative is a conflation of elements of the 'literary' and the 'non-literary'. As Gera suggests, "African writing…has found a truly indigenous tradition in Africa's rich oral culture" (Gera viii). Ode Ogede observes that modern African writing draws its power from having one of its roots deeply embedded in the oral tradition. He argues that, "an awareness of the growing significance of roots for the modern writers of Africa is…a channel for stylistic invigoration extending the frontiers of creative writing in Africa (Ogede 468). Fanon in his groundbreaking study *The Wretched of the Earth* says that the efforts of the post colonial writers "suggest a concern for affirming links with their tradition" (Fanon 1967: 169). In her study of Achebe, Soyinka and Tutuola, Gera points out that these Nigerian novelists have consciously experimented with traditional oral forms:

> But more significant is the unique and original manner in which they have employed oral forms in a Western literary genre in a bid to recreate a particular *Weltanschauung*. They have drawn on folk forms such as folktale, folksong, proverb, dance, rituals,

> oratory, quest motifs, myths and have synthesised them with the novel form to achieve their artistic ends (Gera 26).

Writers like Tutuola and Okri appropriate the tools of both "traditionalism and modernity" (Quayson 2009: 161) for strategic literary purposes. In *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* Abiola Irele writes that "the genres of oral narrative and the aesthetics they illustrate…can be said to provide the imaginative background, and, often, the structural model for the appropriation of the novel genre in both the indigenous languages and the imported European tongues" (Irele 2009:1). He further says that among the various written narratives, the novel in Africa has acquired a cultural significance in the present times that was once the exclusive province of the oral narrative:

> Orature, which serves as the theoretical and ethnographic foundation for the discussion of intrinsic properties [of the novel] (character types, narrative functions and rhetorical devices, as well as the role of metaphor and symbolism) by which the traditional narratives are structured can also be applied to the African novel, insofar as these properties have had a marked effect on the way African novelists have often conceived and executed their works, to the extent that we are sometimes obliged to identify in their works the signs of a textualised orality (Irele 2009: 2).

Irele observes that the novel is a modern narrative genre in the African continent. The relocation of the European literary form resulting in its "Africanisation" makes it an expressive medium in an African environment (Irele 2009: 9). The Yoruba novel pioneered by D.O. Fagunwa is an amalgamation of heroic adventure based on indigenous cosmology and cultural traditions on the one hand, and Christian moralism and symbolism on the other (Irele 2009: 6). Irele further points out that the main lines of the evolution of narrative in Africa takes place from its traditional sources in folktale and myth to the written form of the modern novel:

> A major interest of this evolution derives from the effort by African writers to represent the African world in terms that reflect the structures and values of the pre-colonial societies and cultures, and to capture the dynamics of the transformations these societies and cultures have undergone, along with the tensions involved in the process, in the specific historical context of colonialism and westernisation. This has

> often involved a reappraisal of their cultural inheritance and its narrative resources. The thematic relation of the novel to the African environment has thus come to assume as well an important consequence in formal terms, for the incorporation by African novelists of aspects of the oral narrative within the literate form of the novel can be interpreted as an effort to lend the immediacy of oral performance to the written genre, inorder to transcend the limitations of print as a medium of imaginative expression (Irele 2009: 11-12).

As a mode of literary expression, the novel in Africa is the result of colonial encounter with Europe. The various instances of fiction-writing in the Asian countries (in India, China and Japan, as pointed out in **Section 2.2**) could lead to a reorientation and reassessment of the history of the novel as the product of eighteenth century Europe. But it is a different matter of debate and beyond the focus and scope of this study. The influence of Europe on the novel in Africa is aptly studied by S. Amanor Desagu in "The Influence of Folklore Techniques on the Form of the African Novel". Desagu takes into account the broader scenario of novel writing in European and non-European countries and argues that the predominant influence on novel writing in Africa in the last four hundred years has come from the West. He upholds that so far as the novel is concerned, the influence of Western culture is noticeable in the choice of metropolitan languages of Europe as the medium of expression (Desagu 589). As Africa was under European administration, it would therefore not be fallacious to argue that the non Western cultures where instances of novel writing have been found exerted little influence upon the creation of the novel in Africa.

Another matter that needs to be considered is that a reasonable enquiry into the tradition of novel writing in Africa and a justifiable analysis of its characteristics surpass the limiting debates as to whether the 'novel' as a genre is 'indigenous' or 'alien' to the African literary world. Contrarily, the desirable way to enter into such an issue would be to locate this 'genre' in terms of the multifarious socio-historical and cultural developments that have given it a distinctive flavour within the African context. One could say that the appropriation of a literary genre within a particular socio-cultural context, different from the one in which it was born, now gives it a new identity, which though reminiscent of its existing characteristics, simultaneously renders it with new contours. Thus the novel in Africa, India, Latin America, Caribbean islands is shaped creatively and accordingly, to voice the concerns, crises and

issues that are specific to the region. This factor justifies the nature of the genre itself. Mikhail Bakhtin calls the novel a young, new, ever changing and developing genre, and claims it as the "leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a **new world still in the making** (emphasis mine); it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it" (Bakhtin 1981: 7). As a relatively new genre, the novel in Africa also exhibits the tendencies of a new world.

The novel formed part of the literature syllabus of colonialist education in different parts of Africa. Therefore, the influence of the Western novel could be discerned in the birth of the African novel. The novel as a literary mode, in its earliest manifestation, formed part of larger nationalist political discourse in the hands of pioneer African writers. Emmanuel Ngara observes that, "the writings of committed, political ideologists and talented academics were an expression, in ideological terms, of a new social psychology, a new level of political and ideological awareness after an era of acceptance of and submission to colonial domination, cultural imperialism and capitalist exploitation" (Ngara 29). Against the background of informed nationalist ideology, the African novel is bound to presume a distinctively historical texture. As O.R. Dathorne observes:

> In Africa, the novel is the only literary art form that has been totally imported and imposed over and above development from an indigenous pattern. Drama and poetry on the other hand were an integral part of African heritage; they functioned within the oral tradition, contributing to ceremonial and festive occasions. In a preliterate society, no such functions existed for the novel—there was no need for it to perform. The novel in Africa incorporates the aesthetics of an oral tradition to which it never truly belonged. A European conception articulated by an indigenous African exposition has resulted in what is today acclaimed and recognised as the novel in Africa. Its development has been a process from flat, bold statement to elaborate experimentation. The statement first expressed in the novel centred on an idyllic—innocence, dignity and importance of village life with detailed descriptions of group ceremonies. Such a work might be termed "anthropological" for the writer unlike European writer is not interested in characterisation but in detailed examination of culture and the importance of the narration was in the telling (Dathorne 53).

Critics of the African novel are found to hold different notions about their assessment of the genre in Africa. Some critics tend to hold a belittling attitude on the ground that the novel in Africa comes with the stamp of Western colonialists, missionaries and educators and that the African novelists have borrowed all their techniques from the West in the course of borrowing the art form of the novel. Critics like Solomon Iyasere argue that "The novel as a particular genre has no history in Africa; it is primarily a Western form" (Iyasere 114). In a similar vein Adrian Roscoe says that even a superficial scrutiny would establish that the bulk of the African novel

> ...is poor is quality and merely satisfies an anthropological fad for Africa that the western world is currently enjoying. West Africans by the score are telling a fascinated public about their indigenous way of life, and, doubtless proceeding on the assumption that we all have at least one piece of fiction in us, are calling their efforts "novels." Criticism, unfortunately, allows this term to cover writing which lies at both extremes on the scale of artistic merit, and a masterpiece of Dickens or Jane Austen must shelter beneath the same roof as an offering from Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, or, in the present context, Flora Nwapa, Obi Egbuna, Elechi Amadi, John Munonye, and a host of others waiting for recognition (Roscoe 71-72).

As against such views, one finds critics like Cyprian Ekwensi, Ellis Komey and Anthony Astrachan who tend to suggest how the modern African novelist in general and Nigerian in particular are reshaping the novel to suit their own needs. Astrachan says that the product (African novel) will not fit the traditional Western definition of the novel does not detract from its literary value. One might argue that the modern African novel is a unique phenomenon that blends two distinct traditions—native oral and foreign written literature (Astrachan 132). Cyprian Ekwensi believes that the modern writer is obliged to deal with folklore in his novels. His role is both to recreate oral traditions and to articulate the philosophy behind their usage. This articulation of traditional lore will serve as a means of integrating it into the modern world. The new African writer must look back on the community from which he emerges and explain the psychology and philosophy behind African thought while taking his place in the modern world. (Ekwensi 1956: 701-704). Like Ekwensi, Ellis Komey believes that the modern African writer plays an essential role in his society when he integrates traditional lore into his novels. The modern African writer is

successfully transforming a literary form taken from white culture into a vehicle of expression for traditional African lore (Komey 9-10). The novel is not a heritage genre of Europe that could be claimed time and again by the latter as their own under the assumption that it is actually a European literary genre that the non-Europeans are reshaping to meet their purposes—either of literary expression or affirmation of a cultural identity.

When talking about Africa, one has to take into account that Africa is not a country, it is a continent. And as such the novel writing enterprise in different parts of the continent takes on different contours. O.R. Dathorne provides useful insight to this issue; he observes that the writers belonging to East, Central, and South Africa could be seen as rebels against appearance. These sections of Africa saw not only the European administrator but the settler from Europe as well (Dathorne 121). In the task of reconstituting the community, they urge for revolutionary and active political commitment as found in the works of Ngugi wa Thiongo, Legson Kayira, Leonard Kibera, and South African writers like Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer and so on. Dathorne maintains that these writers advocate freedom in their art, which is particularly crucial in South Africa where censorship had been rigorously exercised. Coming from these parts of the continent, the themes of such novels are frequently directed against the environment with a rigorous political statement and one immediately finds the novel of protest and commitment (Dathorne 121). When posited against their continental counterparts, the political vision of the West African writers are more low-key and "gradualist" (Achebe 1988: 30). One could say that their enterprise is not to mobilise the community into any mass revolutionary action but to undertake a detailed and minute examination of culture. In the novels of West Africa, folklore works as a vehicle for asserting cultural identity. Emmanuel Obiechina observes how the "creative energies of the West African novelists were driven in the direction of cultural affirmation, towards expressing and affirming the past of the ex-colonial people, validating their autochthonous values (especially so far as these survive into the present), often at the expense of the received new values" (Obiechina 1975: 14). Dathorne points out that "while in East, Central and South Africa one immediately finds the novel of revolt, in West African writers, the importance of the narration is in the telling of the tale (Dathorne 53). This aspect of their writings could be an influence of the folktale and is prominently displayed in the works of Amos Tutuola[12]. Dathorne observes, "Tutuola's *TPWD* is an excellent example of how close the novel in Africa might be to

African culture. Frequently, the pattern of the story borrows its design from oral literature. It is often enacted in the manner of the folk tale, departure, initiation and return" (Dathorne xvi). Although Tutuola has received a mixed response from his critics, his efforts are inviolably that of a pioneer of the modern novel in Africa, especially West Africa. There are a number of devices to which Tutuola resorts which the others were to follow later. For instance, he makes use of the apparatus of culture (here, folklore) in such a way that tales, myths, proverbs and riddles (all included under folklore) come together in an easy alliance. Later writers were to exploit these features which make Tutuola, when seen from retrospect, the indicator of new possibilities. Tutuola's enterprise paved the way for new writers to emerge on the scene.

Ben Okri as an expatriate writer has retained a strong sense of his ethnic and cultural connection to his native culture and draws upon this for his creative endeavours. Derek Wright points out that one of Okri's sources is Amos Tutuola, "The spiral structures of Okri's narrative, the repetitive rhetoric written in opposition to linear chronology, sequential form and narrative continuity...maintains an intertextual dialogue which gives a high visibility to his African sources and influences: notably, Tutuola's dream narratives, starting with *The Palm Wine Drinkard*...from which Okri takes his idea of an original, authentic 'African Way'" (Derek Wright 329). In Okri's the *Famished Road* trilogy, the task of narrating the community is entrusted upon Azaro—the abiku child—thereby challenging western modes of perception (of the world) and self-apprehension. Okri is a representative of "the new realism" in the African novel. The overarching context of political culture, as Abiola Irele argues, "has provoked a new discourse of dissidence in the African novel, aimed at uncovering the pathologies of governance that have contributed so massively to the tragic unfolding of the postcolonial condition in Africa" (Irele 2009: 10). Ben Okri takes recourse to the abiku phenomenon (validated by native cultural system) to present a self-introspection of the postcolonial situation in Nigeria through his creative use of myths, tales and beliefs within the literary.

Emmanuel Obiechina in his book *Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel* observes that the novel in Africa is an outgrowth of a society in which oral traditions still form a living reality. By 'living' is meant that oral traditions are a vital part of day-to-day life of the people. He confirms that the oral tradition has survived in West Africa in spite of

the introduction of Western writing and the foreign tradition which it bears. Elements of folklore such as stories, proverbs, dance, songs still play a significant role in shaping the values, beliefs, actions and behaviour of the people. Traditional forms, rituals, ceremonies provide a framework for experiencing reality. He argues that, "in contemporary Nigeria, these forms continue to mould the sensibility of most Nigerians, not merely of the illiterate majority but also of the educated elite" (Obiechina 1975: 26). Thus, for the Nigerian writers, folklore is not a mere aesthetic device; it serves as a means to enliven an entire value system and world-view. Another issue worth paying attention to, as pointed out by Obiechina, is that the novel in Africa is beset with the task of narrating and constituting the community, "one could find in the entire gamut of novel writing by African writers, cutting across the continent, the obsession to articulate a sense of the community to which they belong. One of the reasons for this obsession could be that, it is within the community that the cultural practices and beliefs are sanctioned and validated. Obiechina suggests that the West African novels have, in other words, a strong sense of cultural nationalism in them" (Obiechina 1975: 14). In both Tutuola and Okri, the task of constituting a communal solidarity is effected through the revival, reinforcement and resurgence of African myths, legends and folkloristic elements. Another reason for this obsession to articulate the community could be seen in terms of the African writers' responsibility to assert the differences in their aesthetic concerns from those of the imperial powers.

Historically, the growth and development of the novel coincides with the development of the European states and the colonial empires, and some critics have come to see it more than a mere temporal coincidence. Edward Said, for instance, in *Orientalism* is concerned with the links between imperialism and cultural forms. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said argues for the "extraordinary formal and ideological dependents of the great French and English realist novels on the facts of empire..." (Said 1993: 40), adding, "without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it..." (Said 1993: 83). Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* explores the nexus between nation formation and narrative forms and argues that such links have far reaching effects in the contexts of postcolonial societies. Such deliberations have led to a range of responses. While there are writers who feel that the novel, given that its history is inevitably contaminated with imperialist ideology and that the African and other writers of the Third World should turn to other preferably

indigenous forms, there are others who argue that such contamination is not an insurmountable obstacle, that the language and the form can be used in resistant or oppositional ways and appropriated for African ends. Both Tutuola and Okri, as this thesis argues, effect a kind of synthesis of these positions: retaining the novel, increasingly using it as a vehicle for aesthetic concerns, but at the same time moving it closer to recognisably indigenous styles of narrative construction and expression of a sensibility that is African. As Ode Odege argues, "Modern African writing draws its power from having one of its roots deeply embedded in the oral tradition. An awareness of the growing significance of roots for the modern writers of Africa is not merely a source of escape from the harsh realities of the present but also a channel for stylistic invigoration extending the frontiers of creative writing in Africa" (Ogede 468).

If postmodernism involves a repudiation of canonical practices, the numerous strategies that the African writers have devised for themselves abandoning the coloniser's use of the novel form may loosely be termed as postmodern. It is fair to say that when African writers began employing the novel form for enunciating their own apprehension of an African reality, they were faced with the critical problem of narrating that apprehension in such a way as to complement literary content with an indigenous structure of articulation. The African world is rendered in different ways in the various novelistic enterprises of the African writers but all intended to confer upon such literature, an identity distinctive of its own. Tutuola and Okri articulate ethos of the African world and produce forms of traditional belief systems. A comparative study of the strategies of narrative construction in the select novels of the two writers would serve as an interesting interface to see how they are in dialogue with each other.

The chapters that follow argue that the use of folklore, the cultural metaphor of journey, and the grotesque in the selected novels—all derived from traditional life and oral culture—are used by Tutuola and Okri in constructing and shaping the literary narrative. The recourse to the resources of an oral culture in the construction of the literary narrative translates not merely the need felt by the writers for a culturally grounded mode of self expression, but also functions to give weight and comprehensiveness to the vision of life each writer seeks to project.

2.5 Summing Up

This chapter shows that the literary narrative in any society is conditioned and influenced by the factors of orality prevalent in it and plays a crucial role in shaping writing. In the appropriation of the novel (which is customarily seen as Western art form) by Tutuola and Okri the elements from oral culture and traditional life play a crucial role. The written narrative is a double edged sword. It is a medium of self-representation in a technologised world and a tool to critique Western representations of an African reality.

NOTES

1. Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) is a famous Japanese poet and an exponent of *haiku*. His poetry is internationally renowned, and in Japan many of his poems are reproduced on monuments and traditional sites. It could be said that the impressionistic and concise nature of his verse influenced particularly Ezra Pound and the Imagists, and later the poets of the Beat Generation. Murasaki Shikibu is a Japanese poet and novelist of the Heian period which dates from about 795 to about 1185. She is best known as the author of *The Tale of Genji*, written in Japanese between about 1000 and 1012. It has come to be regarded as the first full-length novel in the history of world literature.

2. Regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Tang Dynasty, often called the "golden age" of classical Chinese poetry, Li Bai was a prolific and a creative poet, as well as one who sketched the rules of versification of his time. The ideas underlying Li Bai's poetry had a profound impact in shaping English Imagist and Modernist poetry through the 20th Century. Tu Fu or Du Fu was a prominent Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty along with Li Bai. He has been called the "Poet-Historian" and the "Poet-Sage" by Chinese critics. *Dream of the Red Chamber* composed by Cao Xueqin, is one of China's four great classical novels. It was written in the middle of the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty. It is considered to be a masterpiece of Chinese literature and is generally acknowledged to have achieved the pinnacle in Chinese fiction. *Dream of the Red Chamber* contains an extraordinarily large number of characters: nearly forty are considered major characters, and there are almost five hundred minor ones.

3. Valmiki (also regarded as the *Adi Kavi* meaning 'the first poet') is the author of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Veda Vyasa is the author as well as a character in the *Mahabharata*. He is considered

to be the scribe of the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*. Kalidasa is a renowned Sanskrit writer, widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in the Sanskrit language. Kalidasa's works are primarily based on Hindu *Puranas* and philosophy. His play *Shakuntala* is the first play in Sankrit to be translated into the English language. Bhavabhuti is an 8th century scholar of India noted for his plays and poetry, written in Sanskrit. His plays are considered equivalent to the works of Kalidasa.

4. Dandin, Banabhatta and Subandhu were Sankrit writers. Banabhatta was the court-poet of King Harsharvardhana. He is famous for his compilation of *Harshacharita*--the biography of Harshavardhana. He is also the author of *Kadambari*—one of the earliest novels of world literature. Dandin is a writer of of prose romances during the sixth and seventh centuries and is best known for composing the *Kavyadarsa*— the earliest surviving systematic treatment of poetics in Sanskrit. Subandhu is a writer of the Gupta period.

5. Rimmon Kenan in *Narrative Fiction* presents his idea of narrative as a 'succession of events', p.3.

6. The literature on narrative is of course immense, but perhaps the most rigorous attempts to provide a typology of narrative are those by Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961) and by Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (London: Cornell UP, 1988). Others, such as Meir Steinberg's, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) show a nuanced understanding of the different levels of narrative.

7. Taking into account their respective backgrounds, they were well informed of bicultural issues and these aspects appear in their novels. Tutuola was born of Christian parents, had a brief education in missionary schools and arguably saw the interaction of Western culture and technology in his Yoruba backdrop. Okri on the other hand, is a Nigerian with first hand experience of life in London since the time he was a young boy.

8. In *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993 p. 235, Said examines how writing as a cultural weapon perpetuates imperial philosophy.

9. One of the greatest authorities on orally composed heroic poetry.

10. George points out that theorists on the novel such as Ian Watt in *Rise of the Novel*, Georg Lukacs in *The Theory of the Novel*, Michael McKeon in *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* put forward the same argument regarding the oral roots of the novelistic genre.

11. The novel represents only a couple of centuries in the continuous narrative tradition of the Western world which can be traced back five thousand years. They argue that the tendency to apply the standards of 19th century realism to all fiction has disadvantages for our understanding of every other kind of narrative. Our view of narrative literature is almost hopelessly novel-centered, p. 6-9.

12. The folktale model in Tutuola's works have been pointed out by critics like O.R. Dathorne, Ato Quayson, Abiola Irele, William R. Ferris, Jr., Bernth Lindfors, S. Amanor Dseagu and Sherryl Takacs, among others.

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