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## Structuralist Study of Ramonu Sanusi's Fiction-Le Bistouri Des Larmes

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### ABSTRACT

One of the problems often associated with African literature is that of originality of language. It is assumed that since African writers write in European languages, their works would be devoid of African values and codes (Mowah 23). Sanusi in his work demonstrates that the borrowed language used by the writers of African literature does not make it shift away from the literary work that is produced from languages and a system made up of units and signs which is the main idea of structuralism. The languages borrowed only serve as umbrella for African cultural codes in a literary work. A structuralist is not interested in the author and his story; neither is he interested in the development of a text from one period to another but in the structure of the story and the aesthetic goal of literature in a particular period. Since evaluative method does not concern a structuralist but an analytic one, this work therefore, moves ahead to analyse Ramonu Sansui's Le Bistouries Des Lames to show how the structure inherent in the fiction relates to each other in the process of forming meaning.

Keywords: Structuralisme, Le Bistouri Des Larmes, Excision, Value, Emancipation and Meaning.

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### INTRODUCTION

African literature is created out of linguistic elements which are applicable to any other literature because the same concept of system and general laws are applicable to all literature; whether it is African or European is immaterial. Again with the language borrowed, modern African literature has uniqueness and the uniqueness is characterized by purely African signifiers and cultural codes. The European language which the African writers use merely for creativity masks an essential African imagination heritage and world view for example, Ferdinand Oyono, Ayi Kwei Armah, Amos Tutuola, Lola Shoneyin and Ramonu Sanusi are unique in the way their works

respectively carry the concrete elements of culture from their respective background. The confusion in critics who dismiss African literature as obscure and inscrutable arises from the concrete nature of the African literature. African writers should think and articulate their thoughts in concrete terms because African languages are well structured in concrete images.

J.P. Clark made a distinction between thinking in 'Abstract terms' and thinking in 'Concrete terms' (The legacy of Caliban) which can be likened to Saussure's distinction between 'la langue' and 'la parole'.

### MEANING AND AESTHETIC GOAL OF LITERATURE

It has always been assumed by many that the goal of criticism of African literature is meaning. It is noticed that critics

concentration on the ideological and didactic intention of literary works tend to overshadow the aesthetic goal of

writers of African literature. They should seek to understand the present structuring reason in a text besides the ideological or sociopolitical issues raised in the texts. In the firm ideological commitment to truth is the peculiar structure that gives the truth of literature its significant essence [1]. A literary text is a structure or structures of signification. There is structure inherent in the work of Sanusi which relate to each other in the process of giving meaning.

the analyst's task is not simply to describe a corpus but to account for the structure and meaning that items of the corpus have for those who have assimilated the rules and norms of the system' (31)

But Lane sees it from his own perspective by saying that structuralism is a method whose main objective is to permit the investigator to go beyond a pure description of what he perceives or experiences in direction of the quality of rationality which underlines the social phenomena in which it's concerned.

The ultimate goal of structuralism is to make explicit the systematic rules and codes of literature as a signifying social institution. [2]

### **What is structuralism?**

The origin of structuralism could be traced to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. He was a pioneer in the field of modern linguistics. Saussure contributed to the development of structuralism as an approach to the study of literature. He studied the formal systems of language with the view of discovering how the elements are related. He saw language as a system of signs and came up with two terms — 'langue' and 'parole'. 'Langue' is termed to be a particular language system, for example, French or English. This is the structure of linguistic signs. It is the structure of signs which make available the resources for speech. 'Parole' is therefore the language in use; that is the speech sound. Language comprises the words and signs and each word has two sides; a 'signifier' which is the concept or meaning. The connection

The issue of meaning is very essential to African literature and since a literary text is a structure or structures of signification, the structuralists should therefore point out how the in avoidable structure in a particular work of art relate to each other to have a meaning. Here, a good structuralist is accountable for facts about the system it is analyzing. Culler's ideology buttresses this as he argued,

The aim of structuralism therefore is to realize the entire record of social relations that the unconscious reason makes possible or restricts. Its method is not geared towards interpretation of the subject matter of a literary work but interpreting the signifying structures to a critic or a reader who searches for meaning.

between the sound, pattern and meaning is arbitrary. The word and thing has no link. It is then this convention which makes it necessary for language to have a systematic structure.

The main idea of structuralism is that a literary work is produced from languages, and it is a system made up of units and signs. These units and signs can be classified in a scientific way and they are integrated. All the integral parts function together to produce a system.

### **The methods of structuralism**

The structuralist theory in literature is applied so that it makes it possible to study what allows the writer to say what he wants to say. These structures permit the combination of words to produce a poem or a story. A story or a poem is seen as a system which must be studied as a

complete system. Each of them (poem or story) has a system of internal organization. We can see that poetry possesses the economy of language which cannot be matched by any other literary genre [3]. The structure enables poetry to be able to say so much in a little space. A close reading will reveal how this economy of language is achieved through a particular use of words, metaphor, technical and poetic devices.

Many concepts have been introduced by structuralism since they have become

The soldiers  
Rebels  
The robbers  
The murderers

shot  
killed  
injured  
fled

They may come in a lateral or 'syntagmatic' system where words occur in chains of association.

The soldiers + shot + the old women and children + inside + the church, The Rebels + killed the politicians + at the campaign+ arena, The robbers + attacked + the travelers + at Benin +and injured many, The murderers + fled as the soldiers arrived. The use of the structure of metaphor and metonymy help us to appreciate the figurative meaning of language. Metaphor is the system of similarity (compressed simile) which enables the reader to see things that are unlike as if they are alike. We can also say that metaphor refers to a particular set of linguistic process whereby aspects of one object are transferred to another, so that the second is spoken of as if it were the first. E.g. 'Amalinze the cat,' which means that Amalinze is a good wrestler, 'Ibe is a lion, meaning that Ibe is very strong' etc. [4] Metonymy is the system whereby meaning is governed by context, one element in the context stands for another; the name of one thing is applied by close association to another. For example, using the crown for the king, one must respect the crown; in place of saying that one

classifications for looking at various elements in the literary work. These for instance are 'denotation' which is the basic meaning of a word and 'connotation' which is the suggestion of a word; 'codes' are the rule- governed structures which produce meanings and their messages; the 'paradigmatic' system or vertical structures which is a whole class of words that may replace one another. For example,

must respect the king, using a course of study for the teacher, here the students always say "madam we have you now instead of saying madam, we have oral skills which is the course madam teaches. etc.

Structuralists, in given close attention to a story and a poem, claim that a story is made up of units which have internal relations. All the units function together as a dynamic whole.

Then the various levels work together and each level has meaning because of its relation to other levels. In story writing, it is a matter of selecting the items which fit into the units hence the story is made up of units. The writer does a very careful work in selecting and combining words together in a way that they fit into the units. The writer uses words to create different patterns of similarity, opposition etc and this is done through their sound, meaning rhythm and connotations. Since the words are the resources which the writer draws upon, they can be replaced. In the creation of pattern, the patterns created then determine the meaning of the work — the signified.

#### **A thematic reading of Ramonu Sanusi's Fiction — *Le Bistouri Des Larmes*.**

In a structuralist view, the poets of a novel amount to a theory of reading.

Reading destroys the old myth of organic unity, for a readers pleasure is often determined by the “fragment”, the incongruous details, the charming excess of certain description and elaborations, the well-constructed sentences whose elegance exceeds its functions or the flaws in a grand design. [5].

For the structuralist reading of a novel, pleasure, admiration and signification of the text depend on a variable rhythm of reading. The most important fact that gives the African literature the right type of pleasure is to succeed in finding the meaning of the right features which lead to signification in a text [6]. Its pleasure is not derived from sexual but that of the accomplishment of a task and with the discovery of the truth of literature. Some

of the features that are significant to the African fiction are theme, plot, dialogue and character. These features are put together with the African cultural code. Our analysis of *Le Bistouri des Larmes*, as a modern African fiction embodies the three literary genres of literatures; poetry, drama, and prose.

In the work of Sanusi, there is mix- up of the three literary genre of literature which characterizes him as a modern writer.

“Mandibou Mandibou  
 Nous les femmes de Mandibou  
 O o o Mandibou  
 Nous te remercions Mama Abibatou  
 Toi lyalode de Mandibou  
 O o o Mandibou  
 Tu vivras longtemps pour nous  
 O o o Mandibou  
 Les chaussures dureront a tes pieds  
 O o o Mandibou [7]

Mandibou, Mandibou  
 We, the women of Mandibou  
 O o o Mandibou  
 We thank you mama Abibatou  
 O o o Mandibou  
 You, the mistress of Mandibou  
 O o o Mandibou  
 You will live long for us  
 O o o Mandibou  
 You will see a good old age  
 O o o Mandibou [ma traduction]

Specifically, Sanusi identifies certain structural features that are peculiar to an African setting. The above song by the women of Mandibou is poetic in nature. They include symbols that are drawn from the narrator's tradition.

‘Mandibou’ signifies the people of a particular village in Mandibou

‘lyalode’ has the connotation of ‘mother of all’, and this is a symbol used by a particular society.

‘Les chaussure durera a tes pieds connotes long life.

We also notice this kind of structure in Lola Shoneyin's fiction, *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*. Here there is also a jingle with a theme “Afowofa” and it's poetic in nature.

Talaka nwa paki  
Olowo nwon'resi  
Igbi aye nyi o  
Ko s'eni to m'ola. [8]

The impoverished search for cassava flour  
While the rich consume rice by the measuring bowl  
The tide of earth turns  
No one knows tomorrow.  
(English Trans)

This poem or jingle is structured in a systematic way that it gives meaning. We study the units. 'Talaka nwa paki' signifies the poor in the society. 'Olowo nwon resi' signifies the rich in the same given society. 'Igbi aye nyi o' signifies temporal action and 'ko s'eni to m'ola' signifies uncertainty. In the structuralist reading, the meaning is not to be sought outside the text. We see the metaphoric reading on the rich and the poor. We also see the image of the future. The two poems are constructed with metaphors and their semantic constituents; the use of images to produce meaning rather than the use of logical mental sequence. According to 'Levi Strauss' there is a difference between the statistical and structural aspect of language. In this, certain sequences of sounds are

associated with definition, meanings in a given language rather than in all languages. Sanusi and Shoneyin used symbols that are peculiar to a given African society.

Sanusi uses 'Sourou' which signifies 'Patience. N'Iwa' which signifies 'behaviour' and the two words put together 'souru ni iwa' to have the signification 'patience is golden'.

Our analysis of Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des Larmes* follows the principle of narrativity. Narrativity according to Roland Barthes, *is a process by which a perceiver actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided by any narrative medium. [Semiotics and interpretation, 60].*

The narration of the text opens significantly as follows:

Mandibou était un village au milieu de la forêt tropicale dans le sud-ouest du Nigara, Par le passé, le produit agricole tels que l'arachide, le café, le cacao y avaient attiré de grands investisseurs toubabs dont la plupart avait transféré tous leurs capitaux de l'occident au Nigara. En effet, à la découverte de l'or noir au Nigara, tout changea brusquement, car tout le monde avait à présent le regard fixé sur cette ressource minière qui rapportait gros ... Très vite, des contrats furent signés entre les investisseurs toubabs et le gouvernement du Nigara. L'exploitation des gisements de l'or noir commença donc sans plus tarder \* [9]

Mondibou was a village in the middle of the tropical forest in the south-East of Nigara,... in the past, the agricultural products such as groundnut, coffee, cacao

attracted many white investors to Nigara where majority of them transferred there capital from the west to Nigara. In reality, with the discovery of crude oil of Nigara, everything suddenly changed, because everybody presently depends on these mineral resources which yields a lot... without wasting time, the contract was signed between the white investors and the government of Nigara. The exploitation in the oil fields therefore began without delay... [My translation]

The important features notable in the text are established as the theme of exploitation and oppression. These features come together (because they are closely related syntagmatically) to form the corpus of the text; but the fact is that we are more attached to the thematic reading which is the 'excision' This has to do with the female genital mutilation, a traditional practice that threatens life. In African society, this act is to designate

traditional practices or initiation ceremonies in which girls make the symbolic transition into womanhood. This brings us to Brahima, the man with the Bistouri des Larmes: *Le Bistouri des larmes* is a symbol that brought about the excision the excision provoked the excised (the protagonist) to action and hence the title of the book, *Le Bistouri des Larmes*. Then, Yetounde who is the protagonist is the significant.

#### LE CORBEAUX

We journey on to the appearance of the 'corbeaux'. These ravens naturally came in search of what to eat but tradition changed the view. In this particular

society, the coming of these birds must be approached with mixed feelings. The 'corbeaux' is also significant to the cultural code.

Ces corbeaux qui venaient d'atterrir comme une nuée de sauterelles dans un champs, portaient donc un plumage annonciateur du bien et du mal qui devaient tomber sur Mandibou'. [10]  
These Ravens which just landed like a crowd of locusts in a farm, with their feathers announcing the good and the bad that would be experienced by Mandibou.  
(My translation)

'Les corbeaux' is the symbol of signification to Mandibou.

prophesied the life of the yet to born child.

There are other lexemes in the text like:  
The visit of the mystic man who

#### The visit of the stranger

The mystic man then said to Rahina before of everybody that;  
l'enfant dont elle accoucherait bientôt serait réputé un jour ... l'enfant devait connaitre des moments des troubles dans sa vie, que ce dernier triompherait de certaines de ces difficultés mais n'arriverait pas a en surmonter une et que

l'enfant même quand il grandirait vivrait toujours avec cette difficulté [11]

The child she will soon give birth to will be renowned in future... the child must encounter difficult times in life which she will be triumphant in all but one of these difficulties and the child lives with this problem when it grows. [My translation]

The 'inconnu' then is the mystery and the child in the womb is the signification.

The visit of the stranger is significant in three forms; uncertainty, the coming of Yetounde {the protagonist} and cultural code. Then, the problem of the reader lies in how to clear the obscurity created by the announcer in discussing the life of a child that is yet to see the sunshine. Then seven days after the Child's birth, the protagonist becomes the custodian of value because at that age she was initiated into womanhood. This age then signifies the beginning of her journey towards the difficult moments. The

stranger is therefore the mystery while the child is the signification.

#### **Brahima et le Bistouri Des larmes**

Another lexeme which is very important in our analyses of this fiction is that of Brahima, the man with the surgical blade [*Le Bistouri Des Larmes*]. He is like Judas of the Holy Bible who accomplished the prophecy about the betrayal of Jesus Christ because Brahima was the man who performed the act that provoked the protagonist to fight for emancipation. He performed the ritual of excision which destroys the sex of Yetounde. This rendered her sterile and the infertility pushed her to attempt murder.

Yetoundé sortit le pistolet de son sac a main et le brandit sur lui. Avant qu'il ne puisse échapper, celle-ci tira sur lui et elle prit la direction de la maison de Mamadou. [11]

Yetounde brought out the pistol from her hand bag and brandished on him. Before he could escape, she fired a shot at him and drove to Mamadou's house. (My translation)

The action of Brahima is significant as the instrument used by God to inflame the actions of the protagonist which brought about the huddles on her way as prophesied by the mystic man. Brahima is the symbol of excision while his bistouri symbolizes the cultural code.

We cannot leave out the lexeme of Yetounde's experience in the prison after the attempted murder because it was there that she got all the idea that made her bold and resolute to tackle her problems and later brought to an end the practice of female genital mutilation in Mandibou, changed the mode of life in Mandibou and in the entire country, Nigara.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore Yetounde's work place which is the airport because it was here that she became aware of her problem. Hence, the airport serves as the symbol of which Aristotle called "L'Anagnorisis". This term demonstrates the moment the protagonist discovers the root of her problem.

The fight Ahmed the hunter had with the spirit in the bush shows that there are good and bad spirits. It shows the existence of spirits in the land of living and reveals that they also die. All these signify mystery.

The sacrifices performed by the people of Mandibou at different times of need signifies cleansing and serves as

signification of impurities and sinful nature of man.

The coming of the whites have three significations:

1) The saving of the life of the protagonist. They saved the protagonist

Il avait vu dans ces documents que les africains vivaient dans des arbres comme des singes, aimaient danser et boire du vin de palme a longueur de journée. [11]

He read from these documents that Africans lived on the trees like monkeys, they like dancing and drinking palm wine all day.

3) The coming of the white brought civilization to Mandibou that created awareness for the protagonist to achieve her aim.

Yetounde being put to prison is another lexeme found in the text. It is there that

from bleeding to death for this tradition has taken a lot of lives.

2) The discovery of the life of Africans as against what they read from the book.

the protagonist discovered how to tackle the problem of excision, an exercise imposed on women by tradition because the prison itself served as a school where she gained wealth of knowledge from men of diverse disciplines, she met in there.

Yetounde s'était tissé des liens d'amitié. Elle pouvait désormais parler de politique comme un politicien, du journalisme comme un journaliste, du commerce comme un homme d'affaires. Elle était devenue une véritable encyclopédie, car elle savait maintenant beaucoup de choses dont elle ignorait tout avant son incarcération. [11]

Yetounde weaved her friendly connections. She could later discuss politics as a politician, journalism as a journalist, business as a business man. She has become a real encyclopedia, because she is now aware of many things which she did not know before her imprisonment. (My translation)

The constant coup d'état in the country signifies bad and corrupt leaders.

The writer telling us about Lamine, the good policeman and telling us how others hated him for doing good also signifies corruption in the society.

Then Brahim, the man with *Le Bistouri des larmes* is a symbol that brought about the excision.

As we discussed, the coming of the white rescued Yetounde (the protagonist) from death and educated her. Then, civilization made her bold to fight to see the end of

excision in Mandibou. Significantly, it is the duty of Yetounde to restore value to the society by the fight to stop excision which has taken many lives of small girls and rendered many women sterile. When the president invited to confer with her on the nomination as minister for social affairs, she demanded for abolition of excision as a condition of acceptance. The president granted her request; hence, her significant role "restoring value" to Mandibou society.

Yetounde, bien qu'agréablement surprise, posa ses conditions; elle voulait que le président fasse abolir l'excision dans tout les pays. Le président ne lui refusa pas et signa illico un décret qui, désormais, abolissait la pratique de l'excision sur toute l'étendue du territoire. [11]

Yetounde, though pleasantly surprised, gave her request; she would want the president to



abolish the practice of excision in the country as a whole. The president did not refuse and immediately passed a decree to abolish the practice of excision in all the territory.

### SYMBOLIC CODES

The next stage in our reading of *Le Bistouri des larmes* evaluates the symbolic code which has guided our research of the text to the thematic reading we have done. *Le Bistouri des larmes* is a myth which attempts to change culture and ideology for safety. Since it is a myth, it has fallen into the area of semiology. Then, the semiotics interpretation enables the mythical Inversion of the normal word order.

*"The mythical inversion to be 'righted' by breaking the message into two semantic systems; a connotative system whose*

*signified is ideological and a denotative system. (Eric Gould, 17) quoted by [2]*

The one that concerns us is the denotative reading which will give our signifiers the guarantee of connotation. We shall use an algebra of literature to mark the plot which revolves around the quest for emancipation. In the first instance, we have the marking in ascending order while the second marking takes to descending order.

Ep.

Pr

As

Br.

Ex

Pg

This explains the protagonist journey to emancipation and the obstacles and impulses that must be overcome and each obstacle shows its own systematic logic of connotations in this interpretation. Here, the above figure is defined thus; Pg, is the protagonist route to value, Ex, is the excision which provoked the protagonist, The second marking reads thus;

Br, is the man with *Le Bistouri Des Larmes* who performed the ritual, As, is the attempted assassination that took her to prison, Pr, is the prison where the Pg gained a wealth of knowledge that created for her an awareness on how to restore value to the society, then the Ep is the emancipation.

Ep

Ex

Br

As

Pr

pg

The second marking demonstrates the journey back, to end up with the protagonist. The journey automatically turns from Ep back to Pg which shows that Pg cannot be isolated. *"The mythical journey portrays the world both as a fact and as a metaphor" [2]*

The figure 2 demonstrates the cyclical relation of being showing the number of elements in the structure and also the nature of signification in *Le Bistouri Des Larmes*. Then the ordered structure has a

set of elements in an ordering relationship. It is cyclical in that one element generates into another and then into the original element.

It is this cyclical order of existence which is the common feature in African cultural experience that forms the basis of narration and narrativity. We can select from the text the incidence or obstacles that the protagonist encountered and the images or metaphors derived from these incidents are substitutable while the

symbols are syntagmatic because, they cannot be replaced. The symbols are Le Bistouri des larmes, the protagonists, the

exciseur, the 'inconnu', the prison and the quest.

### LANGUAGE

*Le Bistouri des larmes* stands as its own signifier. The language is that of a mythical mind, the language of Yoruba narrator. Language of ritual practices, the language of hunter's imagination (celebrated fantasy in Bara).

Personification used in the narration and the type of imagery locates the language

in a particular environment (Yoruba) or culture e.g. the choice of food and the names given to character are purely Yoruba.

The very title of the text *Le Bistouri Des Larmes* is the one of the narration. We have Bistouri but not for tears. E.g. Bistouri signifies surgical blade.

### CHARACTER

[1] argued that character serves as the major totalizing force in fiction. In *Le Bistouri des larmes* the protagonist significantly functions in relation to an We can summaries the characters as thus:

Protagonist

Missionary

Benevolent spirit

Prophet

The living

Rescuer

Antagonist

Apostolate

Malevolent spirit

Evil doers

The dead

Rescued

The totalizing object of significant in *Le Bistouri des larmes* is the function of the

protagonist who is to restore order in the society.

### CONCLUSION

The primary aim of a structuralist study of literature is to bring criticism of any literature in contact with the text itself as a way of appreciating how the organization and workings of the internal structure of the text lead to signification. The essence of this is to let criticism of African literature from an external approach seek the internal coherence of the parts of a work which embodies demonstrable signification. The analysis of Ramonu Sanusi's fiction, *Le Bistouri Des*

*Larmes* is a proof to the critics that the foreign languages used by the African writers does not make their work shift from literary work and its aims. One also testifies that African literature is concrete, the writers works are not devoid of African values and codes; they are well structured in the way that they produce meaning. We have seen the way the protagonist instead of bowing out, fought to restore value to the country.

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