

MYTHS OF ETERNAL RETURN IN *FRESHWATER* AND *HOUSE OF SYMBOLS*: A MYTHOCRITIC COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Freshwater by Akwaeke Emezi and *House of Symbols* by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, the former mixing African and extraterritorial décor and the latter firmly African, elicit interest in what make humans believe that they are just meant to be marionettes in the service of gods or more significant entity here on earth. However, the generational gap between the two authors – Emezi was born in the generation Z era leading to new millennium and Adimora-Ezeigbo in the 20th century – intensifies the widening gaps in the understanding of the so-called gods or more significant entity to an extent that Emezi narrative leads into seeing the entire humanity as embroiled in a collective “Ogbanje” trajectory as against that of Adimora-Ezeigbo that is sectional or specifically identifiable in persons acting in consonance with their “chi”, or ignoring the dictates of destiny specifics, or that of virtual Ezenwayi, like all diviners, well connected to the imagery discoveries of symbols and in position to interpret them for the obedient humans. Obedient humans and how they relate to diviners in search of meaning to life is one of the objectives of this work. It explores how one is born, grows, loves or hates or is loved or hated and reincarnates. Using mythocritic approach of analysis, our findings show that the two works present different views of myth of eternal return, and create sub-sets of what regeneration or reincarnation mean.

Keywords: Gods, destiny, totem, reincarnation, mythocriticism

Introduction

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s work, *The House of Symbols* and that of Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater*, are literary works in search of human origins. Though the two authors are generations apart, they still paint events and create characters that prove that human beings consciously or unconsciously relate to myths or respond to accumulated genetic load that make them always look back, somehow in an inexplicable trance. Previous anthropological literature reviews as well as some works on myth and mythocriticism reveal this. However, as generations come and go, the imaginative authors in fiction tend to capture the rhythm, albeit in verisimilitude patterns although they are far from the alchemy. In the works of the two authors in question, the features are there and the imaginative values of the two authors in relation to what had been known before them show significant loss of symbols, making it hard to capture a quasi-alchemy situation as review of literature shows. Our analysis of the decors into which they are fitting in their characters and scenes, relate to other vistas of the trajectory of the alchemy of the myth of eternal return as known in other traditions.

Notwithstanding, they propose something new that would still relate to already known myths, hence a possible new way of recalling the past for further re-evaluation of already known myths, especially viewing the intersection of Emezi's work that is cross-cultural and cross continental and that of Adimora- Ezeigbo's that is strictly Nigerian based. The two works lead to exploring the importance of clairvoyance or diviner in cross-cultural and specific milieus and how their trades or acts give clues to human origin.

A Review of Myth Paradigms in the Light of Myths of Eternal Return.

Life according to most of African worldviews, as seen in their oral literature, is cyclical—you are born, you grow in the light of a totemic symbol, you temporarily exit and you return as a reincarnated being. The totemic factor of the worldview, it is centered on how human beings treat or view a given species of animals. Africans and Asians, traditionally, share such views. Somehow, it is explained by the Bantu philosophy which Unah (2002, 12) purviews as the Kagame's Muntu, Hantu, Kintu, and Kuntu processes, all imbibing NTU principles which, to an extent, the physicist could claim to be "ion". "NTU is not an entity but that which permeates everything...NTU is not this thing or that thing but what makes things be.... NTU is Force itself, Being itself or spirit itself."

From Bantu perspectives, Africans identifies with animate and inanimate objects as forces on their own, sharing the planet Earth with humans and must be located in their force-nature and how that force-nature relates to humans. Like ion, intangible but real, all inanimate or animate object could be ignited to act as explosives, hence the need to respect their nature for mutual harmony and for the best living conditions of humans.

Lévi- Strauss (1973, 20) admits that myth, following social anthropology, seen in arts, relates well with realities, remote or contingent.

You cannot study gods and not relate with the image meant to represent them; rites and not analyse the objects the participants use in reaching their end result, both at material level or immaterial level. Afterall, in all communications, human beings are using signs and symbols.

Furthermore, Levi-Strauss admits that in studying the social systems of people in Indonesia like witnessed in reading *Freshwater*, dualism is present and it links to the functionality of human beings mirroring a latent function attributable to a myth and seeing it present in the immediate activity of a being. Myth, in effect, gives meaning to human existence beyond being born and dying, while the NTU remains undying and is seen as innate in all societies expressing itself in signs and symbols and perpetuating humanity. Without it chaos will be the bane of humankind (see Dortier 2008, 491). It is like Japanese people relating to their signs and symbols— hakuujins, Oshiri, shikataganai, manekineko, shamisen, etc, to relate with mythical language and objects that guide human activities for the sake of living harmoniously and peacefully. Even the symbolic relationship between human and the moon and the disaster it brought upon humans as the presence of unripe fruits in between humans and the moon, is a nature-force with some mythical touch, as prophesied by Nostradamus and as it happened on 28th January 1986, in Halley(1999,186). "He

will wish to go to far corner of the moon. He will be taken and sent to a strange land. The unripe fruits will cause great scandals. Great blame, great praise to one.”

The point here is that signs and symbols are within the grasp of humans to help them communicate and re-align their living with forces within animates and in animates. The unripe fruit is a force misused by humans who took it to the wrong place.

These effects are seen in the myths of Soundjata of Niane (1960) and even in that of Chaka the Zulu to the extent that mere wearing the Chaka war-like dress in France by Serena William was seen as repugnant by the French, but inspiring for a Serena who sees herself as indomitable on a tennis court. It triggered a nostalgic feeling in the French people whose king was killed on the warfront by the Zulus. So, symbols and signs are quite inspiring and life strengthening for the African if the NTU he or she sees as theirs is well conjured for actions like cropping mineral resources for greater activities – cobalt and diamond for batteries and heat resistant engines.

The two authors, compared here, living in different generations, help test our critical hypothesis of the myth of eternal return serving as muse for some writers; generation gaps notwithstanding.

Freshwaters and Myths

Following a mythocritic paradigm that relates to the rites and symbols peoples of different cultures use to express birth, growth, love, marriage and death /transitions, universals alternatives and specifics are identified. Hence for *Freshwater*, some processes of the myth of eternal return are identifiable as they are analysed hereunder. Birth, even pre-birth occurrences seem to match expectations of destiny and reincarnation assertions.

...we were wrenched, dragged through the gates, across a river, and through the back door of the thin woman's womb, thrust into the rippling water and the small sleeping body floating within. It was time. When the fetus had been housed... We were used to warm thuds of two heart beats separated by walls of flesh and liquid, used to the option of leaving, of returning to the place we came from, free like spirits are meant to be... And so we were trapped by this unfamiliar birthing (the doctor slid a needle into Saachi expelling the body that was becoming ours) this abomination of the fleshly, and this is how we ended up here (p.5)

This excerpt incarnates both pre-birth and birth as the mother Saachi, even in full flesh had to bear housing the new spirit oscillating between being in the body of Saachi who has traversed Asian land to marry an African or refusing to be birthed as the circumstance of birthing seems also strange to the spirit. Emezi is bringing in generational change characters as seen in the fusion of two races and expects even the spirit realm to be hostage and the world seems to be experiencing it also; humans traverse the terrestrial realm using the inanimate NTU seen in cropping matters into spacecrafts and expecting to cage spirits. Somehow, as the spirit turns to flesh, it also gets trapped on the ground, possibly as Ogbanje object or animal of totemic value.

The Ada belonged to us and Ala and Saachi, and as the child grew, there came a time when she would not move on all fours, as most

babies do...The child crawls like serpent...She mentioned , on the phone to her own mother, across the Indian Ocean(p.11)

The impression created here is that a strange spirit has come to live among them— Saul, African and Saachi, Asian— though united by Ala, planet earth, which has no boundary, ocean in between or not.

Ada grew up following the trends of mystery that represent the python, ready to swallow anything whole. In the spirit of birth taking a flesh that agree with a totemic object until that totemic object is also expelled from the spirit for the real living expected of the human being.

We did not come alone, with a force like ours, we dragged other thugs along—a pact, bits of bone, an igneous rock, worn-out velveteen, a strip of human hide tying it all together -iyi-uwa, the oath of the world. The oath says that we will come back, that we will not stay in this world, that we are loyal to the other side (p.15)

This seems to be the phenomenon of Ogbanje— running to the poisonous side— which some people erroneously translate as Abiku— born to die. Mysteriously, the object to be detected to cleanse or exorcise the human being, mostly a girl, from her poisonous attitude that makes life unbearable for her and her parents is hidden within a given radius of the compound into which she was given birth to. In effect, the Ala that is not restrained by boundaries follows the girl to her original birthplace and expects the python which remains the symbol of Ala, to direct or point the direction for the unearthing of the object that could be the link with the other world and cause it to be arrested and burnt with its smell serving as an antidote against the unstable attitude of the girl. Technically, the modern world links it to issues of trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

However, as it occurs mainly to growing girls, referred to as ogbanje, it turns into a myth linked to unearthable object and at the same time leading to freedom from a given trauma if so much so believed to have poisoned the normal or expected behavioral pattern of a girl brought up in a given culture or tradition. The question remains, is a place of origin of birth inheritable? If so, is Ada's place of birth Africa or Asia?

Another mythical trend Emezi seems to be painting via the character of Ada is that Ala , a boundless factor intervening in humans and their attitudes, it transmits its presence in the animals available in the space the human being lives, and somehow as a totem, acknowledged or unconsciously permeating the human being; it could be a snake, a cow, a bird, a monkey, etc. Furthermore, it remains a constant factor, albeit epigenetic, spreading as a factor in an inherent genetic endowment of the human from the mother's side and father's side. It seems Asughara is the main spirit following Ada and expressing itself anywhere Ada goes or as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) inspired.

Asughara (Spirit) speaks:

I had known her (Ada) since I was nothing, since I was everything, since that shell-blue house in Umuahia. I loved her because I watched her grow up, because she gave offerings since I started awakening, feeding me from the crook of her arm and the skin of her thighs. Let me tell you

now, I loved her because in the moment of her devastation, the moment she lost her mind, that girl reached for me so hard that she went completely mad (p.77).

There is a conflict here, expressing itself in Ada and coming from Ala in conflict with Ada's mother's origin, Asia. "Ada still wore a gold crucifix around her neck, a gift from Saachi's mother, a reminder that she had kept her childhood crush on the Christ". (p.73)

It is like a belief system inherited from their grandmother from the maternal side, and it is only partially absorbed by Ada as she finds herself in America as a student. In effect the grandmother seems to have suffered a supposed PTSD phenomenon in the past that makes her rely on the golden cross and expects it to work for Ada also. Ada also has a love life that seems unstable as she hops from one boyfriend to another. She moved from Boston to Texas to outside Boston. Even at that, her engagement with Ewan, an Irish resident, happens outside America, where both of them stay. The mother, Saachi was furious about everything that was happening to Ada.

Like the new expectations of new generation, they (Ewan and Ada) got their first apartment together outside Boston. Ewan proposed to her in a library in Cambridge (Boston) and they got engaged and Saachi (her mother) was furious, but she thawed after she met him and realized that Ada was going to marry him whether Saachi approved or not, after they moved to Brooklyn (New York). (p.171)

The unstable nature of Ada pushes her to remove her breast just to have a feeling of being less female even after conceding to be a spouse. To her, as well as to the Asughara who claim to be the spiritual owner of Ada's body, "you must understand, fertility was a pure and clear abomination to us". Asserting that it remains at the human dimension alone and that it must be diluted; the spirits in Ada state:

It would be unthinkable, unbelievably cruel for us to ever swell so unnaturally, to lactate, to mutate our vessel... The ways of our brother sisters, of ogbanje, were. Do not leave a human lineage, for you did not come from a human lineage. (p.24)

Emezi is painting a new generation that so much believe in their power to remain eternal if they could persist along the line of the original snake that represents Ala in the land of origin of Ada, Africa. Meanwhile nothing is said of Ada's father, the African. Is he playing a natural father?

We were grateful that Saachi had at one time cared for the Ada, had kept her alive as a baby and been an excellent guardian as far as she could but what did she know of graces or beastselves or ugly, unwelcome embodiments or the sacrifices a snake must go through to continue its timeline, the necessity of molting, the graves built of skins. She has to understand where her jurisdiction ended and how pushing further was blasphemy (p.205)

The character of Ada is like the current world of confusion, resisting reality and claiming more knowledgeable than those who preceded you on planet Earth as that same planet Earth remains constant in the name of Ala, which accommodates humans in all their recklessness of trying to outdo Ala, even as it remains the spring from which all freshwater comes out. Ada still wants to be human, after creating disaster for her human person. It is still the confusion of the present humans in the face of excessive technology; sources seen and unseen from above are applied to Ala with great limitation on what a human body can do. A snake moults leaving its skin as a symbol of the grave left behind, in effect, like the belief system that admits that the third-day resurrection happened, and expects humans to claim eternity by it.

You cannot wrestle with your chi and win. In this new obedience, I (Ada) decided to go back to Umuahia (Africa) and see my first mother...ogbanje are as luminal as possible— spirit and human, both and neither. I am here and not here, real and not real, energy pushed into skin and bone... (p.248)

The notion of humans being energy pushed into skin and bone as well as NTU, could be greatly disturbing, and the ogbanje person presents a revolting posture to that, though relatively unimpressive the way the ogbanje goes about it as long as it is still Ala mediated, hence how does the escape from Ala happen? Note that Ada's return to Umuahia is the acknowledgement of a failure to exorcise the human person from the ogbanje spirit outside one's place of origin. Ada seems a reflection of the entire humanity being dragged on an endless quest for happiness on earth and Ada's grandmother who relies on the golden cross seems to give a clue of how to escape the Ogbanje trap or the grave-like human body for renewed life. Does it also mean that the entire humanity could only live better if Africa is recalibrated?

Thus, it is a sustenance of the myth of eternal return, but does Adimora-Ezeigbo paint the same scenes that make humans collectively ogbanje caged or deranged?

House of Symbols and Myths

In *House of Symbols (HOS)*, Eaglewoman, the main character, seems to live in a world that is constantly in a flux of ever unending prognostics for the future by the diviner, Ezenwayi or whoever acts like her

Signs are noticed at birth. Those signs are now objects of divination pronouncements by many claimants to devinationship.

Eaglewoman reaches for the bundle of baby things...Ezenwayi wishes to see you, your husband and the child had been barely one year... Eaglewoman had asked herself if it is her destiny to wallow in the shadows of diviners, soothsayers, fetish mongers Charlatans (p.11)

However, what makes all the diviners' talk hoax is that of Unamma, the most trusted.

Our people say that when something happens a third time that thing should be watched closely...Unamma predicted the

reincarnation of Ejinnaka, your grandmother...she chose us as the vessel for her reincarnation (p.16)

The scene is about the birth of a child incarnate and how the lifelong journey of that child could be an existential concern, all through, for those meant to be used as vessels for bringing him/her to the earth. Somehow, Unamma, another diviner says what is untenable in many instances.

The scenes at Ezenwayi's divination shop were all about setting the trajectory of the child that must act as a marionette under the watch of Ezenwayi's ways as their (Eaglewoman and Osai) child Nnenna turns out another ogbanje, not necessarily born to die but born to exhibit the hollowness and confusion humans create for themselves on earth. Such hollowness, according to Ezenwayi, lies in failing to heed to one's destiny which comes as the right prodding by parents is allowed.

Eaglewoman believes firmly in destiny...Happy is one who cooperates with destiny... simply allow it to fulfil itself, perhaps with a little prodding here and a little prodding there just to ensure that it is on course that nothing is done to obstruct it(p.120)

Adimora-Ezeigbo paints a character that believes paradoxically in all divinations that instruct on proddings that are doable and must be actuated for destiny to be fulfilled. However, what is required is entirely outside the means of the doer. Indeed, on material grounds Eaglewoman sees life differently, and there lies what has nothing to do with destiny. In bread selling, which happens to be what leads to wealth, a different success paradigm beyond divinations and prodding beckons, and Eaglewoman seems not in tune with that. Soronje is her competitor in the bread industry though Soronje seems to see in Eaglewoman, her destiny obstructor and needed to be eliminated. But Eaglewoman, like humans in their hollowness, reasons it this way:

There is a saying in Umuga that there are people destined to accumulate in vain because their chi is against them... On the other hand, there are people whose hands grow money with little or no effort... Soronje (is of the former) one of the unfortunate individuals in the world who advertently or inadvertently enter into wrong business or profession and thus goes through life without fulfilment or satisfaction... However, her chi smiles at her in other ways; rewards her with a life baby after the ordeal of another caesarean birth (p.320)

Strange comparisons of what constitute destiny and what new developments of modernity throw at humans seem to dominate Adimora-Ezeigbo's characters' trajectories.

Many thoughts dominate Osai's mind,...Three tasks in particular elbow their way to the front; to fetch Aziagba (Eaglewoman's mother) for omugwo so that she can assist in taking care of Eaglewoman and the baby for a month or two to enable her to have plenty rest... from the stresses of childbirth and maternity; to arrange the baby's naming rites and baptism; and to invite Mallam Garba, the astrologer, to prepare his sons horoscope as he did when his daughters were born....At birth each human being is

bequeathed with a controlling star and a guardian angel who Umuga people call Chi. Each person has his or her personal Chi (p 195)

Osai is the husband of Eaglewoman, the main character; he is taking the form of destiny enabler of Eaglewoman and also seems the shadow of what a husband ought to be in the milieu that serves as décor of the novel. However, within the same décor, strange phenomena are introduced, giving the impression that the milieu is adapting to a wider world; Mallam Garba as an astrologer that is distinct from Ezenwayi, the diviner that predicts the attitudes of Chi of newborn or teenagers. Either an issue of conflicts of cultures or like Osai's conflict of roles, like the role of the diviner seen in Ezenwayi and, now to a shadow diviner of Mallam Garba. That feeling of debasement of the culture or making it a shadow of the culture of other milieus is expressed further hereunder.

It is difficult for an outsider to appreciate Umuga's complex problem....The Anglicans and the Roman Catholics on one hand are embroiled in a struggle while on the other hand, the Christians as a group are pitted against the Amaala people... The conflicts that exist have their twists and turns, but religious conflict seems to be the most destructive of the worms devouring Umuga's peace (p.235)

Conflicts of all sorts exist in the plot of *HOS* and the worst of them all seems to be the moral decadence that has made its society to throw nobility to the dogs or pigs. The toughest of their males is being attacked as his ancestors are wrongly seen as having led the society to its current unsteady life. It is like the ancestors are purveyors of the collective Ogbanje of Umuga.

In the regular prayer sessions, he holds with his family, he pleads the blood of the lamb over wrong doings his father was guilty of just as his wife offers intercession for Ezeukwu pleading that her great- grandmother's misdeeds should not be a curse to him or to his descendants. These were men who lived according to the morality or immorality of their time... Men who acted sometimes to subvert the accepted standards of their time (p.298)

The endgame of life always craves for regrettable events to repent on and it shows in the *HOS* plot as Eaglewoman and Ezenwayi dominated the last days of their great men of the land and somehow brought them to recant for change and be ready to join their ancestors in peace; as if without her intervention, they could not join their ancestors in peace. Ezenwayi battled the masquerade of the land in support of these men by proving that spiritual power is a gift. Eaglewoman turned a politician after nursing her husband out of a grievous sickness and after overcoming Soronje's wickedness; and in all, it proves that the Chi of Eaglewoman has been very much alive and has helped her to navigate the terrain of life very well. Eaglewoman believes firmly in destiny and says so to everyone who cares to listen; though uncertainty and surprise must come one's way, cooperating with one's Chi will make them surmountable. What is more, knowing when to invite Ezenwayi for cleansing of any misdeed is also part of clearing the way for her Chi to remain faithful. Ezenwayi is the greatest prayer warrior Eaglewoman has ever known. And, to Eaglewoman, Soronje's sorrows and child's death, her supposedly business rival, is a sign that her life trajectory remains fruitful as against that of Soronje. Her collective milieu, the larger society, backs that comparison; that is, people around her and Soronje could bear witness to that.

Myths and Reality Contents in *HOS* and *Freshwater*

Archeologists and primate study experts as followed by Levi-Strauss, Eliade Mircea, and Jim Unah, prove that Myths are compressed experienced phenomena in the past and a priori realities yet to be fully explored by humans to place it in better perspective for the progress they intend to make for the betterment of humanity; and literature and the imagination and creative dimension it embeds give clues to evaluation of origins of species, human inclusive, and how not to misrepresent human trajectory for misadventure that leads to extinction. Such an experienced phenomenon is like the life and activities of dinosaurs or Egyptian pyramids and their hidden secrets.

HOS, as painted by *Emezi* proclaims a newness of the myth of eternal return, though the main character she paints, leading the crusade, aligns with a snake as a totem and could not live out the true renewal a snake's moulting process embeds. Levi-Strauss sees it as relating to gods and the symbols they incarnate without making a great effort to explore them to the fullest. Like Unigwe (2007, 28) narrates, "you felt limp and let down by your body. You wished you could shed this body, the way snake shed its skin and grow a new one. One that is not as treacherous as the present one". Just like Baggot (2013, 268) observes in his psychic excerpts, perceiving an ultimate purpose in life to strengthen human existence lies in strong anthropic principle, intelligent observers, who can go beyond what carbon-based life forms like mere mortals can teleologically present in literature. *Emezi* narration is like making such an attempt as Akwaeke, her first name insinuates. Akwaeke is the egg of a python and like it is known, the moulting process of a python is still a mystery that leads to breaching the myth of eternal return captured in the philosophy of UBANTU which Unah elaborates.

NTU is mere ash and, in effect, inferior to snake-like myth. However, NTU-like is a cautious revelation approach to avoid running faster than your Chi, as Adimora-Ezeigbo narrates. 'My present life is a load that is too heavy for me. I have roared and groaned against the strange things that surround me. My roar and groan have made little difference ... Perhaps, hereafter to return in a new form, as a new vessel, I will learn to be useful'. Adimora-Ezeigbo's leading character admits that teleological human could be identified in the person of Ezenwayi to find a better purpose in present life. Hence the gods even could be made to disarm in their harmfulness to human beings. "This place, a house of symbols, is where people come and receive insights into the true meaning of existence ... I help the seeker to foster a mind armed with self-adaptive response to the continuously changing world we live in and the spiritual forces that control it.

While the leading character of Adimora-Ezeigbo leans on a fellow human being to pave her life trajectory, *Emezi* wants to do it alone leaning on intuition, even the golden cross she inherited is neglected. She is not far from admitting the lucky trajectory of a Kamala Haris in American space; an African – Asian American lady, almost like her.

Conclusion

Our presentation is an attempt to compare the significance of the contributions of the two novels in using myths to unravel the purpose of existence and how such myths could be further unraveled to reduce tensions and helplessness experienced by humans as they allow totemic animals show them the way for natural development and progress that is psychologically seated. Both novels are

not quite psychologically seated for triggering great clues for quasi-eternal living. However, they bring in re-imagining items to unravel further the myth-like theories of totemic animals just like the Chinese use the panda myth (balance and harmony) to relatively find the way for their relative progress in the current world, and it works for them. Ogbanje as capable of deranging a collectivity is re-imagined in Emezi's *Freshwater* from the three continents her characters traversed and what go on in those continents, and the snake moulting process seems a better way of arresting Ogbanje; in contrast, Adimora-Ezeigbo's *HOS*, reincarnation relates to transferring a supposed NTU to another vessel carrier who must birth it as a new human being and must be guided to live a worthy life by deliberate prodding of the parents in consultation with a trusted diviner. So, for a wider world, deranged by Ogbanje, is it better to invent a moulting process or divination-led leaders so that the paths of humanity could be rightly directed for ever regenerating outcome?

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