

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

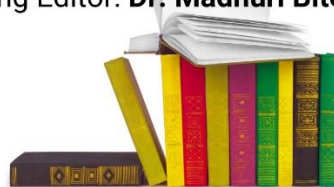
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-1, FEBRUARY 2025

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**



www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Literature as Resistance: Redefining Identity through Language and Mythopoeia

Basundhara Raj Dasgupta
Independent Research Scholar,
Kolkata, West Bengal,
India.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14980195>

Article History: Submitted-29/01/2025, Revised-07/02/2025, Accepted-24/02/2025, Published-28/02/2025.

Abstract:

This paper will examine how literature is a tool of resistance against dominant narratives and how Amos Tutuola uses myth retellings to create a distinct Yoruba cosmology amidst the Western imposition of culture and belief systems. The study will analyze the language used by Tutuola that opposes the Western linguistic system and how the English of the colonizers becomes a vessel to preserve Yoruba identity. The paper will specifically ask how mythical retellings and language were used by Amos Tutuola to reclaim the marginalized African voice during colonization. The research will evaluate cultural retrieval through close examinations of three texts - *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and *The Brave African Huntress*. *The Palm Wine Drinkard* delves into complex representations of Yoruba myths, keeping a fantastical, magical realistic tale on the surface. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* revolves around the plight of an African boy lost in the bushes of Africa while trying to flee from the slave merchants and captures the voice of resistance in the face of the dehumanizing effects of colonization. *The Brave African Huntress* presents a courageous figure who single-handedly saves her brothers from bondage.

Keywords: Mythopoeia, Yoruba culture, Language, African identity.

Introduction

Africa is a continent known for its rich history and cultural heritage. From the brutal chronicles of colonization to rapid urbanization, Africa still bears the scars of it all and has yet to reclaim its identity in the global context. Oral tradition is a way of preserving culture through myths and histories that blend culture with history. Africa is famous for its rich oral traditions, often under “oral civilizations.” Through their unique traditions and lifestyle, the Indigenous people of Africa play a great role in preserving and documenting oral culture. The Yoruba refers to the West African ethnic group who reside in Yorubaland—a collective name for Nigeria, Togo, and Benin. Widely represented in African literature, the Yoruba culture becomes a focal point for studying African traditions, especially through the works of authors like Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri, and Wole Soyinka.

Amos Tutuola is widely known for his Yoruba folk tales and his works are a unique blend of Yoruba cultural heritage and imagination rooted in the Yoruba storytellings and mythologies. Tutuola provides an insight into the religious beliefs and practices of the Yoruba people through mythical retellings in his novels like *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, which serves as a landmark in analyzing Nigerian history. His tales appear fantastical with the literary application of mythopoeia in his books, as he uses traditional folklore to create his own mythical narratives, and his writings use the elements unique to Yoruba to put forward his philosophical ideas on humanity. Therefore, myth has a multi-layered purpose of preserving culture and uplifting the same. According to Northrop Frye, myth is not mere storytelling; it is a symbolic representation of the world we are living in. Myths help us understand our world better, “In terms of meaning or Dianoia, myth is the same world looked at as an area or field of activity.”(Frye 136) It is through Tutuola’s mythopoeia that the readers get to understand the Yoruban psyche. Another striking feature of Amos Tutuola

is his use of language. In the introduction of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Wole Soyinka comments on Tutuola's usage of English, he writes, "Tutuola was not shut off from the correct usage of the English language, he simply chose to invent his own tongue." (Soyinka 6) Tutuola meticulously asserts the thought processes of his people through language, at the same time challenging Western narratives.

Literature Review

Yoruba mythology plays a significant role in the writings of Amos Tutuola. Not only did he represent the oral tradition of Yoruba worldwide, but he also produced his own version of the existing stories through mythical retellings. Through this method, he develops folktales instead of novels and blends individual imagination with oral tradition. (Obiechina 87) 20th-century post-colonial Nigeria, which has seen tradition and modernity intertwined, chooses to create a counter-narrative against colonial devaluation—a constant theme in Tutuola's works. He employs heavy mythic elements to accustom readers to Yoruba tradition and how these help to comment on the social vices. (Onabiye 3) His incorrect syntax of language further helps to uphold cultural purity, which has been called "warm human voice" by several critics. (Collins) While the existing research has evaluated Tutuola's mastery of language and mythopoeia, this research focuses on the same being used as tools of resistance against Western dominance.

Myth as Resistance

According to Northrop Frye, "Myth is an art of implicit metaphorical identity." (Frye, 136) This suggests that mythopoeia is not simply an expression of reality but also the identity or essence of reality. Therefore, mythopoeia does not represent reality at a surface level, it does so at a deeper level, revealing the human condition. Amos Tutuola's works represent the collective consciousness of the Yoruba amidst the colonial regime, therefore, using myth and beliefs as a

resistance to the dominant Western culture. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a man's quest for his dead palm-wine tapster and the unique fantastical experiences he encounters throughout his journey. The novel opens with how the unnamed narrator was distraught by the death of his palm wine tapster, the metaphor of death linking him with the past, and palm wine associated with African tradition as it is an integral part of the culture; therefore, the journey of the narrator is symbolic of the quest for the lost cultural heritage during colonialism. The concept of death in Yoruba mythology is significant here. For the Yoruba people, death is not an end of life; it is the new phase of existence or a transition to the afterlife. This is where the narrator decides to use his magical powers or juju to bring the dead man back to his world. However, his journey isn't a straight path leading him to the destination; he faces several obstacles with supernatural beings and weird, unearthly creatures, which he can overcome gradually. Hereby, Tutuola craftily uses the Yoruba myth to critique colonization. In the chapter titled 'The Description of the Curious Creature,' he describes a "complete gentleman." (Tutuola 15) Different owners have hired each of his body parts. This echoes the Yoruba creation of human beings by Obatala, who created men from clay, which implies an image of detachable body parts. Tutuola uses this idea to portray the dehumanizing effect of slavery, as a "complete man" slowly loses his wholeness when a price tag is placed on him. In the chapter 'Three Good Creatures Took Over Our Trouble - They Were - Drum, Song And Dance', three creatures indulged in the merriment that resonates closely with Yoruba culture - music and dance are symbols of Yoruba identity. Apart from being important components of celebration, these are languages that cultivate a feeling of solidarity among the community. Drums are mediums to connect with the Yoruba spiritual world, and Yoruba people worship the rhythms of the drums. This motif promotes the feeling of Pan-Africanism and cultural pride which challenges the notion of the superiority of Western nations. Stuart Hall in his book *Resistance*

Through Rituals talks about cultures communicating defiance through unique behavior, dress, and music, which gives them a sense of autonomy (Hall 53). Tutuola uses the metaphor of “sold our death to somebody” and “lent our fear to somebody” to symbolize the loss of independence, as ‘death’ here can mean cultural heritage instead of physical death, and the ‘fear’ was borrowed to manipulate the colonized. (Tutuola, 66). Through the mythical creatures like the “red people”, a “dead’s town” where everyone walks backward, horned creatures of three feet height and a hungry creature who “did not stop crying hungry-hungry-hungry once” (Tutuola 110), Tutuola creates a counter-narrative to Western realism. He chooses a symbolic representation of the narrator's journey, and his struggle to survive through his “juju” to portray the constant fight of the Africans against the colonial power. Juju or magic is intricately linked with African culture, as it refers to the religious practices of West Africa, reinforcing social norms. The narrator, therefore, embraces his tradition to fight against the spirits who threaten his identity.

Tutuola presents a mystical journey in *My Life in a Bush of Ghosts*. Geoffrey Parrinder writes, “Fairy Tales can scare, but this is more terrifying than Grimm, as its matter is more serious and is believed in by millions of Africans today.” (Parrinder, 11) The comparison is relevant because the Grimms’ stories are usually more structured, while Tutuola presents a dream-like sequence through his stories that are integral parts of the Yoruba folklore; therefore, Tutuola’s world is not fantastic; it is believed to be real by many Africans. Tutuola clearly states the backdrop of the novel: “The slave wars were causing dead luck to both old and young of those days, but if one is captured, he or she would be sold to slavery for foreigners who would carry him or her to unknown destinations to be killed for the buyer’s god or to be working for him.” (Tutuola 18) The narrator finds himself lost in the bush of ghosts while trying to flee from the slave traders. His struggles start when he is captured by a spirit and forcibly taken to the “7th town of ghosts,” where

he is transformed into different animals, a monkey, lion, and horse, through juju from time to time. He is held captive, “then he put reins into my mouth and tied me on a stump with a thick rope.” (Tutuola 37) The tortures parallel the cruelty of slavery until the narrator steals the spirit’s juju and uses it to free himself, symbolizing the potential of turning the colonizer’s tools like Western education and technology against them, notably the rise of “new elites” in Africa who used Western education to gain more knowledge on political and global rights, questioning the colonial regime.

Amos Tutuola used rich symbolism and metaphors to portray the Yoruba culture authentically. Every concept and element incorporated in the texts is an integral part of the Yoruba culture. For example, in *The Brave African Huntress*, hunting culture is heavily explored. According to the Yoruba, hunting is not merely a part of livelihood; it has spiritual implications that help people connect with the divine world. The Yoruba Orisha (god) of hunting is Ochosi, who looks after the community's wellness. In an interview, Tutuola mentions, “I don't want our past to die. I don't want our culture to vanish.” (Lindfors 143) He also uses these stories to impart a moral lesson, as African oral tradition is largely based on folktales that give moral guidance. For example, the quest in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is not a journey searching for his dead tapster but rather to find wisdom and knowledge at the end. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* ends with “This is what hatred did” (Tutuola 174), which implies that hatred of the supernatural or the world that is beyond our understanding leads to alienation, and negative emotions like hatred should not dictate a man’s rationality. According to Wole Soyinka, “In new societies which begin the seductive experiments in authoritarianism, it has become a familiar experience to watch society crush the writer under a load of guilt for his daring to express a sensibility and an outlook apart from, and independent of the mass direction.” (Soyinka) The idea is relevant in a context where Tutuola’s

writings were termed unoriginal and denied the status of “novel” due to the emulation of myths, as Yoruba folktales divert from the dominant narratives and present a unique African sensibility.

Language as Resistance

Amos Tutuola’s non-standardized use of English gained global attention, especially when it was dismissed by his fellow Nigerian intellectuals. Tutuola received a short nominal formal education, and he was never bothered by the fact that he was not using polished English to write his stories. He started writing *The Palm Wine Drinkard* because he had always been a good storyteller, “When I was at school I was a good tale teller. Why, could I not write my own? Oh, I am very good at this thing!” (Thelwall, 186) He assumes the role of an authentic Yoruba storyteller through his language. However, he uses pen and paper, to keep the authenticity, he uses repetition, a technique unique to African oral storytelling. While narrating how the narrator will trick Death, he writes, “I stopped and dug a pit of his(Death’s)size on the center of that road, after that I spread the net which the old man gave me to bring him(Death)with on that pit.” (Tutuola 11) The constant repetition of ‘Death’ in parenthesis isn’t necessary while writing, but he writes mimicking how a person talks while narrating a story. He does not abandon his native way of speaking, giving rise to a new form of English—the anglicized Yoruba. He uses emphasis in long sentences to put stress on a particular idea. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, while describing the “smelling ghosts,” he writes, “If any one of these smelling ghosts touched anything it would become a bad smell at the same moment and it is bad luck for any ghost who is not a native of smelling ghosts to meet a smelling ghost on the way when going somewhere.” (Tutuola 34) The absence of punctuation and conjunction makes the sentence fluid in appearance, almost like a dream sequence, adding a surreal quality to his narrative. He structures the sentences that find their roots in the Yoruba form of speaking— “Though young and a woman, I am not afraid to go and bring happiness to our village

and many other villages.” (Tutuola 12) Language expresses cultural heritage here, so Tutuola consciously resists Western imposition through language.

Western imposition offered standardization of English and to normalize written language, they introduced a dictionary to apply the correct use of English. Their idea of the English Language was particularly prescriptive rather than descriptive, and it was implemented mainly for non-native speakers to ensure linguistic purity. Tutola rejects this through the coinage of unique words and the creation of a nonconventional vocabulary. Notably, the central character of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a “drinkard” and not a drunkard. The term “drunkard” is associated with a negative meaning, but Tutuola uses the same idea attached to the term to describe “drinkinness” - almost giving it an accepted meaning. The drunkard is irresponsible, but the “drinkard” is an adventurous storyteller. As Soyinka rightly points out, “The social opprobrium attached to the grammar strict word is dissipated, and the anti-hero is accepted as a first-rate raconteur.” (Soyinka 6)

Language is a medium through which one can express oneself; for Tutuola, it is merely a vessel through which one can transmit cultural identity. He adds vivid imagery in his writing, and by keeping his dialogues short, he mirrors the traditional oral storytelling that engages listeners. In *The Brave African Huntress*, a wooden bugle reveals the king of Ibembe’s secret through a song, “The head of the King of Ibembe has two horns! The head of the King of Ibembe has two horns! The two horns are thick and short!” (Tutuola 27) The structure is unconventional, and instead of constructing a single sentence, the author breaks it down to mimic the rhythm of word flow while speaking. The dialogues aren't always comprehensive at first glance, and the author leaves room for interpretation. When the narrator in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* asks a spirit whether he is an earthly person, the spirit replies, “I am and I am not.” (Tutuola 53) Tutuola did not mind the syntax, he intended to erase the border between the physical and the spiritual world and, at the

same time, not impose any rigidity on the reader's imagination through self-explanation. He realized that he needed a different English to portray a world that was "too realistic to be liminal, too paranormal to be realistic." (Soyinka 6)

To analyze an African text by the standards of Western linguistic norms leads to the misrepresentation of African cultural values; rather, the texts should be judged within the framework of African linguistic concepts. Janheinz Jahn notes, "Every mature artist achieves his best work when he attaches himself to his own artistic tradition." (Jahn 207) Amos Tutuola's backdrop lies solely on African oral traditions, and he did not vaguely introduce a 'different' form of standardized English; he made sure that the language knows its cultural background. For example, language is used to portray the African notion of time, as opposed to the Western idea, according to which time is a mechanical and precise concept. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, time is measured using a ghost's clock, "...myself went to the church at about ten o'clock, but it was the ghost's clock said so." (Tutuola 59) Time becomes a non-human concept, the precision and correctness being questioned here. A significant event like a wedding taking place according to a spirit's clock suggests that time is a much more complex force, and it can exist beyond human-governed tools like clocks and calendars. Similarly, the progression of time is non-linear in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* as the Drinkard's journey does not have a clear advancement. There is no particular sequence or predictability in which the events occur; the primary goal of bringing the dead tapster back is overshadowed by adventurous narratives like tricking 'Death,' a visit to the 'wraith island,' and the 'red town.' The author achieves this through the abrupt ending of chapters, like in the chapter titled 'Not too small to be chosen,' the narrator begins his journey to the 'Unreturnable-Heaven's Town,' which unexpectedly ends with the description of the inhabitants of the town— "if anybody entered it, no doubt he or she would not return again, because the

inhabitants of the town were very bad, cruel, and merciless.” (Tutuola 56) As Sheryl Takacs notes, “In folklore and specifically in oral storytelling, plot is incidental and plot structure is therefore loose and episodic by the very nature of this particular genre.” (Takacs 392)

Thus, Amos Tutuola decisively showcases cultural resistance by rejecting Western linguistic limitations and embedding his legacy in the rich tapestry of African oral traditions, myths, and conventions. The language of his narrative demands attention; it cannot be understood in isolation. One must fully consider the cultural, emotional, and historical contexts that shape the story.

Conclusion

There is no reason why a particular cultural heritage should cease to exist. Both Europeans and Africans have equal reasons to take pride in their culture. The co-existence of the cultures will endlessly enrich each other, a vision that Tutuola had a long time ago. “In his quest to recognize and provide for interconnectedness and interdependencies in lieu of zero-sum games of winner takes all, Tutuola opts to bring Yoruba and English into a conversation that is fruitful and enriching to him and the tasks he has at hand.” (Nyamnjoh) He refuses to be given a choice between Yoruba and the West. He keeps the unique myths alive and does so through a language that is a result of cultural co-existence, an example to show that English can exist in a non-rigid way and blend perfectly with indigenous Africa. The language of the colonizer that was used to suppress Africans through the ages is utilized to express and assert the same African identity. The Western notion of individual mastery over everything is also challenged through stories of shared human experience, and how certain ideas exist beyond the realm of human physical existence. Tutuola’s stories will live to inspire both Africans and the West through captivating narratives, as the stories are meant to transmit culture, morals, and wisdom globally. “The richness of the material could be a limitless

source for poets, playwrights, and novelists just as the Greek myths have been for the West.” (Takacs) In conclusion, global literature will forever be a witness to Amos Tutuola’s brilliance and resilience of cultural identity and uniqueness.

Works Cited:

- Collins, Harold R. “A theory of creative mistakes and the mistaking style of Amos Tutuola.” *Taylor & Francis*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 155-171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449857408588300>.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 2000. Accessed 28 January 2025
- Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, editors. *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Taylor & Francis, 2006. Accessed 28 January 2025.
- Jahn, Janheinz. *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*. Grove Press, 1961.
- Nyamnjoh, Francis B.. (2020). Amos Tutuola as a quest hero for endogenous Africa: actively anglicizing the Yoruba language and Yorubanising the English language. *Acta Academica*, 52(1), 89-98. <https://doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i1/kn>
- Obiechina, E. N. “Amos Tutuola and the Oral Tradition.” *Présence Africaine*, no. 65, 1968, pp. 85–106. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24348557>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2025.
- Onabiyi, Monilola Abidemi. “Mythological icons in Amos Tutuola’s The Palm-Wine Drinkard.” *Academia Edu*, 2011, Accessed 29 Jan. 2025
- Takacs, Sherryl. “Oral Tradition in the Works of A. Tutuola.” *Books Abroad*, vol. 44, no. 3, 1970, pp. 392–98. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40124551>. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.
- Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-wine Drinkard; And, My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Grove Press, 1994. Accessed 28 January 2025.

Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard: New Edition*. Faber & Faber, 2014.

Tutuola, Amos. *The Brave African Huntress*. Faber & Faber, 2014.

Web References:

https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_bzz001197501_01/_bzz001197501_01_0125.php