

**SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*
AND ALEX LA GUMA'S *A WALK IN THE NIGHT*.****Udjo-Igboh, Voke**

Department of English

School of Foundation and General Studies

Delta State School of Marine Technology, Burutu.

udjovoke93@gmail.com**Abstract**

It is unquestionably true that many literary writers employ symbols, signs, images and imagery to express profound connotations that are beyond the surface implications of their work. Symbolism has become a vital concept that is used not just in our everyday life but also in literature to represent or express qualities and ideas. It is a communicative style that involves the application of the signifier and the signified. The research is anchored on the theoretical foundation known as Semiotics and Symbolic Interactionism. The study examines and critically evaluates symbols and meaning in these novels. These authors make use of multiple symbols that have deeper meaning in their novels. For instance, in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, he uses signifiers like 'Nzu'-Chalk as a token of goodwill. 'Kolanut' among the Ndi-Igbo is used by hosts to welcome visitors into their homes. In Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, images of dirt, filth and ugliness represent the physical environment and the direct reflection of the mental, physical and moral qualities of the characters. At the end of this research, it is discovered that several authors always use symbols to express their ideas and opinions in symbolic ways that are beyond the written words.

Keywords: Symbolism, Signifier, Signified**Introduction**

Since the beginning of time, symbolism is found in every aspect of our lives, not just in literature. Colors, road signs, logos, and emojis, are all examples of symbolism since the graphics refer to thoughts, businesses, or moods. Forms of storytelling by humans in the beginning of time included hieroglyphics and cave painting which were quite literal symbols representing a more complex belief or portrayal. Symbolism and meaning in literature has been an area of interest for poets. It has been an artistic and literary yet loose movement that has its roots embedded in French poets in the 19th century which has spread to not just painting and theatre but has also influenced both American and European literature in the 20th century. Oftentimes, poets, artists and writers ought to express their experiences through suggestive yet subtle expressions. Writers use symbolism to elevate their writings and give insights to the reader. Symbols give literary works more color and richness while giving a concise and deeper meaning. Every writer uses symbolism as a freedom tool. The writer's work has two distinct meanings: a literal one that is self-evident, and a symbolic one that is far more profound than the literal one. It lends universality to a piece of literature's characters and themes. Symbolism piques readers' interest because it allows them to gain insight into the writer's thoughts on how he sees the world and his thoughts on commonplace, actions and objects that might have broader meanings.

Purpose of Study

This study aims at examining the function of symbolic representations in the aforementioned novels. The major objective of this study is to show that these writers give underlying meaning in their works by using symbols and signs. It also aims at proving that images can convey semiotic relevance beyond the physical objects they represent. It also shows that literary artists do not always depend on words. Literary artists want to prove that they are in the business of trying to say more using symbols and that everything is not expressed through words (graphic representations) that the signified can be much more than the signifier.

Scope of the Study

This study covers two novels. The selection of these novels is from one literary angle which is the symbolic representations in the novels. Writers communicate to their readers through the use of symbols, metaphors, images and cultural artifacts that mean more than their physical nature and appearance.

Similarly, readers are exposed to the invaluable function of symbols, signs and images as major contributors to literary interpretation and evaluation.

Significance of Study

It aims to show that literary artists do not always depend on words. They can use other means of communication which could be connotative or symbolic, not just the denotative meaning. Symbols allow the human brain to create meaning from sensory input and decode symbols via connotation and denotation. It is difficult to find a work of literature that isn't full of symbolism. It is an important literary device for creating complex narratives because it allows writers to convey important information without having to say it directly, to hide themes that are too controversial to discuss openly, and to communicate big ideas quickly and effectively. It aids the reader in visualizing complex concepts and central themes, as well as tracking their progression. It also interprets texts on its own rather than being told what the author is trying to say. This study therefore, would guide novelists, particularly the young ones to improve the essence of a work of art.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics and Symbolic Interactionism

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is semiotics and symbolic interactionism. According to Meyer Howard Abrams, it was Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher who first used the term "semiotic" but Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, in his book entitled: *Course in General Linguistics* proposed a science which he called "Semiology". Meyer said:

Not only explicit systems of communication such as language, the Morse code and traffic signs and signals, are constituted by SIGNS but also that a good diversity of human actions and production- our bodily postures and gestures, the social rituals we perform, the clothes we wear, the meals we serve, the buildings we inhabit all convey shared "meanings" to members of a particular culture and so can be analyzed as signs which function in diverse kinds of Signifying systems (170).

In general semiotics is the study of signs which stand for something else. It could be a gesture, a mark, a word, a picture and so on, and how they work. Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework for comprehending people's behavior and perspectives in which the researcher describes human interaction processes. It's a micro-level theory that looks at how people interact in a society. Semioticians know very well that verbal communication or expression is just one of the ways through which man makes his feelings, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, cultures and social events known to others. Apart from verbal communication, for example, when a group of people put on black clothes and walk in groups or procession, they are speaking a loud language as far as Igbo cultural and conventional practice is concerned. Their language is that of grief, sorrow or sadness resulting from bereavement. If some young palm frond is placed on a piece of land, the language is simple: Do not trespass because the land is in dispute and when placed in the front and back of a car or vehicle, it simply means that the vehicle is carrying a dead body. To this extent, semioticians, in reading, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating literary works, concentrate their critical thoughts and energy on discovering the other SIGN LANGUAGES used by the writer to help him express his message in the work. So the task before the semioticians is to discover and discuss the types and functions of semiotics in a given work of art with a view to illuminating the work and its contents to the ordinary reader.

We can think of sign as the signifier for the sake of simplicity, such as a written word, an utterance, smoke as a sign of fire, and so on. On the other hand, the object is best understood as whatever is being signified. For instance, the object to which a written or spoken word is attached, or the fire symbolized by smoke. The interpretant, Pierce's most innovative and distinctive feature, is best understood as our understanding of the sign/object relationship. For Pierce, the interpretant is crucial because signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign only has

meaning when it is interpreted. This places the interpreter at the center of the sign's content, because a sign's meaning is manifested in the interpretation that it generates in sign users.

Okeke, Fidelia and Ken Chukwu in *Semiotics and Symbolism in Literary Communication: A Study of George Orwell's Animal Farm*: Symbols are simply objects, actions, or events in fiction that convey meaning (94). The significance they convey goes beyond their literal meaning, beyond the more obvious reason for their inclusion in a story. A piece of literary communication (e.g. novel) is therefore essential when its symbols are observed and appropriately interpreted. On the other hand, if its symbol is overlooked, its achievement could be underestimated as well as its significance oversimplified. Omeh Ngwoke cites Arp and Johnson who define symbols as something that means more than what it is (26). Omeh, however, asserts that symbols or symbolic words and expressions evoke mental pictures which, like all images, appeal to the senses. In communication, symbolism exists in the space of semiotics, since symbol-like signs represent different things outside of themselves.

Symbolic Representations in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

The third of what is usually referred to as an African trilogy. The other parts being *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease*-*Arrow of God* is set in the 19th century period of indirect rule in Nigeria when the colonizer were using warrant chiefs to rule. The novel can be described as a consolidation of the first which portrays the traditional convictions and conventional culture of the Igbo individuals of Nigeria. It combines the mythic, religious and social customs of the Igbo's in a bid to investigate the African condition. However, more critically, the novel asserts the supremacy of the world of spirits in the affairs of individuals in their enclosed order and change from ancestral enclaves to larger economic communities. The individuals show unquestioned loyalty to the supernatural.

Arrow of God shows that there is a human yearning of the spirit higher than the physical hunger that we know. Ezeulu is an example of this profound presence of an individual's existence. He is the Ulu's Chief Priest, a divine being made by the people of Umuaro in emergencies to rule over the individual divine gods of the six villages and subsequently to build the security of the Umuaro clan. Ezeulu wore smoked raffia from his waist to his knees during the Festival of the First Pumpkin Leaves. From his head to his toes, the left half of his body was covered in white chalk.(70). Achebe uses this clear description to symbolize that Ezeulu is part-man and part-spirit; that part of him painted white for ceremonial occasions being spiritual. Also, Achebe also uses the python to show that Christianity and Umuaro's religion, old gods are at odds. The Catechist seizes on the python as a religious icon and urges the local Christians to kill it. Despite their acceptance of the new religion, many local Christians are unwilling to harm the sacred python. Killing one of traditional religion's most sacred symbols may seem excessive, but Oduche, Ezeulu's son, accepts the challenge and attempts to kill the python; at the last minute, he loses his nerve and imprisons it in a box. Ezeulu finds the box and sets the python free, horrified that his son could do such a thing. One of the book's crises is triggered by Oduche's abomination. The owner of the royal python, the priest of the god Idemili, demands that Ezeulu purifies his home. Despite the fact that every character in the novel respects the royal python (with the exception of the catechist, John Goodcountry, and Oduche), we are given indications that the old religion is losing ground. At one point, we see Ezeulu children telling the python to flee because the Christians are approaching. We see that Christianity has triumphed over traditional religion as the python obeys.

Another clear depiction of symbolic representation is the moon. It means more than just its universal literal interpretation in the Igbo land. Its appearance is a transitional cue from the present month into another. While in the Igbo world of *Arrow of God*, the people did not have access to a calendar, watch, or clock, and as a result of their adherence to the moon's prompting, they did not lose track of the months. Aside from its general relevance to solar components, its appearance in the novel has a different meaning for the people of Umuaro. It is a signal to eat one of the twelve sacred yams, which is symbolic to harvest of hope on its own. For instance, until all the yams, which must be eaten one each month, and until the prompting of the moon is finished, no one dares to go to the farm to harvest yams. Apart from this obvious reason, people pay attention to the moon's posture, its position, and its

appearance. As a result, the moon's phase change is both exciting and frightening. It can be a bringer of good fortune or a sign of impending doom. When the moon isn't properly seated, it sends shivers down people's spines because it is clear that something isn't right.

Also, the use of kola nuts. Subsistent in all parts of Igbo land, a guest is first presented with kola which must not be rejected for whatever reason. If, however, on account of some reason, health and others, the visitor does not eat kolanut, he says so and quickly a kola substitute is arranged by the host. The substitutes can be in the form of garden egg, bitter kola, dry meat and so on. This is however admissible only in informal occasions or gatherings. On the other hand, if for any reason, the visitor rejects the offer, the host becomes alert as the purpose of visit may be serious or grave. In the novel, as the emissaries from Umuaro led by Akukalia arrived Okperi; after exchange of pleasantries, the next thing their hosts Udezue and Otikpo did was to offer them kola nut:

When they came back Otikpo brought a kola nut in a wooden bowl. Akukalia expressed his gratitude but said that he and his companions carried such heavy loads on their heads that they could neither eat nor drink until the burden was set down (22).

Aside from kolanut, another significant social practice is the offering of Nzu (White clay) to guests. Tokens, which are essential signifiers in the Igbo cultural mold, are frequently used in expression of intents rather than words. After the visitor has been served kola nuts, the next step is for the visitor to explain his reason for visiting, which he may be allowed to do if it is clear that his intentions are good toward his host. Only the use of nzu can demonstrate this. The owner of the house hands a piece of chalk to his visitor, if the stranger draws all upright lines and paints his big toe with the chalk before rolling it back to the host, this indicates that the stranger's visit is generally peaceful and without any intent to provoke. If there is an initial reason for the visit, it could mean a visit for a chat, solidarity, or expression of concern:

As he said this, he reached for a lump of white clay in a four sided wooden bowl shaped like the head of a lizard and rolled it on the floor towards Akuebue who picked it up and drew four upright lines with it on the floor. Then he painted the big toe of his right foot and rolled the chalk back to Ezeulu and he put it away again in the wooden bowl (94).

Achebe gives us access to significant social recognition with the Igbo people. Akuebue makes it clear what the purpose of his visit was without saying anything: friendly and without any intentions of causing any arguments or altercations, as evidenced by the absence of any curved lines. As a result, if a guest refuses to use the chalk or draws flat lines, his intent could be misconstrued as serious or dangerous. In addition to being a signifier of intent, the position of the chalk lines could be used to indicate the signature of individuals, particularly titled men. To represent himself, each titled man uses the chalk in a different way. The visit of Umuaro's leaders to Ezeulu is an example of this practice (all titled men). Ezeulu handed a lump of chalk to each of his visitors, who drew their own personal emblem of upright and horizontal lines on the floor. Others drew on their faces, while others drew on their big toes (205). This explains the difference between the lines drawn by Akuabue when he visited Ezeulu and the lines drawn by Ezeulu when he returned the visit as a titled man and chief priest. He took the chalk and drew five lines on the floor with it: three upright, one flat across the top, and one below. He then painted one of his big toes and drew a thin line around his left eye with white paint (111). The toe painting symbolizes that the visitor entered his host's home in peace and intends to keep it that way. As it is in the Igbo proverb "Let my visitor not kill me with his visit and when he shall leave, may he not be struck with a hunchback". Chinua Achebe is like an architect in writing, his novel *Arrow of God* through his use of symbols and the Igbo culture; he enables us to experience the previous life of the Igbo people. In the novel, he made use of the relationship between the items and their symbolic function and interpretation.

Symbolic representations in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*

A Walk in the Night is a story of Michael Adonis walk-through District Six in one eventful evening. It is also a narrative that attempts to convey an impression of the nightmarish experience of living in the South African ghettos and it contains a critique of the kind of benighted society that promotes human suffering. The people we see in District Six are presented to us as victims of an oppressive social

order who have lost their real identity and to a large extent, their dignity. La Guma uses the title *A Walk in the Night*, for his short novel to express his dissatisfaction with what he perceives to be an ethnically political attitude in the coloured community. In an interview with Cecil Abrahams, he says that, "One of the reasons I called the book *A Walk in the Night* was that the coloured community was still finding its place in the larger struggle against prejudice". They were strolling, suffering, and encountering this in the middle of the night until they discovered themselves and were ready to be citizens of a society to which they wished to contribute. I tried to depict people struggling to see the light, to see the dawn, to see something other than the experiences of their confined community. These words from La Guma means that the non-whites of South Africa have gone through various kinds of maltreatment as they struggle to oppose the oppressive nature of the whites on their native land. "Night" denotes the period of darkness and "darkness" also connotes evil. This therefore clearly gives readers the impression that the coloured probably walk through this period of darkness to suffer maltreatment. The theme of injustice is prevalent throughout the short story novella. It is mentioned right at the start of *A Walk in the Night* when Michael Adonis and Willieboy had a conversation. Michael Adonis was fired from his factory job because he took too long to urinate. His white supervisor did not want him to use the restroom because he believed it was a waste of time. Adonis' work piqued his interest, but not his life. A closer look at Adonis' foreman's actions reveals the general injustices that befell white-colored relations as creatures without the same needs and emotions as they did. The image of dirt and uncleanness is presented to the reader as products of unjust government and racial segregation. This scatological image is painted from the physical appearance of the chief character Mike Adonis:

The young man wore jeans that had been washed several times and which were now left with a pale-blue colour flecked with old grease stains and newer, darker ones of that day's work in the sheet-metal factory, and going white along the hard seams (1).

The café where Michael Adonis went to take his food equally portrays a very dirty and unhealthy place. The novelist reported that there were ancient strings of fly paper lung from their victims strewn across the ceiling (3). The symbolic representation of the physical environment as dirty and ugly is a direct reflection of the mental, physical and moral qualities of the characters, which is a direct consequence of apartheid. The policy is dirty, the operators of the policy are morally dirty and smelling and the recipients of the policy are alive but smelling too. On his way home, he stops at a pub and runs into a few of his friends who were already there enjoying themselves and sharing ideas. We are told by the narrator that:

The pub, like pubs all over the world, was a place for debate and discussion, for the exchange of views and opinions, for arguments and for the working out of problems. It was a forum, a parliament, a fountain of wisdom and a cesspool of nonsense, it was a centre for the lost and the despairing, where cowards absorbed dutch courage out of small glasses and leaned against the shiny, scratched and polished mahogany counter for support against the crushing burdens of insignificant lives. Where the disillusioned gained temporary hope, where acts of kindness was considered and murders planned (13).

The passage above, we are given a vivid description of what goes on in the pub. The pub symbolically represents all good and bad things. The pub creates an avenue for every person who is one way or the other facing a peculiar problem. The lost, the despairing, the cowards and the disillusioned all have their place here because the pub is for working out of problems and acts of kindness considered. The adjective 'temporary' used by the narrator to modify 'hope' tells us that the pub is just a means to overcome hardships for a short period of time and that there is a better means to attain a permanent statue of hope which probably is fighting for your rightful position in your own land. Besides the benefits one gets from visiting the pub, the fact is established that the pub is also 'a cesspool of nonsense' where murders are planned. It is therefore not surprising that Adonis before going home passes by the pub.

Undeniably, poverty characterized the lives of the non-whites living in this era of apartheid particularly those people living in the slums of District Six. La Guma does not explicitly tell us about the economic suffering and widespread poverty but portrays an even more powerful impression of this through his style of narration based on physical details. The detailed description of the tenement tells readers the extent of the poverty that engulfs the lives of the non-whites:

He turned down street, away from the artificial glare of Hanover, between stretches of damp, battered houses with their broken-ribs of front-railings; cracked walls and high tenements that rose like the left-overs of a bombed area in the twilight; vacant lots and weed-grown patches where houses had once stood; and deep doorways resembling the entrance to deserted castles. The floor of the entrance was flagged with white and black slabs in the pattern of draught-board, but the tramp of untold feet and the accumulation of dust and grease and ash had blurred the squares so that now it had taken on the appearance of a kind of loathsome skin disease. A row of dustbin inside of the entrance exhaled the smell of rotten fruit, stale food, stagnant water and general decay. A cat, the colour of one of the bins (21).

The staircase was worn and blackened, the old oak banister loose and scarred. Naked bulbs wherever the sockets were working order cast a pallid glare over parts of the interior, lighting up the big patches of damp and mildew, and the maps of denuded sections on the walls. Somewhere upstairs a radio was playing a Latin-American music, bongos and maracas throbbing softly through the smells of ancient cooking, urine, damp-rot and stale tobacco. A baby wailed with the tortured sound of gripe and malnutrition and a man's voice rose in hysterical laughter (23).

The novelist reinforces the symbolic import of dirt and filth as a depiction of South Africa's ugly socio/political situation by giving a vivid description of the tenement. The diction for the description of the environment and the building go a long way to justify the use of symbolic scatological images to depict the ugliness and provocative image of apartheid as an administrative policy. The policy is dirty, the operators of the policy are morally dirty and smelling and the recipients of the policy are alive but smelling too. A symbolic promise of profound social transformation is carried in the last paragraph of the story, which takes us back to the grimy tenement where Frank Lorenzo and his wife remained for the duration of the night: Frank Lorenzo snored peacefully while sleeping on his back. Grace, the woman beside him, lay awake in the dark, she awaited the dawn, she was restless and felt the knot of life within her. (96). His eyes may be closed now, but it is just a matter of time before he will open them, wake up and see the truth. And when that dawn of illumination comes, as it inevitably must, a new day will begin and a new generation will be born that no longer will have to live in darkness. La Guma's depressing story of life and death in District Six thus ends with a Utopian vision of rebirth through proletarian revolution.

Conclusion

Some of the novelists, playwrights, poets and playwright mentioned in this work are members of different societies and this is portrayed in their works. They made an effort to mirror their various societies, not just by merely writing to entertain but also to inform and popularize the way of life of their society. In this study therefore, it is discovered that Chinua Achebe employed symbols and meaning to enhance the quality of his novel while leaving the decoding of these semiotics signs to the readers. These signs and meanings include white chalk (Nzu), kolanut, sacred python, festivals (such as the New Yam and Pumpkin Leaves), moon, and yams among other signs. These words and what they stood for accentuate the arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified. Similarly, Alex La Guma characteristically employed various symbols to encode meaning in his novel. Scatological images, pubs, and imageries have deeper symbolic implications than their surface value. Therefore, the knowledge of semiotics enables both literature and language teachers to adequately break in their students to a more holistic mode of understanding and interpreting of signs and symbols in literary works, bearing in mind that literary works make extensive use of language of indirection.

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