



Unearthing the Gothic Features in Kenya's Selected Oral Narratives

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Abstract— *This study locates Gothic topoi in African oral literature as a way of embodying and evoking social cultural complexities and anxieties inherent in postmodern societies. Elements of giants, monsters, magicality and superstition make oral literature a rich literary mine for excavating Gothic elements and mechanics that animate the oral literary topography. Gothic traditions have been associated with written literature since the inception of Gothic genre in the sixteenth century, and this is regarded as the hegemonic normative ideological perspective which this study challenges and disrupts. Of import is the connection between oral narrative strand and Gothic genre in the overall aesthetic framework of Gothic terror, amalgamation of phantasmagoria and physical realm and naturalization of magicality. This paper concentrates its focus on the Gothic elements located in oral narratives within African setting. As an exemplification of Gothic nuances inhabiting African oral literature, the paper explores how oral narratives cross socially accepted limits allowing the monsters to become embodiment of the Other: anger, savagism, irrationality and sentimentalism reflecting on postmodern terror and horror. This work employs the theoretical arguments of Gothic-postmodernism as propagated by Maria Beville with the representational premise that selected oral narratives elucidate a Gothic space of literary inter-location. This paper employs a closed library based document analysis of oral narratives and other seminal secondary works to explore ways in which Gothic topoi are embedded in oral narratives; buttressing the notion that meaning of a text is never fixed. The study is motivated by a paucity of serious critical works on Gothic fiction in oral literature that invoke phantasmagoria and use it as a crux to navigate the reading of postmodern life. The scope of this study was selected Kenya's oral narratives that were purposefully selected using purposive sampling. In essence this helps to fortify Africa's Gothic postmodernism; thus, dismantling the essentialist hegemonic Gothic traditions as only consigned to written artistic works. It roots for the establishment of Africa's Gothic-postmodern tradition. Conclusions drawn will make significant contribution to the dialectics surrounding Gothic-postmodern genre in Kenya's oral literature.*



Keywords— *Gothic topoi, horror, magicality, phantasmagoria, postmodern, terror.*

I. GENERAL OVER-VIEW

Oral Literature is envisaged as literature that is transmitted verbally or orally. This view is buttressed by Bukenya and Nandwa (1993) who posit it that oral literature are those utterances which can be spoken or recited and whose composition and performance depict artistic characteristics of “accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious

expression” (p. 7). It is literature that encompasses the yearnings, dreams, complexities and anxieties of a community. Not only does it manifest the traditions and customs but it is also alive to the ceremonies and cultural activities taking place in the society. Oral literature therefore, is central in understanding a community be it in the past or in the present. Like written literature, oral literature is a

Repository of artistic expression in society. Its beauty resonates across cultural frontiers and is a response to the universal human instinct to find balance harmony and beauty (Laura & Appell, 2023, p. 1)

In a world that is disenchanting and disorienting, oral literature responds to and recreates the nature of life at a particular historical and literary epoch. It approximates a lifestyle at certain period in time. Different forms of oral literature exist which include, songs and dances, narratives, short forms (proverbs, riddles, puns and tongue twisters) and other emerging forms (*mchongoano*, crusades and soccer fundom). The creativity, innovation and functionality of oral literature renders it a viable field for research. Elements of superstition, figures of monsters, giants and demons make oral literature a fertile literary ground for excavating Gothic elements and mechanics in order to understand and appreciate the intricacies of life. It allows a critical study of the social cultural, political and historical forces of the society which have shaped oral literature.

II. MAPPING GOTHICISM AS A LITERARY GENRE

This paper examines oral literature within the lens of Gothicism, specifically Maria Beville's brand of Gothic postmodern ideology. Gothic literature is traced to Horace Walpole (1764) whose text *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic-Story* had a resounding effect on the aesthetics and elements of Gothic fiction. Infusing both supernatural and realistic elements, the novel became the foundation of literary Gothic traditions. The term "Gothic" is traced to a Germanic tribe that terrorized and ruled Europe between 3rd to 5th centuries. Otto (2011) associates the term with barbarism and savagery because of the terror they unleashed to the Roman Empire that was then unformidable. During the Renaissance period, —the term "Goth" was resurrected and re-aligned to represent medieval arts; which were connected with intense emotions, sentimentalism and irrationality. As a result, when the neo-classical critics of the 18th century resuscitated medieval art, it is not surprising that "Goth" and "Gothic" represented medieval literary styles. It then stood for raw outlet of passions or emotions, terror, anger, wildness, extravagant fancies and transcendence. This inspired the first writer Horace Walpole who wrote *The Castle of Otranto; A Gothic Story* (1764). The text became a foundation of Gothic hegemonic tradition that has influenced many literatures of the world including oral literature.

Human society often attempt to explain and rationalize unfathomable aspects using mysticism, superstition, oral narratives and or even religion, thus, intertwining the possible physical world and the impossible numinous one. Africa's cosmology consists of what is seen and what is not seen; humanity, animals, spirits, ancestors and the physical environment. This coalesces the visible and the invisible world as interconnected in a cosmological relationship. With the intangible faith and believe in rationalizing the cosmos using oral narratives, legends, myths, monster genres and other narratologies, Africa's invisible world is infiltrated with gods, goddesses and demons, spirits and other magical beings which make oral literature a fertile ground for eschewing Gothic elements. It comes to the fore that competing forces between evil and good often influence human life through oral literature. Children's way of life is shaped through oral narratives that foreground the right behaviour and repress what is evil. The evil remains as part of human darkness that remains as a hauntology; rearing its ugly head quite often in art. Oral narratives become the vent in which the ugly, grotesque, evil and fearful terrors are vented from; fusing an irrational (Gothic realm) with a rational world. Fantasy and reality, two improbable realms become indices that interconnect in a Gothic-postmodern pedestal. Monsters in oral narratives become exemplification of "pleasure and sin (that) blend together in a supernatural and explosive amalgamation" (Gould, 2010, p 4) fusing together an irrational with a rational dimension. Fantasy and reality two contrastive realms become indices that co-join in a Gothic-postmodern axis.

Gothic literature manifests supernatural beings characterized in oral narratives as monsters, which are hybrid embodying societal fears and darkness thus reflecting on the anxieties of the postmodern society. Winner of 1991 Booker Prize Award; Ben Okri in his text *The Famished Road* (1991), unearths an African cosmological interconnections through the juxtaposition of the living, the dead and the spiritual world. He exploits the Yoruba mythology of rebirth that is common in oral literature.

The lead character in Azaro, a Gothic character perceives events in both the physical and spiritual domain through hallucinations, reveries and dreams which help to reconstruct the mythical world inhabited by fairies, magical beings, spirits and Abiku. Abiku is a child that is in spirit form and dies every time it is born. Using an oral narrative mythopoeia, Okri is able to weave a Gothic plot employing the structures of oral narrative form. This resonates with Nnedi Okorafor whose twenty one short stories in *KabuKabu* (2013) are mythical journeys to the world of spirits, jujus, vampires and the undead living. She

draws on a rich heritage of oral literature to generate a Gothic fantasy that exploits African folklore and mythology. Closer home in Kenya, some writers have written texts that manifest Gothic structures. Rebecca Njau examines the excesses in Kenya during postcolonial times using the Gothic mode in her text *The Sacred Seed* (2003). Oral literature too as artistic constructs of society infuse and allow the Gothic to commingle with the reality to manifest happenings in society.

Oral literature recreates the sociocultural and political happenings in a society. As art, orature employs language to reconstruct a fictional world that mirrors postmodern society; with its contradictions, sensibilities and paradoxes. The research method that was most appropriate for this type of study was qualitative in approach. Qualitative approach often uses various sets of practices to collect, interrogate, analyze and interpret data from texts to gain better insight and understanding of subject matter at hand. Aspects of Gothic-postmodernist criticisms guided this study throughout the different stages; sampling, data collection, analysis and interpretation stages. To attain the set objective, analytical research design was used. Primary data was chiseled out from selected oral narratives from Kenya. The theoretical framework used locates itself within Gothic-postmodernism as indicated earlier.

Gothic genre is mapped as an emerging genre that captures contemporary issues elaborately. It depicts events in a dark eerie settings populated by ghosts and other uncanny creatures. This creates an atmosphere of mystery, gloom and phantasmagoria. As one of the major proponents of the genre, Beville (2009) acknowledges the centrality of Gothicism in literature as a hybridized text that recreates the twenty first century life. This too applies to oral literature when narratives are regarded as texts coming to live when the researcher studies them.

III. UNEARTHING GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN KENYA'S SELECTED ORAL NARRATIVES

Oral literature is a rich field for excavating and analyzing Gothic elements that manifest themselves in various forms. A mélange of Gothic mechanics that maps a recreated mimetic existence which transcends the physical mode of life, allow oral narratives to mirror life in society. Using phantasmagoria, oral narratives are embedded in what Smith (2002) refers to as "...contradiction ambiguities and ambivalences (which) provides a dense and complex blend..." (p3) of Gothicity and physicality. The Gothic genre in Africa can be traced to oral narratives that were turned into written texts; Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drunkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) are stark illustrations. Amos Tutuola's *The*

Palm Wine Drunkard (1952) follows a journey of an unnamed narrator-cum-protagonist who is in search of his deceased palm wine tapster into Dead town while in *My Life in The Bush of Ghost* (1954), a young boy's escape from capture into slavery catapults him to a Gothic placeness of the Bush of Ghosts, the land of ghosts. By understanding various transformations from being human to an animal, the seven year old boy manifests various facets of beingness in different forms which reveal the richness of the Gothic genre.

Some oral narratives as shall be seen in this study cross socially accepted boundaries and ascend to a Gothic pedestal. Kenya's oral literature cannot be left behind. As a rich Gothic-topographical artifice or minefield; it provides an illumination of sensibilities, fears, hopes and impediments contemporaneous with society.

The narratives conjure up magical worlds to depict monstrosity as a central Gothic *topoi*. Kenya's oral folklore is replete with monsters, monstrosity and the uncanny, appropriated in different proportions. These are fundamental tropes that define the Gothic as a genre. The main pre-occupation of monster narratives is to re-create monster villains who straddle the literary terrain. Chief among them is the presentation of monsters and monster-like figures that come out as aliens in the world of the living.

'*Amanani*' (Akivaga & Odaga, 1985, p 63) is a Gothic alien monster who is not only ferocious but evil and diabolic as well. Regarded as mortal they transcend the physical world to capture the imagination of the "other". '*Amanani*' described as man-eating monsters are regarded as a terror in themselves. This view is seen in how they are described in 'Kiondondoe and the Ogre' (Kiondondoe na Irimarimu) narrated by Ndekesa Muruambeti in Finke (2003). He is described as half-human, half-animal with a threatening posture, eyes full of rage and deathly venom. He becomes a perfect embodiment of Gothic terror and death. As he stalks the land hauntingly with young Kiondondoe borrowing food, he becomes expressive of postmodern fears that rear its ugly head in different forms; misogyny, racism, violence, extremeism as witnessed in terrorism and xenophobic conflicts of animosity.

In '*Nandagaywa*, the monster (Akivaga et al, pp 63-68) epitomises monstrosity, the uncanny and death. Described as man-eating monster, Nandagaywa crosses the liminal boundary of humanity by becoming an alien. On crossing over the physical domain to the fantastical one he assumes a horrendous posture, swallowing people who are alive.

This in itself depicts the Gothic aesthetics of cannibalism is reproduced in oral narratives where monsters are othered by encoding them with savagery and barbaric violence.

This paper opines that human characters are inverted and appropriated to be the other to represent that which "threatens the purity of human form...." (Scott 2007, p 67) and humanity.

In construction of the non-human monster that has transcended what is natural, oral monster narratives tend to manifest irrational longings, eccentric behavior and excesses. This, as a Gothic *topoi*, reveals a Gothic tradition that principally depicts protagonist or lead characters as savage, violent and oppressive in what Beville describes to as "Barbarous rude, uncouth, unpolished, in bad taste" (p). It recreates a typical Gothic setting imbued with a phantasmagorical life etched beyond the imagination of the narrative.

The monster's ability to converse in the language of the community as observed when Nandagaywa converses with the young girl, the protagonist whom the brother leaves behind when he journeys to heaven to forge some metal spears, reveals his earthly being:

"Where is your father?"

"My father went to heaven" (Akivaga *et al* p. 64).

The conversation solidifies him in human form as a visible but invisible being: his otherness invisibilizes him. He manipulates human beings using language; creating rapport and sustaining it till he achieves his mission of killing. He thus, comes out as a double, the visible and the invisible, the speakable and the unspeakable edifying the spirit and essence of a human-monster. This study refers to such characters who are half human, half monsters as *man-mon*; standing in an in-between space where the boundaries of the two realms have been collapsed. The creation of *man-mon* characters as a hybrid creatures present:

...an in-between (space) of presentable and unrepresentable, the sublime union of the abstract and concrete...and (humanity) manipulate the dynamics of that space to contemplate the true powers of terror... (Beville 2009: 113).

The *man-mon* villains become a stark reminder of Greek classical mammon creatures. The word mammon basically carries the connotation of devil of covetousness. Thus, the character *man-mon* is a Gothic figure bound by excess sentimentalism, casting aggressive behavior. This Gothic aspect is well brought out in the narrative 'Chemakut Teret the monster' (Akivaga *et al* pp. 52-58).

This *man-mons* are often made to appear in a deserted homestead where a child is left hopeless thereby, igniting emotions of horror and terrified expectations. (Austin Bukenya, Jane Nandwa, 1993)text; to arouse feelings of anxiety, dread and horror. A young unknowing child is allowed to defy expectations by being juxtaposed with the

dreaded monster. The Gothic *man-mon* as a Lacanian subject undergoes splitting of self and the other exemplifying a double, a doppelganger that manifests "...the real and the unconscious and the dark side of subjectivity and reality..." (Beville 2009 p50).

Shattering the image of human conception, the *man-mon* remain reconfigured reflections of distorted images locating themselves within human inhabited society. Within the permeable boundary of reality and magicality, the monsters regarded with a lot of trepidation cross and re-cross the boundary in their different physical transformation as witnessed in the monster narrative where the monster transforms into a handsome human being before later changing back to a ferocious monster. This sliding in and out of magicality situates them in two extreme polarities depicting "...loss of identity in being half-inside and half-outside neither entirely dead nor clearly alive....." (Hogle 23002, p. 99) but more of a monster; a being regarded imagined and imaged as an alien representing "the darker vision of contemporary existence" (Beville, p. 99).

Their fixation and obsession with death reconstructs them as irrational, immoral and subverted beings. Such monsters and death are intrinsically linked as they only portend death and suffering. The main protagonist's brother in 'Nandagaywa, the Monster' can only recall how the monster "had eaten all his relatives and all the people he knew when he was still a little boy..." (Akivaga *et al*, p. 99). Being villainous characters ignites in them a repulsive depraved existence. This existence is formulated in the Gothic furnace of villainy and brewed in the cauldron of horror and demonic essence. They stand and exist in the borderline of humanity but crosses over to monsterism which reveals their unstable identity and essence. This is also witnessed when they degenerate to deathness. Nandagaywa on his degeneration to mortality acquires formlessness and a void that reverberates as he accepts his death. He asserts vehemently that:

"You have killed me at last, but I would like to do you a good turn before I die. Cut off the little toe of my right head foot, and there you will find your people who I have eaten over the years...." (Akivaga, p. 67).

The monster spring forth a harvest of living people "..... Out of the toe, little toe came thousands and thousands of people..." (p. 67) thus deflating his monstrosity.

This is replicated in "Chemakut Teret, the Monster, (Akivaga, pp52-54), where the monster's smallest finger is cut and it yields a great multitude of children (Akivaga, p. 53). They restore the mortals who had been killed, an indicator of the trope of subversion, manifesting the

uncanny thus; they are categorized as the uncanny, the weird and the unfathomable. This kneads the atmosphere of the story as one of mystery and suspense, fear and horror. Remaining as beings of subversion mammon's oscillation between humanity and monstrosity re-ignites the double-ness which has been regarded before. Their descent to maddening ravage and cannibal desire spirals them out of humanity and others them as aliens. This induces them with monstrosity and wickedness.

Another Gothic *topoi* includes the unexplainable events which the monster are attributed and linked to. It is not only their behavior but also the form that delineates them from human society encapsulating them within two worlds and molding their ambiguity in an in-between world hovering between life and death. Their bodies, as witnessed early undergo dissolution before a multitude of people regain life in a form of resurrection. Their death thus, embody regeneration and revitalization of human life.

This paper argues that monsters embody loss of self or what Hogle (2002) refers to as "The contradictions and ambiguities of our beings" (p. 7) consequently creating an in-between liminal space expectant with fears, fragmentation and alienation inherent in society. This rekindles the terror of the Gothic that is:

Inherent in monsters and other bodies function(ing) as a deconstructive counter-narrative which presents the darker side of subjectivity, the ghost of otherness that haunt our fragile selves..." (Beville, p. 41) which create gloom and a grotesque atmosphere.

Immortality or what Baudrillard refers to as symbolic death is another Gothic aesthetic that manifests in oral narratives and can be regarded as magical realism since they harbor magicity. Because of the relationship of reality and fantasy, oral monsters are brought out as fictitious beings masquerading as human beings. They "pass" as humans who at the onset are humble, polite and amiable. Nandagaywa, the monster in the titular story comes out as a human being at the commencement of the narrative. He is presented as a product of the binaries of reality and Gothic when the main protagonist journeys to heaven to forge some spears only leaving behind his sister and the two dogs. The monster arrives at the home and holds a candid conversation with the frightened girl. After some persistence the monster characterizes itself as a cannibal when he morphs to a monstrous villain. He not only swallows the girl but also the dogs. Consequently, he manifests his initially suppressed polarity of himself, his double that is "...preserved, nourished and secretly made strong" (Rushdie, 1998 p. 340) (quoted by Beville, p. 133).

His other self comes out as perverse, diabolic, and evil. His lack of protective instinct coupled with his inner desires recreates him as ruthless. This also demonstrated in the Kipsigis Oral Narrative of the brown girl with a bewitching gap between her front upper teeth. (Chesaina, 1991).

The protagonists being too proud and self-conceited of her beauty, refuses all her suitors who propose to her. In her vanity, she feels her beauty is unmatched in the whole kingdom. Not even the prince could win her. The Gothic villain reveals himself as a handsome-wealthy looking young man and using sweet words proposes to the beautiful young lady. The expectation of a Gothic villain straddling the setting and having monstrous appearance is negated. In supernatural transformation, the Gothic villain parodies the alter ego of the beautiful girl: representing rationality, reality and expectations. In the words of Wilde (1994) it represents the "True face of my (the) soul... that has the eyes of the devil" (pp 179-180).

The duplicity of self or what has been referred to as doubleness brings to the fore goodness and evil, heroism and villainy as embedded and residing in individual characters. This foregrounds a problematised Gothic space of a fluid and slippery identity; allowing monsters to cross over humanness to becoming monstrous. The Gothic villain's purported goodness is only but temporary for greed and trickery over-rides him. This becomes a stark reminder of the traditional Gothic villain. The beautiful girl with a bewitching beauty loses her will, independence and self-hood as the Gothic villain lures her to a secret abode; epitomizing a foreboding, mystery and horror. The recurring motif of monsters in oral narratives is a trope that elevates their centrality to the actions taking place. When led through the use of spell or other fantastical means, the girl renounces her autonomy as a human being and becomes a subject of the *man-mon*. Her initial image of self, young and beautiful masks her character of being self-conceited, vain and egoistic. Her self-surrender to an unknown trickster demonstrates how irrational and gullible the girl is since she easily submits to deception and lies; which affirms the Gothic notion that "reality is deceptive" (Beville, p.183) and a double; what Malin (1962) calls "cracked and wavy" (p. 123).

The beautiful girl's realization of her error of judgment as a result of her hubris, comes to her when it is late. The protagonist, a handsome, humble and amiable husband transforms herself to an ogre, what this study refers to *man-mon*. This act of doubling immerses the reader in tense moment of expecting the paranormal, accentuating the paradox of the simultaneity of the fantastical and the normal fusing as one and creating a hybridized being,

man-mon. The *man-mon* ogre crosses the boundary of humanity in order to deflate the girl's narcissistic self-delusion. Confined to a house in a Gothic setting, a deep forest enclosure, and alienated from society, the girl is reduced to irredeemably irreconcilable, first with herself, then with her community. As she avers and totters at the brink of helplessness coupled with hopelessness, she begins slides into flight to nothingness, to a space of weightlessness as she unequivocally accepts her fate.

Trapped in the struggle of knowing and unknowing, realizing and unrealizing herself the protagonist;s only hope is offering the Gothic landscape a lamentation song. The motif of the song is an expressive Gothic manifestation of merging of the known and the unknown self in order to constitute a fundamental essence of her beingness. In her lamentation state, the protagonists dissipates and her human form begins to take formless shape. Thus, her encounter with herself emptied of human essence while remaining unnamable and existing with fragmented consciousness makes her realize herself. Regret makes the girl to link herself with human essence and nurture her form. Her capture form allows her to re-examine her inner monster self that had consumed her inner being. Not willing to surrender her soul to the Gothic forces in a true Gothic encounter, the girl, desirous of resurrection in form of being saved from the ogre gains her inner energy to formulate a song. She, therefore, albeit, unconsciously, slides out of her egotistic and vain self.

This is reverberated in her lament song that carries the spirit of bitterness peppered with unknowing her self. Her attempt of spiraling out of humanity is deadened by her realization that the loss of self-readies her to cross the boundary to a world of void and vacuity. She, consequently, strives towards rebirth as witnessed in the lament song. This concurs with Beville's comment on rebirth: "The people inhabiting Gothic- postmodernist worlds, usually, have all been or are all 'dead' and are striving towards something new, some concept of birth" (p.121).

The same occurrence is witnessed in the Kikuyu narrative 'Wagaciari' (Kabira and Mutahi, 1988)

Wanjiku Mukabi kabira nd karega wa mutahi Gikuyu oral literature 1988 EAPH)

Where the ogre assumes the body of a human recreating itself as a *man-mon* and taking ones as the caretaker of the woman who has delivered a child presents his dual nature. The woman's husband, a blacksmith has relocated to a far-flung place. Wagaciari, the lead protagonists is taken in by the *man-mon*'s charms of kindness, and mid-wifely. Like the other monsters who disguise themselves, the villains stand between the inhuman and the human fold; fusing

both of them and recreating a Gothic villain. The lamentation song, just like the lament earlier mentioned presents a moment of contradiction of subjectivity with the hope of resurrecting human essence and destroying the Gothic monster. Monster split of his sense of self helps to show how he is formulated in the phantasmagoric dimension. This characterizes all Gothic monsters in oral narratives that not only inspire evil and destruction but they also become degenerates.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper in conclusion opines that the Gothic monster in a twist of fate disposes and dislocates their human companions of their reality and form their true self. In this way, they are mimicry of the traditional Gothic creations like the ugly hideous monster, Frankenstein in the titular text by Shelley (2000), Bedford, St. Martins Boston. In search of "presence and symbolic value" (Beville, p. 19) the Gothic monster in oral narratives becomes representative of the explorative expeditions of subjectivity; they manifest a profound exploration of the unknowable inner self.

The paper argues that the Gothic monsters that populate Kenya's oral literary topography are uniquely emblazoned with traits that manifest peculiarity: uncanniness, physical disruptions, otherness, ambivalence and unknowable self. As the monstervacillate between physicality and spirituality, half-human and half-monster, they are brought out as unstable, changing and fluid characters. It is rather a fusion of the subjective and objective self that reflects what is known and unknown and this rightly embodies the Gothic horror.

This paper concludes that since the monster belongs to a different domain of being, they often metamorphose and change form, identity and their essence as has been observed earlier in the oral monster narratives. Such oral monster narratives interweave repressed cultural and political history with individual hauntologies depicting social issues inherent in society. Gothic *topoi*, manifested in Kenya's oral narratives exemplify the fluidity and the slipperiness of subjectivity, identity and human relation. In furtherance to that, it foregrounds the resuscitation and regeneration of human virtues and values.

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