

LANGUAGE AND STYLE EXPERIMENTATIONS IN THOMAS MOFOLO'S CHAKA / RECHERCHES SUR LA LANGUE ET LE STYLE DANS LE ROMAN CHAKA DE THOMAS MOFOLO / EXPERIMENTĂRI ASUPRA LIMBII ȘI STILULUI ÎN ROMANUL CHAKA DE THOMAS MOFOLO¹

Abstract: *The ever central position of Thomas Mofolo's Chaka has often been justified by the novel's cultural and thematic contents. This paper rather links this long standing reputation of the narrative to the stylistic and linguistic experimentations initiated by the author. Such experimentations have consisted in fusing languages and aesthetic canons of differing cultural zones.*

Key words: *hybridity, syncretism, ideophone, literary canon, oral, print.*

Introduction

Among the literary productions of the Sotho born writer, Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka* remains his most known and celebrated literary achievement. Almost a hundred years after its first publication, this novel is still widely read and provides food for thinking in literary circles where articles and books are devoted to deciphering its literary content. It has served as the hypotext for subsequent works by African artists such as the celebrated Senegalese poet L.S.Senghor, the Malian Seydou Badian, the guinean D.T.Niane, the south African Mazisi Kunene, etc.

Most of the studies on this seminal work have however been centred on the themes and other cultural elements conveyed by the narrative. Reviews or critical articles or essays have generally been conducted from the perspectives of thematic motifs like power, magic, love or from anthropological and political perspectives.

If from our point of view, this work has such a long standing reputation, it is not solely on the argument of its themes which convey no original content as such, but rather on its aesthetic achievement. This remains the most important feature that ensures the survival of a work of art over time. What are the linguistic and stylistic experimentations that have contributed to establish the originality and reputation of that novel? How have themes and techniques been fused together expertly to make it such an impressive work? The analysis of that aesthetic achievement will get the best of that work by focusing on stylistic features and other experimentations with language for which postcolonial studies provide ample methodological and theoretical tools.

I. Linguistic hybridity as experimentation.

It is at the level of language as an experimentally original process that *Chaka* proves a major artistic contribution to the rehabilitation of the author's cultural heritage. By many of its linguistic features, it stands out as a piece of literature inspired by traditional art of storytelling.

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Chaka is written in academic English like any other novel by Africans educated in western institutions of education or by any foreign writer whose work uses Africa as its setting. The originality of this novel, however, is Mofolo's fusion of the Zulu cultural realities and language with the academic English that is accessible to all readers who are conversant with the English language. This original experimentation with narrative and linguistic techniques will be the focus of our analysis to show the contribution of Mofolo to the universe of African literature.

Though written in academic English, the novel succeeds in keeping the flavor of its African Zulu context. If we take it that the final English version on which we are working is a faithful translation, we can assume that Zulu and Sotho languages merge to create a language that both Africans and western readers find original. The ritual greetings to royals, the praise songs that the Izibongo art performance is made up of are kept in the English version by Mofolo. They even often appear untranslated in the English text. The text is filled with this tension of two languages battling for precedence or vying to domesticate one another. As a consequence, the text is not an English text in the full and canonical sense of the term. Academic English is alternated with native language of the colonized people. This is what is being done with expressions like "mphu – mphu, kalamajwne, kala majwne" (24), "Bayede Nkossi, Bayede – Baba!" (115).

This 'english' novel familiarizes its readers with the Zulu and Sotho languages. Those of the readers who are concerned with learning some expressions of these native languages would have achieved some progress to the point of being able to exchange greetings with a Zulu native and even know how to pay homage to a Zulu royal.

There is another stylistic device which carries this linguistic syncretism to its fullness. It consists in fusing in a single sentence two or three languages: English, Zulu and Sotho. Thus, a sentence is often begun in English and ended up in one of these two other native languages as it is done here: "he took out his snuff –box ..., tapped it sharply several times with his fingernail, poured out a small quantity of snuff which he sniffed up his nose, going hlwihlwi." (37) This typically local scene of snuff inhaling is given a very accurate description by the ideophone "hlwihlwi."

The fusion of these languages which do not belong to the same linguistic family contributes to bring an air of freshness and novelty particularly to the novel. If we take into account that this novel was written in the early 1900s, we can imagine the scandalized reactions such experimentation could have aroused in some intellectual circles where canon rules are sacrosanct. If it is often remembered that Mofolo's novel was kept in cupboards for more than two decades before being finally published, this rather unprecedented fusion of the colonized natives' language and the white master's language may provide some hypotheses for the reluctance of the writers' patrons to publish the book. Readers are indeed struck by a catalog of unfamiliar words or expressions. While reading the text, we come across unexpected Zulu or Sotho words or expressions like "sedia-dia girls' dance" (5), "the bohadi cattle" (113), "nanso" (29), "Mgungundhlovu" (107), "umlugu" (107), "intombazano ye Zulu" (83), etc. All these linguistic experimentations reveal the social identity of the text. It is typically an African, a Zulu and a sotho text written by an African familiar and even fluent with the English language.

Chaka's narrative is in agreement with the writer's pedagogical and ethnologist aims to explain or translate any expressions or acts that might prove hard to be understood by people who do not share with the Zulu narrator and the Sotho author the latter's respective educational backgrounds. These literary endeavors show clearly to a certain extent that the author had a foreign audience in mind while writing this novel. The traditional narrators of the Chaka legend in Zululand would not have to face such a linguistic problem. They would have a Zulu audience listening to them and would not have to go through this explanatory language. Long explanations and translations are therefore inserted into this version for that matter.

Steps are taken which are a consequence of that linguistic hybridity the narrator has recourse to. Extra literary devices are used which serve to explain or translate notions that could break communication if not well understood or explained. Footnotes, parentheses, translations, words in italics, ..., for instance, appear in the text. All these elements add to the exotic and non canonical flavor of this novel.

Chapter seventeen is particularly interesting as an illustration of that linguistic hybridity that the narrative displays. Pages 116, 117, 118, 119 and 120 are mere records of the Zulu traditional art of praise singing. Transcribed Zulu songs are kept in the English text along with their English translations which is likely to confuse the English reader even more. The aesthetic and ethic features of the traditional life of the Zulu people make up for the distortions of historical cultural facts and the almost denigratory tone on the Zulu hero that is often felt in Mofolo's works. They help recreate the context of the story as it originated from a set of decorum and a sociohistorical context.

In addition to that fusion of two (or three to be more precise) languages that do not belong to the same family of languages, the narrator tries another linguistic device that brings his experimentation with English to its fullness. Some of the English terms used could hardly be accepted as English by some purists of the language. One of the favorite devices the author has recourse to to convey the native reality into the academic medium of English is the literal translations of Sotho and Zulu into the academic medium of English. Here, local linguistic items are translated but the rhythm, rhyming patterns and the syntax of the academic English are destroyed and make way for the rhythm and syntax of local languages. When, for instance, the narrator finds no satisfactory equivalents between these different languages, he undertakes a true creative process which is original. Thus, finding no satisfactory English translation for the Zulu "ho kana", he resorts to the following compound composition "choose – a – lover – game called ho kana" (4) or "the game choose- the- one- you – love." (71) After this brief translation, he introduces long explanations to anticipate any miscomprehensions that could be felt by those unfamiliar with the Zulu ethnological background. He compares the Zulu cultural reality with a Sotho cultural practice and then goes on to explain it both to his Sotho audience and non African readers:

The kana is similar to the sedia – dia girls's dance among the Basotho, but it goes beyond the sedia – dia because in one sense the kana resembles ho iketa whereby a girl offers herself to a young man for marriage without waiting to be asked. (5)

The same generosity of the narrator towards his narratee and readers, which Leif Lorentzon sees as a distinguishing signal of oral narratives (Lorentzon, 1998: 58), is revealed in the narrator's presentation of the "Senyamo" which is pedagogically presented as a "lover's

preference game.” (Mofolo :72) to describe the hurried flight out of fear of the men of Ncube when they hear the lion roar, the narrator composes a linguistic item that conveys the idea of panic and speed with vividness and humour. “The men’s flight home”, the narrator explains, “was like ‘he – who – no – speed – will – be – left – behind’ and ‘don’t – pass – *me* – and – I – won’t – pass – *you*.¹” (18) This sentence shows with vividness that men were running helter skelter scattered in all directions and vying to outrun one another so as to escape the dreadful beast.

Using the same device of coining original phrases, the narrator conveys the desperate situation of Chaka when outcast by his father by describing the boy with words that fix in readers’ minds the loneliness of the hero. He becomes a “hare – that – was – struck – on – the – ear, one – without – parents, a buffalo – standing – all – by – itself.” (34) The difficulty of conveying in a foreign language realities and practices that do not have much to do with this language is therefore a cause of linguistic experimentation that renders these realities with exactitude. The language as it is experimented here by the narrator is made to reflect those realities.

II. The language of realism

Language is an essential component of a people’s culture for it is through that medium that values are transmitted and communicated. These values and social practices do not stand by themselves. They need a vehicle to exist and live. That is why language can be regarded as the very representation of cultural values and social practices. The language of a community reflects not only its cultural heritage but also its living environment. Living intimately with their natural environment, the traditional man’s language and world view could not but reflect this promiscuity with nature. The less sophisticated a society is, the more realistic its language which reflects its everyday life tends to be. This in no sense rules out abstraction and symbolism as it is often wrongly stated about oral traditional communities. When the traditional oral man speaks, it is his social, cultural, geographical, environments, etc that are recreated with the everyday scenes of the rural context. There is a preference for concreteness to abstract language. (Milman 1971: 11; Jousse 2003: 58) Tendency to identify with the familiar environment translates abstract concepts into vivid, perceptible images and ordinary terms. The traditional society’s sense of the real, the need to “have the world inapprehensible clutched” (Okpewho 1979:15) makes it translate any abstract consideration into the concrete experiences of the daily life. Concrete experiences, objects of the visible and physical world are the dominating characteristics of his language. The vivid sense of the real and practical is heavily felt in the traditional man’s language.

As an illustration of this preference for concreteness to abstract language, we have the situation where the narrator uses an expression that does not lack originality. To say that Chaka arrived too late to save the poor victim of the lion, the narrator has a language that no one but a Zulu or a Sotho narrator could use. He uses recurrently the expression “... a thing of yesterday”, “belonged to yesterday”. “Indeed the lion itself”, he comments, “as it stood on top of him, believed he was still alive, not realizing that his life was a thing of a day before yesterday.” (Mofolo 1981: 18) The death of the companion of Ngongo, one of Chaka’s

¹ Italics appear in the text of the author.

military chiefs, is described with the familiar notions of sleep and sunrise. "The man fell asleep for ever, and did not see the rising of the next day." (Mofolo 1981: 144) When Ngongo looks closely at his companion, he realizes that his life was a thing of yesterday." (Mofolo 1981: 145)

Noun phrases or words like "dead a long time ago", adverbs like "already" which would be expected in academic English are replaced by the unexpected local expressions that successfully catch readers' attention and fix images with striking effects into their minds. Moreover, these expressions have an exotic flavor, convey poetic and refreshing effects and contribute to create the atmosphere of a very local story. This language proves that in the context of the oral traditional community, there is no unbridgeable contradiction between poetic language and the common language of the everyday life. The comparison of the academic "he was already dead" or he died a long time ago" with "his life was a thing of yesterday." Or "a thing of a day before yesterday" shows that one could speak poetically in a realistic language. The everyday language can still be realistic without losing any of its poetic effects. Both poetry and realism are fused together to give that language its charms. This dominating quest for concreteness is the main feature of traditional religion where spiritual beings are translated into concrete beings with human qualities and traits.

The language of the traditional man is made up of his ecology, geography and landscape. If Nandi, Chaka's mother, is so attractive, it is because she has a "light brown complexion like a cannabis seed." (4) When Senzangakhona is forced to outcast his son Chaka he loves so much, the decision is painful and difficult to make but there is no other way out. "So he [Senzangakhona] closed his eyes, and the pain was like swallowing a stone as he gave up his wife and son." (11) This is a very concrete materialization of the almost impossible situation that Chaka's father has to go through. For anyone who knows a stone and a human throat, the picture is clear and vividly conveys the desperate and almost impossible situation in which Chief Senzangakhona is trapped.

The poeticity of traditional oral language is therefore to be found in that very realism which reveals the dialectical comprehension of poetic language. Poetry consists in saying in a pleasant and original way the experiences and attitudes available to members of the community. The comprehension of poetry as an art form for a few educated members and inaccessible to the common lot is rather dismissed in this traditional context. Of course esoteric poetic forms exist for initiated members of the community but general literature which is written for the entertainment of the community and education of the young ones rule out that option of deliberate esoteric language. This experimentation with language is rendered all the more necessary by the requirement of shifting from an originally oral performance or use of language to a printed text that has its specific requirements.

III. From oral performance to the printed text.

For some analysts, (for instance Walter Ong 1999: 10), oral literature is a paradoxical term because for them, written texts cannot faithfully convey what was originally said orally. In *Chaka* though, many characteristics of oral performances of epic narratives are saved. The narrator has kept some of the original traits of the spoken 'text.' By this experimentation, Chaka appears as inspired by traditional oral narratives. The most visible aspect of the oral traditional narrating is undoubtedly repetition.

Repetition is a particular trait of the oral speech. It is often used in the written text for stylistic aims and emphasis but this use cannot reach the level of its occurrences in the oral speech or performance. (Jousse 2004: 101)

The first level in an analysis of the repetitive feature is the repetition of single words. Such a repetition creates a sense of litany that serves various purposes. The repetition of single words can appear in sentences where they are easy to single out. But a single word is often scattered over a whole page, paragraph or chapter requiring the analyst a closer scrutiny to spot it. Thus, on pages 27 and 28, the word “hyena” is used several times and this immediately suggests that there is something special about this occurrence and even the beast itself. The litanic use of “a hyena”, “the hyena” recreates the pervasive dreadful atmosphere of fear that prevails in Ncube at the mere evocation of the animal’s name. As if in an attempt to exorcise the fear that grips them at the prospect of a probable visit of the dreadful beast when the sun sets, its name is used by the narrator with an effect that effectively conveys the fear that the villagers feel. With this repetitive feature, the reader is also led to share with these villagers their fear thanks to the appropriate linguistic and stylistic devices used by the narrator. In the collective psyche of this small community, this hyena is more than a hyena. “It is a hyena made from a lump of bread, a hyena of witchcraft.” (28) The word appears seven times on page 27 and is used several other times on page 28 and 29.

As another example of the repetitive use of single words, we can mention the Zulu word “bayede.” This word is used over and over again as the favorite praise greeting addressed to Chaka who cannot suffer to see it addressed to anyone else but him. This shows the various uses of the repetition of single words. They are used not only as a means to convey the idea of repetition and of emphasis, but also for entertainment and aesthetic purposes as is the case in songs and praise poems.

Another example of these uses is the recurrent occurrence of the proposition “without” to convey in a poetic and vivid way the idea of desolation in territories crossed by Chaka and his army:

Ahead of Chaka’s armies the land was beautiful, and was adorned with villages and ploughed fields and numerous herds of cattle; but upon their tracks were charred wastes without villages, without ploughed fields, without cattle, without anything whatsoever, ... (186)

A prosaic language would have been content with, for instance, ‘without villages, ploughed fields, cattle, anything whatsoever’ but the poetic and mnemonic effect of the utterance would be lost.

On pages 164 and 165, the word “sun” is used litantically to suggest a common fate of this astral element and the extraordinary hero. Chaka is compared to the sun and has its quality of eternity. Every new paragraph of these pages start with a movement of the sun: “the sun came up” (Mofolo 1981: 164), “when the sun rose” (165), “the sun came up.” (165) Very soon, Chaka, who was in earlier paragraphs assimilated to the sun can no longer stand on his feet when the sun continues its eternal movement of “com[ing] up”, of “ris[ing].” The sun Chaka used to be can ironically stand no more while the real sun continues to rise or come up. This scene with the repetitive device of the word “sun” shows the gradual decline and futility of human’s pride or vanity.

The most important and interesting aspect of repetition is yet at the level of whole syntactic structures. Not only is musicality of utterances kept but these repeated sentences serve mnemonic purposes in a context of orality where anything worth remembering relies on human memory. There are many of these repeated sentences all through the text. One example will suffice to show its effectiveness in creating vivid images in the minds of readers:

Leaving their age-mate in the field
They ran away leaving their comrade with a wild beast
 Gripping a lion by its jaws (19)¹

The other important aspect of this stylistic device is the repetition with balancing and antithesis not only for emphasis, rhythm and mnemonic purposes but also for aesthetic and entertaining goals. (Jousse, 2004: 231) The poor girl who is made hostage of the hyena laments in cries which are surprisingly poetically recorded. “It’s picking me up! It’s picking down!” (28) she keeps on crying desperately. We say surprisingly because people are not expected to cry poetically when in such a situation of despair where they are concerned about their survival. It also suggests that one does not need to be happy or in a comfortable situation to speak poetically, i.e. using repetitions with balancing.

Poetry can be seen in any context where people express feelings. This is the case during funerals, in songs, in moment of joy, sadness, etc. People use language poetically when lamenting over the death of a loved one, when composing or singing a song to celebrate birth, when on the way to farms, rivers, etc. There is no specific state of mind, no particular context, no particular level of education to be able to say things poetically. The most prosaic situation could elicit the most poetical utterance. As an illustration of repetition at the level of whole syntactic structures is the narrator’s description of Chaka’s contribution to the cultural values of the Zulus. To show that the hero was a civilizing figure, the initiator of almost every aspect of the cultural life of the Zulus, the narrator, by this same device of repetition with balancing succeeds in conveying the idea that the hero was the initiator and architect of the military code of discipline, obedience and martial morality:

He put the remaining ones through a rigorous training programme; he taught them [the Zulus warriors] fighting strategies ...; he taught them how to dance smartly, ... He taught them beautiful war games ... Above all he taught obedience ... (112)

The idea of the collapse of the great elephant, i.e. Chaka, is metaphorically rendered poetically by using a repetitive device that juxtaposes two antithetical attitudes. Chaka helplessly tries to do things he cannot do showing his physical deterioration and decline:

Then when he came to the killing of his “wives”, he felt such pain that he woke up. He tried to stand up, but was unable to do so. He tried to cream, but his mouth was stilled. [...] He stood on his feet, and threw glances this way and that, but he found that there was perfect stillness, ... (162)

The mental picture of a collapsing giant, of a balancing tree unable to stand firmly on its roots or of a man whose body fails him against his wish is recorded by the narrator with perceptiveness. The wish and will to act are still there but the body does not respond to the king’s commands thus revealing by analogy his lost of power. The body shows him, even

¹ The arrangement of the passage this graphic way is mine for the purpose of showing graphically the repetition. In the text we have this: they ran away leaving their age-mate, leaving their comrade, gripping a lion by its jaws.

before some of his subjects realize his weakness and try a rebellion, that he is no more obeyed and that a human being cannot command to everything all the time. Like his men who betray him, his own body is betraying him. Chaka, helplessly, watches his own deterioration.

The accusing and irritating voice of Chaka's conscience carries the same balancing rhythmic parallelism. He is reminded back his own crimes and the accusing inward voice represented by Isanusi makes the whole picture all the more unbearable through the repetition with anaphora:

Chaka, murderer of your own brothers, the blood of your father!

Murderer of your own wife, companion of your heart!

Murderer of your own children, your very own blood!

Murderer of your own mother, she who gave you birth! (176)

The novel becomes a pretext for representing not only native stories, ideas and cultural values but also traditional art forms. The style and language used here are not classical. The language in *Chaka* is not the traditional English that is met in books though it is academic. It is simply attuned to the local realities bringing new sounds and sensations to any reader familiar with the traditional canons of literary language. More than any other consideration, it is by this experimentation with language and style that Mofolo's contribution to world literature and the rehabilitation of the cultural heritage of his people is important. He may have made his some of the ideas and stylistic forms of the literature he had at his disposal but his style remains his own as a consequence of his traditional background. Many foreigners have written about Africa sometimes sharing ethnological purposes with modern African writers. It is at the level of such linguistic and stylistic experimentations that the contribution of African writers will prove their originality and worth.

Conclusion

Themes and ideas embedded in an artistic production are the skeleton of the literary text. They are therefore important and there is nothing like a literary text that conveys no idea or theme. This said, style and linguistic experimentations, i.e., the aesthetic component of literary composition, are what will give the theme its artistic characteristic. It is the perfect fusion of content and form that creates literary masterpieces that outlive their authors, their epochs and inspire contemporary and later generations.

Often regarded as a starting point in the literary history of Africa, *Chaka* can be ranked among the literary productions by African artists who can be referred to as the pioneering generation. As proof of its central position in African literary historiography, this outstanding novel has triggered a chain reaction in the literary field. The Sotho born writer's work has inspired artists like Senghor, Seydou Badian and many other literary productions.

If the myth and legend of Chaka has survived, if many literature producers still see in the Zulu national hero a figure to advocate for independent Africa, it is thanks to the powerful image that Mofolo was able to build through his innovative approaches to language and style. He was able to write a true African novel, an endeavor that could only be achieved by an original approach to language and style. The focus on language is therefore a means of acknowledging the typically aesthetic and therefore artistic merit of that seminal work.

Not having had access to the Sotho version which was translated into English by D. Kunene, there is a feeling of unease about this experimentation. Was it wholly the

experimentation of the writer or has he been partially helped by his translator? How much liberty has the latter taken with the Sotho version? How much of himself has he brought to the Sotho version? These remained issues to be solved to better acknowledge the merit of the writer.

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