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## **Non-Fiction Tradition in Ghana: An Analysis of the First West African Novel, *Marita or the Folly of Love***

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### **Abstract:**

*Considered as the first West African novel, Marita or the Folly of Love has been hailed for the anonymous writer's infinitesimal recording of the colonial enterprise in Ghana. The compilation, published by Newell in 2002, was originally serialized in two newspapers, the Western Echo and the Gold Coast Echo, between January 1886 and February 1888. Aside the novel's acclaimed political relevance, it also hands down some of the tenets that have shaped the development of non-fiction culture in Ghana, influencing compatriots such as Awoonor. This paper, therefore, seeks to explicate some of the techniques used by A. Native in his work.*

**Keywords:** A. Native, Ghana, non-fiction

### **1. Introduction**

A. Native's work, *Marita or the Folly of Love*, has gained some attention because of its in-depth rendering of slavery and colonialism in Ghana, offering the reader snapshots of the tensions that resulted from the interruption of the social structure by the exploiters. In capsules, A. Native photographs the clash between Western and African values, and the resultant turbulences in social life. While there is still some doubt as to who the author of the articles was, it remains unmistakable that the scribbler was "a native" who feels that the anguish his people were being subjected to was not proper, capturing those moments of infamy in words.

To do so, A. Native resorted to experimental writing, which straddles journalism, cultural and oral studies, as well as African liberation theology. For example, A. Native makes conscious efforts to make the reader feel that he is engaged with the news as much as he is with literature in line with the technique of blending his prose with elements from the non-fiction strand. To illustrate this, Bonsoe Penin's interactions with Quiabu in chapter one (p. 43) of the work is styled as an "interview", that is, a journalistic rather than a literary format.

#### *1.1. Native's Skaz*

Native deploys the use of skaz to make a comment about his society in line with the African liberation theology concept. A Russian word meaning "tale", the use of skaz enables the writer to imitate spontaneous oral account of dialect, slang and peculiar idioms (Bolland, 1996, p. 12) into the prose, giving it an authentic account of the outpourings of a people who feel crushed under the weight of the colonial enterprise.

Skaz, according to Bolland, is a vernacular extra-literary narration set in opposition to the expressive mode of the dominant discourse. Bolland is of the view that the term skaz has a particular relevance for the African novel where resistance to colonial ideology and that of the new African elite is conducted through a range of vernacular forms as it expresses the "energies of popular culture breaking through the solemn pathos-filled constraints of the official language". Thus, the use of Skaz by A. Native should be seen as attempt to challenge mainstream discourse at the time, especially the literature promoted by religious institutions which, instead of preaching the gospel, became the conveyor belts for fostering hate ideologies. In essence, the use of skaz by A. Native is not for mere vernacular insertion in the English prose. Rather, he uses it to rouse, captivate and retain the interest of the reader. For example, the African way of telling stories is to evoke communal sensibilities in line with the continent's persistent socialist inclinations.

Thus, A. Native's rendering of his narrative is synonymous with the skaz approach, which means that the writer sometimes deviates from the journalistic format of maintaining distance between the writer, the audience and the subject matter. In doing this, one observes the constantly altering of the narrator's viewpoint from the subjective 'I' to the collective 'we' and the communal 'our', consciously imitating or giving effect to the largely collectivist way of life of the Ghanaian people. This technique makes the reader to feel as though several voices are involved in narrating the story, though at all times there is one discerning narrator as obtained in journalism texts whereby the neutral third person points of view (he/she/they) are preferred to the first person "I".

"We must now leave these two gentlemen and introduce the heroine of this tale to the reader" (p. 44).

"In the last chapter, we mentioned that Wissah called over to see Mr & Mrs Pritza and also mentioned somewhere that she had been of late in the habit of going there frequently" (p. 53).

“Poor Mr Littlemonie! I cannot help pitying you whilst writing about you” (p. 112).

Aside holding up a sympathetic point of view, the narrator oftentimes sounds condemnatory, as pertains in oral/skaz tradition. In some cases, the narrator even behaves as though he is a physician. But this is not surprising as indirectness, unmasking the illusion, making commentary and moral judgments often constitute part of the orality repertoire: “Poor man! He was in a sad predicament. To have the talk there and then he would be giving in to his wife which he did not wish to do; and not to do so, he either must give the minister his promise to marry in the church in which case he would be acting blindly in the affair or if he refused he felt that he must give him – the minister – good and sufficient reasons for refusing which he could not do without first having an interview with her. The lady therefore carried the day, and nothing loathe opened the ball by asking Quiabu to tell her what the minister told him. (p. 71)”. Berning (2001) argues that the “use of third and first-person narrators complements one another resulting in a multi-perspectival narrative”: “The two perspectives reinforce each other, strengthen the story’s internal logic and exhibit verisimilitude”.

### 1.2. Deification of African Values

Successively, one sees A. Native preoccupied with deifying African values, demonstrating that contrary to what Western-originated religious organizations such as the Methodist Church would want people to believe (as recorded in the narrative), Africans have timeless values. To overcome the bigotry, Native frequently used writing to stir up debate on issues such as religion and race. By using tactics of advocacy, including sensitizing the reader on the matter by debating the merits of traditional marriage compared to the one proposed by the Methodist church, A. Native is consciously mobilizing support for his cause and influencing the reader, demonstrating through the debate that despite its derision of country marriages, the alternative proposed by the Methodist church is frivolous.

According to DeFleur et al (1998), the first step in individual transformation or development is for the writer to provide “consistent, persistent and corroborative presentations’. And so through these series of articles, Native kept in sharp focus, of course in consonance with other writers at the time, the need for peoples’ right to be respected, irrespective of race or creed. According to Native, no human being has the right to suppress other beings on the basis of colour, more so by Christian institutions like the church preaching salvation on one hand while enslaving on the other. Against this background, Native sought to provide an alternative which was diametrically exposed to that promoted by the supremacists, doing as Bolland suggests the need for the African novel to be seen as breaking-up the hegemony of an imperial ideology into a multiplicity of urban, rural, nationalist, regional – linguistic consciousness (p. 2). It is for this reason why he attacks the incessant attempt by the Methodist Church for its cunning in using its religious sphere of influence to impose cultural imperialism on the people.

- In fact, no two persons that have been united together by the church could live more happily together than those two who were only married by *country marriage* [emphasis retained], a marriage looked down upon as debasing and degrading. (p. 45)

DeFleur et al explain that the media is considered as having “powerful influence” on society in so far as it brings changes in society as indicated through what they call the “adoption process” (p. 405). By deconstructing the infamous role of the church, an institution deemed to be point of humanity, of solace, and of refuge, A. Native is building an alliance against the race-leaning mercantilist churches, demanding that they align their political ideologies to the doctrine of the Bible they profess to evangelize people on.

Indeed, country marriages are able to withstand marital turbulences compared to marriages sanctioned by the church. A. Native warns Ghanaians not to become acquiescent to false blinding love foisted on them because of its potential to rob them of their inviolability as Africans:

- I see by the light way you take it that your friend, the [Methodist] minister, and his wife have only shewn you its bright and pleasant side; and have kept from you either intentionally or not, its dark, hideous and most miserable side. I will not allow you to undertake an affair of such a nature with your eyes shut, and I will endeavour to explain it to you in the best way I can, leaving you to decide or take what course you please. (p. 72)

Explicating *Marita*, Awoonor (2012) said it raised protest against what is perceived as part of our collective emasculation, a programme designed to destroy the original African family.

- *Marita*’s relevance is not merely in the erudition of its broad scholarship but in the subtle expression of outrage and a deep sense of irony in which was cast the origins of a people’s social catastrophe. The book voices out our collective and expanding unease about all this civilization baggage. The problem is not only the marriage bit, as crucial as it is. It is the whole business of “civilization” which has come with so much loss of identity in the trail of massive ridicule from other peoples. (p. 252)

A. Native champions the need for Africans to avoid rash actions: “I will not allow you to undertake an affair of such a nature with your eyes shut”. It could be inferred here that A. Native casts his role in a long-term, unbending mould. In the communicative field, this is described as the accumulation process intended to bring about desired changes for development in society. According to DeFleur et al, this does not mean that the writer or for that matter the media creates the situation. It means that the media serves as a necessary condition in bringing about the changes (p. 404). In consequence, the preoccupation of writers such as A. Native derives from the “testimony orality offers with regard to dramatizing the conflicts and dilemma involved in the tradition versus modernity dialectic”. Through such efforts, the reader is empowered to make a sense of his world. In the end, it is to ensure the preservation of the splendor of African norms. In his *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) names politics as one of the reasons behind the project of “one language reigning over others”. Often than not the rationale behind such projects, he points out, is to supplant worldview of those being suppressed. As a result, he calls deconstruction of such beliefs to expose their ugly aspects. He said such an action is needed as

linguistic domination has a material aim, that is, the control of the colonized through the destruction of their indigenous cultural and economic relations as clearly articulated in the series of objections raised by A. Native in the excerpt below.

- Our Lord Jesus, although a God, yet conformed himself to the things of this world when he became incarnate. He would suit his divine precept and teachings to the condition of the people. Did he not command his disciples “to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s”? Did he not rebuke the Pharisees for charging the disciples with breach of the Sabbath and uphold his disciples? The Pharisees were astonished when he said the “Sabbath was made for man, but not man for the sabbath” ... He, that is our Lord Jesus, would in this instance say, as in the case of the Sabbath, that marriage was made for man and not man for marriage” ... if the object of the English marriage be to ensure happiness, I am satisfied that peace and joy are sufficiently ensured by our country marriages too, however ridiculous they may appear in the eyes of the stranger, and that by forcing people into this kind of marriage, it would be placing a sharp instrument in the hands of ignorant people to cut their throat, that is the loss of their happiness. (pp. 78-79)

Clearly, the projection of African history and its norms cannot be seen simply as another literary device, but as an integrated concept, which has as its aim, the creation of what Irele (2001) calls “orally conscious poetry or literature” (p. 124). Hence, A. Native’s (1886) attack on the Methodist church for promoting “barbarous idea(s) with civilized notions” (p. 87) which has made quite a number of Africans “change substance for a shadow, happiness for misery” (p. 86) should be seen in this light. As Awoonor (2012) demands, an essential ingredient in *Marita* is its “overt criticism of the pillars of the Wesleyan church for their moral failures”.

- The evangelical progenies of Thomas Birch Freeman, alias Kweku Annan, our author points out, were not paragons of virtue, what with their regularly scandalous behavior with peoples’s wives. The hypocrisy and the pretentiousness that accompanied this systematic display of immoral conduct seem to be the hallmark of a religion that claims moral superiority over others.

A. Native wants to fix African marriages by extending their traditions and heritage as they are of greater value and prestige than some of the imported foreign values being bandied on the continent: “I can only pity you, and blame the parsons whose duty should have been to diffuse happiness, as ministers of God, amongst the people instead of blindly forcing them into certain misery and distress” (p. 49).

### 1.3. *The Use of Sonic Devices by Native*

A. Native uses a number of sonic devices including repetition for aesthetic effect such as slotting in fresh information into the narrative: “In for a penny, in for a pound. The lady was willing, her people were willing: Quaibu had to consult nobody, and there was ‘no just cause or impediment’ why he also should not be willing?” The repetition device can also be used to bestow on the text a sense of variety or creativity. There are instances where A. Native blends repetitive devices with interrogative marks for affective reasons, such as creating humour in the narrative. As Tannen (1999) observes, humour is a common function of repetition (p. 60). Similarly, Starratt (1996) notes that a key feature of oral genres is their capacity to incorporate new elements and expand, continually absorbing additional material:

- ... Have you seriously thought of it? Have you thought of the consequence? Have you studied Miss Wissah so well as she was, as she is; and as she will be in a state to which you are going to raise her? (A. Native. 1886: p. 47)

Another repetitive device that A. Native uses is piling. A. Native uses the device of piling to place emphasis on certain words and through that sequence helps to build the narrative by striking an emotional tone with the reader. Overall, the piling device acts as an involvement strategy that helps in portraying diversity in knowledge. The device also helps in sustaining the attention of the audience.

- A man commits an unworthy act; that act is a sin against God for which he can repent and ask Him to forgive him. But instead of that he goes to the meeting, and either tells his leader that he is a sinner, which he has no occasion to do since by nature we are all sinners. (p. 63)

### 1.4. *Subversive Lyrics*

A. Native integrates in his/her work subversive lyrics or chants of abuse. Newell (2006) speaks of the ability of subversive lyrics to be used to protest the abuse of power, especially when social rights have been violated (p. 62): “it is a locally recognized genre which licensed their actions and conveyed their demand”. Brown (1995) observes that West Africa possesses an abundance of oral genres which are locally recognized as vehicles to convey approval or insults and criticisms of others, often at the highest level.

- The potential for abuse always lurks beneath the praise-laden form as an alternative mode of addressing ‘big men’ and elders. Songs are sung by children and adults alike, songs that were innocently innocent but which were laced with subversive lyrics spreading awareness about people’s discontent with issues...

Avorgbedor (1990) cites the use of abuse-songs as revealing the power of the word to cause real, lasting damage to a person’s reputation while Kofi Anyidoho views the word as a natural cosmic force, with a potential for creative and destructive ends (cited in Deandrea, 2002:115) as reflected in the excerpt that follows: “And now gentle Quaibu, to thee also I have aught to say of advice, give strict attention to it, and it will be of the greatest benefit to thee in the new life thou art going to lead” (p. 81). We can infer from the explication of Avorgbe and Anyidoho that the use of face-threatening techniques is to demand a change in behavior. DeFleur et al (1998) argue that social change comes about because of new ideas and interpretations, playing “significant role” in the transformation of the individual (p. 406).

Talking about the significance of subversive lyrics, Yankah (1989) says they are so powerful to the extent that people who would not be allowed publicly to voice their opinions in ordinary life are permitted under orality to speak ill of their elders and rulers, air grievances using phrases that would otherwise be regarded as libelous or indecent. As well, they can use ‘unspeakable’ language, issue threats and insist upon transformations to their living conditions.

- 'I certainly would not be a fool to join it, my honoured cousin ... how long is it since stupid notions of this sort came into your mind (A. Native, 1886: p. 52)?'

## 2. Conclusion

A. Native uses his narrative to make comments on African issues and, by so doing, seek to influence society in a way that will help repair what he saw as a bruised African psyche by developing in his people a new consciousness that would help counteract the issues that he tackled in his work. It is therefore not surprising that he wrote subversively, stripping away the façade behind European cultural imperialism.

His writing helps in defining Ghanaian culture, with the enthronement of a spirit of cultural self-determination. To appropriate Bertens's (2001) idea, one can conclude that A. Native culls the rhythms and idioms of his own culture into his narration to defamiliarize the reader and draw attention to the non-English linguistic and cultural context of his work by attacking traces of racial superiority and promoting African values. He was particularly averse to the colonial enterprise, especially its bent to imposing Western values on the Ghanaian people. No doubt that there is a heavy dose of veneration of African values in his work. Native's key focus is to demand change in the international sphere, referencing international Christian organizations for attack, demanding that their teachings and actions should align with the principles of the Bible they claim to be adherents of. According to him, such institutions cannot continue to be duplicitous by preaching salvation while robbing those being saved. Thus in A. Native's write-ups, we see a clash in ideologies between unprincipled Christianity and traditional African rites.

Thus A. Native's work has huge resonance for cultural issues, whether using subversive lyrics in uprooting hegemony of its evil vestiges or whether it is by emphasizing the differences between African cultural values from those of the colonialists. One observation to be made about the writing of A. Native is his ability to foreground tensions in the Ghanaian society during the colonial period using the medium of orality in a journalistic format. Using methods of de-centering and dislocation, A. Native demonstrates how orality overlaps media communication to create an avenue for tackling social issues.

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