

WHEN THE SHELL REFUSES TO CRACK: AMBIGUITY AS STRUCTURAL CONDUIT IN FIDELIS OKORO'S *CRACKING THE SHELL*

BY

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Abstract

*Literature has been described as "the language of defamiliarisation". Known in literary studies as *ostrananie*, defamiliarisation is the artistic technique of presenting to readers common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar. This concept is popularized by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay entitled, "Art as Technique". According to Shklovsky, the technique of defamiliarisation is meant to make objects "unfamiliar". He argues that art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object. An object is not important, he says, until we try to defamiliarize it to find its artfulness. Ambiguity, briefly put, is the ability of a text to generate multiple shades of interpretation without making any of the interpretations imposing or overwhelmingly accessible. Because of the confusion inherent in the words or expressions that convey ambiguity, it is only context that often resolves the uncertainty, not necessarily the meaning of words. In this essay, therefore, the aim is to treat ambiguity as an aspect of plot in Fidelis Okoro's *Cracking the Shell*. By employing the deconstructive theory, the take of this write-up is that if literature is actually the language of defamiliarisation, then ambiguity is a veritable instrument in this process. This we shall demonstrate by examining how this concept has animated the characters and plots of the text.*

Key words: Literature, Ambiguity, Structure, Deconstruction, Defamiliarisation

Introduction

Literary webs are not weaved in a vacuum; for in any work of art, there is always an inevitable interaction between the text and the context. Thus, one's critical approach to a literary text, to a large extent, depends on how one understands the concept of text and context, and the relationship between the two. This understanding also determines the literary theory that persuades one; whether the humanist or the formalist or any of their trajectories, even though the different literary theories often come to a confluence in a thoroughly critical research. This inevitable interplay is seen, for instance, in the formalist's attempt to identify the running motif in his consummate analysis of a text, despite his obsession with the "work itself". The thing identified could be called "cardinal function," "correlate of discourse", "discourse motif" or "permanent feature" but whatever name it bears, there is certainly the underlying evocation of the humanist conceptualization; for this finding is obviously couched in language and language in human expression. This position could be corroborated in Keesey's assertion that "... neither those critics who claim to interpret poems, nor those who claim merely to interpret readers, are ever free from the web of words... whatever critical line we follow, thought finally reaches an impasse and begins to turn back on itself"(316).

To this end, this paper aims at identifying ambiguity as a permanent feature or conduit in the text under critique and exploring the author's masterful use of this technique of

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defamiliarisation in the novel. Furthermore, by exploring ambiguity as underscoring the nexus between reality and art, this paper argues that, though literary works reflect real life, they should be appreciated as pieces of art and not historical or social studies. In this novel and, indeed, any work of art, this act of defamiliarisation is achieved, among other ways, by the surplus flow of literary devices and juxtaposition of words in such a manner as to achieve what Chinua Achebe describes as the artist doing “unimaginable things” with language; so that one may wonder whether literature’s aim is to inform or to confuse.

Definitions

Over the years, literary critics and linguists have identified, essentially, two types of ambiguity: lexical ambiguity, where there is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word, and syntactic ambiguity, where there is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single sentence or sequence of words. Lexical ambiguity, also known as semantic ambiguity, deliberately creates pun and other forms of word play. When the meanings evoked by these words are related, lexical ambiguity is said to be polysemous but it is said to be homonymous when meanings are not related. While the related meanings facilitate understanding of the word, the unrelated meanings create difference, which, according to Derrida, is also *differance*. This understanding is very crucial to the perspective of this paper.

Syntactic ambiguity, on the other hand, is also known as structural ambiguity or grammatical ambiguity. This type occurs not in a single word but in phrases, clauses or sentences. Here, the intended meaning of a syntactically ambiguous phrase can only be determined by the context of its use. By extension, any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language, is considered as ambiguity because it raises a puzzle as to what the writer has in mind. Ambiguity presupposes that literature is a conscious and articulate arrangement of words to create linguistic beauty and at the same time pass across information that is beyond the ordinary communicative power of language. In literature, it is often referred to as “fallacy of ambiguity”; where a word, phrase or statement leads to vagueness and confusion, thus giving occasion for instances of unintentional humour. Ambiguity is not just a device or an embellishment but part of whatever makes the work a complete whole. On a large scale, ambiguity may develop in a character or in an entire story or a whole poem. The general perception is that unlike the scientist who seeks to clear his work of ambiguity, the poet or literary artist thrives on it because it can better express experience. Cleanth Brooks explains it in *The Language of Paradox* as follows:

It is a language in which the connotations play as great part as the denotations. And I do not mean that the connotations are important as supplying some sort of full or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand. I mean that the poet does not use a notation at all – as the science may be properly said to do so. The poet, within limits, has to make his language as he goes (web).

For some critics, ambiguity is a flaw in writing but others believe that it is a technique used by writers to allow readers to understand their works in a variety of ways, thus giving their works depth and complexity. For instance, in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which has been regarded as one of the foundational works in the formation of the school of New Criticism,

William Empson avers that we have ambiguity when “alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading” (web). Thus, for Empson, reading of poetry is an exploration of conflicts within the author. Empson’s definition of the sixth type of ambiguity is that it is a situation “when a statement says nothing and the readers are forced to invent a statement of their own, most likely in conflict with that of the author”. Again, this definition is crucial to this paper. It might be necessary to illustrate with William Blake’s poem, *The Sick Rose* before we begin to critically reflect on *Cracking the Shell*.

O Rose thou art sick.
 The inevitable worm,
 That flies in the night
 In the howling storm:
 Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy;
 And this dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy

A close reading will reveal the apparent ambiguity in some of the words in the above poem. For instance, one cannot say for sure what “bed of crimson joy” actually means. While some critics interpret it as “making love”, others lay emphasis the expression, “Has found out” and interpret it as the mere fact of “beginning a love relationship”. Similarly, one cannot be exact about the meaning of the expression, “dark secret love”, an expression which allows readers to explore deeper meaning of both the expression and the entire poem. ‘Love’ is a cherished human virtue but the adjectives ‘dark’ and ‘secret’ are certainly vicious. So, how can virtue and vice be combined to present a common idea? No wonder it is said that ambiguity functions in a work of art to create semantic tension which will eventually diffuse or intensify at the end of the story.

Why Deconstruction?

In *Contexts for Criticism*, Donald Keese (324) advances five contexts which have sustained literary criticism over the years. According to him, in genetic criticism, the author is the context; in formal criticism, the poem is the context; in affective criticism, the audience is the context; in mimetic criticism, reality is the context; and in intertextual criticism, literature is the context. If we follow Keese’s postulation and take literature as the context for intertextual criticism, it follows that all the other contexts for criticism are subsumed in the ‘intertextual’, since the author, the text, the audience and reality are represented in the literary work. It is against this background that this paper is foregrounded on the deconstructive literary theory.

According to Shirley Staton, “Deconstruction’s admirers see it as a way that begins to let us question the presuppositions of the language we think in [while] its detractors condemn its subtle and convoluted readings as narcissistic self-reflexivity” (qtd in Dobie, 149). Emphasizing on this remark by Staton, Dobie observes that “The term *deconstruction* sends many readers running for cover, partly because it is one of the most radical approaches to reading that has appeared on the scene, but also because its terminology presents difficulties of its own”. Thus, wondering why anyone would want to understand it or use it to read a poem

or story, Dobie suggests that it could be because deconstruction provides a way of playing with language and meaning that teases and delights; arguing that deconstruction is not a fully developed critical method or school or even a philosophy but what its founder, Jacques Derrida calls it: a strategy, some “rules for reading, interpretation, and writing”. Thus, Dobie avers conclusively that:

The revolutionary nature of deconstruction can be summarized by saying that, in general, it challenges the way Western civilization has conceived of the world since Plato. More specifically, it overturns the principles that have provided basic beliefs about truth and meaning since the seventeenth-century French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650) applied the rational, inductive methods of science to philosophy”.

Cracking the Shell

Based on the above propositions and assumptions, this paper submits that the deconstructive method of playing with language and meaning is quite appropriate in exploring ambiguity as a structural conduit in *Cracking the Shell*. To this end, we devote the rest of this essay to the attempt to crack the shell. And, perhaps strangely, we are starting from the first page of the book, which is the cover page. I say ‘strange’ because it is not common to bring the inscriptions and drawings on the cover pages of books into the critical analysis of literary texts. But in this case, I am persuaded to tread this critical path, the mooring being the possibility that information (direct or indirect) on the cover page of any text could be as important as that in any other page and could speak volume on the thematic imports of the text. This includes the paintings or drawings on the cover, which might have some relevance with the title and therefore the subject of the work.

And so, we begin by asking whether there is any relationship between the title *Cracking the Shell* and the tortoise drawn on the cover page of the novel sitting on the back of a black elephant that is standing on a thick white blanket spread on a turbulent sea. Again, does the word ‘shell’ have any connection with other shells encountered in the text: like the shell of the egg and that of the palm kernel? Chukwuemeka Ike’s *The Bottled Leopard*, for instance, has the drawing of a leopard in a bottle on its cover page to illustrate how men possess and are possessed by leopard and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* has this statement in the narrative: “he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart”. In each of these examples, the information on the cover page is implicated in the narratives. Can this be said of *Cracking the Shell*? In what sense can we connect cracking shell with the realities represented in the novel? Perhaps, this is a typical example of “when a statement says nothing and the readers are forced to invent a statement of their own, most likely in conflict with that of the author”. Be that as it may, A.N. Akwanya offers a demonstrable ground upon which one can begin to unravel the mysteries:

The process of selection opens up the possibility of substituting one thing for another, usually on the basis of a perceived similarity. Thus an item used in discourse may open a field of association, becoming manifold in significance. This is the underlying pattern in metaphorization, and any individual word in the language can interconnect with many different sets of words as similarity can take many different forms. (35)

Now, on the basis of these “perceived similarities”, as posited above, imaginative reading can make one begin to wonder as to the relevance of the title and the drawing to other related narratives and thus open the ‘field of association’ that might become ‘manifold in significance’. And so, we attempt to unfold these mysteries by invoking a folk tale in the Igbo traditional society concerning the tortoise and the elephant. In this folk-tale, the king is said to have declared that whoever drags the elephant to his palace shall marry his daughter. The tortoise approaches the king and declares his intention to achieve this feat. Consequently, the tortoise meets the elephant, convinces him of the great honour the king is about to give him if only he will follow him to the palace. The elephant not only becomes enthusiastic but quickly follows the tortoise to the palace. The tortoise cunningly complains that the elephant’s speed is too much for him and pleads that he climbs the elephant’s back to make their journey faster and, because of the shortness of the tortoise and the height of the elephant, a rope is thrown round the elephant’s neck, which descends to the ground and through which the tortoise climbs to the back. On approaching the king’s palace, the tortoise announces his victory and is instantly rewarded with the promised bride. The elephant protests but to no avail because the rope on his neck has imprisoned him.

The text itself does not attempt to offer this folktale as an interpretation but based on the ‘perceived similarities’ and following the “underlying pattern of metaphorization, Akem, the protagonist of this tale, can be taken as substitute for the giant black elephant lured into doom by his lust for power and prominence. The bait in his own case is the promise of instant riches, shares in a public liability company and a huge capital to support his ailing business. Akem falls into the trap like the proverbial elephant. In this case, Albert’s alluring words are like the ploy of the tortoise against the elephant, and they simply hold Akem spell bound. He tells Akem that:

a man is poor as long as he is working for money. No matter how big your shop is, you are working for money. To be rich is to cross over to the plane where money works for you. When you invest in stock and shares, you just go home and relax and wait for dividends (193)

Coupled with the above tantalizing speech is the information from the narrative voice that “whenever Akem talked about economic matters with the usual pain in his brow, it reminded Amiche of the young kemko who said he wouldn’t mind slipping into the shoes of the night-soil-man if that could make him a millionaire” (118). Thus, within that short moment, Akem must have gone down memory lane as he is wont of doing at such moments. The narrative voice earlier informs us that as Akem ate his food,

He bit something hard and rolled it out into his palm. It was a palm nut.... he stopped munching his food and focused on the palm nut. Those days, shortly after his father’s death, he used to gather and crack palm nut with his mother for the local market. It was from the proceeds that much of his school fees was paid (86-87).

What a painful past! Certainly, it has to be redressed. Thus, it is not surprising that he is willing to do the sacrifice required from all the initiates to the club, Kedzo. One of the key leaders of this cult describes this inevitable sacrifice as “cracking the shell” as he puts this question

across: "Whoever must eat the kernel must first crack the shell. Are they ready to do so?" (242). Thus, cracking the shell to gain diabolic access to wealth is equated with the genuine struggle to make ends meet. Well, even though Chief Namdem answers for the initiates in the affirmative, it is obvious that Akem does not understand the full import of cracking the shell until he hears this shocking announcement from Albert: "your goods are ready but your apprentice is dead." (251) It now becomes clear to Akem that the "emergency business meeting" taking place in Albert's house on the day he and his wife were invited is nothing but a secret cult meeting (191). What Akem and his wife see in that meeting greatly contribute to their doom; for we are told that while "Anthonia was sooner engrossed in admiration of the room... [Akem's] mind was entirely enraptured by the cars he saw outside". And so, the mad quest to acquire these things becomes intense and gives more force to the bait. Thus, the apparent opposition from Greg, the security man, who nearly stopped Akem from seeing Albert in his (Akem's) best interest, would have served as *deus ex machina*, but Akem's shout attracts the attention of Albert and takes him across the boundary situation from where there is no return.

And so, like the elephant in the story, Akem is ignorantly bent on self destruction. It also becomes clear that Chief Martin Namdem's generosity at the Pelican bar is as dubious and dangerous as his source of wealth, although Nathaniel, the university don has always nursed this reservation: "He had always known Martin to be a determined man. But he did not expect the mammoth transformation from a complaining chief attendant to a fledgling rubber plantation to an affluent international business man" (160). But Akem swallows all the baits hook line and sinker both at the Pelican bar and in Albert's house, thus moving away from "the shade where reasoning works to the wilderness where money thinks" (130)

Ambiguity and Moral Dilemma

The moral dilemma in Akem and Mekene's tragedy heightens the ambiguity in the text. Mekene is faithful to his master to the end, yet his reward is hardship and death in a mysterious circumstance. Mekene's uncle, Benbe, would not want him to suffer the lot of those apprentices who fail to help themselves from their masters' money, who later find out that they have succeeded in "cracking their kernels for the fowl" because they "had not begun to look for the dark goat when it was still day". (197) But Mekene resolves not to soil his hands: "He would not want his master's confidence in him to be shaken in any way". Thus, "He resolved to avoid his uncle as much as he could..." (198) Akem is aware of this apprentice's faithfulness and has often regretted that such a faithful boy is serving him at a time he has little or nothing to settle him at the appropriate time. This explains his utter dejection and hysteria at the death of the boy. But it does not remove the guilt from him. Thus, he keeps hearing himself saying "It is my responsibility" (271); a statement that sounds quite ambiguous. What responsibility is he talking about? Is it to settle Mekene, which he has failed; or to rescue and protect him from whatever is now threatening his life?

Mekene's case is worse than that of Morris, the dubious Pelican shop keeper whose unfaithfulness is quite conspicuous, even though his secret deals with Akem's landlord ends in disappointment. All (or at least half of) the secret savings Morris keeps with the man never gets to him, because as Morris pleads for understanding, the old man sharply intones: "If you are

not prepared to take half, then take the nearest way to blazes" (258). We do not know whether the landlord is actually sick or he feigns sick as a ploy to defraud the fraudster. Either way, it is a clear case of evil coming back to the evil doer or the reaping of whatever one has sown. Thus, compared with the fate of Mekene, who has rejected his wicked uncle's advice to adopt the dubious style of Morris, one may be tempted to ask why the righteous has suffered more than the wicked and this may lead further to the conclusion of Silas Manner (in the novel of the same name) that, "there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent" (P.11)

But even the above conclusion does not stand in the context this novel because neither the righteous innocent nor the perfidious liar is vindicated. Thus, it appears that inexplicable chance happens to both the wicked and the righteous, and this has been the existential dilemma of the human race. This is evident even in the relationship of the couples and their attitude in changing circumstances. Poverty and wealth are two opposites. One is detestable while the other is desirable. But in this text none is preferred to the other as a superior state of life. One can be poor and still be happy while another can be rich and yet be always sad. This, perhaps, is the import of Philomena's remark to Antonia: "Tonia, you're blessed with such a humorous husband. Quite unlike those of them who carry cloudy faces all the time and never stay in the house. Imagine taking siesta with your husband". (10) Of course, "Antonia swallowed hard" because she appreciates the irony in her friend's remarks. We know the reality that Akem has never slept and that there is a domestic crisis rocking their home. Thus, Philomena's remarks suggest that neither poverty nor riches is the cause of or the panacea for trouble in the home. But what does the text suggest as the panacea? Perhaps love! But again, ironically, Anthonia's love grows only when there seems to be money in the house; then only does she notice that "Akem has been looking more handsome"; that he "looked more fatherly, manlier, and more responsible" (179). But at other times, it is only toothless smile and swallowing hard to buttress her hatred for an irresponsible husband, who cannot do what Philomena can. Thus, when she decides to abandon her shop, she triumphantly tells her husband, "Papa Aisha, I'm going home", a statement that is both ambiguous and ironical. She is not just going home from her shop but above all, running away from her family responsibility and journeying towards perdition and deep family crisis. In ignorance, Akem replies: "Oh, I'm coming home soon myself". The irony in their expressions about 'going' and 'coming' home captures Mathew Arnold's description of the world, in "Dover Beach", as "a darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night". Akem does not know that Anthonia's going home is a final step in abdicating the shop and her family responsibility and still hopes to go home to a darling wife.

Such is the clash in Akem's marriage and business (resulting in conflict between him and his wife, his apprentice and his customers) that he decides to look for solution where he should not have. Well, he gets all he needs but neither he nor his beloved apprentice, Mekene, lives to enjoy them. To set off the train of retributive justice, when Mekene's body is brought home for burial, Akem openly confesses: "Udanu, don't let any of these men escape. They killed your son!" (281) In that confession, he not only breaks his vow of secrecy; betraying the brotherhood or fraternity, he also cracks the shell, as it were, and thus plunges himself into perpetual gloom. Albert also cracks the shell at the onset of his madness. When Akem has

already left to join Chief Namdem and the Kedzo, he begins to make this confession: "Martin Namdem is dangerous. He is diabolic. Akem should avoid him by all means". But it is now too late. However, the shell of the egg which Albert cracks and swallows at that particular time could be a symbolic icon. We are told that "The shell came off like the husk of a wet bean and the shinny egg went into his mount whole" (226-7). One may wonder why it is only egg that he finds acceptable, after rejecting every other food and it is after eating the eggs that his confession begins. If we consider that the shell is that which covers the real substance and which must be cracked and removed before the real substance can be seen or used, we can begin to appreciate the intensity of ambiguity in the metaphorization of shell in the narrative, whether the author intends it or not. The apparent symbolism here is that his shell of secrecy has cracked and he can no longer hide the secret, which the narrative voice describes as "to let the black cat out of the bag" (235). Thus, like Ben and Albert who kill themselves after different periods of madness, Akem and his beloved apprentice, Mekene, and the entire crew of Kedzo that come to Udanu for the burial succinctly fulfill the axiom about those "who lived to keep their money but their money lived without keeping them" (129).

The Ambiguous in the Politics of *Cracking the Shell*

Both the postcolonial and the Marxist critics will find the politics of *Cracking the Shell* very interesting. And, of course, since deconstruction does not insist on existing as an isolated autonomous construct or theory, it comfortably accommodates and at the same time interrogates insights from other critical theories in its approach to text. Thus, from postcolonial and Marxist point of view, it is both ironical and ridiculous that a cunning tortoise on the back of an elephant, beaming light from behind it, should be the coat of arm of a newly independent African nation. Again, the symbolism of the elephant and the tortoise in the folk-tale seems to apply: the craftiness of the tortoise and the foolishness of the elephant. The elephant symbolizes the mass of the people who should have been rejoicing for the dismantling of colonialism but are rather threatened by political instability, represented by the turbulent sea on which the elephant stands, with a white blanket under its feet. The coat of arm is a symbol of national strength and integrity. What hope then is there for a nation whose economic prosperity is based on intrigue? What type of light can tortoise-like torch bearers radiate? And what wisdom is there for a giant animal like an elephant to be standing on a blanket that is spread on a violent sea? Will not the blanket soon get soaked and sink into the deep taking its burden with it? Should it be surprising then that there are series of coup d'état?

Thus, the struggle for independence does not worth it, since "the auditioning was the worst thing to happen to this country, next to colonialism". (83). After all, Chief DavlonWokagan is the first indigenous president after the independence struggle but his age is questionable, as deduced from Akem's question; "so Wokogan was able to prove he was younger than 54?". With such questionable characters dominating the polity of the new independent nation, it is not a surprise that the slogan: "Usamba is a land of possibilities" only finds credence in such moral decadence that warrants a grandmother going to court in that country "to prove that she is a man". Even the military regime of General Dan Bonzo, who claims to be the messiah, is a colossal failure. Yet great things are said of him, so that, apart from the folktales which Akem tells the children in the night, he also tells them stories about

General Dan Bonzo: "how he had survived several assassination attempts, how he had jumped off a plane before it exploded... how he would learn of a coup against him just few hours before the execution... and so on" (85). And these stories, which have assumed the category of folk tales, are more important than burning political issues. Thus, neither the civilians nor the military messiahs have policies that touch the life of the masses. Hence, the failure of government agencies and parastatals is showcased in the episode where Albert's house is burnt to the ground even though "there is a fire service station just opposite the mansion" (213). And the reason is that "the tankers had gone to the village to sell water when the tragedy struck" and coming back, they spent time filling their tanks only to "add wetness to the ashes" of the combustion as their rescue mission.

Furthermore, it is neither the AIDS menace ravaging the nation nor the night mare being caused by the equation committee that bothers the powers that be but the domestic environmental issues in the state house. It is not that the issue of environmental sanitation and hygiene should not be taken very seriously by those in the corridor of power. It is rather that moral bankruptcy inevitably translates into physical or environmental filth and to attempt curing the later without first remedying the former will remain an exercise in futility. It is, therefore, a clear case of leaders who neglect weightier issues of social justice and economic emancipation and concentrate on and even quarrel over personal issues like sitting allowance, wardrobe allowance and other trivial? No wonder, therefore, that it is not the nation's minister of information who carries the authentic news from the presidential lodge but the C.P.A's personal cleaner. And this information is most acceptable because it is corroborated by General Bonzo's body guard. National policy matters are thus reduced to kitchen gossips and domestic exchanges. Of course, every government, no matter how bad, must have its praise singers. And so, Amiche and other politicians who hope to gain from the illusive transition programme argue that "every nation has its peculiar problem" and therefore, America is no better than Usamba for even there they talk of "Democracy, democracy and yet bullet fly there like mosquito in Usamba" (82). What a consolation for the bad leaders! As a result, the dedication of General Bonzo in the war of independence is celebrated (by poets) in equal terms with his "exquisitely shaped nose". Perhaps, this is an indictment to political and intellectual praise singers who change the sweet tune of their music from one regime to another irrespective of the failings of the powers that be.

The position of Usamba in the political map of Africa (as found in the text) and their struggle to establish a generally acceptable lingua Franca are very crucial in *Cracking the Shell*. Where is Usamba in Africa? But it is in Africa. Onak is a big commercial city in Northern Usamba while Udanu is a remote town in the East. Spelt in the reverse order, these geographical locations will strikingly translate into two places of exact status in modern Nigeria: Kano in the Northern Nigeria and Unadu in the present Nsukka area of Enugu state. This can also be said of Nineb, the commercial nerve centre where commodities are found cheap and which can also be reversed as Benin, where we have Cotonou, a presently busy commercial city. Neither the author nor the text has volunteered these interpretations but these assumptions can generate other interesting questions. For instance, how relevant is Mekene's legendary story about General Dan Bonzo's survival of several assassination attempts to the similar stories told about great African nationalists, who are said to have

severally dictated and escaped from holes dug by the colonial masters to bury them alive? Perhaps, that General Bonzo is a soldier while those nationalists were civilians is simply a result of the artistic technique of defamiliarisation. Again, in his national broadcast, to inaugurate his second coming-the renaissance, General Bonzo declares: "We have learnt a lot from the civilian who have had the privilege to work with us and we hope they too have learnt from us" (79). This seems to echo the structure of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, where we see diarchy at work, and where Major Samsolite Osai has co-opted his classmates, Ikem Osodi and Chris Oriko, into his cabinet. But in the process of governance, things fall apart between them. Is General Bonzo a replica of Major Osai? Is the political ambivalence of Amiche similar to the reactionary spirit of Ikem Osodi and Chris Oriko? What is the implication of Amiche's wife being his campaign manager, when compared with the role of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*? Why should he start his campaign by tilling his wife's farm? Do these imply that women or perhaps the family, or both have a crucial role to play if politics and democracy must take deep root in African soil? These and more vexing questions are political shells that need to be cracked in the text. Significantly, *Anthills of the Savannah* has been severally critiqued as Achebe's reflection on the corruption and restiveness that characterized the romance between the military and politicians in Africa.

The literary Artist and the Muse of Sane Lunacy

Speaking about the language of literature, Northrop Frye notes that: "This is the language of that curious identification of subject and object, of personality and thing, which the poet has in common with the lunatic and the lover" (qtd in Keeseey, 305). The import of Frye's postulation is that the poet, and by extension, every literary artist, often speaks or writes like a mad man; perhaps the kind of madness that nurtures lucidity. The phenomenon of madness is one of the most profound ambiguities in *Cracking the Shell*. The questions as to how and when madness starts and the link between sanity and insanity have remained unanswered or, to put it better, the answer has remained open ended. Amiche desires to know from Akem when and how madness starts; at what point the epicenter of sanity disintegrates, giving way to illogicality and disorientation (116). Akem, on the other hand, while in his discussion with Benjamin, the mad man who sounds so intelligent "had wondered how thin the line between sanity and insanity was". It is also important to note that even though Albert's thoughts have obviously deranged, "he was sure he was still in perfect control of his senses (235). What a paradox!

Similarly, Amiche's boyish speculation and pondering over the question, "who has created God?" is capable of degenerating into madness, just as his adult preoccupation about being thrown into lime light and political relevance, because both exercise the brain. This is captured in his poem:

When the shell of imagination cracks
And lines hatch
Sleep flees through standing legs
Sending fingers to grope for pen
Under ink (110)

So, it is the cracking of the shell of their imaginations that sets in the madness of Omande, Osusua and O Bena, in spite of their different patterns of manifestation. They all betray one similar threat: the perpetuation of the last sane action performed before the setting in of madness; before their mental shell is cracked, as it were. But Albert's case is most pathetic. In his madness he begins with the destruction of all that he has labored to build; his house, his wife, himself. Yet, in his madness he rationalizes: "Tell Akem that Kedzo is a hole dug overnight that a life time cannot fill" (234). In his madness, he seems to be possessed by the Muse, so that he can sound poetic:

*And the cows are grazing
And the grazers are shooting
And the shooters are hunting
And the hunters are men
And Albito is a man....(236)*

So, who is actually speaking: an intellectually creative artist or a mentally deranged lunatic? Compare this with Amiche's brooding in his state of sanity, as he manufactures words to explain perplexing phenomena: "Notice-me mania", "I am-big-everybody-else-is-small-mania", "I –am-not married and-I-am-not-happy-about it mania", etc. There is no practical difference between this brooding in a state of sanity by Amiche and Albert's mentally deranged ravings. Is it doubtful then that there are elements (or molecules) of madness in any creative writer, that there is a time when he begins to say he knows not what; that the artist often prophesies about himself without knowing it and can touch issues hanging around his neck unabashed because he is possessed; is no longer himself?

Conclusion

What have I actually said? It is, briefly put, that literary criticism is like cracking the shell. At times the shell refuses to crack and separate from the substance, thereby making the critic to smash both the shell and the kernel, like Akem did in his frustration. The literary critic does not act in frustration; however, he rather invokes the creative destruction often unleashed on texts by deconstruction in order to reconstruct meaning. This is in tandem with Stanley Fish's observation that, in literary criticism, "Disagreement cannot be resolved by reference to the facts, because the facts emerge only in the context of some point of view...Disagreements are not settled by the facts, but are the means by which the facts are settled" (qtd. in Keesey, 347-8). Thus, following the representational theory of meaning, where objects make impression on the mind by its own force and the conceptual theory of meaning, where the mind acts upon the impression already made by the object, this paper has concurred with the postulation that, "the meaning of a word may mean one thing in one context and another thing in another context". Therefore, it is not possible in this brief compass to have explored the depth of ambiguity in Fidelis Okolo's *Cracking the Shell*. I have but dealt cursorily with the topic. Nevertheless, this attempt has, to a large extent, underscored the assumption that language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique. Through the process of empirical discovery, this paper has exposed the strength and limits of ambiguity as a tool for literary criticism,

without attributing any truth value to them, so that, should other interpretive instruments become more useful, the readiness to abandon these ones shall remain sacrosanct. This is the beauty of literature and literary criticism and courtesy of deconstruction.

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