

# Modes of Interiority (Language and Narration) in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*

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**Abstract-** This essay traces the functions language and narration play in expressing an individual's or a society's collective experience of the world, the real outside world and the inner world(s) of his/its own consciousness in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. On one level I look at the 'rotten English' as an attempt to conceive, make peace with and communicate an experience which Mene, the central narrator, or the people of Dukana cannot comprehend. On another level, the lawlessness and the 'uninhibited' nature of language are read as the reflection of the consciousness of the narrator, tormented by the chaos of the external world. The essay closely studies the problematic nature of language that creates a need to develop a model/mode of expression that can be built upon something that is already known, the native language. It also analyses the narrative's personal aspect attached to the language which results in a psychological story-telling technique or a mode of narrating an individual's attempt to deal with the strangeness of his environment and his imaginary audience.

**Index Terms-** Interiority, Narrative, Ego-Ideal, Language, Bildungsroman

## I. THE INTERNALIZED BILDUNGSROMAN

The language of interiority in the novel contains great richness and complexity, moulding the narrative into an internalized bildungsroman. Here, I intend to read the narrative in 'rotten English' as, what Doris Akekue calls, the "mind-style" as "language gives structure to experience and helps determine our ways of looking at things."<sup>1</sup> Mind-style, according to M K Halliday, is an 'ideational function' which means that language expresses the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Thus the mind-style narrative of *Sozaboy* is characterized by a language of interiority, a language that helps strike a balance between the outer world reality and its internal uptake. This idea can be seen at the very beginning of the novel. The narrative places itself in the particular physical space of Dukana after a good harvest where 'All the nine villages were dancing' and 'eating plenty maize with pear and knocking tory under the moon' waiting for the 'new government of soza and police', starting with a "happy

ending". Here we see an idealized optimistic understanding of the current reality of the villagers, particularly Mene. In the essay 'Characterization and Meaning in *Sozaboy*', Helen Chukwuma analyses Mene as an "internalizing character".<sup>3</sup> She talks on how actions burst over his head, how his environment continuously preys on him and how the author records his internal emotional upheavals in love and in war, at home and work. Basing my argument in this context, I would like to call the narrative an 'internalizing' narrative. It is in this internalization process that the reader gets to learn the problematic, subverted growth of the character of Mene- from an ignorant "happy young man and apprentice driver" in Dukana to a "prouding" Sozaboy who never fires a shot, to a civilian fully aware of his situation. The self-conscious nature of the internalization process adds to the peculiarity of the narrative. As Freud states, 'a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed.'<sup>4</sup> Ken Saro-wiwa carefully builds Mene and his pseudo-heroic narrative throughout the novel. The first person narrative of Mene's consciousness is given authority through the voices of the other characters like his mother, his wife Agnes, people of Dukana, Bullet, and other 'Soza-men'. It works the opposite way too. The reader reads Mene in relation to other characters and their actions narrated to us by Mene himself. The balance between the authority and lack of authority of Mene over his narrative gives him a simplistic detachment which effectively gives voice to the complete entangled set of complexities in which he is enmeshed.

## II. MENE'S EGO-IDEAL(S)

A Freudian reading of Mene's narcissistic character gives a broader insight into the language and narrative. For Mene himself and the narrative, the self of Sozaboy stays at the centre projecting an obsession with what Mene is and what he wants to be. He reverses the present situations and pictures the future in such a way that it fits his desires and preconceived notions where his narcissism is an 'instinct to self-preservation'.<sup>5</sup> As Thomas Young states in his essay, "the narrative trajectory of Mene is dictated by the projection of ego-ideals, that is to say future projections of his own ego, which contradict, exaggerate or

<sup>1</sup>Doris Akueke, 'Mind-Style in *Sozaboy: A Functional Approach to Language*', in *Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*, ed. by Charles Nolim (Nigeria: Saros International Publishers, 1992), p-16-17

<sup>2</sup> M A K Halliday, "The Form of a Functional Grammar", Kress G R., ed. (London, OUP, 1976)

<sup>3</sup>Helen Chukwuma, 'Characterization and Meaning in *Sozaboy*', in *Critical Essays on Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*, ed. by Charles Nolim (Nigeria: Saros International Publishers, 1992), p- 39-40

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism', (1941) 'Africas of the Mind' Hand-out p-69

<sup>5</sup> 'On Narcissism', p-66

escape from his current reality.”<sup>6</sup> There is also a process of ‘identification’ happening. The future projections are in another sense a desire to be like or to become like another an attempt “whereby an individual becomes identical with another, or two beings become identical with each other”. According to Freud, “[i]dealization is possible in the sphere of the ego-libido as well as in that of the object-libido”.<sup>7</sup> In the process of idealization happens the ironic growth of Mene. I call it an ironic bildungsroman because though Mene pictures an ‘ideal’ future, it ultimately grows into a painful one from which he has always pressured himself to escape. Mene’s narcissistic infantile ego fails to grow into a matured ego as it refuses to come in contact with the reality ( the reality of the war-torn Nigeria and a disintegrating Dukana) making it a superficial development. The ego-ideal and the identification that Mene has is not just his creation. It is the reflection of what the people around him want him to be which he internalizes. Mene’s narrative never gives space for self-analysis. As for Freud, ‘self- analysis is ultimately limited because of the unconscious interference with one’s own sense of self and resistance to some information or subject.’<sup>8</sup> I trace three major stages in the text that facilitate my reading.

Firstly, we see that Mene wants to be like the lorry driver who is a ‘very rich man because he gets salary every month and every day he much get chop money.’<sup>9</sup> Initially, the reader encounters the ‘heroic-narrative’ at this infantile stage of Mene. He attaches his ‘growth’ with the license that he wishes to get in his imagined ideal future. But this idea of the future is the aftermath of what his mother’s expectations of an ideal son with the master driver placed as the ideal. He says,

So my Mama told me that I should learn to be driver... My mama say that if I am apprentice to this driver, after some time I will get my own licence and then I can get my own lorry to drive... I become his apprentice.<sup>10</sup>

Though seemingly ignorant and dependant, he foresees the possible threat to this future as he notices “plenty of trouble everywhere” and fears the possible end of the world that Pastor Barika mentioned. He fears a future in which ‘I never marry yet... And I never get license although I can drive quite well’.<sup>11</sup> Mene always tries to rationalize his thoughts and mould his ideals in the context of his understanding and pressures of the needs of the world, conforming to Freud’s idea that ‘in addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or nation’.<sup>12</sup>

The second future projection is that of a brave soldier. It is the desire of being a ‘strong man who will defend am (Agnes) if

trouble come’<sup>13</sup>, an ideal man to Agnes and an ideal member of the community that drives Mene during his advancement into manhood. Here Agnes becomes the drive that stimulates Mene into action and Zaza becomes the ego-ideal with the help of another external stimulus generated by Duzia, Kole and Bom.

And as I am marching with gun and singing, prouiding, all the people will come and look at me. They will say how I am brave man. Very brave man. Then Agnes will like me. And Zaza cannot make yanga for me again ... And no woman whether Simple Defence or no Simple Defence cannot begin to give me order on the road ... And I will wear uniform!<sup>14</sup>

Here, Zaza is Mene’s idea of a brave soldier who faced the ferocity of war while fighting ‘Hitla’. Though he says it is to put an end to the “prouding stupidity” of the ex-soldier, at some point in his psychological narrative he identifies himself with Zaza. As Young puts it, ‘he (Mene) is informed by the narratives of other characters, such as Zaza’s war experiences, and incorporates them into his own realities/unrealities.’<sup>15</sup> It is a sympathy that leads to Mene’s identification with Zaza, the old soldier. He says, ‘Suppose Dukana boy is soza do you think they will beat our Zaza, that old Zaza...?’<sup>16</sup> The second stage reveals the complicated narcissistic affinities of Mene. He himself is perplexed by his unaware external object-loves.

Thirdly comes Bullet, whose superiority of intelligence and experience made him Mene’s ideal. Mene finds the answer to all his doubts in Bullet and a leads him to maturity. He says, ‘So, as anytime I am confused, I must ask Bullet what is happening... This Bullet is a clever boy...’<sup>17</sup> Mene’s romantic idealism that made him a sozaboy comes in touch with the brutal realities of war through Bullet. Bullet wittingly and philosophically presents “war” and its experiences to the ignorant sozaboy. The best example is when he explains to Mene on why the enemy soldier brought them drinks:

Oh, yes. That man is the enemy. Look, Sozaboy, we are in the war front, o.k. And in the war front there are all sorts of people... There is only one thing which binds them all. Death. And every day they live, they are cheating death.<sup>18</sup>

Though, for Mene, words like these seem too big to grasp, the depth of Mene’s character is evident when he reflects on them later on in his process of “growth”. After Bullet’s death we see a crisis in Mene’s life.

I see say my best friend for dis war front don die. And I know say my life don begin spoil small small. Before this time, I no know wetindie mean. All my life just sweet dreams. Now, today today, I don see say life no be as I dey see am before. I know say wickedness plenty. And I know say my life must change one time.<sup>19</sup>

In the absence of an ideal, for the first time, we see him hopeless. Mene’s narrative consciousness takes a turn when he is

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Young, ‘Can Psychoanalysis Be Applied to African Settings?’, (2006), p-1-11,  
in<<http://thuto.org/bhead/html/critics/Youngs.pdf>>[accessed on 7 March 2016],p. 3

<sup>7</sup> ‘On Narcissism’, p-84

<sup>8</sup>Ranjana Khanna, ‘War, Decolonization, Psychoanalysis’,  
in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, ed. by Charles Nolim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p.-114

<sup>9</sup>*Sozaboy*, p-11

<sup>10</sup>*Sozaboy*, p-11-12

<sup>11</sup>*Sozaboy*, p-9

<sup>12</sup>*On Narcissism*, p.-97

<sup>13</sup>*Sozaboy*, p-37

<sup>14</sup>*Sozaboy*, p-54

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Young, p-2-3

<sup>16</sup>*Sozaboy*, p-43

<sup>17</sup>*Sozaboy*,p-80

<sup>18</sup>*Sozaboy*,p-94-95

<sup>19</sup>*Sozaboy*,p-111-112

taken outside his dependence on ego-ideals and realizes that 'war is a very bad and stupid game'.<sup>20</sup>

In one sense it is the ego-ideal(s) that holds Mene as well as his narrative together. As one ideal shatters he finds refuge in another one, a repeated escape. Or, when one ideal meets its reality, he builds another one, at least, temporarily resistant to the reality that Mene unknowingly wants to avoid. The post-ideal stage of the narrative is characterised by an aspect of the unending or continuity and an urge to repeat, both in the limited language and thinking, signifying, as Young puts it 'a static refusal to cooperate with psychoanalytical norms.'<sup>21</sup>

I was thinking how I was just thinking how the war have spoiled my town Dukana... And I was thinking how I was prouder before to go to soza and call myself sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely.<sup>22</sup>

It is a point where all the images of identification and ego-ideals that Mene has been building are destroyed at the face of reality. Mene not signing at the end of his narrative points to a crisis of identity as it was from the dependency on an ego-ideal that he used to find his position in every social reality. It also gives Ken Saro-wiwa a possibility of rejecting the necessity of proclaiming an end. The next level of repetition starts as a new cycle in the process of continued running away. Internalization helps the author place the narrator as part of the crowd, partly ignorant, immature with a speculative consciousness yet a Cartesian subject putting forward questions in the form of observations and thought, thus presenting a filtered discourse. The seemingly innocent 'thinking' and its bizarre mix of order reveals the disjuncture between the ego-ideals and the social reality. On another level, this repetition-compulsion is a proof for a continuity of an infantile psychic self. According to Freud, a child repeats even the unpleasant experiences as 'through his own activity he gains a far more thorough mastery of the strong impression than was possible by mere passive experience.'<sup>23</sup>

### 'Rotten English': An Interlanguage of "Madness"

Mene's object relations and his urge to conform to it call for a new structure of language- new form of expression that can effectively manipulate the reality to favour his needs and preconceived notions of all power structure. The 'rotten English' thus is an "interlanguage"<sup>24</sup>, an indigenized medium that carries the indigenous culture. Mene's interlanguage has the power to cunningly subvert the existing system which Mene wishes to change. It enables him censor information from himself as he has already located his decision and its subject matter within his consciousness. But with Mene, the censoring process is unconscious. It creates, for Mene, an ideal world with fixed

<sup>20</sup> Sozaboy, p-151

<sup>21</sup> Young, p-9

<sup>22</sup> Sozaboy, p-181

<sup>23</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1992, para-3

<sup>24</sup> Term from Larry Selinker denoting the "approximative" linguistic system used by second-language learners- it is based on the theory that there is a dormant psychological framework in the human brain that is activated when one attempts to learn a second language.

gender roles, power structures, where he can be a driver, an ideal son, and husband, a soldier disguised in the desire to accomplish the ego-ideals. This processed language helps in building the narrative and its obscure inwardness. The narrative that starts in the happy Dukana- "Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first"<sup>25</sup> to the ghost-like post-war Dukana- "Every place was still very quiet, and all the houses that have broken down, nobody repaired them"<sup>26</sup>, grows through this "interlanguage". Mene's autobiographical narrative is thus a microcosm of both Dukana as well as the nation which for Mene is also a movement from community insularity to the national subject.

Thus, in the effort of coping with the context and its articulation, Mene's language is characterized by a 'madness' of a 'psychophobic object' in the words of Fanon. An incomprehensible fear runs as an undercurrent of the narrative. The fear of "plenty trouble" culminates, towards the end of the novel, in what Benedict Anderson calls a nation which is an "imagined community", 'imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.<sup>27</sup> Dukana thus becomes an 'imagined political community' which is inherently limited as well as "sovereign". Mene finds himself nowhere in his land, a land with 'finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations'.<sup>28</sup>

The narrative in its course brings into light the Experiences of every native soldier in the Civil war, the ruthless manner in which the minority ethnic groups were drawn into the Nigerian civil war and slaughtered as objects and its effects on the psyche of the members of the minority groups. Its language presents a position that the people of Dukana hold in relation to the land and 'in someone else's war'. I read that this alienation serves as the basis of the lack of determination and results in a fearful 'internal colonialism'<sup>29</sup> which results in the internalization of Mene and his narrative. 'Rotten English' thus becomes an individualized struggle of the community to cope with the struggle of the nation.

Before before, the grammar was not plenty and everybody was happy. But now grammar begin to plenty and people were not happy. As grammar plenty, na so trouble. And as trouble plenty, na so plenty people were dying.<sup>30</sup>

This shows the importance attributed to language and its impact on a community's life resulting in a constant

<sup>25</sup> Sozaboy, p-1

<sup>26</sup> Sozaboy, p-172

<sup>27</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), p. 6-7

<sup>28</sup> *Imagined Communities*, p-5-7

<sup>29</sup> Derived from Colonialism, S. Howe uses the term in 'Empire: A Very Short Introduction' to describe the distinct separation of the dominant core from the periphery in an empire (points to the blurred lines between geographical boundaries including various other factors). Here I use it in the specific case of Mene and his position in relation to Dukana- considering Dukana as the physical focal point of his identity.

<sup>30</sup> Sozaboy, 3

metamorphosis. Such a crisis of language or mode of expression is a point of predicament of the self and identity of the individual and the collective society. In a young man's attempt to become a driver, a soza, and a 'prouding man' of the village and home exists a long and complex history of a nation, a struggle for pointless power, resources, the national question, the question of citizenship within the nation state constructed from an 'arbitrary block' carved out of Africa. Ken Saro- Wiwa's craft lies in the merging of all these factors in a medium of specially constructed living narrative pattern. It is characterized by a linguistic unevenness parallel to the psychopathic outcomes of history (genocidal Biafra). This is a language of chaos and subjection paralleling a naturalized, institutionalised and normalized Fanonian madness. It possesses a narrative detachment which blatantly portrays the alienated subject and his displaced ideals of self. Mene becomes a ghost-like self, alienated from language, nation and the ego-ideals on which he depended upon all these years. Mene at the end of his pseudo-heroic narrative is what Fanon explains, 'I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.'<sup>31</sup>

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