The Africanness of The Conjure Woman and Feather Woman of the Jungle

CHIKWENYE OKONJO OGUNYEMI

"'I wonder, why every human being never satisfy with whatever his Creator had provided for him!' But I replied: 'That was how our Creator had created all human beings.' "[1] This is the conundrum that informs Amos Tutuola's novel *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (1962). Dissatisfaction with the human lot is also prevalent in the stories contained in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899). Tackling such dissatisfaction underscores the indefatigable spirit in man that drives him on to attempt to improve his lot through crooked means or straight. If "Much of Tutuola's narrative is permeated by a Swiftean aura of filth which is a constant reminder of the baser realities of existence,"[2] Chesnutt's grim presentation of the slave situation in America also is in its way a Swiftean commentary on man's inhumanity. These two romantic writers have common roots steeped in realism.

Tutuola's works have been compared to *Pilgrim's Progress, The Divine Comedy,* the *Odyssey,* and the *Canterbury Tales.*[3] One can also make comparisons between them and *Don Quixote.* I shall add to this list by drawing parallels between Tutuola's *Feather Woman of the Jungle* and Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman.* Tutuola, a Nigerian, and Chesnutt, a black American, are two writers concerned about man in society, about man in a hostile environment, and the ways for man to survive. One of the traditional ways of survival in Africa is through the aid of "juju" or what Chesnutt, African to some extent, calls the "goopher" — different names for the talisman that could be used as a source of protection for the owner or as a weapon of

aggression against his enemy. Chesnutt and Tutuola are outsiders in the literary circles of their respective countries: Chesnutt because of his acknowledged blackness, Tutuola for his broken English. Raconteurs themselves, in their stories they make use of characters who are also raconteurs as one would talismans to raise one's self esteem and to face one's personal crises. Chesnutt could have said with Tutuola: "But I advise every one of you to pay attention to [the stories] so that you may be able to sort out the useful senses which, I believe, will be useful to you in future" (*FW,* p. 12). That is partly the purpose of narrating the stories.

Separated by time, space, cultural influences, and different social concerns, the American Chesnutt and the African Tutuola are two black writers who nevertheless have many things in common. These common aspects are not merely those universal traits noticeable in most story tellers; they possess distinct traces of Africanness despite their varied backgrounds. It is their Africanness which fascinates and contributes to the uniqueness of their works. David D. Britt recognizes this characteristic in Chesnutt when he comments: "But while the African influences on *The Conjure Woman* deserve serious attention, such a study is beyond my competence."[4] This paper will attempt to establish the Africanness of Chesnutt by using as touchstones *The Conjure Woman* and Tutuola's *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (1962). The purpose will be to point out parallels between the two novels to establish by indirection the African quality in Chesnutt's novel. This end will be achieved by stressing the Africanness of Tutuola while pinpointing any such corresponding aspects in Chesnutt.

James Baldwin, commenting on art in Africa, observes that "Art is taken to be perishable, to be made again each time it disappears or is destroyed. What is clung to is the spirit which makes art possible. . . . The artistic image is not intended to represent the thing itself, but, rather, the reality of the force the thing contains."[5] When art

is destructible and has to be recreated, the recreated artifact naturally lacks originality and its distinctive factor is the personal touch which the artist's imagination embellishes it with. That lack of originality is observable in Tutuola with his derivation from Fagunwa[6] and in Chesnutt with his link with the plantation tales.[7] Their derivative quality does not, however, detract from the value of the works when placed in an African context.

As Baldwin has wisely commented, African art is not concerned with verisimilitude but with conveying emotion. Hence we have the atmosphere of the tall tale, the elements of exaggeration and improbability that are prevalent features of these two writers' tales. Both properly set their folk novels[8] in the "real" world; the inner stories occur before the outer story. The inner stories form the core, commenting on the outer story, the shell, with its more mundane contemporary concerns. What distinguishes the stories is the powerful emotional quality that they generate, binding the different members of the audience to the raconteurs in the novels, just as the reader is bound to the authors.

The raconteurs in the two works are African. They are the vital forces that hold the disparate stories together. In true African spirit, such men possess the cunning, wisdom, versatility and inventiveness that are prerequisites of the successful story teller, since, for a story teller to be a success in an oral situation, he has to hold captive his audience, and manipulate them through a play on their imagination. The feedback from the audience is spontaneous and immediate; so the story teller has his reputation at stake. Tutuola's raconteur-hero in this sense is laudable. We note his gratulatory spirit when he remarks to his audience without any modesty: "I am very happy indeed to see all of you again in front of me and I thank every one of you for the true affection you have on me, although I am head of the village. And I wonder greatly too to see that you are increased again, this night more than ninety

per cent" (*FW*, p. 67). He concludes the novel by pointing out that he "was recognized by all the people of the village as the Chief of the village since when they had heard my adventures of the past days" (*FW*, p. 132). He might possibly have had political difficulties with some of his subjects; however, using the well-known Yoruba tact, he refrains from informing the listener or reader about any such undercurrents. Besides the declared intention of entertainment, we can only infer that the autobiographical narration was meant to be an ego-booster for the chief. At the same time it provides the occasion for a spectacle to impress refractory subjects.

Tutuola's raconteur, in accordance with African tradition, is an old man, the typical sage who passes on his experiences and wisdom to the younger generation. He casts a spell on his audience with his palm wine and stories as a "baba alawo"[9] would with his concoctions and incantations. Each story-telling session is preceded by dancing and drinking to help establish a spirit of togetherness. They form part of the ritual. There is the need in the raconteur to be in control, to be in authority, to have power, a need that has driven him to be somewhat repetitive. However, his skill earns him respect and love from his subjects and admiration from the neighboring villages.

That Uncle Julius in *The Conjure Woman* is equally skillful and successful as a raconteur is patently clear in the desire of his employers, including the sceptical and uncharitable John, to listen to his stories to relieve them of their boredom, and, from Julius' point of view, to broaden their limited vision. As Dixon has observed, Julius has used his goopher to cast a spell on his immediate audience. He achieves the goal through his story telling just as Chesnutt has used his book as a talisman to charm his white readers.[10] Like Tutuola's raconteur, Julius is an old man, a moving encyclopaedic folk-lorist. His expertise is revealed in his oral power. We must realize that "the power of the Afro-American oral tradition reaches further

back in history to African traditions. Here the spoken word has divine power."[11] With his skill, "Julius gains power, not the economic and social power John can take for granted with his whiteness, but a power over the more intimate and mysterious secrets of life itself."[12] This sort of power is enduring. Uncle Julius, like Tutuola's hero, does not reveal his motivations in telling particular stories. His reticence adds to the effectiveness and humor of the tales, particularly when viewed by hindsight after the motive has been unveiled to us by John, the narrator.

Although I would not go so far as Dixon does to assert that Julius has some sexual power over Annie, his employer's wife,[13] undoubtedly he does have some subtle influence over her. Annie had been seriously ill in Ohio but she began to recover in the South. To her husband, her recovery has been due to the change of weather. But we do not know this for sure for "The difficulty of dealing with transformations so many-sided as those which all existences have undergone, or are undergoing, is such as to make a complete and deductive interpretation almost hopeless. So to grasp the total process of redistribution of matter and motion as to see simultaneously its several necessary results in their actual interdependence is scarcely possible" (*CW,* p. 164). This philosophical observation can be applied to the change in Annie, the sick white woman. For this ailing Northerner, despite her sensibility, had lost touch with her roots, with reality. Her movement to the South, downward as it were towards reality, is a tentative move towards a cure. In John's introductory and conclusive sections to the story "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," we realize that Annie's illness is psychosomatic — "She became the victim of a settled melancholy, attended with vague forebodings of impending misfortune" (*CW,* p. 132). By the end of the tale Annie has brightened "and she was soon on the way to ultimate recovery" (*CW,* p. 160). In this instance, we see Julius' story working as a goopher. The power of the goopher is both imaginative and psychological;

through it a metamorphosis is possible. The incantatory power of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" is unmistakable. There is of course the talismanic effect of having a rabbit's foot which is an additional contribution to producing a definitive cure for Annie's ailment. Thus, Annie's Northern dissociation from the Southern reality involving the plight of the black man is symbolized (or is she punished?) by her illness. Her move to the South towards reality, towards earthiness, and her empathy with the blacks following her proper reactions and understanding of Julius' tales lead her to recovery. As the goopher is subjective rather than objective its results are inexplicable. However, it is a force that should not be scorned since it is an unknown variable, psychologically effective if only for the fact that it keeps the underdog going in times of hardship. Aun' Peggy was always "wu'king her roots" in order to establish a sense of rootedness in the black man while attempting to solve the black man's problems radically. Annie finally becomes part of the circle; her health is radically improved on joining the club.

Tutuola's adventurous hero is a ruthless, amoral, ambitious person who was self-centred as a young man. From John's point of view, Julius would almost be in the same category. Tutuola's hero must strengthen his authority by demonstrating that he has the qualifications to be Chief, that he has passed from innocence to experience, that he has the art of story telling with the concomitant wisdom to be a proper teacher and guide to his people. These are requisite qualifications to rule his village, not counting the less romantic one of being the ruler by matter of old age.

Chesnutt's raconteur does not announce himself as Tutuola's does but he is announced by John, his employer. Julius is seen but not heard since he is heard through the voice of his master. Chesnutt handles the situation ingeniously, however, because in the end it is the voice of Julius, the African voice, with its "quaintly humorous," "wildly

extravagant . . . Oriental cast of the negro's imagination" (*CW*, p. 41) that remains with us rather than the disembodied writing of John with its formal, unimaginative prose. At the end the roles are changed as Julius masters Annie emotionally (and John indirectly). Through Julius' foresight as demonstrated in his adroit handling of the two love stories in "Hot-Foot Hannibal," he prevents, for the young white lovers, the carnage associated with the black Hannibal in the inner story. In African tradition, the juju can reconcile the irreconcilable. By his narration, Julius has miraculously effected a union of the two quarrelling lovers.

In handling his female characters, Tutuola exhibits what one can conveniently refer to as the "iya aje" syndrome (in common parlance this Yoruba phrase means "mother witch").[14] His important female charatcers are terrible women — callous, inhuman, indifferent to other people's pain and suffering, and completely self-centered. Obvious examples are the Feather Woman herself, the treacherous Queen in the Bush of Quietness, the Queen of the Water People, the Goddess of the Diamonds, and the Hairy Giantess. To offset these formidable creatures Tutuola offers us only the hero's sister and the hero's wife.

From Tutuola's male viewpoint, it seems women are mendacious and vindictive, ever ready to wreak vengence through juju to compensate for their physical disadvantage. The Feather Woman with her bird-like features symbolizes the female aerial quest for the unattainable. As a jungle witch, she should have had the capabilities of flying. Unfortunately for her, she is grounded like her ostrich conveyer. Like the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" she is vulnerable, revivifying her victims willy-nilly through her own demise. The Queen of the Water People is the traditional "mammy water," beautiful, sylph-like, and, in this instance, a great provider, on condition that one follows her instructions to the letter. The Queen in the Bush of Quietness is a stormy petrel; she represents the adulterous woman who

uses her juju to render her man impotent so that she can carry on her sexual liaisons. There are two sides to her — she is cruel and vindictive to her husband, yet loving and faithful to her dead lover — revealing two contradictory sides of women. The Goddess of the Diamonds represents that compelling force in women to be bedecked in all sorts of finery to the point of gaudiness. The Hairy Giantess, who, with her long breasts reaching toward the earth, could have been a potential mother figure, helps to massacre the hero and his companions rather than nurture them. These characters with their predominantly evil qualities could only have been drawn for didactic reasons to demonstrate to women the terrible female propensities that should be guarded against and to serve as a warning to gullible men.

Despite the obviously African traits, Chesnutt's female characters have been modified somewhat in view of the peculiar American situation. Embattled and dehumanized, with the family unit under constant threat of dissolution, the flagging spirit has been kept up by the resourceful black woman. As I have suggested, Chesnutt seems to have portrayed the female conjurer with maternal instincts, placing emphasis on the benign aspect of the "iya aje." Thus Aun' Peggy tends to "wuk" on her roots for the benefit of her clientele. It is only in the story "Hot-Foot Hannibal" that she performs any mischief against a black man — Hannibal — at the request of Chloe, a black middle class aspirant. It is notable that Chloe does not pay for the goopher with the proceeds of nature as the other clients do; instead she pays Aun' Peggy through artificial and corruptible means — a silk scarf and a silver dollar. Otherwise, Aun' Peggy helps the slave whereas her counterpart in Tutuola's novel, the Feather Woman, enslaves people. Aun' Peggy is filled with concern for black people, helping them to obtain a rootedness through a close link with nature and the environment (she transforms little Mose into a bird to enable him to fly to peck up the spirits of his downcast mother, Sis' Becky); she rejuvenates them

(Henry in "The Goophered Grapevine"); and improves their lot by courageously turning a harsh white master into a black slave (in "Mars Jeem's Nightmare") to force his hand in effecting a change for the better after experiencing the hard life of a black slave. The metamorphosis of Mars Jeem has a wider political implication. It dramatizes the need for a change of heart among the whites towards the blacks by arousing their empathy and stressing the human aspect of the slave - master or black - white relationship.

The other female conjurer in Chesnutt's book is Tenie. In the story "Po' Sandy," she attempts to obtain some element of stability and rootedness for her husband, Sandy, by turning him into a tree. However, the change has tragic repercussions. Her failure seems to be one of insight since her imagination apparently has been dulled by her Christianity, which has dissociated her from her roots for fifteen years. Christianity necessitates a radical divorce from her African heritage, leaving her without a full black identity and the wherewithal for survival as a black person. Throughout the novel Chesnutt depicts a modified version of the African heritage prevalent in his time.

Much has been written on the oral tradition in connection with the works of Amos Tutuola. Although Africa does not have unique claims to an oral tradition, it nevertheless is true African tradition to sit down round a fire in harmattan or in a moonlit night to listen to stories. Such communality is in contrast with the Western mode of communication through reading, a purely individualistic process except for the reader's link with the absent writer. Story telling, on the contrary, is a lively occasion needing a teller-audience rapport; it is spontaneous, with immediate feedback to the artist through the visible reaction of the recipient. The occasion of story telling is a time for solidarity, binding one man to the other.

In keeping with the oral tradition, Tutuola's hero is a romantic with romantic stories to tell. There are elements of exaggeration in the tales, with characters that are flat

rather than rounded.[15] The work is necessarily episodic, limited by the mode of narration and the constraints of a live audience who cannot go on listening indefinitely. To keep interest from flagging, the raconteur has to be inventive. Consequently, occasional inconsistencies occur, such as the hero's sister Ashabi having three babies consecutively in two years (*FW,* p. 32). There is also the tendency to be repetitive, to retain the speaking voice. Incorporated into this is the need for the extraordinary in story telling, the need for the uncanny, linking not only man with man, man with nature, but also man with his gods and the unseen world. The spirit that informs *Feather Woman* is thus one of mysticism.

These elements in Tutuola's work one also finds to some degree in Chesnutt's novel. The theme of the quest which emerges from *Feather Woman* as the quest for wealth, experience and a wife is part of the folklore pattern. The idea of quest is also inherent in Uncle Julius' assay against his employers; although his quest is not full of adventure, it demands a great deal of ingenuity on his part so that he can manipulate his employers to gain materially and psychologically from the encounter. There is in addition the quest in the outer story involving John and Annie. In actual fact, they are seeking primarily for Annie's health, and secondarily for wealth, as John's business acumen is commendable. Through their spirit of adventure, uprooting themselves from the North to settle in the South, they obtain psychological as well as physical well-being for the wife.

But her association with the lowly is occasionally strained by her objections to the lack of veracity in one or other of Julius' tales. Her objections and those of her husband signify that they are not really initiated. Julius counters them with the philosophical statement on appearance and reality and the nature of truth. He succinctly puts it thus: "F' instance, dey's a young nigger gwine to school in town, en he come out heah de yuther day en 'lowed dat de sun

stood still en de yeath turnt roun' eve'y day on a kinder axletree. I tol' dat young nigger ef he didn take hisse'f 'way wid dem lies, I'd take a buggy-trace ter 'im; fer I sees de yeath stan'in' still all de time, en I sees de sun gwine roun' it, en ef a man can't b'lieve w'at 'e sees, I can't see no use in libbing . . ." (*CW,* p. 128). Significantly, the pervading spirit of mysticism which is akin to that in Tutuola's novel is as real for the black man as those fantastic forces explained away scientifically are real to the Western mind. But the animistic spirit cannot be lightly dismissed for its subjectivity; it is merely in the realm of the unknown at the present time.

If what distinguishes *Feather Woman of the Jungle* is the speaking voice with its African broken English, the African voice is recognizable too in *Conjure Woman* with Chesnutt's version of Black dialect offset by the standard though stilted usage of the outer narrator. Commenting on the voice, Britt observes that "Dialect — always quaint and humorous to the outsider — prevents the white narrator from taking Julius seriously. And operating safely behind this language buffer, Julius is able to work on John with a considerable degree of impunity."[16] Uncle Julius plays the role of Brer Rabbit in the folk imagination. He uses the magic of the spoken word and his native cunning to make headway in spite of difficult situations. We must remember that Brer Rabbit is a metamorphosed descendant of the African Tortoise of folk tale repute, replete with his wiliness and his determination to survive. Therefore Julius' role as well as Tutuola's protagonist's role are typical of the traditional African folk hero determined to emerge triumphant against all odds. The position of Julius (or the black man) vis-à-vis the hostile white populace, or that of man poised against the vicissitudes of life, as in the case of Tutuola's protagonist, is akin to that of the embattled hero in the folk imagination. The joy to man is that the hero emerges at the end victorious, making his life worth emulating.

As in African folk tales, the "good" and the perservering are rewarded while the bad are punished. In the two novels under consideration, the outer plot is cleverly linked with the inner plot through many reverberations. Consequently, for his fearlessness as a young man in the inner story, Tutuola's hero is rewarded by making material gains and realizing his ambitions in his quest. His career culminates in his inheritance of his village as a kingdom. Again as reward for his skill as a story teller, his reputation spreads to other kingdoms simultaneously with his consolidation of power at home. The evil-doers are appropriately punished with death in the instances of the Feather Woman and the treacherous Queen in the Bush of Quietness.

Chesnutt follows a similar pattern in spite of the intricacy in his plot. The greedy exploiting slave master is punished for misusing a fellow human being, as depicted in "The Goophered Grapevine" where Mars Dugal eventually loses his slave Henry, who had turned out to be a major source of income. For being inconsiderate and inhuman Mars Jeem is translated into a slave in order to effect a reform. John and Annie are their inheritors racially, materially, and, to some extent, spiritually. Since they are more accommodating than their forebears, John is rewarded with material wealth, Annie with better health. The maltreated slave is finally vindicated in the figure of the enviable Julius. He performs a coup de maître by becoming the master of his masters, as I already have indicated, and by acquiring or exploiting some of the master's wealth.

The African mode of story telling is flexible. *The Conjure Woman* and *Feather Woman of the Jungle* can be considered as series of short stories or as sustained works in the folk novel genre. But what happens to our appreciation of these stories meant to have been heard but instead read? Reading with the possibility of rereading makes us more critical; it makes the stories sound like larger-than-life fictions. Fortunately the novel is flexible enough to accommodate diverse materials; we can therefore consider the two novels

as unconscious experimentations, as African contributions to the evolving genre of the novel. The strength of these works is in the African element which imbues the raconteur with an inscrutable power that is not completely submerged by European influence; this power gives the raconteur a hypnotic force so that he can control his audience with his juju, his goopher, the power of the word. For, in the final analysis, it is the strangeness of Tutuola's English and the quaintness of Chesnutt's Black dialect which distinguish their respective novels, and which emphasise their oral quality, their Africanness.

NOTES

[1]Amos Tutuola, *Feather Woman of the Jungle* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1962), p. 90. All subsequent references will be made parenthetically after quotation with the title abbreviated to *FW*.

[2]Robert E. McDowell, "Three Nigerian Storytellers: Okara, Tutuola, and Ekwensi," *Ball State University Forum*, 10, No. 3 (Summer 1969), 72.

[3]Robert P. Armstrong, "The Narrative and Intensive Continuity: *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*," *Research in African Literatures*, 1, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 18.

[4]David D. Britt, "Chesnutt's Conjure Tales: What You See Is What You Get," *CLA Journal*, 15, No. 3 (March 1972), 282.

[5]James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1961), p. 32.

[6]Bernth Lindfors, *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 65-67.

[7]For the plantation tales as a genre see Robert M. Farnsworth's Introduction to Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), pp. v ff. All subsequent references to the novel will be made parenthetically after quotation with the title abbreviated to *CW*.

[8]For an interpretation of *The Conjure Woman* as a folk novel, see Melvin Dixon's "The Teller as Folk Trickster in Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*," *CLA Journal*, 18, No. 2 (December 1974), 186-197. Dixon comments: "Chesnutt, by compiling these tales into a single volume, has consciously created a folk novel that describes a series of adventures of equal importance. Thus, there is no single climax or denouement" (p. 186). The same can be said of Tutuola's *Feather Woman*, where an ambitious young man seeking for wealth and experience obtains these after many adventures.

[9]This is the Yoruba equivalent for a male conjurer. Tutuola's ethnic group is Yoruba.

[10]Dixon, p. 187.

[11]Ibid., p. 191.

[12]Farnsworth, p. XVII.

[13]Dixon, pp. 193 ff.

[14]The phrase is currently used perjoratively to refer to a wicked woman. It is instructive to note that in common usage, there is no "baba aje" or "father witch." The "iya aje" is usually a woman past child-bearing age. She has two traits ascribed to her — on the one hand, she is cruel and vindictive, employing her juju to punish her enemies, while, on the other hand, she is maternal, employing her supernatural powers to protect her favorites. We have the phrase "baba alawo" standing for "father of the cults", a highly revered medicine man or juju maker whose products could be used for vindictive, preventive, or curative purposes. Significantly, there is no phrase such as "iya alawo." The "iya aje" is reputed to possess supernatural powers that are invisible and invincible; the "baba alawo" is a more visible force, formidable by reputation. Chesnutt seems to have developed his Aun' Peggy by emphasizing the benign aspects of the "iya aje" and ignoring the vindictive. His powerful conjure men are akin to the "baba alawo" with emphasis on the vindictive aspects.

[15]Sherryl Takacs, "Oral Tradition in the Works of A. Tutuola," *Books Abroad,* 44, No. 3 (Summer 1970), 392.

[16]Britt, p. 274.