

*Discourse Styles and Forms
in New Literatures in English:
A Reading of Wole Soyinka's "Idanre"*

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A FEATURE OF HUMAN communication, particularly in the modern world, is the refusal of peoples to adhere to norms previously held as absolute. Evident within a single cultural paradigm in which there are shifting conceptualizations of race, class, gender, and literacy, this phenomenon of variability is even more noticeable in cross-cultural communication. Recent systematic studies into the communicative use of language in different social and cultural contexts have provided the analytical equipment needed to cope with this phenomenon. Research in the area of sociolinguistics and in the "ethnography of communication" (Gumperz and Hymes) have broadened the scope of linguistic enquiry into the inter-relationship of language and social context. These studies are characterized by an increasing awareness of the pragmatics of communication in non-European and non-English contexts. In the field of literary theory, earlier critical practices based on the study of text-in-isolation have given way to structuralism and post-structuralism, which have produced a steady movement away from Anglo-American literature to the literatures of other cultures. Deconstruction has accelerated this movement for deconstructive readings pose challenges to established "canonical" texts and point to other modes of expression and interpretation.

These studies have served to underscore that literature written in English in former colonies differs substantially from mainstream English literature (Kachru, *Other Tongue* 325-50). What accounts for the difference is that not only is this literature set within the context of different social and cultural forms of interaction but

that such a context enters into the discourse of the literary text at various levels of linguistic structure, from the smallest items, like the use of certain pronouns, to larger inter-sentential chunks with their own system of cohesive links. This means that the language of these texts has to be analyzed not just as structures of sentences and lexical items, but as discourse, which states or implies certain kinds of participant roles and relationships indicative of a particular framework of belief(s) and particular forms of social interaction. However, even now, extensive linguistic and structural analysis of this literature has not been carried out, and approaches towards a discourse understanding of this literature are not common.

My purpose here is to explore how some recent insights in pragmatics and discourse help us in the study of new literatures in English or "Contact Literature" as some have termed it (Kachru, *Alchemy* 159-61). The rationale for undertaking a discourse-oriented study of this literature is two-fold.

First, it helps us to understand and interpret the text more completely — which means not simply its broad themes and structures but its subtler and more complex links and inter-relationships with its context. The latter includes the historical context of a post-colonial age, the changing cultural beliefs and modes of behaviour, and the dynamics of interaction between the individual and society in such a culture: how the text is affected by the situationality of its production and reception within a particular context, what is its significance in the culture in which it is produced, and how it carries forth and embodies cultural norms and perceptions. But even as we try to understand this, we find that the "situationality" of the text also means that it may not simply reflect cultural norms but may attempt to subvert such norms even while seeming to adhere to them. The last is all the more important because in literature there is seldom a straightforward transportation of culturally and socially ordained linguistic practices and discourse styles. In fact, they are transmuted in many and complex ways by the creation of a new textual situation.

Second, a study of discourse enables us to consider the situationality of the text not only in terms of a specific culture, but also how it is received by *other* cultures. What is the basis on which

certain writers are "received" by more readers in diverse cultures and why is it that writers like Soyinka, for instance, have been accorded world-wide recognition, while his compatriot Nigerian poet Okigbo is still relatively unknown? By what criterion do we judge literature written in English in a non-English culture? Is it by the norms of the English literary tradition or the extent to which the writer follows the norms of his own culture? If the latter consideration is important, then would it be true that any writer who follows indigenous cultural and literary norms is a "good" writer simply because he or she may appeal to a Western reader's sense of the "exotic"? Or is a deeper exploration of cross-cultural significances more commendable for writers who do after all appeal to an international audience?

If we can answer some of these questions, we may be able to "place" new English literatures in relation to literary tradition and literary influence, and address issues such as the relation of this literature to "mainstream" English and American literature, the forms of influence, and the new modes of combination and expression that have been brought into being. These are the questions that a study of discourse styles in the new English literatures can hope to answer. Although it is obvious that all of them cannot be answered here, I try to explain what discourse styles are by incorporating this term into what can be called a "contextual approach" to literature, and apply it briefly to a text — Wole Soyinka's *Idanre*.

A contextual approach is based on the fundamental assumption that all discourse is contextualized within a framework of culture and history. Therefore, literature is social discourse (Fowler). As such, it must be taken as a working out of social and cultural perceptions and modes of communication in many different ways. The parallel assumption to this is that the working out is done mainly through language; therefore, the social orientation of the discourse is to be found in the language of that discourse. Once we accept these linked assumptions, we can mobilize the apparatus of recent research in pragmatics and discourse analysis to study the kind of discourse that is built up in a literary text. In it, sentence forms and lexical items are set within a total "context of utterance" (van Dijk 49; Pratt 152), which includes speaker, hearer, and

situation. The structural-lexical and cohesive forms provide the basis for specifications or implications of speaker-hearer roles and relationships. A contextual approach thus involves first and foremost an understanding of the operation of linguistic features at various levels of organization and their inter-linking, which forms the unique "textuality" of a piece of writing. (This is by no means a simple and straightforward catalogue of prominent items. It is complicated by the reader or analyst himself or herself never being completely objective. Culturally prescribed modes of reading will affect the perception and analysis of the linguistic features, as is discussed below). We can, by such an analysis, get some idea of the "style" or "styles" in the text being analyzed. By "style," therefore, we mean the linguistic features selected from a wide range of possible options that enter into combinations with one another and build up a textual structure. This structure constitutes the *textual* context within which the individual features are specifically functional in that they embody the particular meanings and relationships that constitute the "semiotic" of the text. Thus "style" incorporates meaning — that is, it necessarily includes a particular ideological orientation towards reality and a point of view.

This point of view may or may not be in conformity with the dominant world-view of a writer's culture and age. It must, however, be recognized that to some extent cultural patterns are reflected in a writer's style even if the writer wishes not to do so overtly, since by virtue of use of language itself, the writer is employing culturally and historically recognized forms of expression (Brown and Gilman 252-82). A tension is thus built into any use of language in literature. This is why even so-called "protest" literature — or conversely, conformist literature — may have underlying complexities beneath the overall statement that the writer intends to make.

In this context, the new literatures in English present a specially problematic case. Here the language of the writer (in this case, English) may not be the language of the community and culture. Or a "nativized" form of English is used, which carries its own load of semiotic significance. In either case, there is some kind of gap or fissure between the actual experience of the community and the transmutation of it into a literary text in English. To transcend

this gap, writers evolve styles which may be deviant from the native English speaker's point of view. The notion of "deviation," however, implies "norm" or "standard," and this idea is under attack both in the sociolinguistic work cited above and in the work of critics like Edward Said. Perhaps it may be better to use the term "difference." At any rate, the "new" English used by postcolonial writers sets up a system of opposition to the existent system and asks to be understood with reference to a specific cultural semiotic. At the same time, the opposition or fissure alerts the reader to certain gaps in the text itself, necessitating the deployment of some strategies that would enable the effective contextualizing of features in the text as per their textual existence. At this point, we can consider the larger unit of the text as a whole, as a "form" of discourse, to discover what forms of interaction, and therefore of meaning, are spelled out by the participant and character roles, dialogues, and narrative structures. We can understand the operation of discourse "forms" from two viewpoints. One is that of the strategies employed by readers — the subject of current research in the theory of reading and discourse-processing by such theorists as G. Dillon and C. Alderson—that is, the activation of pre-existent knowledge in the structured form of "frames" and "schemas." These enable the reader to comprehend texts which may seem obscure or unintelligible in isolated segments. The same can be understood from the writer's viewpoint. In constructing a text, he or she takes the help of some pre-existent structure or form, which others have used before, and exploits that for his or her own purpose. Forms can be explained as over-arching structures within which textual structures are placed and understood. Thus, literary discourse takes place within a recognized "form of interaction" which acts like a genetic code, carrying with it specifications of style, of writer-reader relationships, of narrative structure, of expectations and response (Hirsch). "Forms" correspond to "genres" except that "forms" can be seen as being more comprehensive and inclusive than "genres" — for while the latter implies some kind of rigid classification, "forms" are flexible and can consist of mixed "genres." Writers use a knowledge of forms to construct significance and readers use a similar knowledge to grasp and interpret it (Verdaasdonk 87-104).

The postcolonial writer struggles with forms that are recognized by the literary tradition of the colonizing country (from which he or she has borrowed language) and the forms recognized by the indigenous literary traditions. For instance, even if he or she has to express a protest against the colonizer, he or she often has to use along with the language of the colonizer, the recognized forms of the colonizer's literary culture, to make the protest intelligible. In addition, at this stage of postcolonial history, we find that the influences operating on a postcolonial writer are much more diverse than those stemming from a one-to-one relationship with the colonizer. The intense monogamous relationship has given way to a spreading out of susceptibilities — the writer draws from diverse sources not only from other cultures, but from sub-streams and parallel traditions within the indigenous culture. The resultant forms that are created become the basis for the making of a new tradition, even as they include pan-cultural elements, commonly recognized in many cultures. This has several implications, some of which will be discussed later.

The problems regarding interpretation and reception of this literature can be explored in terms of both "styles" and "forms," as these are two interlinked levels of a discourse. It is within the "forms" that the styles employed are understood. Postcolonial texts use a particular style and language and in order to understand why this has been used, a more global kind of knowledge, that of "forms," has to be activated. Conversely, certain elements of style may give us vital clues regarding the forms being deployed, and help us to locate the specific genre(s) to which the text adheres. The paradox here is that specificities of context can, in some cases, be understood better if we take a broader, global view of a text, though in analysis, one may move either way — from macro-level to micro-level, or vice versa.

The following analysis begins with a consideration of discourse styles and forms in a particular text, illustrating the approach I have outlined. This analysis recognizes that a text needs to be studied in the context of its own culture, and to do so, the analyst must resist impositions of the kind that "Orientalists" place on the literature of the East/Third World (Said 82). That is, outside judgements of such literature should be made with care. However,

to ignore the interpretations that an outsider may make is to ignore an important source of information about the text. An outsider's interpretation may be largely wrong, but there may be an element of truth in it that might bring about a greater self-awareness and re-examination. Which is to say, the new literatures in English need to be studied in relation to their cultures but not in relation to their cultures *alone*; one has to look beyond cultural factors even while taking cognizance of them. In the process of analyzing a poem by an African writer, I have found that there are many things that I as a non-African do not and perhaps cannot understand, but there are many things about Yoruba culture that I have managed to discover. Reading about a "strange" culture, I have taken less for granted and made more efforts to read across the text to discover links and significances. As an "outside" reader, my understanding of the poem (and that of other critics and readers) though incomplete, adds to the being and reception of the poem, and possesses its own validity. And while I have sometimes asked for clarification from native Yoruba informants about some parts of the poem, I have found that on occasion, they too were confused and could offer no definitive answers. At that time, we had to go back to the text and by collaborative reading arrive at possible and acceptable interpretations.

Soyinka's poem concerns a journey to the foothills of Idanre where the Yoruba god Ogun is believed to dwell. This journey, undertaken by the narrator-protagonist in the poem, moves parallel to the myth of the god himself, who undertook a similar journey in penance for his acts of misjudgement in war. At the same time, the poem is set in the context of the Nigerian civil war. Soyinka writes in the preface: "In the human context of my society, *Idanre* has made abundant sense . . . the bloody origin of Ogun's pilgrimage has been, in true cyclical manner, most bloodily re-enacted" (58).

Idanre has seven sections. Each is interlaced with descriptions of the origin of the world according to Yoruba cosmology, with accounts of the heroic deeds of the god Ogun and of a journey made by the narrator-protagonist to Idanre hills. These several threads of narrative are pursued in a non-linear manner through complex sentences which are rich in descriptive detail but often

ambiguously constructed. Thus while we get to know about the myth of Ogun and other Yoruba gods, we are at the same time lead along mystifying paths, owing to sentence complexity, ambiguity, and the absence of inter-sentential links. However, in some sections, Soyinka exploits the epic and narrative tradition of African oral literature. These choices have an impact on the organization of the whole poem, creating a certain kind of textual unity and coherence. By this means, they succeed in bringing the text's particular orientation towards its culture to the forefront. The narration is interspersed by lines eulogizing the god Ogun in the manner of a Yoruba praise poem, as in, for example, Section IV:

Ogun is a demanding god ... (64)
 Ogun is the god that ventures first ... (68)
 Ogun is the lascivious god ... (72)

The structure of these sentences is declarative and assertive of known truths as well as being descriptive in function. In this, it is similar to the English translations of Yoruba poetry made by Ulli Beier:

Ogun kills on the right and destroys on the right
 Ogun kills on the left and destroys on the left
 Ogun kills suddenly in the house and suddenly in the field.
 Ogun kills the child with the iron with which it plays.
 Ogun kills in silence. (17)

The repetitiveness and rhythmicity here is echoed also in the italicized stanzas in Section V of the poem:

Who speaks to me in chance recesses
 Who guides the finger's eye ...
 Who speaks to me I cannot tell
 Who guides the hammer's flight

Such repetition and refrain are a feature of Yoruba praise poetry, a similarity signifying that the lines may be seen as representing part of a choric chant, or "ijala," sung by hunters and followers of Ogun. But the repetition of "who" is especially significant here. The use of "who" at the head of a sentence is normally found in interrogative structures, but here there are no question marks. Moreover, the lines occur midway between an account of

Ogun's exploits. These facts suggest that the sentences are perhaps not intended to be questions at all. "Who" can be understood as referring to none but Ogun himself, as it is another way of saying: "None but he. . . ." The "finger's eye" and "the hammer's flight" are terms associated with the marksman and hunter (the hammer is made of iron, Ogun's element), so it clearly refers to "He, who. . . ." The phrases "in chance recesses" and "I cannot tell" in different ways enhance the mysteriousness of the god's actions and the difficulty of divining them (divination being a secret and an art in itself). Embedded in a descriptive matrix where Ogun's nature and actions are detailed, these lines serve to emphasize Ogun's character and role. Repetition foregrounds them and serves to draw a parallel with oral poetry.

The quotations also illustrate the ambiguous communicative intent of certain sentence forms used in the poem. For instance, sentences framed in an interrogative structure do not seem to have the force of questioning. They seem to be more in the nature of rhetorical questions, containing an emphatic reassertion of belief, such as:

What mortal
Brands a platter with an awesome name,
Or feeds him morsels choice without
Gauntlets of iron

The structure of this sentence is that of a question, containing a "wh- element" at the head. Yet we cannot possibly take it to be a "real" question, since the answer to it can be nothing else but "No mortal can dare . . ." ("Him" here is Ogun). Thus, instead of being a question, the sentence is an assertion of the Yoruba belief in the power of Ogun. Questions of a similar type are reiterated throughout the poem.

Hyperbolic description and invocation to the god is yet another convention carried over from the oral tradition, where exclamatory invocations, injunctions, and exhortations are ways of expressing a direct relationship with the gods, as in another Yoruba poem:

Ogun, don't fight against me
Ogun, don't ask me anything
Ogun, do not reject me

In *Idanre* too, the god is addressed directly:
 Your men, Ogun! Your men!
 Lust-blind god, gore-drunk Hunter
 Monster deity, you destroy your men! (Beier 23)

There is also the use of archaic forms of salute, such as "all hail" (83), which is not archaic in the Yoruba oral tradition as it is in contemporary English. On the lexical level, Soyinka makes extensive use of archaisms, such as "emissaries," "boon," "sought," "flee," "bide you," and "behold." Though obsolete in contemporary English literature, some of these are traditionally found in earlier poetry. In Soyinka's poem, they have a defamiliarizing function because we do not expect such usage in modern poetry. They are used in the specific context of a narrative about Yoruba myth. As Macebuh notes: "This may be a way of imparting newness and of translating the cultic, masonic language of Yoruba poetry into English" (211-12). As the choice of archaisms within a new poetic context reinforces the thematic focus of the poem, which is that of making the past a part of the present and informing it with life and relevance, this particular use of language actualizes what the poem says. Other kinds of usage in the poem reflect the communicative idiom of Nigerian English, particularly the use of noun compounds, for example, "two-cowrie" (meaning "worthless"), "monster-child" (reference to a mythical character), and composite nouns such as "Lord-of-all-witches" and "he-who-goes-fore-where-other-gods-have-turned." Naming by the use of such forms becomes a figurative device, condensing much meaning into a single word. But while there is use of archaic vocabulary, contrasting with it is the vocabulary of science. In the poem, lexical items belonging to a scientific frame of reference, for example, "power pylons," "electric coil," "atomised," "alloy," and "protoplasmic," are used to describe the Yoruba myth of creation, of "metagenesis." This reflects, as J. P. Clark (7) has observed, a mingling of modern scientific idiom with a Yoruba way of thinking, such as a tall man being described as an electric pole. For a myth to be described in such a mingling of the archaic and contemporary is unusual and startling in English poetry.

The text further makes explicit its bearings towards its cultural context by extensive and varied use of allusions. The use of names

and attributes, such as "he-who-scrapes-no-earthdung-from-his-feet" and "the axe-handed one," refer explicitly to certain mythological figures. Another kind of reference is found in the poem, that to beliefs and community knowledge, in the form of echoes of Yoruba proverbs, such as:

We do not burn the woods to trap
a squirrel, we do not ask the mountain's
Aid to crack a walnut. (73)

Statements like these function as epigrammatic or gnomic utterances; that is, they encapsulate known truths in a complete and categoric sentence form. The function of these proverbs, which can be seen as quotations not from texts but from oral folk culture, is to comment on the foregoing action or narration, as if to prove or clinch the point. Here too, the recognition of the sentence form, the use of semantic oppositions ("wood-mountain" contrasted with "squirrel-walnut," signifying the contrast between "large" and "tiny") and their positioning in the text provides clues to the reader that this is a proverb or a folk saying. Thus, not only is there an elaborate framework of repeated references to the Yoruba gods and Yoruba cosmology, but the use of proverbs and of passages similar to Yoruba praise poetry provide the means by which the poet *alludes* to the context of his own culture.

At the same time, the allusions are part of the text of the poem, so they are simultaneously placed in a new context of poetic utterance within which they are to be interpreted. Not only does the poem allude to a particular culture, but it adds a new textual significance to each allusion. Even if one does not know much about the myth, or the Yoruba gods, one understands a great deal about them from the system of references and cross-references in the text and the lists or attributes and appositive noun phrases elaborate the description. The outside reader finds these allusions intriguing and tries to find their significance in the texts as well as refer to their extra-textual cultural background. The reader within Yoruba culture experiences the pleasure of recognizing something familiar; but even such a reader finds that the allusions are being used somewhat differently and he or she must ascertain their relevance in the context of the poem. Besides such overt stylistic features, there are

implications generated by ellipsis, breaks, and irregularities in the discourse, which indicate that a reader may be able to fill in the gaps both by drawing on cultural knowledge and by closer reading of the text.

In the discourse of the poem, though there are rhetorical questions assertive of known beliefs, actual questions also occur at the end of the poem. These questions are addressed to the god Ogun and are dramatic, whereby the persona implies that he is not only an observer but is involved in the action on an actual and emotive level. The protagonist asks the god:

Shield of orphans, was your shield
In-spiked that day on sheltering lives?

There is no answer to this and other questions, and the force of the question is that of a reproach to the god who could not protect his own men. Such direct questions highlight the relationship between the persona and the god, as the persona shows he is close enough to the god to reproach him, and imply doubts that undercut the beliefs and eulogies embodied in the assertions and rhetorical questions.

Through the speech act of questioning, the poet builds up a discursive style that alternates between assertion of known beliefs and a critical evaluation of the same. This is further strengthened by alternation in pronominal usage between the first person pronouns “we” and “our” on one hand and “I” and “my” on the other. These signal separate discourse roles enacted by the persona in the same poem. Two voices are implied — one that of a personal self and the other of a community of knowledge and belief. One is that of the representative of the community of believers in the myth. Addressees are implicated in the specific use of “you” (as in the example above): the god is frequently addressed in this way by the protagonist, thus dramatizing the relationship between the protagonist and the god. “We” is used when reference is being made to proverbs, to community activities, such as worship and celebration of harvest. At the other pole within this discourse is the “I,” emphasizing the role of the individual in the present, able to distance himself or herself from the myth, to examine it and to reinterpret it for himself or herself and for others.

By analyzing the textual context in this way, we may appreciate how closely the poem is bound to its external context, in other words, the relation between the text and the social and cultural context in which it is situated. However, the analysis also reveals that the text has other kinds of situationality. It is located within the "possible world" of a consciously constructed piece of discourse, whose personae contribute to establishing a unique and individual frame of reference. Within the textual framework, there is the context that is taken from a recognized world view (such as the Yoruba cosmology described in *Idanre*) and the context established by the persona who expresses a different point of view. Shifts and tensions occur between these contexts. These reflect two tendencies that pull in different directions with resulting complexities. One is the tendency to establish and affirm links with the cultural context through reference and implication. The other is the tendency towards expression of the deviant viewpoint of a personally modulated vision, reflecting the realization and affirmation of individuality. The actualization of the former often takes place through the expression of the latter. That is why it is difficult in some cases to pinpoint exactly how a poem reflects its cultural context. In Soyinka's case, we find evidence of an extensive use of traditional forms that might be taken as reflections of prevailing traditions in Yoruba culture. Yet this clearly does not mean that *Idanre* is a traditional poem or a translation of a Yoruba praise poem into English. Though the traditional devices of such poetry, for instance, repetition, refrain, hyperbole, and invocation, are being followed, there are other sections that do not follow this pattern — in fact, they set up an ironic counter pattern by deviating from the epic style. Thus Soyinka is reflecting the world-view of his own culture, but also subverting, first, by the use of English whose very sentence-structure and semantics set up an opposition to Yoruba forms (as illustrated above in the analysis of questions); second, by creating a new textual context that effects distancing and subjects the cultural forms to a critical reading.

But — and this is crucial — *Idanre* also gestures outwards, towards other cultures and ways of knowing and believing. There are allusions to Christ and to Greek myths. In Ogun's declaration "I will build a path to man" and his bringing of iron to man, there

is the same impulse to link the divine and human found in the myth of Prometheus. In the figure of Atunda, the revolutionary defiant of the chief deity, another similarity is suggested between the Yoruba god and Prometheus (and perhaps even Satan). An Indian reader would perhaps see the creative and destructive aspects of Ogun as resembling those of the god Shiva. Further, the impulse that takes a poet forward to express his own cultural beliefs also impels him to subvert some of these beliefs and discover new modes of affirmation. The later sections of the poem are bold affirmations of an individuality that refuses to be dominated even by its own culture, expressed in sentences that are firmly declarative: "I shall remain in knowledge of myself ..." (82). Quite prominent are the modality of "shall," the dominance of "I" and "myself." We cannot escape the conclusion that these sentences force upon us: the Ogun myth is being used to demonstrate that a culture — and an individual — evolves through the recognition of the tyranny of its — or his or her — own past (expressed in the image of the self-devouring snake). All the allusions to the Ogun myth are ultimately bent to the purpose of subverting the myth, in favour of the thinking, aware individual at the centre of history. This is the one who, by taking up the challenge of the historical moment, discovers the evolutionary "kink" which will take the individual and society to a higher stage (as shown in Soyinka's essay "The Fourth Stage" and also the working of a similar theme in his play *A Dance of the Forests*). Soyinka is dealing with what comes of his experience as an African and, more specifically, as a Yoruba in post-independent Nigeria, not in isolation but in larger perspective, where an individual aligns himself vis-à-vis his own culture and past, and that of the world in which he has a historical existence. What Soyinka is doing with the African experience is to reorganize it, to conceptualize it differently, and to put it in a discourse framework and context which illuminate it, thus imagining transformations and mutations even in that which is known and deeply familiar. This is an insight which the poem holds as valid for all cultures, Eastern and Western, even as it stems from an African world-view and cosmology. From the latter, we recognize that *Idanre* is distinctively and prominently Yoruba and that the Ogun myth is the centre

around which the discourse evolves, though Soyinka undercuts and subverts it towards the end of the poem.

The myth provides the overarching "form" within which the exploration of other modes takes place. It contains elements from the epic, narrative, and dramatic genres. Within this dominant form, many different discourse styles and modes of expression are employed. While the form provides a familiar framework for understanding by a cross-cultural readership, the styles subsumed in this form are divergent and some have a particular reference to the poet's own culture. The latter may not be understood at first by a reader outside Yoruba culture. But with the recognition of such familiar features as those of the epic, the reader is able to contextualize the features of the alien culture within his or her own frame of understanding. Therefore the paradox is resolved: when a reader ceases to look at the text as something alien or "exotic" and sees in it a pan-cultural appeal, it suddenly begins to make sense. The readers from within the poet's culture (by virtue of their cultural knowledge) as well as readers from outside it (by virtue of their close reading of the text) both contribute to the reception and understanding of the poem. Cultural dichotomies are broken down in the evolution of the forms that integrate cultures and readers.

Though this experimentation with form in *Idanre* may be significant in terms of establishing a new tradition in the field of post-colonial discourse, Soyinka's poem is not the only experiment of its kind in the emergent literature. Many poets in several formerly colonized regions have written "long poems," often narrative in structure, but always overwhelmingly dialogic and exploratory in intent. Okigbo's *Labyrinths* is also based on a religious quest or pilgrimage by a protagonist who is engulfed in these myths and yet outside them, probing with agonized ambivalence, the value of the myths for the individual self. The same ambivalence is to be found in the long reflective poem *Relationship* by Jayanta Mahapatra from India, but sharpened with a greater sense of doubt and distancing from the myth. In Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (also from India), the doubt has crystallized into outright disbelief and ironic irreverence. Like the African poets, the Indian poets focus on one image that stands as a totem of the past — a temple or a myth — and

explores its significance in the present. However, Ghana's Okot p'Bitek takes a different tack and builds up in two long poems, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, a dramatized dialogue of two cultures.

The dominance of the long poem whether epic, narrative, dramatic, or reflective or a combination of all these, is not a coincidence. It can be seen as the choice of a recognizable form that can carry the weight of the complexity of the post-colonial writer's experience. Even more than the novel, it is a universal form, having roots in the diverse cultural climates of many lands. It is recognized cross-culturally and recurrent in various ages. It is the first literary form to emerge in the indigenous cultures, whether oral or written, of Greece, Africa, India, or England. In the twentieth century, poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound have used this form to encapsulate widely divergent experiences, ages, literary traditions, and cultures. If we look for a *common* form in new writings in English that deal with the problem of cultural identification and renewal, then the long poem based on the quest motif is one such form. The choice of this form by so many different writers is itself a comment on the affinities that such writing shares with the native traditions of the several cultures on which it draws. It provides a considerable degree of freedom for transferring and blending various styles from the different traditions that these poets wish to refer to — the myths, stories, and legends from their own cultures as well as parallel forms in other cultures. At the same time, this genre provides the poetic context for the exploration and development of a "personal" myth — for the resolution of the individual's predicament vis-à-vis the cultural past, history, and tradition. The dimensions of the quest unfold both on the mythic-historical as well as the personal levels. The long poem appears to be the form that lends itself to the development of these several perspectives within one framework, to give voice to both the continuities and the disharmonies that are inherent in the postcolonial cultures.

This analysis has tried to demonstrate levels of situationality in a literary text. There is a situationality that is culture-bound and specifically historical, a situationality that is textual, and a situationality that is broadly historical in relation to other works at the

same time and age as well as those of the past. Though merely illustrative and not exhaustive, this analysis takes linguistic data available in the text as a starting point and moves outwards towards the development of a perspective in which the text can be "placed" and its various significances can be understood. It suggests some ways of interpreting texts where overlapping and transference of contexts and frames of knowledge occur, such as in the new literatures in English, which reveal specific cultural awareness and conflict while at the same time reaching out to the commonality of human experience in different cultures. The analysis is used with a degree of self-reflexivity. But it is not isolationistic, as it deals with literature and its criticism and readership as a cross-cultural issue, based on an understanding of the increasingly multicultural and multilingual societies of the modern world.

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