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Egwu-onwa: A Convergence of Delightful, Mind-blowing Literary Forms

Ogochukwu Promise

Panel: Genre Lit: Bodice Rippers, Aliens and High Form

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_Egwu-onwa:_
A Convergence of Delightful, Mind-blowing Literary Forms

In this paper, I am going to do a dance called *Egwu-onwa* in the eastern part of Nigeria where I come from. *Egwu-onwa* is a dance by the moonlight. It usually takes place in the village square with different people of various age grades, clans, class, skin pigmentation, background and experiences, all bringing their talents to play. In their words, displays, movements, you find different types of expressions, of forms, sounds, images, use of space, rhythm and cadences. Both individually and collectively, their unique voice, style and message stand out as tools for self-expression, to entertain, inform, probably shock and possibly transform the audience. Some electrify the village square, demand attention, even command series of catharses.

I love *Egwu-onwa* because it holds an assemblage of talents and lends itself very easily to varied techniques and lyrical compositions. Literature reminds me very much of *Egwu-onwa*, where freedom of expression and creativity go across borders, recreating lives, giving meaning even to little things. It enjoys even the freedom to grow wild and be lewd, to titillate—and to be sure to have a literary name for it when it does, like “bodice ripper.”

When I was a kid, the folklore genre spoke to me very sincerely. I remember in the village when we returned home to celebrate Christmas with my grandmother, usually during the harmattan season. She would make us sit round the hearth. The steam from her boiling soup pot would rise up to the rafters, making us perspire and our stomachs rumble. She would tell us a beautiful story. Now when I say *Mbeagaba*, you would kindly respond *Ajambene*. Let me explain what these mean. “Mbeagaba” is the Igbo word for what the mouse does, prompting the cursor to point to things or click on things in the computer. It seeks things out. It’s like saying, “Now I go off again to seek things out.” And “Ajambene” is a resounding cry of solidarity that sort of says, “Click on, mouse, we are with you!” The use of this call and response technique is also very common in folklore narratives in the part of the world I come from. Now shall we practice it?

Call: *Mbeagaba*
Response: *Ajambene*

Once upon a time, the tortoise, having gone on a long journey, returned tired and hungry. He approached a farmer who was harvesting corn on his plantation and asked for some ears of corn. The farmer took pity on him and gave him two ears of
corn. The tortoise thanked him and went away. Upon eating the corn, he realized it was quite delicious. So he decided to go back at night with a basket to steal some more, enough to last him a lifetime. He filled his basket, lifted it to his head and was heading home when a tree fell on him and broke his back. “Just before you die,” the tree said, “Ask yourself, do you repay good with evil? All that corn you stole, whose will it be, now that you are definitely at death’s door?” My grandmother never allowed us to eat and sleep without ensuring that we soaked up the didactic graces of each folktale, which she was certain would help us in our life’s journeys.

Call: Mbecagaba
Response: Ajambene

We arrive at a literary form I find quite interesting, especially because of the controversies it continues to generate: bodice rippers. Before I comment on this genre, it is important to note that it is first and foremost prose, from the novel family. It was, in fact, only very recently labeled bodice rippers. The first reference in print to this form is from *The New York Times*, December 1980, commenting that, “Women too have their pornography: Harlequin romances, novels of ‘sweet savagery,’ – bodice-rippers.” This genre often has as themes forced seduction, rape, abuse, unwilling but sizzling sex that leaves especially the woman breathless, yet longing for more. You have such bodice ripper titles as *The Very Virile Viking* by Sandra Hill, *Passions of the Ghost* by Sara Mackenzie, *In Heat: Mating Call* by Felicity Heaten, and more.

Many critics have argued that this genre puts women down, presenting them mainly as sex objects. But others have seen it as a pointer to women’s rediscovery of their sexual prowess. The line that is often quoted in aid of this view is this: “It wasn’t rape, it was just surprise sex you didn’t know you wanted.”

I have often wondered what the critics would say about a man who constantly rapes his wife. Does she fall in love with him afterwards? Could she?

Let’s read this excerpt taken from my novel, *Red Lips of the Night*:

He dropped his suitcase on the floor, unzipped his pants and allowed them to drop to his feet. He stepped out of them still wearing his boxers. He regarded her for a while, his face taut. She was asleep. He yanked off the quilt with which she covered herself, pulled off her underwear and made love to her still wearing his boxers. She was after all his wife. Her eyes were tightly shut. Without calling her name, he got up when he was done, picked up his pants from the floor and went to his room, shutting her door gently behind him as though he did not wish to disturb her.
This scene might fill many a woman with revulsion. But this happens in many homes and with many couples who are supposedly happily married. Literature stirs up all manner of things. Whether we regard or disregard them, literature excites us, awakens our conscience, sometimes even offends our sensibilities in order to get our attention, like the provocative waist beads of the maidens dancing the *Egwu-onwa*.

Call: *Mbeagaba*
Response: *Ajambene*

Now we arrive at other prose forms, such as fantasy, which has elements that are not real, in which you have characters with imaginary powers trying to resolve conflicts between good and bad. The mystery genre invariably tells stories with real settings and a problem to be solved. Also, there are the romantic suspense novels that keep us turning the pages in search of reconciliation, triumph of love against misconceptions, and envy; they blend very easily with contemporary realistic fiction set in modern times and presenting very plausible tales that deal with such themes as war, rejection, death, pride, love, and a whole bunch of life’s possibilities.

Stories that blend facts and fiction in the futuristic technology that appears in science fiction can be juxtaposed with historical fiction involving real historical figures and settings and events that took place in a certain time and place. Other genres – crime fiction, thrillers, paranormal romance, time-travel romance, inspirational romance, and multicultural romance – use elements popular in realistic fiction, and their plots may be convoluted or linear as they fundamentally tell stories that may or may not appeal to every reader. For instance, some people find biographies boring no matter the skills of the author, while other readers relish them, taking stories, from past to present, of real persons’ experiences and drawing from them lessons that enrich their own lives. Such readers do the same with informational books, transforming nonfiction books that give true facts on a variety of subjects into useful tools they use in building their lives.

What I see in all of these genres, whether they are fables that illustrate inspiring ideas or adventures that lead to discoveries, or whether they rock the mind with the horrors of aliens, are rich in the gothic and eerie, or they take us through the expositions of the high form of the noble class and their nuances, power and often aching vulnerability, is that these literary genres are not very far removed from one another. While a lot is imagined, a lot is also taken from reality and the possible. In the end, all that goes on in our minds and around us is, I must confess, Literature.