

Gothicism/Ghost Stories in Nigerian Literature: Facts or Fiction? A Comparative Analysis of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Rems Umeasiegbu's *Ghost Stories*

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Abstract

*The English and African novels have different traditions which include Gothicism and ghost lore. These sub-genres of Literature are attracting less attention from scholars due to their peculiarity in delving into such areas like the supernatural, the deserted and haunted buildings, the haunting shadows, the fanciful, the dead among the living, antiquities and other appurtenances that trigger off the feeling of fear and awe. This study examines the aspects of this sub-genre of Literature in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Umeasiegbu's *Ghost Stories*. It identifies that the common factors in these novels under analysis are setting and atmosphere that are predominated by mystery. The study establishes the view that the Igbo of Nigeria have a way of interpreting this mystery of ghosts quite different from the English. The study concludes that Umeasiegbu has championed a new literary sub-genre in Nigerian literature which is not strictly confined to folktale narrative techniques but is purely categorized as ghost lore.*

Horace Walpole's publication of a novel, *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 gave the English reading public a true picture of an ardent antiquarian. As the first genuine gothic novel to be published in English language, *The Castle of Otranto* places more emphasis on the exotic, the fanciful, the

supernatural, the antique and the wondrous especially as regards the aspect of realism by rationalism and by the factual. The novel is more of an innovation to the novel form as poetry was still very strong in England in the neo-classical movement, during the first half of the 18th Century. In the words of Onochie:

There are the same physical gothic attributes as in *The Castle of Otranto*: the solid grandeur of the ancient gothic castle with shadowy galleries, moonlit casements, gorgeous apartments and gloomy subterranean passages, people this castle with the usual middle-aged, brutish, arrogant and domineering feudal lord, along with nervous and talkative but faithful servants and the lovely, highly sensitive maiden, and the setting is as complete as it is unmistakably “gothic”. (31)

In *The Castle of Otranto*, a gigantic hand in armour, a ghost ling figure, a vast helmet and a plume out of proportion with the real life dominates the event which deals with succession to a throne by a usurper by providence through the death of his only son called Conrad. In this tale, Walpole’s aim was to present a gothic villain called Manfred and through the happenings, that is through the use of mystery and the supernatural agency in general, to stir in the reader the feelings of doubt, terror and wonder.

Umeasiegbu in 2006 equally published a collection of sixty short stories under the title of *Ghost stories*. The work is a compendium of sixty stories of the supernatural, the unbelievable, the mysterious and the fantasy from Nigeria. In the words of Umeasiegbu, his work goes under the umbrella of a neglected type of literature sub-genre well neglected in

his fledgling country, Nigeria. This type of short gothic fiction is termed the ghost lore. Umeasiegbu states that:

Ghost lore is a neglected sub-type of literature – oral or written – in Nigeria. Just as many people here do not want to talk about death and dying, many others do not wish to have anything, real or imagined, to do with the dead. The result is that stories about dead people or stories involving dead characters are unpopular. (5)

What Really are the Ghostlores?

Are they to be subjected to the anthropological, psychological, sociological or scientific analysis? Research has however shown that there are both the unwritten (folkloric) ghostlores and the written (literary) ghostlores. Although both categories can be classified under the oral literature, the “literary ghost stories are stories written by creative artists who have intentionally used ghosts in their accounts” (Umeasiegbu 5).

The difference in the area of plots of fully developed novels and short stories notwithstanding, nor the characterization and sometimes narrative techniques and setting, one common feature of both genres of literature, is that they both deal with characters (living or dead).

For Umeasiegbu:

Ghosts are supposedly the “disembodied spirits of dead persons”. In the (ghostlore) stories, the living and the dead interact; sometimes they live together under one roof....Whenever there is a ghost, the temperature of the place drops dramatically or the spectators develop goose flesh. Close associations with ghosts and

intimate relationships with them are not part of the experience (5).

From the foregoing, there seems to be a difference in the ghost stories and the gothic novel, with only one common feature, which is mystery.

Mystery in Walpole's: *The Castle of Otranto* and Umeasiegbu's *Ghost Stories*.

The word 'mystery' has various connotations, ranging from 'secret' to 'fiction'. For the purpose of this study, mystery will be approached from the point of *mystery story*, which according to *Encarta* stands for the:

umbrella term for a type of fiction with several subgenres, such as the detective story, including the police procedural; and the romantic suspense, a derivative of the Gothic novel.

The *Encarta Encyclopedia* further states that, "another type of mystery story is based on events that have never been fully explained."

The Gothic novel is described as a type of romantic fiction that predominated in English literature in the last third of the 18th Century and the first two decades of the 19th Century, the setting for which was usually a ruined Gothic castle or abbey. The Gothic novel, or Gothic romance, emphasized mystery and horror and was filled with ghost – haunted rooms, underground passages, and secret stairways. Apart from Horace Walpole, who championed this tradition, other gothic novelists and novels include Clara Reeve's *The Champion of Virtue* (1777); Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); Mathew Gregory Lewis's *Ambrosio, or the Monk* (1796); Charles Robert Maturin's *The Fatal Revenge*

(1807); and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

While the definition of mystery aptly clears the ground for approaches to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Umeasiegbu's *The Ghost Stories*' type of mystery suited the measuring of "something of which the cause or origin is hidden or impossible to understand." (Hornby 559)

The Ghost stories as tales told by persons distant in place and time can generate lots of curiosity and fantasy. These tales sometime come as rumour either from the peddlers or from the media houses, especially the print media. Many Ghost stories have lasted for ages in different communities as fairy tales or fables, which are later modernized to be accepted by the listening public, before they were published.

The core mysteries in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* have to do with the sudden falling of a vast helmet decorated with black sable plumes from the skies upon the little Prince Conrad, in the court as he prepares to go for his wedding ceremony with Isabella in the early parts of the novel. On sending one of his attendants to summon Conrad who had been missing at the Chapel of the castle on his birthday, when he was arranged to wed Isabella, daughter of Frederic, Manfred was surprised at the sudden sight of the remains of his son:

The first thing that struck Manfred's eyes was a group of his servants endeavoring to raise something that appeared to him a mountain of sable plumes. He gazed without believing his sight. What are you doing? Cried Manfred, wrathfully: Where is my Son? A volley of voices replied, Oh, my Lord! The helmet! Shocked with these lamentable sounds, and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily.

But what a sight for a father's eyes! – He beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers.(16 – 17)

The mysterious death of Conrad at the moment of his supposed wedding raised a number of suspicions and questions. Who really killed the young Prince? Is it the curse on the castle of Otranto that: “the Castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it” or is it the handwork of Manfred on his disabled son, so as to inherit Isabella and procreate successors to the throne? Manfred's nonchalant attitude over the death of his son and his first statement of “Take care of the lady Isabella” (17) gives room for this suspicion. Again the young peasant's observation that the miraculous helmet was exactly like that on the figure in black marble of Alfonso the Good, one of their former Princes, in the Church of St. Nicholas gives way for strong tint that the peasant murdered or knows who murdered the young Prince Conrad. Another pertinent question is where the controversial helmet originated from and who brought it to the castle of Otranto? Other shocking mysteries in the novel have to do with the utterance of a deep sigh and heave of breast by the portrait of Manfred's grandfather hanging on a wall in Otranto, as sighs of disgust over Manfred's concerted efforts to consummate marriage with his late son's betrothed Isabella, after he had divorced his wife, Princess Hippolita who gave birth to Prince Conrad. The picture later moves, leaves its panel and descends on the floor with a grave and melancholy air. Manfred was beckoned to a room by the picture before it disappeared.

The later introduction of the rattling armour and a gigantic leg in a chamber in the gallery makes Walpole's novel a big *jigsaw puzzle* and indeed very frightening to the reader. Was the giant who the servant Diego told his colleague Jaquez that he was lying down real or imagined in the novel?

When Lord Frederic and some Knights were approaching the Castle of Otranto for the possession of the castle, "the sable plumes on the enchanted helmet got tempestuously agitated and nodded three times" (62). Again the three drops of blood that fell from Alfonso the Good's status is an indication that the proposed marriage between Frederic and Mathilda, Manfred's daughter is not in harmony, that the blood of Alfonso will never mix with that of Manfred. The rattling hand in armour which Bianca saw at the uppermost banister of the great stairs, the skeleton wrapped in a hermit's cowl and the eventual disclosure of the peasant 'Theodore' as Friar Jereome's long missing son of the house of Falconara in Sicily – descendant of Alfonso the good, alongside others are all elements of mystery and hallmark of the gothic novel that distinguished, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*.

Umesiegbu's *Ghost Stories* is uniquely designed to convince the reader of the reality of the existence of ghosts in Nigerian societies. Extending to all parts of the Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern and Middle belts of Nigeria, the stories embrace different segments of classes of people in the society. The first short story in the collection is about "the Ghost Law student". The narrator narrates the tale in a third person omniscient point of view. With its one page story narrative, the first story tells of a character Obby who was a law student in a Nigerian University. An Igala by ethnic tribe but answering Igbo name, Obby's character was queer and so she stays alone in her room. The visit of a woman who came

to the university where Obby studied to look for her niece, eventually took the woman by accident to room 205 where she accidentally met Obby, the daughter of her friend in Lagos, who died about eight years ago after taking her Joint Admissions and Matriculations Examinations Board (JAMB) and falling ill. Through the woman who said she came to visit her sister's daughter, the panic stricken students learnt that Obby was interested in reading law before death took her away.

Further affirmation by a student who had earlier discovered that Obby was a strange being, while using her mirror, made all the students to vacate the floor of the hostel where the ghost student lived. The daring students however returned to the floor after one semester had passed, but nobody ever returned to the room where the ghost girl lived. The woman was taken for treatment and discharged in a hospital.

As a short story, the motif in the story above may be a warning against queer character, especially those exhibited by some girls and equally being careful of befriending strangers who one does not know their background.

Other three succeeding stories have to do with the medical profession and the experiences of the practitioner; the topics include "The Dead Man Who came to Show Himself to Friends", "The Ghost that Emerged from the Ground", and "The Ghost by the Mortuary".

Ranging from secondary school students paranoid experience of the ghosts to the motorcycle riders', the bus drivers, petty traders, villagers, lorry drivers, groundnut sellers, students at different levels of tertiary institutions, nurses, lovers, civil servants, the palm wine tappers, widows, job applicants, fornicators, landlords, house helps, international marriage partners, children, vulcanizers, deserted houses that are haunted, dead spouses, barbers, to

the transmigration of animals like python into human being (especially ladies), the *Ghost Stories* is suggestive that there are some elements of mystery resulting from the supernatural world of existence.

An analysis of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Umeasiegbu's *Ghost Stories* therefore show that while Walpole tells one complete story that occupies a reasonable length and time, Umeasiegbu's work is a collection of short stories (folktales) told by different persons on different topics and in different occasions.

While Walpole's novel is more of an imaginative work of arts, Umeasiegbu's work has more to do with people's belief system and way of life. Anything to the contrary will nullify the concept of Umeasiegbu's collected data (folklore). While Umeasiegbu's stories are communally owned and could form an ethnographic study of the Nigerian people, Walpole's novel is an individual creation, answering to a fashion in a period in history of the English people.

While there are different motifs in Umeasiegbu's *Ghost stories*, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* has a mechanical plot and perhaps a primitive characterization very usual of the antiquarians.

In the overall analysis, Walpole belongs to a different culture where people's belief in the mysteries is more or less full of gothic appurtenances, while Umeasiegbu belongs to a different culture where people's belief in mystery is rooted in religion, ancestors, spirits or ghosts, transmigration and reincarnation.

Conclusion

There is a clear-cut distinction between Gothicism and ghost stories. Some gothic novels can sometimes include ghosts as much as some ghost stories can equally include the gothic appurtenances. It is however the discovery of this study that

the common factors that distinguish the gothic novel with the ghost story are the mystery and the supernatural. Both of these factors commonly run through Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Umeasiegbu's *Ghost Stories*. Umeasiegbu has therefore championed a new literary sub-genre in Nigerian literature which is not strictly confined to folktale narrative techniques, but is purely categorized as ghost lore.

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