

Interconnectedness: an essay on the structure in Helen Oyeyemi's short story "What is not yours is not yours"

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Abstract

Oyeyemi's what is yours is not yours creates a new world and new identity that suggest new beginning through a network of complex characters. Her collection of short stories interconnected between characters and their histories yet do not link within the events, thus it brings linear structure to the climax. The stories exemplify the amalgamation of unequal ideas and complexities faced by the Contemporary Nigerian in the Globalised World. Oyeyemi rejects the idea of the single thematic and political structure in isolation, further; it produces a real-world in new locations or ideas for identification and exploration of current post-modern society. Characters appear in each story to explore the concept of interconnectedness; conjugate the loosely connected elements of the story to the main plotline. Oyeyemi's stratagem is to bring undeveloped characters' identities and histories and sense of disconnected themes among stories into the bondage of expansive interconnectedness that identifies characters within social and communal relations.

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Oyeyemi's first short story "books and roses" has a fairytale whim and fancy, as the structure suggests a happy ending. Though "books and roses" begins with fairytale idea "Once upon a time in Catalonia a baby was found in a chapel." (1), but the story is unresolved in the end deviates from the classic fairytale concept and brings ambiguous and chaos. Due to extensive plotline and multiple characters, the story lost its coherence, simultaneously produces new territories for subjects through the new structure. However, "it loses a sense of an organic process or a linear movement, and it becomes fragmented,"(Kristine Bendiksen, 3) the structure conveys everything resolves at the end. The structure of Oyeyemi's stories deviate from linear plotline rather it shows the shape of the non-linear structure. "books and roses" follow the shape of a

non-linear structure. Through keys used by Senora Lucy and Monsterrat, indicates some meaning. For Montse, the key around her neck represents hope and faith in her future. The key symbolizes Montse's mystic birth and also it suggests her faith in finding her family and reunion. However, for Senora Lucy, keys are mysterious and it signifies greed and desire. Both the key induces curiosity to know where the key leads to, raise many questions, and it creates dissatisfaction with the locks. Oyeyemi's ideas diffuse through the development of characters since the characters are interconnected within a story without resolution. A romantic relationship between Luce and Safiye, Safiye's working experience with her mistress Senora Del Olmo, Aurelie's affair with FustadelOlmo and Isidoro Salazar, Zalarias Salazar discloses his feelings for his mother Aurelie and at

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last, the story ends in abrupt manner of Lucy finding Montse reading the letter which says about Aurelie. “books and roses” has multiple characters with multiple plot structure, these separate stories are connected to each other to give a complete structure, though dangle somewhere on themselves since it reaches its climax. Oyeyemi’s diffused plotline allows the story to develop without resolution and suggests final remedy which relatively ends in desire and Lucy recognizes the reality “swap you a rose for a book” (43).

“Sorry doesn’t sweeten her tea” has again a diffused non-linear structure like “books and roses.” The narrator Anton tied together multiple stories that are loosely related. Having mentioned about his friend Ched, the narrator narrated his boyfriend’s daughters’ Dayang and Aisha. Aisha childishly worships a pop singer Matyas Fust. On the other hand, Matyas Fust is charged with releasing a woman video on Youtube. However, Aisha’s place in society is challenged after watching the video. The society demands an apology song. ‘Fust should apologize to the woman he beat up’ to ‘Fust should apologize to his fiancée’ to ‘Fust should apologize to us’? (69) Meanwhile, Fust releases his apology song and the public forgives him. There is a story of the Narrator takes care of Ched’s fish and his House of Locks. These multiple events connected to the core plotline of Aisha’s understanding of humans’ mistakes and redemption. Indicating contemporary trolling of women on the Internet, “sorry doesn’t sweeten her tea” represents the physical and emotional abuse of women. This is the outcome of the arrival of modernity; hence, “the disparate elements that make up a person’s individuality vanish.” (Identity Crisis, 31)

“is your blood as red as this?” presents puppetry seems to represent its own world as well as outside the world of racial diversity in particular. It suggests puppetry as described as a significant show, though it does not add complexity to the story, the story thrives between blurred lines of humans and puppets. Deleuze and Guattari explain the rhizome

through the image of a puppet’s strings, “tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first” (1987:8)

Despite providing serious themes, Oyeyemi speaks of relaxed and light-hearted moments through various characters starting from the narrator Radha till ends with Rowan. The story effloresce love affair between two girls Radha and Myrna when it enters the narrative of the school of puppetry, the tale shifts away from the focus of the main theme. Following the multiple digressions, the story extends the ideas of mixed modern technique and unexpected strange world of puppetry school in a comic sense. Oyeyemi displays the significant moment of Tyche Shaw’s puppet asked: “A chess piece asking a personal question, possible one of the most personal questions that could be asked... this tiny queen’s question was large; she spoke and you couldn’t think of anything else but her question, and how to answer it” (91,92). The puppet incorporates not a unified image of character but incarnates diverse and contradictory identities ‘always ready for metamorphosis’ (Gross, 24) Oyeyemi projects frangible subjects for artistic output as it gains motion and voice and draws attention to boundless human characters. As a result, “the postmodernist narrative, therefore, requires a different mode of interpretation, as there is no manifest content of “symptoms” to be discovered beyond the text” (Kristine Bendiksen, 31)

“drownings” hinge on the marks of classic fairytale-like “is your blood as red as this?” “drownings” also ends with light-hearted events with comic elements and unidentifiable setting. Amidst the story reveals Arcady’s imprisonment for setting fire to the building, Eirini the Fair rescues Arcady from prison, her mother’s thinking of grandchildren, Giacomo and Leperello’s assistance to Arcady structure to insidious satire on contemporary world. “drownings” align to the various modes of fairy tale intervening with vagueness but constraints to the

real world politics focussed at the end. Arkady's and Giacomo's relationship is not explicit clearly as it simply a kind of duo relationship. The idea of political upheavals in the country and revolution in the prison is also narrated in scatter. A kind of relationship discussed in the plot provides an ambiguous relationship of characters explicit a sense of disconnection amidst an idea, but with several constraints reaches its form. On the contrary, Eirini's mother thinking on grandchildren brings ludicrous as Oyeyemi puts in "wistfully rocked an invisible baby" (145)

"presence" narrates the characters are more confusing and scenes constantly shifting to others. Characters are like a combination of real and imaginary. In a sense, they have schizophrenic experience; it is an "experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous signifiers material signifiers which fails to link up into a coherent sequence." (Consumer society, 119) The story revolves around Jill Ackermann and Jacob Wallace live in the world of illusion. They often find themselves out of the world almost in their subconscious mind. Especially Jill's internal thoughts and feelings growing up with persistent grudge and stress of various foster homes. "presence" draws likely to be science fiction as Jill and Jacob intended to make the presence project who never existed in the real world. Jill and Jacob always been missing something, missing their son Alex, he becomes the manifestation of their 'Presence' project. Their absence in life, their experience in various foster homes underestimate themselves and inaccessible to one another.

Jill discovers the clock stuck on 12.30 is phantasmagoric than real when she stays in her tenant Radha's apartment. Characters in the story are interrelated to one another. Radha is the first narrator of the story "is your blood as red as this?" joins in puppetry school. Here Radha rents London flat from Jill. It is implied that Radha and Gustav live together and become a famous puppeteer. These multiple events are finally connected to Jacob and

Jill's black and Asian roots. The story is obscure to notice the treatment of race yet only through the reference made by Jill when she teases Jacob for a runoff with Viviane, "beautifully black intellectual couple just like you always wanted." (148) and also by the other references of Jacob's marriage proposal "sublime blasian babies" (151). Character's identity revealed in a subtle manner and brings to the climax of how race impacts their lives.

Oyeyemi's depiction of multiculturalism in the world is an attempt to celebrate different skin colors blindly without understanding how it affects their lives and relationship. Though Jill is portrayed as a psychologist in this story, she failed to recognize her perfect sense of her identity rather she is jealous and feels imperfect about a black and Asian couple.

"Dornicka and the st. Martin's day goose" is written in a style of classic fairytale retelling of Little Red Riding Hood. While "books and roses", "drownings" have followed the style of a fairytale, but this story has a unique specialty in it which recalls Little Red Riding Hood. For instance, Dornicka wears a red cape, she is in her fifties and has a job of Caterer to coal miners. Moreover, she wears the coat: "Our Dornicka had decided that once you reach your late fifties you can wear whatever you want and nobody can say anything to you about it." (212) The author makes a comic observation of the original fairytale, by justifying the fashion of the red cape, Dornicka wears. In the end, the author brings the fact that the red cape is worn by a goose, not a girl.

It is evident that the story maintains incoherent and unrealistic events like how the wolf eats the other wolf, wolf hits Dornicka which results in lump grows on her hip. She cut off her lump and buries it in the garden, again she digs up and puts the lump in the locked chest, and she feeds the lump to the goose. Unusual events take place and also recognize the plotline of sacrificing animals. The story has discernible order in chronological or thematic, instead, "the reader perceives a sense of

completeness in each elements” (Identity crisis, 27) and attained the connectedness.

The collection of short stories “portrays life as an amalgam of arbitrarily interwoven shards of experience” (Joe Brainords, 2). The disconnected form of the story resists the required coherence of a self-narrative and illusionary occurrence at last yield to the whole structure. These events do not engage with one another in a sequence, rather a random arrangement of events can be interpreted as a lack of structure. That is to say “confusion and interruption remain prominent and unresolved” (Identity crisis, 30) “freddybarrancov cheeks...in?” tend to ramble the plotline of coherence and bring resolution at the end. It strikingly recycles characters from previous stories. Characters like Ched, Tyche, and Aisha have fates to learn. Ched becomes a popular signer now dating with Tyche. Tyche becomes a successful puppeteer from “is your blood as red as this?” dating with Ched. Aisha becomes a successful filmmaker formerly was a disillusioned figure in “sorry doesn’t sweeten her tea.” These characters appear again to develop their lives that suggests extending their intense connection in the story. Although they were unambitious in their previous existence, they now take on their responsibility and attempts to maintain their coherent relationship between the previous and the current story. Freddy’s determined effort to overthrow tyrannical government recalls and connects the way Arkady does in “drowning.” The characters exemplify the realities of lives to subdue their anonymous state “in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence.” (Jenny Offill, (1945:10)

Eva’s story reveals the mystery of a locked diary in “if a book is locked there’s probably a good reason for that don’t you think.” She keeps her teenage diary locked as it represents her personality which is always closed. At the same time, Eva’s diary remains to resist her silence and firmness to conserve her voice and identity. Book is personified as both animate and inanimate similar to the puppets in “is your blood as red as this?” like how puppets

act as a substitute for humans and represent the world outside and “a depiction of the shattered concept of identity in modernity” (Identity Crisis, 22) Eva’s diary acts as a repository of harsh and hush she received during her young age. Those untold voices and unrevealed memories are reposed in a diary, moreover, set to release whenever the book is unloosened. The original meaning of Eva’s diary which portrays her life seems unclear. Oyeyemi makes the impression that the book is vivid and active, done its own right capable of molding human’s state of mind either good or bad.

Eva does not want anyone to read it; moreover, it is left to speculate inconclusively. The diary ends with an ambiguous question “So you still think that’s why I locked it.” (263) It recalls past memories as it connects to his teenage. This reminds Rowan Wayland’s expectation at the end is not revealed in “is your blood as red as this?” Similarly, whether Aisha believes Fust’s mistake is unclear. She observed at the end that “Fust is getting closer to identifying his “mistake” (77) in “sorry doesn’t sweeten her tea.” These three identities in various stories record their individual glimpses as an amalgamation of events rather maintaining sequence, it is interconnected with scattered fragments. Despite the lack of unity between the events and actions, the subject has contemporary issues and contradictory ideas to discuss. It “looks for events rather than new worlds... for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things and the way they change.” (Cultural Logic, IX) The story observes the multiplicity of options and decisions which the outside world offers to establish the connection between the characters and between the stories to explore social realities. Every individual indicates a complicated identity when bringing the components into the discussion, it becomes the aspects of a unified whole.

Non-Linear structure creates awareness of the dominant theme in current society and suggests a harmonious structure. Further, interconnectedness assumes the existence of continuous study of the

characters between the possibility and the reality. Though contradictory nature of the characters exposed, “diverse and contrasting elements” (Spencer 1971:113) is logically required to observe the quality of self and their relations to the world. Characters coexist in a challenging world to understand reality and finding the truth and value of life.

That is why Oyeyemi projects a multitude of experiences through characters that are considered as people who might strive to apprehend various events in this world by which they learn to acquaintance with complexities and struggle to master over to build their personality. Oyeyemi discusses race and cultural prejudices and problems faced by them in various circumstances which again help to shape the individual. Oyeyemi’s peripheral vision maps “even realms that are yet to come.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:5)

The structure of the novel reflects postmodern temporality and continues to reflect on the connection of individual subjectivity. Events have no hold on the linear structure as it is “distorted” and “interrupted” looking towards individual experience in postmodern society.

Postmodernism reflects the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change...” (Consumer society, 125)

It affects the individual subject, yet they unable to create their identity where the individual strives to organize a temporal structure that is to project the breakdown of the relationship among characters, unstable meaning of the text. Disconnected ideas lose fluidity in order and isolated from free-floating. Finally, links unrelated events and form a distinct unification of narrative structure.

This paper explains the connection of scattered random events and presents a unified and organic structure as a reflection of the postmodern society. It

focuses on distorted personal identity and coherent development and how it connects the series of events to linear development of the structure. The story has a lack of narrative coherence thus functions its own separate narrative which results in the unification of the whole.

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