

# Oral Narrative Genres as Communicative Dialogic Resources and their Correlation to African Short Fiction

**Loreta Huber**

Vilnius University Kaunas Faculty  
Institute of Language, Literature and Translation Studies  
Muitinės g. 8, LT-44280 Kaunas, Lithuania  
Email: Loreta.Ulvydiene@knf.vu.lt  
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5453-7995>  
Research interests: contemporary literature, semiotics of culture, literary criticism, hermeneutics

**Evelina Jonaitytė**

Vilnius University Kaunas Faculty  
Institute of Language, Literature and Translation Studies  
Muitinės g. 8, LT-44280 Kaunas, Lithuania  
Email: evelina.jonaityte@knf.stud.vu.lt  
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4085-6375>  
Research interests: contemporary literature, literary criticism, reader response criticism

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**Summary.** Oral and written storytelling traditions in Africa developed at the same time and influenced each other in many ways. In the twentieth century, the relation between the deeply rooted oral tradition and literary traditions intensified.

We aim to reveal literary analysis tools that help to trace ways how oral narrative genres found reflection in African short fiction under analysis. A case study is based on two short stories by women writers, *The Rain Came* by Grace Ogot and *The Lovers* by Bessie Head. Images and symbols both, in oral and written traditions in Africa, as well as the way they evolved and extended in a literary genre of short fiction are considered within the framework of hermeneutics, reader reception theory and feminist literary criticism.

The results obtained in the study prove that oral narrative genres interact with literary genres, though most importantly, women's writing as a literary category and images embodied in the short stories play a decisive role and deviation from the images embodied in African oral tradition.

**Keywords:** genre, interpretative turn, communicative dialogic resources, short fiction, symbols.

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## **Introduction**

African literature is extremely varied. Its development leads to diverse reflections on the future of the continent and its population. Furthermore, the roots of African literature lie in deep traditions of African people, especially in the art of storytelling. Oral and written storytelling traditions in Africa developed at the same time and influenced each other in many ways. Simultaneously, African written literature is a combination of the real life and fantasy. It connects the realistic world of the past with the contemporary world. African literature has become important to many non-literary disciplines ranging from anthropology to natural science because it is historical and fictional at the same time. It gives records about the continent: past and present.

The aim of our research is to review African short fiction and Africa's cultural heritage that is an important tool for understanding its literature and woman's role as reflected in African writings and to demonstrate how oral narrative genres found reflection in African short fiction. A hypothesis is raised that African short stories written by female writers in the 20–21st centuries deviate from African oral tradition.

Our research acquires mixed and multimethod design. We rely upon Angouri (2018: 41) who adopts Cresswell's (2003: 210) definition of the term design that refers to a procedure for collecting, analyzing and reporting research.

In addition to a hermeneutic-dialogical approach that is employed in this research, Feminist literary criticism was instigated by the nature of the texts and the themes of inequality of women rights and sexism in Africa in the dialogue with oral narrative genres.

We anticipate we anticipate Barthes's idea, who states that "text is not, and cannot be, 'only itself', nor can it be reified, said to be a 'thing'; a text is a process" (1994: 104). The process moves the text beyond its original psychological and historical contexts and gives it a certain "ideality" of meaning, which is elaborated in a dialogue between the interpreter and the text. The dialogue is grounded in the concern, which the interpreter and the author share toward a common question and a common subject matter. In confronting a viewpoint reflecting a different set of horizons, the interpreter can find his own horizons highlighted and reach critical self-consciousness. In seeking the key question, the interpreter repeatedly transcends his/her own horizons while pulling the text beyond its original horizons until a fusion of the two horizons occurs. The interpreter's imagination can also play a role in the dialogue with texts and carry the understanding of the subject matter beyond the finite interpretation realized in methodological hermeneutics.

Ultimately, as reader-response critics raise theoretical questions regarding how the reader joins with the author to help the text have a meaning, the latter approach takes a functional role in our study.

## **Oral tradition and its influence on Africa's modern writers**

The principal connection of the cultures of the African continent is undoubtedly their oral tradition, particularly in the art of storytelling. It is a special union of image and idea, a method in which stories, history, traditional folktales and religious beliefs are passed on

from generation to generation. These ancient fantasy images are the heritage of African culture and a gift that is transmitted by storytellers. A good narrator has a capacity to affect the audience by disclosing the most sensitive, timorous and emotional details of the culture. During the performance, a storyteller transmits not only a feeling but also attitudes. The performance also involves memory: a storyteller must collect not only his memories, images from the real life and life experience but should also take into consideration each member of the audience and his/her expectations. Therefore, those images should be familiar to the audience, because it is an inherent part of storytelling. Moreover, the story is never a history because the tale-teller always builds it from memories and legends of the past and known images of the present (Ghouti 2015).

Thus, African written literature is a combination of the real life and fantasy. It connects the realistic world of the past with the contemporary world. The intention of the writer is usually to analyze the reader's relationship with the world and history. In this analysis, characters and events assign to history but actually are invented. The principal element of the story is a myth that goes beyond reality (Hernandez et al. 2011).

Thus, every African writer is born to a worldview, which is ritualistic, mythopoeic, folk-oriented, hierarchical, authoritarian, oral and tribal.

Furthermore, many anthropologists are interested in the study of folklore that contains folktales, myths, traditions and customs, and so on since it reflects the reality and the history of the African societies. It is noticeable that oral tradition is relevant and inherent in popular literature. It is created by literary storytellers who know how to manipulate the original material but remain faithful to the tradition at the same time. Most of the early writers started their career by collecting the material of oral tradition. Others improved their writing skills by translating texts from foreign languages into African languages.

In the twentieth century, the relation between the deeply rooted oral tradition and literary traditions intensified. Literary works were associated with forms of the oral tradition. For example, the impact of the epic on the novel influences writers even today. Evidently, the oral tradition had an impact on such writers as Amos Tutuola, D. O. Fagunwa, Violet Dube, S. E. K. Mqhayi and Mario António (Ghouti 2015). Meanwhile, speaking about writing in more specific aspects, not all the writings were influential – some of them were pure limitations of the oral tradition. However, there were writers such as Tutuola who made an impressive effect on the development of literary tradition. He understood how the images and structures of the oral tradition could be transcribed to a literary mode. Another main figure in the beginning of literary tradition was Guybon Sinxo who explored the relationship between the oral tradition and writing in his popular Xhosa novels. In addition, R. R. R. Dhlomo, O. K. Matsepe and A. C. Jordan determined the new relationship between oral and written materials as well as between the writers of popular fiction and those who wished to succeed in writing advanced scientific texts (Hernandez et al. 2011).

After all, there is no doubt that European traditions also interacted in the process. In that period African women like women from other countries had fewer rights than men. However, European culture inspired African women to fight for their rights. One of the ways to prevent inequality between men and women was writing.

## **Woman's role as reflected in African literature**

In scholarly and media accounts, African women were and sometimes still are too often presented as passive, pathetic victims of harsh circumstances, rather than as autonomous creative agents making positive changes in their lives.

Until the 6th decade of the 20th century African literature was written exceptionally by men. Most African male writers were educated by colonists who came from the patriarchal society. The cultural barrier and Western sexism of the colonial system kept African women away from education for many years. This is the main reason why women started writing much later than men. The first work of a female writer was Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* written in 1967. It is considered to be the first Anglophone novel, written by an African female writer. Other famous Anglophone female novelists include Bessie Head, Grace Ogot and Nadine Gordimer. *The Promised Land* written by Grace Ogot was one of the first female works in African literature that was translated into English and published in 1966. The book which explores Ogot's concept of the ideal African wife caused quite a lot of resentment in those days. The influence of these women writers inspired other African women to start writing and in a few years the country had its first female playwrights and fiction writers.

Thus, women literature in Africa arose from inequality of women rights and sexism. Writing was a particular way for women to become a socio-political part of African society. They expressed themselves by writing realistic, inspirational and shocking works. The main themes were gender inequality, female circumcision, marriage, polygamy, restrained life, the role of the daughter, mother and wife. It is not surprising that literary works which are written by female writers are full of symbolical units originated from the aforementioned themes.

A very important role for African female literature belongs to history and urbanization. When colonists invaded Africa and urbanization started, the life of African women changed relentlessly. Urbanization and new class distinction caused a major disruption. Grace Akinyi Ogot in her article "The Role of Woman in African Literature" (1976) states that "modern East African literature has portrayed the woman as a loser, unwanted being, whose life is full of sorrow and struggle. Oral literature, on the other hand, talks of women who became traditional chiefs, great medicine women and even Prophets. Their stories were retold and are still being told." This approach witnesses the importance of oral tradition in African literature.

Clearly enough, woman's position was mainly stated in her home where she was considered as a carrier of light, warmth, care and wisdom. She also had responsibilities for her children, old parents and land. She was not able to move away easily like her husband. Her boundaries were always drawn strictly and that made her think about escaping from them. Literature was one of the main ways to protest and revolt against gender inequality and sexism. This way made women more confident, motivated, educated and broadened their horizons. After long years of fighting for their rights, African women built their road to literature and made a significant input for the future writings.

Thus, certain common themes of African women's resistance quickly emerge in the writings of the 20th and the early 21st century. African women from all over the continent

write about their struggles to balance the demands of cultural traditions with the pull of modernity and their own desires for autonomy and independence. In the African society of the 21st century a woman writer, be it a novelist, dramatist or poet, is a conversationalist, a “questioner” and a reformer.

### **A case study:**

#### ***The Rain Came* by Grace Ogot and *The Lovers* by Bessie Head**

African literature is particularly rich in the profusion of symbols. Seven main groups of symbols prevail in African literature: religion, family, traditions, sacrifice, weather conditions, music and animals.

The study is further devoted to the discussion of four units of symbols from the two short stories and the way they correlate to or diverge from oral narrative genres.

*The Rain Came* is a short story written by Grace Ogot, a Kenyan author, journalist, nurse, politician and diplomat, who was the first Anglophone female Kenyan writer to be published. Ogot’s work witnesses the importance of traditional Luo folklore, mythologies, and oral traditions.

The story tells about one of the African tribes, the chief Labong’o and his daughter Oganda. The tribe is suffering an endless drought and Labong’o attains a judgment from the ancestors to sacrifice his one and only daughter Oganda in order to get rain. Labong’o grieves for this decision though decides to obey the will of ancestors. Oganda cannot believe her destiny but finally she faces up her fate and leaves for the last journey. Her purpose is to sacrifice herself for the monster of the lake. When she finally reaches the exact location, she is saved by her beloved man and the two lovers run away. Although Oganda demonstrates an abdication of responsibility, the rain still turns out in torrents. In this way, the author bravely demonstrates courage and departure from the deeply rooted oral tradition and rituals and manifests liberation from the old rules.

Furthermore, Ogot’s short stories juxtapose traditional and modern themes and notions, demonstrating the conflicts and convergences that exist between the old ways of thought and the new ones. Ogot herself explains such thought processes as exemplary of the blending of traditional and modern understandings, “Many of the stories I have told are based on day-to-day life... And in the final analysis, when the Church fails and the hospital fails, these people will always slip into something they trust, something within their own cultural background. It may appear to us mere superstition, but those who do believe in it do get healed. In day-to-day life in some communities in Kenya, both the modern and the traditional cures coexist” (in Lindfors 1979: 60–62).

Another theme that often appears throughout Ogot’s works is that of womanhood and the female role. Throughout her stories, Ogot demonstrates an interest in family matters, revealing both traditional and modern female gender roles followed by women, especially within the context of marriage and Christian traditions (Chukukere 1995: 60–62).

Chukukere, who analysed gender voices and choices with an attempt to redefine woman’s role in contemporary African fiction, quotes literary critic Maryse Condé who

has suggested that Ogot's emphasis on the importance of the female marital role, as well as her portrayal of women in traditional roles, creates an overwhelmingly patriarchal tone in her stories (Chukukere 1995: 218).

In Ogot's short stories, the women portrayed often have a strong sense of duty, as demonstrated in *The Rain Came*, and her works regularly emphasise the need for understanding in relationships between men and women (Dathorne 1974: 130–131).

Another short story *The Lovers* is written by Bessie Head, who is considered the most influential writer of Botswana. She wrote novels, short fiction and autobiographical works. *The Lovers* tells a story about two young people from different tribes who fall in love and have a love affair which is inappropriate in those times. They meet each other accidentally during the storm while sheltering in a cave. After their first meeting, they keep seeing each other and one day the lovers notice that they are expecting a baby. The secret comes up to the daylight but the families of the lovers do not agree with their relations. The couple has to leave their tribes for a certain time. However, they do not return. After the days of searching, their relatives notice the spirits of the lovers floating to the top of the hill. The legend is kept alive from generation to generation. Bessie Head's work reverberates Grace Ogot's short story in its symbolic representation.

Symbols, as N. K. Dzobo (2010: 86–94) denotes, "are sources of insights into African orientations to life." He continues to make the distinction between signs and symbolism in the degree of qualitative of information that they convey, "While signs provide simple information, symbols are used to communicate complex knowledge." Furthermore, the importance of symbolism is to show the diversity of the continent.

Both short stories correlate in themes and profusion of symbols. The four prime symbols which prevail in both short stories are the rain, sacrifice, marriage and love affair. Due to the limitations of the study only the first two will be briefly examined furtheron.

Rain is one of the most important forms of water. The symbolic meaning of rain is closely related to water imagery as one of the most vital elements for life. Of the many symbolic aspects of rain, two must be emphasized: rain as enriching power from above and rain as enduring or misfortune. Rain frequently reflects all bad weather conditions and acts as a symbol for distressful moments. Water is condensed in clouds and returns to earth in the form of life-giving rain, which is invested with twofold virtues: it is water, and it comes from heaven.

In both stories, *The Rain Came* and *The Lovers* rain is one of the main emotional symbols and transmits a particular message. Grace Ogot's *The Rain Came* starts with unexpected news from above. From the very first paragraph, all the characters are connected to the rain. The tribe's chief Labong'o attains a terrific judgment – his only daughter Oganda must be sacrificed in order for the rain to come:

[r]efusing to yield to the rainmaker's request would mean sacrificing the whole tribe, putting the interests of the individual above those of the society. More than that. It would mean disobeying the ancestors, and most probably wiping the Luo people from the surface of the earth. (Ogot 1964: 187)

On the one hand, it is possible to claim that the image of rain in this story plays two roles: misfortune and salvation. In this case, misfortune would mean endless drought and the death of the only daughter in the chief's family. On the other hand, the sacrifice of the young virgin girl would bring salvation to the whole tribe. Thus, *rain* as an image creates a conflict in this story.

Meanwhile in *The Lovers* by Bessie Head, the rain appears in the very first paragraph as the emotional part of the story. In this way it creates a particular atmosphere and tension:

[i]t was one of those summers when it rained in torrents. Almost every afternoon towards sunset the low-hanging, rain-filled clouds would sweep across the sky in packed masses and suddenly, with barely a warning, the rain would pour down in blinding sheets. The young women and little girls were still out in the forest gathering wood that afternoon when the first warning signs of rain appeared in the sky. They hastily gathered up their bundles of wood and began running home to escape the approaching storm. (Head 1977: 423)

It can be claimed that the element of rain is a symbol of destiny. Before the forthcoming storm, when the rain was getting more intense, a young woman Tselane all of a sudden stepped on a thorn, that is a symbol of evil and distress in the Bible: "there shall be no more a pricking brier to the house of Israel, nor a thorn causing grief" (Ezek 28, 24 The Holy Bible English Standard Version). The thorn can be understood as a sign of imminent misfortune. To carry a step further, the rain as a symbol of destiny may signify the coming incident: finding true love. The rain was getting stronger even when Tselane reached a cavern at the hill, "[t]he roar of the rain was deafening so that even the thunder and lightning was muffled by its intensity" (Head 1977: 424). It can be perceived as a warning from above. However, Native American Indians have an entirely different symbolic meaning of rain. This symbolical unit is implied as change, fertility and renewal. Raindrops can be comprehensible as signs of plentiful crops. Moreover, the gathering of the rain clouds is considered to be a miraculous symbol ensuring a good future.

Furthermore, although in the beginning of the story the symbolic unit of rain was perspicuous as misfortune, the ending is quite unexpected. The skies send the rain even though the commitment is broken. Due to this fact, it can be explicable that the woman's willingness and resolve to sacrifice is enough to satisfy the expectations of the ancestors. Accordingly, it can be affirmed that in this case, the rain symbolizes a blessing. In the semi-arid land of Israel, rain is an indication of being a "good land" and Talmud says in Masehet Ta'anit, "the day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created." Moreover, rain symbolizes fertility and spiritual influence on earth (Becker 2000: 139).

However, rain in this situation may also signify punishment. The author leaves space for the reader's imagination and does not disclose if the rain brings peace to the village. The coherence between God and the Noah's Ark may be seen here, though in this case, rain is perspicuous as a judgement, "[a]nd rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights" (Genesis 7: 12 The Holy Bible English Standard Version). Therefore, rain may also be

interpreted as a punishment from above. This case illustrates a strong connection between the actions of people and rain as the power of Gods.

Further on, the light should be shed on the diversity of sacrifice. *Sacrifice* is defined as a symbol of a cult action and a refusal of earthly goods by devoting to God or ancestors, though often also to magical intentions (Becker 2000: 29). Sacrifice can symbolize the metamorphosis of oneself, the access to the higher spiritual and mental level. Human sacrifice was practiced in many ancient cultures. As a central act of many different religions and rituals but a small number of cultures sacrifice, or, in other words, outcast, has received much attention. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss discussed the social function of sacrifice, Edward B. Tylor introduced his theory of sacrifice as a gift. This was followed by another critic W. Robertson Smith's theory of sacrifice as a "totemic communal meal" (Beers 1992: 25). The last principal theory of sacrifice as a theory of expiation was proposed by James Frazer.

In the light of African traditions sacrifice is a symbol of honor. Here Ogot offers the way for the dialogue between a short story as a short prose genre and oral tradition. On the one hand, the author constructs the plot around oral narratives with deep mythological meaning, and on the other, the writer strongly resists the old traditions and invites the reader to discuss the following conflicts: human vs society and human vs self. In fact, the story *The Rain Came* was firstly named *A Year of Sacrifice* but for the reasons known only for the author, it was changed. The chief's of Luo tribe decision to make an act of his daughter's sacrifice is not his first sacrifice. The first one is considered to be his marriage. Even though Labong'o loved his first wife just as his second, third and the fourth wives, he made a sacrifice to marry many times because of his tribe's expectations for him to bring a daughter, thus, he:

[m]arried a second, a third, and a fourth wife. But they all gave birth to male children. When Labong'o married a fifth wife she bore him a daughter. They called her Oganda, meaning "beans," because her skin was very fair. Out of Labong'o's twenty children, Oganda was the only girl. (Ogot 1964: 186)

In the case when the chief's only daughter needs to be sacrificed, his personal sacrifice is a symbol of his inner conflict:

[n]ever in his life had he been faced with such an impossible decision. <...> On the other hand, to let Oganda die as a ransom for the people would permanently cripple Labong'o spiritually. He knew he would never be the same chief again. (Ogot 1964: 187)

A closer look at how the sacred and religious texts describe sacrifice opens another way for the fusion of the horizons. According to the Bible, sacrifice is a symbol of holiness rather than punishment. The Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for us (Ephesians 5 The Holy Bible English Standard Version). The aspect of sacrifice is underlined in Philippians (2: 6-8 The Holy Bible English Standard Version) by the following words:



“[h]e humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross!” To carry the step further, in the Bible, sacrifice is a symbol of love for God and others, justice and mercy and holiness. It does not stand for a punishment: “[f]or I desired Mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6: 6 The Holy Bible English Standard Version).

It is equally important to discuss the symbolical number 20. The young woman Oganda is the only girl from 20 children in her family and she is born latest:

[o]ut of Labong’o’s twenty children, Oganda was the only girl. Though she was the chief’s favourite, her mother’s co-wives swallowed their jealous feeling and showered her with love. After all, they said, Oganda was a female child whose days in the royal family were numbered. (Ogot 1964: 186)

The inscriptions in Genesis tell us about Jacob who has been working for twenty years as a servant in Laban’s house and has not received any pay (Genesis 31:41 The Holy Bible English Standard Version) and about Joseph who was sold to the Ishmaelite for twenty pieces of silver give evidence to bad luck. The episodes from the Bible witness bad luck of number 20 and even death. Saint Jerome considers the number 20 as threatening because it signifies the universal fight.

Meanwhile, another example from *The Lovers* offers a different approach. The main characters fall in love and are expecting a baby even though their relationship is forbidden. However, instead of refusing their love they choose to sacrifice their families and leave their villages:

[h]e had only one part of all his planning secure, a safe escape route outside the village and on to a new and unknown life they would make for themselves. They had made themselves outcasts from the acceptable order of village life and he presented her with two alternatives from which she could choose.” (Head 1977: 434)

The short story in this case clearly demonstrates that oral traditions, though deeply rooted in African literature, attain a new light of freedom and liberation in women writers’ universe.

## Conclusion

Oral and written storytelling traditions in Africa developed at the same time and influenced each other in many ways. In the twentieth century, the relation between the deeply rooted oral tradition and literary traditions intensified.

Forms of symbolic representation identify and illustrate our cultural ethos, thus, the meaning of a certain object in African literature can differ and depend on the history and cultural heritage, though usually, the perception of a certain symbol depends on the reception of the reader.

The analysis proved that symbolical units depend on beliefs, context, religion, history and traditions, which are inherent for the writer, however, the fundamental attention in analysing symbols is given to reader-response criticism and the theory of reception.

The symbol of rain proves that the perception of this symbolic unit is determined by the traditions, religious beliefs and depends on the reader as an active agent that imparts “real existence” to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation.

The symbol of sacrifice demonstrates how African traditions influence its people’s acts and belief.

Most importantly, African short stories written by female writers in the 20–21<sup>st</sup> centuries deviate from African oral tradition and accommodate newer, global-village-conscious African literature.

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