

Watching and Waiting in the Background: A Reconfiguration of the Archetypal

Sage in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

Although the archetype of the sage is encountered in literary works, it has lingered as one of the least explored spheres in criticism. Immense attention has been paid to the heroes, the tricksters, the father or mother figures, and other mythic figures, especially from Greek mythology, but there is relative neglect of the wise old man or woman who is often seen supporting the hero in his or her quest. This unbalanced attention creates a gap, and by focusing on this spurned dimension, this research seeks balance. With a focus on the power the sage holds, especially in having the last say and proffering solutions to problems, this paper will present a reflection on the archetypal sage and then interpret Teacher as an embodiment of the sage archetype in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Additionally, this essay identifies the specific character trait of 'Watching and Waiting' that characterizes Teacher, which unavoidably knits him closer to similar characters of classical and contemporary literary tradition.

Keywords: Sage, Archetype, Watching and Waiting, Wisdom and Knowledge, Literary Tradition, Collective Unconscious.

Introduction

The character of Teacher in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, no doubt, sparks up memories from characters like Ogbuefi Ezeudu in *Things Fall Apart* and Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex* in more ways than in having the character traits of prophets, liminal and wizardly figures, professors, as have been read by many scholars in analyzing sages. And this shouldn't be tied to the authors' conscious framing as, in the words of Umberto Eco, "works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together

they speak to each other independently of the intention of the authors” (qtd in Linda Borzsei, 2). So, it is this uncontrollable insignia of connection that makes tropes and archetypes easily recognizable and so allows for intertextuality, which Umberto calls “stereotyped situations derived from preceding textual tradition”(2). In the same sense, the work of art, for Jung, in his *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, “has its source not in the *personal unconscious* of the poet, but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind” (*Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 125). These “primordial images” are what Jung refers to as archetype: “a figure—be it a daemon or a human being, or a process—that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed” (127).

The sharp, instinctive recognition of the character trait of watching and waiting exhibited by sages in literary works has remained enduring to such dimension that it would not be out of place to identify watching and waiting as a trope, especially because “it conjures up an image,” to use Linda Borzsei's words (1), the image of one who is innately attentive to the unfolding of events in others' lives and discreetly expecting already conjectured consequences of other characters' actions to occur. In more particular sense, "watching" for when disaster could strike, and "waiting" for when one becomes the sole source of recourse to avert danger. Other than the case we have in Young Adult Literatures where the sage, in the form of a soothsayer, wizard, prophet or liminal figures; as we see in *Lord of the Rings* where we have Gandalf and Harry Potter with Albus Dumbledore, who are consistently present in the lives of the protagonists. In works like *Oedipus Rex*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and *Children of Blood and Bone*, we notice elongated absences of the sages at certain moments of the protagonists' lives before they are first introduced into

the scheme of events and after, until in dire moments of need, which indicates a "waiting and watching" recurrence.

Following Jung, we understand that "recurrence" is the keyword that defines archetypal criticism. This recurrence draws from a mythic tradition, a tradition that is common to mankind, so that at the moment of our encounter with such mythological experience in, say, a literary text "we are no longer individuals, but the race; the voice of all mankind resounds in us" (128).

Maud Bodkin's main thesis in her 1934 text, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* takes from Jungian theories of recurrent patterns in human experiences. Bodkin finds that certain poems possess a special emotional significance due to the excitation of unconscious forces known as archetypes, which have been described as recurring, primordial images that determine an individual's present experience.

Understanding *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* in the Light of Other Readings

In "An African Woman's Dilemma in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*: A *Bosadi* Perspective on the Challenges and Pains of Infertility," Gift T. Baloyi reflects on the predicament faced by African women in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, and interrogates how it is even prevalent in the lives of South African women. For Baloyi, women's sexuality is viewed as a patriarchal prejudice. She showcases this by employing Masenya's notion of "bosadi" (womanhood), to indicate the significance of the way in which "a woman was created by God to be a fully active human" (1). Baloyi observes the role of women in the predicament of other women. For her, the first three wives of Baba Segi helped in propagating his patriarchal agenda. They achieve this by covering up Baba Segi's infertility.

Fiona Moola in the essay “The Polygamous Household in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives: A Haven in a Heartless World*,” sees polygamy as the preoccupation of the novel and opines that plural marriage in Africa is an enduring social phenomenon into the twenty-first century despite the cultural dominance of monogamy in colonial and then global culture. Moola goes ahead in the essay to highlight the paradox in the text, whereby wives in a formal polygamous household turn to become informal polyandrous in order to protect their marriage; a case which she claims is not adequately demonstrative of the Yoruba culture (88).

Olushola Ayodeji Akanmode in his essay, “A Feminist Evaluation of Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*,” adopts the “snail-sense feminism” of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo which advocates dialogue, negotiation, good education for women and also emphasizes individual empowerment to study the text. Ezeigbo coined the snail-sense feminism from the Igbo adage that says, “*Ire omakaejulejiagan’ogwu*” – meaning, “The snail crawls over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue” (27). In her interpretation of the text, Akanmode observes that “improving women’s condition in Nigeria has continued to be a challenge in our society and some socio-cultural, political, religious and economic structures that oppress women defy the attempts made to eliminate them” (1). And for that, he suggests that it is important to apply other strategies that will be of foremost importance in both self-actualization and self-development which the patriarchal society denies women.

As clearly observed, none of these researches have studied this work with the archetypal lenses, hence this text awaits a reading that earmarks its uniqueness as a literary text and divorces it from sociological interpretations. The subsequent sections of this essay then, to borrow Ekeh’s words, “offers a different critical dimension to the

work” (qtd in Onwuegbuchi, 5). While a lot—more than the ones articulated above—have been written on Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, there is no work that focuses on the character of Teacher, especially, as the wise old man who watches and waits. Even criticisms that have been made on the archetype so far in the reading of other texts draw strength from the rhythm of the fantasy genre and magic realism, and often times these sages, as pertains to other texts, are solely interpreted as magicians or prophets for being in possession of wisdom and esoteric knowledge. But in the literary tradition, the sage is more than that and this is what this research seeks to espouse.

The Sage Archetype

In The Oedipus trilogy by Sophocles, we encounter one of the earliest representations of the sage archetype manifested in the character of Tiresias. In *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, it is apparent how the sage's importance to the plot is stamped at the onset of a crisis or quest, in providing clues or pieces of advice to the protagonist, or whoever to whom he’s at behest. There are situations where these pieces of advice are taken, like the case of Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*. There are also situations where they are not upheld, as in the case of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Whatever the case is, these figures represent the sage archetype. In his *Aspects of the Masculine*, Jung hints that:

The frequency with which the spirit-type appears as an old man is about the same in fairytales as in dreams. The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea ...can extricate him (158).

This hopelessness conditions the hero in a situation where he is incapable of thinking for himself. For Christopher Booker, sages “intervene in the action as to act as guides and advisers” (qtd in Wilson, 16). And in Benjamin Fleer, the sage is “a guide for the soul, a force which exists to help spur the individual forward upon the path to reaching self-actualization and enlightenment” (36).

Wilson further notes in her paper that it is the sage’s ability to “watch” and “wait” that “sets him outside the rhythms of everyday life” (53). It is from these two kindnesses—watching and waiting—which the sage offers that this essay generates her base in order to establish the archetype as one which is fully alive in African literature.

These figures that embody the sage in texts must not be of the male gender. They are only elderly and wise. We have also encountered wise old women in literary works and African folktales. They must not be old either. It is a deconstruction that wisdom is not only associated with the old. Baba Segi is called “Baba”—a title in Yoruba which means “Old man,” but he is not wise enough to advise himself. He only gets counsel from Teacher. Jung’s description of this archetype invokes a strong image of Teacher:

The old man thus represents knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness and intuition, on the one hand, and – on the other – moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help (222).

For Ian Parker Renga and Mark A. Lewis in their “Wisdom, Mystery, and Dangerous Knowledge: Exploring Depictions of the Archetypal Sage in Young Adult Literature,” they believe that the sage is “...usually marked as different, live isolated lives, and possess the power of particular knowledge that is locked away from the broader

community” (1). The sage cannot stand alone in a story, for his wisdom is only made manifest through the hero. The hero may be filled with ambition which is not enough; he needs directions to help him battle his challenges. They are usually old and tartar, isolated, and offer advice on the problems lying in wait and how to solve them. Old age does not make a sage, it is principally possession of knowledge, and often, a unique, salvaging knowledge; one which is required to unravel a mystery, break a bond or dispel ignorance.

Watching and Waiting: The Trope That Binds Teacher to Other Literary Sages

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, we read about Teacher in the very beginning thus: “Everyman had his say but Teacher had the last word in the matter” (3), and notably, Oedipus Rex continues with the summoning of Tiresias to affirm what Tiresias has forewarned many years back regarding the destructive reign of Oedipus in a fashion that resembles having the last words in a matter. He says: “whether I speak or not it is bound to come...” (6). No doubt, these characters' exemplifications are so akin to the description of Ogbuefi Ezeudu in *Things Fall Apart* as somewhat of a repository of knowledge and foresight. One thing remains stable: the essentiality of the salvaging presence of these sages in the plot of these texts; their innate ability to come in and proffer solutions over matters; the direct consequences of which they have only known but not felt; a scene of events from which they have been absent for a while. This revokes the waiting pattern represented in the character of Olamilekan in *Children of Blood and Bone*, who, strangely, is not directly affected by the raid against the Magi tribe until the moment when he proffers knowledge about the intricacies and doctrines of the Magi tribe regarding certain redeeming instruments to the major character, Zeli (314-318).

The *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* continued in this movement as the essentiality of the character of Teacher is signified in the beginning as Baba Segi's reveries over teacher being the only one with answers to his fourth wife's childlessness: "...he knew it was time to do something about his fourth wife's childlessness...Then and there he decided to pay Teacher a visit" (1). This does not only echo the essence of Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex* whose prophesy the classic plays opens up with, but the indication that it has taken a while before Baba Segi visited Teacher, in much the same way as Oedipus had no need of Tiresias until the moment he seeks to avert the curse on his land. And this bespeaks the sage's waiting character trait. His words: "You are running from post to pillar when the answer is there in your face" (5), re-echoes those of Tiresias saying to Oedipus: "I say you are the murderer whom you seek" (7).

While there is no clear implication from Teacher's first words to Baba Segi's that Bolanle holds the key to unraveling the mystery to his conundrum and to revealing the deceit of his older wives, there is no doubt that one goes back to those words as the text reaches its moment of ultimate revelation and dénouement, not to mention the recalling of the words of Ogbuefi Ezeudu to Okonkwo at the onset of the latter's debacle: "Do not bear a hand in the death of that boy. He calls you father" (*Things Fall Apart* 57) is equally reminiscent. It proves Ogbuefi Ezeudu's watchfulness to events as they unfold and bespeaks his foresight just as is the case with Teacher. To say that these words resembles those of Teacher to Baba Segi, thus: "Your partiality is the cause of your problem" (64) in terms of proving only how watchful over the events around the protagonist these sages are will be saying the peripheral, as it also indicates the stubbornness inherent in all the protagonists, whose lives are knit to sages in literary texts, poses a blame and a warning at the same time.

Teacher as the Archetypal Sage in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

Teacher's demur is both unusual and fascinating, which accounts for why school children always go to greet him just to "steam up the louvers with his response" (1). He lives in isolation. His house was "sandwiched between two brothels" (1). This is in line with Wilson's opinion of sages as often "living alone on the outskirts of their respective communities" and "living outside the prescribed norms and institutions" (1). He is different even in conversations, for while everyone has the right to say anything, "Teacher always had the last word" (1).

In Baba Segi's three visits to Teacher in the novel, he always meets people there—people who willingly offer advice but not as "impressive" as Teacher's. On Baba Segi's first visit, he comes to report that Bolanle has refused to go to either the herbalist or the prophet and Teacher remarked:

You are running from post to pillar when the answer is there in front of your face. Since the woman is educated, she will only listen to people from the world she knows. The place to take her is the hospital (5).

His remark is preceded by the metaphor, his voice "rang through silence" (5), denoting how special he is regarded, and he is also the last to speak. It is these words that convinces Baba Segi to take Bolanle to the hospital, which in turn, opens up chains of events leading up to the exposure of the deceit of Baba Segi's older wives through medical science, thus making Teacher's advice both pivotal and timely. Baba Segi loves to be the one in control in his home affairs. He would not have given in to Bolanle's preference of going to the hospital if Teacher does not tell him so. Neither can Teacher stand alone in the narrative, as his essence is tied to Baba Segi's, whose visits both proclaims and reinforces Teacher's place as the sage in the text, as is usually the plot movement with sages of classical and other contemporary texts.

At Baba Segi's second visit, Teacher blames him for being the cause of the problem: "Your partiality is the cause of these problems" (64). He does not care how much these words can hurt Baba Segi, as long as it achieves the aim of guiding him through. He tells him: "Treat your wives equally. Blacken the kettle as you blacken the pots" (65). His words provide the closure of Chapter Six, reemphasizing that Teacher always has the last say in Baba Segi's affairs.

When Baba Segi realizes that he is not the father of his seven children, the only person he decides to speak with is Teacher. Teacher not only gives him hope, but also tells him what to do: "It is time for you to let the deceivers who have brought bastards into your home return to their father's homes" (229). Teacher's words manage to pull Baba Segi's already broken life together. Baba Segi always feels unusual in the presence of Teacher. Once, he says: "Teacher, your wisdom humbles me" (229). Quite differently from Baba Segi, Teacher has lived with the knowledge that he is impotent and has no affair with women and he embraces same, indicating the level of self-awareness and self-acceptance that is contaminant with being a Sage. And interestingly, upon his realization that Baba Segi too is impotent, "a sense of comradeship brewed within him" (229).

Baba Segi is a novice in his condition and therefore is on a quest to find a solution to his problem. It is in this seeking that the character of the Teacher is made manifest. In fact, one of the things that establishes any hero is a meeting with a sage, who becomes a guide. It is through the acquisition of this wisdom offered by the sage that a hero often gains self-discovery and awareness, as Baba Segi does in the end. Teacher is fearless and delivers his message regardless of how it might hurt. Teacher thus passes as that figure who "watched and waited" for the protagonist. In watching, he sees

beyond what meets the eye and therefore becomes the guide; in waiting, he carries to proffer a solution.

Conclusion

The power of the sage lies in seeing and telling the truth, in watching and waiting in the background. Found mostly among teachers, scholars, and researchers, they can also be experienced in the lives of detectives, experts, and even ordinary people. They are always balancing tradition and ensuring stability while expressing the need for growth and change in the lives of the characters whom they offer their counsel to. In naming the character, 'Teacher,' and bequeathing him with all the ethereal of a sage, it is as though Shoneyin is not unaware of what she was unlocking. For the word 'Teacher,' is one of the words which Jung uses to describe the sage. He states: "He is...an enlightener, the superior master and teacher, the archetype of the spirit, who symbolizes the pre-existent meaning hidden in the chaos of life" (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 35).

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