STANDING IN THE CIRCLE: Images of Old People in African Literature

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Abstract

A lot has been written about the portrayal of women in African literature, but very little has been written on how the old are portrayed. This work focuses on portraits of old men and women in African literature. Are they positive or negative? What factors influence the portraiture of the old? Is there a correlation between the portrayal and treatment of elderly characters in African fiction and society? Are the old portrayed the same in African literature as they are in Western literature?

Keywords: social gerontology, archetypes, stereotypes, wisdom, African literature, old characters

Introduction

This article is concerned with how the old are treated in African literature. This includes the question of whether the images of the old are negative or positive, and whether the treatment and portrayals reflect what goes on in the societies which produce the literature. This article analyses selected African literary texts, including three Zambian texts: John Luangala's *The Chosen Bud*, Binwell Sinyangwe's *Quills of Desire*, and Gideon Phiri's *Ticklish Sensation*. Other texts include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Wole Soyinka's *The Lion* and *the Jewel* and *Kongi's Harvest*, Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, and Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*.

The question of how old people are treated in literature is not peculiar to African literature but can even be related to classical Greek literature, from as early as Homer's *Odyssey*, which includes an old blind prophet called Teiresias, a character who plays a critical role in later works particularly, Sophocles' *Theban Plays, Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. The old prophet is the mouthpiece of the Greek gods, the human guardian of divine wisdom.

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In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus goes down to Hades to consult the spirit of Teiresias regarding what to expect on his journey back home (Homer, 2003: 143-4). In *Oedipus Rex*, even Oedipus, who later turns against Teiresias, considers the blind prophet to be a source of wisdom and specially gifted with divine insight. When the city-state of Thebes suffers under the weight of a plague, Oedipus calls for Teiresias to help with a solution (Sophocles, 1974: 35).

This is a case of the wise old man archetype which we also find in Orwell's classic work *Animal Farm*. Old Major, the prize boar who sparks off the farm animals' rebellion against Mr Jones, is associated with wisdom: 'Old Major… was so highly regarded on the farm that everyone was quite ready to lose an hour's sleep in order to hear what he had to say' (Orwell, 1945: 5). Old Major had a 'wise and benevolent appearance' *(ibid: 6*).

Within the Western tradition, however, the old person is sometimes portrayed as wicked, destructive, uncaring and selfish. The most common image is that of a witch. Thus, for example, in the famous Grimm tale, *Hansel and Grethel,* the two young children, Hansel and Grethel, lose their way and end up at the house of an old woman who, 'leaning on a crutch' (Grimm, 1993: 92), initially appears to be harmless. However, her behaviour is deceitful because, in reality, she is 'a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children' whom she would entice into her house, then kill and eat them (*ibid,* 93). Hansel and Grethel, however, outwit the old witch and escape death.

In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, the events are largely shaped by the influence of three old witches whose entrance greets us at the beginning of the play (Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 1; Gill, 1977: 1) These Shakespearian hags are not associated with moral uprightness or wisdom, but rather with wickedness and devilish knowledge of the future which they exploit to manipulate Macbeth and influence events.

In Hans Christian Andersen's tale, *The Story of a Mother*,' death is presented as a poor old man who mercilessly takes away a mother's beloved little baby. In the story, death is determined to take away the baby despite pleas of mercy from the child's mother, thus, projecting the image of a bringer of sorrow and pain (Andersen, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on two theories. First, social gerontology and, second, Carl Jung's theory of archetypes. Brossoie (2015: 20) defines gerontology as 'the scientific study of ageing that examines the biological, psychological, and sociological (biopsychosocial) factors associated with old age and ageing.' Brossoie adds that '… biological factors include genetic background and physical health; psychological influences include the level of cognition, mental health status, and general well-being; and sociological factors range from personal relationships to the cultures, policies, and infrastructure

that organise society' (20). Social gerontology is, therefore, a subfield of gerontology, concerned with the sociological factors of old age and ageing.

Social gerontology is also concerned with the concept of old age. What do we mean when we say a particular person is old? What is ageing? These questions are pertinent to this study because they focus on the treatment of 'the old' in selected African literary texts. As Brossoie (2015: 4) observes, however, the concept of old age is slippery; 'Old age is a difficult and complex concept to grasp because the idea of ageing is constantly changing. What was thought to be old in the 19th Century is considered middle age now. Policymakers have used the age of 65 as a marker in establishing policies affecting old people. Whatever classification of ageing you choose to use is a matter of preference, as long as you realise the limitations and variations implied by the term old age.'

Brossoie (2015)'s observation implies, and justifiably so, that old age and ageing are social constructs. Perceptions of old age or ageing, therefore, may differ from one society to another. This is generally true of African societies, particularly as reflected in the texts selected for analysis in this study. A cross-cutting perception, however, is that old people are a valuable asset to any society because of their experiential knowledge. 'Throughout history, older people have been generally valued for their experience, insight, and the wisdom they can share with others. Leadership is frequently bestowed upon older adults because of a social belief that wisdom and experience are acquired over time. However, conferring respect and responsibility to older adults has not always been consistent' (Brossoie, 2015: 20).

The inconsistency referred to by Brossoie is due, in part, to the assumption that wisdom is not an automatic product of ageing. In other words, not every old person is wise, although the process of ageing can make one wiser due to having more experience. Bengston and Schaie (1999: 50) make a pertinent observation, 'As with many other phenomena of ageing, wisdom is not a natural outcome of living longer, but it does require some level of experience. On the other hand, wisdom qualifies as a potentially positive outcome of ageing and deserves serious attention.'

The inconsistency in respecting old people may also be due to ageism, which Brossoie (2015: 20) defines as the 'systematic labelling and discrimination against people who are old. Ageism, generally, tends to be associated with social stereotypes about older people. Brossoie (22) sheds some light on ageist stereotypes as orchestrated by the media, 'The media regularly perpetuate the stereotypes of older people through inaccurate and sometimes demeaning portrayals of old people as in print, advertising, and entertainment…. The entertainment industry plays a major role in perpetuating age stereotypes…. Movie scripts tend to feature old people as characters only when they are reclusive (Finding Forrester), dying (The Notebook), or facing their own mortality (The Bucket List).'

This study is concerned, in part, with the question of whether ageist stereotypes are a factor in the portrayal of the old in African literature as they are in the media. Generally, the study is concerned with how older people are portrayed, both negatively and positively, in African literature, using selected texts as a microcosm.

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious is an important tool for analysis in this study. In his seminal work, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung distinguishes between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious, arguing that the former emanates from and is built upon the latter, which is a deeper layer in the human psyche and 'which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn' (1959: 4). The collective unconscious, Jung postulates, is not individual but universal and is distinguished from the personal unconscious by the fact that its contents and modes of behaviour are more or less the same in every society and all individuals. While the personal unconscious is attributable to the efforts of the individual, the collective unconscious is not; it is, on the contrary, acquired at birth; 'it is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us' (Jung, 1959: 4).

The contents of the collective unconscious are what Jung refers to as images, or more commonly, archetypes (Rosenfield, 1967; Read *et al*., 1969). Archetypes are inherited from our ancestors and are atavistic in nature. The fundamental facts of human life are archetypal in nature; birth, love, hate, beauty, truth, goodness, untruthfulness, friendship, enmity, growth and indeed ageing and old age, are archetypal in nature.

The Jungian theory postulates that the archetype is an indispensable and integral element of the collective unconscious and it constitutes definite forms in the psyche which are present everywhere, all the time (Read *et al.,* 1969: 42). For example, Jung argues that the archetype of the wise old man appears through the centuries, in all cultures. It is mainly manifested not only in the active imagination but also through dreams, which are an outlet of the contents of the collective unconscious (Read *et al.,* 1969: 215).

The wise old man is a repository of wisdom. In addition, the wise old man is distinguished because of his moral qualities, which he employs to test the moral qualities of other people. Jung argues, 'The old man, thus, represents knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral questions such as goodwill and readiness to help' (Read *et al*., 222).

It is clear, from Jung's theory, that he associates old age with wisdom. It is worth noting, however, and especially in the context of this article, that Jung does acknowledge that, while archetypes have a positive favourable side to them, they also have a negative side. Jung gives an example of a Balkan tale in which an old man is handicapped by

the loss of one eye – symbolising the idea that he has lost part of his eyesight and by extension part of his insight and enlightenment (Read *et al*., 1969: 226).

It may be concluded, therefore, that, generally, the old are a blessing to have around – that old age is an asset, not a liability. However, there are, as Jung acknowledges, exceptions to this archetype. This article will examine the place of the old people in African literature, as well as the extent to which characters of the old people may deviate from the norm because of personal deficiencies or character flaws.

The Old in African Literature

There is little difference in the portrayal of the old between Western folklore, on one hand, and Zambian folklore, on the other. Julius Chongo, one of Zambia's greatest dramatists and storytellers, told a tale entitled 'The Unfortunate Emigrants' about Sinoya and Mekerani. Upon their return to their village after retiring from the mines, the two men are tricked out of the belongings they buy from their pension by an old man – a wizard who turns them into pigs. The old man is, therefore, not only a trickster but also wicked (Wendland, 2004).

In African fiction, old people are generally portrayed as wise, be they male or female. This image is well captured in the character of Rev. Odhuno, an old man in Ogot's *The Old White Witch* who 'was often called Solomon because of his wise counsel' (Ogot, 1968: 10). Faced with a crisis caused by a nurses' rebellion at the hospital, Matron Jack banks on the wisdom of Odhuno to convince the nurses to return to work. Essentially, he has to mediate between the nurses who like him because he is 'fatherly and pure in heart' on the one hand, and, on the other, the European members of staff who look at him as 'Solomon incarnate – arbitrator and judge in difficult cases' (Ogot, 1968: 10-11).

The image of an old man as wise Solomon incarnate is central to the plot of Zambian author Luangala's novel, *The Chosen Bud*. Ndande, one of the younger characters in the novel, likens Old Sicholo, the eldest man of the Ngulube clan, to a tree stump and a stream:

> … a parent is a tree-stump. Every child who has mucus above the upper lip of his mouth scoops it between his thumb and his forefinger, and then he comes to rub it onto the stump. Every pig that gathers a lot of mud after its bath comes to scratch itself on the tree-stump. When a dog is hard pressed by the need to relieve itself, it looks for a stump, it goes there, lifts its hind leg and relieves itself. And those of us who go hunting know very well that when you catch a hare, a squirrel or mouse you kill it better by dashing its head against the tree-stump. And it is on the stump where young shoots sprout to begin life again. An elder is like a stream which is always wet, they also said. Fire can start far away in the bush, but as soon as it reaches the stream,

> even a weak child can extinguish it very easily. When we have a parent with us, we the young children will always boast of an easy source of a stiff nailed thumb which can crack our lice to give our loins some peace (Luangala, 1991: 58-9).

Quite often, therefore, the elderly characters in African literature tend to be projected or perceived as best placed to provide advice to the younger generations.

However, as in the case of the Jungian wise old man and African folklore, there are 'defective' versions of the wise old man. The latter do not always give advice and are sometimes manipulative. Thus, for example, the old man Boi, in Meja Mwangi's novel *Kill Me Quick*, starts off as an advisor and father figure to the two young men, Meja and Maina. Boi uses lies to recruit them for his white master, promising them a good salary, free food and accommodation (Mwangi, 1973: 14). When they arrive at the farm, however, they discover that the reality is far from what Boi had promised. When he is accidentally injured while visiting the two boys in their hut, he vows to pursue revenge. What follows is a subtle battle of wits between the old man and the two boys. In the end, however, the old man manages to frame the two boys and have them fired (Mwangi, 1973). Defeated, the boys can only refer to him as 'the old devil' (1973: 40).

An example of another elderly character who deviates from the image of the wise old man is Mazambezi in Chimombo's short story, *The Rubbish Dump.*

The old man works as an airport garbage collector, his daily routine is to remove garbage from the airport and deposit it at the rubbish dump outside the boundaries of the airport. However, not only does Mazambezi dump rubbish at the site, he also feeds from it and even encourages a young boy, Joey, to also feed from the rubbish heap (Chimombo, 1992: 80).

Mazambezi is not alone in his failure to provide appropriate advice and guidance and be an example to the young. Chambuleni, Wiza's father in Zambian author Binwell Sinyangwe's seminal work, *Quills of Desire*, initially appears to be a wise parent who advises his son thus:

> 'My son, life is like a queue. With patience, your turn always comes. When that time comes you are free to pick what pleases you. They say look after your neck; the beads to wear around it are as easy to find as the droppings of a chicken' (Sinyangwe, 1993: 3).

However, it is the same man who eventually indirectly causes the death of his son by attempting to force him to marry Gelina, a girl he is not in love with.

There is, however, a type of wise old man who takes the form of a trickster hero and is, therefore, not considered evil. Despite doing what is 'wrong,' such a character is praised and admired for their cleverness, as is the case with all trickster heroes of African folklore such as the spider in West Africa, the tortoise in South Africa and

the hare (or Kalulu) in Zambia. An example of a trickster-hero elderly character is Baroka in Soyinka's play, *The Lion and the Jewel*. Baroka finds himself competing with Lakunle, a much younger man, for the hand of Sidi, the belle of Ilujinle. While Lakunle is about 23 years of age, Baroka is a 62-year-old traditional ruler. Lakunle is the village school teacher and, therefore, the most educated in the area. He wants Sidi as much as Baroka does. He is confident that the mere fact that he is educated and the Bale is not, gives him an edge over the old man. He, thus, tries to impress her by using big words from the English dictionary, as well as by trying to show her that he is well-schooled in the Western way of life – the main reason he refuses to pay the bride price for Sidi.

Despite Sidi's insistence that he pays the bride price, Lakunle refuses – yet it is this ignorance of the traditional ways of his people that leads to Lakunle's failure to marry Sidi. The wily Baroka is aware of Lakunle's weakness of blindly following Western ways. He even mocks him.

True to his trickster-hero status, the Bale manages to come up with a stratagem to get Sidi for himself – and it works. He pretends to have become impotent, and, when she hears of the news from the Bale's old wife, she goes to his home to tantalise him. She says to Sadiku, the Bale's eldest wife 'I long to see him thwarted, to watch his longing. His twitching hands which this time cannot rush to loosen his trouser cords' (1974: 32).

Sadiku warns the young virgin, 'You will have to match the fox's cunningness' (32).

The Bale manages to lure her into a sexual encounter, deflowering her. In line with tradition, she becomes his wife. In the end, therefore, it is the cunningness of the old man that triumphs over the 'education' of the naïve young suitor. Baroka's wisdom and cleverness are evident not only in what he says but also in how he says it.

The clever language by Baroka is not an isolated case. Most elderly characters in African literature tend to use language characterised by wise sayings, imagery and proverbs. In Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, for example, Oba Danlola uses elevated language associated with the wisdom of the old in African society. He says to the Superintendent (Soyinka, 1974: 64):

The nude shanks of a king
Is not a sight for children –
It will blind them.
When an Oba stops the procession
And squats on the wayside,
It's on an urgent matter

Which spares neither king nor god.
Wise heads turn away
Until he's wiped his bottom.

In *The Old Man and the Medal*, Nti, described as 'a man of mature years' (1967: 151), says to Engamba, 'I will put an ember in your pipe.' The more direct words would be, 'I will continue the point you are making' (164). Similarly, old Nana in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* uses proverbial language on a number of occasions. For example, she says to Esi Kom who complains about her son's departure from the ways of their people: 'Esi Kom, leave that child alone, for no one knows what the man of fame and honour was like when he was a child' (Aidoo, 1965: 9). At another occasion she advises Ato: 'Young man, one does not stand in ant-trail to pick off ants' (1965: 38).

In African literature, the elderly are also generally perceived as father or mother figures who should be treated as such by younger people. In Ngugi's play *The Black Hermit*, the elders are projected as father figures. For example, when the elders go to talk to Remi at his flat, Remi addresses them as 'Fathers of the tribe' (Act II, Scene II). In Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* (1967), Meka is respected as a father figure in his community. To illustrate, when Meka goes to Mammy Titi's for a drink, a young man gives up his seat for him out of respect (6). Culturally, the young man is expected to treat an elderly person, even a non-relative, as he would his father or mother. Meka is, as Engamba says, 'a man of ripe years' (158).

There is, therefore, a poignant contrast between the way Meka is treated in his African community and the way he is treated by the colonial authorities on the day he goes to receive his medal; instead of being given a seat, he is made to stand, isolated in a white circle, scorched by the hot sun, while the younger white people and Africans attending the ceremony have seats (Oyono, 1967, 85-92). Meka considers himself worthy of being respected as a father figure. Thus, when, after the ceremony, he is arrested and harassed by a young police constable, Meka pleads with the young man to respect him as a 'father' (125), 'Officer, my son… listen to me just one last time! I am not a prowler, my son!'

Not only are the old generally respected and revered because of their advanced age and advisory roles, it is considered taboo to disrespect them or disregard their advice. The general perception is that the old people have the capacity to curse disrespectful younger people. An example is the case of Kalimbambo in *The Chosen Bud*. When he harasses his grandfather Old Sicholo, the old man swears and curses. 'To be beaten by your own child! It was a cursed custom which taught the young to raise their arm against their elder! The good custom taught a child to stand still and receive the beating from an elder, whether deserved or not. The Nsenga custom taught a child never to answer back when an elder was speaking to reprimand him' (Luangala, 1991: 74-5).

In Soyinka's play, *Kongi's Harvest* (1974), Oba Danlola, the old deposed king, threatens to prostrate himself before the Superintendent, who represents the new illegitimate authority. The Superintendent pleads for mercy, aware that the Oba's act of prostration would be tantamount to cursing him. In response, the Oba mocks him.

SUPERINTENDENT: I did not make any impious demands of you. All I asked was for more respect to constituted authority. I didn't ask for a curse on my head.

DANLOLA: A Curse? Who spoke of curses? To prostrate to a loyal servant of Kongi – is that a curse?

SUPERINTENDENT: Only a foolish child lets a father prostrate to him. I don't ask to become a leper or a lunatic. I have no wish to live on sour berries.

There are cases, however, when elderly people are presented as caricatures rather than patriarchs and matriarchs to be revered. The protagonist of Phiri's *Ticklish Sensation* Jojo, for instance, describes his grandmother, Loliwe Kuzwe, in not-so-pleasant terms:

> We loved moments when our eyes saw her wrinkled mouth chew words out. She had no teeth. I never saw one ever since I was born. None among us knew her age. She never told it. But I believed she must have been born when the moon was created. I came to this conclusion because she loved basking in the moonlight for long hours. I don't recall seeing her retire into her hovel when the moon was still shining. Probably she went to sleep with it; I don't know. She was a gaunt hag, who was slowly taking the shape of a shrivelled monkey. Bones stuck out of her ageing body. I wondered whether there was any flesh between those bones and skin that looked like snake peelings. She had such a squint that made you feel she was not looking at you when she was staring at us and when she was not (1973: 7).

It ought to be noted, however, that this description is in the context of the lighthearted tone of the novel. The description is consistent with the sense of humour that pervades the story. Similarly, the satirical tone of Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* is the reason the narrator says of the old man Boi the first time we encounter him:

> The old man hobbled down the back street with his large myopic eyes darting this way and that. Every now and then, he stopped to look uncomfortably behind him to peer into one of the large waste bins that littered the pavement. The stink was overwhelming and his large Negroid nose twitched uncomfortably. The afternoon sun was hot and under his white starched suit, the old man felt very uncomfortable. His sandals were slippery and dust-covered and slippery from sweat. Through the straps of the sandals, the horny toes peeped timidly out (1973: 12).

There are instances when the narrator of Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* portrays Meka in caricature-like terms, although it is worth noting that the novel is satirical in style. As Meka prepares to receive the medal, he has a zazou jacket made for him; however, he looks so ridiculous in it that his wife refuses to sew buttons on it, calling him 'a fool' (Oyono, 1967: 75). Ironically, however, Meka's wife Kelara goes on to force him to wear leather shoes that do not fit him well either – making him look more like an idiot (1967: 76).

It would appear gender is a critical factor in the way female elderly Africans are portrayed as compared to the way male elderly Africans are portrayed in African literature. African literature tends to apportion more power and leadership roles to the male elderly characters than to the female ones. It is worth noting that all the elders in *The Black Hermit* are men, as are all members of the ndichie in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. No woman qualifies to be part of the ndichie regardless of her age. Thus, when the boy Ikemefuna is given to the people of Umuofia as part of the compensation for the killing of Udo's wife, the elders of the clan decide that he 'should be in Okonkwo's care for a while' (Achebe, 1958: 25), which means he has to be taken care of by Okonkwo's most senior wife, Nwoye's mother. However, Nwoye's mother is not even consulted. Thus, when Okonkwo hands Ikemefuna over to her, he merely says to her, 'on the authority of the ndichie, he belongs to the clan. So look after him.' Nwoye's mother innocently seeks clarification, asking, 'Is he staying long with us?' Not amused, Okonkwo angrily says to her, 'Do what you are told, woman. When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?' It is apparent that the fact that Nwoye's mother, like her husband, is advanced in years, does not qualify her to be considered wise enough to be part of the clique of elders of Umuofia. The ndichie is an exclusive club for the wise old men.

Similarly, in Luangala's *The Chosen Bud*, the old men are considered to be wiser than the old women. Even when there is a family meeting to discuss a crisis, the old men take prominence over the old women. Thus, for example, though the elderly women attend a family meeting at Sokoloku's, they do not take part in the decision-making (Luangala, 1991: 35). They often could only make polite comments on the decisions that had been made by the men, and that was only when they were asked to do so. Otherwise, they only listened and supplied the men with the necessary information in some cases. Even when they disagreed with the men's decision, they could not raise a protest. But even the women themselves knew that men would very often make the right decisions because men were strong-hearted and always very well composed in times of problems. Whenever a problem arose, probably an accident, women would only resort to crying while men would always think of what to do to solve the problem (1991: 35).

An elderly woman, however, may take the leading role in leadership when there are no elderly men to take the role. An example is Loliwe Kuzwe, Jojo's grandmother in *Ticklish Sensation.* In general, she can advise younger members of the family. For example, she says to them (1973: 7):

> My son's children, keep on smiling in time of strife, strain or peace… Because if you shut up your mouth and remain pathetic, sullen and gloomy, your teeth will rot and fall out. It happened to me. Now I can't chew meat. All my good teeth are gone…

However, when a crisis develops in Njoka village, as the only elderly person around, she has to solve the problem.

Similarly, in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Nana, despite being the eldest surviving member of the clan, cannot lead discussions due to the fact that she is female. Thus, the critical discussions in the clan are led by Ato's two uncles, Petu and Akroma, particularly, Petu, even when Nana is around. Akroma, for example, says to Ato, 'Ato, they sent us to bring you a message and they asked us to take words from your own mouth to them,' (1965: 40). However, elderly women are sometimes associated with witchcraft, as is the case with Nyakasiya in *The Chosen Bud* (1991: 51), 'Nyakasiya was a very well known witch'.

It ought to be borne in mind, however, that wise old men and women of African literature tend to also be associated with the profound knowledge of the traditional ways of the people; they are the reservoirs of African cultural norms and indigenous knowledge systems. Western education, on the other hand, is projected as a threat to the indigenous African way of life. This indeed is the central thematic thread of Achebe's seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart*. It would appear that in as far as the characterisation of the old in African literature is concerned, Europeans may not be considered wise as they threaten the essence of the African ethos as epitomised by elderly African people.

The situation in Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* gives credence to this perception. While the pages of the novel are heavily populated with African characters, there is also a sizeable number of white characters, some of whom are elderly, such as the High Commissioner who comes to Doum to honour Meka with the medal. However, despite the fact that the French colonial administration chooses to honour Meka and the fact that he is of advanced age, they still fail to treat him with the respect due to an elderly African man. For a while they leave Meka standing in isolation in the middle of a white circle, in the hot sun, they, on the other hand, sit under the shade and comfort of the veranda of M. Fouconi's office (Oyono, 1967: 90).

It would appear that keeping a man of advanced age standing in the sun for more than an hour is considered, in this context, wrong and disrespectful. Meka himself is perturbed when he observes that, while he is scorched by the sun without his helmet,

the Europeans who leave to sit on the veranda ensure that they have their helmets on, 'They are wearing pith helmets and they are young… I am a poor old man but I have to leave my head baking in the sun like a lizard' (1967: 89). Thus, the Whites in *The Old Man and the Medal* are not portrayed wise but rather as evil, reckless, disrespectful, sadistic, hypocritical and even foolish – foolish enough to think Meka and his fellow villagers are too ignorant to ever see the hypocrisy and deceitfulness behind the awarding of the medal.

The Old Man and the Medal ultimately reflects the dilemma of elderly characters in the light of the deculturalisation and Westernisation of African society. In the colonialist's mind, Meka is just as ignorant as any other African who has not undergone Western education. On the other hand, to most of the Africans attending the medal ceremony, Meka is a symbol of wisdom. Westernisation is a threat to the revered position of elderly characters in African literature. Thus, for example, in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Ato returns from his studies in the United States with a different attitude towards his people's culture and traditions. He abandons the communal approach to life, which emphasises family and respect for elders, and instead adopts an individualistic Western way of life. Instead of first informing the elders of his clan about his plans to marry and seeking their guidance and involvement, he makes an individual decision to marry Eulalie, an African-American woman he meets in the United States. His elderly uncles, Petu and Akroma, his ageing mother Esi Kom, his aunties and Naana, his grandmother, are all shocked that he marries without consulting the elders (Aidoo, 1965: 10-12). To fail to consult the elders of the clan is tantamount to disrespecting them and violating longstanding traditions. Hence, Naana is worried about how she would explain what transpired once she dies and joins the ancestors.

In urban settings where Westernisation is a big factor, therefore, elderly characters appear misplaced and are not accorded space to play the role of reservoirs of wisdom. They do not even receive the amount of respect they generally receive in rural or traditional settings as portrayed in African works of fiction or drama. This is the position in which Boi finds himself in Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*. When, for instance, he first encounters the two boys Meja and Maina when recruiting them, the boys show open disrespect for him, mockingly referring to him as an 'old crow' (1973: 13), a 'mongrel' (14). When he introduces himself as 'Boi,' they make fun of his name: 'Boy! Have you lost your way to the asylum old man? You must have made a wrong turning. We cannot direct you though. We have not been there, yet' (13). Similarly, in Brian Chikwava's short story *Dancing to the Jazz Goblin and his Rhythm* published in *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* (Habila, 2012) the protagonist, Jabu, who had been dependent on his grandfather's advice in handling social issues, declares, '…my faith in my grandfather had deserted me' (47).

Meka's experience reflects the ambiguous position of elderly African characters in African literature – particularly, in view of the changing times and the threat of modernisation. While the Jungian wise old man or woman is the dominant image of the old in African literature, there are a variety of corrupted or unpleasant versions of the Jungian sage. Like the old man in the Balkan tale referred to by Jung, there are some 'handicapped' old men and women; their personalities are defective.

The irony and ambiguity of Meka's being awarded a medal are projected most poignantly as he stands in the circle painted with whitewash waiting for the High Commissioner to arrive at the ceremony (Oyono, 1967). The circle represents not only isolation from his people and the white people he naively thinks he is now part of, but also the contradiction of being both respected and disrespected during the same occasion. While most of the Africans envy and respect him for being privileged to receive a medal from the High Commissioner, the Europeans have no regard for him despite being a recipient of the medal.

Like Meka, the elderly African character of African literature stands in a circle of contradiction; the circle of those both respected and disrespected because of their age. It is a circle of the elderly who are projected as indispensable to modern society in some texts of African literature while being presented as irrelevant to modern society in others; it is a circle of people who are treated both as wise by some and ignorant and backwards by others.

Conclusion

Having set out to investigate the treatment of the old in African literature, this study has arrived at a number of findings, although there should be no hesitation to mention that the findings are only with regard to the texts analysed and may not, therefore, be said to apply to every African literary text dealing with elderly people. Firstly, the study has established that there are some similarities and differences in the portrayal of old people in African and Western literature, although the treatment of the elderly in the folklore of both traditions tends to be similar. In general, both African and Western folklore project older characters as an epitome of wisdom, reflecting Carl Jung's archetype of the wise old person. In both cases, however, there are some departures from the 'norm' with characters such as witches and wizards.

Secondly, the study has revealed that in African literature the association of elderly people with experiential wisdom does not betray any gender bias. Both male and female elderly characters are treated as wise and respectable, and deserving of respect; they are perceived and projected as problem-solvers, builders of social cohesion, reservoirs of cultural norms, father and mother figures (or patriarchs and

matriarchs) and the first as well as last stop for those seeking guidance on matters of life. Examples include old Nana and Loliwe Kuzwe in *The Dilemma of a Ghost and Ticklish Sensation* respectively.

It would appear from the findings, however, that elderly males have more authority – and by extension receive more respect – than elderly females. This is largely due to the fact that the narratives unfold in patriarchal African social contexts where power, wealth and authority are generally associated with men. Thus, for example, the ndichie in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a male establishment, as is the group of elders in *Ngugi's Black Hermit*. In the absence of elderly males in the community, however, elderly females take over the responsibility of guiding the younger people.

Thirdly, elderly characters are so revered that they are perceived and portrayed as having the power to curse the younger people if provoked or disrespected. Thus, for example, in Luangala's *The Chosen Bud,* Old Sicholo curses his grandson Kalimbambo for beating and insulting him. The implication is that the old man's curse is responsible for Kalimbambo's tragic end. Similarly, the Superintendent in Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* is afraid that any act of prostration by the deposed old King, Oba Danlola will amount to a curse on him. Hence, he pleads with the old man not to curse him.

Fourthly, the study has revealed that there are, however, departures from the positive portrayal of the elderly. The first type of departure does not, however, appear to be condemned by the narrators. This is when an elderly character is portrayed as a trickster hero – and trickster heroes such as the hare, spider and tortoise are much-loved characters of African folklore. Bale Baroka, the old chief in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, falls into this category. A good manipulator of language, he manages to trick the village beauty, Sidi, into marrying him at the expense of the educated but self-gratifying Lakunle.

Fifthly, the study has shown that there are, however, some elderly characters who are portrayed in negative terms because of deficiencies in their behaviour. Examples include Boi and Mazambezi in Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and Chimombo's *The Rubbish Dump* respectively. Such characters are, nonetheless, the exception rather than the norm. There is also a tendency, in some instances, to stereotype the old as not attractive or desirable. Thus, for example, Loliwe Kuzwe and Boi, in *Ticklish Sensation* and *Kill Me Quick* respectively, are described in terms that cast them as caricatures. This point needs to be made sparingly, however, because the two works are written in a humorous tone and the mood occasionally tends to be light-hearted.

In addition, it is worth noting that Boi is placed in an urban environment which, because of the effects of modernisation – which in essence is Westernisation – tends to downgrade the role of the elderly in social development.

Sixthly, generally, elderly characters receive more respect in the rural setting than in the urban one. Hence, Boi is not the only one who suffers disrespect from younger people; Mazambezi also suffers humiliation. The ill-treatment of the elderly finds its most poignant expression in the humiliation suffered by Meka at the hands of Europeans and their African collaborators in Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*. Meka is ill-treated by the Europeans who purport to have given him a medal of honour and gratitude. Western culture is portrayed as decadent and corrupt in part because of its disrespect for the elderly Meka. It is, additionally, presented as a negative influence on the Africans who embrace it, in particular, the law enforcement officers who arrest and humiliate Meka. The circle in which Meka is placed at the medal-giving ceremony epitomises the peculiar and ironic condition of the elderly characters in African literature still respected by those who value traditional African values, but disregarded and degraded by those who have embraced Western values.

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