

Elements of Romanticism in Melamu's "The Quest."

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Abstract

The paper examines the extent to which Melamu's "The Quest" depicts Romantic elements, and how it conforms to the structure of literary quest. As a Romantic literary scholar, there is no doubt that John Melamu was influenced by Romantic poets, and in reading "The Quest", one can certainly identify a number of characteristics of Romanticism such as Romantic strive against racial boundaries or limitations placed on his race, individuality, vision of what literature is or should teach, and what the society should be like, the expression of intensely felt emotion and the infinitude nature of the Romantic quest. His is a literary quest, which from time to time was impeded by 'monstrous' perils [social and educational obstacles beyond his control] occasioned by the political and educational climate of the day. "The Quest" follows the quest pattern: he starts a journey with a purpose, fulfills his task because of his special qualities, overcomes perils, discovers the object of his quest, but over and above all resolves to continue the search even after his accomplishment of the goal.

Keywords: Quest, Romanticism, identity, obstacles, fulfilment.

Introduction

Hornby (2000) defines quest as "a long search for something especially for some quality such as happiness, to search for something that is difficult to find." Based on this definition, Oketch (2015), argues that since the quest hinges on movement and personal experience of the hero, its authors impose patterns of their lives and construct coherent journey stories out of them, which involves the hero's desire to achieve a certain goal. In stories of the quest, heroes are on the brink of a great change.

John Campbell, cited by Taitt (1974) defines a quest as a monomyth, the standard path of which involves a magnification of the formular represented in the rite of passage: separation-initiation and return. Northrop Frye (1957) in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* distinguishes three stages in a successful quest: the journey, struggle, and exaltation of a hero. He further asserts that in some quests, there is not necessarily a conflict. All definitions by the cited critics converge towards a common structure of a quest: hero, journey, obstacles, and the triumph of the protagonist. Melamu's "The Quest" embodies historical and political reality during the apartheid

regime in South Africa. It is a search undertaken over a defined period: the apartheid era, in a South African black township with an intended motive of the search stated at the outset. The hero's ultimate success not only benefits both the quester and the society.

This paper argues that Melamu's "The Quest" follows the quest structures postulated by the cited authors, in depicts a resemblance to quests undertaken by English Romantic poets, notably Lord George Byron in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*. According to Bloom (1970), there are two main elements of the major phase of the Romantic quest, the first being, the inward overcoming of the selfhood temptations and the second, the outward turning of the triumphant imagination free of further internalizations.

Theoretical Framework

John Forster, cited at <http://alwaysaquest.wikispaces.com/The+Quest+Theory> (accessed on 9/7/2022), outlines elements of a quest as follows: a quester, a place to go, a stated reason to go there, challenges and trials en route, and the real reason for the quest. Apart from this, the paper borrows from the theory of logotherapy's notion of the quester's strife to find a meaning in one's life. Logotherapy was developed by Viktor Frankl (1962), a psychiatrist and psychotherapist and it helps one to find personal meaning in life. It is a form of psychotherapy that is focused on the future and on our ability to endure hardships and suffering through a search for purpose. It is a pursuit of meaning for one's life. However, the theory can be used beyond therapy. It can be used, as in this case, as a philosophical approach to the analysis of personal experience. Along such stance, Leontiev (2016)'s asserts that Socrates philosophy advances the guidance of a person towards answering one's life questions, constructing a meaning of their life, and facilitating the capacity of working through one's life experiences. This argument will be useful in illuminating the nature of Melamu's "The Quest".

Analysis of the text

"The Quest" is an inaugural lecture presented by Professor Melamu, then the Professor of English in the Faculty of English, University of Botswana. The inaugural lecture traces his life from a tender age in Sophiatown, South Africa during the apartheid era to an English Professor. Melamu writes about his development as a black boy in the township and the limited access to English novels because of lack of libraries in the area and the banning of some books and magazines by the apartheid regime. It further sheds light on how he managed to buy some books with the minimal allowance he got from her grandmother who worked as a "kitchen girl". His quest for knowledge, like other literary quests depicts a movement from a place of illiteracy to literacy, which was riddled with obstacles, which he like other questers, overcame and ultimately attained his goal.

The paper argues that Melamu's "The Quest" conforms to the stipulated quest as postulated by Forster. He is the quester who embarks on a literary journey to master the English language and discover the meaning of literature and hence his is a search for knowledge. It depicts his escape from the chasm of illiteracy, of darkness of the mind, and his battle against restrictions of the historical moment orchestrated by the apartheid regime of the time in South Africa. He then resolved to break through impediments to attain fulfilment of his search for self fulfilment and as

a student and a teacher of literature. Melamu reads literature not only for art's sake, but also as a mirror of human life; a piece of work that should not only be consumed, but critically analysed.

Melamu shares fundamental similarities with Romantic poets such as George Gordon Lord Byron who searched for the truth about the world and himself as depicted in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*. Daniel Westwood (2017), developing Harold Bloom's argument that the Romantics create an 'internalized' quest-romance, shows each poet formulating their own unique sense of quest. Westwood argues that while Byron tends towards disruption only to stop short of dismantling quest, Shelley's quest revels in a purposeful precariousness. For Keats, quest represents a means of enacting his voyage towards capable poethood.

As an English Romantic poetry scholar and teacher, Melamu was naturally baptized into their literary works and lives, and in his "The Quest" reflects the phases of the quest motif, which are reflected in the romantic poets' works. Like Byron, he breaks free from apartheid educational and political restrictions, triumphs over all obstacles, and finds his true sense of identity as a teacher of literature. For Melamu, it was a quest for identity and knowledge, a vocation that involved a lot of reading and acquisition of skills of reading literature and discerning hidden and mysterious themes across all genres. To achieve his goal, he had to master the use of English language and the teaching of literature.

His quest for knowledge is depicted through his determination to gain knowledge despite lack of libraries and censorship of certain texts by the apartheid regime. He intends to move from "kitchen English" used by black servants to communicate with their masters to orthographic English. This was a hazardous adventure since there was no school library. Melamu describes his quest as "a bumpy road" since he could only borrow one book a week from an adjacent western native township's library. His perseverance resembles that of English Romantic poets' protagonists. Harold in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* never gives up his quest even in the face of danger:

Awaking with a start,
The waters heave all around me; and on high
The winds lift up their voices: I depart,
Wither I know not; but the hour's gone by,
When Albion's lessening shores could grieve or glad
mine eye. (Canto III, I, 5-9)

The similarity between the hero in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* and the quester in Melamu's "The Quest" depicts the hero's resolute and unwavering intention to seek fulfilment of the object of his search against all odds. The hero's determination speaks to their autonomy. Autonomy is the capacity and ability of the individual to make valid choices of behaviour in the light of their needs. This means that a person may decide to conform to societal restrictions or may decide to be an innovator. Autonomy also implies that one must admit that he/she has certain needs, and embark on a journey, in pursuit of their fulfillment.

Melamu's quest is not without obstacles. He faces several impediments along his literary journey and must navigate his way around them to fulfil his goal. At the beginning of the quest, he laments, "as I took the first unsteady steps in the "quest", it was indeed a bumpy road." The bumpy road is characterized by lack of reading material at primary school level, and limited access to books in the library due to large numbers of students at secondary school level. He does not recall "seeing any drama or poetry in that apology for a [school] library" (p.7). However, there was a small library in Soweto which was "relatively adequately stocked in most areas of English Literature." The banning of certain literature which the apartheid government classified as subversive added to his woes. Comic books were viewed as the "devil's literature" which could be "unhealthy for the moral development" of young people and were not supposed to be read by students. However, through perseverance, strong will and curiosity, he triumphed over these hurdles by stealthily reading a collection he attained through the allowance he received from his grandmother.

Another hurdle was the secondary school examination which he failed because of essay topics which demanded them to write on "Afrikaner" or white life experiences. "This", he writes, "was a serious set-back for all of us, as we had toyed with the ambition of entering University. For me, [I] embarked upon a voyage of discovering the essence of literature". In his search, he comes across literature texts like William Shakespeare's *Lamb Tales*, tragedies like *Othello*, which helped him understand the racial segregation prevalent in the apartheid South Africa. His literary journey takes him to Indian novels, Arabic literature, and Victorian novels such as Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and others, which he does not just read for pleasure, but learns about the debilitating conditions of the poor during the Victorian period. It is important to note that unlike Harold, whose quest takes him to physical geographical spaces like Greece, Spain, Portugal, and France, Melamu's quest takes him through literary spaces and cultures represented in the literary texts that he reads. It is this acquisition of the English language through reading that leads to his achievement as expressed in "The Quest". He proclaims:

In time I graduated from Superman and Captain Marvel to classical literature, which had the double advantage of providing me with a good story and helping me in my attempt at improving my language skills. Therefore, in spite of my headmaster's reactionary views, the comics went a long way, not only towards fostering my passion for reading, but also cultivating and refining my love of literature. (10-11)

Another obstacle in his "rite of passage"; his literary evolution from secondary school to tertiary institution, is failing the J.M.B. examination. He laments, "the sum of what I am saying is that all twenty-nine of us in our form V class, failed the essay, failed English and failed J.M.B. of course... But you see, J.M.B. had a way of clipping people's wings." (12 &13) In order to survive the setback, he finds solace in Bunyan's hymn in *The Pilgrim's Progress* which reads, "There is no discouragement shall make him once relent his first avowed intent to be a pilgrim."¹ This kind of perseverance is found in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* when Harold declares:

But in Man's dwellings he became a thing

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Restless and worn, and stern and wearisome,
 Drooped as a wild-born falcon with clipt wing,
 To whom the boundless air alone were home:
 Then came his fit again, which to o'ercome,
 As eagerly the barred-up bird will beat
 His breast and beak against his wiry dome
 Till the blood tinge his plumage, so the heat
 Of his impeded soul would through his bosom eat.
 (Canto III, XV. 127-135)

The excerpt above clearly portrays Harold's determination to break away from bondage or confinement and embark on a quest to gain freedom from Albion. The comparison of man to a caged bird shows how stifled the protagonist is by the environment he finds himself in his society. He feels caged by stifling societal conventions and moral standards. His continued struggle against societal manacles, and his yearning for freedom knows no limit. He is determined to embark on a quest for self-discovery against all odds. He admits that trying to break away will hurt him, after all it is never easy to fight any system. However, he is adamant that he will surely break through and fulfill his vocation. The "fit" that comes again symbolizes the internalized urge within him to break free from his society. The protagonist ultimately leaves Albion and sails across Europe:

Once more upon the waters! Yet once more!
 And the waves bound beneath me as a steed
 That knows its rider. Welcome to the roar!
 Swift be thy guidance, wheresoe'er it lead!
 Though the strained mast should quiver as a reed,
 And the rent canvas flattering strew the gale,
 Still must I on; for I am as a weed,
 Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam to sail
 Wher'er the surge may sweep, the tempest's breath prevail.
 (Canto III, II. 10-18).

Melamu like Harold does not give up after failing the J.M.B. examination, but sits for a supplementary exam and passes. He states “I learned from this experience that I should not take anything for granted in my quest after self-realization. I learned that attaining what I set my mind on will not come easily, that I have to gear myself for unexpected reverses in the process of trying to reach my goals. This was the rude awakening which the J.M.B. English examination gave me.” (14). As a teacher, he faces prejudice and skepticism from students like Malinga and Nqosa, who believe that no African can teach them English literature. However, he proves them wrong by fervently and meticulously teaching *Othello*, to the bafflement of his antagonists. Like a true Romantic scholar, he presses on, bearing his cross with fortitude.

The quest always reaches an end, a fulfilment of the vocation of the hero. The paper argues that Melamu indeed fulfilled his quest for identity as a teacher and scholar of English literature. He triumphed over internal conflicts and uncertainties regarding the choices he had made in life concerning his career. When faced with uncertainties, he finds direction from the works of some literary giants such as Robert Frost’s “The Road not Taken”; Sophocles’ *King Oedipus*; Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and understands that once one has taken a certain road, he/ she cannot reverse their steps. If one encounters perils along the way, they must find a way to deal with them. Even though he comes to the end of his journey, he feels that he still has new discoveries to make and hence his search, like that of a Romantic, is infinite, and the truth about literature and life still has to be discovered. He evaluates his journey by saying:

What of my “journey”? I have referred to “journey’s end” which should, like our four “frame- journeys”, culminate in “discovery” and/ or “self- discovery”, be it “fulfilment” or ultimate “self-disgust”.... But since literature is “life” there is no way in which I could claim to have reached the end of my “pilgrimage”. The fascinating thing about literature is that it is, as it were, self- perpetuating and has a way of insisting on its “infinity”. And how does one impose finality on what is intrinsically infinite? I can, therefore, not define the exact parameters of the “quest” in which I am involved. I can only speak of the end of a particular phase of an on-going “journey”/ “search”. Even as there has been obvious progression, there is still a vast expanse of treasures and knowledge to unearth, which makes my “quest” a lifetime proposition.” (33)

At the end of the journey, Melamu has achieved literary analytical skills after learning the art of literary criticism, become a teacher and an eloquent speaker of the English Language. In “The Quest”, one finds a sense of literary growth, maturity, and fulfillment. The hero declares, “When I was a child, I reasoned like a child, / I thought like a child, /When I became a man, I put childish ways behind” words he borrows from Corinthians 13:11. In a nutshell, he no longer reads literature for enjoyment, but probed the depth of texts with which he is faced for meaning.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that Melamu’s “The Quest” follows the stages of the quest genre: the beginning of the journey, obstacles, the end which culminates in some sort of fulfilment. It

has also drawn a similarity between “The Quest” and Romantic quests especially, the infinite nature of the quest. Melamu has captured his pursuit of being and becoming because of his quest for literary accomplishment. His quest conforms to the structure of any literary quest across literary periods and genres. It is evident that the paper has located Melamu’s work as a quest motif, which according to Nagar (2017), “beautifully assimilates the core ideology of self-realization inherent in Eastern and Western thought, including African literature.

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¹Bunyan, J. 1815. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. London: R. Edwards.

¹Leontiev, Dimitry. 2016. “Logotherapy Beyond Psychotherapy: Dealing with the Spiritual Dimension”. *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna Series*