

Animal Symbolism as a Mark of Human Existential Paradox in Hope Eghagha's *Onowawi Shall Rise Again* and Bose Afolayan's *Once Upon an Elephant*

Mulikah Adeyemi LAWAL

Abstract

*At first instance, humans generally do not relish being called animals and in fact take offence when they are called such. Ironically, such people sometimes refer to themselves as certain animals in different contexts. Hence, this study examines the discourse of cultural semiotics by noting that the characteristics which cultures give different animals at different times help to elucidate the existential paradox of humans. This shows that humans, as part of nature, are capable of varying and paradoxical aspects. It is argued here that as existentialists posit, the importance and basicity of human existence, literary writers also emphasize the paradox of the human nature particularly because literature is concerned with the discourse of life or life's experiences. The paper utilizes existentialism and semiotics to expatiate the content of a literary text thereby fusing philosophy, linguistics and literature in an interdisciplinary approach. Thus, using Hope Eghagha's *Onowawi Shall Rise Again* and Bose Ademilua-Afolayan's *Once Upon an Elephant*, it is observed in this paper, that writers sometimes espouse their authorial vision via the instrument of animal symbolism (animals as symbols to expatiate the subject-matter of the texts). In other words, animals are used as symbols of the oxymoronic nature of humans as capable of dual/multiple identities. These texts based on the Urhobo and Yoruba cultures respectively emphasize the multicultural nature of the centrality of animals as cultural symbols that can be used to elucidate the nature of humans.*

Keywords: animal symbolism, existentialism, paradox, cultural semiotics, humans

Introduction

This essay attempts to examine the purview of literary symbolism with the use of animals. It investigates the way[s] humans exhibit their different and complementing characters. This is why it is thought that humans are capable of exhibiting the characteristics of different animals. This shows the paradoxical nature of human existence. Hence, this essay attempts to fuse the disciplines of philosophy, semiotics and literature. This is made possible because of the nature of literature as an image-creating discipline. Literature mirrors life and shows the way humans live in connection with other aspects of nature. This paper, therefore, investigates the way[s] in which humans exhibit

their paradoxical nature by taking on the garb of different animals. This is the ambit of this study. To do this, two texts- *Once upon an Elephant* and *Onowawi shall Rise Again*- have been meticulously chosen to illustrate the focus of the research. The essay will use aspects of existentialism, cultural semiotics and symbolism to examine the observations made in the analysis of the texts.

Hope Eghagha's *Onowawi shall Rise Again* centres on a power hungry regent who wishes to be king even when it is neither time nor his due for him to be. This regent actualizes his dream by removing all obstacles to his dream. He banishes Onowawi, his staunch critic, for complaining about his wishes to be king. In the end, the villagers led by the banished Onowawi conspire and revolt against him which saw an end to his tyrannical rule. Like Eghagha's *Onowawi Shall Rise Again*, Ademilua-Afolayan's *Once upon an Elephant* revolves around Olaniyonu (Ajanaku), a power-hungry illegitimate son of the ailing king. He asks Serubawon, his real father and head of the kingmakers, to make him king though the king was still alive but ill. Olaniyonu became king but was not satisfied as he then wanted to become immortal. To achieve this, he needed to rape seven virgins. Unfortunately for him, the sixth virgin he raped happened to be Desola, Serubawon's only daughter and his step sister. This birth the beginning of his downfall as while trying to save Desola's life, Serubawon reveals the secret to Iya Agba who helped to reverse the death of Desola thereby bringing about the death of Olaniyonu. Serubawon committed suicide out of shame.

Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework

A symbol in literature is an object or idea that suggests another abstract idea. This abstract idea being suggested may not be easily identifiable from a cursory look at the symbol. Thus, there is the need for an introspective investigation into the relationship between the symbol and the idea. Many symbolic objects have to be arbitrarily accepted in the society in order for mutual intelligibility to be achieved. For instance, the following are objects that have been accepted and generally understood:

- Red-symbolises love or danger
- Purple-symbolises royalty
- The dove –symbolises peace
- The heart shape-symbolises love, etc.

Thus some objects, colour, etc. have already established ideas that they represent. However, in literature, the writer may espouse many other things to symbolise the ideas embedded in the text. This position is elucidated by Heitkamp (1971) who posits that a symbol in literature is:

... a trope which combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect. In other words, it is an object which exists itself and at the same time suggests something else, something abstract (i).

Heitkamp's definition of the symbol above emphasizes the idea that the symbol usually has its connotative and denotative aspects as the "abstract or suggestive". The abstract idea has to be inferred from the surrounding discussion ongoing in the text. This is why the symbol is different from the sign which portrays exactly what is being reflected. It is in a bid to understand the nature of the symbol that Heitkamp juxtaposes it with the sign thus:

William York Tindall distinguishes symbol from sign by defining sign as an exact reference to something definite and symbol as an exact reference to something indefinite (iii).

In literature, symbols are used to expatiate the idea a writer is trying to pass across. This is why they usually deal with abstract ideas and concepts. A literary text is said to make use of symbolism when there are many symbols that elucidate a particular idea in it. This means in essence that the symbol can be taken as a sign when it is related to an idea. This is why semiotics as linguistic discipline is related to literary symbolism. Daniel Chandlers puts it succinctly thus:

Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as "signs" in everyday speech, but of anything which "stands for something else.... Contemporary semioticians study signs not only in isolation but as part of semiotic sign-systems (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made and how reality is interpreted (2002:2).

The quote above emphasizes the idea that signs and symbols help in the creation of the meanings of texts. It also shows the way(s) in which societies generate meanings from happenings that design their realities. In addition, by focusing on signs that signify not just their signified but something more abstract, semiotics discusses both the denotative and connotative aspects of a subject. The connotation is the attributive meanings that an object, for instance, achieves by its usage in contexts. This is different from the denotative meaning that focuses on the literal meanings of words. Semiotics deals more with connotative meanings that are derived from the ways objects generate meanings as they are being used in context. Thus, this essay views the use of animals in the dialogue of characters as an expansion of the meanings of the texts in terms of the ways in which characters exhibit their paradoxical characteristics while using the natures of multiple animals. These natures por-

tray the existential belief in the paradox of human nature. In the opinion of Edward Quinn (2006), a paradox is “an apparent contradiction that asserts a truth”. This definition shows that by taking on the garb of multiple animals, humans contradict themselves in order to assert the truth of the possibility of a dual personality which they exhibit at varying times.

On its part, existentialism is a philosophical doctrine that upholds the existence of humans over any other thing. More Vijay Raosaheb (2016) puts it succinctly thus: “Existentialism believes in individual’s personal experiences.... French existentialist famous dictum “existence comes before essence”, which implies that there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which it makes for itself” (2016:15). This statement helps to foreground the focus of this essay and its interest in the way(s) humans (as represented by characters in the texts under review) create an essence for themselves in different contexts especially after establishing their existence. In the opinion of Stefan Bolea:

Existentialism emphasises the inherent creativity of the human subjects, who must find their “personal truths” and have to invent meaning, even though they are living in a world where absurdity is unavoidable ((2014:5).

This justifies the idea that humans sometimes relish being called animals and sometimes detest it. This happens in different contexts. The absurdity of the human world is also seen when an individual can adopt the different and opposing characteristics of other creatures. To emphasise this, the existential concepts of absurdity, anxiety and choice are used as the backdrop for analysis. Existentialists posit that the concept of absurdity captures the meaninglessness of life such that good people die and evil sometimes triumph. This meaninglessness is foregrounded by man’s search for order in the face of chaos. The existential concept of anxiety is based on the idea of freedom. This is because anxiety impedes the satisfaction man enjoys as a result of his freedom. What this means is that man is in constant dread over the consequences of his freedom and thus cannot enjoy the freedom as he would love to. This also leads to the concept of choice as the ultimate evaluator. Man is free to choose the way he wants to act and this leads to the establishment of his essence. Ironically, this choice is capable of spelling doom for the individual if it is not a good one. This essay examines the manner with which humans exhibit the varying personalities that animals possess. Many times, humans have to make choices that manifest their anxiety as well as the absurd nature of the world that gives room for a paradox that is at once contradictory and true. At this juncture, it is perhaps necessary to justify the relation-

ship between literature and existential philosophy. Literature focuses on the experiences of humans in relation to one another. It also shows the way individuals relate with others like them in the society. This is also true of existentialism. Bolea says: “William Barret (1962) reveals an important piece of the existentialist discourse: the central subject of the existential philosophers is “the unique experience of the single one, the individual” ((2014:66). However, Bolea is quick to add that the focus on the individual does not generate the belief in solipsism. He retorts thus:

We have thus a philosophy of the individual extracted from the serial mass: but not a new solipsism: the way the individual interacts with others or how he is immersed in social life, his effort to build an authentic existence, interests us greatly.... Existentialism is relatively prosperous even today in psychology, in pop culture and in everyday life (the immanence of existentialism in our lives is revealed through the fact that choice is primordial in our lives, moreover, that we live in a culture of choice (Bolea, 2014:66-68).

In essence, any critical work that looks at the way in which humans coexist in the society is hinged on the discourse of existentialism whether consciously or not. Therefore, if it has been established that existentialism is immanent in human lives, it becomes important for every discipline (more importantly literature which prides itself as the mirror of the society) to study it. The way in which existentialism focuses on the ways individuals create their own essence shows that it focuses on the way(s) humans live and coexist with others in the society. Raosaheb comments thus: “existentialism, clearly, is not concerned with explaining, nor changing, nor contemplating the world, but rather with lived participation in it” (2016:19). In essence, the theory examines the manner humans interact, cohabit and participate in the daily affairs of life. The process of participating in life activities usually reflects the paradox of the human nature.

Animal Symbolism in *Once Upon an Elephant* and *Onowawi* Shall Rise Again

The first and perhaps the most significant use of animals as symbols in the texts is the fact that the use of animals as symbols can be used to show the summary of the texts. This is so because by plotting a chronicle of the adages/sayings of the characters that use animals as symbols, one can reveal the summary of the plot of the text. Thus, animals are symbolic as the tale tellers in the plays. In the beginning of *Once upon an Elephant* (hereafter called *Once*), Serubawon says: “Akinjobi dies slowly. Nobody can help him now, nothing

can bring back his own hand of time, because his horse has finished its own race" (16).

The above statement refers to Oba Akinjobi as a horse because he is of the royalty and the horse represents the honour with which members of the upper class journey round the town. However, the horse "has finished its own race" because the man is dying thereby leaving the seat vacant and paving way for the tyrant, Ajanaku. After he (Ajanaku) becomes king, he reveals that he knows the chiefs do not like him because of his high handedness. He also believes that the people will gang up against him one day.

Ajanaku: I had thought that if a cock crows on earth, its peers in heaven respond. But do we have such corresponding gestures from those who twirl around us? (25)

Ogundele: Our elders have decided to stand by royalty.

Ajanaku: Like locusts draw strength from number to strike down a branch from the farm?

Odejimi: The baldness which affects the vulture is hardly the reason of its carrying heavy loads. There is hardly any reason to doubt the support of the elders (26).

Using animals like cock, locusts, and vulture, the excerpt above reveals the fact that after taking over power forcefully, the people do not like Ajanaku and he knows. He lives in a sort of disguised fear of the people he is king over who can come together like "locusts" to defeat him. Symbolically, this foreshadows the events that eventually lead to the fall of Ajanaku as the people actually struck the dictator like a swarm of locusts. Odejimi, on his part, talks tongue in cheek by saying that there is no reason for the king to "doubt the support of the elders". He retorts that the vulture is not bald because of the load it carries, thereby signifying that the chiefs are not against Ajanaku because he is king but are merely concerned about the manner in which he becomes king.

Later on, Ajanaku continues in his oppression of the people and indeed shows his rascality. He takes the wives of citizens of the land by force, seizes peoples' lands and even rapes Desola, who unknown to him is his half-sister. His rascality is emphasised in the dialogue he has with Iya Agba thus:

Ajanaku: What do you want in my palace?

Iya Agba: My palace is never the right word for aking worthy of his position to say, Olaniyonu.

Ajanaku: You must call me by my rightful name. I am Ajanaku, conqueror of lands and forests!

Iya Agba: Oh true indeed. The lizard may resemble a crocodile, but they are certainly different... you really have matured in your rascality. Your father will be so proud of you, Olaniyonu (36-8).

King Olaniyonu insists that he be called Ajanaku, meaning Elephant. Later, he praises himself saying "...Ajanaku, who tramples the forest and homestead alike" (61). After Ajanaku exhibits his rascal behaviour by raping Desola, Odekunle's friends mock and warn him that the rape is as a result of the secret meeting place he goes with Desola. Dele (Odekunle's friend) says: "the snake that travels alone gets killed by the farmer" (52). The animal symbols conclude the summary when Ajanaku himself confirms his stupidity and oppression of the people which later leads to his downfall.

Ajanaku: Perhaps Iya Agba was right after all - I am Ajanaku, the big and senseless elephant stalking the community in shame and foolishness. I sit on the throne but it is you who hold the rope and hook in your hand. And me? Just the miserable fish swallowing gullibly and hungrily without sense. So whatever appeals to you, you do with the hook, the rope, and the fish. How brilliant can that be!" (63).

In Ajanaku's statement above, he first illustrates the nature of animals as incapable of rational thought. This is indeed why animals do not wish to be referred to as animals. He emphasizes the ironic nature of animals by "stalking" their own community in "shame and foolishness". Thus, as animals prey on their kind, Ajanaku also relates himself to them as he has become a terror to even his own people. In the same vein, Ajanaku (the elephant) relates himself to the fish that Serubawon uses as he wills just as the fisherman uses the hook as bait for the fish. Serubawon uses power as bait to lure Ajanaku into an eventual self-destruction. It is paradoxical that the king can be referred to as an elephant and a fish. Both animals are not even similar in size or character. The elephant is bigger and cannot be baited easily. This is why a Yoruba adage goes thus: "*eni ti o ba fe pegan ajanaku ni o nso wipe mo ri nkan firi, ti a ba r'erin ki a so wipe a r'erin*" (it is he who is jealous of the elephant that says I caught a glimpse of something, if we see an elephant, let's acknowledge it). But because Ajanaku, the king, desires power, he exhibits his "fishlike" characteristics by letting himself to be easily baited by Serubawon, who already has his own selfish desires. Therefore, in different contexts, Ajanaku is an elephant and a fish. When he oppresses the people, he becomes like an elephant trampling on lesser animals but when he falls prey to Serubawon's antics, he becomes like a fish that is easily baited.

Chief Onowawi: Something great must be in the offing! Our people say
when you see rabbit

The nature of the rabbit and rat scampering in urgency to get what they want is used here to symbolize the impending events to follow particularly the urgency with which the regent wants to be king. Later, the regent reveals his intention to become king. This he does by also using animals as symbols.

Here, the regent uses the analogy of the crowing cock that initiates the rising of the serious farmer to suggest that it is also time for him to take over the throne as he believes the cock has crowed for him too. He also calls the enemy towns “locusts” and thus uses the image of the swarm of locusts to symbolises the way the enemy towns have taken advantage of the weakness of the society to invade her because the present king is ill. After informing the people of his intention to take over the mantle of leadership of the community, the regent proclaims himself as king and even boasts about it. Onowawi warns him about the repercussions of his actions while the town crier cautions the people not to disobey the tyrant king. All of these are done with the aid of animal symbolism thus:

Onowawi: Do not let us like the hen

Scatter that which we have gathered! (13)

When the snake sheds its skin

He does not return to the same spot (14)

Regent: The snake becomes a formidable foe

After shedding its skin (14)

Town crier: Any man who decides to be deaf

After hearing the lion's cry

Should not blame the witches

In his family for his death (25).

Onowawi warns the regent to seek caution against the consequences of his rash acts and admonished that the regent taking over power by force will be synonymous to the hen that scatters what it has gathered. Here, Onowawi foreshadows that the unity of the society will be discarded or scattered if the regent does not follow due process. He also cautions the regent that his actions are more or less like conscious acts to detach himself from the co-operation of the community. To this, the regent replies that he is ready, in fact, to be not only an outsider to the people but also an enemy. On his part, the town crier calls the regent-turned-king a lion which is a reference to his strength and ruthlessness. In essence, the regent portrays behaviors antithetical to the expected behaviour of a leader. He does not even give room for antagonism or suggestion but merely issues orders. This is why he banishes Onowawi from the palace for daring to counter his opinion. In the end, the revolution that serves as an end to every tyrannical rule occurs as Onowawi leads the people to unseat the regent.

While advocating for the unity necessary for the eventual revolution that occurs, Onowawi says: "let us not like/ Flies which assembly can be overrun / By a shake of the hand" (37). Thus, it is clear and unarguably so that when read together excluding all other speeches, the dialogues involving the use of animals as symbols alone can be used to summarise the texts.

In addition to serving as a form of chronicle of the synopsis of the texts, the use of animals as symbols in the text shows that the existential nature of humans suggests, like existentialists do, that like animals have varying characteristics and have the prerogative of manifesting whichever they prefer at varying times so do humans. Ajanaku and the regent in Afolayan and Eghagha's texts respectively both have their good and romantic sides which they show to their wives and other loved ones. However, they prefer to be thought of as strong and difficult characters and this is the aspect of their character which they manifest more even to the wives they sometimes show some love

to. This idea establishes the existential paradox of humans. In the same vein, it emphasizes the existential idea of “existence preceding essence” and illustrates the fact that man is not inherently evil but develops his essence (his nature/ characteristics) as he grows in or within the society. Thus, character is a societal construct. Our society sometimes moulds us into the kinds of persons we become. This fact is illustrated in the texts under review. Ajanaku in Afolayan’s *Once* is described as a rascal from childhood. Proclaiming it himself, he remembers with a sort of nostalgia how he used to fight and bully his childhood friends and colleagues. He also remembers how his father used to praise him for being a brave boy. Hence, the father unknowingly and inadvertently encouraged the oppressive rascality exercised by the boy. This is what Yalom, D. V. (1931) refers to as “existential isolation”, whereby a child does not get the necessary guide and care he requires and needs leading to a conflict between human desire for freedom and a need for someone to look up to. The researcher (Yalom) puts it succinctly thus:

The child’s basic need is for security - for interpersonal acceptance and approval- and the quality of interaction with security providing significant adults determines his or her character structure. The child, though not powered by instincts, nonetheless has great innate energy, curiosity, an innocence of the body, an inherent potential for growth, and a wish for exclusive possession of loved adults. These attributes are not always consonant with the demands of surrounding significant adults, and the core conflict is between these natural growth inclinations and the child’s need for security and approval. If a child is unfortunate enough to have parents so caught up in their own neurotic struggles that they can neither provide security nor encourage autonomous growth, then severe conflict ensues (6-7).

By inference, the child believes he or she needs the approval of the significant adult. Thus, when this is absent, the child succumbs to either his id desires or societal pressure from which he could incur ruin to an extent that it may affect the larger society. In essence, Yalom does not believe that the child can, based on his freedom to choose, decide to emulate other good adults in the society regardless of whether the significant adult is responsible or not since goodness is usually obvious to all. Hence, Yalom gives the child who has no responsible significant adult an easy route to choose chaos and anarchy.

This idea is portrayed in Afolayan’s text when the ailing king (Olaniyonu’s supposed father) and Serubawon (Olaniyonu’s biological father) ironically got a slice of his son’s bad behaviour when he (Ajanaku) humiliates him by recounting the gory manner in which the king died to the astonishment of strangers who wonder how a child could humiliate his father so. It

is possible that the boy could have turned his strengths to more worthwhile and laudable deeds if he had been trained so by the significant adults in his life all of whom turned out irresponsible. This elucidates the existential concept of choice, anxiety and absurdity. Being devoid of proper parental control, Olaniyonu makes a bad choice and eventually suffers for it. His downfall is foreshadowed when he mentions that he is probably the fish that is being baited by Serubawon. This shows his state of anxiety having become conscious of the possibility of his failure as a result of the choices he makes. The writer amplifies the absurd nature of the society when King Akinjobi, Desola, Omoyeni and Iya Agba all suffer the consequences of actions they know nothing of. This is also true of Eghagha's *Onowawi Shall Rise Again* where the regent suffers the consequence of his tyrannical rule. It is also culturally symbolic that the regent and Ajanaku both use the cock and locust symbolism. The cock shows how the tyrants blow their own trumpets living in the splendor of their self-praise. The locust symbolism projects the eventual revolution that brings an end to every oppressive rule.

In addition to this existential outlook, cultural semiotics, on its part, attempts a survey into the sign and interpreter relationship within a culture. It examines the "advantages and disadvantages which an individual experiences in belonging to a specific culture" (Posner). The cultural semiotics embedded in Afolayan and Eghagha's texts reveal the idea that the Yoruba and Urhobo cultures (from which both texts get their oral and historical origins) respectively give people the advantage of warning before doom. Essentially, people are warned several times to take on good behaviour in order not to perish. Most of the time, animals are used to portray the repercussion of certain deeds to humans. This fact is illustrated on many occasions in the texts analysed here. As such, humans sometimes see themselves in animals.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted a summary of the texts via animal symbolism as exemplified in the dialogues of characters. It argues that through the use of animals as symbols, the summary of the text can be revealed. In addition, the essay notes that the characteristics which different cultures give different animals at varying times help to elucidate the essential paradoxical nature of humans. Thus, humans, as part of nature, are capable of exhibiting varying and paradoxical aspects of their nature in different contexts in order to achieve different aims. These paradoxical aspects are accounted for by the existential outlook and its belief on the fundamentality of human existence. It underscores the idea that no one is solely good or bad as humans manifest different behaviours in contexts. Bearing the possibility of a bipolar personality that

humans have and can exhibit, it is thought that it would be best that humans should endeavour to exhibit their positive sides in order to make the society a better place for all. Aside this, the essay shows that the use of animals as symbols is a multi-cultural phenomenon. This is shown via the Urhobo and Yoruba traditions in the texts reviewed. Animals are also used as symbols to expatiate the subject matter of the texts viz- tyranny and oppressive rule. Hence, it is shown that as some animals lord it over others in the jungle, humans also exhibit the same terror to other humans.

REFERENCES

- Ademilua-Afolayan, B. (2015). *Once Upon an Elephant*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.
- Bolea, S. (2014). "What is Existentialism? A Revision of Contemporary Definitions." *Studia Ubb. Philosophia*, 59(2), 63-72.
- Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.
- Eghagha, H. (2006). *Onowawi Shall Rise Again*. Lagos: Ababa Press Ltd.
- Heitkamp, J. (1971). "Nature Symbolism in the Fiction of John Steinbeck." Unpublished Masters' Thesis, Department of English, Denton, Texas.
- Osim, S. E. (2008). Symbolism: African Way of Philosophising. *African Pentecost: Journal of Theology, Psychology and Social Work*. 1 (2), 13-20.
- Posner, R. (2004). Basic Tasks of Cultural Semiotics. *Signs of Power- Power of Signs: Essays in Honour of Jeff Bernard*. Eds. Withalm, Gloria and Josef Wallmanns. Vienna: INST.
- Quinn, E. (2006). *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Raosaheb, M. V. (2016). Existentialism: A Philosophic Standpoint to Existence over Essence. *The South African Research Chronicle*, III (1), 13-20.
- Yalom, I. D. (1931). *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.