

Representation of Medical Practice in African Literature: A Comparative Analysis of Veronique Tadjou's *En Compagnie Des Hommes* and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

Ndu Augustina Orié

Department Of Modern European Languages

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

ao.ndu@unizik.edu.ng

08075065710

Abstract

Medicine is as old as man. For centuries, Medicine has increasingly come under closer scrutiny in literary text due to the fact that literature proves suitable means for addressing patients' illness concerns. Literature as a mirror of society reflects all life's endeavor of man, his fortunes and misfortunes. One main objective of medicine is the relief of human suffering, and the softening of the symptoms that cause distress to humans. In the other hand, literature aims at describing elements that cause concern or suffering to humans. In Africa, the practice of medicine has been from the beginning. Before the arrival of colonialists in Africa, roots, barks, herbs, and animal materials were used for curative purposes. This type of medicine is what is referred to as traditional medicine. This type of practice of medicine is most often embedded in African cultural beliefs. Africa coming in contact with the western world through slave trade and colonialism embraced another type of medicine that we term modern medicine. This paper investigates the representation of medical practice in African literature using Veronique Tadjou's *En Compagnie des Hommes* and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. It describes how African writers explore the ontological nexus between medical practice and literary studies, and deploying the postcolonial theory, specifically Achille Mbembe's argument, it contends that both the orthodox and traditional medical practices

are sources of health care delivery services that are available to the sick in the selected texts. It indicates that there is marginalized presence of the education on African medical culture which seems to undermine the use of African traditional medicine in the texts. Our finding is that the two systems of medical practices are represented in African literary texts but the choice of the system represented and explained in a particular text depends largely on the author's vast knowledge of any or both of them.

Keywords: Representation, medical, practice, African, comparative.

Introduction

Literature and medicine are two different disciplines but have appreciable relationship. In literature, the writer, or poet, or novelist, or drama artist diagnosis, warns, and treats social vices at individual or national level. In medicine, the doctor or medical practitioner is concerned with the maintenance of and the prevention, alleviation, or cure of diseases. He diagnoses and treats the soul, spirit, and body of the sick. As writers use different literary forms to diagnose and treat social vices so also African medical practitioners use two main systems of medicine to diagnose and treat the sick. These are modern system of medicine and traditional system of medicine. These two systems of medical practices are used in Africa to treat sicknesses and ailments as represented in the corpus. Analyzing the practice of medicine in literary texts is what we term medical literature or medical humanities. This form of literature dates back to the period of light in Europe and France as (Aja 45) noted. "L'intérêt des écrivains littéraires pour la médecine est antérieur à la période des Lumières en Europe et en France notamment parce que *Le Médecin malgré lui* et *Le malade imaginaire* (1673) de Molière et *La Peste* d'Albert Camus (1947) témoignent de la relation entre littérature et

The interest of literary writers for medicine dates back to the period of light in Europe and France, noting the work of Moliere's *Le medecin malgre lui et le malade imaginer* and Albert Camus's *La peste* shows the relationship between literature and medicine. Our translation.

From the perspective of medical literature, the chosen corpus describes different sicknesses and the different therapies used by the two medical systems known and practiced in Africa for health care delivery. It is worthy of note that writers for ages have always included medical discourse in their literary works. According to Squier:

“Writers take part in suffering, in sympathizing and also are spectators of sicknesses, epidemics and pandemics. They therefore have the responsibility to represent them either in fiction or nonfiction because fiction plays the dominating role in the articulation of biomedical imaginary, the zone that articulates the contribution of psyches in biomedicine” (124).

It is important to note that it's not only writers that exercise their creativity towards medical write ups, medical doctors are equally involved in medical humanities. (Louis 177) defined medical humanities as "programs that seek to re-introduce human and social sciences, visual arts and literature into medical field". Despite the fact that writers have contributed a lot in medical literature, literary critiques seldom find it a subject of discussion, therefore many literary critics have not really paid attention to the analysis of traditional and modern medicine, and they only view it as the enclaves of medical practitioners thereby relegating their responsibilities of societal cure through criticism to the background. Today having acknowledged literature as all encompassing, touching every aspect of human life, few critics have seen the need to evaluate medical activities and practices in

Africa through literary criticism in order to correct the social vices inherent in this practice through this medium, but we observe that many critics are yet to take up this all important responsibility hence this present work seeks to fill this gap. This role becomes very crucial as it forms part of human sciences which plays important role in the development and preservation of human culture.

Medicine is the practice concerned with the maintenance of and the prevention, alleviation, or cure of disease. According to Dictionary.com/browse/medicine online source, "Medicine is any substance or substances used in treating diseases or illnesses: It also sees medicine as the art or science of restoring or preserving health or due physical condition, as by means of drugs, surgical operation or appliances or manipulations"... Traditional medicine according to (Ezekwesili and Okaka 80348) is viewed as a "combination of knowledge and practice used in diagnosing, preventing, and eliminating disease". This may rely on past experience and observations handed down from generation to generation either verbally, frequently in the form of stories, or spiritually by ancestors or, in modern times, in writing".

Pallipedia free online palliative care dictionary observes that "Traditional medicine refers to the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, used in the maintenance of health and in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illness". Traditional medicine covers a wide variety of therapies and practices that vary from country to country and region to region. In some countries, it is referred to as "complementary" and "alternative" medicine (CAM).

According to medical news today.com online source, "Modern medicine is that field of health and healing which

includes nurses, doctors, and various specialists. It covers diagnoses, medical research, and many other aspects of health. It is also sometimes called allopathic medicine which involves the use of drugs or surgery, often supported by counseling and lifestyle measures". For Britanica.com/science/medicine online source, "Modern medicine is also called allopathic medicine. Modern medicine involves the use of drugs and surgeries to help and cure the disease or solve the problem of the patient". The goals of modern medicine are to help in the prevention of diseases, promote the health of every individual in society and improve the quality of life of individuals or groups. In literature therefore these two systems of medicine is always accounted for, either when describing Africans socio-cultural heritage in the case of traditional medicine or when describing societal problems of ill health as it affects individuals and the society at large as in the case of epidemics or pandemics and the therapeutics prescribed for solutions.

Many novelists have described characters with peculiar ill health and the different therapies used in trying to find solution to their health problems through traditional medicine or through modern medicine. In *Behind the clouds* by Ifeoma okoye, the author paints the picture of the protagonist Ije Apia in her struggles' to overcome infertility. Ije and Dozie were happily married but without children. They long for a baby to crown their happy marriage. In the cause of seeking for solution to this problem, they consulted both medical doctors (MM), herbalists (TM), and spiritualists (priests and pastors). In Ahamadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*, the mother of Birahima the narrator suffers ulcer of the leg which incapacitates her, a situation which makes walking difficult for her. Her relations trying to help, recommended modern medical treatment. The only solution prescribed by the modern medical practitioner, is to amputate the affected leg; this resulted to rejecting the treatment. They

smuggled her out of the hospital but invited a traditional medical practitioner to treat her traditionally. In Leonora Miano's *Contours du jour qui vient*, the protagonist suffers an incurable blood disease. According to the protagonist, they have spent all that they had in paying for drugs. Que depuis que papa était mort, tout ce que nous possédions passait dans le paiement de mes soins médicaux. (CJV10). She also received treatments from Kwedi, a woman who gave her decoctions to drink. The population in this novel seeks the help of priests and pastors to receive divine healing. Papa and Mama Bosangui affirm that they have through their prayers healed old Ebabadi of paralyses as the old Ebabadi testifies to the healing by walking to the front of the Alter herself without support. In Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l' Atlantique*, the author describes how her grandmother uses her experience of traditional way of delivery to help her daughter in labor. In describing the African cultural heritage through her grandmother, she exposes how this woman with her experience uses herbs to treat childhood diseases thereby making the new born fit to survive in their new environment.

In Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, the author also describes the rich cultural heritage of the Igbos of Nigeria, opening the eyes of her readers to the traditional ways of curing sicknesses in igbo land. When Ezinma was sick of Iba, Okonkwo gathered herbs, roots, and barks of tree for the treatment of Ezinma. We also note Okagbue in the same novel that the author describes as medicine man, which was believed to specialize in healing infertility and also putting an end to any form of maternal misfortune through his divine powers. Many and more novelists' have treated the issue of medicine in their works but many critics are yet to emerge to throw more light on this very important part of life.

Concept of Post-Colonialism

Post-colonialism takes the post-independence era into consideration. Post-colonialism began in the 1960s, when immigrants from already colonized countries arrived in American and British universities and colleges and began to analyze their history. This term results from the colonial phenomenon and its effects. It focuses on the conversation between colonizing nations and colonized societies. It is a study of the effects of colonialism on African cultures and civilizations.

Following Achille Mbembe's concept of postcolonial theory, this paper examines the representation of medical practice in African literature. According to Mbembe, the post-colonial notion specifically identifies a given historical trajectory, that of societies emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence that the colonial relationship implies (Mbembe102). It locates the starting point of post-colonialism at the end of imperialism. Aspects of post-colonialism are found in literature, politics, culture and identity of colonizing and colonized countries. Colonialism aims to explain these literary works that come from the former colonies by placing them in their cultural and socio-cultural context. Gilbert notes that:

Postcolonial critique can be seen as a more or less distinct set of reading practices if it is understood as a concern primarily through the analysis of cultural forms that meditate, challenge or reflect on relations of domination and subordination, economic, cultural and political (and often within) nations and races or cultures, which characterize their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism and which, in equally characteristic ways, continue to appear in the presence of neo-colonialism (71).

The corpus of this work shows the dominance of Western culture and values over African culture and values. Medicine practice is often represented in African literature as African authors set to expose African cultural values and heritage in a bid to deconstruct the western false claim that Africans had no culture and civilization before colonialism. This theory was developed in the Anglo-Saxon world by theorists like Edward Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabba. This theory makes it possible to analyze the writings produced by writers from countries with a history of colonization. This analysis examines works written or published during the colonial period. She also shows us how this situation of servitude is represented in literature.

According to Dobie, "post-colonialism is about third world people because whites are the oppressors of the colonized." (206). This theory is about the submission of one population to another by addressing the cultural, political and economic domination carried out by the colonial masters. He questions the superiority of European culture over African culture. She also considers the imposition of this so-called superior culture on Africans. Traditional medical practice and modern medical practice are well represented in African literature as the two systems of health care delivery available to Africans but critiques often pay less attention to it because today Africans attach less importance to the practice especially the traditional medicine because of the dominance of the modern medicine practice.

Comparative Analysis of the Representation of Modern Medicine in *the Corpus*

Modern medicine involves the use of drugs and surgeries to help and cure disease or solve the problem of the patient. In modern medicine, every sickness is consequential to a particular pathology detected through medical analyses and consultations. Three therapeutic processes are involved in modern medicine.

They include the diagnostic therapeutic process. Preventive therapeutic process, and curative therapeutic process. The goals of modern medicine are to help in the prevention of diseases, promote the health of every individual in society and improve the quality of life of individuals or groups. In Chinua Achebe *Arrow of God*, the practice of modern medicine was noted when Captain Winterbottom collapsed after giving instruction to arrest the chief priest Ezeulu. Before now Captain Winterbottom had had signs of malaria and was advised to see a doctor for treatment but he declined and put it forward:

For two days now Captain Winterbottom had been feeling unduly tired and run down. The rains did not seem to bring the expected respite. His gums looked paler than ever and his feet felt cold. He would not be due for another bout of fever for yet a while, but these were the signs all right. Of course he was not afraid as a new boy might be. Fever for an old coaster was no more than an inconvenience; it laid one off for a few days that was all... You should go and see a doctor (AFG 147).

This was a case of treatment of modern medicine. In the case of Captain Winterbottom, he was already used to this ailment and could do self-diagnoses and even self-prescription. Of course this didn't work as he eventually collapsed, was unconscious. Here hospital, doctor Mary Savage, a mention of special ward where he was kept all indicate that he was receiving treatment through modern system of medicine. Dr. Savage was also known to be carrying out surgical operations, the villagers already knew Wednesdays as the day of cutting open of bowels:

Captain Winterbottom's delirium lasted for three days and in all that time Dr. Savage rarely left his bed side. She even postponed the operation which she performed every Wednesday for which that day was known throughout the village as the day of the cutting open of bowels (AFG 150).

This is a clear indication that though the villagers might have their beliefs on the cause of certain illnesses, they still patronized the modern medicine. Consequently, the practice of the two systems of medicine co-existed from the colonial period. In as much as this encounter and presentation of modern medicine might not be lengthy enough to form a study in this particular novel but traditional system of medicine is well treated and explained as it forms part of the cultural heritage of the African people and it opens the eyes to a system of medicine that might otherwise not have been popular at that period. In our cultural studies, everything that makes up culture should be well analyzed. The case of Captain Winterbottom and the introduction of modern system of medicine were actually presented to buttress the belief of Africans when certain actions taken are viewed as affront on their traditional religious system. The narrator observes:

Perhaps it was Captain Winterbottom that brought it on; perhaps his steward was right about the cause. But on that very morning when two police men set out to arrest Ezeulu in Umuaro Captain Winterbottom suddenly collapsed and went into delirium (AFG 149).

All that Dr. Savage was devoted doing during this period was to care for the sick and help him regain his health. This is the very essence of both systems of medicine in Africa. Although we were not eventually told the diagnoses of the doctor on the case of Captain Winterbottom but he already diagnosed fever from his own experience, he even prescribed a preventive solution that eventually did not materialize before he was eventually forced for cure.

In *En compagnie des hommes* Veronique Tadjó tries to describe the scene the epidemic Ebola created in Africa and the struggles embarked by every one that was infected and those not infected by the virus but in one way or the other were affected by this deadly virus. Through the use of modern medication, doctors,

nurses, care givers and volunteer workers combined medical forces to battle against the epidemic caused by Ebola virus, for the medical personnel and the entire community it was a battle. This novel unravels the trauma, the panic and the fear such life treating epidemics can create in humans and it equally reveals how humans faced by a common enemy that fears no class or status can unite to fight to gain victory. From the very first page of the novel we note the commencement of Ebola through two children of the same parents who had been infected after eating bats they got from their hunting expedition. One of the narrators in the novel notes:

Moins d'un mois plus tard, ils étaient à l'agonie. Le sang coulait par tous leurs orifices... Quand l'infirmier fut alerté, ... Éloigne-toi, vous êtes en danger, j'appelle l'équipe ... L'équipe arriva. Les hommes sortirent leur matériel.(ECDH 12).

In less than a month, they were in agony. Blood was gushing out of their opening cavities. When the Nurse was alerted... she instructed, 'stay far from them, you are in danger, I will call the team,... the team arrived. The men brought out their materials. (Our translation).

The nurse that was alerted who called the team, in this case the medical team indicates that the treatment received by these patients was that of modern medicine. The methods of treatment also indicate the system of modern medicine:

La majorité des employés arrive en minibus. Ils se sont levés très tôt, quittant la maison alors que les enfants dormaient encore. Parmi eux, il y a les infirmières, si déterminés dans leur mission, les psychologues à la tâche difficile, les membres d'équipes d'eau, assainissement, enterrement des corps. Arrivent aussi les cuisiniers et les blanchisseurs au travail modeste mais essentiel, et enfin les administrateurs et les logisticiens, qui se rendent très vite dans leurs bureaux à l'autre bout du centre. Volontaires

locaux ou étranges, ils se sentent unis par un désir commun d'éradiquer Ebola. Il y a aussi, bien entendu, les autres docteurs, mes collègues les plus proches(ECDH 27).

The majority of the workers came in minibuses. They wake up very early, leaving the house while the children are still in bed. Among them are nurses, determined in their mission, the psychologists with their difficult task, team members, water team members, decontaminators, body buriers. Cooks and launderers of simple but essential work also came, then the administrators and the logisticians who go quickly to their offices at the other end of the center. Local and foreign volunteers, they felt united by a common desire to eradicate Ebola. There were other doctors as well, my closest colleagues. (Our translation).

Above are the medical practitioners in modern medicine. The presence of any epidemic in any society attracts the attention of all including writers who are either spectators, sufferers or those who join to find solution to the problem. Therefore, the way and manner such situations are managed in the society should be the concern of all. The representation of such occurrences in literary works is a manifestation that writers are mirroring well the society. No aspect of societal life should be ignored by critiques that are saddled with the task or responsibility of interpreting these literary works and giving them life:

Les soins aux malades ne sont que des traitements de soutien. Il n'existe pas de médicaments efficaces contre le virus. L'important, c'est de réhydrater le malade. Beaucoup de liquides, autant que possible. Alimenter aussi par voie orale et, si ce n'est pas possible, par voie intraveineuse. Il faut donner des comprimés pour contrôler la fièvre et surveiller les problèmes gastro-intestinaux. Traiter la douleur, faire diminuer l'anxiété. Les patients sont devenus des proies faciles. Il faut soigner les maladies

qui se greffent sur leurs corps atteints : i n f e c t i o n s bactériennes, paludisme, typhoïde, tuberculose. Il ne faut pas s'arrêter de soigner, même quand les malades semblent être proches de la mort(ECDH 29).

The care of patients is nothing but the sustaining of treatments. There is no effective treatment against the virus. The important thing is to rehydrate the patient, as much liquids as possible. Feeding through oral therapy, or if not possible through the vein. Tablets are given to control fever and guard against stomach problems. Treating sadness, help in reducing anxiety. The patients have become easy prey. We should care for the illnesses transplanted on their suffering bodies. Malaria, Typhoid, and Tuberculoses. We should not stop to care even when the patients are close to death(Our translation).

These are the therapies used by modern medical practitioners in combating the virus Ebola well represented in this novel. It is equally educating as we navigate its contents. Literature here performs its enlightening objective through sensitization in the society but we ask where are the critiques whose duty is to interpret the writer's motive to the populace? This is in line with what KRA KOFFI Jerome noted that literature is an arm of persuasion, of education, and a sort of preventive and curative remedy to the social vices that is suffered by the society (117).

To prevent the spread of Ebola virus, the author in the novel educated the populace through the invention of a communiqué by the ministry of health on how to prevent Ebola. Documented in a novel is an attempt to educate even the unborn population about the virus Ebola. It is worthy of note that literature and medicine have preventive therapies for illnesses.

Comparative Analysis of the Representation of Traditional Medicine in the Corpus

The two systems of medicine have a single objective of treating the sickness that ravages man physically and morally. Traditional medicine practitioners in *Arrow of God* include; the magicians or medicine man, and divinities or chief priests. The medicine man or magician practices magic which he combines with healing. His main objective is to reestablish the unity of the soul and body of an individual. He uses appropriate therapies that he deem suitable either to cure or to prevent diseases. The man Otakepeli in our corpus serves as example (AOG 148,196).

A divinity or Chief priest achieves this feat through rigorous and long learning. He is considered by his people as a small god whose duty is to interpret the will of the gods or ancestors and communicate them to the living. Most times, their therapies are preventive, because they are expected to foresee the evil. Ezeulu the chief priest is a perfect example.

In traditional medicine, the same sickness may be said to have different causes depending on the medicine man or healer. Sicknesses may be caused by spirits of ancestors who are angry for one offence or the other committed by an individual or community at large. It could also be caused by bewitchment or no respect for social or customary practices. The therapy for curing the convulsion of Nwafo was the carving of an okposi: This is in agreement with what Ayodele noted [diseases mostly revolve around witchcraft/sorcery, gods or ancestors, natural, as well as inherited.

Nwafo's eyes picked out the special okposi that belonged to him. It had been carved for him because of his frequent convulsions at night. They told him to call it Namesake, and he did. Gradually the convulsions had left him (AOG 6).

Sicknesses were also prevented by introducing weeks of rest. Certain festivals are introduced to prevent illnesses as we observed in the corpus. The introduction of new yam festivals, festival of the first pumpkin leaves were geared towards making the population to observe some days of rest (AOG 64-65, 201). This is the practice in the modern medicine system where people are given bed rest in hospitals to reduce stress which has been discovered to be the cause of dangerous ailments like hypertension, stroke and paralysis. This practice had long ago been in practice by the traditional practitioners.

The consultation of a dibia is also to prevent a mishap or calamity (AOG 158, 217). The son of late Ogbuefi Amalu had to meet a Dibia to find out the best way his father's burial should be conducted to avoid his wrath. Couple Matthew Nweke consulted a dibia regularly for protection and safety. African traditional medicine practitioners combine medicine with their religious practices just as we have seen in our corpus. The methods of prevention always depend on their religious and cultural beliefs. Ezekwesili and Okaka remark:

The traditional healer provides health care services based on culture, religious background, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that are prevalent in his community. Illness is regarded as having both natural and supernatural causes and thus must be treated by both physical and spiritual means, using divination, incantations, animal sacrifice, exorcism, and herbs.

The writings of Achebe are preoccupied with the physical healing of an individual and equally the societal healing where the individual comes from. This societal healing is achieved through mythical celebrations which sometimes represent traditional healers' practices and major festivals in African societies. In *En compagnie des hommes*, despite the fact that Veronique Tadj

focused on the modern curative therapy of the Virus Ebola, she did not equally hesitate to make mention of the role played by the traditional practitioners in the combat against Ebola. Although Ebola is a strange infection to the traditional healers yet they tried their lot in the combat against the deadly virus. This is instructive as in all African societies, the usefulness of traditional healers as the main means of providing health care cannot be over emphasized. In some Asian and European countries they may be regarded as alternative medicine but in Africa this is the major system of medicine. Ezekwesili and Okaka, agrees with this fact when they noted that "In the continent of Africa, the practice of traditional healing and magic is much older than some of the other traditional medical sciences and seems to be much more prevalent compared to conventional medicine."

In our corpus *En compagnie des hommes*, the mother of the children who were infected with the virus Ebola consulted the traditional healer when the medical team of modern medicine delayed their arrival. This traditional healer or medicine man tried to give the woman some herbal mixtures to help the children. The therapy used by this healer was both preventive and curative just as in the case of modern medicine. He first of all prescribed cleaning of the whole village and purification rites to prevent the occurrence of this virus:

La mère ne pouvait plus rester là sans rien faire. Elle alla chez le guérisseur pour chercher les plantes qui soignent... Il faut nettoyer le village, faire des rites de purification. Mais il eut pitié d'elle et lui donna des décoctions pour ses enfants(ECDH 12).

The mother could no longer stay doing nothing. She went to the traditional healer to look for healing plants...we should clean the village and perform purification rites. But he had pity on her and gave her some decoction for her children(Our translation).

Conclusion

From this study, we have seen that literature and medicine are seen as two different disciplines which have appreciable relationship. While medicine seeks to heal the physical body, literature is always all about inventing, prescribing and healing because the doctor needs the right choice of words to describe the body or explain the pathologies of patients. In literature, the writer, or poet, or novelist, or drama artist diagnosis, warns, and treats social vices at individual or national level. We have noted that the two systems of medicine, modern and traditional medicine are well represented in African literature as we peruse the corpus of this study, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Veronique Tadj'o's *En compagnie des hommes*. The various practitioners of these two systems of medicine and the therapies they use in treating illnesses as presented to us by the authors have been examined as well. We conclude that the two systems of medical practice are well represented in African literary texts but the choice of the systems narrated and explained in a particular text depends largely on the author's vast knowledge of any or both of them. We therefore invite literary critiques to dive into the analyses and explanation of medical practices as they are presented in literary works in order to clarify, and educate the public on the happenings in these areas. Perusing a literary work by authors in other countries provide the opportunity of inward journeying, a lot can be learned through this means. By so doing, we promote the education of African medical culture. (Ndu and Obiorah 198) is of the opinion that "There is need to understand the values of the African culture and avoid unwholesome imitations which further divide Africans and make them insignificant" (198). This equally applies to our medical culture, lets develop it by all means possible.

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