

Modern (Wo)Man and the Narrative Grammar of Tony Nwaka's *Shadows and Nothings*

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ABSTRACT

This paper has been informed fundamentally by the criticisms against Structuralism as a tool of critical exegesis. Despite such criticisms, the paper argues for its relevance by using it in the reading of Tony Nwaka's novel, *Shadows and Nothings* (2019). The paper first clears some erroneous misconception about the theory of Structuralism before deploying its two basic concepts – the concept of signification and of binary opposition – for its analysis. Drawing on the concept of signification (the arbitrary relations between the signifier and the signified), it makes use of Tzvetan Todorov's schema of narrative grammar that stresses that every narrative follows the seek-and-find formula. Yet, by deploying the three properties of signification – wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation – the paper demonstrates that Todorov's traditional "seek-and-find" formula undergoes some transformation in Nwaka's novel – so that, instead of the "seek-and-find" pattern, there is on one hand the "seek-find-and-lose again" and on the other, the "seek-find-lose-and-find-again" structure. However, the narrative is still self-regulated because, despite its transformation, it again reinforces the redemptive underpinning that characterizes classical fictions – that of the hero(ines) always questing for one thing or another that they feel in some way would transform them. Going further, by employing the concept of binary opposition, the paper contends that there are two pairs of oppositional characters in Nwaka's *Shadows and Nothings* – those who "seek-find-and-lose" and those who "seek-find-lose-and-find" again. The paper then concludes that by broadening or overturning the scope of the traditional "seek-and-find" structure, Nwaka successfully lines himself up in the queue of modernist writers who see the life of modern (wo)man as being more complicated, and who would, therefore, completely avoid a dogmatic adherence to the sentimentality of traditional/classical narratives.

Key words: Structuralism, narrative grammar, Nwaka, *Shadows and Nothings*.

Introduction

Arguably, there is no critical theory that has been so maligned in its usefulness to critical exegesis as Structuralism. For instance, while acknowledging that “[m]odern structuralism seeks to be scientific” (494), G. A. K. nonetheless describes Claude Levi-Strauss’ structural analysis of the Oedipus myth as notorious (494). He observes that “scientific” structuralism is often open to the charge that it begins with certain cultural assumptions – for example that myth necessarily has something to do with the polarities of life and death, light and dark, good and evil, or kinship relations – and ends up finding these structures in oral or written texts” (494). What G. A. K. brings to the fore is the fundamental criticism against structuralism that it imposes on texts already held notions – what has been described as working from the answer to the question.

Likewise, Anthony Appiah suggests that the application of Ferdinand de Saussure’s Structural linguistics to literary hermeneutics is more of a burden than a privilege (658). Commenting on the relations between Saussure’s the signifier and the signified, he submits that even though it is so much acclaimed, it “is hardly very interesting.” According to Appiah, it is very “commonsensical” that “words become meaningful because of their association with ‘ideas.’” He then adds that “the claim is neither very exciting nor very original” since it can be taken for granted that “the relationship between the signified and the signifier...is conventional and not natural” (658). It is in the same vein that Appiah then goes ahead to criticize Claude Levi-Strauss’ structural anthropology. In line with Pietro Pucci’s criticism of Levi-Strauss’ structural analysis of myths that it offers not “much broader

information” (109), Appiah also asserts that “it is not clear to me that this claim (Levi-Strauss’ claim that the structure of myths is universal) is, in the final analysis, one with very much content” (661). Appiah then concludes that “For defining a pair of binary opposition to constitute the axes for a space containing but three elements produces so little structure that it is difficult not to suspect that this ‘universal of human thought’ is an artifact of his (Levi-Strauss’) system of analysis” (661). Appiah’s criticism that Levi-Strauss’ Structuralism works from the answer to the question is not any different from Pucci’s own criticism that in the application of Levi-Strauss’ structural method, “one realizes that the result of the game (analysis) is fixed beforehand” (107).

Notwithstanding such criticisms against structuralism, this paper argues for its relevance by using it in the reading of Tony Nwaka’s novel, *Shadows and Nothings* (2019), which narrates an intriguing love story of two lovers – Lauretta and Julius. After having been jilted by his heartthrob, Evelyn; Julius resolves not to get entangled again, and instead he devotes so much of his time to his work to while away time as well as cope with his sorrow. It is in this state that he reluctantly attends the wedding ceremony of Esosa (Edobor’s sister), upon Edobor’s (his best friend’s) invitation. Although resolved not to get entangled again, Julius meets Lauretta at the wedding ceremony and falls in love with her at first sight. In no time, they bond well and grow fond of each other. But while they dream of a future together (something beyond just being friends), some unresolved issues in their pasts cast a shadow on the realization of their love story. For Julius, it is his previous relationship with Evelyn that threatens his present with Lauretta. On the other hand, Lauretta’s mysterious experiences in her previous relationships with three different men (all of whom are bedeviled by one kind of misfortune or another almost immediately after penetrating her) dampens her spirit and suppresses her growing love for Julius. Though she loves Julius and eagerly desires to give herself to him, she restrains herself because of the fear that the same misfortune might befall him immediately she allows him inside of her. At last, they must rise to fight for the love they share. And by the end of the novel, their wedding is just two weeks away.

The Critical Reception of Nwaka’s Novel

In spite of the intriguing story that Nwaka’s novel relates; as a very recent work, it has not received any full-length critical attention, either in Nigeria where it is produced, or outside it. And owing to its synopsis, most of

the scant reviews have not paid attention to how Nwaka at the same time appropriates and reacts against Tzvetan Todorov's schema of narrative grammar, and his aesthetic vision in doing so. Anote Ajeluoru, for instance, sees the novel as a narrative of the power of love in conquering superstitious beliefs (*The Guardian* February 2nd, 2020). In her words, Nwaka's *Shadows and Nothings*:

explores such dark theme as how a father's past unsavoury dealings can impact the destiny of his children negatively. It is an intriguing subject of supernatural dimension that tests the love of two young people and how sheer faith in the strength of love comes as strong arbiter in resolving an otherwise knotty problem. Nwaka discharges his writerly duty conscientiously in navigating a rather tricky issue of love untangling cultural beliefs. (*The Guardian* February 2nd, 2020)

It is this perspective of the power of love over cultural/superstitious beliefs, and in fact all obstacles that has defined all the scant reviews of Nwaka's novel. Thus, no structuralist analysis or any full-length hermeneutics of Nwaka's novel has been enacted. Accordingly, as far as we are aware, this paper is the first full-length essay on Nwaka's novel under consideration.

Structuralism

In effecting its analysis, however, and as already indicated, this paper deploys Structuralism as its tool of critical exegesis. Structuralism came into being through the pioneering work of Ferdinand de Saussure in the field of Structural Linguistics. The work, which was published in Paris in 1916 by Saussure's "colleagues after his death, based on lecture notes taken down by Saussure's students in his lifetime" was under the title *A Course in General Linguistics* (Lodge & Wood 1). In this work, Saussure sets out to demonstrate what should be the object of study for linguists. Making a distinction between *langue* (the structure of language) and *parole* (the individual utterances that occur when we speak), Saussure insists that the object of study for the linguist is not *parole*, but *langue* (Tyson, 201). In other words, as far as Saussure is concerned, the object of study for linguists should be the structure of language; not the individual words or utterances of a language. So was the advent of the structuralist approach to literary interpretation, which emphasizes the study of the literary devices that make a work of art what it is, rather than studying the historicity of a work or using extra-textual elements in the explicatory business of the literary critic.

Prior to Saussure's work, language was studied in terms of the origin of individual words and the changes such words have gone through over periods of time. But instead of studying the origin of individual words and the changes they have gone through, Saussure advocated the study of the structure that lies beneath the relationship between and among words. This relationship among and between words in Saussurean linguistics is of two kinds - the syntagmatic relations and the paradigmatic relations. While the syntagmatic relation is a semantic and collocational relation between words within a given sentence (vertically), the paradigmatic relation is that which exists among words in the same classification or category (horizontally). These words belonging to the same class or category can be substituted with one another to form a different sentence with a different meaning; yet the structure of the sentence remains the same. This can be illustrated with the following sentences:

Paradigmatic Relations

Syntagmatic Relations: Evelyn moved to Canada with Fabian after abandoning Julius.

Lauretta moved to the US with her parents after her accident in a car crash

Irrespective of the difference in the number of words between the first and second sentence, the structure of the two sentences is the same both paradigmatically and syntagmatically. It is the same rules of combination of subject-verb-object relations that has produced both sentences.

The second relationship identified by Saussure is the arbitrary nature of the sign between the signifier and the signified. Having no one to one correspondence, but based on the agreed convention of the users of a language, the signifier is just the spoken or written word referring to the mental image of an idea, a phenomenon, or object (signified) in the outside world. For example, the word "chair" either spoken or written is the signifier, while the mental image of a "chair" shared by both writer/speaker and reader/listener is the signified. Saussure insists that: "The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern and relate all other manifestations of language to it. Indeed, amidst so many dualities, linguistic structure seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something our minds can satisfactorily grasp" (Lodge & Wood 3). There are too many words in any given language that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to have or know the inventory of all the words. Thus, rather than studying all the individual words in any given language, Saussure's

structural linguistics advocates the understanding of their rules of combination, which according to Saussure, “gives language what unity it has” (Lodge & Wood 4).

Structuralist Analysis of Literary Texts

It is this unity that language has that is adopted into the structural analysis of literary texts. Just as it is the business of the linguist to study the structure of language; so is it the business of the literary critic, in the application of Structuralism, to study the structure of a literary text. A literary text is constituted using language. Thus, the inherent unity of language is also that of a literary text. Yet, one is not engaged in Structuralism if an individual literary text is being studied in isolation or independently in terms of its underlying features. In Saussure’s own words, “If one wishes to discover the true nature of language system, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind” (Lodge & Wood 9). To be engaged in structuralist activity, different literary texts belonging to the same structural system have to be studied so as to understand the underlying features that make them belong to the same structural system. Analogously, a literary text can be studied in isolation, only in terms of how it participates or belongs to a given structural system. To illustrate, Tutuola’s *Palmwine Drinkard*, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; Ngugi’s *The River Between*; Laye’s *The African Child*; Oyono’s *The Old Man and the Medal*; Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba*; and other African novels of the like can be studied structurally in terms of the underlying features that make them anti-colonial African novels. Yet, the underlying features of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* can be studied alone in terms of how it participates or belongs to the structural system of anti-colonial African novel.

The Structuralist approach is not interested in what a text means. Rather, its focus is to investigate how a text means. In other words, its focus of analysis is not the content but the form of a literary text. Writing about the linguistic criticism of literary texts by the Formalists, which is very much the same with the Structuralists; Blamires observes that:

For the formalists the proper province of criticism is the ‘literariness’ of a text. The critic is not concerned with the content of a work of literature as such – with what it represents of human life and so-called reality. He is concerned with the literary devices employed in the work, and should seek a scientific account of their character and function. In ‘Formalism’ we can see foreshadowed the kind of critical approaches later developed by the ‘Structuralists.’ It is concerned with the technical devices which differentiates literary language from ordinary utterance. (357)

While the form of a text cannot be totally divorced from its content or vice-versa, and while the form or content of a text cannot be explicated without due reference to their polarities; the fact remains that the purview of Structuralism in literary analysis is more on the form than the content.

Concepts in Structuralism and Nwaka's Novel

There are two basic concepts in Structuralism. These are the concepts of signification (the arbitrary relations between the signified and the signifier) and of binary opposition, which stresses that the meaning of one item in a binary opposition is derived from the understanding of what the other term is or is not. However, where the study of structuralism is concerned, the preoccupation is with the signifier, because it is the underlying structure that births the understanding of what is signified. Apart from Ferdinand de Saussure, the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Vladimir Propp, Northrop Frye, Algirdas J. Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov and Jonathan Culler, to mention a few, have further advanced the scope and discourse of structuralism. Some of the ideas that are central to their works are: langue and parole, signifier and signified, narrative grammar, the theory of mythoi, among others. However, what is crucial to all of them is their intentionality to find the meaning of a thing, not in the thing itself, but in the relationship that the thing shares with other things. It is the belief of structuralists that nothing exists in isolation; instead, everything in life is a unit of a broader system. Hence, to know a thing, an understanding of the structure of the system in which it operates is very important.

It is these two concepts of Structuralism that this paper draws on in its interpretative exercise. Drawing on the concept of signification, the paper makes use of Tzvetan Todorov's schema of narrative grammar that stresses that every narrative follows the seek-and-find formula in the reading of Nwaka's novel. Yet, by deploying the three properties of signification – wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation – the paper demonstrates that Todorov's traditional "seek-and-find" formula undergoes some transformation in Nwaka's novel – so that, instead of the "seek-and-find" structure, there is on one hand the "seek-find-and-lose" and on the other, the "seek-find-lose-and-find-again" pattern. However, the narrative is still self-regulated because, despite its transformation, it again reinforces the redemptive underpinning that characterizes classical fictions – that of the heroes always questing for one thing or another. Going further, by employing the concept of binary opposition, the paper

contends that there are two pairs of oppositional characters in Nwaka's *Shadows and Nothings* – those who “seek-find-and-lose” and those who “seek-find-lose-and-find” again. We argue in this paper, that by broadening or overturning the scope of the traditional “seek-and-find” structure, Nwaka successfully projects the view of modernist writers who see the life of modern (wo)man as being more complicated, and are therefore reluctant to resolve their narrative conflicts.

Todorov's Structuralist Narrative Grammar of Seek-and-Find Formula

However, while there are many Structuralist poetics as already established, it is with Todorov's narrative grammar that this paper analyzes Nwaka's novel. As David Lodge and Nigel Wood have pointed out, Todorov “took a leading part in the emergence of structuralism as a force in literary studies in France in the 1960s, firstly by translating and disseminating the work of the Russian Formalists from which structuralism derived much of its methodology, and secondly by his own original contributions, especially in the field of narratology” (137). The fundamental contribution of Todorov in the field of narratology is arguably his observation that the understanding of the subject-verb-object structure of language will go a long way in aiding the structural analysis of any literary work. According to him, any structural reading of any text can be undertaken by “combining each character (noun) with an action (verb) or attribute (adjectives)” (Tyson 222). Over time, his (Todorov's) traditional “seek-and-find” action formula (verbal elements) has grown to become a primary structural premise for the categorization of several classical fictions. This is because, in many classical narratives, the hero(ine) always sets out to find something. What is to be found could be love, wealth, power, fame, cure, an element or a person. However, after surmounting many obstacles and hindrances to the accomplishment of his “finding” mission, the hero eventually always “finds.” Tyson adds that “even if the hero dies achieving the goal of his quest, or attempting to achieve it, the world is transformed in some way by his effort: something important is found” (225). In other words, what this implies is that, even if the hero(ine) dies in the cause of attaining his/her goal, even on his/her death bed, s/he still successfully achieves the “finding” mission because in some way s/he is transformed.

Having informed the structure of most classical narratives, scholars today, have also continued to deploy the “seek-and-find” narrative grammar in the reading of a number of modernist works. For instance, Lois Tyson and Bipana Koirala have employed the traditional “seek-and-find” formula to suit their respective readings. In her reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s, *The Great Gatsby*, Tyson establishes that all the actions in the novel “can be reduced to three verbs: “to seek,” “to find,” and “to lose.”” According to her, the structure of Fitzgerald’s novel follows a “seek-find-lose” and “seek-but-don’t-find” pattern (Tyson 224). On the other hand, in doing a structural symmetry of Amar Nyaupane’s *Seto Dharatee*, Koirala transforms the “seek-and-find” structure into “seek-find-lose” and “lack-but-don’t-find” structure (245). Looking at their (Tyson and Koirala’s) criticisms using Todorov’s narrative grammars, their similarity can immediately be spotted – which is, the “seek-find-lose” structure that is common to both of them on one hand, and their almost similar “seek-but-don’t-find” and “lack-but-don’t-find” narrative structures on the other. What is central to both of them is their contention that “the significance of this structure is that it reflects the reality of human life which is usually the lack of something that we desire” (Koirala 248). For the purpose of this analysis, we will make use of what we describe as the “seek-find-lose-and-find” and “seek-find-and-lose-again” narrative grammars.

If X = the character(s), and Y = what the character(s) seek(s) for, the formulaic structures of *Shadows and Nothings* are as follows:

- (1) [X seeks Y] [X finds Y] [X loses Y] [X finds Y]
- (2) [X seeks Y] [X finds Y] [X loses Y]

Tyson and Koirala maintain that their devised narrative structures in their reading of their respective narratives oppose the traditional style. Similarly, Nwaka’s novel also opposes the traditional seek-and-find model. Instead, what obtains as already indicated is to “seek,” to “find,” to “lose,” and to “find” again” and to “seek,” to “find,” and to “lose” narrative grammars. However, the “seek-find-and-lose” pattern is important because it provides a more profound meaning to the “seek-find-lose-and-find-again” structure within the framework of the binary opposition that operates in Nwaka’s novel.

The Narrative Grammar of Nwaka's *Shadows and Nothings*

It is the foregoing structural formula that drives forward the plot of Nwaka's narrative. Yet, Nwaka's narrative is, first and foremost, constituted along the axis of Todorov's narrative structure of "seek-and-find." This is what constitutes the wholeness of Nwaka's novel. In analyzing a narrative in terms of its grammar, A. J. Greimas posits that what needs to be utilized is "the concept of grammar in its most general and non-metaphorical sense, understanding such a grammar to consist in a limited number of principles of structural organization of narrative units, complete with rules for the combination and functioning of these units, leading to the production of narrative objects" (794). He then adds that such narrative grammar should be characterized by "the modalities *to want, to be able, to know*, or the functions of *doing* and *communication*," and that it is all of this that "in effect presupposes a human subject" (797). It is this that characterizes Todorov's narrative grammar in which there is a pattern of reoccurring actions (verb) in relation to the major characters (noun). As Tyson points out, in the deployment of Todorov's schema, what the critic does is to "try to discover how the text is structured by the pattern of relations among recurring actions (which are analogous to verbs) and attributes (which are analogous to adjectives) associated with particular characters (which are analogous to nouns)" (222). It is the repetition of the same grammar in which the major characters (noun) are engaged in seeking (verb) for the same thing under different circumstances or different things under the same circumstance. It is therefore, this thematic unity of seeking something which they all hope to find that aligns all the major characters of Nwaka's novel.

Although love is the major thing lacking in their lives, which they all seek to find; all the major characters in one way or another also seek greener pastures/career development, which in fact they all appear to find in accordance with Todorov's narrative grammar of "seek-and-find." According to Greimas, "narrative structures present characteristics which are remarkably *recurrent*, that these recurrences allow for the recording of distinguishable regularities, and that they thus lead to the construction of a narrative grammar" (794). On the aspect of greener pastures/career development, the distinguishable regularity and recurrences in Nwaka's novel is that all the major characters seek, and they find. For instance, despite their humble background, Julius and Edozor develop to become managers in Gramond Brewery with personal and official cars – and with both of them living in their respective duplexes. Likewise, Evelyn turns out to become a Canadian citizen despite her humble background.

Though born with a silver spoon, Laretta/Ebunoluwa also develops to successfully manage a big supermarket with a retinue of staff. Moreover, while Nwaka's novel does not provide much clue as to the background of Morayo and Funke, the fact remains that they are also depicted to grow to successfully manage a restaurant in a highbrow area and contract business respectively. No less notable, is Laretta's father who also grows to become a governor of his state despite all the obstacles in his way – which he himself describes as “[t]he syndrome of aborted favour” (210). Hence, what constitutes the wholeness of Nwaka's novel is that it is, first and foremost, a narrative of “seek-and-find.”

But as already indicated, Nwaka transforms the “seek-and-find” pattern into the “seek-find-and-lose” and the “seek-find-lose-and-find-again” structural formula. As Todorov himself posits “[t]he major work creates, in a sense, a new genre and at the same time transgresses the previously valid rules of the genre” (138). He then adds that: “One might say that every great book establishes the existence of two genres, the reality of two norms: that of the genre it transgresses, which dominated the preceding literature, and that of the genre it creates” (138). While not pushing the argument that Nwaka's novel is a major work or that it is a great book or otherwise, the fact remains that it transgresses or transforms Todorov's “to seek and to find” into “to seek, to find, and to lose” and “to seek, to find, to lose, and to find again.” The latter structural formula can be illustrated with Julius, one of Nwaka's protagonists. Julius, all through the narrative, seeks love. First, he finds love in Evelyn, but soon loses her to Fabian. Nwaka presents Julius' pitiable loss through a letter that Evelyn writes to him, from the very prologue to the novel. In the letter, Evelyn recounts to Julius the circumstance that had compelled her to marry Fabian:

While I agree that you are at liberty to draw whatever conclusions you deem appropriate, permit me to say that, as a woman, there were minimum grounds beyond which I could no longer hold realistic visions of our marital expectations. In as much as I concede that we were looking forward to a happy future, the reality of your modest station at the time was such that did not bear much prospects for the envisioned future. I was therefore left with no option but to seize the opportunity presented in the hour and face a direction that gave a practical and reasonable expression to my matrimonial desires. (7)

It is clear that Evelyn leaves Julius for Fabian because the latter is wealthier and, in fact, holds a Canadian residency. As the narrative later reveals, Evelyn's mother also pressures her to marry Fabian because of his wealth, and this appears to be the fundamental issue that contributes to Evelyn's decision to leave Julius.

Eventually though, Julius finds love again. This time, he finds it in a young lady with a double appellation: while she introduces herself to Julius as Laretta; her parents, friends and close family relatives call her Ebunoluwa. Julius meets Laretta at a wedding reception. Julius, who does not normally attend wedding ceremonies, finds it compelling to attend this particular one because it is the wedding of his best friend's (Edobor's) sister. It is there that he finds love again, and despite the several bellows that raged against their love story – from the rumour that Chief Oni Alaba (Laretta's father and Julius' father-in-law-to-be) is under a curse, to the myth of the ill-fate that befalls the former lovers of Laretta seven days after each of them penetrate her, and eventually to Laretta's ghastly accident upon hearing of Julius' sexual relationship with Evelyn, his former girlfriend – Julius would not let go of Laretta's hand. He would not lose her. Instead, by the end of the novel, his marriage to Laretta is just two weeks away.

Laretta, on the other hand, seeks a man who will love and cherish her through thick and thin. First, she finds love in Daniel (her first boyfriend), but soon loses him. After a year, she finds love again in Clifford (her second boyfriend), but again, she loses him. Eventually, after two years of waiting and seeking love in another man, she finds love, once again, in Shola (her third boyfriend), but unfortunately, she loses him again. The text suggests that it is the curse against Laretta's father invoked by naked women (whose land were taken by the force of government) at a village shrine in 1992 (the year in which Laretta was born) that is responsible for all the misfortunes in Laretta's life (88). Therefore, getting weary and tired of it all, Laretta seeks love for the final time, and finds it in Julius (her fiancé and soon-to-be husband). In a conversation that ensues between Laretta and her two best friends (Funke and Morayo), Nwaka, through the character of Funke, narrates to readers the past experiences of Laretta (referred to as Egun, here), as she seeks, finds, loses, and finds love, again and again, from one man to another. Funke's narrative of Laretta's ordeal is worth quoting at length:

Morayo, my dear, your case is different. How does one tell Egun's story?... Oh, my darling Julius, I have this thing I've been meaning to tell you. It all began when I returned from London five years ago. I had a relationship with a guy called Daniel.

He was working with Adilax Petroleum. Everything was moving smoothly until I slept with him. A week after we made love, he lost his job. Thereafter, he never called or saw me again, neither did he take my calls. I only heard from his colleagues that he had quietly slipped out of the country. To this day, I don't know where he is. A year later, I met Clifford. We were getting on fine. But a week after he took me to bed, he lost his mother in a motor accident. He said I brought calamity his way and broke the affair. I was so heartbroken that for two years I stayed off relationships with men. When I eventually met Shola, I thought affliction would not arise a third time. And, to be on the safe side, I didn't sleep with him for almost a year. Everything went fine. But, again, a week after we made love, he lost a multi-billion-naira road construction contract for which he had fulfilled all terms of the contract. What was left was just to sign the final papers with the Ministry of Works. Of course, he blamed me for the loss and never took my calls again. Now, Morayo, tell me, how does all this sound to your ears? Is this what you want Ebun to tell Julius? Which man will hear these stories and still remain with a lady? (122-123)

Having hid this secret from Julius for a long while, Laretta opens up to him at last. She tells him “all the strange misfortunes that began to befall her lovers seven days after they had slept with her” (*Shadows and Nothings* 146). But Julius would neither be moved by Laretta's explanations nor retire from loving her. Instead, it is on that fateful night that the love birds retire to Julius' bed to consummate their love. It is based on this premise that the structural pattern of their (Julius and Laretta) love stories is “seek-find-lose-and-find-again.”

But by deploying the concept of binary opposition, we contend that in the understanding of the “seek-find-lose-and-find-again” narrative structure of *Shadows and Nothings*, it is equally important to understand the role of the main antagonist – Evelyn – in the novel through the structural framework of “seek-find-and lose again” structure. As observed by Greimas, meaning is constructed in human lives in the form of opposites: “A is the opposite of B” and “–A (the negation of A) is the opposite of –B (the negation of B)” (Tyson 212). It is, therefore, the understanding of Evelyn (the antagonist) through the structural lens of “seek-find-and lose again” that gives meaning to the “seek-find-lose-and-find-again” structural reading of Laretta's and Julius' (the protagonists') narratives.

The situation of Evelyn is a reversal of Laretta's and Julius' narratives. First, Evelyn seeks love and finds it in Julius (her first boyfriend), but she loses him because of her longing for material possession, although pushed by her materialistic mother. After going to the altar with Fabian, she realizes how much of a man and how much love she has lost in Julius. Although she relocates to Canada with Fabian, living large and big, but he (Fabian) would

not cease to mistreat and assault her. At last, she requests for a divorce, returns to Nigeria for a brief holiday, and seeks to reunite with Julius. She wants her first lover again: “Now that she had thirty days of her annual vacation all to herself, she would remain in Nigeria and not return to Canada until she found her lost love” (149). Unfortunately, Julius has moved on with his life. He has found Laretta. So, it turns out that she loses Julius to Laretta.

But Evelyn refuses to give up. She is determined to fight back for the love of Julius. After much resistance from Julius, Evelyn succeeds in inviting him over to Maddox Leisure Home for a talk. It is the last straw that breaks the camel’s back. Although Julius reluctantly honors her invitation, upon setting his eyes on the glow of her skin, and “the thick nipples that pressed against her blouse” (184), he gets lost in the warmth of Evelyn’s arms. Unable to erase his romantic and affectionate past with his first lover, Julius does not only declare his love for Evelyn by categorically saying “I love you, Evelyn” (187), but he also ends up making love with Evelyn. However, Evelyn cannot own Julius’ heart beyond that night. As Julius admits “what had happened between them (sex at Maddox Hotel) ...was simply an unfortunate fling that was compelled by the lustful passion and physical urge of the moment” (189 – 190). Despite being a moment of lust and an action of indiscretion as Julius admits, it does not change the fact that Evelyn found love that night at Maddox Leisure Home; only that, by daybreak, she loses his love again.

But, again, upon getting pregnant for Julius, Evelyn ends up finding love and succor in a young Julius that is growing within her. Pitiably, she does not only end up losing Julius to Laretta completely, but also loses the young Julius in her protruding stomach. Indeed, her final words, in the letter she sends to Julius, which also informs the epilogue of the novel, is not only emotional, but also very symbolic because it summarizes her tragic end as represented in her “seek-find-lose again” formulaic fate.

I am not passing this message so that you may begin to reexamine your position or reactivate whatever passion you may have begun to rekindle towards me No, not at all. I have lost you. . . . I had a dream of a glorious future for us. Unfortunately, so it will remain. A dream. A dream that has now fizzled with the flames of fate. . . . O how cruel could fate be! Even the last vestige of you which I thought that fortune had bestowed upon me as compensation for all my struggles to reunite with you was snatched away in the most punishing form. I lost the pregnancy I had hoped would become another Julius that would remain permanently with me. . . . Now, I am empty and lonely. Thrown again into a life of desolation and hopelessness. . . . Let me not further belabor you with the tales of

my worthless existence. . . . Such has become my destiny. An endless pursuit of shadows. . . . I shall drop the pen at this point and retire to the solitude of my wretched life, clinging only to memories of how we once lived, loved and laughed, and the dream that never saw the light of day. (*Shadows and Nothings* 260-261)

Overall, love is indeed the motivation that drives the recurring “seek-find-lose-and-find-again” and “seek-find-and-lose again” narrative grammars in the lives and situations of Nwaka’s major characters – from Julius to Lauretta on one hand, and to Funke, to Morayo, to Daniel, to Clifford, to Shola, and finally to Evelyn on the other.

Although not writing from the perspective of the structuralist poetics, Elaine Showalter in her reading of Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* argues that “pairs of characters” function in a narrative “as characters and their shadows” (31). She posits that Dickens in the novel shows the shadow side of all his major characters by creating other characters whose actions are the opposite character traits of the major characters (38). This is what also obtains in Nwaka’s novel. The only difference is that unlike Dickens, Nwaka does not dwell so much on the polarities in the actions and inactions of his characters as he does on the outcome of their quests. Like Evelyn, and unlike Julius and Lauretta; Nwaka depicts Daniel, Clifford, Shola, Funke and Morayo as not finding love at the end of the narrative. While the novel does not reveal so much about Daniel, Clifford, and Shola, the fact remains that three of them found love in Lauretta but lost her due to the different misfortunes that befall them after penetrating her.

Also, all through the narrative, there is no man in Funke’s life. Repeatedly, whenever there is any argument between them about the relationship between Julius and Lauretta, Morayo will always taunt Funke that she is not in a position to give advice on romantic relationships as she has no boyfriend. Drawing on the Freudian slip, it can even be argued that Funke’s joking invitation to Julius: “Ride me and you’ll be convinced” (102), though an invitation to ride in her car, is an expression of her wish-fulfillment to get entangled with Julius. Not surprisingly, though jokingly also, Morayo screams: “*Arrhh!* Ride you?” and turns to Lauretta, warning her to “keep an eye on” Funke (102 – 103). It is conjecturable, therefore, that although Funke wants a man in her life, she has not succeeded and does not succeed in getting one.

The same is also true for Morayo, although from a different perspective. In her own case, she is married off to “a 60-year-old man” at the age of fourteen (122). Not finding love with the old man, she “ran away from the man

two years later” and claims to have found love in Michael (122). Yet, when Laurretta gets involved in a ghastly car accident and becomes unconscious; believing that the ominous fate would eventually befall Laurretta (that it is Laurretta who is going to die, and not Julius they had all expected was going to die after penetrating Laurretta), Morayo becomes very cosy with Julius in an attempt to take the place of Laurretta in Julius’ life. The narrator explains:

Initially he (Julius) had assumed it was all part of her (Morayo’s) generous nature, that she probably was desirous of helping him to overcome the agonizing misfortune of Laurretta’s accident. But now that she was repeatedly saying he should see her as a shoulder he could lean on and had asked, for the third time in two days, if she could visit him in his house, he began to really get confused. He wondered if her action was simply an innocent effort to stand in the gap for her bosom friend, Laurretta, or she was deviously scheming to take advantage of the prevailing circumstances and supplant her altogether. Especially considering also the manner she seemed to be seductively flaunting her massive boobs and swinging her hips anytime she was around him. (253)

It is clear that Morayo schemes to take the place of Laurretta in Julius’ life because she has not found love or sexual satisfaction with Michael. This is especially so, as Lurretta has even revealed to Morayo how satisfying her sexual encounter is with Julius. Having not experienced such sexual satisfaction with Michael, and wishing to experience it with Julius; Morayo schemes to supplant Laurretta and take her place in Julius’ life. She is, therefore, very much like Evelyn. They both seek love twice, find it twice, and lose it twice – returning “to the position of the unfulfilled seeker” (Tyson 223).

Conclusion

In conclusion, by adopting the “seek-find-lose-and-find-again” and the “seek-find-and-lose” structure, Nwaka introduces complexity to the scope of what used to be a simple “seek-and-find” traditional structure. By making/causing his major characters to repeatedly alternate between the dichotomy of “finding” and “losing” love, Nwaka presents the many uncertainties that characterize the life of modern (wo)man. As Tyson points out in her reading of Fitzgerald’s novel, “[t]his more pessimistic” (the “seek but don’t find” narrative structure of the novel) is the more “realistic vision of human experience...associated with the modernist worldview” (225 – 226). Hence, Nwaka in *Shadows and Nothings* does not only create a wider room to accommodate the many sides of

realities that characterize the modernist age, but also successfully aligns himself with other modernist writers who are critical of traditional models and would completely avoid a dogmatic adherence to its narrative structure.

Yet, Lukacs holds that in a modernist work “technique could enhance the depiction projected...It may assist in building the world of the subject and revealing ‘the complexity of his relations with his own past, present and even future experience’” (quoted in Richa Bajaj 86). He then adds that: “modernist writing underpins and exaggerates the crisis of living to the extent that it turns into its opposite – making the crisis undefeatable and the individual suffering desirable” (Bajaj 87). What Lukacs points out is how form and content are interwoven. It is how form determines content and vice-versa. Thus, modernist writers do not just adopt a formal structure of narrative for the fun of it. They do so as a means of depicting the complex existence and relations as well as the crisis of living in a modernist age. This is particularly true of Nwaka in relation to his narrative under consideration. He transgresses and transforms the traditional “seek-and-find” structure into one in which his characters alternate repeatedly between “finding and losing” as a way of highlighting the complex existence and relations of his characters as well as their crisis of living in a modernist age. This complex existence and crisis of living is palpable in the lives of all the major characters of Nwaka’s narrative. At every point, there is always something to punctuate their happiness or seeming achievement or progress; there is always an obstacle in the wheel of progress of their wish-fulfillment – a shadow that makes their lives incomplete or that lurks around to sour their happiness. For instance, the myth surrounding the misfortunes that befall Laretta is the sour grape in the seeming wealth, comfort, and success of Laretta’s father and mother. It is this phenomenon that cast a shadow on their wealth, comfort, and happiness - making everything they have achieved to want to amount to nothing. Also, Fabian and Evelyn’s mothers are the obstacles and shadows that turn Julius’ and Evelyn’s exciting romantic relationship into becoming nothing. Evelyn herself is the shadow that lurks around to sour the exciting romantic relationship between Julius and Laretta. In fact, she almost succeeds in ensuring that the relationship amounts to nothing. Moreover, in relation to Evelyn herself, her inability to get Julius back (Julius himself and Julius Junior who she had hope to give birth to but which she loses) will always cast a shadow on her seeming success of becoming a Canadian citizen, thereby making her success to amount to nothing.

Even with the wedding of Laretta and Julius two weeks away at the end of Nwaka's narrative, which on the face value signifies a happy ending; lurking in the shadows to sour their happiness in marriage is Funke and Morayo, who in their bid to experience the sexual nirvana that Laretta has related to them are desirous of Julius tasting their own "honey pot" (162). Thus, while Nwaka's novel (through Julius as a mouthpiece) suggests that the "shadows that are really nothing" (250) are the myths surrounding the misfortunes that befall Laretta, the crisis in the lives of all the major characters appears to suggest otherwise. It is evidently against this background of the crisis in the lives of all the major characters that "Shadows and Nothings" become metaphors of the uncertainties that characterize the life of modern (wo)man. It is significant that towards the end of Nwaka's narrative, in the epilogue, Evelyn laments "O how cruel could fate be!..Now I am empty and lonely. Thrown into a life of desolation and hopelessness...Such has become my destiny. An endless pursuit of shadows" (260 – 261). Evelyn's lamentation is a graphic representation of the life of modern (wo)man as depicted in modernist works. It is a representation of the angst that characterizes modernist narratives. The fate and destiny of modern (wo)man is not just cruel, it is also desolate and hopeless and an endless pursuit of shadows (*Shadows and Nothings* 260 – 261). It is, therefore, not surprising that Nwaka would transform Todorov's traditional "seek-and-find" structure into one in which his major characters repeatedly alternate between the dichotomy of "finding" and "losing" so as to depict the complex existence and relations of modern (wo)man as well as her/his crisis of living – a crisis of living in which s/he is defeated in advance, and which is inescapable.

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