



## APPLICATION OF THE GENETTEAN THEORY OF THE NARRATIVE DISCOURSE ON THREE WEST AFRICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on West African autobiographies classified by Odoi (2010). He identifies four main sub groups of the autobiography namely: the factual autobiography, the fictionalised autobiography, the literary autobiography and the autobiographical fiction as present in many ways the works of practising writers in the West African sub Region. The last three types of autobiographies named above are glossed as having enough information and literary value to merit an analysis using the Genettean model. Genette's macrotexual demarcations of **Time**, **Mood** and **Voice** and their subcategories are used to show the differences between these three identified autobiographies. The paper also shows the three works on a continuum from the most factual to the most novelistic.*

**Key words: Autobiography, Analepsis, Prolepsis, Time, Mood, Voice, Diegesis**

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### Introduction

The autobiography as literary genre has almost always reigned in the periphery of Literature (Finney, 1985; Opoku Agyeman, 1989; Odoi, 2010). It is regarded as the 'dark continent' of Literature (Shapiro, 1965). The level of bastardization of the art form culminates from the fact that critical discourse on it is quite sparse and far in between. Besides, leading critics on the autobiography or life narratives have labelled it as nebulous and difficult to identify or study (de Man, 1979; Olney, 1979; Bakhtin, 1981 & Jay, 1984). Indeed, Smith and Watson (2001) identify fifty-two (52) types of life narratives and even claim that this figure is not adequate. The sheer numbers of life narratives identified by these two critics add to the levels to which the autobiography become a murky area of study. Critical study on the autobiography is sparse in the West African sub region (Opoku-Agyemang, 1989; Odoi, 2010). However, it has been found out that though the West African sub region is almost bereft of the autobiography as a genre and though there are few critical discourses on it, aspects of

the autobiography can be found in most West African novels or work of art. It is on the strength of this that Odoi (2010) identifies four types of the autobiography in the novels from the sub region. Odoi (2010) however notes that of the four, it is only three that have literary value mainly because they are works of practising novelists who make conscious efforts to include the aesthetic ingredients needed in a literary work. Therefore, this work has selected the works of three practising novelists namely: Camara Laye, Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah. This paper analyzes three identifiable types of the autobiography in West Africa, namely: the fictional autobiography exemplified by Camara Laye's *The African Child*, the literary autobiography exemplified by Wole Soyinka's *Ake: the Years of Childhood* and the autobiographical fiction represented by Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*. The thrust of this discussion is that, the differences in the types of autobiography can be gleaned from the method of narration. This paper will therefore compare the

methods of narration in these three types of autobiography which are written as Literature, to show the extent to which each may be classified as inclined towards personal history or towards the artistic. The paper relies heavily on the Genettean theory of the macrotext of the narrative discourse. Genette identifies **Time**, **Mood** and **Voice** as key to unlocking a narrative.

### **Definition of Terms**

Some terms will be used a number of times and so for purposes of clarity, a glossary of terms used in this paper has been posted as an appendix.

### **Summary of the Three Autobiographies**

#### ***The African Child***

This is the story of a young Guinean of the Mandinka ethnic group. The work narrates the first nineteen years of Laye's life. As a child, Laye narrates his growth a development in the outbacks of Kouroussa. He observes and takes part in rustic life and foregrounds important aspects of Mandinka culture. He enrolls in the French school in his native Kouroussa, and makes great progress. This Propels him to go to the capital, Conakry to study in the Technical School. The story is basically about Upper Guinea and their ways of life as it affects a young Mandinka boy.

#### ***Ake: The Years of Childhood***

A narration of the first twelve years of the life of Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Prize Laureate. It traces the life Soyinka from his native Abeokuta through the Government School. The narration takes tour of Soyinka's family, his school and his friends. The story also take a look at local politics and a transformation from boyhood to young adulthood.

#### ***Fragments***

This novel has been touted as autobiographical and reflects the life of Armah himself. It narrates the story of Baako Onipa who returns from States where he had gone to study. His return evoked a great expectation of a catapulting of the whole family into a middle class one. The disappointment and heavy expectations which he was unable to fulfil and his clash with the establishment in the country drives Baako into a mental state.

### **Analysis/Discussion**

The discussion will start with **Time** and its sub-categories. Since the three authors do not necessarily make use of all the sub-categories, the discussion will centre only those that are overt and can help with comparisons.

In terms of exterior analepsis, Laye's *The African Child* uses this sub-category once: when Laye's father tells his son about the little black snake and its visits. These occurred long before Laye was born yet Laye encapsulates these in his work. Laye deems these events surrounding his father as necessary to make his audience be able to understand the mystic nature and stature of his father in Mandinka town of Kouroussa. In this vein, Laye's use of exterior analepsis is similar to that of Marian Ewurama Addy in in autobiography. Addy goes as far back as recounting information that occur long before she was born(Odoi,2014). Soyinka also uses this method of narration at least once in *Ake* when he employs the story of his mother to explain why Uncle Sanya is an *oro* and the show of faith by Eniola's uncle, the Rev. J.J. Ransome-Kuti and his display of Christian faith in spite of preponderance of traditional religion. Armah in *Fragments* uses one exterior analepsis and this is in the first Chapter 'Naana' where Baako's grandmother goes as far back as when Baako embarked on his journey before the story that marks his return is focused on. In spite of the three authors appearing to be at par in terms of the use of exterior analepsis, Armah proves a more conscious craftsman since he uses a whole chapter as the exterior analepsis whereas Laye and Soyinka use parts of Chapters to show exterior analepsis. It is also arguable that in terms of the use of exterior analepsis, Soyinka is the one who goes the farthest because he narrates the story as far back as when his own mother was a girl. Laye follows Soyinka in the use of exterior analepsis with Armah pulling the rear. It is also fairly evident that the nearer the occurrence of the exterior analepsis, the likelihood of the work getting into the realm of fiction. In other words, Armah's exterior analepsis occurs about five years earlier to the return of Baako from the United States and there is an artistic representation of this by Naana narrating the occurrence in a whole chapter. Soyinka in *Ake*

and Laye in *The African Child* go beyond the times they are given birth to by creating a metalepsis or creating metadiegetic narrators to fill in the gaps of narration. Above all, analepsis in all the three works is used to explain the metaphysical.

Prolepses also come up in the three novels under interrogation. Prolepses refers to a flashforward in the narration. Laye, for instance, in his work notes that his father sees long ago that he is not destined to be a master blacksmith like himself. Again, during the harvest in Tindican, Laye's youngest maternal uncle cautions him not to overexert himself since he is not meant to be a farmer. These hints are strong indicators of what Laye becomes as an adult. In *Ake*, Soyinka's dexterity at grasping his lessons at the primary school even with the presence of his older sister, and his attempt at attending the Government School at a relatively young age are examples within the narration that mark him off as exceptional or gifted student. Therefore, Soyinka's prowess as an academic that he is known for as an adult take roots from what he presents in *Ake*. In the case of Armah, there is no overt exterior prolepsis, the nearest to exterior prolepsis is the scene of a mad dog about to be hunted down which creates a form of interior prolepsis which pre-emptly Baako's 'high fever' he suffers at the latter part of the novel; this event is more of an amorce or a hint rather than an Interior prolepsis. In all, if the argument is that autobiographies are written by adults looking back on their past, then whatever happens as a child will be seen as indicators to what happens to the adult autobiographer. Prolepsis is also possible in such works like the autobiography or an autobiographical work because the autobiographer never finishes telling his mythic tale in viva and the work only helps in understanding what the autobiographer is at the present time.

Under 'Duration' a sub category of **Time**, Laye uses dialogue and scene less frequently than Soyinka, and Armah appears most frequently to use dialogue and scene. In other words, Laye does more of the 'Telling' and less of 'Showing' since his work is ethnological as well as autobiographical. Soyinka lies in the middle and Armah does more of 'showing' and less of

'telling'. By such an activity, Armah creates the most realistic characters who can be isolated and analyzed on their own whereas Laye's characters seem to die out of the story once they finish playing their role in Laye's development. Again, Soyinka lies between the other two authors in their development of realistic characters extremes. Soyinka's situation becomes peculiar since he is writing an autobiography with trappings of a novel and so the balance must be well achieved. Armah operates what is termed 'mimesis' or acting out whereas Laye falls within the realms of 'diegesis' or 'telling'.

Under 'Frequency' a sub- category of **Time** we note that all three authors tend to narrate once what occurs once. However, there are a few occasions where the authors narrate once what happens several times. For instance, in Laye's work, he narrates issues concerning the harvest at Tindican once although he witnesses this several times because he says he always spends December at Tindican and it is in Tindican that he observes the harvest. Laye also witnesses several ceremonies related to initiation and circumcision yet he chooses to narrate this once.

The analysis will now shift to **Mood**, the second major category proposed by Genette, the narratologist as it affects the three types of autobiography found in West Africa. The first sub-category of **Mood** to be discussed here is 'Perspective'. Laye's narration is basically internally focalized. This means the person telling the story in Laye's work is a part of the story. The person from whose eyes the story is told is Laye himself. Where Laye the protagonist is, there the story is and characters are shown from his perspective. In other words, the action of the novel and portraits of character are seen from what Laye, the character in the work, says.

In comparative terms, Laye's characters lack depth as compared to Soyinka's characters. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first President writes a type of autobiography that Odoi (2010) classifies as a 'Factual' autobiography and the type is not analysed here in this essay. However when Laye's work is compared to the factual autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah, Laye's characters and themes are of better and of greater literary value although presented by the first person narrator. For instance, Nkrumah's mother, Nyanibah dies out of the story

immediately Nkrumah moves into Achimota. This is because it is only Nkrumah who goes to Achimota and not his mother. Besides, Nkrumah's mother has no direct bearing on the activities at Achimota and so she is effaced. Laye's mother has no name but her presence is relatively palpable throughout the novel. She is heard of in the novel the first time when she rescues Laye from a snake, she next points out to Laye a special snake which must not be killed, and she is described as having powers of sorcery and thus can make an obstinate horse obey her. Laye's mother is instrumental during his circumcision and her permission has to be sought before Laye embarks on the trip to France for further studies. So although Laye's mother is presented from a first person narrative point of view or the narration is internally focalized, she comes out as a more 'living' character than what Nkrumah presents of his mother.

The argument here is that Laye is a more conscious presenter of character from a first person narrative point of view than Nkrumah but this is to be expected since Nkrumah's work is not intended as literature but a factual/historical record; there is the need to posit Laye's work side by side that of Nkrumah for a better appreciation of Laye's fictional purpose. We may describe Soyinka's work as the middle point between the autobiography as history and the autobiography as literature. Soyinka being a literary and not a factual autobiographer is able to coherently narrate the first twelve years of his life such that though he is talking about himself, he is able to rope in other characters who can be given a fuller rendition and analysis. The narration is such that it is almost impossible to demarcate the life of Soyinka away from that of others. For instance, Soyinka's grandfather comes into the story once but his role thematically and rhetorically gives Soyinka the needed confidence to 'fight off' activities related to the spiritual at the Government Scholarship Examination. Though his grandfather's entry is brief, he is a literary character who can easily be isolated and analyzed with the critical tools of Literature. In *Ake*, the characters, except for the very minor ones, play large roles in the development of Soyinka. Laye in contrast only picks those that have a direct value to him to be foregrounded; for instance, Laye

never mentions the presence of a step-mother until the circumcision when she presents a book to him as a symbol of a future of scholarship. In both Laye's and Soyinka's works though the story is told from an internally focalized perspective, the autobiographers give room to other characters to fill in the gaps of narration especially when an external analepsis occurs. In all these endeavours however, Soyinka is able to tell his story using more novelistic tools than Laye does. In other words, Soyinka is able to use the tools to more advantage than Laye although both works are internally focalized. The two works make use of autodiegetic narrators which is a special form of the homodiegetic narrator but when there are gaps to be filled, both employ a metadiegetic narrator. In the case of Armah, a large tract of the narration is done by a diegetic narrator or is told by an omniscient narrator who has the freedom of time and space to comment at will. However, when a homodiegetic narrator is employed as is seen in the first and last Chapters titled 'Naana', then metadiegetic narrators are employed to fill in aspects of the narration. We must note here that though Armah employs a homodiegetic narrator in the Chapters dubbed "Naana", the extent of the homodiegesis does not match that which is found in Laye's and Soyinka's works. In other words, Armah's homodiegetic narrator does share the same strengths that we see in Laye's and Soyinka's works. Armah does not use an 'autodiegetic narrator'. Besides, Armah's homodiegetic narrator, the 'alterdiegetic narrator' does not stretch the narration to the point of emphasizing the growth and development of her own personality to be described as 'autodiegetic' like we find in *The African Child* or *Ake* where there is a great emphasis on the growth and development of the protagonist.

One other way of comparing the three types of the autobiography under interrogation is by looking at 'Perspective' where we have to determine whether we have more of 'Narration of Events' or 'Narration of Speech'.

Laye's Narration, it has been argued, is close to that of Nkrumah who is generally not a practising creative writer. Because of this, we note that Laye does more of telling to give his readers an insight into what makes his society so 'special'. But this argument is true insofar as Laye's work is

compared to that of Soyinka for instance. Laye's work is superior to that of Nkrumah in terms of narrative emphasis because Laye introduces other relevant characters to fill in the gaps of narration especially through dialogues and scenes. Laye therefore does more of 'mimesis' or 'showing' than Nkrumah does. However, Laye's narration is less novelistic when compared to that of Soyinka because Laye tries to fuse what happens in nineteen years into a relatively small novel whereas Soyinka chooses to narrate the first eleven years of his life in a longer narrative taking time to observe most of the narrative and artistic landmarks. Many of the issues raised by Soyinka cannot be glossed over in summaries and so he employs large quantities of scenes and dialogues to graphically display emotions and the messages he means to carry across. Soyinka ends up doing a lot more 'showing' than 'telling' and so he narrates 'Speech' more than that of 'Event'.

Armah is the ultimate master of 'mimesis' out of the three authors. Armah right from the beginning engages his readers' attention by making his characters to "show" what message he means to carry across. The employment temporarily of Naana as a narrator is itself mimetic since she carries the main thrust of the message: corruption and high expectations from a son who has been abroad, to the reader. Indeed, from Naana's monologue, there is adequate showing of Foli's corruption and the high expectations of Efua and Araba. The height of mimesis is displayed in the meeting of Juana and Baako's mother, the meeting with Ocran, the rebellion against Asante-Smith and a host of other scenes where Armah rather than 'tell' chooses to "show" what he means.

The third category of narratological discourse on the narrative is related to **Voice** or the person telling the story. This categorization helps to fine-tune the various types of the autobiography. The first sub-category of **Voice** is related to the time of narration. In Laye's work we find an adult looking back at what he used to be, and so the bulk of the narration is done using 'ulterior time' or the narrative voice which is predominantly in the past tense. The present tense is rarely used and it is used when a dialogue is introduced or when a metadiegetic narrator is introduced in the story, an example being Laye's father talking to his son

about the appearance of the little black snake to him. The encounter is rendered in the present tense because it still has relevance in the present time.

Narrative levels also account for the artistry of any novel. There are three narrative levels, the extradiegetic level, the intradiegetic level and the metadiegetic level. In this comparative study, the metadiegetic level is the measure of artistry as it relates to the three types of autobiography identified. In Laye's case there is a metadiegetic level created at least once and this can be found in the encounter between Laye's father and the little black snake. This encounter is a story within a story, Laye's own story and his father's story which help to fill in the gaps of the narration since Laye was not born when the event took place (external analepsis). Laye's father assumes the narrator's position and therefore becomes a metadiegetic narrator since the main story is not about him. The works of Laye and Soyinka are predominantly presented on the intradiegetic level since we have a convergence of narrator and protagonist as one person. However, in Armah's work the prevalent voice is extradiegetic level since the narrator is not an active participant in the novel.

'Person' is the last sub-category under **Voice** and the last to be discussed

. Under 'Person' a sub-category of 'Voice', we can establish a heterodiegetic person and a homodiegetic Person. These two types of **Voice** are relevant to our discussion. Camara Laye invariably writes from a first person narrative point of view and so his narrator is homodiegetic. The level of the homogeneity in the person narrating the story is so great that he qualifies to be named in the special category of being autodiegetic. We however find other narrative voices that help with external analepsis and so the creation of metadiegetic Narrators become evident.

Soyinka toes a similar line as Laye does in the creation of persons to narrate the story. The predominant voice is that of Soyinka as narrator but then we also have Soyinka's mother serving as a metadiegetic narrator in an external analepsis narrating how Uncle Sanya was saved from spirits when an exorcism was performed on him. The metadiegetic narrator who at a certain time is

Eniola, Soyinka's mother is able to show how challenging it is to have a juxtaposition of two religions: the Traditional and the Christian.

Armah, as has been noted earlier, is the most artistically purposeful of the three autobiographers. Because Armah has the latitude to deny or to equate his person to Baako, the hero, he creates at least two dominant narrative voices: the voice of an omniscient narrator (extradiegetic) and the voice of Naana as a homodiegetic narrator. Naana, is not the protagonist of *Fragments*, she merely observes and is too weak as a character to be effectual and so she comes under one of the captions of a homodiegetic narrator and in her case she is an alterdiegetic narrator'. Naana's type of narration is different from a metadiegetic narrator who comes into the story briefly and is effaced when his part of the story is finished. Since the dominant voice in *Fragments* is extradiegetic then the voice is equally heterodiegetic since he can comment on any character or event at will without any inhibitions.

### Conclusion

This analysis has basically been a comparative one which draws on the categories: **Time, Mood** and **Voice** mooted by Genette and their sub-categories. These narratological tools are applied to three novels from West Africa. These categories and sub-categories help identify artistry in the narratives under interrogation as they reflect on the three types of autobiography of artistic value we find in the West African sub-region. It has been noted that the three autobiographers extensively use the fictive elements of narrative discourse. Under the limiting factor of writing in the first person, Laye and Soyinka have used both analepsis and prolepsis to make their narration interesting and plausible. In terms of 'scene' and 'dialogue', Soyinka presents more and gets close to 'showing' than 'telling'. Armah is the most 'dialogic' and 'scenic' since he uses in the main, an 'omniscient narrator' who has a lot of advantages as compared to the first person which is employed by the other two fabulists- Laye and Soyinka. Therefore, in spite of a dearth of autobiographies and critical discourse on them in the West African sub region, the autobiography

exists in various forms within West African novels and the various types can be identified from their mode of narration. Indeed, from the discussion above it is noteworthy that the various types of autobiography range from the most factual like that of Laye, to the most novelistic one like Armah's.

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## Appendix

### A glossary of narratological terms

1. ANALEPSIS :A flashback in the narrative. Analepsis can be both internal and external. External Analepsis refers to a time outside the narrative itself.
2. ANTERIOR TIME: A time period in a narrative where the story is told in the future tense. This is typical of Apocalyptic and Futuristic novels
3. AUTODIEGETIC NARRATOR: A special form of the Homodiegetic Narrator where the Narrator is the same as the protagonist of the story and the story seen from his perspective.
4. ALTERDIEGETIC NARRATOR: This is also a form of the Homodiegetic Narrator. In this instance, the narrator is an active participant in the story but he is not the protagonist. The events of the story are narrated from his perspective.
5. EXTERNAL FOCALISER: A situation in the story where the one who sees and is telling the story is OUTSIDE the story. He is not an active participant in the story.
6. FREQUENCY: This refers to the number of times an event is told in a story. An event that occurs once may be narrated several times and habitual events may be narrated once.
7. INTERNAL FOCALISER: An internal focaliser is a participant in the narration .He may be an active participant or may have the grace of presence and events are seen from his perspective.
8. INTRA DIEGESIS: It is sometimes called Diegetic and is the main narrative level under *Voice*, the third Narratological Category. In other words, it is the voice of the narrator who may be a participant in the story.
9. HETERODIEGETIC NARRATOR: This refers to the absent narrator telling the story of others. He is normally effaced from the story itself.
10. HOMODIEGETIC NARRATOR: A type of Narrator who is an active participant in the story. The Homodiegetic Narrator may be the Protagonist or another major character.
11. MACROTEXT: This refers to one part of the *Recit* as opposed to the *Histoire*. It refers to the make or structure of the narrative as opposed to the storyline itself.
12. METADIEGESIS: This refers to a part of the story where another person takes up the story from the regular narrator to fill in gaps in the narration which the regular narrator may not be privy to.
13. MICROTEXT: It is the other part of the *Recit* which looks at words and sentence structures for example as they affect the narration.
14. MOOD: This is the second major category of Narratological Criticism three categories. **Mood** refers to the one who sees or the one whose point of view the story is presented. Mood is divided into two main areas namely : Distance and Perspective
15. NARRATION OF EVENTS: This refers to a situation in the story where there is more narration and less mimesis. Or, there is more action and less narration.

16. **NARRATION OF SPEECH:** This refers to the quantity of Mimesis (action) shown by the speeches in the story. The more indirect the speech, the less character presence and more narrator presence. Inversely, the more direct the speech the more character presence and the less narrator presence.
17. **PAUSE:** This belongs to the second subcategory of Time under Duration. Pause refers to a part of the narration where no or advancement takes place in the story but rather time is spent describing or commenting on issues.
18. **PERSPECTIVE:** It is the second subcategory under *Mood* and this deals with who is seeing the events that is narrated. The person narrating the story could be someone outside of the story(External focaliser), or the person could be someone who is a character within the story(Internal focaliser).
19. **PROLEPSIS:** This belongs to the first subcategory under Time named 'Order'. It refers to a flash forward or an advanced point in the story.
20. **SCENE :** This also belongs to the second subcategory of Time under Duration. In a Scene whatever is to be narrated is enacted through dialogues especially. Story Time and Narrative Time are equal in a Scene.
21. **SIMULTANEOUS TIME:** A type of narration where the present tense is used throughout. It is presupposed that the event is narrated as it occurs.
22. **SUMMARY:** Summary belongs to the second sub category of Time labeled 'Duration'. In Summary the Narrative Time is shorter than the Story Time since few word are used to describe an entire event.
23. **TIME:** The first major category of Narratological Criticism that comes with other categories like '**Mood**' and '**Voice**'. Time has sub categories '*Order*', '*Duration*' and '*Frequency*'.
24. **ULTERIOR TIME:** A type of narration where the language used is predominantly in the past tense.
25. **VOICE:** This the third major category fashioned by narratologists. The other categories being **Time** and **Mood**. Voice refers to the person who *speaks* in the narration as opposed to the one who *sees*(**Mood**) Voice has the sub categories: *Time of Narration*, *Narrative Levels*, and *Person*.