

Ritual Subversion

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1 Introduction

In this seminar I'll try and summarise the ideas behind my Ph.D. thesis, which deals with the novels of the Moroccan French author Tahar Ben Jelloun. However, I'll be concentrating on a key chapter of the thesis dealing with what I call "ritual subversion".

I hope it will become clear what I mean by this term later in the talk, but first, a little background.

The title of my 1999 thesis is *Ritual Fictions* [6]. It focuses almost entirely on Ben Jelloun's novels, even though he is also a prolific poet and social commentator. The reason is that the use of rituals in fiction—the topic of my thesis—is fully explored and developed in his novels.

First of all, it's useful to keep in mind that ritual is, in many senses, a subversive act. In its beginnings, a new ritual rebels

against the forces of the unknown, naming them and attempting to control them. As Leonard Cohen once wrote, it represents “moment-to-moment creation in the face of annihilation” [5, p. 127]. Also, the performance of proscribed rituals has been a key element historically in actual subversion. So one should keep in mind that the subversion of ritual is perhaps not the contradiction it might seem to be, and perhaps represents a conflict only in its popular perception.

In my thesis, a key supposition I make is that Ben Jelloun’s characters behave in a singular and unique fashion, which springs from their partially-developed awareness that they are fictional entities.

Thus, for example, the pursuit of identity in their social context is manifested in the drive for self-awareness as fictional characters. Similarly, the struggle for power in their relationships takes the form of a battle for narrative control.

It will become apparent later how this fits into the topic of ritual in fiction. I’ll just mention here that many rituals are widely thought to perform a similar function. For instance, in a rite of passage, the performance of a narrative is held to enable individuation on the psychological level.

2 Subversion of Meanings

To illustrate this struggle for power I’ll begin with an example of the main topic of this talk, ritual subversion. I use this term to describe how the author’s characters take important rituals from their culture and modify them to their own personal ends. Sometimes they are motivated by greed, sometimes by ego, sometimes by some psychological phenomenon. Some serve to attempt to appropriate narrative power, as I alluded to earlier.

In Ben Jelloun’s novel *L’Enfant de sable*, the girl protagonist’s father elaborately stages a fake circumcision to continue the charade that he has at last borne a son. This is an embryonic example of the principle of ritual subversion at work in Ben Jelloun’s fiction.

In this case the reasons are purely egotistical, but the implications and resonances of what amounts to an outrageous sacrilege are drawn out to rebound throughout the rest of the novel:

Comment couper un prépuce imaginaire? Comment ne pas fêter avec faste le passage à l'âge d'homme de cette enfant?

Ô mes amis, il est des folies que même le diable ignore!

...

Figurez-vous qu'il a présenté au coiffeur-circonciseur son fils, les jambes écartées, et que quelque chose a été effectivement coupé, que le sang a coulé, éclaboussant les cuisses de l'enfant et le visage du coiffeur. [3, p. 31-32]

In my thesis I examine the implications of this episode for Ben Jelloun's concern with emptiness of meanings in fiction.

I argue that in this author's work rituals as they are performed traditionally lack the essential meaning which they are assumed to possess. This leaves a vacuum which inspires their use by iconoclasts in his novels who seek to inscribe them with new meanings of their own.

In the example I've just mentioned, the protagonist resists the father's desire for her father's charade to represent a (false) passage to manhood, until she makes a connection between this and the arrival of her first period. But still she implies the body resists meaning in this event, which represents the "résistance du corps au nom".

In other words, the body seeks to subvert the ritual.

In this author's novels, the subversion of the meaning inherent in rituals appears in literal terms also. In one work the author has one of his characters subvert the simple ritual of reciting religious text. The character Sindibad, a former religious student in the novel *La Prière de l'absent*, demonstrates his mastery of the Koran in the following way:

... pour prouver sa parfaite maîtrise, il les récitait aussi en remontant de la dernière sourate à la Fatiha, la sourate de l'ouverture. C'était même sa coquetterie : jongler sans erreur avec la rigueur architecturale du Livre saint. [1, p. 79]

3 Author–Character Relationship

An important implication of my first point, that Ben Jelloun’s characters are somehow aware of their fictionality, is that the relationships between reader, narrator and author are necessarily redefined. As the characters struggle for self-control, they must necessarily vie with the author himself for narrative control. All this would seem more extravagant if it were not for the inclusion in the text of recognisable rituals, which we unthinkingly attribute with similar qualities in life. The simple act of religious prayer springs to mind as an example.

Since Sindibad is also a writer, Ben Jelloun’s treatment of this character reflects his concern with the role of the storyteller, and the redefinitions of the relationship between the storyteller, the narrator and the author. These concerns are unified in the following passage:

Il rédigeait des pages entières de façon mécanique, sans jamais se relire, utilisant une plume en roseau qu’il trempait dans de l’encre marron pâle, l’encre des hommes de religion, des charlatans et des sorciers. [1, p. 79]

Through the agent of his role as witch or sorcerer, the character Sindibad the author impinges on the territory of the real author. This reflects the way the magical qualities of the ritual allow the other characters to expand outside their “traditional” boundaries, when it is subverted to their own ends. Let’s consider the hubris exhibited by a character in the novel *La Nuit de l’erreur*. As Salim wanders around the town of Chaouen, he comes across a funeral procession for a man who has committed suicide, and who therefore has no right to a Muslim burial. Ignorant of this, he decides to accompany the coffin, and is informed that the dead man sacrilegiously had his body prepared for burial before his death, eventually being suffocated by the burial shroud [4, p. 261]. The narrator is puzzled by the dead man’s motivation in exerting such control over his final bodily fate through the mechanism of this ritual, twisted to suit his own ends.

In this episode we see how the author uses ritual to allow his characters to implicate their own bodies in a narrative of their own design. They are thereby in control of the people who unwittingly participate in the modified ritual, modifying their expected interpretation of it to fit into a blasphemous scheme which springs from

their imagination. The mourners in this case are mere characters in their personal story. It is suggested that physical bodily ritual can therefore be a kind of fiction. In this way the characters attempt to control the meanings which are implicit in their own bodily existence, in defiance of external authority.

Another example which clearly demonstrates the quality of rituals to enable the acquisition of power and control occurs in the novel *La Nuit sacrée*. The protagonist Zahra wishes to regain control of a narrative which has seen her separated from the object of her desire, an older blind man. During a ritual in which men and women queue to kiss the hand of a Saint, Zahra joins the men's queue:

Quand je fus face au Saint, je m'agenouillai, je pris sa main tendue et, au lieu de la baiser, je la léchai, suçant chacun de ses doigts. Le Saint essaya de la retirer mais je la retenais de mes deux mains. [2, p. 189]

Zahra's self-conscious manipulation of the ceremony makes her the author as well as the protagonist at the climax of the work. It also feeds off and is enabled by a realisation of her fictional nature, as this blasphemy is prefigured by an epiphany for her:

Tout devenait clair dans mon esprit. Je pensais qu'entre la vie et la mort il n'y avait qu'une très mince couche faite de brume ou de ténèbres, que le mensonge tissait ses fils entre la réalité et l'apparence, le temps n'étant qu'une illusion de nos angoisses. [2, 189]

4 Search for Identity

This individualising of ritual supports a broader theme in Ben Jelloun's work, involving the individualisation of the characters themselves and their search for identity, and this search is seen as taking place by means of a rupture with an immediate authority.

It's easy to see how this behaviour ties in with the characters' nascent awareness of their own fictionality. We can say that the characters seek to become free of the narrative, and this is exactly the conclusion which Ben Jelloun seems to come to. His novel *L'Enfant de sable* is prefaced with the explanation:

« ... Un journal est parfois nécessaire pour dire que l'on a cessé d'être. » Son dessein était exactement cela : dire ce qu'il avait cessé d'être. [3, p. 11–12]

Through rituals the fictional characters in Ben Jelloun's novels seem to be able to manifest a degree of control over their fictional existence in much the same way that people perceive the effect of rituals in life. This appears to result from the perception of the reader that ritual is itself a metaphor which allows them a semblance of control over the supposed supernatural forces which shape their lives.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Ben Jelloun's fictional work is replete with examples of the confrontation of the individual with the communal, and his employment of rituals is no exception. By the mechanism of subversion, the author demonstrates how the power-enhancing qualities of ritual may be appropriated for individual use, and thus demonstrates the extent to which ritual's innate subversive qualities actually create this power structure.

By stressing the unpredictability of meanings which may be assigned to ritual acts and the inherent misunderstandings which they provoke, the author leaves the way open for a plethora of individual meanings, and in turn individualised rituals which generate infinitely more of these.

The evocation of rituals in the novels of Tahar Ben Jelloun is firmly integrated into the author's fictional strategies. These strategies, although varied and chaotic, work to emphasize the role of subversion and manipulation in the generative process, and specifically in the creation of fiction itself.

References

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