

Unveiling paths and patterns: a stylistic analysis of Chris Abani's *Song for Night*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the novella *Song for Night* (2007) by Chris Abani. Focusing on its form, an exceedingly understudied aspect of the work, I argue that, in contrast to a widespread humanitarian praxis, the novella problematises clear-cut binary oppositions. Such problematisation arises from the use of *topoi* of binarisms such as victim vs. perpetrator, physicality vs. spirituality and life vs. death, which are eventually dismantled. Thematic duality reverberates on the stylistic level, characterised by a tension between literal and figurative interpretation. Thus, readers must juggle what initially appears as antithetical concepts and implement mediation. By triggering this process, *Song for Night* opens readers' eyes to complexity by criticising easy distinctions.

Keywords

Song for Night, Chris Abani, stylistic analysis, binarism, humanitarian discourse

The novella *Song for Night* (2007 [2016]) by the global Igbo author Chris Abani was published in a period characterised by the recurring presence of the child soldier figure in literary works by African and diasporic writers. The proliferation of memoir-style novels having African child soldiers as protagonists led Coundouriotis (2010) and Mastey (2016) to define it as a popular literary trend,¹ while Okuyade (2013) considered it one of the two common traits of the new African novel. The child soldiers' permeance in the literary market may lie in the historical context of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when wars erupted in several African countries, including Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan, where young soldiers were involved in the fighting (Gehrmann 2011). The 2001-Child Soldiers International (CSI) report estimated that, between June 1998 and March 2001, three hundred thousand children joined military conflicts across eighty-five different nations. Besides these contextual configurations, the publication of such novels usually tends to represent a financial opportunity for the literary market, because it exploits an existing market share comprising readers' engagement with what is labelled as "misery literature" (Bury 2007 and Addley 2007 in Mastey 2016).²

Child soldier narratives primarily depict children coming from Africa. As Mastey (2016, 149) notes, the novels set outside the continent, such as *Gorilla* (2008) by Şöpā Cakti and

Never Fall Down (2012) by Patricia McCormick, have not been as successful. According to Mastey (2016), the reason lies in Afro-pessimism, i.e. a vision of Africa as a doomed (Paravy 2011) and hopeless continent (de B'éri and Louw 2011). It arises from a practice of representation rooted in colonial discourse and has produced “Africa as a naturalised pessimistic object of knowledge” (de B'éri and Louw 2011, 345). Moynagh (2011), who does not mention the term, associates this vision of the continent with the child soldier narrative trend: Africa seems to be “a place already prepared in the Western imagination for the African child soldier as a subject of violence” (41). This image of Africa as the *heart of darkness*, she concludes, risks triggering a view of the “African child soldier [...as] in need of human rights intervention and rehabilitation” that “threatens to mimic colonial infantilising of Africans as needing the ‘protection’ of European powers” (Moynagh 2011, 41). Responding to this danger, Moynagh (2016) tackles the “problem of the form” of fiction and non-fiction dealing with child soldiers and highlights the entanglement of literary works with humanitarian discourse. She further problematises the extensive humanitarian praxis of separating the victim of violence, who needs to be protected, from the committer of violence that the figure of the child soldier embodies. Specifically, she claims that the victim-perpetrator protagonist of *Song for Night* poses “a direct challenge to the human rights discourse of the innocent victim” (Moynagh 2016, 52).

Following Moynagh’s observation, the central thesis of this article states that Chris Abani, through the representation of *Song for Night*’s protagonist, does not simply highlight the aporia at the basis of humanitarian intervention, such that it becomes impossible to differentiate the child from the soldier and the victim from the perpetrator, but he goes as far as deconstructing the very foundations of clear-cut binarisms. He does so by employing binary oppositions – victim vs. perpetrator, physicality vs. spirituality, and life vs. death – that are eventually problematised and, in some cases, dismantled. In doing so, Abani embraces Igbo epistemology, which refutes well-defined distinctions (Anyanwu 1984). I will contend that the key to understanding this mechanism is focusing on an understudied aspect of the novella: its language. Therefore, I will argue my case through stylistic analysis. Indeed, although many literary critics have pointed out the centrality of its language, praised as “poetical” and “lyrical” (Addei 2018, Durrant 2018, Giommi 2014, Gehrman 2011, Moore and Goldberg 2014), apart from Tunca’s analysis (2014) of the author’s use of irony, little has been said about its style. In the following analysis, I will concentrate on the protagonist’s idiom – that is, his lexicon, syntax and register – to highlight his surviving humanness and problematise the victim/perpetrator binary. I will, then, turn to the recurrent oscillation between the protagonist’s body and mind, physicality and spirituality – an oscillation representing a *fil rouge* in the novella – and finally, I will engage with the effect it has on the work’s style: the coexistence of literal and figurative interpretation.

“I cannot speak something that was never in words”: the question of language

Set in an unmentioned country in a correspondingly unmentioned conflict, seeming to mirror the Nigerian Civil War, *Song for Night* recounts the vicissitudes of a fifteen-year-old landmine diffuser, My Luck.³ The novella begins when he wakes up after losing consciousness due to a landmine explosion and starts a journey searching for his platoon through a war-torn landscape of horror and annihilation. Even if the novella seems to be a paradigmatic quest story, as it proceeds, it becomes clear that “the quest is a spiritual one” insofar as “the protagonist looks for a way to accept death” (Abani 2009a, n.p.). Thus, his journey could be deemed a way to exorcise his sense of guilt for the atrocities he committed. This is the reason why the past intrudes into the present through the irruption of My Luck’s memories as flashbacks. Indeed, as Ijeoma – the ghost girlfriend of the protagonist – suggests, to assuage his sense of grief, he has to “relive and release his darkness” (84). This process of reminiscence is dotted by the inadequacy of his language, describing the traumatic experiences of violence he endured: “I cannot speak something that was never in words” (29).

Complicating communication further is that, given the peculiarity of his duty, My Luck’s vocal cords – and those of his comrades – have been severed so that if one of the soldiers detonated a mine, they “wouldn’t scare each other with [...] death screams” (12), and the war machine would continue to work smoothly. Nevertheless, despite their voicelessness, the child soldiers retain a sense of agency, developing a way of communicating through a concoction of telepathy and a sign language of their invention. Thus, the concern with language is vital and comes to the fore from the incipit of the novella. From the beginning of the story, the protagonist speaks directly to readers, telling them that they “have gained access to [his] head” (11) and that his inner speech “is not in English” (11) but Igbo. These explanations show the artificiality of My Luck’s monologue (i.e. language as fiction) and, concurrently, disclose how his language is a palimpsest: the result of superimposed layers consisting of thoughts, signs, and telepathy, all conflating into a lyrical monologue. Therefore, My Luck’s first-person narrative represents a deviation from the child soldier genre, whose founding text – Ken Saro Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1985) – employs “rotten English,” i.e. an orchestrated language trying to reflect colloquial Nigerian English (Boyd 1994). Inspired by this founding text, many child soldier narratives deploy a similar strategy. For instance, Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) displays ungrammatical sentences that have the aim of depicting the diglossia that characterises the linguistic milieu of its protagonist. However, the highly lyrical language in *Song for Night* helps to shift this work away from the genre of child-soldier narrative. Here the aim of Abani, who repeatedly expresses his concern with language (Abani 2009b, Abani 2016), is to investigate the “primal language of the genes” (11), which would correspond in Saussurean terms to the universal system of *langage*. Comparatively, one can argue that in *Song for Night*, language also represents an organising structure building the architecture of

the novel itself: the narrative text is fragmented into short chapters, the headings of which draw attention to this topic by depicting a translation of specific words into the nonverbal language used by the mine diffusers after their vocal cords have been severed. These translations are part of the child soldier's *argot* and represent a key to understanding their surviving humanness.

Chapter headings: a dictionary of the victim-perpetrator's bruised humanity

Within the war context, My Luck and his comrades risk losing their humanity due to the violence that they suffer from and that they perpetuate. This loss may be caused by the military education provided by their commander, Major Essien, who is responsible for their training and aims to transform them into perfect cogs in the war machine. After being compared to an animal himself – see the use of the simile “like a bird of prey” (26, emphasis added) –, Essien is “determined to turn [his soldiers] into animals” (25, emphasis added). In this context, sexual violence plays the role of an initiation rite. When the commander coerces My Luck to rape an old woman, the protagonist's confession of his enjoyment deprives him of his innocence and position as a victim of the war: “Some part of me was enjoying it and that perhaps hurt me the most” (85). Nevertheless, My Luck cannot be considered only a full perpetrator of violence either. A window to his bruised humanity is offered by the sign language used by the child soldiers, encapsulated in the headings of the numerous fragmented chapters interlocking past and present.

These headings juxtapose entry nouns with their definitions, comprising gestures and body movements. In Saussurean terms, this resulting translation represents the correspondence between a physical signifier and a signified. Therefore, “Will,” the signified, is expressed through “an Emphatic Finger Pointing,” the signifier. The words that My Luck translates relate to the events recounted in that specific chapter, thus offering a sort of synopsis of that same chapter. According to Moore and Goldberg (2014), this technique shows that the narrative is “organized not around plot elements but around the complex system of signs used by the child soldiers to communicate with each other” (68). However, although the two scholars highlight the importance of sign language, they do not delve deeply into it.

My reading suggests that the focus on the soldiers' *argot* reveals that the author problematises a clear-cut distinction between victims and perpetrators of violence and shows how, as in humanitarian discourse, it is “tricky to separate the child from the soldier” (Moynagh 2011, 40). Considering the war, one may expect that the words needed by the soldiers would be practical words that they might use as tools for survival. Yet, the category of concrete nouns – consisting of words such as “train,” “shelter,” and “roll call” – represents only a slim percentage of the set of words “translated” by My Luck. Instead, the semantic field of war is supplanted almost entirely by a selection of abstract words that have no practical use in such

an adverse setting. The preponderance of such words – “love,” “imagination,” “mercy,” etc. – shows the dented but still existing humanity of the child soldiers and their need to express it. Amidst the horror of violence, the child soldiers’ nuanced linguistic repertoire proves that their commander’s desire to transform them into animals, epitomised by the deprivation of their voice, has bitterly failed. The content of this micro-dictionary can be a key for the reader to understand the remaining part of the protagonist’s humanity. The reassertion of the common ground between the two engenders a sense of proximity, preventing readers from readily categorising the protagonist as a mere violent perpetrator.

If the readers’ initiation into this secret language is available from the beginning of the novella – “Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat” (13) – the origin of the synesthetic structure of My Luck’s translation is shown in chapter fourteen. It can be traced back to his childhood when his aunt, “all bruised from a beating from her husband” (61), articulated her profound sense of solitude. My Luck’s hug makes her unveil her feelings:

“My Luck,” she said, “My Luck, do you know what lonely feels like?” [...]

“*Lonely is a cold, itchy back,*” she said. (62, emphasis added)

Through the employment of this sentence, the woman provides the protagonist with a syntactic structure that he pursues vigorously after being deprived of his voice. Therefore, his body becomes a “medium through which intangible knowledge can be communicated” (Dalley 2013, 452). The resulting, almost invariable pattern of the headings makes up a micro-dictionary of his sign language, revealing that although his “humanity [is] reduced to its worst and lowest degree” (Giommi 2011, 177), he still preserves it.

Another example of the protagonist’s humanity is that, notwithstanding the violence and the horror of war, he can still love. Through flashbacks, readers discover that, after the rape episode, his comrade Ijeoma becomes his girlfriend, and she washes the blood from his face as if an ablution could wash away his sense of guilt. Henceforth, “whenever [the platoon] raided a town or a village, while the others were raping the women and sometimes the men, [My Luck and Ijeoma] made desperate love [...] to make sure that amongst all that horror, there was still love” (67). Their love is present even after Ijeoma’s death as shown in the chapter titled “Child’s play” (85). The heading breaks the regular pattern described above, as it does not present the correspondence between a signified and a visual-manual signifier. Instead, it displays only the former – the entry world of My Luck’s micro-dictionary – while the way it is signed can be found in the first sentence of the chapter. Such a type of “depart[ure] from the norms of the text itself,” defined by Leech and Short as internal deviation (2007, 44), engenders a foregrounding effect: the chapter stands out, and its emphasis serves as a flashing sign for readers to pay attention to its content. Although the chapter depicts a remembrance of the past, different from

the other flashbacks recounted with the use of the past tense, here, the present tense is employed: “play is a veiled thing,” “Endlessly we play,” “still we smile” (85). Even if “Rock, paper, scissors” (85) can no longer be played because Ijeoma is dead, the present tense of this chapter could be interpreted as the grammatical translation of My Luck’s everlasting love. This sentiment of love felt by the protagonist can be seen as proof of his remaining humanity.

Oscillation from the mind to the body: entrapment between life and death

The *fil rouge* of the narrative is My Luck’s oscillation between body and mind and between physicality and spirituality. He cannot dispel such binarism, and it causes his disorientation and his inability to find the path towards death. Indeed, the protagonist is supposed to reconcile with his sense of guilt by reminiscing upon his past. Yet, he keeps pushing back everything that could make him remember it. Therefore, when facing an object triggering his memory, he repeatedly falls back on his earthly body as a way to ground himself. For instance, the moment when he reflects on his status as a chimaera – entrapped between childhood and adulthood as war stole the former from him and denied him the latter – he interrupts his ruminations by returning to his *modus operandi*: “If it help, I would cry, but tears are useless here. Anyway, I can’t afford to lose any more fluids until I find clear drinking water” (118). The failure to remember the song his grandfather taught him – a song that could have been the compass to find his way towards the afterlife – is characterised by the same *leitmotif* i.e. the oscillation from his mind to his body. The realisation is indeed pursued by a simple “oh, well” (56): He does not despair and keeps eating, nourishing his physical body. The body also symbolises protection from the atrocity of war: when he sees “a macabre regatta” of corpses floating in the river, he “light[s] a cigarette and scratch[es his] belly” (31). This habit is so pervasive that even when he tries to take shelter in his mind and “[b]lock out the horror and imagine good things,” the focus once again diverts to his body, “All I can think is that it would be nice to have a hot meal” (44).

This clinging to the body can be traced back to a deeply traumatic moment of his life: the murder of his mother. Paradoxically, the event is displayed through a flashback corresponding to one of those “memories [that are] brought into life almost without [his] participation” (Simoes da Silva 2018, 118), where his mind prevails over his body. In tackling this remembrance, his *parole* fails:

What does it mean to hide in a ceiling, in that narrow hot crawl space, crouched like an animal smelling my own scent (...) while my mother stays below in what seems like the brightest sunlight although it is only the light of a six-watt bulb, waiting to deflect the anger of people intent on murder, my murder, waiting so that I may live, and I watch what happens below and I am grateful that I can smell my smell, smell my smell and live while below it happens, it happens that night bright as day, but I cannot name it, those things that happened while I watched, and I cannot speak something that was never in words, speak of things I cannot imagine, could never have seen even as I saw it, and I hide and am grateful for my smell crouched like an animal in that dark hot space. (29)

The passage can be seen as the apotheosis of ‘external deviation’ as it does not follow the commonly accepted linguistic norms. It comprises an exceedingly long period, intertwining subordinations and coordinations, both connected by commas. The syntax renders the comprehension of the sentence difficult and simultaneously engenders a sense of confusion, exacerbated by the numerous repetitions of specific words and clauses. The technique of rejecting ‘elegant variation’ thoroughly imitates My Luck’s mental confusion, which derives from the trauma he experienced facing the murder of his mother. In this passage, through the abundance of references to his body odour – the lexeme “smell” is repeated six times under the guise of verbs and nouns as well as its synonymic “scent” –, the protagonist reassures himself that he is still alive. The insistence on the body is accentuated by the cyclical motion of the sentence: its *incipit*, corresponding almost perfectly to its *denouement*, focuses on My Luck’s position maintained in the “narrow *hot* crawl space,” “crouched like an animal” (29). Such a focus on his body mirrors the impossibility of a *récit* due to trauma. Indeed, as in the most conventional psychoanalytic approaches, including Freud’s, when linguistic resources collapse, the only way to communicate traumatic experiences is, together with dreams, through the body.

The prominence of the body is exacerbated within the war context, where its preservation is more important than anything else as it becomes a tool of the war machine. The receptacle of protocols of survival is an invisible manual to which Major Essien frequently refers. As Durrant (2018) states, using Agambenian terminology, the manual’s aim is the mere survival of ‘bare life’, the biological fact of life. Nevertheless, nobody has seen the manual as it is only in the commander’s head. Its immateriality, however, does not prevent My Luck from following its instructions: his “first instinct is always survival” (13). Therefore, the protagonist’s movement in space is influenced by the manual at the beginning of his journey – “The first thing I do is search for Nebu’s body. That’s the way it is laid out in the manual” (12) – but also throughout his journey – “the lost manual would call for shelter, so I hunt across the hilltop until I come to a rock formation” (98).

My Luck’s military indoctrination is epitomised by the fact that the language of the manual permeates his own idiom. The evidence supporting this idea is found when he carves a cross on his skin to commemorate his dead comrade and tells the reader how he avoids infections: “I take out my prick and *piss* all over my arm, feeling it stinging and cooling at the same time. In basic first aid *they* told us that *human urine* is the best field disinfectant there is” (24, emphasis added).⁴ This passage is characterised by changes in register, which “tend [...] to imply that we are listening to this or that person’s manner of speaking” (Leech and Short 2007, 87). Therefore, the author’s decision to employ synonyms such as “piss” and “human urine” may reflect more than his desire to avoid lexical repetition. Indeed, if the colloquial word is characteristic of the protagonist’s way of talking, the formality of “human urine” points to a

higher register. Although My Luck uses it, it is more probably a word from his commander's manual. The shift between the first-person pronoun in the first sentence and the third-person pronoun "they" supports this hypothesis, showing that the second sentence is an indirect speech. By his admission, this is not the only time the language of the immaterial manual seeps into his idiom: he uses terms such as "pros and cons," epitomising "the language of the invisible manual" (34). Usually, when he recites the teaching of the manual, the syntax abandons any lyricism, predilecting the simplicity of subject-verb-object patterns, which has a shot-like effect: "Ambush is standard procedure" (33), "This has pros and cons" (34), "The rule of thumb is that [...]" (12). Thus, the manual is indeed "drummed" into My Luck (12).

As the manual dictates his movements, My Luck is lost completely. The culmination of his disorientation in space is displayed in chapter eighteenth, whose heading depicts another internal deviation as it does not include an entry word. The chapter shows the absurdity of "army speak" (81), whose points of reference are dubious, "one mile is one click" (81) of a lighter. Besides the absurdity of its logic, child soldiers do not even possess a lighter; thus, they have to mimic the gesture of using one. Also, the equivalence portrays the possible alteration of the manual itself: although the commander prides himself in the fact that it is "the same manual they use in West Point, the same one they use in Sandhurst" (20), the equation between one mile and one-click is flawed. Unlike what he argues, in military jargon, one klick corresponds to one kilometre.

Mimicking the gesture of lighting an invisible lighter is nothing more than a farce, and upon following this strategy, My Luck finds himself entrapped in the bowels of a town, "looking for a way out" (82). There, he witnesses his first unmistakably paranormal event – the encounter with the ghost of Ijeoma, his dead lover, and his commander. The former reveals to the protagonist that to reach the afterlife, he has to "relive and release his darkness" (84). These instructions sharply contrast with those of Major Essien, who in this sequence remains symbolically silent. Apparently, in the realm between life and death, the commander cannot afford any valuable indications. Therefore, as Durrant (2018) states, "it is this internalized survival manual that My Luck must disremember if he is to accept his biological death and begin his life as a spirit" (192); he has to disparage the Cartesian logic preventing him from understanding his status between life and death. Yet, he is still entrapped in physicality and he still believes that he cannot either be dead or a ghost because when he pinches himself, "it hurts" (84).

My Luck's logic has already been problematized during his childhood by his grandfather, who represents the repository of Igbo cosmology and knowledge, to which he tried to initiate his grandson. Readers learn about the episode in chapter twelve, which stands out because its heading tackles the only concept – the soul – that is untranslatable in the child soldier's sign language. It suggests that in the necropolitical context of the war, governed only by the twisted

logic of extermination, spiritual elements are out of place: in the language of the child soldier, “A Soul has no Sign” (52).

The overcoming of the caesura between body and mind, physicality and spirituality is presented by a crucial myth about a sacred Igbo lake, disclosed by his grandfather. Suggestively, the episode is remembered notwithstanding My Luck’s desire to focus on his body: his memories intrude on the present. While roasting a fish, its smell makes him remember a precise moment, when his grandfather unveiled the existence of a lake, “the repository of human souls” (55). Since My Luck’s senses trigger this memory, this *mémoire involontaire*, as Durrant (2018) calls it, taking inspiration from the emblematic *madeleine de Proust*, highlights the interdependence between body and mind, which the protagonist tries adamantly to avoid. Such caesura is repudiated by Igbo epistemology, which “does not make a clear-cut distinction [...] between body and spirit, between the visible and invisible worlds but regards all as a field of [the] aesthetic continuum” (Anyanwu 1984, 89). In *Song for Night*, the denial of strict binary oppositions is discernible in the dialogue between My Luck and his grandfather:

“There is a lake in the middle of the world.

Grandfather said.

This is the oldest truth of our people. This is the oldest lie” (52)

[...]

“And this lake is real?” [My Luck asks]

“Very.”

“But it sounds like a tall tale.”

“It is.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nobody does. Everybody does. It is real because it is a tall tale. This lake is at the heart of our people. This lake is love. If you find it and find the pillar, you can climb it into the very heart of God.” (56)

This interaction confuses My Luck because his grandfather’s words appear more like riddles than graspable knowledge. His inability to comprehend the message of these communicative acts, representing the quintessence of ambiguity for him, supports Durrant’s claim (2018) that the protagonist is severed from Igbo tradition.⁵ A further corroboration of this thesis is observable in My Luck’s incapacity to comprehend the pieces of Igbo knowledge transmitted to him under the guise of proverbs and apophthegms by his grandfather. The statements, “Why put the ocean into a coconut?” (13) and “The closer we are to death, the easier our facility for seeing ghosts becomes” (97), give My Luck beneficial indications on how to behave and what to deduce from the situation he is in. Proverbs, including those contained in the novel, are a

typical feature of Igbo culture. As the author states, citing Chinua Achebe, proverbs are believed to be “the palm oil with which words are eaten” and to “provide insight into [the] moral” of the protagonist’s culture (Abani 2016, 173). These bits of Igbo culture and knowledge interspersed within the text are of utmost importance for the protagonist, as they offer him an alternative to the information he has access to during the war. Tragically, however, it is evident that My Luck cannot fully comprehend the meaning behind these proverbs or misinterprets them. These common sayings become like ritualistic prayers, ossified into dogma; their true meaning have almost vanished. For instance, referring to the aphorism mentioned earlier, he does not understand that his ability to see ghosts is acquired through his liminal position between life and death and not due to the risk of dying. Also, when the protagonist remembers his grandfather saying: “Life and death are like this river [...] You can go anywhere on its spread as long as you don’t try to stop or alter the river’s course,” the former goes against the grain “he was wrong. I have cheated death course many times, and I am still here” (32).

My Luck’s grandfather believes in the truth of his answers. Through their ambiguity, he aims to initiate My Luck into his wisdom. Imbued within Igbo knowledge, the wise man dismantles binary oppositions: the lake is truth, but, concurrently, it is also a lie. For him, the contradiction between the two does not subsist as he envisions a continuum where both the veracity and falsity of the lake can coexist. Therefore, as Durrant states (2018), his “teachings prove of more practical relevance precisely because they are presented as paradoxical stories [...] rather than rigid belief structures” (192). After all, the rigid belief inculcated by My Luck’s commander represents an (almost) insurmountable obstacle during his journey towards death. A way to surmount it would be recollecting the song his grandfather taught him on the same occasion (56), a song that might have been the compass to find the way towards the afterlife. However, he cannot remember it and, thus, he is entrapped within a *limbo*, a liminal space unsettling the binarism between life and death.

This entrapment is heightened by My Luck’s inability to accept that he is dead, creating a discrepancy between the logic making him rationalise the supernatural events and the supernatural events *per se*. Tunca interprets this discrepancy as irony, which, according to her, represents “the backbone of the book’s narrative strategy” (2014, 166). She interprets it as a literary device fooling readers and aiming to mock their empathy. However, as the story proceeds, an increasing number of hints related to the true status of the protagonist are dropped, so much so that it is almost impossible to reach the end of the novel without at least doubting that he is, indeed, a ghost. Therefore, the rhetorical device employed by the author must be deemed dramatic irony, i.e., a form of irony in which readers know and understand more about a situation than the characters involved.

In the beginning, only inconspicuous hints about him being a ghost are provided, but as the novella progresses, they bloom. The first hint, which could initially pass unnoticed, is

offered by the paratext of the novella. As Genette and Maclean (1991) maintained, paratexts represent the vestibule of literary works and are capable of determining “a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading” (265). Indeed, one of the epigraphs making up the paratext could guide the reader’s interpretation: the passage in the narrative taken from Molière – *We die only once and for such a long time* – seems to be an allusion to the protagonist’s long process of dying (Tunca 2014, Durrant 2018). Clues about My Luck’s passing also include a plethora of puns. To name a few, when My Luck’s inner voice share with his readers the destiny of people treading on a mine – e.g., they are “killed” (33) –, he adds, “They are *lucky*” (33, emphasis added). Even if the association between the adjective employed and his own name might, at first sight, seem coincidental, it amounts to a mightier consequence when it is reinforced by another hint, positioned immediately afterward. My Luck compiles a list of “pros and cons of being at the front of every battle” (35). While the disadvantages consist of a repetition of the word *death*, the list of advantages is manifold:

- Prime pillaging opportunities.
- The battle is over quicker.
- If you die, it is quick (*unless you fall victim to a mine, which can be a slow death sometimes*). (35, emphasis added)

The dramatic irony in this passage is evident as the protagonist does not grasp that the third item applies to him. Stylistically, this item is foregrounded through internal deviation, realised through the presence of a parenthetical clause in a list containing no other bracketed structure.

Additionally, the protagonist encounters different characters calling him “Tufia,” the Igbo word for banishing spirits: the women robbing corpses and the man on the premises of the “Die Hard Motel and Eatery,” whose name could be interpreted as another pun referring to the condition of the protagonist between life and death.

The critical moment when My Luck discovers the right direction – albeit still unaware of the destination – is embodied in chapter twenty, the last one characterised by the internal deviation of its heading. “Hand Held like a Pistol” represents the partial movement conveying the meaning of a concept, revealed only towards the end of the same chapter: telepathy is “A handheld like a pistol, forefinger as barrel and thumb as hammer, barrel swinging away from the forehead and swinging back” (90-91). The iconicity of the preceding headings is supplanted by a construction based on similes creating the most complex sign among the words translated by My Luck. The telepathy to which the protagonist alludes represents his own explanation for the fact that he can communicate without using his sign language when he meets “Peter, the catechist” (90). The enigmatic dialogue between the two shows some of the characteristics displayed in exchanges with the grandfather. Peter, too, has a thorough knowledge of the complexity of the world and tries to make My Luck gather that he is one of those confused

spirits blown miles away from their body (90). However, he also comprehends that My Luck is not ready to discern the truth. So, as “the conflict is never in the truth, only in how we receive it” (90), the catechist does not make it explicit that My Luck is dead. He merely points him in the right direction by disclosing to the protagonist that he has to cross the River Cross. Thus, the protagonist finally starts to find new places, breaking (almost) free from the entrapment in the topography of his past.

Binarism’s effect on style: between the literal and the figurative

The dramatic irony referred to above sometimes – as in the case of the paratext – mirrors a recurrent play in the novella, which is not confined to the in-betweenness of My Luck: the oscillation from what is perceived as figurative to the necessity of literal interpretation, i.e. a sort of anti-metaphoric resistance. Such a *leitmotif* mimics My Luck’s continual movement from the mind to the body. For instance, when My Luck meets a woman named Grace, she states that “Death is our burden to carry” (132). Notwithstanding the temptation for a metaphorical interpretation, she refers to the actual coffin carried on her shoulders. Also, when the protagonist says that “Time is standing still,” the sentence seems to be a veiled reference to the journey’s temporality, but he refers to the fact that “the old Timex that belonged to [his] father” does not work (38). Moreover, when he states that “the water will not wash [him] clean” (111), Dalley (2013) interprets it figuratively as referring to his sense of guilt. However, the protagonist adds: “Not in a symbolic sense, but clean from the dirt here that grits every pore until I sweat mud” (111).

Yet, the temptation for a literal interpretation of such passages is counterbalanced by the use of rhetorical figures, such as symbols. An example of such an allegorical interpretation is the interplay between darkness and light. Its apotheosis is reached in the oneiric battle between Ijeoma, the embodiment of pure light, “an orb smaller than a star but no less bright” (68), and the “woman made of night” (68), the incarnation of the protagonist’s hate. The description of the violent confrontation between the two women is dotted with several antonyms and synonyms referring to the binarism between light and bright versus darkness and night. Nonetheless, this strict binary opposition between metaphorical darkness and light is blurred when the protagonist realises that it is thanks to the former that the latter exists: “Out of a nightmare sometimes a good dream is born” (124). He comes to such a realisation almost unexpectedly: one morning, he simply wakes up and does not feel sad anymore. Instead, he states:

I am filled with an almost unbearable lightness. This *light* comes not from a sudden wholeness on my part, but from the very wounds I carry on my body and my soul. Each wound, in its particular way, giving off a peculiar *light*. (124, emphasis added)

The continuation of the previous interplay between light and darkness becomes evident when the protagonist comprehends that the obstacle encountered in the form of an insuperable “cliff,” interrupting his path, is actually the embodiment of his sense of “guilt” (125). Once again, the confrontation is stylistically exacerbated by the above-mentioned antonyms. However, the binary opposition is put into question: not only does My Luck need light “to cross darkness,” but as stated by the author, darkness is indispensable “for the concept of light to exist” (Abani 2006, n.p.). Thus, thanks to the acceptance of his darkness, he can reach the other side of the river, the world of ancestors, where the only possible redemption is the restoration of his voice. From a stylistic perspective, the apparent formal contradiction between the oscillation from literal to figurative interpretations echoes the approach of My Luck’s grandfather. The binarism between literal and figurative interpretation can coexist with and be part of the aesthetic continuum embodied in the novella.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *Song for Night* problematises clear-cut binary oppositions embodied in the figure of My Luck. As the analysis of the chapter headings shows, his sign language is permeated by words pointing to a still existing humanity, complicating his categorisation as a victim or a perpetrator. Moreover, notwithstanding his focus on his body as a strategy for survival, the intrusion of his memories, specifically those of his grandfather, complicates the protagonist’s cartesian logic. His grandfather’s “tall tales” (56) are the key to comprehending that ambiguity. Indeed, they mirror the complexity of existence, where “certain kinds of magical thinking remain vital” (Durrant 2018, 201), so much so that the distinction between life and death is disputed. Besides, the article has disclosed how binary opposites influence the form of the text, characterised by the juggling between literal and figurative language. Abani takes inspiration from his inheritance of Igbo culture and its refusal of mutually exclusive opposites, making literal and figurative language part of an aesthetic continuum. Consequently, in reading *Song for Night*, readers simultaneously question clear borders between categories and their very foundations.

Notes

¹ Some examples of such novels are Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000), Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002), Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005), and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). In 2015, a film adaptation of the latter was released by Netflix.

² Misery literature describes mainly non-fictional literary works having children as protagonists dealing with different types of abuse but can eventually overcome their experience of violence (Bury 2007; Addley 2007 quoted in Mastey, 2016).

³ The chronotope of the story has been debated for a long time. Apart from Coundouriotis stating that “it cannot be Biafra” (2010, 196) due to the presence of several anachronisms, literary critics tend to

agree that, in fact, it is (Giommi 2014, Ouma 2020, Tunca 2013, Oboe and Bordin, 2020). However, as Durrant rightly points out, the “temporal and spatial elasticity” (2018, 187) reveals that Abani’s aim is not historicity. Moreover, Tunca states that “debates over historical inaccuracy” are “superfluous,” as they disclose readers’ “idea that fiction is, and necessarily must be, aligned with reality” (2014, 174). Even Abani affirmed that he intended to represent “the life of all children forced into darkness” (Goyal 2014, 236).

⁴ It is interesting to note that, even in this passage, My Luck escapes from the sense of loss due to the death of his comrade and falls back to his body by carving crosses on his arm.

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