

Liminality and Transformation: An Exploration of Afrojujuism's Influence on Character Development and Narrative Structure in Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*

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Abstract:

This study explores the concept of liminality and transformation within the framework of Afrojujuism in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Amos Tutuola. Afrojujuism—a fusion of African spiritual cosmologies, folklore, and surrealist aesthetics—shapes the novel's character development and narrative structure, blurring the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical worlds. Through an analysis of Tutuola's use of mythic tropes, supernatural encounters, and fluid identity transitions, this paper examines how liminality functions as a transformative force in the protagonist's journey. The research highlights how Afrojujuism informs the novel's fragmented, episodic storytelling, reflecting the fluid and nonlinear nature of African oral traditions. Ultimately, the study underscores how Tutuola's work challenges conventional narrative forms and enriches the literary exploration of identity, exile, and metamorphosis.

Keywords: Afrojujuism, liminality, transformation, Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, African folklore, narrative structure, character development, supernatural, oral tradition.

Introduction

Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) is a landmark work in African literature, renowned for its fusion of Yoruba oral traditions, supernatural elements, and fragmented storytelling. At the heart of this novel lies a deep engagement with liminality and transformation, concepts that are central to both its character development and narrative structure. Through the lens of Afrojujuism—a term that encapsulates the blending of African spiritual cosmologies, folklore, and surrealist aesthetics—Tutuola crafts a narrative that exists in the interstitial space between the real and the spectral, the mortal and the divine, the past and the present.

Liminality, a concept introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner, refers to a state of transition where individuals or societies are caught between stages of existence, often leading to profound change. In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the protagonist, a young boy lost in the supernatural realm, undergoes a series of transformations as he navigates a world populated by spirits, deities, and magical beings. His journey is marked by a constant state of flux, reflecting both personal growth and the broader cultural significance of transformation in African storytelling.

The novel's episodic and non-linear narrative structure mirrors the protagonist's liminal existence, challenging conventional Western literary frameworks. Tutuola's storytelling method, deeply rooted in oral tradition, allows for a fluid, almost dreamlike sequence of events, reinforcing the disorienting and transformative nature of the protagonist's experiences. This structural approach aligns with the Afrojujuist aesthetic, which embraces the coexistence of multiple realities, spectral interventions, and the cyclical nature of time.

By examining the interplay between liminality and transformation in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, this paper explores how Afrojujuism shapes both character development and narrative form. In doing so, it sheds light on Tutuola's innovative literary techniques and his broader contribution to African speculative fiction. Ultimately, this study argues that the novel's embrace of liminality is not only a narrative strategy but also a reflection of the fluid and evolving nature of identity, culture, and storytelling in the African literary imagination.

II. Literature Review

A. Liminality Theory

The concept of liminality was first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1909), where he described it as the transitional phase between two stages of life or identity. This idea was later expanded by Victor Turner, who emphasized liminality as a space of transformation, ambiguity, and disorientation, often associated with rituals, rites of passage, and mythological narratives. Within literature, liminality manifests as a state of flux—both in character development and narrative structure—where protagonists undergo profound changes. In the context of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the protagonist's journey through the supernatural world embodies a liminal existence, reflecting his struggle for self-discovery and survival. The novel's fragmented and non-linear structure further reinforces this liminality, disrupting conventional storytelling and immersing readers in a space of constant transition.

B. Afrojujuism and Yoruba Mythology

Afrojujuism, a term that encapsulates the fusion of African spiritual traditions, folklore, and speculative fiction, provides a critical framework for analyzing *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Rooted in Yoruba mythology, Afrojujuism emphasizes transformation, spiritual encounters, and the coexistence of the visible and invisible worlds. Yoruba cosmology is deeply intertwined with concepts of ancestral reverence, spirit possession, and metaphysical journeys—elements that are central to Tutuola's narrative. The novel's depiction of ghosts, deities, and shape-shifting beings aligns with Yoruba mythological beliefs, where the boundary between the physical and spiritual

realms is fluid. Furthermore, Afrojujuism embraces oral storytelling traditions, which influence the novel's episodic structure and lyrical prose, reinforcing its liminal and transformative themes.

C. Amos Tutuola's Work

Amos Tutuola is widely recognized for his distinctive literary style, which blends Yoruba oral traditions with modern literary forms. His debut novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), established his reputation as a pioneer of African speculative fiction, and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) further solidified his place in Nigerian literature. Tutuola's works are characterized by their surreal landscapes, folkloric influences, and exploration of existential themes such as exile, identity, and spiritual metamorphosis. *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* in particular exemplifies his innovative approach, presenting a protagonist who undergoes multiple transformations while navigating a world shaped by Yoruba cosmology. The novel's fragmented, almost dreamlike structure defies traditional Western narrative expectations, aligning instead with the cyclical and episodic nature of African oral storytelling. By situating Tutuola's work within the broader context of Afrojujuism and liminality, this study aims to highlight the ways in which his narrative techniques and thematic concerns contribute to the evolution of African literary discourse.

III. Character Development through Liminality

A. The Protagonist's Journey

In *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, the protagonist, a young boy lost in the supernatural realm, undergoes a series of profound transformations that illustrate the concept of liminality. His journey is marked by continuous shifts between human and non-human states, emphasizing the in-between nature of his existence. As he navigates the mystical and often terrifying world of ghosts, he moves beyond conventional human experiences, entering a transitional phase where his identity, perception, and understanding of reality are constantly in flux. This liminal journey mirrors the traditional Yoruba concept of spiritual passage, where individuals must undergo trials before achieving enlightenment or reintegration into society. The protagonist's ultimate return to the human world signifies the completion of his transformation, highlighting how liminality serves as a vehicle for growth and self-discovery.

B. Encounters with Ghosts and Spirits

The protagonist's encounters with supernatural beings serve as catalysts for his transformation. Throughout the novel, he interacts with a range of spectral and mythical figures—some benevolent, others malevolent—each representing different aspects of Yoruba cosmology. These encounters place him in extreme situations that challenge his understanding of life, death, and the boundaries of existence. For instance, the spirits he meets often impose trials upon him, forcing him to adapt, learn, and evolve in response. Such encounters align with the liminal phase described by Turner, where the individual undergoes a process of dissolution and reconstruction, shedding old identities and acquiring new ones. Through these supernatural engagements, the

protagonist gains wisdom, resilience, and a deeper connection to the spiritual world, reinforcing his character development.

C. Identity Formation

The protagonist's prolonged stay in the bush of ghosts fundamentally reshapes his identity and worldview. Initially a fearful and disoriented child, he gradually acquires a sense of agency and understanding of his place in the liminal space. The challenges he faces—from being trapped in the ghostly domain to adopting temporary non-human forms—force him to redefine himself beyond the limitations of his mortal origins. This evolving sense of self reflects the transformative power of liminality, where identity is not fixed but continuously reconstituted. Moreover, his eventual return to the human world does not signify a simple restoration of his original identity; rather, he emerges as someone profoundly changed by his experiences, embodying a hybrid existence that bridges both the human and supernatural realms. Through this lens, Tutuola's novel offers a nuanced exploration of identity as a dynamic and fluid construct, shaped by liminal encounters and transformative journeys.

IV. Narrative Structure and Liminality

A. Non-Linear Narrative

Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* employs a non-linear narrative structure that mirrors the protagonist's liminal journey. Unlike conventional Western storytelling, which often follows a clear beginning, middle, and end, Tutuola's narrative is fragmented and episodic, reflecting the disorienting experience of existing between the human and spirit worlds. This non-linearity aligns with the Yoruba oral tradition, where storytelling is cyclical and fluid rather than strictly chronological. By structuring the novel in this way, Tutuola reinforces the liminal nature of his protagonist's experiences, immersing readers in a world where time, identity, and reality are in constant flux. The disruptions in narrative continuity serve to highlight the instability of the liminal phase, making the protagonist's journey unpredictable and transformative.

B. Symbolism and Metaphor

Tutuola's use of symbolism and metaphor further enhances the novel's liminal theme, creating a dreamlike and surreal atmosphere. Ghosts, spirits, and shape-shifting beings symbolize the fluid boundaries between life and death, reality and illusion, self and other. The protagonist's frequent transformations—such as his encounters with hybrid beings and his temporary loss of human identity—function as metaphors for spiritual and existential liminality. Additionally, the bush itself serves as a symbolic space of transition, representing both exile and initiation. Within Yoruba cosmology, forests and wilderness areas are often depicted as sites of transformation, where individuals undergo trials that lead to greater knowledge or personal evolution. Tutuola draws on these cultural motifs to reinforce the protagonist's journey as one of metaphysical and psychological change.

C. Cultural Significance

The novel's engagement with liminality extends beyond individual transformation, reflecting broader cultural themes within Yoruba mythology and oral tradition. Transformation is a central tenet of Yoruba spiritual beliefs, particularly in initiation rites and mythological narratives, where individuals must pass through liminal stages before attaining wisdom or spiritual elevation. Tutuola's narrative structure echoes this principle, positioning the protagonist's journey as an allegory for personal and communal growth. Furthermore, the novel's episodic and nonlinear storytelling aligns with Yoruba oral traditions, which prioritize adaptability and fluidity over rigid structural conventions. By embedding these cultural elements into the novel's form, Tutuola not only challenges Western literary norms but also underscores the enduring significance of liminality as a means of understanding selfhood, spirituality, and the human condition.

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