

Tara Menon

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Professor Corinne Scheiner

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**Carving the “Old Trunk of Olive”/ Inventing a Path in the Sand: Narrative as Construction of Human Identity in *The Odyssey* and *The Sand Child***

In both Homer’s *Odyssey* (henceforth *O*) and Ben Jelloun’s *The Sand Child* (*SC*), narration becomes a means of constructing human identity in what one could describe as four progressive logical levels: i. the story creates human identity; ii. the story becomes identity; iii. the metaphor for identity becomes the metaphor for story; iv. the nature of the metaphor determines the nature both of the story (i.e. the mode of narration) and of human identity. In *O* the telling of a hero’s story is inextricably linked with his achieving *kleos*, a specific identity in honor and fame. In *SC* the story “become[s] embodied within” (Ben Jelloun 5) those who tell it in addition to answering the question about the protagonist, “And what had he been?”(5). Both texts use certain motifs, notably that of sand in *SC* and of crafted trees in *O*, as representative of human identity and, by extension, as mimetic representations of the narrative craft itself. The way these symbols are presented throughout the two texts defines the conception of the narrative art in each and therefore the nature of the human identity constructed by this narration.

In a more obvious sense, by shaping other peoples’ perceptions of it, a narrative creates the identity of its subject. Odysseus’ *kleos* depends upon the narration of “the story/ of that man skilled in all ways of contending” (Homer, 1.1-2), and when it appears that he will die at sea he mourns that he is deprived of this identity: “Would God

I...had...met my end/ that time the Trojans made so many casts at me... I should have had a soldier's burial/ and praise from the Akhaians—not this choking/ waiting for me at sea, unmarked and lonely” (5.308-321). What he objects to is not merely that he will die but that he will be “unmarked”— he will lose his identity because no one will tell his story (“praise from the Akhaians”). Significantly, he describes a death at sea as “choking,” not just a literal deprivation of air through drowning but also a denial of the right to speech, of the telling of his story. In *SC*, the story is the exploration of “What had he been?” (Ben Jelloun, 5) – in both texts, the narrative is a posthumous record, a lasting trace of identity which, given the fact of human mortality, is perhaps the one way of defining oneself in the face of the ephemeral nature (and therefore potential insignificance) of the human condition. Interestingly, the reason the first narrator gives for Ahmed's having constructed a narrative of his life is that “he had heard that an Egyptian poet had justified keeping a journal with the following argument: ‘From however far one comes, it is always from oneself. A journal is necessary to say that one has ceased to be.’ His aim was precisely that: to say that he had ceased to be” (4-5). Ahmed's initially appears to be a desire for annihilation, for the extinction of identity, but one should note that he wants to “say that he had ceased to be;” his saying that “he has ceased to be” implies that he has been, so that in effect his story confirms his existence by stating the fact of its termination. The Egyptian poet's rationale also defines writing as a means of exploring the “self,” the individual identity. Thus, the act of narration is an affirmation of identity because it is a testimony of its subject's existence.

However, both texts also represent the story not only as constructing the identity of its subject but also as almost usurping the identity of its narrator. *O* begins with the

invocation to the muse, which in a sense is a request for the tale to possess its teller—“Sing in me, Muse”(Homer 1.1). Once the bard finishes the invocation, the rest of the epic is the song itself—there are no further narratorial intrusions. There is no reminder of the bard as an external entity, so in effect he becomes his song. At various points in *SC* those who take up the narration describe this experience of being taken over by the tale— it begins with the first storyteller, who claims, “I am that book” (Ben Jelloun 5), and ends with the assertion of the woman who conveys the story to the character who is probably a fictional representation of the author himself “ Now the story is in you. It will... dig its bed in your body and your mind” (164-5). The notion of the story as entering into its teller, as becoming entrenched in and therefore one with the narrator, is nearly the same idea as that of the muse “singing in” the bard. Both ideas merge the identity of the narrator (the human being) with that of the story. Certain tropes define both identities when they are thus merged—in *O* primarily the recurrent motif of the metaphor of the tree, and in *SC* that of sand. Thus, the difference between the nature of the tree and the nature of sand as metaphors for both the story and human identity indicates a difference between *O* and *SC* in their conception of human identity and the narrative craft that springs from and is used to define it. In an extended metaphor like those both texts use here, the nature of the vehicle does not fix that of the tenor, but it does help direct the reader’s perception of it— the characteristics of tree and sand, both in themselves as objects with certain connotations in the human consciousness and through their specific use in the two texts, do not ultimately determine the totality of the identity of either the human being or the narrative because neither *O* nor *SC* is an allegorical work with a fixed one-to-one correspondence of vehicle and tenor. Nevertheless, the images have thematic

relevance in that they contribute significantly to a tangible conveyance (through the connotative power of the figures of tree and sand) of the more abstract notions of narrative and human identity. In this process, they serve as a mechanism of narrative and at the same time, due to the merging I have already mentioned, embody narration as well as identity while leaving room for the exegetical ambiguity that permits the use of the same image for two interpenetrating and mutually defining ideas.

In *O* the tree, and more specifically, the “crafted” tree, the tree subjected to shaping by human hands, is a central metaphor for both human identity and the narrative which defines it. Storytelling and the image of the tree frequently appear in conjunction with each other, whether through the device of the Homeric simile as on the occasions when Odysseus plays the role of artisan shaping objects out of wood, both crafting his own *kleos* and mirroring the process of the crafting of the tale, or in their juxtaposition through situational association as when, before deciding whether to “pour out the tale of war” (Homer, 24.260) and reveal his identity (inseparable from the “tale”) to his father, he “paused by a tall pear tree” (24.258), a tree that could represent his nobility and heroic achievements (it is “tall”) and at the same time their fruition in his having returned home and established his *kleos* (this is a pear tree that bears fruit, an image of fertility).

In *SC*, although the narrative frequently reflects on its own nature in the manner of self-conscious fiction and uses a range of metaphors for this purpose, the image of sand tends to predominate, as the title suggests. The “story is [...] a desert [...] hot sand” (Ben Jelloun 7), and the identification (through the title) of the subject of the story as “the sand child” affirms that its identity is created by the story. Ahmed in his appearance in the blind troubadour’s version of the story declares, “it is not as an outline

filled with sands and words that I present myself to you,” but this statement implies that he could be seen thus through the story—that he does not “present himself” thus implies that there is the possibility of such a representation. Ahmed’s dream in the time when he joins the circus and changes his sexual identity evokes the transformatory power of narrative construction through the image of “Horses’ heads baked to a cinder in the sand” (92)— narrative can destroy as well as create identity, and this dissolution can become the mode of the creation of a new negative identity, just as Ahmed’s identity as a man is attenuated to create a new identity in the course of his time at the circus. Sand as representative of the story “entering into” its teller appears when, before beginning his story, the fictional figure who could be Ben Jelloun ingests a “pinch of yellow powder” (158) that strangely resembles sand, and we could see this ingestion as generating or at least impelling the subsequent narrative — this, he hopes, will “shorten his pains and cure him,” and at several points throughout the text various characters describe the relief obtained from narration: Salem, for example, states, “Now I feel better. I feel relieved” (111).

The central olive tree of *O* is both living and rooted and shaped through human effort – Odysseus “hewed and shaped...from the roots up”(Homer 23.221) the basic material of the rooted olive tree trunk that he turns into a bed for himself and Penelope just as he works to create his own identity and achieve kleos, and this process of “handiwork” (23.215) is similar to the process of crafting the tale. Odysseus’ role as artisan shaping “handiwork” from natural material also identifies him with the storyteller and he is in fact referred to as “The teller of many stories” (Homer, 23.293) in the passage directly following this one in which he attains the highest fulfillment of his role

as craftsman. The bed is the site of the consummation of his marriage with Penelope and therefore that of the conception of Telemakhos, their “true son” (1.311) who will perpetuate Odysseus’ identity, and as the centre of his home both the culmination of his wanderings and the point of their origin. Just as the protagonist of *SC* could be seen as having an identity in a sense born from the sand, Odysseus’ identity is to some extent born from the tree through the birth of his son.

The image of the tree suggests a far greater stability of identity than the human identity constructed in *SC*; a tree is rooted and single while sand is the ultimate image of fragmentation. The primary characteristic of sand is that it shifts, while a tree is essentially stable: Odysseus is outraged at the possibility of the tree-trunk bed having been moved from its central location— “No mortal in his best days could have shifted it with a crowbar[...] Could someone else’s hand/ have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?”(23.211-230). Interestingly, the trope of the journey pervades both texts—the protagonists of both are “wanderers” (Homer 1.2; Ben Jelloun 141) and the stories themselves become a metaphorical journey for the transformation of both the teller of the tale and those who hear it. We the readers (or the storyteller’s audience; it is ambiguous, but exactly which audience it is is irrelevant in this context because what is important is the expansion of the image of sand to include yet another subset of humanity) must become like sand in Ben Jelloun’s story, to “slip through the breaches in the wall” (45), insinuating ourselves into the potentially elusive interpretive possibilities of the tale. There is no equally compelling corresponding image in *O* in which the reader/hearer *becomes* the tree, but the image of the firmly rooted “old trunk of olive” experientially

grounds us by confirming the fact that the sea journey and the threat of loss of identity is over and Odysseus has achieved the rooted stability of *kleos*.

However, this similarity of the common trope of the journey serves to reveal an essential difference between the two texts in their attitude towards both the narrative craft and the identity constructed through it. Odysseus' is a *nostos* story, which by definition has a clear destination, while the first reference to the story as a journey through the desert sand in *SC* is a vision of lack of definite direction: "For this story is also a desert. You will have to walk barefoot on the hot sand, believing in the oasis that shimmers on the horizon and never ceases to move towards the sky [...] Our steps invent the path as we proceed; behind us they leave no trace, only the void" (Ben Jelloun 8). This image contains no indication of a clear destination except "belief," (as well as no prescribed direction) and while the olive tree is "hewed and shaped" permanently so that Odysseus can return to it after many years and find it unchanged (just as he finds Penelope unchanged in her characteristic fidelity), even the slight "trace" left by footprints in the sand is immediately effaced. Completion defines the journey in *O*, while in *SC* it is left incomplete—the "saint of the sands"(164) is never found. While the tree of *O* is rooted in one spot in the soil, the sands are more comparable to the sea in *O* as a state of continued wandering and no final end—they "cover up and hide" (164) any chance of distinct identity.

The fact that the carved tree-trunk bed is the "pact and pledge" (a promise to eternity) of Odysseus and Penelope echoes the idea of the relative permanence achieved by the identity and narrative constructed in *O*. An injunction on the part of the narrator not to forget the story precedes the first occasion describing the narrative as a journey

through desert sand in *SC*. Ironically, what follows immediately after is an image of the “oblivion” we are warned against— oblivion is a spring and we are told to walk towards the oasis; the footprints that evoke the idea of memory immediately vanish to leave a “void.” It is “intriguing” (Scheiner) that the text begins with one narrator’s appeal for remembrance and ends with another’s longing for “deliverance” in “forgetfulness” (165). Both texts suggest that the quest for identity involves seeking an ideal, the “oasis” moving towards the sky of *SC* and the trunk of olive in *O* which represents the shaping of basic human material (a “stump”) into the “handiwork” of an identity of ideal humanity. However, the rootedness of the tree confirms the certitude of the achievement of the ideal in *O* (roots also imply life, strength and stability), whereas the quest in *SC* is through barren and mutable sand.

While both texts have multiple stories within them (after all, Odysseus is the “teller of many tales,” a “contriver” like Athena), this common characteristic only serves to accentuate their essential difference in the type of narrative and identity they construct; the multiplicity of the tales of *O* are like the many branches of a tree, joining in one rooted locus in Odysseus’ final kleos, while the narrations of *SC* are disparate like grains of sand, left without a ultimately determined truth of story so that we are also uncertain of Ahmed’s fate and identity. Ben Jelloun’s novel in its finality is far more ambivalent, springing from and leading to fragmentation (like separate grains of sand) while Homer’s epic follows a cycle whose origin is in rootedness and which returns to rootedness of both identity and narration.

### **Works Cited**

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