[00:00:00]

Marta Figlerowicz: It happened one day that my father prepared himself and set off to hunt. After he had hunted a long while, he felt somewhat tired and sat on a tree stump to rest. He was not long seated when, happening to look up, he saw the ground in front of him begin to split and smoke pour upwards from the rent. In a moment the smoke had filled the entire area where my father sat so thickly that he could not see a thing; all about him had turned impenetrably black. Even as he began to seek a way of escape he observed that the smoke had begun to fuse together in one spot and, before he could so much as blink, it fused completely, and a stocky being emerged, sword in hand, and came towards my father. My father took to his heels instantly but the man called on him to stop and began to address him thus:

‘ Can you not see that I am not of the human race? I arrived even [00:01:00] today from the vault of the heavens and it was on your account that I am come hither, my purpose being to kill you. Run where you will this day; kill you I most resolutely will.’

Jim Phelan: This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. Today I'll be talking with Marta Figlerowicz who has selected the first chapter of D. O. Fágúnwà' s \_Forest of a Thousand Daemons,\_ and then the chapter is entitled, The Author Meets Akara-Ogun". Fagunwa's novel was originally published in Yoruba in 1938, and it was translated by Wole Soyinka in 1982. Marta Figlerowicz is the Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of Graduate Studies at Yale University. Marta's scholarly interests include 20th and 21st century [00:02:00] American, Brazilian, British French, Polish, and West African literature, as well as the novel, new media, translation studies and narrative theory. Marta has recently become co-editor of the Journal Narrative, along with a guest on our July 2025 podcast, Kent Puckett. As the former editor, I'm delighted to have passed the torch to such able people. Marta's books include \_Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character, \_from 2016\_,\_

\_Spaces of Feeling: Affects and Awareness in Modernist Literature, \_2017,\_ \_and a translation of the work of Polish critical theorist Maria Janion, entitled \_The Bad Child: A Maria Janion Reader. \_Marta is currently working on a project entitled,\_ It Must Be Possible: Modernity and Trans-Cultural Knowledge\_. In 2024, Marta received a Guggenheim Fellowship to support her work on that project.

Marta, welcome to the [00:03:00] podcast.

Marta Figlerowicz: Thank you, Jim. It's great to be there.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, great to have you. Is there anything you'd like to say to introduce Fagunwa and the chapter from his novel that you're going to read?

Marta Figlerowicz: Well, let me just start by saying a few things. So, Fagunwa is seen as the greatest Yoruba language novelist of the 20th century.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: And his books, particularly the book whose first chapter we're reading tend to be read by schoolchildren and young people in Nigeria, and they have a similar status to what Shakespeare has in English.

Jim Phelan: Oh, okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: His, his metaphors have seeped into the language. So, the historical context of the writing of this first volume in the 1930s, Nigeria is still a British colony, but it's clear that is going to change in the not too distant future.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm. Great.

Marta Figlerowicz: It's beginning to look towards independence and Fagunwa was one of the people who is supporting the independence effort. And one other thing to know about the tales in terms of context is they're [00:04:00] presented as found folk tales.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: But, they're anything but. He actually carefully devises them and invents them, and why he would choose to use that format is in itself an interesting narrative question. Another thing to note is that Fagunwa was committed to including a mix of Christian and indigenous belief systems, and in part he's interested in their inter-penetration.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: The intersection, so you're gonna see a lot of that.

Jim Phelan: All right, great. Well, that, that's good. And then, as we prepare for you to read the story, are there particular aspects of the story itself that you'd like our listeners to pay attention to?

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah, well, as I mentioned, these are deceptively simple fairytales.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Marta Figlerowicz: Or fables. So, one thing I'd love for listeners to listen for as I read, is the contradictory signs, some of which point to the story being set in kind of Neverland.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Marta Figlerowicz: Once upon a time. And then others which suggest it's set like yesterday [00:05:00] or Fagunwa's recent lifetime.

Jim Phelan: All right. Terrific. Now, here's Marta Figlerowicz reading the first chapter of D.O. Fagunwa's novel, \_Forest of a Thousand Daemons\_, "The Author Meets Akara-Ogun".

Marta Figlerowicz: My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the agidigbo; it is the wise who dance to it, and the learned who understand its language. The story which follows is a veritable agidigbo; it is I who will drum it, and you the wise heads who will interpret it. Our elders have a favourite proverb—are you not dying to ask me how it goes?—they tell it thus, ‘When our masquerade dances well, our heads swell and do a spin.’ Forgive my forwardness, it is the proverb which speaks. Now I do not want you to dance to my drumming as a mosquito to the deep bembe drums, its legs twitching haphazardly, at loggerheads with the [00:06:00] drums. Dance my friends, in harmony, with joy and laughter, that your audience may ring your brows with coins and pave your path with clothing; that men may prostrate before you and women curtsey in sheer pleasure at your dancing. But for a start, if you want this dance to be a success, here are two things I must request of you. Firstly, whenever a character in my story speaks in his own person, you must put yourselves in his place and speak as if you are that very man. And when the other replies, you must relate the story to yourselves as if you, sitting down, had been addressed and now respond to the first speaker.

In addition, as men of discerning—and this is the second task you must perform—you will yourselves extract various wisdoms from the story as you follow its progress.

Well, I do not want to say too much at the start lest I become a loquacious fool, one who deserts the clearly blazed path and beats about the [00:07:00] bush. I will rather now take up my drum and set to it, and I request you to adjust your agbada, toss its sleeve properly over your shoulder, prepare yourselves for dancing, that the affair may dovetail neatly in the spirit of the saying, ‘I can dance and you can drum; this is the meeting of two grubs.’ That, forgive me, is a proverb of our elders.

It all began one beautiful morning; a clear daybreak it was, the harmattan haze had retreated home, the creatures of the forest were still asleep, those of the backyard were feeding on the day’s providence and birds were singing praises of their Maker. A beatific breeze rustled the dark leaves of the forest, deep dark and shimmering leaves, the sun rose from the East in God’s own splendour, spread its light into the world and the sons of men began their daily perambulations. As for me I sat in my favourite [00:08:00] chair, settled into it with voluptuous contentment, enjoying my very existence.

Not long after I was seated an old man came up to me and greeted me. I returned him courtesy for courtesy. Observing what appeared to be a desire to stay I offered him a chair and turned it to face me. Once seated, we began to exchange pleasantries and share jokes like old acquaintances. But it was not very long after when I heard the man sigh deeply as one whose mind was troubled by a heavy thought. Even as I began to consider asking him the cause, he began himself to speak thus:

‘Take up your pen and paper and write down the story which I will now tell. Do not delay it till another day lest the benefit of it pass you over. I would not myself have come to you today, but I am concerned about the future and there is this fear that I may die unexpectedly and my story die with me. But if I pass it [00:09:00] on to you now and you take it all down diligently, even when the day comes that I must meet my Maker, the world will not forget me.’

When he had spoken thus I hurried to fetch my writing things, brought them over to my table, settled myself in comfort, and let the stranger know that I was now prepared for his tale. And he began in the words that follow to tell me the story of his life—

My name is Akara-ogun, Compound-of-Spells, one of the formidable hunters of a bygone age. My own father was a hunter, he was also a great one for medicines and spells. He had a thousand powder gourdlets, eight hundred ato, and his amulets numbered six hundred. Two hundred and sixty incubi lived in that house and the birds of divination were without number. It was the spirits who guarded the house when he was away, and no one dared enter that house when my father was absent—it was [00:10:00] unthinkable. But deep as he was in the art of the supernatural, he was no match for my mother, for she was a deep seasoned witch from the cauldrons of hell.

Once my father had nine children, of whom I was the eldest; four wives and my mother was the most senior of them. She had four children, the wife who was next to her had three, the next two and the fourth had none at all. One day my mother and another of these wives had a quarrel and took the case to my father for settlement. He found my mother at fault and this so angered her that she resolved to take vengeance for the slight. She became so ruthless in her witching, that, before the year was out, eight of my father’s children were dead and three of his wives had gone the same way. Thus was I left the only child and my mother the only wife.

Look on me, my friend, and if [00:11:00] you are not yet married I implore you to consider the matter well before you do. True, your wife ought to be beautiful lest you tire of each other quickly; and a lack of brains is not to be recommended since you must needs hold converse with each other, but this is not the heart of the matter. The important requisite is that your wife should not be prone to evil, for it is your wife who gives you meat and gives you drink and is admitted most to your secrets. God has created them such close creatures that there hardly exists any manner in which they cannot come at a man; and when I tell you what my father suffered at the hands of this wife of his, you will be truly terrified.

It happened one day that my father prepared himself and set off to hunt. After he had hunted a long while, he felt somewhat tired and sat on a tree stump to rest. He was not long seated when, happening to look up, he saw the ground [00:12:00] in front of him begin to split and smoke pour upwards from the rent. In a moment the smoke had filled the entire area where my father sat so thickly that he could not see a thing; all about him had turned impenetrably black. Even as he began to seek a way of escape he observed that the smoke had begun to fuse together in one spot and, before he could so much as blink, it fused completely and a stocky being emerged sword in hand and came towards my father. My father took to his heels instantly but the man called on him to stop and began to address him thus:

‘Can you not see that I am not of the human race? I arrived even today from the vault of the heavens and it was on your account that I am come hither, my purpose being to kill you. Run where you will this day; kill you I most resolutely will.’

[00:13:00] When he had spoken thus, my father was truly afraid but even so he steeled his heart like a man and said, ‘Truly, as I observe you, I know you are not of this world, and I see also that the sword in your hand spells mortal danger for me. Nevertheless, I implore you, and I charge you in the name of the immortal God, do not fail to tell me the nature of my offence.’

The man replied to him, saying, ‘Do you not know that you have grievously offended your Maker? That you have ruined his handiwork even to this extent, that you sent eleven souls to heaven when it was not yet the hour allotted them by their God?’

These words of his were a great astonishment to my father, for while it was true that he was well versed in magic and charms, he did no one any evil. So he replied to him, ‘If this is indeed your complaint then your mission is to a different man; it [00:14:00] certainly is not I. Since the day I was born I have never harmed anyone: I do not see a man going about his business and take umbrage at his existence; I do not see a rich man and suffer thereby from envy. When I see a man at his dinner I continue on my own way. I have never inflicted wounds on any man, I have not shot a man down in my life, so how can you claim my life, and for a crime of which I am innocent!’

He waited for my father to finish his speech and then he replied, ‘True, you have not with your own hand killed anyone, but you have been responsible for the suffering of poor innocents. With your eyes wide open to what you did you married a deep-dyed witch for the mere beauty of her body—is that an act of goodness? Does the blood of your many wives not call out to you? Does the crime against your eight children not hang round your neck? [00:15:00] And, despite all of this, do you have the gall to tell me that you have never been guilty of evil? Indeed there is no remedy; kill you I must.’

Only then did my father call to mind the kind of woman he had taken to wife, and so he replied to him, ‘Truly I see now that I have sinned. I have a wife whom I cannot control, I strut like a husband merely in name. What I should have done I have left undone, the path I should have trodden I have neglected, the creature who deserved to die at my hand I have indulged with praises. Ah, stranger from the dome of heaven, forgive me.’

When he heard this, the man forgave my father and desisted from killing him, but he warned him that he must, the moment he returned home, put my mother to death. So saying, he turned into the forest and continued his travels that way.[00:16:00]

When he had gone my father took up his gun and returned home. And it so happened that the path he took led him past a field of okro on the way to the town. It was evening when he came there, the moon was already up, and, coming up to the field he looked over to the other side and observed someone approaching from that direction. Quickly he climbed up a tree, waiting to see what this person was about. The figure came on unswerving until it vanished into a large anthill. Shortly afterwards, an antelope emerged from this anthill, entered the field and began to feed on the okro. My father brought his gun to bear on the creature and drove furnaces into its skull. The gun had no sooner roared than there came from the antelope a human cry and the words, ‘Ah, woe is me!’

That night my father slept in a little hut by the [00:17:00] field. When daylight broke he went to the spot where the antelope was shot, but he found nothing there, only blood. He began to follow the trail of blood, and it was with increasing astonishment that he found that the trail led homewards. He followed it until he arrived right home. But in midtown the trail vanished completely and he did not come upon it again until he was nearly at his own doorstep: then it led him straight into my mother’s room. I had not myself slept at home that night. Whenever my father was away I hated to spend the night at home because the spirits gave one no peace all through the night. Even my mother rarely slept at home and then only when my father gave his permission. I returned to the house just as my father was opening the door to my mother’s room, and when he had opened the door and we entered, that moment when [00:18:00] I caught sight of my mother, it was all I could do not to take flight. From her head down to her shoulders was human enough, but the rest of her was wholly antelope. She was all covered in blood and swarms of flies. My father touched her; she was dead and had begun to rot. Indeed she was the antelope stealing out at night to feast in the field of okro.

And so did my mother die, and hardly was a month over when my father also followed her. From that day was I orphaned, fatherless and motherless. And thus ends the story of my parents and comes the turn of my own. I greet your labour my friend.

Jim Phelan: Okay, so much going on, and as you say, it also comes of course, like this, you know, straightforward, simple fable. So, there's a lot for us to dig [00:19:00] into. Maybe a good place to start is just with the title and then the initial emphasis, right? We have a long sort of lead up to the switch from the authors telling to Akara-Ogun's telling. So, maybe start with those issues.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yes, absolutely. So, this is very much a convention of Fagunwa's narratives in general. He typically starts from a narrator who's a writer, who lives in a village,

who is visited by somebody from outside a village, somebody who's been to the forest,

which is a kind of space of the wilderness, the supernatural, and this person who knows how to write is asked by the person coming from the wilderness to write down a story. So, this act of writing down a story that had previously been oral i s a kind of central trope of a lot of his narratives, which signal on the one hand, the folkloric origins of the story, of the popular origins of the story, but on the other hand, the ways in [00:20:00] which the story is a written piece.

Jim Phelan: Okay. Yeah. Great.

One of the other things that's interesting, striking to me anyway is that there's like this double movement, right, in the beginning before we have the transmission of, of who's telling. So, we have the address, you know, my friends, all like the honors proverb, do we drum and, and it's all about, you know, setting up a relationship between him as teller and the audience. And then we have this switch to the narrative occasion, right,

of this particular day, this morning, you know, this glorious morning, then this visitor showed up. So, I mean, it's, you know, one could imagine just starting with the glorious morning and this visitor showed up, but instead we have this elaborate, you know, address setting up the relationship between the narrator and the audience, and with specific advice about how to listen.[00:21:00]

So, what do you make of that? And, and maybe let's get into some of that advice.

Marta Figlerowicz: Please.

The mention of drums and the masquerader of course crucial to understanding yeah what he's saying. Again, the context is both written kind of, it's a classic mm-hmm novelistic trope to begin rhetorically by invoking the reader.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: But here we're being invoked as if we were all there physically. That kind of linking back to indigenous, Yoruba traditions of masquerades of kinda ceremonies in which Gods are and deities are literally embodied and ceremonially narratives of their interactions with humans are reenacted.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: You're being asked as a reader to do your best to perform that kind of empathic reenactment. And the act of narrator empathy as it described, as a kind of dance to which the storyteller provides. the drumbeat.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Marta Figlerowicz: So if one took that as a theory of narrative, it's a strikingly collaborative one.

Jim Phelan: [00:22:00] Yes.

Right. It's very rhetorical. Right, I mean.

Marta Figlerowicz: I know. Talk about reader response.

Jim Phelan: Right, right, right.

Marta Figlerowicz: Where the narrative basically seems like a play. Except what is provided by the narrator is comparatively so small compared to the collective effort of understanding and learning.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Yeah, good.

But then there's also the advice about, okay, this is some things I'm gonna instruct you to be sure to do, you know, put yourself in the, you know, position of the character who speaks and et cetera, right? So the dance, it's a dance and the drum beat is provided, but there's also some, you know, maybe prescriptions for dance steps or if, if you wanna continue the metaphor.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah, that's right. And then above all, there's the moral purpose of the dance and the drumming where your first job is to enact the dance, to put yourself in the person of a speaker, and also of the listener. Again, here you're not supposed to identify just with any single character, okay, you're supposed to identify [00:23:00] dialogue. WHICH again, thinking about the collectivity in this opening is a fascinating nuance. But then he says, you're gonna get wisdom out of it, and This emphasis on wisdom begins much earlier with proverbs.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: Before he even gets to the narrative, we've had three different proverbs already. And Proverbs are a really interesting genre in Yoruba culture. Um, I mean the, the word proverb, it's the right word to use 'cause it's the only available word, but it doesn't quite translate - \*word in Yoruba\* - which is the original Yoruba word for it.

So one should begin by saying, the proverb is very much a continued rhetorical presence in Yoruba culture. When you talk to people, or when you hear somebody lecture or preach, they will often begin a proverb and then have the congregation complete the proverb together.

Jim Phelan: Oh, okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: And these proverbs are often highly metaphorical and highly nomic.

They're not simply conventional proverbs in the sense of being kind of directly prescriptive. [00:24:00] Instead they hover kind of somewhere between kind of prescription and metaphor, kind of the analogy is something that has to be, grasped at and thought about.

Jim Phelan: Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: A better comparison might be the parable.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm. Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: Where the parable, like a biblical parable in the gospels might talk about different classes of people. It might talk about the kingdom of heaven. I think you know what the different terms refer to talk to somebody else, they might have a different interpretation. And in that sense...

Jim Phelan: So the proverb, I mean like we say in England, you know, in Western anyway, say a proverb, stitch in time saves nine.

Okay. Yeah. So we just apply that, right? Um, and the parable, we are then moving to a narrative, right? And, and then when that allows for sort of greater freedom of interpretation a little bit. So in these proverbs, is there some sort of implied narrative or. Is that the right, is that helpful way to talk about what they're, [00:25:00] how they work?

Marta Figlerowicz: Yes. I mean, even to take, when the masquerade dances, well, our heads swell and do a spin. It is on the one hand a statement of fact.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: On the other hand, the, again, the question of what counts as a masquerade, what it means to dance well, should your heads swell.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: And, people like Karen Barber, the scholar of or in West Africa will tell you that, like, we should really think of those kinds of proverbs as moments of kind of hermeneutical opening, they're not invitations to close interpretation, but to open it.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Yeah. So like, yeah, what does it mean that your head is swelling and spinning.

Right? And, and also that this is, this seems to be a good thing, right? So yeah, the marere goes, well, this is the effect. And okay, well it is, then what does that mean? There is a lot of openness, I think. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: That's right. And also, let's remember in traditional worship, like people are [00:26:00] supposed to be mounted, possessed during a masquerade.

And that's part of the point, the metaphors are going very deep here. It's both about the collectivity of narrative as collaborative, but also about losing control.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: And it's also setting up for the loss of control. That is the theme of the opening story that we get in this chapter.

Jim Phelan: Alright,

great. Well that's, that's very helpful. So then maybe we could, we can sort of transition a little ourselves to talk about, the story itself. It's in some way we just a big picture kind of thing. It's a, it's a family story, it's high narrativity, you know, events follow one upon the other.

It's also, you know, as you were saying in the introduction, sort of merging magical things and you know, natural realistic things, domestic situation, so on. so, is that a kind of standard set of, you know, properties of, this larger book of the \_Forest of a Thousand Daemons\_?

Marta Figlerowicz: [00:27:00] Yes.

Yes, very much so. And also. I think we are encountering here somebody who's very aware, having been educated by the British of kind of conventional western distinctions between say, allegory parable, supernatural story, but who's also kind of refusing them.

Jim Phelan: Uhhuh.

Marta Figlerowicz: And uh, Greek critics will talk, talk about Fagunwa as a predecessor to

the current critical recognition that the supposed distinctions between the modern and the non-modern, the secular and the non-secular are themselves quite arbitrary. And he's putting you in a world in which you are always already believing in many different systems of knowledge.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Marta Figlerowicz: And making them aware that they coexist with each other.

In that regard, one of my favorite aspects of the story is that the father kills the antelope who is the mother with a gun. Might be hunters in a kind of traditional way, but you're not artificially aging the narrative by giving him a bow and arrow.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah. Right. I [00:28:00] see. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Stone thrower instead, like you just use contemporary technology and that's that.

It's the fact that even though he's using a gun, which puts us like somewhere in the 19th, 20th century, but the wife still isn't half an antelope is what gives you pause. So need to wonder like, so where, how do all of these worlds coexist with each other?

Jim Phelan: Each other. Right, right. And and I think, yeah, that we can think about these traditional sort of genre categories, but it doesn't fit right.

It's not a straightforward allegory. It's not a straightforward, realistic tale, by any means, and so on. Yeah. So maybe we can get into some more of the details of it, maybe starting with the fact that, our, storyteller, the son of telling the story of his father and his mother, but he's really very much an observer, narrator in the sense that he's not affecting the action. He's, he's there and so on, and seems to know all the relevant [00:29:00] information. It's almost like he's, you know, he, he can report on what the father does in the forest when he's not there, and you know, he, that kind of thing.

So that's another, I think, feature of the kind of, Fagunwa is not worried about, oh, epistemic access to all the information on the part of our storyteller.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yes.

It's very much kind of on the one hand a ma triage al of narratives that we have the writer narrator telling us what the hunter narrator himself half witnessed, half heard from his father, presumably, 'cause he wasn't there. But there's also as like both in this chapter and also in later ones, a constant kind of shifting of the position of storyteller and actor. So towards the beginning of this chapter, we have the father hear his own tail told back to him by the demon who was supposed to kill him.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right. [00:30:00]

Marta Figlerowicz: And then he sees his life from a different point of view.

Jim Phelan: Yes.

Marta Figlerowicz: He says, oh, I suppose I should not have allowed this to happen. And like obviously there's a lot of patriarchal assumptions there, talk about that later.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Shifting of perspective. And after this chapter, it's the speaker who becomes both speaker and protagonist of the stories. So he inherits his father's gun and some of his spells, and then he starts to go into the forest.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: So part of what's interesting is that on the one hand, knowing the distinction between storyteller and listener is very important in any moment,

but the roles can also switch.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Good.

Marta Figlerowicz: Add to the moral positions of the characters. I mean, the, the mother here is not very nice, but one point when he's in trouble, he calls out to her and she comes and saves him on the grave. And at that point we're not worried about the other eight children she killed.

We're worried about her saving her firstborn.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. [00:31:00] Alright, good. So yeah, maybe we should talk a little bit more about the character of the father and the mother. And, you know, in this chapter anyway, the mother is, painted as the, the villain, evil, et cetera. Akara-Ogun, you know, talks about the importance of choosing wisely and what this means and for a man to choose a wife.

So, and it does seem, as you say, very patriarchal, what, you know, what, is this a kind of cultural thing or what's, what's going on with, with, with that aspect of it.

Marta Figlerowicz: I mean, in part it is a cultural thing in some parts, it's also something that Fagunwa does ironize.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: Um, I mean, gender relations and Yoruba land complicatedly at that point

also inflected by colonial, kind of influences. But in general, even though there is a strong sense of kind of gender separation, there is, and if men and women hold different kinds of power. And even men continue to assert their patriarchal centrality, like women do have seats of [00:32:00] power, which they continue to undermine it, and we see some of that tension here. The other thing to notice is like, he really likes playing with your expectations about kind of narrative kind of numbers and narrative patterns. One of my favorite aspects of this, the story of the mother, is that, so she's the eldest of the four wives.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: She has four children and the next one has three. The next one has two, the fourth has none. But then when she kills all of the children, she kills like three out of the five children she kills are her own.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: And nobody's talking about why the fourth wife has no children, and what did she ever do to anybody?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah. There's a kind of, kind of narrative recklessness or narrative arbitrariness that continues to push against the kind of easy counting logic of the fable.

Jim Phelan: Okay, good. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Typically you would know like it's always the third child or the third wife, the elder or the youngest, and here

you are never quite sure which of those systems is gonna get activated.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Oh, nice. Okay. Yeah. So then, we maybe switch a little [00:33:00] bit to the father, the hunter and the, the encounter with the stocky figure who emerges from the earth and the smoke, right, who starts out, right,

well, I must kill you because, you know, then we have the back and forth. Well, I've, what? I've never done anything wrong, right, and right. And then as you say, he tells 'em story back and he sees it differently and says, okay, I have to accept responsibility. But then it's also like, he's able to dissuade, you know, this daemon, from killing him,

right. Even though he's accept, he's acknowledging his guilt.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Right. So that's an interesting move.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah. Part of what's interesting also is I'm sure, when you think about the creature so vividly depicted who emerges out of puffs of smoke that gradually coalesce into a person. Like what does that sound like?

It sounds like the genies.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Of a knight, and that's where he gets it from. The Y mon is close [00:34:00] to the Arabic gin for genie.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: And I mean, Islamic influences had always been big in the region. In fact, the use of Arabic script to write down non-Arabic language, that was the first, Yoruba was written down that we know of.

And he, I'm sure he knows the stories of A Thousand and One Nights, and he's also kind of creating an implicit parallel comparison here to the modus operandi of that kind of story, where you also have many frame narratives, and then a genie comes out. Now for the most part, those genies in the Arabic tales tend to be kind of morally quite chaotic.

Jim Phelan: Uhhuh.

Marta Figlerowicz: They are not in a series of good, right. They kind of have their own problems and yeah, power struggles and if they decide to kill you or not, it's. It is not about morality, it's about whether you made them angry.

Jim Phelan: Uhhuh, right, yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Um, so, but if a certain expectation is set up [00:35:00] here also because a gin in that kind of tale would never just say, oh, okay, that's fine.

Thanks.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Here's an alternative quest for you. Have to kind of trap him back in the bottle or do any kind of, and here you kind of come out of this world of the chaotic supernatural into the world of the moral supernatural. The moral in a way that like in the local context is not like this is how people generally think about how murder works.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: In the culture, it's like a very strange perspective shift, in which it's not clear whether he's being blamed simultaneously for having angered his wife and for having allowed her to get out of hand, or just for having allowed her to get out of hand.

Jim Phelan: To get out hand. Yeah.

Yeah, and like some of the gaps in the story, like we don't really know what the, you know, coral is about or, you know, Fagunwa doesn't sort of say, all right, the wife is, you know, totally wrong here, or that the [00:36:00] father made the right choice or made the wrong choice or anything.

It's just like, okay, this happened and then, that led to the wife killing so many, right? And then the creature comes and says, okay, well you're responsible in some way. And then one of the things that's interesting, and it sort of, sort of struck me when you were reading it, it's just this today that, you know, the, if this, the creature is sort of, his purpose is to sort of avenge the death or somehow respond to this, once the father tells the story and you know, explains it and so on, and even takes responsible or responsibility, it could be either be more of a, emphasis on, okay, now that you've taken responsibility, you have to carry out, you know, this rough justice or, or to say, okay, yeah, I've got the wrong person.

I will go and take care of your wife.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah.

And that is augmented by the fact that [00:37:00] the transition into the killing of the wife is so weird.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: 'Cause he supposedly has no idea. He thinks he's killing an antelope who's eating his crops.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. Yeah, yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Or have somebody else's crops in the village.

And he realizes with horror that this is his wife. Again, in a more conventional fairytale, this would be a narrative of tragic revelation.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Marta Figlerowicz: Where you think you're killing an animal and like, boom, it's your wife. Yeah. And here you think you're killing an animal and boom, it was your wife who're supposed to kill.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. So you, you've inadvertently done what you were charged to do. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yes.

Which kind of prevents him from having to face, of course, like gonna face-to-face murder of another human being, or kind of execution style, but narratively, it's very interesting because the different components of the narrative kind of locked together into a sequence in very unpredictable ways.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Not unlike the wife deciding to kill her own children, and you don't know why she suddenly turned Madea, not completely.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. Good.

Marta Figlerowicz: Here [00:38:00] you get the antelope, which you realize retro retroactively was the right thing to do, but that also raises the question of, why is that the story the father told

the son?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Like is this a kind of self exculpating story? That's how she directed to the son that the son is believing naively.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: Oh, I didn't kill your mother. I thought she was an antelope.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah. Right, right. Okay. Yeah. Good. And what about the cultural significance of the antelope itself?

Marta Figlerowicz: So here again, there's not much kind of allegorical here. Antelopes like turtles, like birds are often creatures in traditional yuba fables, and those creatures typically have kind of pretty set personalities. Particularly the turtle, the turtles always the bad guy, like you do not trust it.

But the antelope tends to be a relatively benign in those fables. Like not the smartest, but also not malevolent.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: But you're right to point that out, what kind of also touching borders here could not just with the world of Thousand and One Nights but also with the [00:39:00] world of the animal tale.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm. Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: Which would've been the actual folk tale tradition that he might be drawing on.

Jim Phelan: I see. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, good.

Marta Figlerowicz: And into which, like hybridity is, of course the theme here, just like the mother, the mother is half antelope when she dies, the son, like what kind of human is he, kind of, he's implicitly revealing to you in the process that he's not quite human,

Akara-Ogun, but in a way that's hard to parse. It reminds, there's that amazing in Gilgamesh, the Sumerian Epic, where the narrator says, well, Gilgamesh was one third human and two thirds divine.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Marta Figlerowicz: You wanna see me? How does that math work?

Jim Phelan: Right. Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: I'm like, that's great. Like, I'm not sure how that happened.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Marta Figlerowicz: and you have a similar thing here too, where by the end of the story you're wondering like, well, if your father was not a warlock, but a man of magic, and your mother was a witch who could transform into animals, like who are you?

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Well [00:40:00] then, yeah, this maybe just a little bit more about where we go then, with the end of the story.

So one of the, one of the things, again, striking to me is that, okay, so you know, the last paragraph, and so did my mother die, and hardly was a month over when my father also followed her, like the sudden, you know, death of the father, leaving him, right, our storyteller, from that day I was often fatherless and motherless,

thus ends the story of my parents and comes to turn of my own. So, alright, he is setting up the backstory for, okay, I am gonna tell you about my adventures as, as a hunter, et cetera. But there seems to be, you know, like from, again, from a Western perspective, right, something missing there about, well, what about, what, what happened between him and his father, or...

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: You know, is a little bit more even we don't learn why the father died or anything, just that he died. [00:41:00] I mean, that's, you know, and that the, somehow we are, we're hasten it seems, again, from a Western perspective, we're hastening to the situation of him being orphaned.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah. It reminds you of that old adage that the difference between like a statement of events and plot is, instead of saying the king died and the queen died, you said the king died and the queen died of grief.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Marta Figlerowicz: But here you just have the queen died, the like, you don't have that causality, right?

Jim Phelan: We have, yeah, story without plot. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah.

Or rather you have plot for the beginning of the story, but not at the end of it.

Jim Phelan: Exactly. Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Which again is jostling and surprising. The question of what can be explained or explainable and what cannot or should not be explainable is kind of another huge topic to explore with Fagunwa. Another thing to mention is also, so Yoruba culture has this traditional oral genre called oriki, which is a panegyric, a praise belt.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Marta Figlerowicz: There's many varieties of it, but hunters frequently sing either about themselves [00:42:00] or about other famous hunters, and a good beginning to one typically is a genealogy, kinda start with where the hunter comes from. So, to the extent that he ends by saying, agree to your labor, my friend suggesting, okay, now my story is coming,

which is the important story.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Marta Figlerowicz: But that also begs the question again, speaking of beginnings of why did he tell us this genealogy?

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Marta Figlerowicz: Which, while conventionally needed, is not necessarily the most favorable.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right, yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: It doesn't set him up in a clear way either in terms of his humanity or in terms of his morality.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Yeah. Yeah. And from the, but from the perspective of kind of like narrative drive, it's like, wow, okay, let, let, let's hear about you now, right?

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: You come from this, this is, yeah. Yeah. And then we think about that it's the first chapter,

it's very effective, from that perspective. So, should we come back to the proverbs, you know, having sort of talked through the [00:43:00] story and thinking about, we begin with proverbs, are there. you know, that to reconfigure anything about those proverbs?

Marta Figlerowicz: Yeah.

I think one thing to think about here is just the way in which this story itself hovers between like a narrative and like a conventional fictional narrative in a proverb or book.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Like one thing that's very interesting about it is those constant excursions into morals, the self interpretive impulse, which on the one hand is constantly present in the tale and the other hand is separate from the tale.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: If you have to say the lesson, then the lesson is not embedded in the tale.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. So

Marta Figlerowicz: that kind of raises the question of, like how is the tale supposed to be interpreted, kind of, even as it continues to invite you to do kind of the work of like wisdom hermeneutics?

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: Suggesting like, like those proverbs, this might be a slippery tale.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: But for Fagunwa, that's also kinda about statements of reality, what reality is like kind of [00:44:00] causality, whether moral or physical, is never simple.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Marta Figlerowicz: His narratives do function as parallels for each other.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Great. Yeah, no, I think that works, that makes a lot of sense.

Well, we're sort of coming to the end of our time, but is there anything else you'd like to touch on that we haven't gotten to?

Marta Figlerowicz: Not really. I think just to say like, please, go read the whole thing. It's really fun.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. And right, well, I think this, this is a great teaser, right, if we think about it from that perspective.

And also I...

Marta Figlerowicz: We'll find out what happens to the hunter. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, no, I think, Marta, I really wanna thank you for, for, you know, selecting this and sort of expanding the range of narratives that we, we've been talking about on the Project Narrative podcast, so thank you. Thank you both for the selection and thanks for the

great illumination of this, apparently simple but extremely complex first chapter. So, thanks so much.

Marta Figlerowicz: Thank you. Thank you so much, Jim, for having me on air. This is a [00:45:00] wonderful podcast. I'm so honored to be a part of it.

Jim Phelan: Well, thank you. My pleasure. And I wanna thank our listeners and also to remind you that we're happy to receive feedback, which you can send to us at email address projectnarrative@osu.edu, or on our Facebook page or to our Twitter/X account, which is @PNOhioState. And I also wanna remind you that you can find more than 45 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts, and if you do listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us.

Thank you again for listening.