



CULTURE, ALIENATION AND IDENTITY ISSUES IN SELECT NOVELS OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Although Africa has had a long and enduring tradition of poetry and drama, the novel is today, as almost everywhere else in the world, the dominant literary genre on the continent. The recent publication of a number of critical works on African Literature and the ensuing flurry of literary controversy suggest that the criteria for the evaluation of this new literature have not yet been finally settled, and that a reexamination of the whole purpose and nature of criticism, with particular reference to African fiction, is justified. African literature is a new development and still growing. African literature, which was originally directed at a largely foreign audience, must now be brought home to its own public, and the critic has a very vital role to play in the process of making it accessible to an increasingly literate African audience. The continuity with the oral tradition is evident in the novels written in the African languages, in which the derivation of content and mode is direct and immediate. But the oral–literate interface, in its various manifestations, can also be felt as a quality of the fictional works of many an African writer, reflecting either a conscious design or, as is often the case, the effect of a cultural retention determined by the African background. Thus, the genres of oral narrative and the aesthetics they illustrate-in so far as this involves the recital of texts in the living contexts of performance – can be said to provide the imaginative background and, often, the structural model for the appropriation of the novel genre by African writers, in both the indigenous languages and the imported European tongues. This paper concentrates on community, culture and Identity Issues in African literature has its main thrust in explaining what Literature as a field of study is all about, together with its usefulness to mankind. This usefulness has to do with empowering the reader language- wise and imparting to him a civilizing value, thus making him a better person to function in human environment socially, morally and intellectually.

Introduction

Literature can, however, be seen as the use or manipulation of language tool in the best form for the purpose of exploring human experience in diverse situations. The empirical study of any language by this means cannot be accomplished except its Literature component is explored vis a vis. Literature is usually the creative works of the best brains in a particular language and culture. Literature can create a better citizen because of its

salutary influence on our psyche and attitude to life. This is greatly in a way that it can train our minds to receive opposing values. It is basically on this platform that Literature has become a veritable element for cultural globalization, especially for Africa whose Literature has been denigrated and repudiated by Western critics all along, on the claim that African Literature does not aspire to ideological universalism; which they claim to be peculiar reserve of the Western works, to the exclusion of

works from other races. After all, western literary works, like the African, emerged from the pre-literate western cultures to what they later on become in the Middle - age. The history of Africa as presented by European scholars had been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people... Such disparaging account had been given of Africa societies and their culture as to justify slavery; and slavery posed against these accounts served as positive deliverance of our ancestors

Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* published in 1952 is the first major attempt by a Nigerian to write a novel in English and it was an instant success, primarily due to its unusual and largely ungrammatical use of English. Critics saw in it, the birth of a new variety of English. However, they were not sure if Tutuola's subsequent writings in the same style would be as successful. However, Tutuola repeated his success many times to show that there was more to his writings than just 'wrong English'. In fact, Tutuola had, like D.D. Fagunwa before him, blended reality with fantasy. He had also drawn heavily from Yoruba folklore material, transforming its myths to their modern versions. It is in this new use of Yoruba folklore that the intrinsic significance of *Palm-Wine Drinkard* lies. Tutuola was well-received internationally and his writings were translated into in any languages of Europe.

As a reaction against this imperialist world and its attitude to the African, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 and explained the purpose for his work as follows;

Apart in 1958 and explained the purpose for his work as follows; ... a purpose implicit or expressed, to correct the distortion of West Africa cultures, to recreate the past in the present in order to educate the West African reader and give him the confidence in his cultural heritage which had been eroded by colonialism, and also in order to enlighten the foreign reader and help him get rid of the false impressions about the West African cultures acquired from centuries of cultural misrepresentation. (Obiechina, 1972:244)

In Africa, Asia, India, the United States, Latin America, the West Indies, Ireland, and other nations that share a history of slavery and neo-slavery, as

well as colonialism and its ubiquitous variant neocolonialism, drama is an enterprise of "cultural nationalism" and political practice and commitment to "political correctness." African postcolonial drama is an interrogating dialogue with history, an attempt to transcend the boundaries of political, economic, social, and cultural alienation

Ironic Dilemma of Alienation in African Literature

The predicament of human isolation and alienation is a pervasive theme that has not been sufficiently studied in Thomas Hardy's fiction. This study investigates the theme of alienation focusing on Hardy's major novels. Although the term 'alienation' is one of the most outstanding features of this age, it is not very clear what it precisely means. The writer has to draw extensively on Hegel, Marx, Fromm and other thinkers to understand the complex ramifications of the term. The numerous connections in which the term has been used are restricted to include only a few meanings and applications among which the most important refers to a disparity between one's society and one's spiritual interests or welfare. The theme of alienation, then, is investigated in representative texts from the wide trajectory of Victorian literature. It is clear that the central intellectual characteristic of the Victorian age is, as Arnold diagnosed it, "the sense of want of correspondence between the forms of modern Europe and its spirit". The increasing difficulty of reconciling historical and spiritual perspectives has become a major theme for Hardy and other late Victorians.

According to Bernard Magnier (2008), African literature was "confined during the 1970s and 1980s to politically radical circles". This statement undoubtedly captures the literary activities as well as the struggles against social, political, economic, and psychological alienation in the plays of Ngugi and Micere Mugo. Ngugi's plays are less in number and have received less critical attention than his fiction, essays, and autobiographical works. His first novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), was followed by *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), which details the politics of rebellion and the betrayals of revolutionary leadership trust. His other fiction includes *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1980), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). His nonfiction works include *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981), *Barrel of a Pen* (1983), *Decolonising*

the Mind (1986), *Moving the Centre* (1992), *Pen Points*, *Gunpoints and Dreams* (1992), and a miscellany of children literature. Ngugi's plays—*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982), and *The Black Hermit*—have special social regenerative and revolutionary power, both in the reading of their texts and as catalysts of revolutionary rage wherever they are produced and performed on stage.

Two clear ideological arguments resonate in Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*. One is Ngugi's vehement stand against the linguistic and cultural absurdity of writing African literature in European languages like English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Lusophone, etc. The second is his critique of capitalism and its manifestations in economic deprivation and political domination, which he describes as "the rule of consolidated finance capital" (Ngugi 1986, 83). Here he addresses the economic alienation of the majority (the masses) from the means of production by the capitalists and aristocrats. Thus, as other scholars have noted (Robson 1979; Killam 1980, 1984; Cook and Okenimkpe 1997; Ogude 1999; Gikandi 2000; and Ndigirgi 2006), Ngugi's works have captured the history and memories of the Mau Mau wars of liberation and the ironic turns of alienation and nostalgia in postcolonial Kenya.

In modern African drama, alienation is often mirrored as a microcosm of the social or class tensions in African society at different stages of its history. While *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* deals with the Kenyans' heroic resistance to the colonial domination of their economic and social life, *I Will Marry When I Want* mirrors the evils of neocolonialism and the capitalist exploitation in post-independence Kenya. It depicts the contemporary relation of labor and entrepreneur to the means of production. Social alienation is relevant to the analysis of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, in the sense that the whole of the society's political, economic, and social life is dominated by expatriates—the imperialists—while the Kenyans themselves are alienated: deprived and disinherited of their natural rights such as national economy and political power. Shaw Handerson, the European imperialist figure in the play, dispenses injustice with relish and impunity.

Thomas Hardy novels like *The Return of the Native*, Clym is the earliest prototype in Hardy's fiction of alienated modern man. He returns to Egdon Heath only to live in isolation unable to communicate with the very people whom he thought of as a cure for his alienation. Eustacia has consistently been leading a life of alienation in Egdon Heath which leads to her suicide. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard's alienation may be more ascribed to his own character, recalling Boldwood, than to incongruity with society. Yet Hardy emphasises the tendency of society towards modernity which Henchard cannot cope with.

Achebe through his writing shows that how colonial rule and English education reject native values and try to install Christianity as the only true faith and consider themselves racially superior to the natives. The depiction of alienation and rootlessness forms a continuing thematic concern not only to Achebe but also to the writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Ngugi, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Nyantara Sahgal, V.S Naipal etc.

Prison as Metaphor for Physical Alienation in African Literature

In any modern African drama of alienation, the prison or cell can assume a metaphorical dimension that represents the "prison" of the collective human psyche, conscience, spirit, or soul in that society. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Bode Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon*, glimpses of this metaphoric significance are obvious. In the former, the rhetorical question that Kimathi asks, "What revolution will unchain these minds!" (47) shows Ngugi's visionary awareness that the whole of the collective psyche—of the entire soul and spirit of Kenya—is in colonial "chains," demonstrating the social and collective alienation of that society. However, the epic fortitude and heroic drive with which Kimathi resists all sorts of persuasion to surrender and fall flat to colonial domination, coupled with the consequent pronouncement of a death sentence on him, ironically point to the triumph of the spirit of human liberation struggle. In essence, it is a triumph for the Kenyan people as a whole. They refuse to surrender to colonial domination at the expense of their own blood. Kimathi's blood becomes a redemptive force that would cleanse the society of colonial domination,

and restore peace and social order—the necessary conditions to alleviate social alienation.

Political Alienation

“Doris Lessing is an interesting, ambitious and intensely committed writer, deeply involved with the changing patterns of thought, feeling and culture of her time.” As we know, her time --- the 1930s were “a decade of political certainty: fascism was a clear evil to fight against; communism, it seemed to many, was an equally clear ideal to fight for.” (Schlueter, 47) In common with many other British and American intellectuals in the 1930s and early 1940s, Doris Lessing became a communist as a result of sincere optimistic desires to see the world improved and to have the injustices of a supposedly inhuman competitive system of values eliminated. As a convinced communist, she came by this conviction in a rather different way from that of most European left-wingers. Her experience of south African politics persuaded her that the communists in that country showed more “moral courage” than most --- and this was a quality that she admired. However, “in the postwar years, the old certainties seemed less certain; the issues were less clear-cut. As for so many other left-wing intellectuals, communism no longer seemed to be the answer. It has been betrayed”. To a great extent, her decision to become a communist appears now as naive as many other youthful enthusiasms or commitments. Ghana's premier novelist is Ayi Kwei Armah. His earliest fiction, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), is set in the last days of Nkrumah's regime. In this novel of disillusionment and alienation, a railway clerk, "the man," makes his way in a greedy and corrupt world. In later novels, *Fragments* (1970), *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), and *The Healers* (1978), Armah's fiction moves from this focus on the personal experience of disillusionment to historical and allegorical analyses of African failure to resist Arab and European conquerors.

IDENTITY

The question of identity is the most controversial issue in postcolonial time and literature and it can be regarded the most important because of its crisis exist in all postcolonial communities. Due to the circumstances of post-colonial era and the problematic conditions that faced newly freed nations and countries in their

search and formation of self-identity the crisis floated on the surface. The issue of identity is not a clear and fixed concept as it may be imagined that led to the crisis and became a phenomena as Mercer argues that identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (43).

African literature, by virtue of its serious and crucial commitments with the people and human experience, has strong links with other movements for the liberation and the modernization of Africa. Anthropologists and sociologists concerned with the structure of a changing African society have carried on the discussion in a variety of ways-, by African statesmen intent on rallying their people behind the new independence movements, by political commentators, and by artists, writers and intellectuals seeking new means of expression to match a new socio- political order. Indeed, the search for advancing a new poetics of the African personality, as it has travelled through varied phases of history, towards a new, internationalist and a trans-cultural awareness of its identity.

The search for cultural identity is one of the fundamental concerns in the majority of significant works of African fiction and hence occupies a central place in the writers' quest for exposing the authentic African personality and the pressing influences on the psyche. Firstly, there is need for historical roots and a modern culture based not on foreign ideas but on native African values. A second aspect of African cultural identity is the urge to establish and express a sense of human dignity & political themes have obviously surfaced in a big way in modern African fiction. The third element of cultural identity springs naturally from the search for roots and the wish for the approbation of one's fellowman. This is the desire to make some positive contribution to contemporary world culture. As voiced in the philosophy of Negritude-the African lives in close sympathy with the natural forces of the world, his religious instincts bring him to a surer touch with the infinite, and his higher sensitivity and morality is the only hope for a world hopelessly out of touch with its own rhythm, lacking faith, and apparently bent on self-destruction. Nkengasong explores the use of rituals in the plays of two African dramatists: Wole Soyinka (*A Dance of the Forest*) and Bole Butake

(And Palmwine will Flow). A reading of these plays demonstrates the view that ritual is the very foundation of African culture and identity. Consequently, “the imposition of alien religion can never really attain the require stasis because it is not rooted in the history and culture of Africa”. He brings out the specificities and similarities of both dramatists. While Soyinka envisions a new Africa that will escape the colonial past and present characterized by greed, tyranny, corruption and prostitution”, Butake ‘attacks negative forces of the society that undermine the sense of fullness of life and of a traditional work order conditioned by pity, heroism and unwavering belief in the god spirits of the ancestors’. As Coetzee is famous for his allegorical writing this attempt was to justify pseudo post-apartheid identity as linguistically scholar but lost the sense of morals. In historical context David from apartheid era and his attitude too reflect stubborn nature of apartheid white men. But here after reader could identify a very different David Lurie. In all the trials, summons and discussions David accept his action and ready for punishment. His integrity and clarity about thought, guilt, expected punishment appears to be very vivid and different from the introductory David Lurie. Then in further plot David expelled from the university and he decides to spend some time with his daughter Lucy, who stays in rural Cape Town. Lucy represents Post-Apartheid young generation, who don’t believe in racism and want to live their own life with their own way. Though educated Lucy love to travel, learn and see the world. Finally she settled in rural Cape Town, with her friend Bev Shaw, she also owns her own farm, and simultaneously doing a business of doghouse. She found peace and sanity in rural South Africa. It also reflects in Post-Apartheid way of life. Lucy introduces Lurie to life. For some days Lurie becomes companion with Lucy and help her in her farm but at the mind Lurie struggles a lot for adjustment in Lucy’s life. His opinion about Bev reflects his own understanding about rural life and charity:

“It’s admirable, what you do, what (Bev does, but to me animal –welfare people are a bit like Christians of certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well intentioned that after a while you itch to go

off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat” (73)

After some peaceful days one day on the way to morning walk three black strangers attacked them, they raped Lucy beat David and killed some dogs. This incident brought helplessness, instability and absurdity in the life of David Lurie and Lucy. This also represents changing power polarisation from white to black. The identity of white as powerful and dominated appeared to be weak and helplessness, actually these all results of Post-Apartheid political conditions.

In Walker’s *The Color Purple*, a group of characters suffer confusion about their true identity and their designated roles in society. Their confusion precipitates the creation of not only personal but also social tragedy. Harpo and Sofia are a happy couple. Harpo is not as physically and emotionally strong as Sofia. Given a choice, he would be happy to be who he is, but Harpo’s father tells him to be the man of the house and take control. Harpo and Sofia’s resultant conflict eventually leads to the separation of the two. The reader learns that Harpo’s father, Albert, had a similar experience. Listening to his father turned Albert into a victim of moribund traditions.

Chinua Achebe’s novels exhibit individual dilemma in the quest of identity and various facets of cultural diversity, it is necessary to have a look at the need of harmonious coexistence of the issues of identity and culture having various viewpoints and outlooks.

As with the issues of identity and culture, a place has always been of great importance to post-colonial study as it is related with the language, naming, and narration. The destruction of the environment is one of the most damaging aspects of the Western Industrialization. The fact is that the post-colonial writers have reflected the environment as the source of ‘civilizing’ benefits of modernity. Wolch and Emel point out;

“The roots of contemporary environmentalism may lie in colonial damage in both settler colonies and colonies of occupation, neo-colonialism, often in association with the colonial past, continues to produce classes of interests between ‘the West and the Rest’ in, for instance, areas of land and food scarcity,

where the well-being of humans and endangered animal species may be at odds” (Wolch & Emel, 1998:56).

The hierarchical distinction between humans and animals intrinsic to European humanism were frequently employed metaphorically in the creation of racialized hierarchies during the colonial period. The post-colonial environmentalism, therefore, deals with a number of deeply problematic issues and conflicting issues.

Conclusion

The issues of identity and culture are penetrated under the influence of global surroundings. The importance of globalization to post-colonial studies comes first from its demonstration of the structure of world power relations, which stands firm in the twentieth century as a legacy of the Western imperialism. In conclusion we would like to observe that most of the literary efforts in African languages were made primarily in British colonies and hardly any worthwhile efforts in this direction were made in either French or Portuguese colonies. The reasons for this are not difficult to seek. Encouraging Africans to develop their own languages and literatures was contrary to the French and Portuguese policies of assimilation which had the aims of absorbing the Africans completely into the culture of the colonizing nations, namely French and Portuguese cultures respectively. They encouraged the Africans to learn French and Portuguese respectively and write in them. In the course of time, African writings appeared in not only these two languages but also in English. In this paper, I have addressed the problems of social alienation and exilic consciousness in African societies as depicted in famous writers of African Literature. A complex structural pattern of alienation has emerged in this study. This type of collective alienation takes an aggressive, violent, and riotous form. It is, generally, in the form of the Marxist idea of antagonism (antithesis) between the oppressor and the oppressed of each society. African novel in this sense has become a historical document that shows the struggle of African people to throw away the colonial chains and to achieve all types of freedom. African fiction has a special identity & place in world literature, which is also a historical record of the African society having its own unique

identity and ethno-cultural sufficiency. Africans have suffered the most from other people’s attempts to ‘modernize’ them and much of their literature in the 20th century has been inspired by a reappraisal of their own present place. Thus, African writers have produced fiction that is fully contemporary, both in its form and content.

The novelist like Chinua Achebe elucidates the issues of identity and culture in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) that relates the theme of the hero’s fall, search for identity and the end of Igbo civilization. It continued in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) which represents the end of pure, idealistic democracy and the triumph of corruption. *Arrow of God* (1964) represents the downfall of Igbo religion, and the triumph of Christianity. *A Man of the People* (1966) is an example of the darker sides of political satire and impact on their culture and *Anthills of Savannah* (1987) is about cynicism driven by compassion and complex issues of identity and culture. The significance of the ‘Local Color’ is presented by the writers in the forms of culture and tradition. Wole Soyinka, the first African winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 explores, in grimly comic fashion, the sense of despair in *The Interpreter* (1965). Farah’s exploration of the links between sexuality, gender and the nation in *L’ Enfant de sable* (1985, trans. The Sand Child) is the story about a female child raised as a boy by her father, distraught at the fate.

On the whole, the African Novels in the Post-colonial period relate the balance considerations of the global and local. It makes an appeal to the pertaining issues of identity and culture in the context pressing needs to develop the understanding of ‘local’ issues in order to analyze the postcolonial African issues of identity and culture.

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