

Major Themes of Sociopolitical Post-Colonial African Literature

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Abstract

Post-colonial African literature takes "matter" from the realities of African living conditions and value systems in the past and present. In the African society the writer, be it a novelist, dramatist or poet is a sensitive "questioner" and reformer; as all literature in a way is criticism of the human condition obtainable in the society it mirrors. The writer often cannot help exposing the bad and the ugly in man and society. Thus much of Post-colonial African literature is a deploration of the harsh and inhuman condition in which the majority of Africans live in i.e. poverty, misery, political oppression, economic exploitation, excesses of the affluent, liquidation of humane African traditional values, and many forms of injustices which seem to be the lot of a large majority in most African societies.

المستخلص

يتناول الأدب الأفريقي في مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار "مادته" من واقع الظروف المعيشية الأفريقية وأنظمة القيم في الماضي والحاضر. في المجتمع الأفريقي، الكاتب، سواء كان روائياً أو مسرحياً أو شاعراً، هو "سائل" حساس ومصلح لأن جميع الفنون الأدبية هي بطريقة ما نقد للواقع البشري المعيش في المجتمع الذي تعكسه. ومن المعتاد ألا يستطيع الكاتب المساعدة في كشف الشرور والقبح في الإنسان والمجتمع. وهكذا، فإن الكثير من أدب ما بعد الاستعمار الأفريقي هو استنكار للظروف القاسية واللاإنسانية التي يعيش فيها أغلبية الأفارقة في الفقر، والبؤس، والقمع السياسي، والاستغلال الاقتصادي، وتجاوزات الأثرياء، وتصفية القيم الإنسانية الأفريقية التقليدية، والعديد من أشكال المظالم التي يبدو أنها تمثل غالبية كبيرة في معظم المجتمعات الأفريقية.

Keywords: African literature; post-colonial; sociopolitical; Afrocentric; Nigerian Novel; analytical ; descriptive ; Negritude

1. Introduction

In drama, novel, poetry or short story, the writer's dialogue with his physical and human environments comes out as a mirror in which his people and society can see what they look like. Every image painted by a skillful artist is expressed or put into writing / print, becomes public property and leaves itself open for evaluation by those who read and understand the language and expression. There is therefore a need to identify the thematic preoccupation of African sociopolitical postcolonial literature which is the focus of this paper with a view to identifying their peculiarities with textual references.

This paper deals with some of the themes in Post-colonial African literature such as colonialism, liberation, nationalism, tradition, displacement and rootlessness. First of all, it is necessary to have an idea about what constitutes the African literature. Most of African literature comes from West Africa, East Africa, South Africa and its suburb Rhodesia. These literatures are quite naturally different from each other. But they have in common the fact that they are written by young and middle-aged authors, most of them born after 1930.

The term, post-colonialism, has been widely used for critiquing the postcolonial situation in a society signifying the political, linguistic and cultural experiences of previously colonized nations. Thus, the postcolonial discourse is the discourse of the colonized, which begins with colonization and doesn't stop when the colonizers go home. It covers "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Brydon, 2000:9).

As a direct result of the colonialism that Africa underwent, the relation between individual, society and government witnessed a radical transformation resulting in several maladjustments in the African society. Among the worst consequences of colonization was the cultural subjugation of the Africans by generating ideas like Africa is "a land of toms-toms, drums and ... mysterious rites and customs" as a result the "colonized were ... despised ... marginalized, dispossessed, subjugated within their own land" (Parker & Starkey, 1995:6).

African literature means different things to different people. Some consider it a new world literature, a new genre with new messages. Others regard it as a political document, characterised by the protest against colonialism's downgrading of the blacks. For some it is another form of English and French literature. However, Post-colonial African literature is instructive, informative and documentary literature.

African writers who wrote in English were often accused of addressing themselves to a Western audience and, to some extent, they were engaged in a debate with the West about

the Western interpretation of Africa, and in a sense they were directing a message both at the colonizer and the colonized. They were trying to reform African ideas about African experience but they were also trying to reform European ideas about the African experience by using the colonizer's language to express his ideas.

This happened during the Negritude movement in Africa- Francophone Africa- which was an attempt also to place positive value on African culture and to make Europeans aware that Africa has a culture, local traditions, that Africa was capable of high-quality literature often based on the same premises that the Europeans were using. It was addressed to Africans themselves; who, through reading their literature, could change their own minds about the experience they have been through, and today most of the African writing is addressed to a local audience.

2. Research Methodology

In order to attain this research objectives, the researcher resorts to a variety of literary approaches. The social historical approach considers literature as a product that comes from the people's experiences and is usually written to teach society how it can develop. In this case, the approach is helpful in as far as it helps the researcher to examine and evaluate the novels in terms of the social contexts, history and political conditions under which the art was produced. Reference is made to the post-independence period and the role of the artist in transforming society at any stage of history.

The Afrocentric approach is helpful in this study because it asserts the African cultural values against those of colonialism and neocolonialism. The approach helps the researcher to deconstruct Eurocentric notions of African culture and traditional values being perpetuated by black leaders after independence. This approach allows the researcher to analyze data using indigenous knowledge system of the traditional Shona or African cultural values. This helps in analyzing the commitment of writers in articulating issues truthfully.

The researcher adopts the descriptive and analytical approaches to achieve a genuine understanding of the works under study. In order to do so, he gathers all authentic data relevant to the field of the study and describes the pieces of information unfolded before establishing his analytical framework according to agreed-upon literary theories.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Fanon sheds light on his protest moral theory of colonialism in his classic *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965). According to his theory, economic injustice is only one aspect of colonization. There is another important issue: the aspect of race or colour. This aspect determines the native's social class. He identifies the colonizers' world as a Manichean world, a world split into two worlds; it is rich against poor, the white against the blacks, pure against evil. In such a world, white represents purity and black represents evil.

According to Fanon, colonialism is illegally imposed; the entire official human machinery - teachers, policemen, soldiers - is exploited to suppress the native. Without aggression, acceptance for colonialism and exploitation is impossible. Edward W. Said also, in his major work *Orientalism* (1995), exposes the imperialistic structures behind the moral justifications offered by Europeans. Said speaks of the "cultural hegemony" or "positional superiority" - the idea that European identity is superior to that of all non-European peoples and cultures - that is dominant in all the studies of the Orient. Said also says that nineteenth century writers like J. S. Mill, Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, Newman, Ruskin, Macaulay, George Eliot and even Charles Dickens had pro-racist and pro-imperialist views. Said states that this image is stressed for the sake of colonizing and usurping other countries. Khayyoom (1988) also states that:

Africa, for many an outsider, is a gloomy phenomenon, a dark continent of dense forests and wild life, a fantasy world inhabited by bushmen ... a literally swinging Tarzan." " The thrilling silence of thick forests, sudden sunsets, formidable vultures, black water fever, the throbbing big drums and primitive customs of Africa have prompted the European mind to dismiss Africa as a trackless wilderness devoid of meaning (1988:42).

African fiction emerges as a kind of protest against the Eurocentric version of the Africans portrayed in terms of savage peoples living in a dark continent. However, African novel has been able to capture the true African reality in social and political terms. Thus, the Afrocentric view of the reality offered by postcolonial African literature as opposed to the Eurocentric negative representation of Africa "attempts to dismantle and de-center European hegemonic authority (Pandurang, 1997:14).

Many postcolonial novelists have a common feeling of colonial consciousness. This awareness is more apparent among the African elites owing to widespread slavery, colour prejudice and segregation, which makes the condition of Africans worse than that of the other

colonized peoples who belong to other races. Based on the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the colonized Africa, colonialism fortifies its existence through oppression and aggression. The colonizing countries resorted to portraying the colonized Africans as lazy, dependent, inferior, stubborn and wicked.

As a form of protest and resistance, the inferior status that the West had assigned to the Africans necessitated the need for self-assurance among African intellectuals. Since African literature was generated by this traumatic collective experience of colonization, it strongly reflects the resistance to the colonial and neo-colonial invasion of African cultural space as its primary thematic preoccupation. In his introduction to *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1981), Abiola Irele explains the value of modern African writing as a literature with a directive purpose and is essentially:

...the comprehensive testimony it offers to the turns and patterns of an unfolding drama of existence in which we continue to be involved. That drama has its source in our relation to the Western world which has crossed our historical path and modified the realities of our entire perspective upon the world. The imaginative writing in particular stands both as a direct representative of the concrete facts of our collective experience as well as a reconstruction in the form of images of the states of consciousness induced by that experience; the very process of symbolic projection revealing itself as a means of drawing this experience more fully and ultimately within the collective self so as to enable us to comprehend its meaning for ourselves in the immediate future (1981:203).

The Nigerian novel, in one sense, has assisted in the process of decolonization for the people who suffered the trauma of foreign conquest and the imposition of an alien culture. The Nigerian writers have exquisitely interpreted the contemporary socio-political and cultural reality in their writings so as to offer an explicit comment on the inheritance that the society received from colonial period. Their novels reflect the changes which have taken place in postcolonial Nigerian life.

The African intellectuals' commitment to art involves their conscious choice to express a specific point of view and to place enough tactical pressure to persuade the reader to re-examine social realities. The reason for the postcolonial writers' major preoccupation with the novel is for using it as an ideological weapon for asserting political and cultural identity.

The experience of certain areas of Africa of colonialism has been very different from the others. In certain rural areas, the consciousness of being dominated by an alien culture was minimal. Their existence went on regardless of who were on their soil. In that way, parts of Africa never really felt the impact of colonisation like the people along the coastline or in the metropolitan cities. However, the impact of colonialism was more severe in African countries than in the other Commonwealth countries. Most of the African writers- Olive Schreiner, Sembene Ousmane, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Laurens Vander Post, Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye, Ayi Kwei Armah, Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara, all of them have powerfully presented the impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism to the downtrodden masses of their country in their works.

Most Post-colonial African literature is an expression of a country's social change. The writers are concerned about the past and present history of their country and this concern is reflected in their works. They focus on the changes that Africa had been subjected to since the colonisation of the country- the cultural, political and missionary influences, in addition to the present state of achieved independence with a growing awareness of both national identity and modern problems.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a worthy archetype of the novel which shows the tragic consequences of Africa's encounter with Europe. The village Umuofia is a representative of traditional Ibo society. A similarity can be drawn between the changes in the protagonist Okonkwo's life and the social change that Nigeria underwent before and after its encounter with European culture. Having examined the strains and stresses in Ibo society in the wake of colonialist's advance in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), and the problems facing the educated classes in modern Nigeria in *No Longer at Ease* (1960), in *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe shows what Nigerians made of their country consequent to the departure of the imperialists. Michael Ondaatje's renowned work, *The English Patient* (1992), also deals with the theme of colonial presence.

Liberation in literature challenges people, community and the continent to identify the positive elements in their heritage and inspires them to find solutions to their problems. Along with the Yoruba culture, Wole Soyinka also advocates the theme of liberation in his works. In his prison notes, *The Man Died* (1971), he says that the second phase of self-liberation is the creation of a continental language as an instrument of continuing continental struggle. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o regarded the revision of Kenyan history as essential to liberation from colonial legacy. In his novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977), he explains through the

characters of Karega and Joseph, that the spirit of liberation is a continuous process which is indicative of the social consciousness of the people.

Similarly, Ayi Kwei Armah's novels are crafted as tools of resistance and liberation. His novels *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1979) are regarded as novels of liberation. Both works are revolutionary in their perspectives. In these novels, Africa becomes the plot, character, theme and the situation, and Armah's novelistic vision has a main goal: to emancipate the Africa from the forces of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Two Thousand Seasons provides a survey of the history of Africa from the past to the future. It chronicles the life of the African people confronted with cultural, religious, economic and social enslavement. It calls for a struggle for their liberation. The novel is a fight not only to rehabilitate Africa's battered image but also to liberate it from slavery, disintegration, distortion and dislocation of its unique African cultural identity.

Achebe's *Arrow of God* is a study of an African man struggling to come to terms with his identity when a nationalizing colonial force undermines the structures of his community and destroys his sense of security. The novel shows that two issues central to the protagonist's identity crisis remain a problem to Nigerians today. If Nigeria is a nation, are the Ibo or Yoruba just tribes? African writers warn that until the people of Africa understand their pre-colonial foundations and restructure their society accordingly, they cannot hope to build nations with harmonious ethnic co-existence. Moreover the writers are often divided over the use of colonial languages as national languages. Achebe's *Arrow of God* is an example of a narrative that probes the post-colonial identity by seeking to identify the moment of transition of a society with a pre-colonial identity to one with a national identity.

Africa is known for its rich tradition. In the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the social harmony of the village is evoked vividly through Achebe's presentation of the customs and traditions extending from birth, through marriage to death and of the educational, religious and hierarchical systems. Achebe also takes a strongly satiric stand in *A Man of the People*, to show how the local traditions and customs are exploited by the modern politicians to meet their selfish needs.

In almost all of his novels, Ngugi wa Thiongo' tries to uplift the cultural heritage of Africa by explaining the colonial subjugation to the Kenyans, by presenting before every Kenyan what he was, what he is and where he is being led into. His novel, *Petals of Blood* gives the picture of a traditional Gikuyu society and how the peaceful life of the Gikuyus was spoiled with the intrusion of the Europeans. In this novel he presents the life of a young man,

Waiyaki, who fails in bringing about reconciliation between traditionalism and Christianity. This was not the problem of Waiyaki alone but it was a social problem which affected many societies and tribes during the 1920s. The social life of the traditional societies which aimed at communal consciousness has been disturbed by the entrance of the Europeans. Ngugi seems to suggest that the dilemma of the masses to make a choice between traditionalism and Christianity has resulted in utter confusion. He suggests that a blend of the good qualities of the both traditions or a reconciliation between the two would have been a better choice. But the lack of social awareness among the people had created chaos in the society which ultimately led to the destruction of traditional values.

Africa is also well known for its rich oral tradition. The Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor researched into the poetic forms of the Ewe ethnic group, which resulted in the publication of his *Guardians of the Sacred Wood: Ewe Poetry* (1973), a collection containing Awoonor's English translations of the oral recitations. A similar thread which links the traditional and the modern is seen in the poetry of Okot p'Bitek.

Place and experience of displacement are both important features of Post-colonial African literature. It originated against the background of a complex history of colonisation and decolonisation. Displacement caused by colonisation can take on several forms- physical displacements, figurative displacement. The figurative displacement is visible in the relationship of black African writers writing to African literary canon which has been mostly dominated by white African writing. The other forms of displacements include the displacement brought about by the appropriation of land by European colonisers, the displacements resulting from the forced removals under certain apartheid laws as well as the displacement caused by imprisonment or resulting from hostile political policies. Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* is basically about processes of displacement, elimination and substitution.

A Man of the People by Achebe depicts the post-colonial situation in a modern African state which is on its way to sever its ties with the traditional past. Achebe exposes the inadequacies in a society which is losing its traditional moorings and also the opportunistic tendencies of the local, newly emerging politicians. This causes dislocation from one's native land and results in a sense of rootlessness. It is also caused by either displacement, exile or other similar factors. The juxtaposition of the native tradition with the alien tradition of the colonizers played a significant role in creating a sense of rootlessness- the clash between tradition and modernity, between the real and the occult are some among them. This sense of

rootlessness has been depicted mainly in African poetry, such as 'The Cathedral' by Kofi Awoonor.

However, every African writer is "two people". He is born to a worldview which is mythopoeic, ritualistic, hierarchical, authoritarian, folk-oriented, oral and tribal. But by a historical accident he has become aware of a culture that is rational; actuality oriented techno-scientific, pragmatics and endowed with an established discourse. The given tradition, its past and present relevance, its juxtaposition with the alien tradition has to find a place. This is achieved by the literary geniuses from the Continent, making the Eurocentric world look at them in a new light.

When political independence was achieved, most of the freed African societies upheld the belief that their communities would no longer be kept away from prosperity and development. The issues of justice, equality, social reform and economic flourishing became amongst the most persistent hopes and dreams.

Most post-independence African governments, in their earlier policy statements, had promised to build nations based on equity. They pledged to be committed to clearing the stage and unleashing a vigorous attack on the evils of mass poverty, disease and ignorance. These statements showed the vision envisaged by the leaders soon after independence, a vision to end racial discrimination and enact legislations to improve the quality of life for their peoples. All these dreams were not fulfilled as the governments failed to deliver on most of their promises. Most of African citizens soon realized that independence did not bring them total liberation; instead, it introduced them to new hardships and injustices.

Prominent African literary figures struggled via their intellectual production during the pre-independence era to claim national independence. Unfortunately, With the advent of formal independence throughout the continent, the critique of subjects like foreign domination under colonialism and the urgent issue of identity gradually disappeared and the focus was shifted to the disillusionment of independence and the critique of abusive power and corruption. This critique was never absent from African literatures but the critique of post-independence regimes is accomplished in part by a change in literary form, which Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests in his controversial essay *Decolonising the Mind*:

How does a writer, a novelist, shock his readers by telling them that these [heads of state who collaborate with imperialist powers] are neo-slaves when they themselves, the neo-slaves, are openly announcing the fact on the rooftops? How do you shock your readers by pointing out that these are mass

murderers, looters, robbers, thieves, when they, the perpetrators of these anti-people crimes, are not even attempting to hide the fact? When in some cases they are actually and proudly celebrating their massacre of children, and the theft and robbery of the nation? How do you satirise their utterances and claims when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations? (1986:17)

Communal wars is another theme stressed in post-colonial African literature. Some of these wars are caused by tribal differences while others are caused by certain civil issues. Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976) is a war novel that explores the psychological make up of characters in the war drama. In this novel, the Federal and the Secessionist armies are locked in a fierce battle. But the author plays down the drama of external violence and concentrates fully on its deeper human dimensions. We have committed characters giving account of their experiences and roles in the war. The themes of the novel are revealed one by one until there is a complex network of themes: the disruption in communal life, the mischievous manipulation of military authorities for the settlement of private scores, the sexual oppression of a miserable woman, the abuse of children and the handicapped and the heroic assertion of personal integrity in the face of immorality.

Since the politicians were driven only by personal ambition, it gave way to moral vacuum and other evils related to it. The Nigerian novels written after independence reflect the changing values of society in transition. The writers have presented a society that is a living, breathing organism, exercised by small ordinary fears, hopes, vices and virtues. These people with a confused state of mind have to cope with the troublesome scenario of the African politics. The traditionally isolated people suffered from internal conflicts and the novelists express the crisis faced by these people in their writings.

Nigerian novelists, who perceive themselves in an educative role, impart a sensitive interpretation of their own society in their works. Achebe points out in this context:

The writer cannot be excused the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all...the sensitive point of his community (1964:102).

The theme of military struggles and coups is also present in the African post-colonial literature. In his *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe describes a new situation in a modern African state which is on its way to cut its ties with traditional past and expresses the opportunistic tendencies of newly emerging politicians in independent Nigeria. Achebe does not only conduct a sentimental journey into the traditional past but takes a satirical stance to

show how the traditional values are exploited by the politicians to achieve their selfish objectives.

Achebe's *A Man of the People* foreshadows the Nigerian coups of 1966 and shows the manipulations, violence and corruption of a society making its own way between the two worlds, the world of common people and that of leaders. *A Man of the People* is a first person retrospective narrative rendered by Odili Samalu, a school teacher in his native village. At first wholly cynical about the political leadership of the country, Odili keeps a scornful distance from any kind of political activity whatsoever. Once he had complete faith in University-trained leaders who promised an economically prosperous and politically stable unified nation in the post-independent period, but political opportunists, of whom Chief Nanga is an apt example, start hankering after the gleam of materialism so as to increase their personal fortunes at the expense of the nation or citizens.

The novel questions the dichotomy of power and leadership in the newly emergent nation state. The country is now in the hands of native people, but there is no worthy leadership so as to speak of, and the leaders are governed by the drive of unrestrained greed, unchecked political corruption and unlimited self-interest. The quality of the leadership and the response of the people to that leadership form the core of the novel.

A Man of the People completes a sequence of novels depicting the changes in the Nigerian life during the twentieth century, the period beginning with the pacification of the local tribes and ending with the post-independent Nigeria. The novel shows how the traditional values have badly changed by the advent of colonialism and ends in gloom, chaos and corruption. The situation in Nigeria is not specifically unique; in fact, the majority of the African countries experienced similar crises and contradictions. Achebe has taken his example from the Nigerian society, the Igbo society, represents the African dilemma.

Anthills of the Savannah (1987) heightens and furthers Achebe's sense of failure of Post-independence Nigeria to fulfill people's aspirations. The novel traces the matter of interference and dominance of the army in a society where democracy is still an infant.

4. Conclusion

Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka in *Season of Anomy* and *A Dance of the Forests* and Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* in the same class with Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* point to the disillusionment that followed many African nation's independence as it had not improved the lot of the people.

This disillusionment, as time goes on, seems to have tended towards pessimism which is very evident in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006).

Adichie, like Soyinka, Awoonor, Achebe and others in their group, has merely exposed problems inherent in the African nations without providing any solution. For example, what should Biafra do after the "sunset" in *Half of a Yellow Sun*? Towards the end of the novel, for instance, Richard is seen traumatized:

Richard dabbled at his nose. Darkness descended on him, and when it lifted, he knew that he would never see Kainene again and that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses (430).

This confirms Gakwandi's position that "African writing has been growing progressively more pessimistic; angry artists if they cannot give solutions to the problems which face the continent today, have at least attacked the errors and villainy of the politicians and the people" (1980: 85).

As a conclusion, many prominent post-colonial African novelists, through their literary works, believe that most of the African countries are richly endowed with natural resources and high quality human capital. Nevertheless, these countries are yet to find their rightful place among the category of developed nations. A major reason that has been responsible for such a vicious cycle of deterioration and failure is attributed to sociopolitical corruption and inefficiency.

The major cause of agony and disappointment in postcolonial Africa was foregrounded in politics, which is extensively explored by the African writers. The revolutionary African critics, Cheikh Anta Diop, Frantz Fanon, Chinweizu and Ngugi wa Thiong'O for instance, considered African literature and political discourse as two sides of the same coin. Moreover, The sociopolitical changes to which Africa had been subjected as a result of post-colonialism and post-independence find expression in the contemporary African fiction. The frustration and despair of Africans after independence, when the indigenous rulers did their best to imitate their white predecessors, form a significant part of postcolonial African writings.

Fanon's prophecy regarding the devastating effect of colonialism on Africa proves to be true, as the decay and corruption are so obvious in independent Africa that many post-independence protest novels become a manifestation of this realization. The independent

African countries have new set of masters - black this time - into the seats of their previous colonial leaders. These new masters have acquired the same symbols and behave with the same arrogance and indifference as the old masters.

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