

ISSUES AND INSIGHT INTO POST COLONIAL LITERATURE: A STUDY OF AFRICAN WORKS

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Abstract

'Postcolonial discourse'¹ is a modern trend as well as an analytical framework for studying African literary works. It emanated from the feeling among literary critics that all other previous analytical theories for African works were insufficient. Based on the various identified perspectives of 'postcolonial discourse' this paper reveals the issue that postcolonial literature is a reaction against the colonialists; and their delineation of Africa societies in a negative light, so as to justify both slavery and colonization of Africa. Another issue is that the liberation of Africa continent from western colonialism took a multilateral dimension, one of which involved the use of the 'text'. Finally, this paper reveals that Europe used their power of persuasion to assault the sensibilities of Africans and succeeded in their denigration of the id-factor, thereby making some Africans believe that Africa's backwardness was attached to the intrinsic and intractable vices in Africa's cultural life. Based on this concept, some Africans have written what could be passed off as gratuitous novels that glorified western , ' influence to the detriment of the image of Africa. Postcolonial literature, therefore, aims at presenting the image of Africa in a positive light to the world. This attempt has continued to be misconstrued by colonialist critics as confrontational, on the part of postcolonial discourse.

Introduction

Virtually the entire Africa passed through some form of colonialism. Colonialism started soon after the abolition of slave trade in Europe and America, in the form of what historians referred to as the 'scramble for Africa'¹. European countries - England, France, Belgium, Germany, Portugal and America (to a less extent) attempted to establish colonies overseas for two basic reasons. Dike (1963:108) asserted that:

Europe scrambled for African colonies to establish their rival presence in overseas, and to use these colonies as large markets for manufactured goods from the European industries,... while also obtaining the needed raw materials for these industries from their colonies.

It became fashionable and a source of economic power and national pride for these western powers to establish colonies abroad.

The colonized countries could be said to have been subjugated by these powers who also imposed their cultures and religion on them by sheer force. In Nigeria, for example, Dike (1963) recorded a series of punitive expeditions involving the gunboat politics of the Niger Delta, the Akassa raid, the deposition of King Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itsekiri and King Dosurnu of Lagos - to mention but a few. The South African case was another level of colonialism where Britain used the whites in South Africa to establish an apartheid white enclave to dominate and control the entire African population in South Africa.

This political imposition and subsequent struggle for independence dominated the history and literary activities of African continent before, during and after independence. This gave rise to intense literacy-activities and movements, the most prominent being the 'Nigeritude' and what came to be known as 'postcolonial discourse'¹.

In its major outline, 'Nigeritude' writing included all the literary works from Africa which emphasized extolling the beauty of Africa and virtues of black civilization; a return to 'mother Africa', and rejection of 'white culture'. This movement characterized most African literature up to early nineteen eighties. These were manifested in such writers as the Diops, Levpold Senghor; Dennis Brutus, Cainra Laye, Mongo Beti, Aimc' Caesare, and the .Southern African writers of Apartheid opposition like Bessie Head, Nelson Rodney, Alex La Guma, Albert Lituli, Mbulelo Nzamare and a host of others. A study of 'Nigeritude'¹ shows that the writers that were more militant were -the French -speaking Africans, while the English speaking writers appeared to tread soft.

However, 'postcolonial discourse' can be said to reflect all the literary works from Africa and

encapsulates Negritude whether they belong to the French expression or English. There are some African writers who seem to negate the theory and practice of 'postcolonial' or 'Negritude' discourse in their works. To some extent, they are all 'postcolonial' at different levels. This is why 'postcolonial discourse' is a better analytical framework for discussing African literary works than any other analytical theory hitherto, because it encompasses the totality of literary works written in the ex-colonies.

What is Postcolonial Discourse

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) trace the origin of 'postcolonial discourse' to 1960s when there came a growing dissatisfaction in the previous analytical theories for African literature. One of the foremost proponents of this theory was Frantz Fanon. According to Ashcroft et al (1989) 'postcolonial discourse' stands for: a way of talking about the political and discursive strategies of colonized societies which was generated by a simple realization that the effect of the colonizing process over individuals, cultures and society throughout Europe's domain was vast and produced consequences as complex as they were profound....

It was colonialism therefore that produced in the colonized people a way of answering or talking back to colonialists about their attitude of denigrating the colonized people and their cultures. 'Postcolonial discourse' offers six various perspectives as analytical framework for African writings. In a nutshell, these include the following:

- * It does not imply the period after independence from colonialism. Therefore, all African writings before, during and after European colonialism are 'postcolonial' literature;
- 4 It is a challenge to the claim of the western imperialists of (their monopoly of the power to define the entire world order in their euro-centric notion, according to Smith (1998).
- * It is a framework for studying and criticizing European writings and culture.
- * It makes way for the recognition of the dual identity of the colonized both as African by birth and as citizens of the colonizing powers through imperialism. This leads Barry (1998:19) to classify the identities of colonized people as 'absorbed', 'hybrid'¹ or 'settler';
- * It simulates the characteristic African literature written in English, as different from the English literature, regarded in colonial circles as the 'mainstream' literature of the world; with particular reference to language, stylistics and themes.
- * Finally, 'postcolonial'¹ literature makes for the distinctive 'difference' from European writings in the intrinsic manner of how the colonialist writer portrays the colonized and how the 'postcolonial' writer portrays his society.

Issues in Postcolonial Writings

Smith (1999:23) asserts that postcolonial literature is a way of reasserting one's individual or national identity in the course of history it is a way of reasserting oneself either as an individual, or a nation in the course of history this has to do with politics, language, culture, intellect...

This culture reassertion started as far back as 1789 when the first black novel - *Equiano's Travels* written by Gustavus Vassa was published by Heinemann. This novel was a reassertion of both the individual and national identity of the writer and his Ibo cultural background. He wrote to explain that contrary to what is written about us: we were almost a nation of musicians, poets and dancers; sophisticated in state craft and economy Our women were uncommonly graceful, at least in my own eyes.

Vassa had to make this assertion to contradict the denigration of the African dignity by European writers whose facts were based on the subjective account of only travelers in Africa,

Plaatje (1930) in his book titled *Mhadi* had to write in defence of the culture of his tribe, the Barolong of South Africa, against imperialist defamation. According to Couzens (1975:10) the concern of Plaatje is and only to defend (the customs of the traditional life of the Barolong land to some extent; he is also intent on re-interpreting, history from the point of view of his own people.

Plaatje's bid to re-write and re-interpret history from the viewpoint of his people is in order to present the other side of the story which imperialism tried to submerge under its mendacious propaganda against the colonized people so as to justify both slavery and colonialism. Nlarumah (1957:18) explained this point further when he asserted that:

The history of Africa as presented by European scholars had been encumbered by malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people.... Such disparaging accounts had been given of African society and culture as to justify slavery, and slavery posed against these accounts seemed as positive deliverance of our ancestors.

These African writers have had to defend African's image in the face of violation of Africa's dignity and human rights posed by colonialism. In this light, Achebe (1975:17) while answering the question as to whether Africans benefited from colonialism replied that: Africa suffered terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the encounter with Europe was almost a complete disaster.

Achebe goes further to explain that the entire world is, to the western imperialists, seen in the 'image of their glory and for their profits', while the Negro became 'the poor motherless child of the spirituals'

Postcolonial literature is bent on raising the issues of Europe's violation of Africa's human rights, in the pretext of deliverance, and poses the challenge to imperialists to show the world how much Africa has benefited from the encounter with Europe. In the anticipation of these challenges in the future, and based on lack of convincing explanation to them, European writers and scholars devised two levels of blackmail. The first was discrediting the educated African who they portrayed as 'man of two worlds'. The second one was to attack the literary works of educated Africans, showing how they were either baseless' or 'falsification' according to Franklin (1998). However, it is notable that the struggle for Africa's liberation and independence, involved the literary, psychological, political and physical battle with Europe. This implies that the writers, psychologists, politicians and soldiers fighting behind the lives, joined their efforts to win Africa's liberation. This was why Abraham (1962:19) explained the issue argumentatively as follows:

.....just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa, African political scientists concern themselves with the political problem of Africa, why should African literary writers be exempted from the services that they themselves consider as genuine'...

It is only the use of the text' the African literary writers employ as their weapon European writers know that 'the text' is a potent weapon; hence, it is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. They used that weapon.

According to Lord (2002:36) 'all these varied components of liberation struggle had their peculiar parts to play towards African liberation'. Along this strain, Ode (2003:10) agreed that 'the imperialists who claimed to work on God's behalf in colonizing African were nevertheless not working on God's behalf to willingly grant Africa her independence'. Ode asked the question if it was the same God that asked the colonialists to 'denigrate and deprave' mankind in the name of colonialism. Europe's claims to bring light to Africa is therefore under serious questioning in-postcolonial literature.

Insight into Postcolonial Literature

In their bid to denigrate African writings, writers and culture, the colonialist critics wove around the Africa educated elite the image of 'a man of two worlds syndrome'. Nwczc (1978) has accused European writers of projecting an image of (ho black-man as foolish, primitive ant! savage'. Both Mphulilchlc (1962) and Achebe (1975) speak of their 'distress' for the distortions of the African personality they found in Joyce *Gary's Mr. Johnson* as other novels; and Pierre Lodd's works. These distortions constitute 'the burden of Africa' which must be cast off by African writers. Other critics of African writings include Andrcki (1965), Woakes (1995) and Pcterse (1998) who referred to African as 'dressing in raffia starts'. Africa's 'primitivity and provincialism', and 'gross immorality' of the Africans as evidence of the Africans being just a step above the ape-man' respectively. Apart from these white critics, others like Adrian Roscoe (1971), Innis (1985) and Holmes (2001) prefer to see subjectivity in African works, including Achebe's. *A Man of the People*'.

'Postcolonial discourse' reveals that western scholars intend to dominate or monopolize the interpretation and criticism of African literature, as part of their bid to monopolize the definition of the entire world order. For this reason, Achebe (1975) feels that Africans must not yield the ground to (he whiles to define Africa's cosmology and tradition in their subjectivity. Achebe also feels that since Europe used 'the text'¹ to colonise the world, Africa must also use 'the text' to liberate herself.

Postcolonial discourse reveals a kind of 'mud-slinging' between African writers and their European opponents who regard the enslavement and colonization of Africa as positive intervention by Europe, acting on God's behalf. To further distort African image, the European writers descended into raw attacks of individual African writers whose works are anti colonialist.

'A man of two worlds' refers to an African from the colonized society, who has had the 'benefit' of western education that is expected to transform him from his 'provincial' background to become 'enlightened'. By virtue of his education, he is a member of the colonizers' world. However, the colonialists show that in terms of personal dignity, this 'man of two worlds' lacks the knowledge of his background and shows himself to be ungovernable and unappreciative of the benefits of western education he has acquired. At the end, he is worse off than his '*brothers in the bush*' (Allen, 2000).

Foremost among the colonialist scholars with this critical bent is Buchumi (1910) whose Prosier John in a book of the same title is a typical example of a man of dual worlds' who appeals cultured and regenerated from the 'bush ways of African culture'. However his exposure to the situation in his home country portrays him to be 'unregenerated'. By this delineation, the colonialist critics imply that the African could never absorb the western ideas and way of life, no matter how long he might be exposed to them.

It is, however, not only the western critics that take to this kind of blackmail of Africa and her writers. Some African writers are part of this vanguard of calumny against Africa, through their works. An instance is Aluko, whose novels from *One Man, One Wife, and One man, One Matched through Kinsmen and Foreman and Chief the Honourable Minister, to His Worshipful Majesty* portray tradition in a negative sense as anti progress. It is only in his sixth novel *Wrong ones in the Dock* published in 1983 that Aluko begins to see the positive dimension of traditional life. This is for the reason that modernisation which Aluko saw earlier as the panacea for the backwardness of his society, that to him was rooted in traditional life, failed to achieve the social transformation he envisaged. It is for the reason of such negative portrayal of African image that Aboada (1993) declared that '*no African writer could afford to stand aloof in the raging rhetorics*'. Achebe (1975) also reacted that: *those African writers who continually portray Africa's backwardness as if it had not been proved beyond doubt, should not think that they are doing any service to Africa, even in the face of recent history.*

Writers like Aluko and Yambo Ologuém were known to have written in line with the preconceived European image of Africa's backwardness not in the lone of decolonising Africa. This was probably why Aluko's works, though unpopular among African critics, were read in the BBC African Service; because, it suited the conceit of the imperialists.

In *Bound to Violence* (1962), Ologuém lends to portray, like Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) that African societies are rooted in violence. This kind of report is palatable to western critics who identify 'universalism' (Allen, 1971) in Ologuém's novel and hial Soyinka's drama as '*a realistic . critique of a nation in transition*' (Richard, 1984:37). Richard and Allen, by these comments have identified themselves as part of the colonialist critics who are unhappy with decolonisation of Africa and who would use Africa's self-accusation to echo to the world that Africa was heading to a precipice and disaster in her independence. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka uses the imaginary corrupt] ;i in the ancient Ghana and Mali empires and in the court of Mata Khenibu, linking these with the present West Africa through the process of reincarnation, and forecasts that the future of Africa is black.

Postcolonial literature stands for the attempt to decolonise Africa literally. Achebe's (1975) declaration that he would be satisfied if his novels, especially those set in the past, did no more than assure his readers that their past, with its imperfections, was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf, delivered their ancestors shows that post colonialia. literature aims at decolonizing our minds from colonial influences marked by denigration and falsification of our roots.

in the same trend Obiechina (1975) was of the opinion that Achebe's novels also teach the European readers to get over their denigration of African society and culture which was a product of centuries of biases against the continent and its people. The fact that African writers that wrote to support the colonialists' claims of Africa's backwardness but later on report to write balanced accounts of

Africa's social order, shows that they have begun to see dignity and respect in the African personality and his past, contrary to (heir previous views.

Conclusion

Postcolonial discourse' has raised and defended the issues of African humanity and digni:;, which colonialist critics tried to deny. It has tried to prove that African did not hear about culture firs: from the Europeans who came to Africa. Rather, Africans had their own cosmology, belief system, history and social organizations that served the interest of African communities. These cultural heritage were on the ground when the early whitemen came to the scene. To deny these facts by European scholars amounts to falsification. It was part of Gustavuuus Vassah's intension in writing *Equiano's Travels* for example 'to do battle' against this falsification. An insight into postcolonia! literature reveals that the whole trend was intended to reassert Africa's humanity and expose the mendacity of European writers whose concern is to keep the world perpetually under delusion about Africa's humanity, in order to buttress their action of slavery and colonialism. This way, Africa's claim of exploitation by Europe, and her current demand for reparation for inhumanity and injustice done to African would be a non-issue.

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