

Colonialism and Identity in African Literature

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Abstract

This study aimed at documenting the impact of colonialism on African identity and the implicated liaison between African colonial literature and the African identity. Most of the literary genres in the continent during colonialism were revolving around the agitation against colonizers who were endeavoring to obliterate the African cultures, values, traditions and social aspects. The study could also shed light on the tremendous efforts made by African writers throughout the continents in showing the African identity through their writings moreover to the most outstanding literary products which could appropriately bring the international recognition to the African literary work. The researcher portrayed the way Africans were leading their lives during the pre-colonialism and the unstultified remarkable changes during colonialism.

Keywords: literary genre, transition, paganism.

المستخلص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة لتوثيق أثر الاستعمار على الهوية الإفريقية والرابط الضمني بين الأدب الأفريقي إبان فترة الاستعمار والهوية الإفريقية، إذ كانت معظم الأجناس الأدبية في غضون سني الاستعمار تتمحور حول تحريض العنصر الإفريقي ضد المستعمر الذي كان يسعى سعياً حثيثاً لنسخ الثقافات، القيم، التقاليد وكل معالم المجتمع الإفريقي كما سلطت الدراسة الضوء على الجهود الكبيرة المبذولة من قبل الكتاب الأفريقيين من كل أرجاء القارة في إبراز الهوية الإفريقية من خلال كتاباتهم فضلاً عن المنتج الأدبي الإفريقي البارز والذي بدوره قام بتقديم الأدب الإفريقي للعالم بصورة لائقة. عمد الباحث لتصوير مظاهر حياة المجتمعات الإفريقية ما قبل الاستعمار والتغييرات الملحوظة بعد مجيء المستعمر.

Introduction

African people have been degraded by most of the world population as they believe that Africans have been leading a jungle life which submits to no rules, principles or regulations. Such a claim would throw a heavy burden on the shoulders of the enlightened Africans particularly those who have been undertaken literary movements. Before the forth coming of the colonizers there were the oral forms of literature which were used to teach the juveniles the values and principles of their clan or

tribe. They were mainly made to reinforce bravery which could equip them with a sense and tendency of protecting their properties and lands.

Publication of literary products can pretty show the identity of a particular society otherwise their identity will be kept notorious for the rest of the neighboring societies. However, the pre-colonial identity of the African societies was transferred to the world by western writers who had recorded a great deal of how Africans were leading their lives.

Writers like Sir Henry Rider could address the African identity in their writings according to their own perspectives and that portrayed those poor outlaw people who were living unsystematically as it was claimed. In accordance with Achebe's aim, his novel (*Things Fall Apart*) comes to be universally acknowledged as a subversion of western racist discourse propagated in novels like *Heart of Darkness*. *Things Fall Apart* is widely acclaimed for its realistic and moving description of an African society in the pre-colonial period. (Gallagher, 1994. 6)

The severe struggle between colonizers and the African people was quite obvious in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in which the white man made tremendous effort to transit people of Uomofia from paganism to Christianity and change their identity to hold the ground for more stable western sovereignty in Africa. (Middleton, 2002. 5) clarified that when Christian missionaries began arriving in Africa in greater numbers in the early 1800s, they made a serious effort to educate local populations. The goal of the early missionary schools was to produce literate individuals to take over minor positions in local churches and become functioning church members. Hence, that was regarded as a threshold for the colonizers in metamorphosing the African identity to control the Africans smoothly and conveniently.

This study is an account of the historical aspects of the colonial impact on the African identity depicting the gigantic

endeavor of the colonizers in manipulating the Africans societies as a part of dominating the continent as whole.

2. Why Write in European Languages

The ethnic dimension which is ever in the ascendancy to use African indigenous languages in writing African heritage and literature did not seem to have received enough recognition. Almost all African literature seems to have in common the intention to address a European audience for the sole purpose of drawing their attention to the ailments committed by European settlers. However, the question of language is of central importance to the entire African continent. The advent of the European settlers with their language has motivated Africans to learn the colonialist languages to be used as *lingua frankas*. Despite the fact that African writers have reached an outstanding position in using the colonialist language there are still some voices coming from the continent that favor the use of the indigenous languages. One such prominent figure is Ngugi wa Thiangu from Kenya who stood so assertively against the use of European colonizers in writing and called for return to indigenous African languages.

Needless to say, that there are some leading literary figures in Africa who opposed the question of using the indigenous African languages such as Chinua Achebe. He stated that the issue of language a point of contention in drawing and conveying the manifestations and features of African literature.



Any language can be adopted to portray the lifestyles and peculiarities of Africans. So the debate goes on that almost all African people receive education in European languages the thing which tips the balance in favor of using a European language

3. An Argument

Identity is defined by (Richards. 1987.198) as “ *the distinguishing character or personality of an individual*”

There are five major themes in African literature namely colonialism, liberation, nationalism, tradition, displacement and rootlessness. African literature means different things to different people. In view of the recursive themes it frequently portrays, it is thought of as a new world literature, a new genre with new messages which mainly seeks to convey to African young generation. Some critics consider African literature as a political document which cries out for the world to see the horrible demotion by the Europeans as settlers moving the indigenous inhabitants to lower positions of humanity. In fact, to a very greater degree, African literature is enormously instructive and a documentary literature that serves to widen African awareness of their grievances and the loss of their heritage and how they should set out actively to reclaim it.

African writers who wrote in English were often accused of addressing themselves to a Western audience. In doing so they are making a debate with the West about the West indisputable

conceptualization of Africa while at the same time addressing the African societies. So in writing in English African writers intend to improve the Europeans view of Africa and drawing their attention to the crucial fact that much of the present African suffering is directly attributable to the Europeans intervention in Africa and their attempts to introduce massive change in African heritage. The result of Europeans involvement in Africa with their well calculated projects is a distorted image of Africa. The Africans have irretrievably lost a greater portion of their heritage and failed to live up to the colonialist culture.

Probably, colonization could have an impact on African Identity and that could not be controversial as it has been so apparent and obvious in the various aspects of African cultural and linguistic issues which can be touched in different African literary products. African writers wrote most of their literary work in colonizers' languages and that is due to the power of colonizers over the colonized. Hence, using the Western languages would obliterate African identity to some extent, but it will render the African writings long-lasting and well-known as a result of that two juxtaposed views were developed by some African writers who divided themselves into two parties either opponent or proponent to the idea of using Western languages in African literature in simultaneity with the concept of identity.

2. COLONIAL INFLUENCE ON AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES

It is doubtless that colonialism stimulated positive and negative changes in Africa. More importantly, colonial rule was an imposition that unleashed deadly blow on African culture with the immediate consequence of the introduction of such values as rugged individualism, corruption, capitalism and oppression. Colonial rule disrupted the traditional machinery of moral homogeneity and practice. The method of moral inculcation was vitiated, which resulted in the abandonment of traditional norms and values through a systematic depersonalization of the African and paganisation of its values. Instead of the cherished communalism which defined the life of the African, for example, a burgeoning societal construct was introduced which alienates and destroys the organic fabric of the spirit of feeling. According to Okoduwa (2008: 18), colonial rulers promoted their economic and religious values. This is evident in economic exploitation and socio-religious vitrification that characterised the colonial period. It is in this theorising that Irvin Markovitz conceives of colonialism as “one expression of an ever more encompassing capitalism” (Ibid). However, apart from the economic exploitative agenda, colonialism expressed in “the ethnocentric belief that the morals and values of the colonizer were superior to those of the colonized” (Ibid). This belief was programmatically achieved through the establishment of schools, which curricula were tailored to achieve the goals of the colonizer rather than train the colonised to be independent, and the missionary ventures, which helped a great deal in vitrifying the religious concept and inclination of the colonised. This scenario naturally created two classes, one being the superogatory and the other the subordinatory, with deliberate

administrative structure that favoured the former. One consequence of this was the erosion of the values, culture and religion of the subordinatory. The African cosmos became a victim of extraneous ideology which it has continued to grapple with, with little or no success. For instance, as part of the erosion of the African cultural values, Africans now bear at least a European or Christian name. This means that African names, arts, music, religion, etc. are inferior of pagan in orientation and value. The acceptance of this by the Africans has continued to have serious negative effects on the postcolonial Africa and its values.

5. African Writers’ struggle for Identity

The African writer has been nurtured in a society in which the sense of community is very strong. A cardinal point for understanding the African view of humankind is the belief that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 108-9). Literature in Africa has been and remains an affirmation of faith in one's cultural ideals. Social cohesiveness is very important to Africans because they believe that "the earliest act of civilization was...the establishment of a cooperative, interactive, human community." Kunene adds:

The idea of integrating the artist's vision within a broad social experience becomes a normal and natural process that does not require rules for its application. Both the philosophic and artistic worlds fuse to produce a discipline that aims at affirming the social purpose of all expressions of human life. In short, the ideal of social solidarity is projected (1982, xvi).
Modern



African literature is very socialized. This literature is different from that which focuses on the individual. It is this communal spirit which informs the characterization and social analysis in Soyinka's *Interpreters*, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. In each of these novels a group, rather than an individual, is emphasized. There is no single protagonist that overwhelms other characters. For instance, in *Anthills of the Savannah* it is the fate of the nation of Kangan that is at stake in the lives of Sam, Christopher Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and Beatrice Okoh. Similarly in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the community can be said to be a protagonist struggling against Western intruders to maintain its cultural practices. The focus on society with its attendant social criticism in modern African literature is in the African tradition. African writers, in asserting their cultural identity, condemn Western intervention as disruptive of the growth and development of African culture through colonialism. Cultural habits and practices change and the writers generally feel that there were and still are sufficient mechanisms and ample latitude for internal changes in African cultural life. After all, culture is dynamic. As Achebe demonstrates in *Things Fall Apart*, such practices as the throwing away of twins, the *osu* caste system, human sacrifice and exiling a person for inadvertent murder were already being questioned from within by Obierika and others. Africa did not need colonialists and the Christian religion to change. In Soyinka's *Death and the King's*

Horseman, the dramatist's viewpoint suggests that the practice of the king's horseman accompanying him to the spirit world by ritual suicide was already failing and needed no colonial intervention to stop. The colonial officer's intervention resulted in a greater tragedy for the society in the waste of two lives in the place of one. Mazisi Kunene, the South African poet and scholar, has cautioned in *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain* against any group assuming ethical and moral superiority over others because of its material and technological advantages (1982, xi). Material and technological advancement and ethical and moral advancement do not necessarily go together and are in fact antithetical in the experience of both Africa and Europe. As cultural standard-bearers of their people, African writers use literature to assert cultural independence.

6. African literature and European Languages

The debate concerning which language(s) African writers should use in addressing their literary works has brought in two arguments, although a carefully examination shows that both are not logically far from each other. The first argument is the one presented by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and his followers, who suggest that for a literature to be called "African literature" should, no doubt, be written in indigenous African languages. They oppose the fact that foreign languages (like English, French, Arabic and Portuguese, among many others) should not be acceptable languages used in portraying African lifestyles and peculiarities.



The second group is led by Chinua Achebe and his followers who are mainly in favour of adopted foreign languages. To them, the colonial languages provide the possible solution in addressing African literature since, on one hand, there are so many diverse ethnic languages in Africa, and on the other, they can cover a larger range of population than the undeveloped African languages.

There is no doubt that Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the most front runner of this group. Other writers and critics are Abiola Irele, Charles Nnolim, Obiajunwa Wali, Gabriel Ruhumbika and Mazisi Kunene, among many others. As we illustrated earlier, their major argument is that for African literature to be authentic and worth the name "African literature", it must be written in one of the African languages (Menang, 2001). They suggest that there is need to make one or two African languages official, and from which it would be used in writing a literature meant for African people.

Should African literature be written in African languages? Or should it be written about the people of Africans in a language other than their own? These are two pertinent questions that Ngugi wa Thiong'o tries to address. He suggests that African languages should be the only medium through which African writers can address the ways of life of their fellow Africans; the languages provide direct access to the rich traditions of Africa and its people. To him, writing in one's native language (L1) is for identification and a way of fighting against the imperialist powers that can

defend their cultural and national heritage. African languages are the sources through which African writers can struggle against wider imperialist domination by the colonisers. In 1986, Ngugi has suggested that African writers should always write in their L1, avoiding the old imposed colonial languages of English, French, Arabic and Portuguese, among others. According to him, although his earlier works (novels and plays) have been heavily written in English, yet he has switched to writing mostly in Gikuyu, a Kenyan language, in order to reach his target audience. He claims that decolonisation is possible only by liberating oneself from the power of the imperialist languages; it is the only way of reclaiming the cultural identity of a nation: "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngugi, 1972, p. 290). According to the source, the bullet used by the colonisers is a means of physical subjugation, whereas the used of the imposed colonial languages in depicting African literature is another means of spiritual subjugation.

In order to communicate to wider audience if there is need for it, Ngugi suggests that translation is possible since it ought to be the equalitarian mode of interaction between and among languages, and writing in his L1 would pass his message well to his common people. Also, it would show that he is no longer subjected to any colonial subjugation.



He argues that writing in European languages is only for the educated elite class; and as such, literature written in any language other than African languages is not quality to be recognised as African literature. Rather, such literature should be considered as Afro-European literature. That is, the writers have created another hybrid tradition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European (literature written by Africans in European languages), reaching only a limited audience, not a wider one (Ngugi, 1990).

Ngugi celebrates the merits of African national languages, arguing that he would like to see African writers writing in such a literature that would reflect the real rhythms of African child's spoken expression. He actually places African languages at the top of a hierarchy of languages used in depicting literature for the African writers. Apart from the communicating function of a language, Ngugi argues that writing in one's L1 would help to express and carry the cultural heritage of the people, becoming a storehouse of its images, wisdom, experience and history. In his words, language is power: it draws the writer closer to his people. In other words, Ngugi is of the opinion that Europeans force their languages on Africa, and meanwhile, African writers have blindly accepted the offer, enriching another culture (European culture) with their own experience, thereby ignorantly disregarding theirs. He believes that writing in any of the European languages by some African writers is another

means of spiritual subjugation. He therefore, encourages African writers to be proactive and take a responsibility onto themselves to counter such imperialism. And he delves into writing in his L1 (Gikuyu) because it is the only way to move away from European domination: "I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenya language, an African language, is a part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 28). Ngugi challenges such African writers writing in European or imposed colonial languages to abandon such act.

7. Conclusion

In this paper the researcher discussed the influential role of colonialism on African identity and literature. On the basis of that African literary movements during colonialism were oriented towards the decisive struggle between their local societies and the European outsiders who were intrusively making effort to propagate their doctrines, values and style of life for more exploration in the continent.

Colonizers could spread Christianity over which there was a great controversy as the first step of obliterating the African identity. Writers were to send out their work into the Western languages with the pretext of transmitting their themes to the whole world. However, Some of them encouraged the others to use their local tongues to maintain their identity and make their literary products and cultures purely African and can properly be attributed to the very continent.

To sum up, African identity has been influenced by the colonizers in spite of the ongoing struggle led by its authors and literary men in the way of freeing their local societies from the impact of foreigners for more independent cultures and identity.

7. Recommendations

- African writers should use some of their major languages to propagate their cultures and local values to confirm their identity and upgrade their societies.
- Language is one of the effective means of securing nations identity.
- One or two widely spoken African languages should be standardised and adopted as a medium of instruction in all the African schools until majority would have access to those languages. If that is done, and especially used in writing African literature, it will help to define the real identity of African literature. Such languages would serve as central identity, promoting Africans at the international level.

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