

# AFRICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

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## ABSTRACT

Eurocentric criticisms of African literature are an illustration of a deliberate desire to impose Western norms on African literature. European attacks on African literature concentrate on the domains of the themes developed, the techniques of writing, the concepts, and the general philosophy of literary theory. Critics from other parts of the world, using African literary productions, tried to find parallels in what they knew from their own countries. For them, African literature must be oriented towards Western standards since they consider African ways to be primitive. This is the beginning of Western influence on African literature. This situation continues unfortunately, and African literature today, is totally dominated by Western values. The purpose of this article is both to highlight some aspects of the influence of this cultural imperialism on African literature and to emphasize the need for a cultural restoration in this domain.

*Key words:* Africa, literature, criticism, cultural imperialism

## RÉSUMÉ

La critique européenne, désireuse d'imposer des normes occidentales à la littérature africaine, a accusé celle-ci de primitive. Les accusations ainsi formulées concernent les thèmes développés, les techniques d'écriture utilisées, les concepts abordés et la philosophie générale qui sous-tend l'art littéraire. La littérature africaine a été malheureusement comparée à des modèles étrangers, avec comme objectif de lui donner une nouvelle orientation basée sur des principes nouveaux. C'est le début de l'influence occidentale sur la littérature africaine à laquelle des normes et des règlements ont été «imposés». Aujourd'hui, la littérature africaine est totalement dominée par des valeurs occidentales. Le point de cet article est d'analyser l'impact de cet impérialisme culturel sur la littérature africaine et insister sur la nécessité d'une restauration culturelle dans ce domaine.

*Mots clés:* Afrique, littérature, critique, impérialisme culturel.

## INTRODUCTION

Some time ago, the literary image of Africa was created almost entirely by non-Africans. With their superiority complex, these people had a lopsided view of African literature and considered it primitive, because they have been using western standards to evaluate it. This attitude from the West creates a situation of a double colonization: the one suffered by Africans with all its consequences of humiliating slavery and that which has been trying to impose Western norms and standards on African literature. The result is that few Africans would see any relevance at all in their own cultural system which is frequently said to be backward, or at best folkloric with a poor quality. In this essay, we will focus on Western influence on African literature and show why the quest for africaness in African literature should be the urgent preoccupation of all Africans.

Chinua Achebe, who is regarded by many scholars as «the father of African literature in English» declared that the African writer has a responsibility different from that of his western counterpart. This is also my opinion because African literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures. It has its own traditions, models and norms. It is understandably different from European and other literatures. Its history and culture impose upon it preoccupations which at times are quite different from those of other literatures. These ideas concern also African literature written in European languages. Because of this, some concerns of other peoples seem to have no validity in the context African literature.

Literature reflects the value system and the expectations of the society from which it springs. And as Roscoe observes: "Much of Africa is still a land of myth..... of people who continue to stay close enough to the earth to hear its pastoral symphonies and to feel strongly the spin of Fate's wheel and to learn to endure" (1981: 250). Because African literature stems from oral traditions, it retains many vestiges of oral art. This can be noted in the writings of Armah, Aidoo, Tutuola, Okara, and the power of proverbs in Achebe's fiction, etc. The writer in my view has the responsibility to present to his audiences the stresses and joys of African societies as they take place. He must capture and create the tone and texture of the life of this people in his work. So, African literature can only be relevant and useful when it takes

into consideration the motivations and the cultural background against which it is written. Many African writers exploited with success the use of proverbs, tales, myths, community festivals, traditional ceremonies, music and dancing for their literary creations. They succeed in giving to their work an African quality and African character.

For Christopher Heywood "the African writer must give back to the African character the will to act and change the scheme of things" (1968: 7). In Achebe's fiction, for example, the characters have a vital relationship with their social and economic landscape. Their whole views, their aspirations, have been shaped by a particular environment. Thus, Achebe has paved the way. He has succeeded in giving human dignity to his African characters. In defence of African philosophy and identity he had this to say:

If I were God, I would regard as the very worst our acceptance, for whatever reason, of racial inferiority. It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us<sup>1</sup>

The creative African writer must make sure he presents his community to both itself and to others. It should be a community that discusses its experiences with itself, commenting, for entertainment and enlightenment, upon the world in which it finds itself. He must be concerned with the artistic tradition of his people, their present, but also their future. Pioneers like Achebe have got a sense of the general direction, trying to control the consciousness of their people within the context in which African literature, I think, must operate. Some people think that Africa should always be in a situation whereby Europe is to decide when it is ripe. Europe is thought to be the master who knows what is good and what is bad for Africa. Africans are even urged to go western as much as possible. They see these things pitifully and painfully, because it is as if their continent had no traditions of its own. Africa has its cultural tradition, its religious, economic or political backgrounds and a history of glory in creative art. All these are characteristics that deserve serious attention. Ngugi.

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### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> This quote is from Christopher Heywood, *Perspectives on African Literature*, Pelican Books (London; 1968), p. 7.

Tutuola, Amadi and many others adopted various techniques in which they have utilized material from African tales, fables, proverbs, epigrams, etc ... to convey useful messages to national and international audiences. The African writer, who has chosen today to write about divination, witchcraft, benevolent as well as malevolent interventions of Gods and spirits in human affairs, etc, must revisit the various African folk tale traditions to learn the traditional conventions for handling such characters, incidents and settings. An African writer who has chosen to take inspiration from African realities and write for his African audience, must be aware that characters, themes, techniques that are absent from European novels for example, can have a place in the African novel. Africa is not Europe, and should not be expected to do things necessarily like Europe. Some prominent African writers, as we have stated earlier on, have utilized materials from tales, fables, and proverbs; and the structure and texture of their narrations have counterparts in short as well as extended oral narratives. But what is it that has happened to the folk tales of our African villages, no one can tell.

The Euro-centric writers claim that the only legitimate model to African literature is and ought to be Europe. But African societies include the world of spirits, the dead, the living, and even the unborn. Because of this, it would be rather surprising if there should be no divergences between African and European literatures. A legitimate part of the African view of life and the world involves the world of the spirits. The Africans, whether Christian or not, intellectual or illiterate in their great majority, still consult divinities and diviners when they have health problems or when their business is in a mess. Western ways are good, but you run back to your ancestral roots when things get out of hand. These things are deeper than foreigners may think. Why is it that some critics consider primitive a belief in a world of spirits, magic, human communicating with the dead and other supernatural occurrences and identify them as a «childhood of civilisation» (Chinweizu, 1998; 23). Africans have internalized prejudices of imperialistic criticism. The white man has used his language to convey a feeling of superiority and domination in every domain of African life, including arts. Chinweizu and his friends have cried loud and clear for the decolonization of African literature. For them, the European standards which are set for African literature today are a dangerous death-grip from which it must be released. It is a manifestation of a cultural imperialism, to try to constrain the developments of African literature by demanding strict and exclusive adherence to the characteristics of Western strains.

Some African pioneer writers are accused of primitivism and their works are considered problematic, because they introduce in human affairs supernatural beings and occurrences which the European academics officially regard as superstitions worthy of belief only among the primitives and infantile minds. A response to this may be what Achebe said that "African writers write out of experience and of commitment to African Destiny. For them that destiny does not include a future European identity" (1998; 50). If the Africans themselves have not banished some considerations and beliefs from their lives, is it the prerogative of a non-African to do so?

Colonialist critics conceive of African writing as an overseas extension of European literatures and, therefore, fail to realise the need to adjust their sights. It is a well-known fact that the entire African continent went through colonialism and because of this, its contemporary culture is under foreign domination. But I think that our culture has to destroy the colonial mentality and map out new foundations for an African modernity. It is a challenge which will emphasize the continuity and even the development of the valuable aspects of our pre-colonial culture and literature. Of course, the accomplishment of this task must benefit from the vitalizing contributions from other cultures in order for a healthy synthesis from them all to be achieved.

There is a general remark today. Literature seems to be a domain reserved only for the elite. African literature is taught in schools and discussed at conferences among scholars and specialists. The greater majority of our people are there apparently unconcerned with whatever it is that is going on in the field of African literature. This state of affairs should not be explained only by the fact that the greater majority of Africans are illiterate. It is a fact that even among the intellectuals: many are not interested in African literature, for lack of motivation. I think that a much closer relationship must develop between the African writer and his African audience if we don't want African literature to be dealt with as art for art sake. There must be a return to indigenous sources for material and inspiration, to Africa's ancient oral traditions, religions, customs, folklore and myth, which are carried down in African vernaculars, and which our people must continue to tap with enthusiasm and dignity in order to keep alive our African identity.



and material for the inspiration of literary art. Today, Africa's cultural collision with Europe has involved the loss of a certain part of the traditional heritage, while Western cultural elements have been absorbed. But, this situation must be utilized by the African writer for the sake of his people. This literature of Africans must be original and avoid a slavish imitation of Western models and practice. The wish here is to see African literature advance positively with its own heritage largely intact, with the addition only of what is advantageous to absorb. In his *Culture et Colonisation* Aimé Césaire made the point that,

In the new African culture, there will be new elements, modern elements, elements borrowed from Europe. But we also believe that many traditional elements will live on in this culture. We refuse to yield to the *tabula rasa* temptation. I refuse to believe that any future African culture will totally and brutally reject the old order.<sup>3</sup>

The language factor should not be seen as a hindrance to the authenticity in African literature. Achebe and many other famous African writers have already succeeded to africanize the English language in order to make it express the local experience of the African peoples. Working in a foreign language may even have its advantages.

Our assimilation of Western cultures should be selective and discriminating with thorough analysis as to the compatibility of some patterns of behaviours and thoughts to the nature of society and people that we are and nature of society we wish to create in Africa. We have no right to lose our moral and spiritual values which constitute the core of African identity and which do not have the same place in the so-called advanced nations. These values must be disseminated to offer the opportunity to man to crown his achievements in this world characterized by J.A. Sofola as a world of ...

Extreme individuality of Western atomic robot who considers himself and his interests alone, who sees himself in a Hobbesian manner of thought in which every human being is considered to be at war with another human being and therefore, all people are potential enemies against whom he must protect himself (1973: 19)

Western culture and philosophy is now leading the world, and the novel form for example which is from the West, is obliging the African writer to generalize many important issues. In their desire to westernize their

writings, some African writers have dangerously degraded African personality and philosophy. A case in point is the feminist writing in African literature. In their fight against the forces of patriarchy, polygamy, child marriage and levirate, many African female writers attack the very foundation of African society which, they say, is strongly built against woman's progress and emancipation. The appearance of «Feminisms» today is a sign of the profound disagreement among women themselves with regard to the African female agenda which, some of them think, must be different from that of their Western counterparts.

Once again, the African needs inspiration from the rich customs and traditions of the African soil if he wants to be heard, understood, and appreciated not only by an international audience but also by a national audience. If in spite of his modernity, the African has never been wholly severed from the cradle of a continuous culture; African writers should consider this characteristic and play their role of light bearers for their people on their way to a better future. There are examples of works which are models of memorable thought and utterances from the African world. These examples of achievements of the African peoples in the homeland and in the Diaspora show with admiration what African literature cannot afford to cast aside in its fascination with and emulation of Western literature. African critics who tend to be Euro-centric whereas they should be Afrocentric, and who view African literature through European eyes, must see the need for a restorative cultural enterprise and its literary implications for Africa. Africa's literary culture must be decolonized - to use Chinweizu's term. As he put it,

The cultural task in hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality, to clear the bushes and stake out new foundations for a liberated African modernity. This is something that must take place in all spheres of African life in government, industry, family and social life, education, city planning, architecture, arts, entertainment etc. (1980: 01).

African oral traditions which are an important reservoir of African values, aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought must serve as a foundation and a guideline to the authentic African literature we are calling for. Our oral traditions must be the root from which African literature must continue to draw inspiration and sustenance. Africans must put an end to the mutilations their arts and culture are suffering. We must

seek the traditions into which modern African writings should insert themselves and look for qualities and norms which are transferable from our oral traditions to modern African literature. If nothing is done, in one or two decades to come, the double consciousness and cultural hybridity imposed on the continent by the white man, will create a situation whereby the African writers and critics will consider their profession as an overseas department of European literature, forgetting that African literature has a tradition of its own, an audience to address, and interests to defend. These preoccupations should be, among others, the concerns that can help to create the unique experience of African literary tradition which would make again the pride of our glorious peoples in the years to come. In the legacy of the post colonial experience, the idea of culture has been entangled with Western practices. And since the 1980s, a growing corpus of writings has debated questions about the relation between the hegemony of Western discourses and the possibilities of resistance, and about the formation of colonial and post-colonial subjects. The post-colonial theory and writings have become an attempt to intervene in the construction of culture and knowledge, and, for intellectuals who come from post-colonial societies, to write back into a history others have written. For Achebe, «no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul». That is why he was determined to help his society «regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration». His writings mirror the profound unease which afflicts contemporary Africa and the deep decay in our culture.

African literature is produced out of cultural and social circumstances that must be understood and preserved if we don't want to miss the benefits of enriching human experience. Though there have been profound changes in Africa since independence, and African literature has been introduced in the scheme of world literature, the African writer and critic should broaden their actions now and liberate themselves from the bondage of the former colonial power. To reach this aim, they need inspiration and energy to engage in an active nationalist consciousness. Our writers and critics must avoid being conned into pseudo-universalism.

In conclusion to this analysis, it seems fair to say that African literature should be restored to its traditional roots which show African pride and dignity, because "Les rapports entre le littéraire et le social sont d'une très grande intimité"<sup>4</sup>. African writers must raise their intellectual and artistic performances above the bygone days to eschew the

colonial impediments and fight for an authentic development of African literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Chinua Achebe. "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" *African Writers on Writing*, ed. G.D Killan, Northwestern University Press (Evanston; 1973), p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard, Doob. «The Psychological Pressure upon the Modern African», *Modern Africa*, (eds.) Mc Ewan and Sutcliffe, p.376.

<sup>3</sup> The passage is quoted from Roscoe, *Mother is Gold*, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Nubukpo, K. Messan, 1990. «Pourquoi enseigner la littérature», *Actes des Journées Scientifiques de l' U. B.*, volume I, pp 10 - 19

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