

## The Politics of Poetics: The Quest for Ethno- Cultural Identity and Selfhood in Modern African Fiction

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**Abstract**—Africa has rich literary traditions as a part of its cultural heritage. The modern African fiction is an outcome of interaction between oral story telling and European narrative style i.e novel. African fiction portrays the socio-cultural developments in African society from pre to post colonial era. Thus the present paper is an effort to project the politics that affected African society, culture and literature and how the poetics of modern fiction came into being.

**Keywords**-African fiction, Anglo-phone, Colonialism, Oral-Tradition, Poetics,Black-aesthetics,Negritude .

### I. INTRODUCTION

Africa has rich literary traditions as a part of its cultural heritage. Although drama, epic and poetry –all the literary forms had existed in an oral form till the advent of literacy, but not the novel. For that reason, the present forms of literature are a comparatively recent phenomenon in the African context. Written literature, with its conventions of private composition and consumption, thus represented a radical departure for the community- centered African mind, as did many of the social and cultural values embodied in the western texts. As Dathorne has pointed out, the novel (fiction) is the only literary art form that has been totally imported and imposed over the indigenous tradition [1].

African literature has its roots in performance, and is a part of community life. It is associated with ceremonial, festive and social occasions. So, dramatic and musical features are to be found in every piece of native literature in Africa. The narrative art is not alien to Africa. This art is found in the traditional oral- story- telling and epic sagas involving ancestors, gods and hunters.

On the intrusion of European colonizers, the phase of literacy started in Africa which influenced deeply African history and historical assumptions, politico- economic set up, socio-cultural strands, customs, traditions, religion as well as literary styles (output). The modern African fiction written in English has born out of the interaction between indigenous forms of oral- story- telling and the European literature, culture, represented by the European narrative style i.e. novel. This art is now encapsulated in the form of African novel through which African writers found easy and fit medium to portray the predicament of African natives, and their own world, socio-cultural conflict, colonial influences upon the traditional patterns of life and humanity before the world.

African literature, by virtue of its serious and crucial commitments with the people and human experience, has strong links with other movements for the liberation and the modernization of Africa. Anthropologists and sociologists concerned with the structure of a changing African society have carried on the discussion in a variety of ways-, by African statesmen intent on rallying their people behind the new independence movements, by political commentators, and by artists, writers and intellectuals seeking new means of expression to match a new socio- political order. Indeed, the search for advancing a new poetics of the African personality, as it has traveled through varied phases of history, towards a new, internationalist and a trans-cultural awareness of its identity. This is proved by the active pursuit of debates in the Congresses of African writers sponsored by Presence Africaine, in which perceptive insights were provided into the African experience in different areas. Taken in a different sense, the rise of independent states in Africa since 1957 has led to search for independence i.e. more subtle and difficult to achieve even than political freedom. Thoughtful Africans realize that political freedom and economic development must be accomplished by a true cultural emancipation.

The search for cultural identity is one of the fundamental concerns in the majority of significant works of African fiction and hence occupies a central place in the writers' quest for exposing the authentic African personality and the pressing influences on the psyche. Firstly, there is need for historical roots and a modern culture based not on foreign ideas but on native African values. A second aspect of African cultural identity is the urge to establish and express a sense of human dignity & political themes have obviously surfaced in a big way in modern African fiction. The third element of cultural identity springs naturally from the search for roots and the wish for the approbation of one's fellowman. This is the desire to make some positive contribution to contemporary world culture. as voiced in the philosophy of Negritude – the African lives in close sympathy with the natural forces of the world, his religious instincts bring him to a surer touch with the infinite, and his higher sensitivity and morality is the only hope for a world hopelessly out of touch with its own rhythm, lacking faith, and apparently bent on self –destruction. Cyprian Ekwensi describes these aspects of the African in Jagua Nana - the characters express earthiness, the religious sense, the quick humor etc. In a crux, the African aesthetics envisage and

envision a better African life in the face of fast changing existence and the emergence of new societies.

This way the African fiction is an outcome of the socio-political intercourse between European Colonial settlers and native African inhabitants, initially, on the western edge of the continent. That is why African fiction is called "Cultural Hybrid." This new art form arose up to show the protest of the natives against the humiliation, shattering of their traditions, customs and wreckage of the cultural patterns of life. The major fore-runners of the protest were included in the poetic field: Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire; as well as in the fiction and drama: Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Nadine Gordimer, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and others.

## II. CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Our basic aim in the present paper is to project the 'politics', which have both decisively, damaged, distorted, and at the same time, have also meaningfully reshaped the 'poetics' of modern African fiction. Obviously, references to the African oral tradition, culture, folklore, superstitions, meta-physics and life rhythms are imperative as they have been coming into violent clash with the forces of western opinion and biased judgments through colonization, economic slavery and intellectual assumptions about its history and traditions. On the other hand, Modern African literature - fiction has its creative and intellectual foundations in its assertion of African nationalism, race, art - culture. Hence what is today comprehended as Negritude is more than a vehement racial outcry and a violent slogan to do away with all that is opposed to black world- view & black freedom. Black literature and Black consciousness symbolized by Negritude is an answer to a certain combination of circumstances. It is product of a historical situation that has become a cultural and political myth in the 20th century. Indeed, the point to be pondered upon is the variegated sets of beliefs and counter justifications placed by Negritude. Negritude not only remained a challenge to White supremacy, it also confronted white domination with its own protest drawing together the sentiments and attitudes that went with Black reaction and embody them in a heightened form. In fact, it moved very distinctly towards a racial, cultural and political ideology.

African writers express a view of the world from within a culture which has been more or less politically disregarded by the western stream of thought, and has been relegated to the position of the 'other' even since Conrad found it 'prehistoric' some ninety years ago. Among others, a recent tendency is to speak of 'hybrid' culture and of people who live in two worlds. But more importantly, one has to consider that the art of a novelist who looks at what is real in his own perception of life finds it more complex, vital and unpredictable than that.

African novelists address readers at home (and abroad) on the basis of the setting of their present experience. Since they are still beset by outside assumptions about Africa's future, this becomes an urgent commitment. Addressing other readers in English and French, the novels can be disconcerting to what Roland Barthes called the *Doxa*, the sum of commonly received opinions- and to views publicized by Barthes. The most creative and internationally acclaimed writers viz. Chinua

Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Ayi Kwei Armah, Cyprian Ekwensi, Camara Laye, Nadine Gordimer and many others can be seen to develop a fictional poetics based on African reality and African identity in all its complexities and political - racial compulsions. Their works can be seen in relation to European or Western fictional works of 1950s to 1970s & so on.

Wole Soyinka, a Nobel laureate observes about his Nigerian experience: "The earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer gathering multifarious experience under the two cultures and exploiting them in one extravagant confident whole [2]. Not only this, these writers protested against the forcibly imposed conditions on their society by colonizers. Again Wole Soyinka shows a deep sense of the White rejection: "We object to outsiders' imposition of their European world, and their history, their social neurosis and their value system [3]. On similar grounds Bruce King states the legacy of African fiction that basically originated in the West African nations: Nigeria, Ghana, or Kenya etc. this is the location where first of all the socio- cultural and political interaction took place between the Europeans and the Africans, who were related to different regions, races and cultures. The outcome is: "The tragic sense in Nigerian literature is a legacy of colonialism, which shattered traditional patterns of life without creating a harmonious modern society.... Ghanaian & Nigerian literature often touch is in lamenting or satirizing the turning away from African tribal values, which are seen as spiritual and natural, towards a gross love for European 'things'... African society losing its identity... through the desire for material wealth [4].

The knowledge of its past is a must to study the present state of a society. It is significant that the African novel has come being when the social, cultural and political situation has demanded a reassessment of the African history. African countries emerged from colonialism have direct confrontation with their own history and cultural past as it has been illustrated in dozens of works under the impact of colonial experience. It is indeed, one of the crucial areas of discussion in modern African novel: the questioning of one's own values and traditions against a complex of historical experiences. As Karl Marx observes, "The rise of colonialism... was accompanied by unparalleled barbarism and desperate outrages on the subject people. The history of colonialism had been the history of relations of treachery, bribery, massacre and meanness [5].

The colonial impact has two facets: it has severed them from their roots, broken up traditional order and distorted their psyche. It made them feel that they had no cultural or historical identity worth preserving. Secondly, it has also given them the very means and exact opportunity they needed, to re-examine their history & becoming conscious of their colonial past. Being a committed writer, Chinua Achebe, through his portrayals, answered the situation of dislocation that colonialism wrought on his society. Observing the situation in historical context he points out the evolution of the novel and its relations to history, he states: "to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement; but it is also the writer's duty to explore in depth the human condition. In the African case,

therefore the novel and history are the same- the novel is history; it is record of the history as Africans have seen and live it [6].

Taking into consideration the above historical process of colonial settlement Karl Marx observes: "The earlier colonial expansion was the period of Merchant Adventures, of free looting and plundering, expeditions of the slave trade, of the establishment of trading stations of privileged monopoly of trading companies... extermination of the original inheritance ...[7]. Marx and Engels were of the view that colonialism is a part of historical development of society from feudalism to capitalism. It is also a process of socio-economic development of the society. The industrial revolution changed the nature of colonialism. There after it signified the "dissolution of feudal society, with the expropriation and partial eviction of the country population [8]. And "Colonialism was the design of the industrial bourgeoisie to create a world after their own image"[9].

Thus, frightful was the impact of colonial that have no humane thinking except their own economic benefits treating human beings cruelly in plantation colonies of West Indies. The African predicament was similar and the direct "accumulation of misery, agony of toil-slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation of exploited people [10]. Marx also stresses that: "the natives were hanged on the mere suspicion of sympathizing with their own countrymen, and whole of the villages were burnt down on same plea [11]. This way the colonizers disrupted the life physically as well as spiritually in Africa. The natives had lost their ethno-cultural identity & selfhood, due to politico-economic slavery. Under these repressive circumstances the colonized people resorted to revolt and intellectual dissatisfaction against the colonizers. We can mention here Caliban's words to Prospero, he spoke in the *Tempest*; "You taught me language/ and my benefit on it is! I know how to curse"[12]. Colonialism also played a constructive role. Indeed, the majority of post-colonial societies today have seen through its crucial, if destructive and morally debasing role. It has been a kind of revolution in disguise- it has brought about the state of affairs, the particular circumstances that were required for a contemporary re-awakening, re-assessment and re-invigoration of African culture to take place. In response to various accusations discussed above, the native African writers led movements like Negritude in Africa, Black Power movements in U.S.A. like the Harlem Renaissance and nationalistic movements in Africa for socio-economic and political freedom of the nations. To lead their people the writers played a catalytic role by developing their own aesthetics, that is "Black Aesthetics."

"Black-aesthetics" involves a heightened awareness of the greatness of the African past and African traditional culture. As it developed in protest against the colonial influence, it is both anti-rational and anti-colonial. It describes the characteristics of Black culture as being based on emotion as opposed to the rationalist and scientific white culture. Rhythm and sensuousness are essential qualities of Black art. It is also based on the African metaphysics of relation between the dead and the living, god and man, human and cosmic forces and art as being a communal and socially functional activity. Jean Paul Sartre predicted this reality that "after a long subjugation under

colonialism that got freedom and brought their Negritude/Africa remained slave to colonial powers who exploited it for their own pleasures and profits. Colonialism had been the bane of Africa, and its people [13].

### III. INFLUENCE OF NEGRITUDE

Negritude thus became a cult, or a kind of cultural manifesto to express a pride in and a love of the African heritage, physically, spiritually and culturally. Sartre comments on African poetry written in French and English as "anti-racist-racism", which emerges from the sense of Black Africa's search for the self of looking inwards for values and benefits and of a racial essence that will ultimately triumph."[14]. Leopold Senghor, one of the major exponents of Negritude define it as: "Negritude is the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world. It is not racialism, it is culture [15].

The term, Negritude has flowered as indeed a movement itself at discovering a distinctive identity common to Black people everywhere. Negritude celebrated the warm humanism of the Negro contrasting it with the old impersonality of the whites in the western world. It argued that if Europe was reason, Africa was emotion. That is if the White race is analytical, scientific, objective, detached and reasonable then Blacks are traditional subjective inherently intuitive, involved and sensual. These were the reasons of biological dialectics of White-Black confrontation. Yet to define black culture as something markedly different from white culture, Bernth Lindfors observes: "Negritude, originally a literary and philosophical movement, contributed directly to political change by informing the ideology of national leaders throughout Africa"[16].

Negritude managed to win friends and influence people because it quickly gained acceptance as a highly civilized mode of protest. Protesting against colonial plundering and looting of African life- culture, history, Leon Damas reflects: They have stolen the space that was mine,  
Customs, days, life, song rhythm, efforts,  
Pathways, water, home, wisdom, words, palaver,  
Ancestors, cadence, hands, standards, lands,  
tramping the soil [17].

Therefore, Negritude was an assertion of the Black man's dignity as human being. On the other hand, prose writers who marched along under the banner of Negritude displayed protest in similar tones, e.g. Camara Laye, by evoking memories of his childhood in *L'Enfant Noir*, told how a young African through education was weaned away from his family and from the communal warmth and security of the village. Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono used the life to lampoon the results of Europe's interaction in Africa and their writings showed Africans trying to adjust to a world gone awry, a hybrid, half-cooped, semi-civilization in which they felt lonely, alienated, lost or degraded. Hence, "Negritude advanced an argument against the radical and cultural assumptions upon which colonialism rested."[18].

Negritude may be distinguished from other efforts to rehabilitate Africa by an 'ethno-logical' aspect, which attempted to redefine its terms, and to re-evaluate Africa within a non-Western framework. Something that has been

extensively portrayed in African fiction in terms of myths, rituals, cultural and folk-life, has again been one of the central concerns of the Negritude. The accent was invariably placed on non-material aspects, on those intangible elements which could distinguish the African's approach to the world from the western, and which might seem to underlie his conscious existence as well as his material interests. Thus, African traditional beliefs in particular, the native forms of religion received strong emphasis. African 'animism' tended in general to be placed equal to Christianity, though by reconciling the two on many occasions, Negritude has developed itself into both an ideology and a cultural vision in keeping comprising and putting together the different historical experiences of Negro societies and nations. Although it has been attacked for being insulted and centered on the self, Negritude, in its creation of self-awareness has always had an intellectual content, for instance, in Senghor's theory of Negritude. What is even more significant is its role in the cultural and social evolution of Africa. However, it has taken the best from the two sides- African and Western- to convey the reality and the truth of African identity and tradition. Thus, although African in content, it is western in formal expression. It is obvious that most African writers, writing with a political or ideological urge or out of cultural, historical consciousness have derived the positive aspects of Negritude.

The movement thus marks a tradition in the nature of collective expression of Africa from the myth of the millennium and from the religious under-current upon which traditional Africa had relied for human accomplishment to the lay, intellectually centered approach to the world that is a legacy of the European Renaissance. It marks a 'de-socialization' of African collective life, an attitude which is spontaneous and no longer imposed, and out of which have flowed new currents of ideas for tackling the modern African problems.

#### IV. ANGLOPHONE REFLECTIONS

On the other hand, the African writers in Anglophone showed similar sense of ingratitude and dishonor. Lindfors examines that Chinua Achebe, "whose classic novel *Things Fall Apart* examined the impact of Europe's initial penetration into African heartland, felt that it was necessary for Africans to re-appraise their past in order to assess for themselves what they had gone through [19]. Okonkwo bitterly resisted with sense of revenge when White man killed sacred python: "If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what I do? Do I shut my eyes? No I take a stick and break his head [20]. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O a Kenyan writer reiterated Achene's position when he expressed the view:

"The African novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to the terms with 'the thing that has been' a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history [21].

Thus, Ngugi was one of those writers who tried to chronicle his people's history by writing novels set in colonial Kenya. He described the emergence of Kikuyu independent schools in *The River Between* and the outbreak of Mau Mau in *Weep Not Child*. Like Achebe's works these novels told people of their stormy past and where the reign began to beat them. These

artists did not seek to glorify the past or pretend that Africa was a Garden of Eden before Europe intruded and planned the fall. So there was less exaggerated mode of protest that can be called rational and authentic condemnation of colonizers. African writers united in their struggle against an alien enemy, and they carried on to wage to vigorous verbal war until political freedom was won. Their basic strategy behind African creative initiative during the colonial period was to assert and demonstrate the self-identity and humanity of Africans.

The World War Second started the historical process of de-colonialization that shattered the colonizers' strong grip and the phase of independence came. Even after independence was achieved, conflict against started within African societies because of local political intervention in life of people by native rulers themselves. Earlier a politician was portrayed as a nationalist, superhero, a founding father, a messiah leading his people to promised land. Now his image degenerated to unscrupulous rogue mouthing government platitudes about unity, brotherhood and socialism; but doing everything in his power to augment in his own wealth and position. He has been transformed into a monster, an object of satire & burlesque. Achebe portrayed such memorable characters in *A Man of the People*, as "chief the honorable M.A. Nanga, M.P. & minister of culture".

The total thrust of African fiction is based on experience of life from its post to the present on the one hand, and the present realities in physical and spiritual context, on the other. The most significant literature written in Africa in 1960s – 70s dealt with contemporary realities rather than with the past. Wole Soyinka observes in this context: "The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past", if he is to fulfill his function "as the record of the modes and experience of his society as the voice of vision in his own time [22].

Achebe summed up the situation of African society and role of an artist to his land, people and society: "Most of Africa today is politically free...Thirty-six independent African States managing their own affairs sometimes very badly. A new situation has thus arisen. One of the writer's functions has always been to expose and attack injustice...[23].

The Black writer's burden, he contended was "to express our thought and feeling, even against ourselves, without anxiety that what we say will be taken in evidence against our race [24]. Due to changing society in this present scientific age the African writers produced literature of disillusionment that pounces upon the current realities like civil war in Nigeria or ruthless suppression by the politicians of their own race-colour and apartheid in South-African nation. So, the literary output coincides with the socio-political upheavals. Wole Soyinka, in his works like – *The Man Died*, *Madmen*, and *Season of Anomy* touch upon these current realities. Bernth Lindfors observes a more significant and recent developments in African fiction: "A few writers seek to transcend the chaos of the present by using the experience of the past to examine Africa's prospects for the future. History thus, serves as an aid to prophecy, not just as a means of reconstructing a lost heritage"[25]. Novels of Ayi Kwei, Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* depict such themes and portray concerns with a more liberated future and a hope for

redemption facing current realities and hardships to find out destiny and ethno-cultural identity and selfhood in the historically developing human societies.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The real significance of African fiction is that African writers played a key role in boosting up the rebel spirit of their people against the colonial powers. African novel in this sense has become a historical document that shows the struggle of African people to throw away the colonial chains and to achieve all types of freedom. African fiction has a special identity & place in world literature, which is also a historical record of the African society having its own unique identity and ethno-cultural sufficiency. Africans have suffered the most from other people's attempts to 'modernize' them and much of their literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been inspired by a reappraisal of their own present place. Thus, African writers have produced fiction that is fully contemporary, both in its form and content.

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