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MODERNITY AND IMPERIALISM IN AFRICAN WRITING AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON PEDAGOGY.

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Abstract

This article explores the ideas of some key African writers and critics and how they impact on education and social development in general. Given the diversity of African writing, it is impossible to do justice to the various contributions that constitute African literature, some of which are written in various ethnic languages. The paper seeks to solve this problem by resorting to typical works, trend setting works and it also makes recourse to what can be referred to as literary movements. It is crucial from the outset to argue that what we seem to have could be a case of literature that has come to a standstill. Whereas the paper does not give definitive answers, it argues here that the combative and vociferous literary voices of the 1970s have now whittled out and in place we have new mixed views. For instance, among the notable traits of the mid 1980s into to the present era is the resurgence of a literature informed by the modernisation theory in the form of vicious Neo-liberalism. In any case, Neo liberalism brings the modernisation theory through the back door. Under Neo-liberalism, approval for developmental projects is often sought from outside where nationalism and national identity become problematic and the question of sovereignty is beside the point. The dominant groups are the donor organisations and not the people. On the other side, the African elite align themselves to work with the International organisations to get donor funds. The African elite keeps on maintaining curricula that is inimical to pan African identity, dignity and sense of belonging. There is a spirited attempt to legitimate inequalities of the colonial yesteryear through euphemistic terms to cover imperialism.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, the power and form of the European governance was brought to bear on the African continent thereby substituting and remoulding a 'traditional' African lifestyle into a fundamentally European construct. The outcome of such a venture was the 'estrangement' and the subsequent entrapment of Africans into a system they could hardly control and this was characterised by the domination of

their physical space, reformation of their minds and the lop-sided integration of their economies into the western well pool (Walter Rodney, 1983: 93-96). This process became known as imperialism as its drive emanated from the need to expand European empires politically and economically and to integrate people from other parts of the world into 'modern' albeit European controlled societies. In response to imperialism and the resultant 'modern' project, African writers have generally fallen into three groups: writers who have relied on Western literary tradition, writers who avoided it and others who prefer to make a synthesis of western and African elements.(Bishop, 1988, 61). The last group might be the most incisive and pragmatic group if not the most divisive when it comes to the pan African agenda in literary arts.

Theoretical debates.

It is commonplace among literature scholars to gloss over 'theories of African literature' as a discipline worthy of study given the fact that a lot of European theories of literature find their way into the works of Africa's venerated literary scholars and analysts. It is true to say that a lot has been happening on the literary domain from way before Chinua Achebe, often touted as the father of the African novel wrote his *Things Fall Apart*. Since then, quite a lot is taking place and among some of the notable developments, there are several literary theories that are gaining ground in the academia. Some literary theories that originate in Europe easily get adherents and followers in the third world in general and in Africa in particular, the bottom-line being literature is a universal language and human experiences are universal in nature. However, some theorists insist on the uniqueness of experiences and on the closed nature of cultures if we are to go by the fact that the word culture is a derivative of the word 'cult' which is a secret society whose mores are understood by those within. This view also goes a long way in dispelling the notion of 'popular culture' as a mere myth.

In the literary domain, there was a lot of optimism in the 1960s and the world was amenable to helping Africa, especially in the context of the cold war. In the same period the modernisation theory became popular as African nations urged to create pre-conditions for take off and become self sustainable like countries in the developed world. Also, during the same period, social democracy became the popular form of governance in Europe, especially in the Scandinavian nations. Literature got a boost and at this particular time there was a lot of goodwill from the Western Bloc and the Eastern bloc to win over newly independent nations to the blocs' ambits.

Little wonder, Ngugi WaThiongo attests to the fact that he attended a meeting funded by the CIA through the Society for Cultural Freedom, held at Makerere University in Uganda in 1962 entitled "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression".(Ngugi Wa Thiongo, 1981: 30).The significance of such a conference can be struck out of the fact that , literature, being one of the portent tools in the development of a people, became a contested domain and literary production became an area of concern for the major powers. Also, one of the most notable traits of the literature of the period was the influence of the Marxist theories in the veneration of struggles for independence.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new and very aggressive process of Globalisation came on to the fore with the defeat of James Callaghan and the rise of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and the rise of Ronald Reagan in America. There was an intense weakening of social democracy and in place private companies were given new leases of life by taking over some parastatals, and by being given the leeway to boost a free market economy. The result was that most companies that were transnational in orientation thrived as borders became extremely porous and an intensified form of globalisation often referred to as neo-liberalism came into being. (Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, 1983). Since literature is the nerve centre of cultural production there was the challenge of merging cultural production, the economy and politics. With most transnational companies controlling a substantive stake in the African continent, it is imperative to see how African writers have responded as the African nation state became a domain for contestation as well. An off the cuff expose' of some theories that have been applied by African writers brings to the fore theories such as Garveyism, Nationalism, Pan Africanism, Marxist theories, the Postcolonial theory of literature and Postmodernism.

On the Reality of Modernity: Whither African Writing?

'Modernity' refers to the modes of social life which emerged and were promulgated from Europe to other parts of the world and which became more or less worldwide in influence. These involve the spread of European languages, style of dress, eating habits, architecture, music, the adoption of urban lifestyle based around industrial production, a pattern of cultural experience dominated by mass media, literature and a range of cultural values regarding liberty, gender and sexuality, human rights, religion, scientific and technological rationality.(Tomlinson in Tucker,1996: 26). Cumulatively, modernity becomes a way of ordering reality. It is about how to control one's environment and human communities depend on their

ability to understand it, adapt to it, and work with it. Giddens (1990: 16) contends:

(Modernity)...derives from the separation of time and space and their recombination in forms which permit the precise time-zoning of social life, the disembedding of social systems, and the reflexive ordering and re-ordering of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups.

Thus, when Africa got colonised, the social 'evolutionism' of the traditional societies was discontinued and there was a concerted effort on the coloniser's part to 'deconstruct the African storyline and African history. The foreclosure of the African storyline in imperial discourse as part of the modern enterprise is aptly dramatised in Professor Hugh Trevor Roper's assertion that; "...perhaps in future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness...And darkness is not a subject of history". (BBC, Listener magazine, 1963: 871-875). In line, ideas of writers such as Froude, Seeley, Alfred Tennyson, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad and Rider Haggard helped to eulogise the myth of the invincibility of the empire. In this regard, the imperial discourse strengthened links between the metropole and the backyard of the empire and this became commonplace at the turn of the nineteenth century. The British society became steeped in jingoism and its claim of being the haven of civilisation was promulgated through films, songs, magazines and postcards. The Queen's birthday was declared Empire day and this was to be a holiday in Britain and in the colonies. In addition, the Empire Marketing Board was established and its mission was to exploit the media, cinema, posters and the British educational system to relay values of the empire to the people in the metropole and in the colonies.

The main assumption inherent within the Eurocentric view of African literature was that Africa and the Third world were following the same developmental path with the Western world. Educational curricula were influenced to portray the systems of the colonial power as the standard. Subjects in the curricula were taught in such a way that no critical creative thinking was promoted. Colonial education was not only maintained, but further developed to emulate the systems of the former colonial power with very little, if any African cultural influence. In many subjects, science subjects included, the teaching pedagogy ignored students' enacted worldviews (Jegade and Aikenhead, 2000; Aikenhead, 2002; Kazembe and Nyanhi, in press). It became an education that got christening from Paulo Freire as *the pedagogy of the oppressed*. The assimilation of African

students into thinking like Western students undermines the African students' self-identities as African people and has detrimental effects on economic development, environmental responsibility, and cultural survival of the African people. In Ngugi WaThiongo's *Devil on the Cross*, Gatuiria laments thus: "...the education bequeathed to us by whites has clipped the wings of our abilities, leaving us limping like wounded birds".(Ngugi Wa Thiongo, 1983: 63) This type of Education signaled the creation of an unanchored African elite in the colonies.

Like the British, the French also used education to transmit values of the empire in their African colonies. The results of such a venture can be seen in the cultural disintegration and the veneration of everything European by some characters in African writing. In *Houseboy*, Toundi only realises when it is too late that something was essentially wrong with a blackman calling himself a Frenchman. No doubt, the process of making black people loath their black identity was effected through the colonial school. The French did not leave anything to chance in ensuring that conquest would be permanent. In Cheik Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, the new school is equated to lethal cannon that make conquest permanent. Commenting on the role of education in de-centering the African, in *The Last of the Empire*, Cheik Tidiane Sall puts it: "Our schools in particular are not places for imparting culture. They serve only as to manufacture mandarins. The young of today... grow up in families whose world is in collapse, lost, torn apart". (Sembene, 1983: 97). In this vein, modernity and imperialism have thrust in the "reflexive" appropriation of knowledge and in doing so; the lives of the colonial subjects tend to be rolled away from the fixities of tradition.(Giddens, 1990). The fragmentation of the African societies at the onslaught of the imperial hegemony is also captured by the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, in his early novels particularly in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In *Things Fall Apart*, the appropriation of knowledge by the Empire is conspicuous when the men of Mbanta are told by the whiteman that their gods are mere pieces of stone and wood. This prompts them to register their surprise and respond by derisive laughter as they can hardly comprehend suggestions that Ani, Amadiora, Idemili and Ogwugwu are harmless gods.(Kemoli, 1984: 40).It is the appropriation of knowledge, symbols and a worldview that is at the core of what Giddens(1990) terms "estrangement" within the African societies and other former colonised states in the world.

In response to the imperial hegemony, Chinua Achebe is of the opinion that an African writer has to draw from Africa's experience and see from "where the rain began to beat us" as this in turn will help to show:

...that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans...; their societies...had a philosophy of great value and beauty,...they had poetry and above all, they had dignity.(Achebe,1975: 44)

Here, Achebe asserts the vitality of the African past thereby projecting counter-discourse to colonial discourse and modernity. In *Arrow of God*, the etiquette exuded in the presentation of the New Yam feast festival and the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves gives the vitality of the traditional Igbo society. In the like manner, the “Rebirth” and subsequent 'Initiation' ceremonies in Ngugi WaThiongo's *The River Between* bring to the fore the decorum that characterise the Gikuyu culture. However, it can be argued that in *The River Between*, Ngugi WaThiongo does not offer tradition as oppositional to modernity. Instead, Ngugi Wa Thiongo mixes the Christian and Gikuyu myths such that modernity itself becomes a means of offering oppositional reading. (Lindfors and Kondaraman, 2001: 13). While elders like Kabonyi might advocate for a return to traditional values and methods of learning, their impact in the text is neutralised by Waiyaki's pragmatism when it comes to education and the new religion. Moreover, the recurring use of the metaphor of 'saviour' who will liberate people from the throes of imperialism provide a counter-discursive dimension in Waiyaki's participation in the colonialist mission of education with the claim to 'civilisation'. (Lindfors and Kondaraman, 2001: 12)

However, writers who respond to colonial myths with traditional myths, as Maurice Vambe (2004: 27) puts it, “end up elaborating an 'alternate genealogy' of blackness” and certainly, this has some limitations. Kwameh Antony Appiah, a Ghanaian thinker captures the limitation succinctly thus:

The terms of resistance are already given (them), and their contestation is entrapped within the Western Cultural conjecture (they) affect to dispute...Railing against the cultural hegemony of the West, the nativists are of its part without knowing it...In their ideological inscription the cultural nationalists remain in a position to counter identification...which is to continue to participate in an institutional configuration...one officially decries.(Appiah 1992: 59)

The colonial entrenched binaries of the African as the 'other' and as an 'inferior being' are inadvertently maintained.

Unlike Achebe, Gilroy (1993) proposes an analysis of modernity that is dynamic and floating. He recognises modernity as global and nomadic and calls upon all races to embrace what he dubs the “Black Atlantic Culture” which has been necessitated by the middle passage. Gilroy refuses to locate

and 'fix' a tradition for black people, a tradition he sees as being located in the pre-modern past which confers them a 'humanity'. Instead, he advocates for one global culture:

...a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, a Black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcends ethnicity and nationality to produce something new...(Gilroy, 1993: 15)

The 'Black Atlantic Culture' is given as a counter-culture to modernity. Unbeknown to Gilroy is the fact that modernity is inconsistent with the economic development of colonial and neo-colonial states. Moreover, as Cabral (1980) saw quite clearly, imperial domination denies the organic and historical development of a culture, of a subject people and liquidates the very essence of that particular culture. Instead of being contend with capitalism as advocated by Gilroy, the works of neo-Marxists such as Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Paul Baran and Samir Amin are replete with facts to the effect that capitalism is consistent with the economic interests and objectives of the West. How then can Africans who have and who are still incurring "Some Kinds of Wounds" as Charles Mungoshi would put it, fit and be content in this 'Black Atlantic Culture'. Gikandi (1996: 2) argues that Paul Gilroy's attempt to detour the historical is puzzling given the fact that slavery and colonialism both of which are transcendental desires of modernity need interrogation. Accordingly, there is need to critically analyse the notion that modernity and modernism are gifts of the West to the rest of the world. One is also bound to ask whether the "Black Atlantic Culture" is necessarily a compound of equally united and fairly bunched cultures of people from different ethnicities or it merely facilitates and perpetuates the imprisonment of black cultures in the western paradigm. One readily agrees with Dayan (1996)'s observations that:

Gilroy's symbolic ship of transcultural passage ignores the reduction of the so-called transnational or deterritorialized nation states into locales for cheap labor, giving the United States companies' access to labor costs less than ten percent of those in the United States... (Dayan, 1996: 11)

It is not an understatement to point out that Gilroy disapproves cultural nativists, a category into which most revered African writers fall; one may just pick on names such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi WaThiongo, Kofi Awoonor among others. In line with Gilroy's viewpoint, Homi Bhabha (1994: 35) argues that cultural differences "problematize the binary division of ...tradition and modernity", and thus negates and "undermines our sense of homogenizing...cultural symbols and icons...(and achieving)

cultural synthesis in general". Against this background, a reading of Gilroy and Homi Bhabha's thoughts on the black experience and on the way forward within modernity does not offer hope for Africa. What is worrisome is the fact that the Neo-liberal theories are gaining ground especially in contemporary literature and literary criticism. Texts such as Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Chenjerai Hove's poetry anthologies *In the Dust* and *Blind Moon*, Irene Stounton edited anthology, *Women Writing Zimbabwe*, Ama books' edited anthology, *Long Time Coming* and Petina Gappah's anthology, *An Elegy for Easterly* give the readers the impression that definitely something is wrong with the African society. The writers simply remain quiet about the global causes of the problems that emanate from imperialism.

Cabral (1980) points out that colonialism took Africans out of their history into the history of Europe. Imperialism is a worldwide expression of the European profit motive and the ever increasing accumulation of surplus values by monopoly capital. Interesting to note is the way in which imperialism is likened to piracy on land where the plunder of African resources is consolidated and given preponderance. To bring an end to the injustices engendered by imperialism, Cabral advocates for a process of re-Africanisation which he calls a "return to the source" by the mentally colonised African elite. Unlike the elite, he argues that the African masses in the rural areas have a capacity to defend themselves from all forms of colonial cultural onslaught. Cabral points out that the question of a 'return to the source' or 'cultural renaissance' "...does not arise and could not arise for the masses of these people for they who are the repository of the culture and at the same time the only social sector who can preserve and build it up and make history". (Cabral 1973: 61). Thus, Cabral advocates for an upward thrust, a reconnection with history. He applauds peasants' participation in the armed struggles in Africa in general and in Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau in particular and he calls such struggles forms of cultural resistance. He calls upon the African elite to reconnect with peasants as this would help in mapping out the way forward. An evaluation of Cabral's proposal reveals some merits given the fact that the elite as shown in Lucifer in *Waiting for the Rain*, Medza in *Mission to Kala*, Samba Diallo in *Ambiguous Adventure* and Babamukuru in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* lose the spirit of unity that once connected them to their extended families.

Mudimbe (1988) argues that discourse on imperialism and modernity establishes worlds of thoughts in which people conceive, or fail to conceive their identity. Within the modern project, Western anthropologists, missionaries and writers have brought distortions on African history and

cultural representations. The African state is therefore thrust on the position of an intermediary state between a “modernity that is in actual fact an illusion of development, and a tradition that...reflects a poor image of a mythical past.” Thus there is the perpetual siphoning of raw materials from the 'periphery' to the metropole which is the imperial centre. There is a continuation of the imperial stranglehold of the former colony even after the much celebrated independence movements as the economies of the former colonies remain hamstrung and attached to that of the metropole. Ngugi WaThiongo (1993: 2) underpins the destructive and distorting effects of imperialism and calls for a shift from “Eurocentricism” and its modernity to Afrocentricism. He states: “...there is need to move the centre from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres of cultures of the world.” Like Frantz Fanon before him, Ngugi perceives how colonialism destroyed social forms and the cultures of the 'natives'. The process created a world divided into 'compartments' where settler space was characterised by bounty and the 'native' town wallowed in hunger by day. (Fanon, 1980: 29-30). In the colonial dispensation, Africans attempted to gain a conceptual mastery over the changing world and in this guise, violence became cyclic. However, cultural assertiveness on the part of the “native” becomes a central phenomenon as “he decides to prove that he has a culture” and he attempts to get to grip with history. (Fanon, 1980: 170).

Education, Neo-liberalism and The Quest for Curriculum Reform in Africa.

In Africa, the post Independence education system has been lauded for increasing the literacy rate. However, with increasing poverty and economic hardships accompanied by civil wars, many people have begun to argue whether education has achieved its goals of eradicating poverty and improving economic efficiency in Sub Saharan Africa. In a paper entitled: “*Has Education failed to transform Africa?*” Ruth Kagia argues thus: “The current education systems in most African countries do not facilitate a revolution in development and the curricular continues to address issues that are peripheral to development.”(Kagia in Zvobgo, 2007:113). She proposes that there should be a political will, good governance and the absence of corruption for true transformation to take place. (Kagia in Zvobgo, 2007: 114-115). Brilliant as her ideas may appear, there is need for caution as some of the so called pre-conditions can easily be construed to fall into stereotypes of the African being corrupt and amoral. It is a *fait accompli* that the type of education inherited by African governments ensures a rollback of the gains of independence and liberation.(Zvobgo, 2007) The education system continues to churn out a pool of labourers for

the Transnational companies in Africa. Given the fact that these companies are mostly owned by Westerners, they often adhere to the stipulations of their mother countries which may demand the scaling down of operations and massive labour lay-offs for no apparent reasons. For example, in Zimbabwe the Economic Structural Adjustment program of the 1990s that contributed to retrenchments in many companies and relocation of investments even between continents. The result of such developments would be unemployment at a large scale and this brings with it a different set of problems. Most literary texts that are being written in Zimbabwe document the daily problems that Zimbabweans face as they try to eke a living. However few writers link the problems to the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs that were foisted on many African countries by the Bretton Woods institutions. In "An Elegy for Easterly", Petina Gappah presents readers to the insensitivity of the state that goes about destroying shacks without giving proper shelter to the weak and vulnerable of the society. In "The Sound of the Last Post" in *An Elegy for Easterly*, Gappah demystifies the solemnity, pomp and ceremony that characterise proceedings at the burial of Heroes at the Zimbabwe National Heroes Acre. What Gappah fails acknowledge is that a Heroes acre is important in a country where "the bullet brought the ballot".

It is against this background that a whole new scholarship of Western educated elite that has found a sizeable number of converts in Africa are calling for a 'realignment' of revolutionary governments to the reality of globalisation and the efficacy of market forces. Thus, Postcolonial studies were introduced in Universities and Colleges in Africa and other parts of the world. What is worrisome is that postcolonial studies emerged in "close proximity to the onset of (the) new imperialist offensive that began in (the) mid- 1970s. The new academic venture did, of course, align itself with this offensive". (Lazarus, 2005: 113). In literature, postcolonial and neo-liberal theories were introduced and these offered:

...a rationalization of and pragmatic adjustment to the end of the era of decolonization, the downturn in the fortunes and influence of the insurgent national liberation movements and ideologies that had carried the banner of anti-imperialism over the course of the previous quarter century. (Lazarus, 2005: 113)

As such, the onus is upon African writers and thinkers to seriously consider the wider implications of trailing the path of Postcolonial studies. There is need to have an elite that provides an "anchor and even a semblance of independence" whose main preoccupation is to design and develop a

curricular for Africa. In Zimbabwe, there is need to teach literature that is not informed by the neo-liberal ideologies. Literature that is informed by neo-liberal ideologies has a tendency of presenting characters who laugh at African people's efforts to liberate themselves from Western imperialism. Failure to do this simply means that Zimbabwe and Africa in general continue to regress as the Western world continues to exploit Africa's resources.

Conclusion

One can note that the engagement of Africa into modernity through violence, plunder and looting meant that Africa would trail in the path being an entrapped backyard of the Western world. At cultural and religious levels, through schools, the press, and audio-visual media the imperial enterprise was diffused and new attitudes which were contradictory broke the schema of most African traditions. This has repercussions in that some African writers and thinkers have chosen to toe the Western line embracing Western values as "universal" values which are applicable to Africa's "development". What stands glaringly noteworthy is the fact that African writers and thinkers have not yet come to a consensus as to how to deal with modernity and imperialism. Yet, the more people write, the more debate is generated, consensus becomes less likely. Given that what happens in the academia has a bearing on Africa's development, unless something is done, Africa will continue to regress while the Western world continues to exploit Africa's resources.

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