

DISMANTLING THE FRONTIER OF "OTHERNESS": AFRICAN LITERATURE AND THE IMPLANTATION OF A SUSTAINABLE CANON

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ABSTRACT

From the outset, modern African literature has, unarguably, provided a vista to critique the western hegemonic predilection whose rhetoric was given impetus by acerbic criticism from critics who seemed to have a mandate to discountenance the intellectual pillars of non-western socio-cultural milieu. Western critics did not consider African studies worthy of a sustained intellectual enquiry hence African discourse had occasioned a patriotic endeavour to privilege African culture, on one hand, and renounce western sophistry for its inadequacies in advancing cross-cultural meanings, on the other hand. In this vein, this study rebuffs the uncritical castigation of non-western literature as "others". Employing a deconstructive investigation of certain aspects of western civilization which had been projected as the grand norm, it exposes the limitations of western canon in the quest for cultural meaning, particularly in reading the poetics of non-western writers. While foregrounding the sine qua non of socio-cultural engagement, devoid of western dictate in modern African writings, it seeks recourse to the epistemological foundation of African culture which would propel reliable cultural meanings. It, however, charges African critics to acquaint themselves of African worldview from where a quintessential African canon can be extracted.

Key words: Modern African literature, western critics, deconstructive investigation, cultural meanings, African canon.

Introduction

Unarguably, the epochal incidences of slavery and colonialism have contributed, in no small measure, to the implantation of western hegemony all over the world. Since western scholarship had free reign at the time, its critics had disseminated western sentiment as the 'gospel truth' without taking the cultural specificity of non-western society into cognizance. The aftermaths of the Industrial Revolution, which propelled the advancement in science and technology, further galvanized the sustenance of western ideals to the detriment of non-western cultures. The post-World War II era of unprecedented information explosion, as well as its attendant articulation of western capitalism, became a vista for the propagation of western ideals, especially after the Cold War. To give vent to western predilection, western critics had assumed an all-knowing pretention which was sustained through a conscious castigation of non-western idiosyncrasies as the "other". In their jaundiced view, aided largely by the Internet and cable television, non-western culture is unworthy of a sustained scholarly investigation. They averred that non-western society, particularly Africa, was peopled by

primitive, barbaric and uncivilized settlers who had a 'sense of duty' to be appreciative of western intervention in the civilization mission! Since nothing can assuage the 'patriotic' endeavor to justify the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, the best the "others", can do is to view western culture with awe-inspired nostalgic feelings!

Expectedly, modern African literature had begun as a counter-discursive writing to alter misconceptions about Africa and Africans. The earlier practitioners had embarked on a sustained critique of the epistemological foundation of western culture, as well as the suitability of its canon for the interpretation of African cosmo. With particular reference to Joseph Conrad and James Cary's *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson* respectively, the denigration of Africa as a continent bedeviled with all manners of evils and pestilences that had to be corrected. Chinua Achebe (1997) is quick to assert that his critical and creative writings would have achieved their intended purposes if, and only if, they can be directed at correcting erroneous impressions about Africa through a deliberate interrogation of western treatise on Africa. In this vein, Achebe (1995:60) denounces the abuse of the term "universality" which was adduced for the interpretation of concepts of which western critics had little or no understanding of "until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world". He warns African scholars not to be taken in uncritically by western perspective which is a ploy to denounce non-western literature:

But, of course, it would not occur to them to doubt the universality of their own literature. In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So and so's work is universal; he has truly arrived! As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you may take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home (21).

Thus, he charges African critics to take charge of African literary criticism so that "outsiders whose wailing drowned the grief of the owners of the corpse" will desist from their uncritical polemic on Africa. In line with Achebe's position, Lindfors (2001:3) has submitted that no other group of people, except the bearers of a culture, is better placed to interpret cultural norms in a society:

Bearers of a culture are better equipped to interpret that culture than aliens who have experienced its realities only vicariously. Those who share a writer's background can more readily comprehend the full implications of his message.

Thus, Achebe's *oeuvre* traverses the resolve to advance African worldview from a quintessential African-specific mindset. Even if Achebe's warning is not enough, Chinweizn *et al* (1980) enjoin African critics to, among others, serve as guide for creative writers in the promotion and sustenance of core African values. They, however, caution that critics can only attain this level if they are thoroughly grounded in African worldview:

To do this effectively, African critics must develop an African esthetic, encourage an awareness of African tradition, and play the role of critical intelligence guiding the transmission of

African cultural values. Whereas the artist creates cultural artifacts, the critic evaluates them. Whereas the artist is a maker of well-made things, the critic is a maker of judgements⁽²⁰⁷⁾.

Arguably, post-colonial African writings have been largely influenced by colonial and neo-colonial 'affronts' which have 'engulfed' the contemporary African mind. Euro-American critics are committed to the wholesale imposition of western standpoint which they perceive to be the opposite benchmark to critique literature all over the world. In their own wisdom, they 'coined' the world universal and gave it a self-serving interpretation to suit their whim and caprice. In other words, any worthwhile venture which does not meet this 'parochial' consideration is unworthy of scholarly inquiry. The consequence of the wholesale transfer of foreign culture into another without a modicum of respect for non-western cultural peculiarities is seen in the outward denigration of African culture. African culture, and invariably African literature, is classified as 'others' hence unworthy of any critical inquiry, unlike its 'totalising' western counterpart! The limitation of this argument is underscored by Chinweizu *et al* (1980) who have argued that African civilization is not a derivative of its European counterpart:

Long before Caesar led his Roman legions to bring civilization to barbarian Gaul, to Celtic Britain, and to the Druidic German tribes of Vercingetorix in the 1st century B.C., the African Nile valley civilizations of Pharaonic Egypt, Nubia, Kush, Meroe and Ethiopia had literate cultures-in territories where Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt are today located⁽⁶⁸⁾.

Thus, the conviction to reassess African literary scholarship against the backdrop of 'hostile' a western model informs the determination to articulate an African poetics of literary interpretation to suit contemporary African needs.

Ironically, some post-colonial African scholars are comfortable with the implantation of western critical polemic into African consciousness. They, therefore, continue to pay lip service to the need to denounce Africa's overdependence on western canon. They erroneously believe that 'alien' standards can provide the requisite critical template to investigate African society! In fact, majority of them imbibed European worldview uncritically as the "grand norm" apparently to gain 'undue advantage' from western publishing authority. This has evidently informed Fashina's (2008) warning to African scholars to be careful of the dire consequences of articulating Eurocentric sentiments in the interpretation of African texts, all in a bid to contribute the so-called "African dimension of knowledge to the great Western tradition, and as a way of internationalizing their scholarship". This attitude amounts to mere chasing the shadow. It does the quest for an African-specific theory of literary interpreting no good:

There is, indeed, the need to receive with severe caution, the critical discourses that tend to police literary interpretation and theorization of African texts only in the direction of a particular 'post' such as post-structuralism, post-deconstruction, postmodernism, post-coloniality and so on, a situation which Niyi Osundare (1993, 2001) describes as an empty text-technology with no relevance to the nature of African knowledge⁽⁶⁷⁻⁶⁸⁾.

If Fashina's 'note of warning' would suffice, an African alternative theory is required. Chinweizu *et al* are of the opinion that African scholars should begin an investigation into African epistemology. Their findings should be 'transferred' to African writers and their audience for the betterment of the society. The "paucity of available material" on African worldview should not deter them. It should rather be a source of encouragement for them to embark on a sustained investigation. Only this can guarantee the sustainability of the 'anticipated' theory for the interpretation of African texts. Even if it is indisputable that the west provided the launch-pad for prose writing, over-reliance on western canon has the tendency to encumber African history and thought system from giving rise to an indigenous African theory devoid of western sentiment. Thus, as a counter theoretical discourse, post-colonial African scholars should be committed to an outright renunciation of western theoretical standpoint. An African-centred alternative, in line with Afrocentric philosophical tradition, is thus required.

The quest for an African theory for literary interpretation should lead African scholars in the direction of African culture and tradition. Although colonial 'intrusion' has encouraged diverse cultural experiences in Africa, her "relative cultural homogeneity" has positioned her as a reliable repertoire of the African worldview. Also, the fact that indigenous African societies are peopled by "culturally diverse" groups of people, who are heterogeneous in languages, economies, customs, myths and legends, does not preclude the exigencies of "common denominators in the core African values" which are enshrined in African worldview. This worldview is encapsulated in the traditional African system of thought and it is 'distilled' from Africa's philosophy, history, religion, oral tradition, myth, legend, folktales, riddles, and proverbs. A thorough and consistent investigation of the basic assumptions of her worldview would reveal a reliable African epistemology which researchers can advance in the quest for an African-specific theory for global consumption vis-a-vis the reconstruction of knowledge. A fuller understanding of African epistemology would evidently show the contradiction in equating it with western standpoint.

Towards a Sustainable Indigenous Canon for African Literary Interpretation

Cheikh Anta Diop's classic, *African Origin of Civilization* (1974) attempts to reconstruct history and debunk western hegemonic postulation. Since the main thrust of Eurocentric postulation on Africa is that the 'dark continent' had no history, no culture and no civilisation worthy of note, Diop argues that ancient Egypt, then known as Kemet, is the cradle of world civilisation. According to Diop, Egypt had architecture, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, cosmology, geometry, and science and technology long before Greece. Also, the Greek word 'sophia' (wisdom) is derived from its African equivalent, 'seba', hence the practice of philosophy cannot be said to have originated from Greece. In fact, ancient Greek philosophers like Thales and Pythagoras actually came to Egypt to learn philosophy at the temple of Wemnofer! Besides, the ancient Egyptians were Negroid whose civilisation had peaked and had suffered series of invasions long before Herodotus 'visited' between 480 and 425 B.C (Asante, 1980; Chinweizu *et al*, 1980). Odebowale (2005) attests to the grandeur of Egypt:

Before the conquest of Alexander in 332 BC, the Greeks had had sufficient contacts with Egypt through visits by eminent Hellenic scholars. Thales, the West acclaimed inventor of

philosophy, studied in Egypt and was influenced to develop his doctrine of cosmic origin, geometry, and his political and epistemological theories. Herodotus and Diogenes Laertius write that Pythagoras, a native of Samos, was initiated into the Egyptian Mystery System in Heliopolis, Memphis and Thebes. He was taught measurement, medicine, the doctrine of metempsychosis and dietetics. He was reported to have sacrificed to the Muses after the secrets of the properties of the right angled triangle was revealed to him (111-112).

These positions are given credence to by archaeological evidences which have it that the first architectural masterpiece, the Sakkara pyramid, was built in Egypt by Imhotep, the "earliest personality recorded in history" (Asante, 2000). Whereas Homer came in 800 B.C., the pyramid was completed in 2500 B.C.

The daring reassessment of the African past has a long lasting impression on contemporary African and African-American scholars, hence their resolve to re-cast history in a manner that accords Africa the respect she deserves. To achieve this, they begin a quest for a theoretical standpoint which places Africa and her people at the centre of any historical or cultural appraisal about the continent. Suffice it to say that in the onerous task of developing the continent, an African-specific theory for literary interpretation is required. Chinweizu *et al* (1980) have articulated the need for African critics to redirect their critical sensibilities towards the advancement of an African-conscious theory of reading African literary texts. No wonder as part of the decolonization process, post-colonial writings have largely been redirected towards the appropriation of a cultural worldview or ideology that better suits the continent's developmental yearnings.

Under the generic name Afrocentrists, these scholars interrogate the core assumptions of Euro-American worldviews which pretend to be of universal benefit to all cultures of the world but are grossly impositional and parochial. This quest for a valid Afrocentric epistemology is premised on the assumptions that no 'alien' theory would be adequate to articulate a critical model that is in consonance with African scholars' goal of placing African culture at the centre-point of their creative and critical sensibilities. This would, invariably, serve as the launch-pad for the development of the continent. According to Henderson (1995: xi-xiii), rather than merely postulating "a knee-jerk reaction to European effrontery", Afrocentric scholars direct their critical attention to "constructing alternative, more appropriate, more accurate, and more relevant, social theory" to liberate the continent from western theoretical postulation which is irrelevant to African cause. This is coming against the backdrop of the assumption that Afrocentrism offers "the most complete philosophical totalization of the African being" (Asante, 1987:25) which is aimed at "self-healing for some very deep wounds of the past" (Landry, 2010:2). This would invariably guarantee psychological, political, social, cultural, and economic change. It falls in place with Fanon's admonition to African critics to produce a unique African contribution to global worldviews devoid of western standpoint. Fanon's assertion is premised on the realisation of the fact that what African people want from their writers is not the imitation of European canon, but a consistent articulation of the African alternative. This is because no imitation can be original.

Although it began with the activities of African-American scholars of late

nineteenth and early twentieth century, Afrocentrism attained its modern meaning owing to the consequences of Civil Right Movement in America. As an ethnocentric cultural worldview, it places Africa and Africans at the centre of African reality in history. Henceforth, African ideals should dominate any discussion on African culture because Africans are proactive subject in history, and not passive onlookers. While emphasising Africa's central role in world history, its deconstructive philosophical assumption is aimed at stimulating a credible African approach to theory formulation which would denounce Eurocentric postulation that justifies racial discrimination. At a time African-American intellectuals were seeking a rediscovery of African pride in world history, Afrocentrism emerged as a valuable ideological weapon to sustain an inversion of European standpoint through a conscious articulation of Africa's place in history. Afrocentric worldview was given impetus by the 1980 publication of Asante's *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change*.

Meanwhile, the quest for an all-embracing African-centred theoretical model which can provide an appropriate theoretical template to advance the philosophical and epistemological foundations of African worldviews gathered momentum from the 1980s. Hitherto, the fear of being labeled 'others' and denied publishing 'privilege' by the imperialist publishing firms, unilaterally controlled by western hegemonic authority, is enough worry for African scholars. Thus, they dare not articulate an African-specific intellectual discourse that is not in congruence with western standard! Nonetheless, African critics shake off the lethargy and challenge the negative perception of Africa which is aimed at legitimizing the socio-cultural preeminence of Europe, even if, according to Fashina (2009:7), they have not had the privilege of a "quality breakthrough in the search for fixed and systematic canons of reading and theorizing in African studies" to date. Although western critics would have us believe that there is "a wide gulf of hermeneutic knowledge" between Africa and the west, yet we aver that this is not due to any genetic disparity in both the physiological and mental make-up of Europeans and Africans. The west may continue in her 'blind' refusal to acknowledge the exigencies of African oral narratives, which is embedded in African literary culture, as this attitude does not foreclose their relevance in distilling an African epistemology. In fact, if Kalu's (2000) position that indigenous African system of thought can only be appreciated from an African perspective is anything to go by, then the inability of western critics to come to terms with non-western cultural specificity becomes understandable. However, Kalu's optimism is consequent on "the acquisition of relevant oral narrative and performance skills". Unfortunately, many African scholars have little or no grounding in African socio-cultural milieu, hence they resigned to fate and imbibed, hook, line and sinker, polemics from western critics. Amongst others, Fashina (2009:7) adduces reasons for this to include the myth associated with "malevolent spirits and demons of the African ritual groves at the domain of the Ifa priest" and the need to keep at bay anything which could 'taint' ones "Christian status". Unfortunately, many of those who are versed in African epistemology are largely illiterate in the western sense. Ironically, majority of western critics are obviously not committed to an empirical study of African culture and philosophical assumptions!

Similarly, Kumene (2007:320) advises African critics to look in the direction of literary works written in indigenous languages if they are to be relevant in the society. He wants them to inculcate the habit of western critics who "have established themselves as the foremost authorities in the scholarship of English literature". He also charges them to assert their own

preeminence in indigenous culture by providing “answers demanded by the logic of our situation”. He submits that only this would liberate them from the ‘all-knowing’ pretention of western critics who discuss African literature “with pontifical authority”! Unfortunately, Chinweizu *et al* aver that many African critics have flagrantly discountenanced this “fundamental ground rule”, barely turning works from African writers “into the procrustean beds of an alien esthetic”. This “mentality of cultural inferiority” can be attributed to the inability to “develop a contemporary African esthetic” which can be discovered through a sustained investigation of African epistemology. In the same vein, while affirming the indispensability of oral narratives as an integral medium which can be positively employed to advance African literary theory, Kahu (2000:49) situates Africa’s developmental yearnings on strict adherence to her tradition because “productive strategies should create change that must not disconnect us from our origin”.

African history is replete with the anthropomorphic activities of gods and goddess, monarchs and emperors, heroes and heroines. Her oral tradition is peopled by daunting tasks and adventures of deified personalities whose actions, and inactions, justify their respective places in the world. The communal living and reverence for traditional cultural ethos are unparalleled. The unwritten constitution and succession principle of Benin, Kanem Bornu, Mali and Ghana empires are legendary. Long before any contact with Baron de Montesquieu, the French writer who propounded the theory of checks and balances in modern democracy, the checks and balances in old Oyo Kingdom had operated and ensured that the paramount ruler (the Alááfin) discharged his traditional duties in a manner which promoted social development, else he could be ‘impeached’ by the legislative arm of the government (the Oyomèsi). To avert this ugly trend, the griots and bards employed their vast retentive memory to warn the kings of the consequences of their actions, thus promoting cosmic harmony. So influential was the artistry of these traditional poets that Fashina (2008) refers to them as “the unacknowledged sociologists and anthropologists of the African space of their time” whose records formed part of the materials employed by European critics for modern literary interpretation:

The historians and poets were court officials. Although they were not appointed or designated by formal university tradition as research fellows and scholars, they nevertheless perform such roles and functions in their relative conditions, age and time as researchers in history, ethnography and culture⁽⁶⁵⁾.

It is now incumbent on African scholars to investigate this historic and cultural landmark from where an African epistemology can be derived. This makes the evolution of an African-specific theory for textual analysis inevitable.

Conclusion

The crux of this study is that the “mega status” inclination of western theory does not justify its application for the interpretation of the literature of non-western society, particularly Africa. Since Africa and the west do not ascribe similar meanings to socio-cultural idiosyncrasies, it is an absurdity for western critical standard to be adduced for African cultural norm. The west may have attained a preeminent status owing to its advance technology,

Africa's yearning for development can only be achieved with recourse to her quintessential African worldview from where a credible African theory can be extracted. Without undue romanticization of the past, we aver that Africa's history is replete with valuable indigenous aesthetics from where a reliable canon can be advanced for global use. Unfortunately, many African scholars are not conversant with the core tenets of African epistemology hence continue to privilege 'alien' theory to the detriment of theirs. Thus, a sustained investigation of the basic assumptions of African worldview is the *sine qua non* for the implantation of an indigenous African theoretical standard. The time to begin this enquiry is now.

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