

The Concise History of African Literature

Dr Samir Arab ¹ *, Dr Kamel Eddine Attallah²

²Hassiba BenBouali University of Chlef, Algeria, s.arab@univ-chlef.dz

²Hassiba BenBouali University of Chlef, Algeria, k.attalah@univ-chlef.dz

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Abstract:

Traditionally, Africans do not separate art from teaching. They use art to communicate important facts and information to society. In this respect, African literature falls within the category of art that concerns itself with reflecting and refracting the socio-political activities of the nation. In dealing with plights of the masses, African writers have enlarged the scope of their novels thematically speaking. Accordingly, readers are usually struck by the vagueness and difficulty of the political messages that African writers convey throughout their works. This paper examines the long and complex history of African literature and shows interest in its evolution from pre-colonial to colonial and postcolonial phases. It considers African literature a good terrain where the political seeds have always been sowed by its committed writers who align themselves with the struggles of Africans for a meaningful national ideal.

Keywords: African Literature; Colonialism; Denunciation; Rebellious Voice.

* Corresponding Author. **Dr Samir Arab**

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1. Introduction

The term African literature is multifarious. It covers Swahili literature, diasporic literature, central African literature, apartheid and Afrikaans literatures, and other literature written by Africans in French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Amazigh, and Arabic. By definition, African literature is the literature written in European languages by native Africans whose cultural matrix is purely and exclusively African. The fact that it is written in different languages and genres, one is able to say that it is probably impossible to consider it as homogeneous or coherent. Africa is the second largest continent in the world which consists of more than fifty nations and several hundred languages. African literature is enriched by different genres that depict Africa's rich oral traditions, myths, legends, and folktales. The way the African tried to express himself is universal. Teachers of texts like *The River Between* and *Things Fall Apart*, understand the richness of the African culture and the uniqueness of its thematic concerns and stylistic features.

African literature gained ground during the colonial period. The second half of the twentieth century was a turning point for Africa and African literature. The continent witnessed an upsurge of military upheavals as Africans realized that violence was the means by which freedom would be achieved and dignity could be restored. Historians proved that the gun was not the only weapon used by the natives in their struggle for *uhuru*. Authors from the continent raised their pens to write and make heard the Negro's voice. In *Politics and the Novel in Africa*, Si Abderahman Arab claims that African literature first appeared as:

response to the colonial situation, a response which is both cultural by the fact that it interprets its world in European terms and political as it is informed by a national stance. It is the permanent and fundamental antagonism between

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colonialism and the African revolution which forms the source and driving force of its modern literary creation in Africa. (5)

The reactionary emergence of African literature during the colonial period does not mean that it did not exist before colonialism. African literature existed as long as Africans existed. It had been produced outside the colonialist institutions. Indeed, the existence of oral records in different languages which date back to the precolonial era proved that Africans were acquainted with literature. Based on the three phases of African history, critics argued that African literature thrived in three different periods; precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial.

2. Evolution of African Literature

African literature has a long and complex history. In terms of evolution, critics came up with the assumption that it underwent three different phases. African literature, therefore, is a meeting point of a variety of written and oral genres that passed from one generation to another by word of mouth or through printed documents after the rise of the script in the continent. In studying history of literature in African, various vicissitudes of progression have been traced from precolonial, to colonial and postcolonial literatures.

2.1. Literature from a Paradise on Earth: Oral Traditions' Features and Importance

Claiming that African literature began in the 18th century is a misconception. It existed as long as Africans themselves existed on the continent. Africa has an extensive reservoir of oral records which came from over ten thousand small civilizations and societies. It is well known for its cultural diversity. Africans are diverse in terms of origins, religion, color, physical appearance, language and traditions. The continent was subject to change culturally speaking. Colonialism was a turning point in Africa's life mode. Africa was urban before the

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arrival of the Whiteman and became rural since the colonizer began modernizing the villages. Africans knew the script for the first time during the colonial period and started documenting their centuries-old collections of oral records which passed from one generation to another by ‘mouth’.

Oral literature covers oral records that passed orally, or were preserved in written documents. The term is given to a literature which is featured by the art of verbal story-telling. It includes different genres and subgenres of literature that are based on or marked by aspects of orality like traditional proverbs, songs of praise, legendary stories, and riddles. The Ugandan linguist Pio Zirumu framed the concept ‘orature’ to name all forms of oral traditions. The concept has since been used to include all ritual texts, curative chants, epics, poems, myths, spells, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, and historical narratives. In *African Oral Literature for Schools*, Jane Nandwa and Austin Bukenya define oral literature as those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic character of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression. (1)

Pre-colonial African literature was a means of entertainment which was unique in terms of form and content. Critics believe that it is primitive compared to written literature. This is probably due to the fact that those who produced those oral records were illiterate. Additionally, all African oral records often lack an original/definitive version or author. Orature shares with written literature the use of heightened and elevated language in various genres, but its uniqueness lies in the fact that it is actualized only in performance and by the fact that the performer can (and sometimes is obliged to) improvise so that oral text constitutes an event. Stylistically, oral records featured linguistic devices designed to enhance the vocal performance for a live audience because they were meant to be sung at particular events.

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The cultural background is the key to understand the form and content of oral traditions. Critics noticed that oral literature blends myth with reality and this is what creates a timeless impression and make the task of easily understanding the texts somehow impossible. Accordingly, Parker and Rathbone claim that:

Oral Traditions... were far from straight forward. They were generated within particular cultures and strongly shaped by local aesthetic preferences, with narratives often advancing by way of spiritual or magical transformation rather than incremental chronological change. (58)

In terms of importance and role, oral traditions occupy a prominent place since they are means of entertainment and education. Thus, they fall within the two categories of art; art for art's sake, and art for life's sake. They were used to teach children their past and the heroic deeds of the ancestors. Orality was a source of societal education and a means to keep the ethnic groups united. Griots celebrated the community's spirit and rejected individualism. Commenting on the role of oral traditions, Joseph George asserts that:

...traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. Rather, they write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society. Indeed, an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build. (qtd in Gordon & Gordon 304)

Oral traditions helped Africans understand the world and were used to teach children important aspects of their culture. With the rise of the script, oral traditions continued to be vibrant and became an important feature of African literature. They still play a vital role in preserving and protecting the local heritage. West African critics like Mdubuike and Chinweizu are convinced that African writers "should

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be more mindful of the importance of Oral traditions in Africa and their contributions to the development of modern African literature” (qtd. in Talib 75). Okot P’Bitek’s poetry is a glaring example to explain this influence. Aspects of orality are found in contemporary African poetry and fiction. African writing is not separate from orality. Edouard Glissant describes this relation as “the complex union of writing and orality.” (qtd. in Talib 59)

2.2. Paradise Disturbed: Colonial African Literature as a Means of Combat

Colonialism was a turning point in Africa’s long history. The continent was under the pressure of foreign domination for many years. Africa witnessed the highest military aggression by imperialistic powers like France, Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Portugal. The peaceful paradise was disturbed by the machine that made things fall apart. For centuries, Africans experienced the curse and turmoil of colonialism and humiliation. After many bloody years, Africans realized that revolution was the only way to achieve independence and restore their dignity. Several uprisings took place in different countries such as Kenya, Algeria, Angola, Congo, Nigeria, and Zanzibar. The process of decolonization was marred with violence and political unrest. The gun, however, was not the only means of decolonization. The pen was another means of protest and writers used their pens to introduce the sufferance of Africans to the world. Accordingly, written African literature gained more reputation and was named the political art of resistance which contributed to the liberty of the continent as soon as colonial powers made transition to independent states.

African literature gained more reputation in the 1950’s. It was in the second half of the twentieth century that African literature became an institutionalized subject of study and debate in the institutions of education and interpretation. It was produced in the crucible of

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colonialism. Africans, using the colonizer's language, wrote texts that dealt with African issues. At that time, the continent was under the pressure of colonialism and the fire of the natives' rebellions. Accordingly, the African novel in particular was devoted to the task of fictionalizing the plight of the colonized.

Modernist African literature is the one that appeared during the colonial period. Its corpus is vast and varied. However, there are two important impulses that govern and place some confines around the literary works of the colonial era; the reclaiming of the voice, and the subjective critique of the colonizer's abusive power. African writers' aim was to make the subaltern speak and make their bloody situation and the dark side of colonialism visible. This is why it is called the literature of protest or combat. As its names indicates, literature of protest was a means of resistance to unmask the colonialist project and show the cruelty of the Whiteman. Names like that of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye, and Thomas Mofolo are unavoidably part of the official history of the literature of combat. Their primary objective was to combat, and interrogate the colonialist literature and epistemology which articulated and justified the moral authority of the colonized, and postulated the inferiority of the native as metaphysical fact. Commenting on its importance and role, in *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon writes:

Calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation...it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (193)

African Poets played a vital role in criticizing the colonizer's abusive power. They wrote anti-colonial poetry and invented new models to embody their reactions to life. Within the context of protest

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and reaction, Negritude poetry was first launched in 1930's Paris, in the climate of modernism, surrealism, and Jazz. Negritude poets' aim was to restore the African civilization and introduce it to Africans first, and then to the World. In 1951, African writers of diaspora created the Center for African Studies in Lisbon. The center was founded by Amilcar Cabral and Mario de Andrade who played a pivotal role in publishing Lusophone African essays and organizing anthologies. Lusophone writers were highly committed as they all adopted and agreed with Cabral's diction that the struggle was an act of culture. Being one of the leading figures of Lusophone writers, Agostinho Neto's poetry is one of combat. Combativeness in his poetry is a decisive factor.

African writers of the colonial period appeared from the fight as the vanguards. Chinua Achebe once stated that their objective was let the world know that Africa has its own culture and civilization and that they "did not hear of culture hear of culture for the first time from Europeans...They had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty and dignity" ("The Role of the Writer in the New Nation"158). That was the literary tradition during the colonial age. Around the 1960s most of African countries gained their independence, and African literature's scope changed drastically.

2.3. On Paradise Lost and Literature of Denunciation

Postcolonial African literature reflects, refracts, and interprets post-independence African condition. It concerns itself with the disastrous state of the nation and analyses the extent to which colonialism affected or/and still affects the continent. The Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the authors who contributed the development of postcolonial African novel. Known for his satirical works, Armah agrees with Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka and other committed writers, and makes his pen in the service of his local readers to draw their attention to socio-political, cultural, and economic impact of colonialism.

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Postcolonial African literature revisits the colonial past and studies its impact on the present. African writers' vision of the past is revealed through the nostalgic feeling of the precolonial tranquility. Meanwhile, they embark on a journey to the past to describe the miserable situation of colonial period to evaluate the colonial aftermath. Known as the literature of inward-criticism or literature of self-criticism, postcolonial African literature is sharper and highly committed. It is devoted to expression of disillusionment with independent Africa. It examines the extent to which people on the entire continent are trapped in a tremendously serious socio-economic crisis.

Literature of denunciation, or inward-criticism is a subjective critique and personal assessment of the post-independence decadence. There have been many attempts to limit the scope of postcolonial novel in terms of thematic issues. According to Ali Mazrui, literature of denunciation revolves around:

... the clash between Africa's past and present, between tradition and modernity, between indigenous and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance and between Africanity and humanity. (qtd. in Adetuyi & Adeniran²⁴)

Committed literature works as a recorder and interpreter of the socio-political activities of society. Being committed, African literature, especially in post-independence era, mirrors the condition of the nation and provides the reader with the required solutions. For African writers, literature is man 's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him. Within this context, literature of inward-criticism begins with describing the plight of the masses and looks for the reasons behind their devastated condition. The African novel is known for its

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disillusionment that pounces upon the current realities like civil war in Nigeria or ruthless suppression by the politicians of their own race color and apartheid in South-African nation.

African novel, in this case, works as a means of emancipation and awakening. African writers draw their readers attention to the cultural, economic and political impact of the colonial past on the present and future. Culturally, the postcolonial novel contributes in the process of decolonization for the people who suffered the trauma of foreign conquest and the imposition of an alien culture. In *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe sheds light on a 'new Nigerian' society which is on its way to cut ties with traditional past. He satirically examines how the traditional values are exploited by the élites and new politicians to achieve their selfish objectives.

Marxist African writers are more interested in examining the economic system adopted by the regime and evaluate its impact on the social structure. Politically, they accuse the colonizer for creating and training the new ruling classes to be oppressive. Economically, however, African authors show the extent to which the capitalist system widens the gap between the social layers and gives the upper class the absolute right to rob the country and enslave the working and lower classes. Within this corrupted atmosphere, workers (the proletariats) choose the socialist system of property relations and reject the capitalist regime. In 1964, the Malawian poet and novelist David Rubadiri published *No Bride Price*, which showed his extreme dissatisfaction with the post-Independence era in Africa: the leaders of the anti-colonial struggle have become traitors to their peoples' cause and have sacrificed Africa on the altar of their own middle-class comfort.

3. Conclusion

African literature has a long and complex history. Its political tone and mood reflect the misery that the natives have been exposed to

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since the colonial era. Thematically and stylistically, African literature differs from European and American literatures. African novel's thrust is based on Africans' experiences in the past and present. In reading the novel of protest or inward-criticism, the reader is exposed to a world of sadness and injustice. He also discovers how subjective African writers are. The subjectivity is the result of being committed and of being authors who side with the masses and refuse all aspects of injustice.

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