



Rhetorics of Protest as An Emerging Perspective in Post-Colonial Literature: A Study of some Selected African Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines the rhetorics of protests in post-colonial writings using some selected African poems. It does this against the backdrop of post-colonialism as the umbrella theory; although Marxist theory is considered in empassé due to the context of protest in this work. The paper is thus discussed in the order of background of study, scope of study, problem of study, significance of study, theoretical framework, contribution to knowledge and of course the main body, which is the explication of the elements of protests in some selected poems of some African poets. Post-colonialism in the view of this study, is the theoretical approach which studies works of literature from the perspectives of “challenging the status quo”. Post-colonialism involves the critical view of all forms of artistic revolution against colonial imperatives, post-independence failures and neo-colonial tendencies in the writings of former colonised societies. It looks at such works from the perspective of the colonized rather than the colonial power. Bill and Griffiths (1989) view of post-colonialism is decidedly the dominant view in this study.

Keywords: Protest Literature, Post-Colonial Literature, African Poetry, Rhetorics of Protest, Emerging Perspectives

Introduction

A cursory look at African literary passage reveals a world of creative consciousness which began as oral tradition, and later written traditions. The latter is used as a form of protest against western prejudice and the painful bites of colonialism; and equally, the quest for social change in the post-independence era. However, literature in Africa is believed to be as old as the continent itself. Ruth Finnegan clears the air of doubts on this subject matter when she avers that:

Africa possesses both written and unwritten traditions. The former are relatively well known—at any rate the recent writings in European languages (much work remains to be publicized on earlier Arabic and local written literatures in Africa). The unwritten forms, however, are far less widely known and appreciated. Such forms do not fit neatly into the familiar categories of literate cultures, they are harder to record and present, and, for a superficial observer at least, they are easier to overlook than the corresponding written materials (43).

This argument above, contradicts the Conradian sentiment and misrepresentation of the image of Africa, her culture and indeed her literature. In the wake of European invasion and colonialism, African literary spirit took a different dimension from the old tradition to the new (written) tradition. The literature of the colonial era which reflects on the encounters with the western world and her culture is more often than not, referred to as literature of cultural nationalism or anti-colonial literature. It later metamorphosed into what is now known as post-colonial literature with particular interest in confronting the many ills of the post-independence era and social concern towards salvaging the post-colonial African societies from the shackles of neo-colonialism, exploitation, social and political injustices.

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'O, African literature has grown through three major ages. The age of Anti-colonial struggle; the age of Independence; and the age of neo-colonialism. The age of anti-colonial literature in his words, "saw the Nasserite national assertion in Egypt, culminating in the triumphant nationalisation of the Suez Canal; armed struggles by Kenyan Land and Freedom Army, Mau Mau against British colonialism, and against French colonialism in Algeria; intensified

resistance against the South African Apartheid regime"(Tejumola and Quayson: 157). And in his opinion, what marks the success of this age is the independence of Ghana in 1957 and Nigeria in 1960. The age of Independence on the other hand began in the sixties with the attendant literature. Finally, the age of neo-colonialism which is also considered as the era of disillusionment. The period when African writers began to mourn the failure of independence occasioned by lack of true leadership and good governance in Africa. This period straddles the seventies through eighties to the present day. The major theme of this period is the quest for social change.

African literature may mean different things to different people. Someone like Ngugi, had argue that a literature presented in foreign language(s) cannot completely be regarded as African literature because of a possible distortion in the thought processes and of course the aesthetics of her *Africanness*. Others like Achebe, believe that language is not enough to dissuade writers from showcasing their creative talents. In whatever way this argument is presented, it is important to note that Africa has a literature before the western invasion and since language was among the tool of invasion, it is necessary for the creative artists to communicate to the world about their literature and culture in the language the world will understand. To simply put in another perspective, "the writer who chooses to express himself in an African language will be addressing his message to a relatively small audience, merely a fraction of the total literate population in his country" (Bernth Lindfors, 22).The history of modern African literature is thus, inextricably linked to the history of western colonization and the attendant 'civilization'. It is also interesting to reiterate that the emergence of modern African literature simply suggests that there was a literature of the African people that is characteristically old - the oral literature. Earliest written African literary works are the *Kebra*

Negas or the *Book of Kings* of Ethiopia written in Ge'ez language. Succeeding the precolonial era is the colonial era. One of the examples of colonial literature is Joseph Ephraim Caseley Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation*. The slave narratives such as Oluadah Equaino's narrative is also considered in the category of colonial literature. This is because colonialism was accompanied by slave trade.The significance of colonialism in the emergence of a new literature in Africa cannot be over emphasized. Simon Gikandi puts this very strongly that "the political and cultural force of colonialism in Africa was so enduring that writers concerned with the nature of African society could not avoid the trauma and drama" that came with colonialism (cited in Tejumola and Quayson: 55). The effect of colonialism arouses in writers a different spirit which produced the anti-colonial writings; whereas effects of the failures of post-independence produced what is today known as post-colonial literature. In actual fact, modern African literature grew from the colonial to the post-colonial literature.

It is necessary here to underscore that African literature cannot be separated from the society. According to Tanure Ojaide "there is, culturally speaking, no 'art for art's sake' in Africa. Every literary work has a social function"(44). Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson on the other hand put it more explicitly that "the dominant conception of literature is as a pathfinder for society, a deconstructive searchlight of truth against all the dark burdens that circumscribed the ability of the community to achieve its best and realise its finest aspirations"(101).

Aim/Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine the rhetorics of protests in some selected African poems and the objectives are:

1. To examine works of art are veritable tools in the struggle against imperialism
2. To inspire younger researchers to consider post-colonial studies and its intersections with revolutionary aesthetics as a growing perspectives in modern African literature and
3. To examine African poetry beyond possession of the ability to delight but also the ability to revolt hegemonic forces

Theoretical Framework

This work is studied via post-colonial theory. Post-colonialism is a recent theoretical framework used to discuss literary works from the standpoint of post-colonial experiences. Post-colonialism emanates from colonialism. And to discuss post-colonialism, the concept of colonialism must be considered for the sake of clarity and coordination. According to Onyemaechi Udumukwu, the word 'colonialism' "amounts to a significant historical fact" (23). Yet he sees colonialism as a concept which "crystalises in the occupation, seizure of power by foreign power, and the institution of a new system of authority over a territory or a people"(23). Colonialism thus, simply put, is the act of imposition of alien culture, policies, and government on a people. Colonialism portends cultural hegemony, political hegemony, religious hegemony and the likes. Cultural hegemony seems to be the thrust of Said's discourse *Orientalism*. Udumukwu argues in favour of this when he says that "the thrust of Said's account is that cultural hegemony has influenced the relationship between the Orient and the Occident"(25). And according to him Said argues that Orientalism (the Colonising Power), as a form of discourse, is animated by the relationship

between the West and the Orientals (the colonised). This hegemonic display of power by the Colonizing Power or as Edward Said would call it, 'Orientalism', completely defines colonialism. And in Africa, the western invasion and the attendant take-over of the continent, is the beginning of colonialism. This period witnessed an intellectual revolution. The colonial injustices were confronted by writers who produced what was regarded as Anti-colonial literature. And the ideological temper of this period is directed against the colonialist. Soon after this period, comes the era of independence in Africa which gave rise to Post-colonialism as a critical construct. Shatto Gakwandi writes, "the resultant change in the socio-political atmosphere of these countries has had discernible influence on fictional themes"(66). Udumukwu then conclude by the saying that "the new creative spirit after independence is focused on the problems of building a nation"(9).

Thus, the period after independence is regarded as the post-colonial period. Its literary harvest and its imaginative response is considered as post-colonial discourse. Post-colonialism as a critical framework becomes a sensitive discourse. It was Edward Said who began the first remarkable inroads to its concepts and precepts by referring to the Colonial power as Orientalism and the colonised as Orients or Occident. However, after Said's ideological presentation, Bill Ashcroft and Griffiths Hellen Tiffin come up with another discourse of post-colonialism entitled *The Empire Writes Back*. Here, they painstakingly considered post-colonialism as a critical framework and for the purpose of this paper we shall dwell more on their position. *The Empire Writes Back* discusses post-colonialism as its subject matter. The entire argument in the book revolves around the concept of post-colonialism. One observable aim of the writers in this book, one would reason, is to give a more accommodating explanation or definition to the concept of post-colonial, breaking down every form of sentiment arising therefrom.

The writers identify models by which post-colonial literature can be studied, assess or analysed. These models includes (a) National or regional models, (b) Race-based or Black writing models, (c) Comparative models, and (d) More comprehensive comparative. According to them, national models considers those features that determine the nationality of a given literature. This is because, in their views, the development of national literature and criticism is fundamental in the whole enterprise of post-colonial studies.

The black writing or Race-based model on the other hand provides that post-colonial literature can be assessed or studied from the idea of race. They argue that the experience of political and economic discrimination compels Africans in diaspora to produce their post-colonial experiences in the art form. Thus, to study a post-colonial work(s), a consideration of the emergence of black writing is key. This is therefore where race-base model becomes useful and requisite in post-colonial studies. Comparative model is another identifiable model for post-colonial literature. Here, the writers seems to suggest that to find a name for a given work, a consideration of place and language, thematic parallels, colonizer and colonized, dominated and dominating, are the determining elements to post-colonial literature. What they suggest here is that these items provides for a competitive analysis of a given post-colonial literature. Model of hybridity and syncretism is another model which seeks to study post-colonial literature not by European theories alone but also by the historical and cultural circumstance under which a work of art is produced. Here critics are "advised" perhaps, to look at work of post colonialism not from the view point of the colonizer but also of the colonized.

Furthermore, on Language, they considered the significance and role of language in post-colonial literature. Here they write that there are two major ways language issue is handled in post-colonial literature. The abrogation or denial which involves the outright rejection, of the language of the centre (colonizer), and then, secondly the appropriation; where by the language of the centre is taken and used in the context of the colonized. The Achebe transliteration of English to accommodate the cultural burden of a typical African society is an example to note. Consequently, the writers identify three

linguistic groups to note in post-colonial discourse. They include; Monoglossic, diglossic and polyglossic. The monoglossic refers to those colonized society who receive the English language as their first and native tongue. Diglossic on the other hand refers to those societies in which a majority of them speak two or more languages like a bilingual society such as Africa. The polyglossic or poly-dialectic they say, is commonly found on the Caribbean where a multitude of dialects interweave to form what they call "a comprehensible continuum". The resultant implication of this is the creole theory.

In what they call "Replacing the Text", they reveal that one of the key means of colonial oppression is the control of the means of communication. In the argument of the writers in this chapter, as long as the means of communication is been controlled by imperial centre, the colonized remains, marginal. Thus, they call for

the appropriation of the language as a major way of escape. By appropriation they mean, getting the language and appropriating it to reflect the cultural experience of the colonized. They also noted that one significant feature of post-colonial writing is the silencing and marginalizing of the post-colonial voice by the centre. Therefore, to abrogate this imperial tendencies within the text, there should be the practice of appropriation of language and culture of the centre by writers of the post-colonial discourse.

In "Theory at the Crossroads" the writers decry the indiscriminate manner in which indigenous literature are being assessed, analysed using the imported theories of the imperial centre. They acknowledge that "all post-colonial countries once had or still have 'native culture' of some kind including literary culture like the oral culture of black sub-Saharan Africa and others. And that the creative development of these post-colonial societies are often influenced by this pre-colonial, indigenous culture. Thus, they make case for the indigenous literary theory of the post-colonial societies. In doing this, the authors consider the various literary theories of the respective post-colonial societies such as Indian literary theories, African literary theories and the Caribbean theories. They equally argue that post-colonial writing and literary theory interact in "so many ways with recent European literary movements" (144) as well as contemporary critical ideologies like Marxism and feminism. In their argument they admit that, in spite of the many biases there are, over the Europeanization of post-colonial discourse, certain literary theories actually offer a better explanation to some of the crucial issues addressed by colonial literature.

What they simply explain is that, whereas the colonized races decry oppression and suppression, feminism and Marxism for instance shares similar intimacy in terms of discussing oppression and exploitation as subject matters. Women in all cultures are marginalized. Thus, while post-colonial discourse decries marginalization and oppression by the imperial power, feminism and Marxism equally discuss marginalization and oppression against the women by patriarchal society and on the other side against the peasant workers by the elitist class. The writers at this point, simply argue that contemporary literary ideologies like feminism and Marxism, better explain oppression and marginalization which is a crucial subject matter of post-colonial literature. Very interestingly, in the sixth chapter of the book "Re- thinking the Post-colonial", the writers define "post-colonial" as a concept that transcends beyond the idea of colonization. To them, whereas others see, Post-colonialism as a period after independence, post-colonial refers to "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day".

In the argument of the authors, both the colonized and colonial power are affected in one way or the other. And that the issue of attempting a decolonization of the psychology and culture of the erstwhile colonized society may not all-together be meaningful because colonization was not the main evil. To them, marginalization and oppression are the burning evil in all cultures and society. It is this sense marginalization and oppression that give the impetus to protest in post-colonial writings. And to examine the rhetorics of protest is to consider the aesthetics of revolution. And since, Marxism, according to Ashcroft and Hellen, is an aspect of post-colonial theory, it is necessary to consider it briefly. Marxism "focuses on the economic and political elements of art" (Kennedy & Gioia, 1807). Revolutionary literature which is our major concern in this study is subsumed under Marxism.

Marxist criticism or dialectical approach is culled from Karl Marx's theory of 'Dialectical materialism'. This theory believes mainly that "in order to survive in this world, man requires certain basic material objects especially food, clothing and shelter" (Worgu, 92). To him, this theory goes further to explain that 'in order to possess these things man enters into partnership with his fellow men". And Marx contends that very soon contradictions begin to manifest in this partnership with one class-those with the capital or means of production oppressing the other class - those who supply ordinary labour" (Worgu, 94).

All these are explaining Marxism as an economic concept. However, it is imperative to note that Marxism also is "an effective tool for analyzing the functions and forms of literature" (Eyoh, 67). Eagleton, cited in Eyoh, states that "the aim of Marxism is to explain the literary work, paying sensitive attention to its forms, style and meanings and 'grasping those forms', styles and meaning as the product of a particular history", Worgu agrees to this position when he says that "Marxist critics concern themselves not only with social realism but also with aesthetic consideration, with questions of 'form and content' as integral part of criticism" (94). This means that Marxist critics acknowledge form and content as integral part of criticism.

To this end, every rhetorics of protests in a given work of art, either as theme, or style or language, portends Marxism which is also a feature of post-colonial discourse.

Rhetorics of Protests in Some Selected African Poems

Early African poets are among those writers whose works enthroned nationalism as a spirit across Africa. Most of these poets write from nostalgic feelings, and protest against racial discrimination against the blacks. Among the prominent poets of the anti-colonial period are Leopold Sedar Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara amongst others. The protest spirit and defiance followed the post-colonial poetry. Emmanuel Ngara noted this when he says that the poetry of the postcolonial period "completely free of mystification and subjective realism...reflects the concrete reality of a people fighting for freedom, independence and social justice"(cited in Tejumola and Quayson: 402). He explains further that the post-colonial poetry are characteristically noted by their unity in theory - revolutionary. This means that poetry of the post-colonial era, like the anti-colonial poetry, are characterised by revolutionary aesthetics, but this time, the revolution is against internal colonialism occasioned by the failures of independence. Obari Gomba tend to nodd his head in agreement when he reiterates that "the post-colonial situation... has provoked the strong questions on the issues of suzerainty and subjection, to the point that the post-colonial is perceived to be an extension of the colonial"(156).

In Gabriel Okara's 'The Fisherman's Invocation', the persona seem to lament the failure of post-independence Nigeria after the celebrations and hope that greeted the new political independent nation. Here, the people had hoped that after all the struggle for political independence, the new leaders, who are now Africans not colonialists, should do better, instead, the nation is greeted with disillusionment and corruption. In the words of the persona:

The celebration is now ended
But the echoes are all around
Whirling like a harmattan
Whirl-wind throwing dust around
And hands cover faces and feet grope. (lines 1-5)

The persona in this poem believes that the 'echoes' of colonialism still subsist in Africa. Consequently, 'whirlwind', corruption and bad leadership continues to 'throw' 'dust' which in this context means hardship, around.

The poem disparages the rate of disillusionment upon political independence. Whereas the people had hoped that after 'the drums lay quiet' and the dancers disperse / waiting for the next' (line 7-8 & 10), the only thing they see is a few clothed in hypocritical innocence ripping the nation off and leaving the hapless masses in perpetual penury. The persona laments as follows:

But the child-front is now lying on laps
feeding from the measureless breaststroke of the Back (lines 16-17).

Note that, according to Udumukwu, "the failure of the promises of independence in the 1960s precipitated the emergence of a new creative talent that was imbued with a new pre occupation that shifted from earlier concerns ...to the problem of building a nation "(9).

Thus, in Birago Diop's 'Vanity', the persona seems to suggests that to be able to achieve the new responsibility of nation building, a revolutionary approach in addressing the failures of independence is inevitable. In line 1 to 5, the writer says that;

If we tell, gently, gently
All that we shall one day have to tell,
Who then will hear our voices without laughter,
Sad complaining voices of beggars
Who indeed, will hear them without laughter?

The thematic concerns contained in the expression above are revolutionary in nature. The persona seem to call on activist writers to defy being gentleman and confront the woes of their society because diplomacy is not an option, instead, the people will be taken for granted 'laughed at'. In the second stanza, he agitatively exclaims but,

'If we cry roughly of our torments'

Nobody will take them for granted. In other words 'what eyes will watch our large mouths?' Is a rhetorical question which suggests no one will dare take them for granted if properly agitating for the necessary change. The poem is a call to both creative writers and the masses to rise to the occasion and take responsibility. The concept of protest

as an emerging perspective in post-colonial literature is rooted in the revolutionary aesthetics writers use their works to demonstrate.

Another writer whom post-colonial failings inspired greatly is J.P. Clark. His poem 'Casualties' is derived from the national tragedy of the Nigerian Civil War. Chinyere Nwahunaya writes that, "the events of civil war period in Nigeria were traumatic experiences that threatened the very existence of people as individuals, and of a people as corporate entity. Therefore, the urge to take a retrospective glance at those events has just been too strong to be resisted by our writers"(ix). It is this strong urge that has compelled J.P. Clark into bringing 'Casualties' to being. Don't forget, Lucien Goldmann has opined that "periods of crisis... are particularly, favourable to the birth of great works of art and of literature"(cited in Nwahunaya x). The poem bemoans the tragedy of the civil war and its enduring traumatic effect on the masses most of who are victims. The poem looks at the victims of the war as not just those who died, or lost their properties, or lost their loved ones but those innocent masses who have no role in the cause of the war yet are suffering the adverse effects. The writer seems to accuse the ruling class as the cause of the war yet are kept in safe heavens in the guise of prison; 'the Casualties are not only those led away by night/the cell is a cruel place, sometimes a haven' (lines 9&10). But that the real casualties of the war are those without help yet bearing the brunt of war. In the words of the persona 'the casualties are many, and a good number well/ outside the scenes of ravage and wreck' (lines 18-19).

The post-civil literature is an example of post-colonial writings. The poem 'Casualties' considers one of the challenges of the post-independence Nigerian society - the effect of the aftermath of the war. Protest in post-colonial writings takes different measures unlike the anti-colonial period. They take the form of satire, rebuke, and revolutionary style. Thus, protest is considered an aspect of post-colonial writings especially within the ambience of some African poetry.

Conclusion

"In every age literature has always mirrored society. And writers have invariably shown concerns for the convolutions that beset their societies"(Nwahunaya x). This is true of African poets who through their work, confronts the many issues that affected both the colonized Africa, post-independence Africa, and the neo-colonial African society.

Contribution to Knowledge

This work attempts a post-colonial reading of some literary text (selected African poems) with a view to bring out their revolutionary imperatives. The essence of this is to add to the field of post-colonial studies and its intersections with Marxist theoretical framework. Thus, it is the contribution of this work to inspire further study into the intersectionality of theories and this case, post-colonialism and Marxism. It also helps to further strengthen the view that post-colonialism is not necessarily about the period after colonial era but, the underlying ideology of confronting the hegemony of colonial powers in whatever forms through the work of art.

Recommendation

- We recommend a fresh study into *Intersectionality* as an emerging perspective to the study of Post-colonialism in African Poetry.

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