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Rise Of The African Novel In English: A Study of Chinua Achebi's Novels

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Abstract – Chinua Achebe has proven his worth among English-speaking African novelists by representing the African social and political environment in a thoroughly realistic way. His novels depict life within a particular historical background, and convey a sense of growing disgust and unrest within Nigerian society, a society that has started to emerge from the 'colonial complex' caused by years of denigration and self-abasement. A Man of the People (1967) is Achebe's fourth novel. It describes Nigeria in its post-independence phase, during which time the country became a 'cesspool of corruption and misrule' in the context of colonial-style social and economic development, a situation that resulted in conflict between the emergent, elitist middle class and the general population. Achebe's reputation as a novelist rests on his impartial understanding of, and ability to represent, the Nigerian environment. His realistic characterization, and diagnosis, of his country's malaise has the power to inspire a revolution informed by African ideologies.

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INTRODUCTION

We African Novel consists of three basic parts: This study introduces the reader to three main issues (history, language, genre) necessary to understanding African cultural practices in their own historical and aesthetic contexts. The second part provides a literary history of the African novel written in English. It also, however, includes a brief overview of lusophone and francophone African fiction whose discussion Booker otherwise deliberately excludes "as part of a general emphasis on accessibility to American and British undergraduate readers". The third and longest part of this textbook includes extended discussions of eight novels written in English, their historical background, and their author's biography. The eight books discussed are: Chinua Achebe's Wings Fall Apart and Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood (Nigeria), Ayi Kwei Armah's We Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy (Ghana), Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter and Alex La Guma's In the Fog of the Season's End (South Africa), Nguigi wa ^iong'o's Devil on the Cross (Kenya) and Tsitsi Dangerembga's Nervous Conditions (Zimbabwe). Booker explains his omission of difficult writers like Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and South Africa's Bessie Head in terms of the emphasis on accessibility mentioned above.

No understanding of African fiction would be complete without a knowledge of the theoretical paradigms and critical dilemmas, which Booker of his book and invokes again throughout his analyses of individual texts. Following Jameson's influential and controversial essay, Booker warns, for instance, against the temptation to judge African culture by European aesthetic and formalist standards which claim to be "universal" but fail to respect the role of African oral traditions in the development of modern African literature. Inversely, he is also conscious of the difficulty of accounting for the otherness of African aesthetics without reverting to an orientalist tendency that sees African culture as an "alien and exotic curiosity". This double bind (universalism versus orientalism) is further complicated, Booker explains, by the fact that critics who seek to acknowledge the dialogue between African and European literatures still risk perpetuating Europe's colonial and cultural domination of Africa if they "lean too far in one direction or another in appreciating this hybrid- ity". After discussing the difficulties critics face in approaching African culture, Booker highlights the dilemmas with which African writers themselves have to contend when producing their fictional works. In suc- cint but cogent sub-sections, the author investigates the three basic issues of history, language and literary genre- fraught notions for postcolonial writers invested in developing their own national cultures. ^e concepts were all originated and/or have developed in a Eurocentric discursive and capitalist framework and make, for instance, the choice of English (the language of the colonizer) or of the novel (the quintessential European bourgeois

genre) a highly political and debated act for African writers.

Even as Booker emphasizes the need to appreciate the hybridity of the African novel, his position remains firmly grounded in a Jamesonian paradigm. His textual analyses which are significantly followed by historical, political and economic details about each author's country of origin confirm Jameson's much-debated claim that ^ird World literatures function as "national allegories." Like Jameson, Booker argues that in "'Mrd World" fiction, the protagonist's development parallels that of the nation and that separating the character's private and public lives would only further the fragmentation of social life triggered by capitalism. This "reification" ultimately "draws any energies away from the public world of politics and thus weakens any attempt to oppose the current structure of power". The influence of Marxist thinkers like Jameson and Lukacs on Booker's approach is also evident when he tackles the issue of the "relevance" of African literature to a Western audience. Drawing on Jameson's discussion of the global dominance of late capitalism and of its resulting "homogenization" of cultural life across the world, Booker emphasizes the importance of African literature for Western readers on two counts: first, he argues that in today's interconnected global cultural system, "African and Western culture no longer exist as separate, pure phenomena", and that Western students need to know about African culture; secondly, African cultural productions provide new and important perspectives on Western literature insofar as they resist the "homogenizing" tendencies of third stage capitalism and represent instead an empowering "collective experience." In other words, African novels are both like and unlike Western cultural productions. We can not only relate to them and understand them but also use them to better understand ourselves.

It is confirmation of the troublesome assignment anticipating faultfinders of "'Mrd World" culture that even a reporter as distinctly mindful of ideological twofold ties as Keith Booker couldn't stay away from the trap of Eurocentric inclinations when he looks at the significance of African literature to Western perusers. Booker starts his presentation with a talk of "The Question of Relevance: The African Novel and the Western Reader" and closes with an update that "if the African novel raises various formal and ideological issues that are unique in relation to those we regularly experience in the European novel, this very contrast can offer us some assistance with understanding Western literature better". This commentator was made uncomfortable by the creator's rehashed endeavors at supporting the estimation of African literature to a Western group of onlookers and by the subsequent instrumentality credited (but certainly) to African cultural practices. Booker makes an awesome showing underlining the need to test Western tasteful and good values so as to enough acknowledge African culture, however the defense for doing as such needs to surpass that of learning "to see "our" culture in new and diverse ways". Reminding Western perusers that African culture is "a urgent part of the national cultural legacies of both Britain and America" is one thing; surrounding the dialog of African literature regarding its rele-vance toward the West is another. No starting course reading to French or German literatures, for occasion, would be¬gin with such defense. Its importance to understudies and educators from other semantic and cultural affiliations is underestimated. Booker is generally so aware of the twofold ties pundits ofpostcolonial literatures need to face that the oversight of a self-reflexive examination with regards to this issue is especially striking.

In the third and longest area of We African Novel, Booker highlights the half and half nature of African literature through the examination of chose novels. Contingent upon the work under investigation, then again, his investigation of the routes in which African fiction joins both African and European scholarly conventions is pretty much persua¬sive. It is persuading when he represents the syn¬cretic blend of composed and oral cultural motivations in Achebe's Wings Fall Apart yet less relevant when he depicts the workings of sex in Buchi Emecheta's We Joys of Motherhood or the operations of style in Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy. In the wake of belligerence, for case, that Nnu Ego, the hero of Emecheta's novel, gives a "trenchant depiction of the pretended by the glorification of parenthood ... in conventional Igbo society", Booker addresses the very translation he has quite recently supported as an Eurocentric projection of Western women's activist worries: "to put it plainly, Nnu Ego's disaster may not be that she is constrained into a customary part as the mother of Oshio and Adim however that the effect of colonialism makes it unthinkable for her to expect that part completely". The same sort of opposing reading portrays Booker's examination of scholarly tech¬nique in Aidoo's novel. From one viewpoint, he recommends that the "roundabout free-form" and complex story voice utilized as a part of Sister Killjoy vouches for the rich and dialogic rela-tionship between the African novel and innovator works like Conrad's. Then again, he cautions his perusers against putting Aidoo's content inside of the traditions of Western pioneer style, a signal whose universalizing propensities disregard the impact of African oral stories.

LANGUAGE AND THE AFRICAN NOVEL

WRITING IN ENGLISH presents the West African writer with a problem the English writer does not have. Stated simply, it is how to express the African experience in a language that was originally evolved to embody a different kind of experience and to convey a different kind of sensibility? How can the novelist render his characters' words, feelings, and attitudes in English and still retain their idiomatic quality and authenticity? This, in a way, is the problem of all translations; but, for the West African writer, the problem is more immediate and acute than in ordinary cases of translation. To the West African living in one of the ex-British colonies, English is the national, administrative, legal, and (along with the vernaculars),

literary language. The writer using the English language is therefore bilingual and expected to be "at home" both in English and in his own language.

Whereas the literary reputation of European novelists translated into English has been made in the language in which they originally wrote, West African novelists, by an ironic twist of history, have to make their literary reputation in a language that traces its development as a literary language to King Alfred and his Anglo-Saxons in the sixth century A.D. In other words, if an English translation of Crime and Punishment, or Mastro-don Gesualdo fails, to convey the idiom of the Russian or Italian original, or the setting, experience, and inner atmosphere and vision the writer intended to convey, there is some consolation that the original is still there, to be translated at any future time by someone more competent. With West Africans writing in English, the process of translation is part and parcel of the process of creation and determines summarily whether the completed book is a success or a failure.

The problem for the West African writer is that bilingualism in Africa, that is, the situation in which people speak one of the European "colonial" languages with as much ease and fluency as they speak their native tongues, is a phenomenon associated with a small (if continually growing) minority. In spite of the strides made in education since the early fifties, less than onequarter of the population of any of the West African countries in the sixties and perhaps the seventies, is truly bilingual in English and the vernaculars.

This means that a large section of the West African population still thinks, feels, and reacts in the vernaculars and is more deeply affected by the oral tradition than by the introduced literary tradition. The writers, because of their peculiar privilege of belonging to "both worlds," are in a position to use their literary gifts and to exploit the advantages of their bilingual knowledge to make available to the world at large the culture, traditions, and heritage of their people. Their knowledge of a "world" language, coupled with their background of African life, qualifies them to interpret this life through fiction. It is a fact that West African writers using the English language are conveying the West African experience that has distinguished West African literature from English literature proper.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE AFRICAN NOVEL

Although Africa has had a long and enduring tradition of poetry and drama, the novel is today, as almost everywhere else in the world, the dominant literary genre on the continent. Its privileged status as a written genre may be attributed to European influence and its association with an imaginative consciousness grounded in literate modernity. However, there can be no doubt that the appeal of the novel has to do with the integrative function that narratives have always played in African societies, a role that is well illustrated not only by the didactic and reflexive purpose of the folk tales and fables that inform the sensibility and define a primary level of the imaginative faculty in traditional African societies,1 but also by the centrality of the mythical tale, extending to the great oral epics – as exemplified by the Sundiata epic of Mali and the Ozidi saga of the Ijaws – with the ideological and symbolic significance these varieties of the narrative form assumed in precolonial times and their continued relevance in the contemporary period. In short, the novel has acquired today a cultural significance that was once the exclusive province of the oral narrative.

The continuity with the oral convention is apparent in the novels written in the African languages, in which the inference of substance and mode is immediate and quick. In any case, the oral–literate interface, in its different manifestations, can likewise be felt as a nature of the anecdotal works of many an African writer, reflecting either a cognizant outline or, as is frequently the case, the impact of a cultural maintenance dictated by the African foundation. Therefore, the class of oral account and the feel they delineate – seeing that this includes the presentation of writings in the living settings of performance – can be said to give the innovative foundation and, regularly, the basic model for the appointment of the novel classification by African writers, in both the indigenous languages and the foreign European tongues. The idea of orality (or "orature"), which serves as the hypothetical and ethnographic establishment for the dialog of the characteristic properties (character sorts, account capacities and logical gadgets, and in addition the part of illustration and imagery) by which the customary stories are organized can likewise be connected to the African novel, seeing that these properties have markedly affected the way African novelists have frequently considered and executed their works, to the degree that we are now and then obliged to distinguish in their works the indications of a textualized orality.

It was to take almost a thousand years, on the other hand, before we were to witness the full development of the African novel as an educated type. It is critical to note in this regard the essential pretended in this improvement by the African languages, which came to offer the writer the normal method for educated expression once these languages started to be lessened to writing all through the mainland over the span of the nineteenth century, for the most part through Christian fervent exertion. As of now commented, this exertion was engaged generally on the interpretation of the Bible into the indigenous languages, regularly prompting the formation of a scholarly saying for many of the languages. In the circumstances, the first African novelists were results of preacher schools, so that an instructional and

outreaching reason came to prevail in this early literature, expectation as the writers were on creating works of good enlightenment, as a major aspect of Christian educating. Past this restricted motivation behind the writers, these missioninspired works came to contain a bigger cultural impact, for they demonstrated the veracity of the significant change of qualities that the effect of Christianity had gotten under way in Africa, a procedure in which the conventional religions and frameworks of conviction came to exist in a condition of pressure with the new religion and with structures of psyche connected with Western civilization. These writings were in this manner instrumental in the development of another mental universe essential for the rise in Africa of a Western-propelled advancement.

POLITICS IN THE EARLY AFRICAN NOVEL

THE PLACE of politics in West African creative fiction reflects the importance of the topic in the whole of Africa and, indeed, in former European colonies all over the world. There are good reasons for this. In the first place, politics has been given enormous importance by the nationalist struggle in Africa, especially since the 1940s when mass political parties were established by African nationalists. Since then, we have achieved political independence and native Africans have assumed responsibility for the government of their people. The growth of literacy and spread of the mass media have encouraged the dissemination of ideas and information about political events everywhere in the continent and in the world at large. The post-independence campaign against the threat of a real or hypothetical neocolonialism has kept interest in politics alive. The introduction of party politics or, where there are oneparty systems, of populist movements, has fostered political awareness among most West Africans. The very novelty of organized politics, which is an inevitable concomitant of the modernizing process going on in Africa, fascinates the popular imagination, coupled with the fact that the first generation of post-independence politicians live in style, exercise great influence, and have made themselves into a clearly observable elite group. This draws attention to politicians and their profession in a way that is inconceivable in more technologically advanced countries. For the political scientist, West Africa has provided a fascinating opportunity to study the dynamics involved in the welding of traditional, kinship-oriented societies with different backgrounds and historical developments into nation-states. The novelists dealing with contemporary West Africa cannot ignore a subject of such absorbing interest to the people.

The novelist is concerned essentially with values: the values by which human behavior is determined, and, more particularly, with the quality or ranking of these values and their adequacy or otherwise for ensuring human happiness and individual integration into society. We expect the novelist in exploring the values of society to contribute substantially to social and moral insight, to the vision of the good life. In a subject like politics, the concern with values inevitably leads the novelist into the sphere of ideologies, which largely determine political morality. As Irving Howe observes, "The political novel... is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behavior and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology." It should be noted, however, that apart from Ekwensi Beautiful Feathers, Conton The African, and Okara The Voice, of the early African novels, politics as an interplay of ideas is not treated in any sustained way in the West African novels I am concerned with but, rather, as part of the panoramic sweep of social conflict resulting from cultural change.

The novel is of considerable interest for the light it throws on the behavior of the urban mob, that vast unassimilated product of an immature democracy. The town, because of its greater opportunities for employment and numerous other attractions, has drawn, in everincreasing numbers, ill-educated and sometimes illiterate young people from the villages in search of work. This body is constantly being increased by elementary school leavers.

CONCLUSION

This study examines Chinua Aehebe's literature and narrative mobility. It visualizes a comparative analysis of Acliebe's five cultural and political fictions aud their narratives' analysis with passing references on other African writers. The 'narratologicaP praxis of Jonathan Crewe is enforced here because we combine narrative context and content with critical analysis. Also, we demonstrated an insight into their thematic pre-occupations and concerns.

It can be said that both the novels are able to create a feeling in the readers "which is compounded of amusement, contempt, disgust and hatred….". Throughout the novels, this emotion is sustained and at the end the reader is left with a moral judgment detesting the corruption and all that represents it.

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