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RECLAIMING THE LOST WORLD THROUGH POETRY; A STUDY OF AFRICAN
POST-COLONIAL POETRY

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ABSTRACT

In a broad sense, postcolonial literature is writing which has been “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al., 2). For Post-colonial writers, writing is a political activity. They considered them as authors and social and political activist. They wrote about the pathetic conditions of their state and their protest to the colonisers. This paper tries to explicate how the post-colonial poetry of Africa reclaims its lost world, spaces and culture. This article makes a detailed analysis of three poems by African Post-colonial writers- David Diop’s ‘Africa’, Wole Soyinka’s ‘Telephone Conversation’ and ‘The Casualties’ by John Pepper Clark.

Keywords: protest, imitation, space, post-colonial, War, Poems, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial literature is a synthesis of protest and imitation. It blends revolt and conciliation. The African colonial experience has dominated the origin and nature of contemporary African protest literature and rendered it opposed to Western standards of aesthetics. The desire for originality was thus to become the prerequisite for authentic African literature, which would explore Africa's past, buttress its present, and advocate a hopeful future. The distinction between imitation and imposition in the evolution of modern African literary discourse is pertinent to the question of responsibility for the contemporary crisis of post-colonial Africa -- a continent which is believed to have taken its destiny into its own hands. This is because imitation presupposes choice, and choice implies responsibility for the consequences thereof. The one side of this is the unpolluted innocence of Africans. On the other side they reclaim their culture and letters through powerful movements like Negritude.

Defining Post-colonial

Postcolonial literature shares some significant concerns and characteristics.

Concerns

1) Reclaiming spaces and places

Colonialism was, above all, a means of claiming and exploiting foreign lands, resources, and people. Enslavement, indentured labour, and migration forced many indigenous populations to move from the places that they considered “home”. Postcolonial literature attempts to counteract their resulting alienation from

their surroundings by restoring a connection between indigenous people and places through description, narration, and dramatization.

2) Asserting cultural integrity

During colonization, the indigenous cultures of those countries subjected to foreign rule were often side-lined, suppressed, and openly denigrated in favour of elevating the social and cultural preferences and conventions of the colonizers. In response, much postcolonial literature seeks to assert the richness and validity of indigenous cultures in an effort to restore pride in practices and traditions that were systematically degraded under colonialism.

3) Revising history

Colonizers often depicted their colonial subjects as existing "outside of history" in unchanging, timeless societies, unable to progress or develop without their intervention and assistance. In this way, they justified their actions, including violence against those who resisted colonial rule. Revising history to tell things from the perspective of those colonized is thus a major preoccupation of postcolonial writing.

Characteristics

1) Resistant descriptions

Postcolonial writers use detailed descriptions of indigenous people, places, and practices to counteract or "resist" the stereotypes, inaccuracies, and generalizations which the colonizers circulated in educational, legal, political, and social texts and settings.

2) Appropriation of the colonizers' language

Although many colonized countries are home to multiple indigenous languages—in India, for example, more than twelve languages exist alongside English—many postcolonial writers choose to write in the colonizers' "tongue". However, authors such as Arundhati Roy deliberately play with English, remoulding it to reflect the rhythms and syntax of indigenous languages, and inventing new words and styles to demonstrate mastery of a language that was, in a sense, forced upon them.

3) Reworking colonial art-forms

Similarly, authors such as Arundhati Roy rework European art-forms like the novel to reflect indigenous modes of invention and creation. They reshape imported colonial art-forms to incorporate the style, structure, and themes of indigenous modes of creative expression, such as oral poetry and dramatic performances.

African Post-colonial poetry

The role of poetry, in African literature, has been highly effective in providing the people with the needful inspiration and the necessary insight. The language of poetry, for the African people, is a source of learning and becoming aware of their destiny that necessitates the knowledge of their past, present and the possible future. These and several other ideas fuelled African poetry in English. For the African poets, poetry became a powerful medium through which they conveyed to the world audience, not only their

"despairs and hopes, the enthusiasm and empathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain..." but also a nation's history as it moved from "freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and from independence to tasks of reconstruction which further involve situations of failure and disillusion".

One of the most important phases in African poetry is Negritude, a powerful literary movement. Among other things, the Negritude poets favoured the theme of glorification of Africa. They worshipped anything African in scintillating rhymes. Anger at injustice meted out to the colonized Africa is also one of the oft-repeated themes of their poetry. Deification of Africa is a fit topic for many African poets. Perhaps this is their reaction to the self-glorification and the civilizing zeal of the imperial powers of Europe. In Africa, the advent of the white man's civilizing mission displaced scores of native societies from their own cultural roots. The impact of the spread of Christianity combined with material benefits such as classroom education and well-paid jobs forced many Africans abandon their own faith and adapt the religion of the pale-faced aliens. This situation is responsible for the natives to suffer from culture shock. Nevertheless, the native is expected to owe allegiance to his own tribal culture and embrace Christianity for material benefit.

After this brief glance at African poetry, we realize that it is not simply an offshoot of British literary tradition. Despite the many disadvantages such as a scarred past, colonial trauma, expression in a foreign medium, inability to travel abroad, unstable economic and political state of affairs in their respective nations, lack of educational opportunities, the African poet has effortless creative capacity. It is an enriching combination of rich oral literature, native experience and imported tradition of writing in English that made African poetry a tremendous success both at home and abroad. The 'Black Orpheus' (African Poets) is no longer an unknown or an unwanted quantity but a fascinating and often enviable and beneficent literary marvel from what was ignorantly termed as the 'dark continent'.

Reclaiming lost Space

The word 'space' has multiple connotations in literature. It means sufficient freedom from external pressure to develop or explore one's needs, interests, and individuality. The Africans lost the capacity to develop or explore their need freely by the pressure of colonisation. With the process of decolonisation they try to unbind the traps of imperialism through culture, protest, poetry etc.

David Diop's 'Africa' is composed in form of a dialogue, or, perhaps, dramatic monologue where the speaker seems to be in a conversation with Africa. The poem can be thematically divided into three parts – the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial Africa. In Part one, the speaker extols the histories, the heroes and the ancestors of Africa nostalgically in order to stimulate pride in achievement in its noble past. He cherishes and commends Africa's proud past. He perceives her as being fertile or possessing the power of fertility. This could be seen in line 7 of the poem. This is smugness based on the fact that black loamy soil is generally fertile. He takes delight and cherishes the pre-colonial Africa which was characterised by "proud warriors in ancestral savannahs".

In Part Two, the mood of the poet changes as he denounces colonial Africa which has been subjugated, humiliated and dehumanised by the West. As a result, Africa is now exposed to bitterness, despair and mockery. Again, the speaker diverts to the interruption, exploitation and degradation of the entire continent: "Is this your back that is bent? / This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation". The speaker also laments the disruption and corruption of the once simple African civilization by the selfish colonialists. Definitely, this is not the kind of Africa that the poet wants to see. In Part Three, the poet envisages a post-colonial Africa of freedom and sovereignty as he ends the poem optimistically that someday, Africa will rise to enjoy the bitter taste of liberty: "That is Africa your Africa springing up anew / Springing up patiently obstinately / Whose fruits bit by bit acquire/The bitter taste of liberty."

Soyinka's 'Telephone Conversation' depicts a conversation between a white lady and an African American man which casts a harsh light on the racism and prejudice which grips society. Wole Soyinka uses two main literary devices to drive home the message of the poem. The first of the two is imagery. Right at the beginning, the imagery used to describe the mental image the man has of the woman: "lipstick coated, gold rolled cigarette holder piped", just from listening to her voice shows one that he thinks that she is from the so called upper class. Then when he hears her question regarding how dark he is, he is so humiliated and angry that he sees red everywhere. The imagery of the huge bus squelching the black tar is symbolic of how the dominant white community treats those belonging to the minor black one.

The next most evident use is that of irony. In the beginning of the poem, the African says that he has to "self-confess" when he reveals his skin colour to the lady. The colour of his skin is something that he has no control over, and even if he did, it is not a sin to be dark skinned, so the fact that the man feels ashamed and sorry for this is ironical and casts light on how ridiculous racism is that one should apologize or be differentiated against solely because of the colour of one's skin. Also, it seems almost comical that anyone should be so submissive when he has actually committed no mistakes.

On the other hand, the lady is continuously described in positive terms, suggesting that she is of a good breeding and upper class. Even when the reader finds out that she is a shallow and racist person who exhibits extreme insensitivity by asking crude questions, the man seems to think that she is 'considerate; and her clinical response to his question shows only 'light impersonality.' The repeated and exaggerated assertions of the woman's good manners and sophistication drip with irony as her speech contradict this strongly.

After negotiating for a house on rent on telephone, he tells the landlady of his being a black African. He was rudely shocked when he was 'caught...fouly' by the lady's query regarding his darkness thus: "HOW DARK...?" I had not misheard... "Are you light OR VERY DARK?"

The "ill- mannered silence" between the two is filled with images such as 'stench of rancid breath of public- hide-and-speak, Red booth, Red- Pillar-box, Red double-tiered Omnibus squelching tar' that subsume the age-old and still hopeless and violent colour- conflict.

Nothing remained

But self-confession. "Madam," I warned,

"I hate a wasted journey—I am African."

This is where the lapses in communication begin

This poem uses a lot of irony and sarcasm. The poet mainly uses irony in three places. The first tone of irony is sensed when the man confesses that he is an African. When describing the lady, the poet uses a lot of sarcastic language. Irony is lastly used when the man describes himself to the woman. The last line of the poem also leaves a sense of mystery in the reader. Wole Soyinka brings out a great use of irony in this poem.

'The Casualties', a poem by John Pepper Clark, points to 1966, the time of the Civil War. Biafra wanted to be free and independent. It affected the common people who were suffering endlessly. The Battle failed and the problem was silenced. The poet asserts that the casualties are not only the ones who are dead, for they are far from the devastating consequences of the war. They are not only those who are wounded though they are well on the route to death. They await burial by installments as death is the Ultimate escapism.

'The Casualties' is a post-mortem of the Nigeria civil war. The operational subject is that we are all casualties of the war and not only those who died while fighting the war. It is the position of the poet that all categories of Nigerians were originators, facilitators and victims of the national tragedy. The creative writer expresses his disgust and disappointment in a rather subtle and subdued tone, thereby heightening the poetic quality of a work referred to by some scholars as predominantly prosaic. The last line of the poem seems to expand the bounds of the poem and make accomplice of non-Nigerians. This is an obvious reference to the global dimensions of the war

It is important to state that the Nigeria of 2014/2015 is in a state of war, technically speaking. The war we are confronted with currently is compartmentalized, sectionalized, and departmentalized. There is war in the oil sector, chaos in the creeks and visible turbulence in the north. The minority groups are crying of marginalization and exploitation and several questions are begging for answers

CONCLUSION

The modern concept and role of African literature must be founded on the solid rock of universal patrimony so that we can begin to see its linguistic medium and themes as part of a global heritage. The first generation poets who experienced their countries being weaned from colonialism, or second generation and contemporary poets, who are also witnesses to the mishaps of post-independence, are all scribes who codified the events of postcolonial Africa through the voice of poetry. The troubles encountered in early 60s when most African nations gained independence can still be said to be the same in this 21st Century, which is not an over-statement. Various poets from different regions of Africa will be considered to prove this, and their thematic expressions in their poetry will be brought to limelight. Due to war, either of terrorism or ethnic clashes, some became refugees in their own land. Postcolonial societies have become hybridized (split identity). With all these confusions and traumas, post-colonial African poetry throbs with life, protest, despair, difficulties. Many times they prove that intense poetry comes from an aching heart. They try to recover lost glories with all vigour through their poetry.

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