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Theorizing Contemporary Post-Colonial Fiction: Modern African Literature

Mr. JS Jahangir

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Iqbal College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India.

Abstract

The globe has patience to hold the callous men but man is so cruel towards his fellow beings. He is excited in satiating his materialistic gains. This has now been formally inaugurated by the introduction of globalization. It keeps the nation state distinctions live as first world, second world and also the third world nations. Third world nations, which fall within the paradigm of past colonization has an ocean of literary as well as cultural history to speak. This speech is in the form of violence and an outcome of large protest. These literary outputs, particularly fiction are theorized in this article. The article tries to examine different works encompassing different perspectives to shape a theory.

Keywords

Third world nations, Postcolonial literatures, Colonial discourse, Edward Said, Other, Orientalism, Franz Fanon, National model, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Negritude, Black Woman, Womanism.

Introduction

Study in the contemporary post colonial fictions unremittingly and anxiously must sprout from the historical contexts of colonialism, and forbidding but startling violence. Violence in colonization and colonialism, encompassing cultural, economical, political, military, epistemic facets converged to form the history of "Third World" nations. Postcolonial literature addresses the ways in which non- European (African, South American, Asian, perhaps, other small settler colonies) literatures and cultures have been subalternized as an impact of their tyrannical regime, and to possibly investigate, means of resistance, reclamation, and reversal of their pre-colonial past.

Objective of postcolonial literature is to negotiate, contest and subvert Euro- American ideologies and representations. Postcolonial writing as a literature; critically, perhaps with a panoramic view of the field, employs with history of oppression, colonialism (both internal and external), racism, injustice, but with a special emphasis on issues of race, ethnicity and predominantly religion. It is a literature, in larger sense, a discourse of emancipation, evaluation and transformation.

1. Colonial Discourse

Colonial discourse theory, particularly the theory of Orientalism, expounded by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), has shown how the Western male colonialist constructed the native as "Other" to himself. This Other was seen as inferior, subservient, effeminate, and emotional rather than rational. In this representation, the Western male is able to define himself in relation to his difference and superiority to the Other. The Other may represent an underground or surrogate self that the Western male fears will come to the surface but that he wishes to repress. Said developed his theory through analysis of the power relations of the West and the Orient, but the concepts of Orientalism and the Other have been used in interpreting works written by colonial writers and set in Africa, such as Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1886) and Joseph Conrad's seminal modernist novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

The works of Said and other colonial discourse theorists have been criticized for their concentration on colonial representation and the subjugation of natives. Critics who take this position argue that, as part of a decolonization process, the ways in which postcolonial writers have challenged and resisted colonial stereotypes should be seen as important if not more important than the colonial representations.

As African countries became independent at the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s, African writers prepared for or celebrated this independence by writing against colonialism and colonial representations of Africa and Africans. Achebe, like other Nigerian writers, had studied the major works of English literature as an undergraduate, but he had also studied works by English and other European writers set in Africa, such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939). Cary's work is now little read but was influential in the 1950s when Achebe first encountered it. In an interview with Lewis Nkosi in 1962, Achebe explained how he had started writing to counter Cary's misrepresentation of Nigeria and Nigerians:

> I was quite certain that I was going to try my hand at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Carey's [sic] novel set in Nigeria, Mr Johnson, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that this was a most superficial picture of--not only of the country, but even of the Nigerian character and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside (4).

Achebe did not lose sight, though, of the need to challenge colonial representations of Africa through criticism. In the role of critic, Achebe uses colonial discourse theory to demonstrate the ways in which Africa is represented by even the major European writers. Achebe's second Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts in 1975 was entitled "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*" In this lecture, Achebe argues that *Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world, the antithesis of

Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (3). Achebe is adamant that however fine a writer Conrad may be, this does not excuse his representation of Africans as savages to whom language is denied. Achebe uses a comparison with Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) to demonstrate how Africa has become Europe's surrogate self:

> Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray - a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardous integrity. (17-18)

In their study of postcolonial writing, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures,* Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin identify four types of models of postcolonial writing: national or regional models; race-based models, such as literature of the African diaspora or Black writing; comparative models that analyse common linguistic, historical, and cultural features in literatures from different nations or regions; comparative models that look for common features, such as hybridity and syncretism, in all postcolonial literatures. They argue that these models are not necessarily self-contained and examples of postcolonial writing can incorporate elements of the different models.

2. The National Model

The national or regional models have been influential in the theory of African literature. African literature from across the whole continent is one model. This would include literature from North Africa (often referred to as the Maghreb) normally in Arabic or French; the literature from East and West Africa in English, French, Swahili, or indigenous languages; and the literature of Southern Africa in English, Portuguese, or indigenous languages, including South African literature by white writers descended from the settler communities. The literature of the regions can be studied separately, for example

East African writing. More specifically, case studies of literary production in individual countries can be undertaken. The wealth of writings, both literary and popular, produced in Nigeria have led to several studies of Nigerian literature, and South African literature has also been the subject of numerous studies. One of the reasons why these national literatures have been studied so extensively is that they have produced major writers with international reputations. Studies of popular literature and culture within a country tend to take a cultural studies approach and analyse patterns of production, distribution, or performance rather than concentrating on textual analysis. A national or regional approach would require the critic to consider what was distinctive about African or East African or Kenyan literature and to define its key characteristics.

A key facet of national and regional literatures in Africa has been the attempt to write against colonial misrepresentation, for example Chinua Achebe writing *Things Fall Apart* to rectify the way in which colonial writers such as Conrad and Cary had represented Africa, Africans, and the African past. This setting to rights involves recovering a lost or hidden history, often a history that was dependent on oral sources or that needed to be reconstructed. It could also involve the use and development of indigenous languages that were suppressed in colonial education. The work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been devoted to this since he wrote *Devil on the Cross* in his mother tongue, Gikuyu.

One of the most commonly used paradigms for the development of postcolonial culture is that outlined by the Martinican writer, psychiatrist, and activist Frantz Fanon who had become actively involved in the Algerian revolution. In “On National Culture,” a statement made at the Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Rome and published in English in *The Wretched of the Earth,* Fanon argues that the native intellectual goes through three phases in the decolonization process. In the first phase, he assimilates the language and culture of the colonizer, often speaking English or French better than native speakers of those languages. In the second phase, he realizes that he has lost touch with his people and tries to return to his roots by celebrating tradition. He

has, however, become distant from his childhood culture through formal schooling and therefore cannot successfully reintegrate himself into tradition. In the third phase, he becomes an organic intellectual who works with the masses to create a new revolutionary culture. (175)

3. The Black Aesthetic

One of the early influences on African literature was the aesthetic of négritude. Of central concern to négritude were issues of black identity and black consciousness. The term "négritude" was first used by the Martinican writer Aimé Césaire in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939, revised 1956; translated as *Return to My Native Land*). Césaire believed in an essential black identity that was formed through black people's identification with the physical geography of their land. *Return to My Native Land* was written shortly before Césaire left France to return to Martinique, and the work has its European influences. Césaire's work has been compared to that of the European surrealists and, indeed, the French surrealist writer André Breton wrote the introduction to a 1947 edition of *Return to My Native Land.*

Négritude was espoused by the Francophone Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor who became the first president of Senegal on its independence in 1960. Senghor had studied at the Sorbonne in Paris where he had met black students from other parts of the world. Among the students he met were Césaire and Léon Damas, also from the Francophone Caribbean, and in 1934 together they founded the journal *L'Étudiant noir.*

The celebration of the physicality and sensuality of the black body in Senghor's poetry has been criticized as essentialist. The metaphorical language of Senghor's poem "Femme noire" ("Black Woman") is close to the language of colonial discourse with its associations of woman, land, and conquest: Nude mother, black mother, Ripe fruit of firm flesh, deep rapture of dark wine, lips song is my song, Savanna of pure horizons, savanna trembling at the East Wind's eager kisses, Carved tom-tom, tight tom-tom, groaning under the hands of the conqueror, Your heavy contralto is the spirit song of the loved.(6)

When Senghor edited a collection of black poetry entitled *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948), which includes poems by black Caribbean, Malagasy, and African poets, the French existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the preface "Orphée noir." Sartre refers to négritude as being-in-the-black-world and sees it as an attempt to recover a black spirituality that the white world has repressed. Fanon was highly critical of négritude and the role Sartre played in promoting it. For Fanon, Sartre represents blackness in negative terms, as the opposite of whiteness. Fanon asserts his own sense of identity against this: "I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is.* It is its own follower" (135).

As a philosophy and a practice, négritude contained contradictions. It incorporated the first and second phases of Fanon's model. It had assimilated French culture, and most of the early négritude works were written in French, but it also sought to get back to the source, to the roots of African or Caribbean culture. Lamine Diakhate, writing in *Présence africaine,* saw the movement as a cultural dialectic: "The movement is dialectic, which, rising from its origins, assimilates the contribution made by the colonized in order to use it as one would use a torch on a wild night." (69)

Négritude has had very few followers in Anglophone African literature. In *Myth, Literature and the African World,* Soyinka puts forward a sustained critique of négritude. He argues that négritude adopted the European binary opposition of good and evil, or Manicheism, instead of attempting to find an African system of values:

> It extolled the apparent. Its reference points took far too much colouring from European ideas even while its Messiahs pronounced themselves fanatically African. In attempting to refute the evaluation to which black reality had been subject, Negritude adopted the Manichean tradition of European thought and inflicted it on a

culture which is most radically anti-Manichean. (127)

4. Comparative Models

Comparative approaches to African and other postcolonial literatures focus on language, identity, and hybridity. Within a postcolonial context, African literature is most commonly compared with other black literatures, such as Caribbean, African-American, and Black British. Comparisons can be made between the Creole, or national language of Caribbean writers, and the language used by African writers whether Creole, pidgin, or an "English" that has been modified to fit in with indigenous speech patterns, rhythms, and ways of thinking. The Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite in *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984) has described Caribbean nation language as *The submerged* area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. "It may be in English: but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time" (13).

The American scholar Henry Louis Gates has used Yoruba folk literature, in particular the trickster figure Esu-Elegbara, to trace and interpret the practice of signifying in the works of African-American writers. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), he demonstrates the ways in which signifying has been used as subversive parody. Similarly, theories of hybridity suggest that as colonial culture came in contact with indigenous culture, it was hybridized. In mimicry or replication, something of the original was lost, and the hybrid that was subsequently produced undermined colonial culture.

The British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy has developed the concept of "the black Atlantic," which draws together the Caribbean and those areas of North America, Latin America, Africa, and Europe that lie on the Atlantic coast. According to Gilroy, the African diaspora, through the slave trade and migration, has set up a nexus of transnational cultural links within the Atlantic region.

Literature, music, and movements from different parts of this region can be compared in terms of cultural transmission. Stuart Hall has presented a similar thesis in relation to Caribbean identities. He argues that there are three geographical presences in the Caribbean: "the African presence (with an intended pun on the influential journal, *Présence africaine*), the European presence, and an American or New World presence" (65).

The writings of Emecheta, Aidoo, and Head are often considered feminist. It may be more appropriate, though, to consider their relationship to the writings of Black American woman writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange. Like these writers, the major African women writers have been seen as transgressive in their alleged refusal to conform to the rules and traditions of their societies. Carole Boyce Davies suggests that African feminism is a hybrid that "seeks to combine African concerns with feminist concerns." She goes on to suggest that Alice Walker's term "womanism" is "inextricably entwined in the definition of African feminism" (12) since it seeks to find a way of placing feminist concerns within a Black aesthetic. Analysis of the cross-cultural influence of African and African-American women's writing, however, is not unproblematic. Walker has attempted to fuse African and African-American women's experiences in her fiction, most notably *The Color Purple* (1983) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), but the latter novel has been criticized for representing African culture, particularly female circumcision, as barbaric and for representing a new American consciousness as liberating for the African woman.

Conclusion

The intersection of the postmodern and the postcolonial in African writing has developed from the 1970s. An early example was Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy,* which uses fragmentation and hybridity to comment on the postcolonial condition in Africa and Europe. The work of Marechera and Farah provide other examples. Marechera's work, in particular *Mindblast or The Definitive Buddy* (1984), questions a narrow nationalist agenda through its experimental form, its array of allusions to Western modernist and popular culture, and its

foregrounding of the marginalized in Zimbabwean society. Farah's work shows the influence of his multilingualism and his experience of living and studying on different continents--Africa, Asia, and Europe. In his *Blood in the Sun* trilogy of novels, he interweaves the ancient and the modern, myth and contemporary reality, in nonlinear narratives with frequent time shifts in a manner comparable to that of the Indo-British writer Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983).

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