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Testimonial Narrative of Protest: An Analysis of Gabriel Okara's "The Mystic Drum"

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Abstract

Literature is usually produced by the dominant classes in a society and they represent ideas as seen from their social as well as cultural position. Subaltern people have long been powerless in presenting themselves in the literary world. They have not been better represented, rather socially and politically misrepresented. The paper examines how testimonial narrative of Gabriel Okara's "The Mystic Drum" protests against hegemony.

Keywords

Gabriel Okara, "The Mystic Drum", Testimonial Narrative, Protest against hegemony.

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John Beverly suggests that the best way to understand the subaltern is through Testimonial Literature. Testimonial narrative has come a long way ever

since and it does not write to the past but with the future. George Yudice defines Testimonial Literature as an “authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of situation (eg. war ,oppression, revolution, etc.)”. Yudice also explains: the testimonialista gives his or her personal “directly,” addressing a specific interlocutor.

Gabriel Okara is a Nigerian poet and novelist, whose verse had been translated into several languages by the early 1960s. Okara’s poetry is based on a series of contrasts in which symbols are neatly balanced against each other. The need to reconcile the extremes of experience (life and death are common themes) preoccupies his verse, and a typical poem has a circular movement from everyday reality to a moment of joy and back to reality again.

Cultural conflict is one of the most striking points in African poetry. In Africa, what is culture and tradition seems uncultured or peculiar to the Westerners. African poet, Gabriel Okara focuses the ice-cold attitude of Europeans to the African culture.

Gabriel Okara has infused his poetry with images of Nigerian landscape, traditional rituals and writing it with the ideas and syntax of his native language, Ijaw, with English vocabulary and grammar. His poem ‘The Mystic Drum’ is African in both content and form. In African religion and folklore, drumbeating is a ritualistic process. It has also a mythical significance. By talking about this ritualistic process, the poet goes back to his roots in history, religion, culture, and folklore. The poet uses images and symbols to intensify the mysterious power of the drumbeating. The beating of the drum unites the mind and heart, or rather the thoughts and feelings of the drummer with the external world or nature. It shows the intensity of the drumbeating and the unity of the people of Africa.

The mystic drum beat in my inside and fishes
Danced in the rivers and men and women danced
On land to the rhythm of my drum

But standing behind a tree with leaves

Around her waist she only smiled with a
Shake of her head. (MD 1-6)

The drum in African poems generally stands for the spiritual pulse of traditional African life. The poet asserts that first as the drum beat inside him fishes danced in the rivers and man and women danced on the land to the rhythm of the drum. But standing behind the tree there stood an outsider who smiled with an air of indifference at the richness of their culture; however the drum still continued to beat rippling the air with quickened tempo compelling the dead to dance and sing with their shadows. The ancestral glory overpowers other considerations: so powerful is the Mystic drum, that it brings back even the dead alive. The rhythm of the drum is the aching for an ideal Nigerian state of harmony.

The outsider is used in the poem for western imperialism that was looked down upon anything Eastern, non-western, alien and therefore incomprehensible for their own good as the other.

Then the Drum beat with a rhythm of the
Things of the ground and invoked
The eye of the sky the sun and the moon
And the gods and the trees began to dance ... (MD 13-17)

The African culture is so much in tune with nature that the mystic drum invokes the sun, the moon, the river gods and the trees began to dance. The gap finally gets bridged between humanity and nature, the animal world and human world, the hydrosphere and lithosphere that fishes turned men, and men became fishes.

The fishes turned men.

And things stopped to grow
But standing behind a tree
With leaves around her waist
She only smiled with a shake of her head.

And then the mystic drum
In my inside stopped to beat and men
Became men, Fishes became fishes
And trees, the sun and the moon Found
Their places, ant the dead Went to the ground
And things began to grow. (MD 18-28)

But later as the Mystic drum stopped beating, men became men, and fishes became fishes. Life now became dry, logical and mechanical. Thanks to western scientific imperialism and everything found its place. Leaves started sprouting on the woman she started to flourish on the land. Gradually her roots struck the ground. Spreading a kind of parched rationalism smoke issued from her lips and her lips parted in smile. The term 'smoke' is also suggestive of the pollution caused by industrialization and also the clouding of morals. Ultimately the speaker was left in belching darkness, completely cut off from the heart of his culture and he packed the Mystic drum not to beat loudly anymore. The 'belching darkness' alludes to the futility and hollowness the imposed existence. The outsider at first only had an objective role standing behind a tree. Eventually, she intrudes and tries to involve in their spiritual lives. The leaves around her waist are very much suggestive of eve who adorned the same after losing her innocence. Leaves stop growing on the trees but only sprout on her head implying deforestation. The refrain reminds us again and again that this Eve turns out to be the Eve of Nigerian damnation.

Okara's poem tends to reflect the problems that African nations face as they are torn between the culture of their European colonists and their traditional African heritage. He also looks at the traumatic effect that colonization and de-colonization can have on the self and on one's sense of personal identity. For example, Okara often depicts characters suffering from 'Culture shock' as they are torn between these two irreconcilable cultures. On the one hand there is Christianity and the definite material benefits such as classroom education and well-paid jobs that the European way of life offers,

while on the other hand, there is the unspoken expectation that the 'true' African was allegiance to his original tribal culture and should embrace these 'roots'.

Gabriel Okara considers the invader as an enemy whom it is not easy to conquer. During the British imperialism the South African culture, the poet's ancient heritage was ruined. The poet is worried about his countrymen who are torn between the two cultures but cannot accept one.

A Testimonio may include all categories considered conventional literature such as autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life-history, novella –testimonio, non-fiction novel or factographic literature. Testimonio is an instrument of retrieving and registering the presence of Subaltern. Testimonio is a site of knowledge enhancing multiplicity of experiences. It shows how knowledge of and from everyday lives is the basis for theorizing and constructing and evolving political practices to address the material conditions in which the society is caught. It is a new type of intellectual activity used to reveal complexity of identity.

Gabriel Okara criticizes the western ways that that has been adopted by the natives. He raises his voice against the western hegemony and he unmasks western imperialism.

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