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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

DECONSTRUCTING EUROCENTRIC DISCOURSE AND RECREATING HISTORY: AFRICAN FICTION IN CONTEXT

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Abstract:

The representation of African culture and history in Eurocentric discourses was more or less a political affair to construct the image of the "Other" rather than an objective approach to highlight the historical and cultural ethos of the continent. This biased approach of the Eurocentric writers tempted the African writers to put their history and culture before the audience in a right perspective. The representation of Africa as an anti-thesis of what the European supposedly represents and the denigration of African culture and history at the hands of the Eurocentric writers invited a revisionistic approach from the African writers. The present paper aims at highlighting the means through which the colonizers of Africa constructed the image of Africa as "Other" and distorted its history and culture to debase it. The paper also aims to deconstruct the myth of Africa as Other and underscore the ways through which the African novelists attempted to present their culture and history in a right perspective through the medium of written discourse.

KEYWORDS:

Deconstructing , History , Eurocentric , Philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

The colonial representation of Africa in all forms of discourse was a politicized one. Canonical texts like Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson, to cite a few, aimed at appropriating and stereotyping a sub-human image of the Africans. Africa was looked upon as a land of the savages and its institutions as primitive. The leitmotif of these discourses of denigration, was to construct an image of Africa as a place with no history and consequently to justify the incursion into the continent. In his Introduction to the Philosophy of History, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel proclaimed as: "Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained shut up… The negro [sic] as already observed exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state…[T]here is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. At this point we leave Africa never to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no development or movement to exhibit"(C. L. Innes, 2007: 8).

This arduous task of denigrating the Africans was not confined to the works of historians and philosophers only. It made its appearance even in other fields of knowledge like cartography, anthropology and imaginative literatures. Even as late as 1965, when most of the African countries like Nigeria and Kenya had gained independence from the colonial powers, the Eurocentric views retained their dominance. Hugh Trevor-Roper, Professor of History at Oxford University stated in 1965: "Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness … And darkness is not a subject for history" (C. L. Innes, 2007: 47).

All these discursive statements caste in the form of history, philosophy, anthropology, etc., had been used to justify the European exploitation of Africa. The ulterior motive behind all this – creation of Eurocentric discourses, myths and images to present the image of Africa as 'Other' – was to form the basis of a ruse of 'civilizing' these so-called African savages and to enter the continent for economic exploitation. Many European and British novelists guided by the views of their predecessors in history and philosophy wrote their works within the ambit of the colonial consciousness. Africa, in the works of such writers, was seen as a "dark continent, a symbol of the irrational, nourishing undifferentiated and childlike peoples governed by fear and superstition rather than reason, a people only too ready to welcome and, indeed, worship, the whiteman" (C L Innes and Bernth Lindfords, 1978: 3).

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, based upon Conrad's own experience of the Belgian Congo which he visited in 1890, is a truthful account of the conditions in which the 'savages' of Congo, a country of the dark continent of Africa, lived under the imperialist rule of the white man. Mr. Kurtz, the central figure in the novel represents the Western man's greed and commercial mentality. He also represents the hypocrisy of the whiteman's claims of civilizing the Africans. The claims are, however, only a camouflage for the whiteman's economic exploitation of the Africans. A cursory reading of the text tells us that it is a story involving confrontation with exotic natives, ominous dangers of the jungle, brutal savagery and even cannibalism. But a close reading shows that a perverted version of the 'white man's burden' is the philosophy adopted by the ivory hunters at the Inner Station. Heart of Darkness could be viewed, of course, as most readers do, including Chinua Achebe himself, as a critique of imperialist exploitation and violence but Joseph Conrad's powerful restaging of the primitivism of the 'other' makes Achebe's reading of racism in the novel quite convincing. In his essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Achebe looks at the novel as a "story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question, … [it] projects the image of Africa as "the other" world, the anti-thesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Chinua Achebe,www.jstor.org). Achebe is of the opinion that Heart of Darkness did not deserve the canonical status that was bestowed upon it by Western critics. The question for Achebe is "whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization [of Africa], which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art" (Chinua Achebe, www.jstor.org). The answer is obviously, no. For Achebe, the problem of European critics to comprehend racism in Heart of Darkness is "due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (Chinua Achebe, www.jstor.org). While on the one hand, the novel is an exposé of the exploitation of Africans by the European powers, yet on the other hand, its ultimate motive is the "dehumanization of Africa and the Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world" (Chinua Achebe, www.jstor.org). In "An Image of Africa", Achebe points out Conrad's portrayal of Africans as basically speechless "rudimentary souls" of Africa. Having denied them of speech – one of the ultimate signs of difference between animals and humans – Conrad reduces the Africans to animals. The novel, in short, shows how "Africans are characterized – as cannibals, as having no speech, as a mass of whirling savages indulging in unspeakable rites, and also as mere background to the story of Marlow and Kurtz" (C L Innes, 2007: 40). Another novelist who follows the trajectory of Joseph Conrad and sticks loyally to a colonialist idiom is Joyce Cary. He presents Africa as "a metaphysical space, a Conradian moral hollowness, a depraved 'jungly' zone,…"(Elleke Boehmer, 2005: 147).

The ceaseless efforts of the colonialists towards the denigration of Africa and the distortion of their history ultimately destroyed the basic character of African societies. However, the colonized realized the need to write their own histories to encounter the colonizers who devalued their history, culture, religion and literature. The two prominent postcolonial theoreticians who deserve a mention here are Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Their historical interrogation of colonialism in terms of its presence within English literature paved way for a radical deconstruction of the imperialistic perspective. It was after World War II that literary activity by African writers began on a large scale. By the time Chinua Achebe came to write, the struggle for independence in Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya had gained momentum. The Africans had started to counter the European rule and question the fabricated assumptions employed to justify that rule. The African writers became overtly political and nationalistic concerns loomed large. Several conferences were organized to direct all intellectual activity into the service of nationalistic causes. The first conference which was held in Paris in 1956 under the auspices of Presence Africaine laid down some principles which were to guide African writers. The African novel rose to command serious attention and achieved some kind of dignity with Chinua Achebe. The roots of his writing were grounded in an urgency to reconstruct in fictional terms a definition of African identity in view of the severe colonial onslaughts unleashed all over the continent. And the novel that received wide spread international acclaim was Chinua Achebe's first and most impressive novel Things Fall Apart (1958). Hailed as a modern classic, it was potent enough to replace Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress as a seminal school text in Africa.

Things Fall Apart is in many ways a direct response to a Eurocentric discourse about African culture and history. The novel was a conscious attempt to restore a sense of dignity and history to Africa whose cultures were being abused and debased by the imperialist designs of Europeans. In Morning Yet on Creation Day Achebe himself says about how he came to write: "At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised Mr. Johnson) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned … [M]y first book, Things Fall Apart, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son" (Peter T Simatei, 2005: 235).

The extensive use of proverbs in Things Fall Apart and the dexterity of "fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience …, in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (Dennis Walder, 2002: 52) aims at rejecting the assumptions of those colonialists who presented Africans as speechless "rudimentary souls". However, it was not only because of language and style that Achebe became a doyen of African fiction but also because of his commitment that writers have to their nations and cultures. In all essays, especially "The Novelist as Teacher" and "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", Achebe emphasizes the writers' role for writing in Africa. For Achebe "The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost" (Kolawole Ogungbesan, 1978: 37). Achebe takes upon himself the role of a cultural nationalist with a mission to help his "society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of denigration and self-abasement" (Chinua Achebe, 2007: 105). Achebe's novels grow out of a sense of deeply felt need, a need to convey the world that "African peoples [sic] did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans" (Kolawole Ogungbesan, 1978: 37) but had their own philosophy, culture and dignity.

In Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe comes to terms with history– an obsessive theme in postcolonial literatures – and attempts to balance it by giving an alternate version. Achebe does not glorify the Igbo society nor does he malign the Christian European behaviour as a whole. According to Achebe, African writers cannot forget the past because the present comes out of it; but they should not be mesmerized by their contemplation of the past and thereby flaw their art. Although Things Fall Apart is a multi-thematic narrative, it is the theme of "encounter" between Europe and Africa that looms large. The theme of the novel is clearly stated on page 183: "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Chinua Achebe, 2007: 183). The knife of British administration falls on the serene world of Igboland and cuts it to bleed and die. By zooming the theme of colonization of Africa and setting it on the agenda of African fiction writing, Achebe played a significant role in the emergence of postcolonial Anglophone literature in Africa, and set an example for a whole group of younger African novelists.

The utmost challenge before African novelists besides deconstructing the Eurocentric discourse was to chronicle the momentous chapters of their history in a right perspective. As such the momentous episodes of their history like The Period of Emergency (1952-57) – the so called Mau Mau phase find an ample space in their works. Given the gravity and intensity of such events in East Africa, the writers became overtly political and socially committed. The Mau Mau phase proved to be a prime force behind the works of writers like Ngugi, Meja Mwangi and Godwin Wachira. Ngugi's works, like Achebe's, are critiques of colonialism and chronicle the life and times of East Africa (Kenya). Apart from focusing his attention on the disarray caused by foreign value systems within the traditional African society as evidenced from The River Between, Ngugi gives ample space in his works to the Mau Mau revolt by the Kenyans against the British administration. Novels like Weep Not, Child (1964) and A Grain of Wheat (1967) are based on the Mau Mau phase of the Kenyan history. A Grain of Wheat revolves round the violent events of the Mau Mau struggle for freedom. At the very outset, we find Mugo reminiscing on the atrocities of the whiteman and the terror and oppression unleashed by the government troops on the innocent people. Gitogo, a deaf and dumb young man is killed in cold blood by the government troops during one of their search operations and then labelled a "terrorist" (Ngugi wa Thiong'O, 1968: 6).

The imposition of emergency to suppress the freedom struggle brought innumerable sufferings both to men and women. After Gikonyo's detention, his wife Mumbi has to pass through heart-rending experiences to sustain herself and her family. Commenting on the cruelties of the administration, Mumbi tells Mugo: "They splashed some petrol on the grass thatch of my mother's hut … [T]he roof caught fire…the flames leapt to the sky…I could not bear to see the game repeated, so I shut my eyes … The roofs were cracking. I remember the pain as the cracking noise repeated in my heart". (Ngugi wa Thiong'O, 1968: 122-123).

A Grain of Wheat recreates, in fictional terms, a significant phase of the Kenyan history and portrays the sufferings faced by the Africans during this violent phase. The illegal land grabbing, forced labour on white settlers' land, bulldozing of whole villages, police brutalities, detentions, third-degree

tortures and fabricated encounters – all these horrible episodes of Kenyan history are highlighted. Ngugi presents in A Grain of Wheat both the European and the African perspective of the Mau Mau struggle for liberation. Whereas the European representatives view Mau Mau struggle as "anarchy" and "savagery", Africans view it as a struggle to liberate Kenya from British occupation. Thompson, one of the British representatives, is a party to the European colonial agenda. Ngugi gives his readers a peep into his notebook which he maintains for his intended book Prospero in Africa. The entries he makes reveal his colonial ideology. He looks at Mau Mau as evil, "a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven". (Ngugi wa Thiong'O, 1968: 49). However, the responsibility of revealing the real face of "Prospero" and exposing the game of deceit played by the colonizers on the apparent pretext of bringing civilization was left to freedom fighters like Kihika. Similarly, another seminal Kenyan novelist Meja Mwangi portrays a lively picture of the Mau Mau phase. Set in pre-independence Emergency period, both Carcase for Hounds (1974) and Taste of Death (1975) chronicle the Mau Mau phase for struggle. In his Carcase for Hounds, Mwangi gives a "powerful" presentation of the Mau Mau struggle. He "presents the Mau Mau from the inside, through the thoughts and activities of the freedom fighters themselves" (Eustace Palmer, 1979: 312). Mwangi, like Ngugi in A Grain of Wheat, presents both the African and European perspectives of the Mau Mau struggle.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that African novelists have tried in one way or the other to deconstruct the Eurocentric discourses which formed the image of the African continent as the Other and tried to interpret it according to its own parameters. Not only do African novelists through their imaginative literatures endeavour to liberate themselves from the complexes of denigration but also reconstruct and recreate in fictional terms the momentous chapters of their history in a right perspective. Whether it is Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Ngugi's A Grain of wheat, or Mwangi's Carcase for Hounds, all have chronicled the important aspects of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Not only have these works succeeded in highlighting the momentous chapters of the African history but also in exposing the myth of the Other. All these works are an attempt to deconstruct the stereotypical Eurocentric discourses about the native Africans and Africa and to recreate those momentous episodes of African history in a right perspective which have been debased by the Eurocentric discourses.

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