

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 3 [June 2016]

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

The Criterion



www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxymrj.com

Explication of Themes and Tone in the Literary Works of Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe and Dennis Brutus

Ifediora Okiche

Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Port Harcourt
Nigeria.

Abstract:

In exploring colonial domination in West Africa and apartheid prevalent in South Africa, this paper examines works of African writers such as Armah, Achebe and Dennis Brutus from the perspective of what could be referred to as “the confrontational talkback syndrome.” These writers equipped with western education, wrote protest literary works that unraveled the atrocities perpetuated as a result of colonialism and apartheid with the intension to correcting the ills prevalent in their society. This paper critically investigates the role of these writers under study, how they succeed in sensitizing Africans through their literary works about their glorious past and the negative effects of colonialism and neocolonialism on the people of Africa. This paper concludes that aside from the aesthetic and utilitarian value which the works of these writers under study upholds, these writers set the pace for contemporary African writers to follow. They have succeeded in illuminating the fact that some writers are “teachers” and should be emulated.

Keywords: Africa, Achebe, Armah, Dennis Brutus

Introduction

African literature could be referred to as “contact literature,” this is as result of colonial invasion by imperialist Britain and other European countries who exploited her colonies. Committed writers such as Achebe, Armah and Brutus, through their creative works, thought it pivotal to educate, teach, entertain, and reorient prospective African readers, gave birth to the kind of literary works they wrote. Their works nevertheless, unraveled the political, historical, and more importantly, socioeconomic experiences of Africans. These writers on the other hand, did not distance themselves from the masses; they felt that they needed to carry their people along. They were greatly influence by African oral literature, the use of pidgin, vernacular and sometimes the fusing together English language with indigenous African languages for stylistic effects. They made extensive use of their skill, talent and education to achieving success in the various genres they wrote which includes poetry, prose and drama. English language becomes the most acceptable means use to expressing themselves with the motive of making their works assessable to many readers in Africa and the world in general. Armah, Achebe and Brutus creative and imaginative literary works could be accessed from the position which they present their works “writers as teachers,” they taught and entertained their readers through their creative works. Equipped with the knowledge of African culture, they made attempts to present the African point of view in their novels and poetry, a critically exploration of the African world view (cosmology) and sociological experience was also prevalent in the tone of their literary

works. For a writer such as Achebe, his literary works were forms of protest and they include his most widely read novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of god*, while the poetry of Dennis Brutus could also be referred to as protest poems against the evil claws of racism and the inhuman apartheid laws prevalent in Southern Africa. In addition, Brutus poems were influenced to a large extent by poets such as Tennyson, Wordsworth and Hopkins. Having made mention of the influence of oral tradition in the works of Achebe, more importantly, he makes use of the structure of the folktale which has a beginning, middle and end in writing his novels.

Colonial Domination Explored in the Literary Works of Achebe

Chinua Achebe has often been referred to as a “teacher”, his novels are didactic and rich in African oral tradition or literature, and he is described by many as a good “story teller,” this, he succeeds in doing in his novel entitled *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe’s novels are protest literary works that criticized colonialism, Eldred Durosimi Jones view in respect to Africa’s colonial experience is that:

The period of colonial protest and struggle gave way to the establishment of independence regimes, to a stock-taking and a preliminary assessment of the fruits of the new state of life. The writers of Africa looked about them, and applied to life under their own kind the same critical examination, through their art and conduct, which had been given to earlier colonial regimes. (2)

Achebe sought through his literary works, realistic ways to re-interpreting the distorted view European writers had about Africa as seen in the works of Joseph Conrad, Joyce Kilmer and Rider Haggard. The major thematic preoccupations examined in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* are culture conflict, religion imposition through domination and the destruction of traditional African religion. Achebe has succeeded in unraveling the various misguided views of the colonizer about the colonized. In addition, the colonizer through their agents such as the missionaries, anthropologists, colonial administrators and scholars concluded that the colonized are savages and primitives who needed to be guided. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* examines cultural domination through colonialism which gave birth to the struggle for social existence by the protagonist (Okonkwo) in the novel (TFA) henceforth. Dan Izevbaye perception in discussing the thematic preoccupation in Achebe’s novel has this to say:

Since colonialism has imposed a similar pattern of linguistic relationships and a common political experience on African societies, the theme of colonialism has provided a compulsive point of view for many critics.(8)

In Achebe’s novel (TFA) we notice the gradual rise in conflict associated with colonial domination by imperialist British authority over the tragic-hero Okonkwo. Furthermore, the sub-theme in the novel is the quest for existence unraveled in the personality of the tragic-hero Okonkwo who did all he could to maintain his dignity as a custodian of African tradition and religion. The colonizer sought ways in relegating to the background the traditional way of life of the natives by imposing their culture and religion which is alien to the natives. Achebe vividly captures the change in the various phases of the traditional values of Africans under colonial domination. It is in view of this change that during colonialism, Christianity was introduced to

Africans as the only way to salvation which I disagree and regard as a fallacy championed by misguided elements. It is moreover pertinent to observe that Achebe's (TFA) and *Arrow of God* are novels that unravel the total destabilization of the African (Igbo cosmology) way of life, through colonial domination and suppression by imperialist Britain. Achebe clearly points out the negative impact of western colonialism on the Igbo worldview and culture, the white man ridiculed traditional African way of life and religion "Your gods are not alive and cannot do any harm," Replied the white man. They are pieces of wood and stone" (105). The colonizer (misguided elements) also venerated idols with the use of stones and other objects. The conflict in Achebe's novel (TFA) reveals the negative portrayal of traditional values by an alien and more powerful culture causing the traditional society to fall apart. Europeans portray Africans negatively in their novels but Izevbaye is asking a question that needs to be answered by African writers and scholars:

What literary manner was the young novelist to reach to the prevailing conceptions of culture and civilization which, because they were based on the existing state of European knowledge and scholarship about Africa, were considered by the African intellectual as contributing to an inadequate and unpleasantly romantic view of Africa? (15)

What Achebe has succeeded in doing in (TFA) is repackaging and rewriting the African story from the African perspective and from an objective point of view. In Achebe's *Arrow of God* we find the British imperial power through its agent trying to impose on Ezeulu the priest Ulu the prestigious position of a warrant chief which he refuses. The major theme explored in *Arrow of God* is the suppression of traditional Igbo culture and the conversion of the natives to Christianity. The imprisoning of Ezeulu by Winterbottom signifies the domination of British imperial power. The tone in Achebe's *Arrow of God* is one of protest, before the invasion of Africa by British imperial power; Africa had their worldview, culture and sociological pattern. Izevbaye makes a perceptive observation:

The defeat of epic values in the two traditional novels of Achebe makes place for the world in which the form of the novel can be developed in more conventional terms. The epic-hero – that man of uncommon abilities who combines himself the most highly rated values of his race-seems to have disappeared from recent African fiction. (20)

Ezeulu becomes the tragic-hero in Achebe's novel, his decision to send his son to "be his eyes" from my opinion indicates the rate which the "lunatic religion" (Christianity) has dominated the life of the priest of Ulu. Achebe does not view the old religion (African traditional religion) and culture as primitive, negative and evil in totality, when he says "... teach my readers that their past- with all the imperfections was not one night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (21). The novels of Achebe examines vividly colonial domination in various ways, which has led to the disintegration of Africans as portrayed by the character of Ezeulu who eventually runs mad as a result of his unwillingness to submit to imperial power and Okonkwo who hangs himself as a result of his frustration caused by a commissioner under the colonial authority.

Armah's Novels, the Colonial Experience

Ayi Kwei Armah remains one of Ghana's most committed novelists who have unraveled through his novels the negative impact of colonial domination in Ghana and West African in general. Armah's novels are rich in aesthetic and utilitarian value, his literary works appeals to the universals and are didactic, Izevbaye states that "A novel ensures that its original function will not be forgotten because it is an art form which depends on the printed word for its transformation and preservation" (28). Pivotal is the realization that Armah's novels which include *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments*, *Why Are We So Bleast?* and *Two thousand seasons* thematic preoccupations have proliferated from the communal protest over cultural conflicts (colonial domination) to individual perceptions of truth and reality. Armah succeeds in unraveling the negative effects of colonialism on Africa. In addition to Armah's view, Nwahunanya comments that:

... the experience of colonialism wiped this out and replaced it with an individualism cultivated through the divisive practices and selfish tastes introduced by whites. (272)

The statement above shows the negative effect of colonialism which has affected the world view and culture of Ghanaians. Armah therefore re-examines the negative and selfish attitude of man, attributed to colonial domination which has a negative effect on the way Ghanaians think and act. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the theme of corruption, helplessness and pessimistic attitude are unmasked through the characters in the novel. He makes vivid use of figurative language and his characters are corrupt men and women, the imagery he employs is captured in the frustration, disappointment, disillusionment and shrinking attitude of the characters in the novel. Charles Nnolim opinion about Armah's novels is absurd,

Armah is both a cosmic pessimist (who views the world as inevitably and intrinsically bad and life in it essentially gloomy and futile), and a retrogressive pessimist or peyorist (one who views the world as undergoing an inevitable corruption and degeneration). (207)

Armah seem to emphasis more about the corruption predominant in Ghana, he makes use of images such as lubricity, mucus, urine, vomiting, and bad breath to indicate the level of moral decay prevalent in Ghana at the time he wrote the novel. The after effect of colonial domination in Ghana is massive, it changed the way of life of Ghanaians as they lost the communal love that made them united in the past, greed and the quest for materialism becomes the practice in Ghana. The tone in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is pessimistic and he reveals this through the use of imagery and symbolism. The writer makes use of words such as "your mother's rotten cunt" (3), "spat out a generous gob of mucus" (1), and "the mess of some traveler's vomit" (102), to indicate the corruption inherent in Ghana. Nnolim's comparative view captures the essence of Armah's thought "With its emphasis on the image of rot and decay, it offers a clue to the theme and meaning of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*" (208). Colonial masters have taught Ghanaians to be corrupt, this we discover in one of the characters in the novel Koomson who derives solace in collecting bribe, is lustful, a glutton of some sort and a

selfish sinner whose desires are directed towards materialism. The shithole, ditch and latrines are symbols which indicate a hell of some sort for corrupt people. Nnolim is also of the opinion that:

In this circle, too, I place the lawyers, the politicians, and the merchant women. When Koomson and Man pass through the shithole of the latrine, they are in the second bolgia of the Eight Circle in Hell. (211)

Armah consciously makes use of paradox and irony in various incidents in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* deliberately for stylistic purpose in the novel. In a fictional way, his novel captures the collapse of Nkrumah era in government and the series of corruption that followed subsequent era's Armah states:

A pitiful shrinking of the world from those days teacher still lookedback to, when the single mind was filled with hopes of a whole people. A pitiful shrinking, to days when all the powerful could thinkof was to use power of a people to fill their own paunches. (160)

Armah makes lucid use of irony and paradox in exploring the themes in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* through the character of the Man, described by Oyo "The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul. But the chichidodo only feeds on maggots, and you know the maggots grow best inside the lavatory (44). The Man who does everything possible to avoid corrupt practice ends up been involved in it during the boat deal with Koomson as he encourages the boatman to offer bribe to the watchman who helps Koomson escape. The major thematic preoccupation assessed in Armah's *Why We Are So Blest?* Are the futility and despair inherent in post-colonial Ghana, the novel has a pessimistic undertone. Weassert after a careful study of the literary works of the novelist that Armah (he) is a "dark writer."

Attack on Apartheid Policy, Protest Poetry by Dennis Brutus

Racial segregation in apartheid South Africa gave birth to the writing of protest literary works to condemn the inhuman treatment of black majority by the white minority in the country. South African writers sought ways to express how they felt and channeled their creative energy towards the publication of literary works that criticized the evil policies of apartheid. The undertone of the writings of many South African writers is political. It is in view of this that Dathorn has comments "For an African to be involved in politics is to court the wrath of the apartheid regime" (291). Many South African writers are faced with a choice of either remaining in apartheid South Africa or go to exile in a foreign country as a result of the government policies that are harsh to those that oppose them Obuke comments "... the hard choice South Africans face from time to time; whether to escape into exile or remain" (196). Dennis Brutus remained a committed activist even in exile till death, like I had mentioned earlier that most poems written in South Africa during apartheid were protest poems which condemned the inhuman polices during that era. Clive Wake says "and it seems the poets of South Africa have inherited from those of West Africa the creative energy stimulated by aspiration and protest" (235).

The major thematic preoccupations in Brutus poems are man inhumanity to fellow man, brutality and protest against harsh government policies. K.E. Semanu and T.Vincent comments that “Brutus writes simply and subtly.His style belongs to the main tradition of English poetry” (55). Brutus poems challenged white oppressive minority. In his poem “A troubadour I traverse...” the poet sees himself as a knight whose duty is to protect her lady which symbolical represents South Africa. In the poem, the theme is revolved around the ban on freedom of speech, this we see in the lines below:

... those who banned inquire and
Movements, delighting in the test. (56)

The poet’s tone is one filled with bitterness and a protest for justice in South Africa, the poem entitled “The sun on this rubble” examines the helplessness of the oppressed by the oppressor, he makes reference in lines below:

or spell some malignant nemesis
Sharpevilled to spearpoints for revenging (58)

He makes reference to oppressive apartheid laws in South Africa after the massacre that took place at Sharpeville. In “After exile (4 Selections)” he imagined what life was like for an oppressed black in South Africa; another theme in the poem is the unavoidability of protest by the maltreated oppressed. The tone of the poet is revolved around of pain and anguish.

Conclusion

The literary works of writers from West Africa to large degree are various forms of protest literature that condemned colonial domination of British imperial power which affected the tone of writers from the region. Apartheid in South Africa contributed to the massive turn out of literary publications and protest poems from the region led by Dennis Brutus who criticized the excesses of the white minority in positions of authority. We extol the effort of Armah, Achebe and Brutus for their insight in exploring the various themes prevalent in their regions with the hope that it will restore the lost dignity of man.

Works Cited:

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958. Print.

---. *Morning Yet On Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975. Print.

Armah, KweiAyi. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. London: Heinemann, 1969. Print.

Jones, Durosimi.E. “Ten Years of African Literature Today”. Jones (ed)*African Literature Today 10Retrospect & Prospects*. New York: Heinemann, 1979. Print.

Izevabaye, Dan. “Issues in the Reassessment of the African Novel”.Jones (ed) *African Literature Today10 Retrospect & Prospects*. New York: Heinemann, 1979. Print.

Nnolim, Charles. "Dialectics as Form: Pejorism in the Novels of Armah". *In African Literature Today 10 Retrospect & Prospects*. New York: Heinemann, 1979. Print.

Nwahunanya, C. "The Social and Cultural Foundations of the Tragedy in Achebe's Rural Novels". Nwahunanya's (ed) *Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Post Colonial African Literature*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd, 2012. Print.

Obuke, Okpure. "South African History, Politics and literature: Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue and Rive's Emergency". *In African Literature Today 10 Retrospect & Prospects*. New York: Heinemann, 1979. Print.

Senanu, K.E(ed). *A Selection of African Poetry*. London: Longman Group Ltd, 1976. Print.