

AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION: THE STRENGTH OF MODERN LITERATURE

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Abstract

In “New Trends in Modern African Fiction”, many critics observe that “Fiction in Africa”- written in English and French - is currently enjoying an unprecedented creative outburst, proliferation and popularity. This popularity, according to them, seems to arise from some aesthetic strength hitherto unrealized in Written African Fiction which has successfully adapted the representations of Orality and Ethnicity techniques into such a written form. The use of such features is abundantly in the works of major African writers. Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold: first to explore the nature of the Modern African Fiction and how it emerges. The second is to investigate, through critical reading, the extent to which the orality and ethnicity have influenced the genuine African literature.

Keywords: Orality, ethnicity, African literature, modern African fiction, written African literature, fiction.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is worth nothing at the outset that this paper intends to redress the balance between two distinct kinds of literatures: Oral and Written literature. In fact, it has been made clear, at present, that these two forms undergo reciprocal influence. To discuss it so, and in order to find a reliable answer to the rationale, two basic objectives are intentionally introduced: the first is to explore the nature of Modern African Fiction and how it emerges, and the second objective is to investigate and interpret, through critical reading, the cultural impact as exposed in orality and ethnicity that –in turn- are representing an evidence embedded in the genuine African literature.

2 MODERN AFRICAN FICTION

To talk about the first part, it obviously known that no critics could ignore the cultural and language diversity that spread over the whole African continent and this is resulted in the numerous fictional texts, ranging from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages (English, Portuguese and French). To illustrate this reality that shows that most fictional texts are written in English and French, Wauthier in *L’Afrique des Africains* (1977) simply puts it as a fictional production implying the existence of “two Africas inherited from colonisation, the English and the French one”. This, consequently, engendered the emergence of a new form of literature known as Modern African literature. This type of fiction is far from being modern by European standards: It is traditional in its form and content with a strong streak of social realism (Arab, 1982, p.12) in its fiction and of romanticism in its poetry.

To tell the untold –through the lens of the westerns- this form of literature is regarded as a as a quaint picture resulting from the British or French literatures and an absurd assertion of the excellence of the primitive, black culture. At best it is found to be of sociological interest, a good source for ethnographic data of the traditional past. Even the most outstanding European critics deny its literary value.

Oral literatures are in decline for a number of complex and interrelated reasons. One principal driver behind

the decline of oral culture is the ever greater focus on universal, basic literacy promoted by international organizations working in human development and education. Another causal factor is the high degree of endangerment of many of the world's remaining indigenous languages. Rather paradoxically, the family of organizations that make up the United Nations are involved in campaigns that address both processes: on the one hand, they promote mass literacy programs that have been shown to undermine and erode established traditions of oral transmission; on the other, they fund programs that nurture cultural diversity and support the mapping and documentation of endangered languages (Turin, 2013).

It is true that Modern African literature has no one like Samuel Beckett or Albert Camus to show as literary evidence. But if at all Ezekiel, Wa'Thiong'O N'gugui, Achebe, Med Dib, Kateb Yacine, Leila Abouleila, or any other African writer would survive, s/he would survive precisely because of his/her refusal to fall in line with the European counterpart. The African writers' situation is fundamentally different. It did not follow the usual line-up that goes from the tribal to the modern, by passing the medieval; the change is directly with no intermediate stage. The on-ward fast changing has not come to deny the strong points of the tribal literary society; however, it comes up to enhance the subtlety of the African literature in its orality; the oral transmission can afford the nostalgia for the idyllic past.

3 ORALITY AND ETHNICITY

To tell the untold –through the lens of an African- Orality, as a hallmark in African literature, does not just provide a literary mine to be exploited by writers, it is an attempt to save the culture from being swept away by the Western tide. In most parts of Africa the situation is so difficult because colonialism took an aggressive form towards the indigenous religion or culture. It has therefore provoked a sharper reaction in the African writer. To illustrate this point, Wa'Thiong'O N'gugui (1975, p. xv) says that this form of literature is “**given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces**” that cannot be ignored, and then has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestation, slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

As a matter of fact, political freedom –as most topical issue depicted in literary texts- has not introduced any noticeable change. In some countries colonialism has simply changed hands and roles – a foreign regime has been replaced by an indigenous regime, more ruthless and more repressive. For instance, the historical process of the Modern African literature as shown in the four developing periods mentioned below proves the fact:

- The pre- colonial period is well presented in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe; it shapes a style of literature that was bound in a period preceding the era of the European settlements in Africa, and it represents successfully the harmonious life that the natives lead before the coming of the whites.
- The colonial period, that is presented by Wa'Thiong'O N'gugui in *A Grain of Wheat*, (1967) is a form of political awareness; it is the stimulus emergence of nationalism and a decisive factor in the rise of the anti-colonialist ideology in Africa and against assimilation.
- The post-colonial period is less exposed to assimilation, but it is nurtured in radical political thought such as Apartheid, imperialism and neo-colonialism. The writers are alarmed to depict the political and the social malaise that the Africans live; the writer who shapes this period the South African Writer Eziekle Mphahlele in *Down Second Avenue*.
- The nowadays literary period is for the most part characterized by despair. And the note of despair can be heard mainly in the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah' s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) or in Achebe' s *The Man of the People*. This literature sees with horror the new young men who instead of fighting for a better Africa, are hankering American jeans and English music. It finds the new generation to be cynical, self –centred and apish. This would create stagnation in the creative life.

By the same token, many critics observe that the “New Trends in Modern African Fiction” - written in English and French - are currently enjoying an unprecedented creative outburst, proliferation and popularity. This popularity, according to them, seems to take place because not only the aesthetic strength was reinforced but also the representation of Orality and Ethnicity techniques have been successfully implemented in Written African Fiction. Walter J. Ong (1982, p.12) puts forward that “thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles as ‘oral literature’ is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels”.

It is certainly to say that despite the major transformations that have taken place in Africa in the past few centuries, a large number of people remain in close contact with traditional cultures. Oral traditions continue to play important roles in their lives. For the westernized elite, (like Wole Soyinka) oral traditions are useful resources for placing an authentic African stamp on writings and they can help in reconstructions of

traditional life. The oral form or the oral tradition is the oldest literature and the most typical and genuine African because it has been practiced for many centuries. It is conveyed more through speech than through writing, oral literature is often an important medium for the transmission of ideas, knowledge, and history. This form of literature includes great varieties of genres such as legend, myths, ritual texts, curative chants, fables, genealogies, tales, folk tales, songs, poems, riddles, tongue twisters, recitations, historical narratives and mainly proverbs (palm oil, much has been said about 'the palm wine with which Achebe's words are eaten' (Lindfords, 1968, p.18). For the Africans, as it is noted and recorded in books and magazines, it is in priority a matter of entertainment rather than instruction that is why this type of literature is qualified as the escapist literature.

4 ORALITY AND ETHNICITY IN MODERN AFRICAN FICTION

On the other hand, the written form is defined as to be the interpreted literature because it is by definition a literature of consciousness and deep understanding of the real situation in Africa (it is a depiction of colonialism and the societal malaise that seriously came into sight just after the independences) it takes a form of social document. This literature emerged from the contact of the local cultures and foreign ones, particularly those of the Europeans. For some of the African elites the birth of this literary type is a historical inevitability that for better or for worse, human history has moved in a particular direction, and there can be no going back. They have to catch up with the West or perish. But in the process of catching up with the West they may perish too. They may lose their cultural and social, even their linguistic identity, a situation which the average African is not prepared to accept.

The historicity of this literature relates the needs of stigmatizing, preserving and saving it because it was about to be swept away by the western tide, since it is viewed through the lens of the Eurocentric vision as non normative literature. But indeed, many writers were aware and worked in a conscious way to preserve their literature which according to a historical document had appeared since the 18th century with the work of Olaudah Equiano's *Travels*, it is the first Nigerian novel which is qualified as "the earliest Igbo literary writing" (Obiechina, 1973, p. 35). It is an autobiography with definite interests written by Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, native of the Nigerian coasts. He is a self-taught person who publishes his chronicle in 1789 after he bought his freedom, back as an experienced militant he devoted his lifetime to the anti-slavery movements.

Similarly to orality, ethnicity constitutes significant units in the African context. In recent times, the assertion of ethnic identity within the context of nations in Africa is adequate proof of their influence not only in the sphere of politics but in the making of the cultural identities of various nations. In the literary criticism context, the suppression of the ethnic factor has taken the form of erasing the ethnic presence in the literary history of individual countries. At best, there has always been a vague reference to 'orature', a label that neither properly designates the complex literary resources of diverse group-ethnicities nor reflects their nature. However, other critics assume that identifying ethnicity in African literature may be a major step towards developing a viable alternative to literary dominance. Albert Gerard (1981, pp. 31-32) has argued the fact by insisting on the inclusion of the ethnicity in literatures of Africa.

5 THE IMPACT OF ORALITY AND ETHNICITY IN MODERN AFRICAN FICTION

It is also worth to mention that the African cultures possess a rich repertoire of proverbs and sayings. These are the most significant epitome of the combination of oral forms with written figures of speech expressing a popular point of view on a human attitude. For Africans, effective speech and social success depend on a good command of proverbs; i.e. a bank of proverbs ones have is to strength and deepens their wisdoms. These serve as a reliable authority in arguments or discussion that requires the listener to decipher the intended meaning.

Consequently, to talk about the oral tradition and the written form separately is quasi impossible because these two distinct forms of expression that mediated through two channels meet in the writer and reader's minds, and contribute to the production of a hybridised semiotic variety which combines mouth and ears for the first and eyes for the second. The main difference between the two traditions lies in the type of communication it entails as Ong formulates it:

The reader is normally absent when the writer writes and the writer is normally absent when the reader reads, whereas in an oral communication speaker and hearer are present to one another. (1982, p.171)

The intention here is to single out the originality of the 'text act', the author being a writer and a speaker at once, and the reader being a listener too.

To conclude with, it is observed that most African writers did not write in their native languages, but in the language of the coloniser (in this respect the Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine said the language of the coloniser is “un butain de guerre” a treasure of war). It was a form of response in order to assert such a valid literature which found refuge in Social Realism Trend. So, it is half traditional and half modern; the modernity is only in the language used, but tradition is apparent in the use of the oral form and the inclusion of a great number of identity indices. Therefore, the purpose of the markers is to assert a literary identity that develops its own entity.

The markers, as illustrated, can be words: Mask, Oracles, or Goatskin; can be names: Aboliga, Nwoye and Ahmed; can be places: compound hut, medina; can be a habit: gathering around the water tap (Eziekel Mphalele); can be a proverb “in Armah’s the wise man; and can be the style; very simple style.

6 CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, it is widely commented that most African People and even the educated ones might avoid the written document and trust the oral direct tale because orality –according to them- transmits the authenticity and evidence. Orality is the common core of all Africans. Its role has been highly effective in providing the people with the needful inspiration and the necessary insight. Orality, for the African people, is also a source of becoming aware of their destiny that necessitates the knowledge of their past, present and the possible future. However, the written form conveys a diverse field of political differences because each African intellectual is indoctrinated with a given ideology.

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