

Theorizing Literature: Style and Themes in Selected Texts by African Authors

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Abstract

This paper investigates some major thematic preoccupations and stylistic trends prevalent in African literature; the paper examines the works of some African writers from different generations and how they use their creative works to unravel postcolonial realities in Africa. The paper brings to our notice the various literary theories adopted in revealing the numerous stylistic trends and themes in modern African literature, not excluding Gay theory which is relatively new in contemporary African fiction. This paper concludes that contrary to popular research findings, writers have more to do in correcting numerous societal ills prevalent in Africa.

Keywords: African, writers, literary, theme, theory, style

Introduction

African literature has different phases which include; the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial stages which have significantly influenced the themes and styles of African writers. The writer's environment constitutes a major determining factor that influences what and who he/she writes for, it is imperative to observe the importance of African oral tradition which has tremendous influence the literary works of many African writers, Michael Etherton comments:

It is a shift from the re-creation of oral tradition in dramatic terms to the re-creation of a past contained in written histories. It is concerned with the colonial period, and also with the immediate pre-colonial period and with those one powerful and extensive African empires (65).

The importance of African oral tradition cannot be over emphasized. Many African writers unravel extensively; transformational vision of the neo-colonial society they found themselves in through their literary works. In a primary sense, they expose the social-economic factors which have disrupted the development of Africa and the gradual degeneration of her as a result of bad governance, massive corruption, political instability and insecurity in their creative works. In many African countries, corruption and political misappropriation of funds are the major issues examined. Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horseman* is a play which examine thematic preoccupations such as culture contact and culture conflict between traditional belief systems of Africans (Yoruba) and Europeans. Soyinka creatively dramatized a historical event in one of his best plays, *Death and the Kings Horseman*. Etherton observes that:

Soyinka is at pains to point out that his play is only incidentally about the colonial presence the colonialist are only catalysts and not antagonist in the metaphysical conflict which takes place between the Elesin and his fellow Yoruba's (66).

Apart from the fact that Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugu Wa Thiong'o and J.P. Clark Bekederemo occupy the prestigious positions as first generation African writers, they have influenced subsequent generations of African writers.

Textual Examination of Style and Themes in the Literary Works of Selected African Authors

In this section, the selection of literary texts to be investigated is based on the relevance of the texts in contemporary African society. Texts examined are selected from the four regions of Africa namely: West, East, North and South Africa. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o an African from Kenyan extraction have contributed tremendously to the growth of what could be referred to as modern African literature, he makes use of historical events in Kenya in many of his creative literary works to expose the evil prevalent in his home country in particular and African in general. Etherton contribution towards Ngugi's achievement as a writer is commendable, he opines that "*The Trials of Dedan Kimathi* will indicate the qualities which these sorts of historical drama embody as well as the literary nature of the work" (66). The major theme examined in the play is revolution by the Mau Mau freedom fighters to reclaim what belongs to them (land). Ngugi gives a fictional account of the situation in Kenya during the Mau Mau struggle; he makes use of the Marxist literary theory in the play. Sola Afolayan opines that "The conception of Marxism arose from the radical perception of human society; and its practitioners have been viewed as radicals" (1). Ngugi makes use of a radical approach in most of his Marxist novels to addressing societal ills prevalent in Kenya. African novels have essentially reflected the position of writers who reveal the numerous socio-political and economic experiences in their countries. In addition, another playwright whose work dwells on the theme of culture conflict is Ahmed Yerima's *The Trail of Oba Ovonramwen*, which is a thought provoking play unravels the culture conflict between Benin inhabitants and British invaders who disrupted the peace and harmony in ancient Benin kingdom. Yerima makes use of New Historicism as the major

literary theory in his play to unravel the evil inherent in colonization and British conquest. Britain's invasion of Benin Kingdom led to a total destruction of their rustic and communal activities, the various violent events in the play is illuminating. The killing of the white men in an attempt to preserve the rituals and culture of the people of Benin led to subsequent deaths in the play.

Zulu Sofola is one of Nigerian famous playwright, her drama *The Wedlock of the Gods* might have contributed to bringing her to limelight. In this tragic play, a lady who is married to a man she hates who eventually dies, she remarries without following due customs and becomes pregnant. The play is romanticized based on individual and selfish norms above traditional values. Sofola makes lucid use of mythical and archetypal literary theories; she also adopts classical Western style of tragedy in her play. Ifediora Okiche makes use of binary opposition in his anthology entitled *Cosmic Cycle* to unravel the cosmic conflict which is the war against the forces of good versus evil. The themes explored in his works are corruption; insecurity and love, elements of myths and culture are explored in poems like "Earthen Pot" and "Ancestral Mission". The writer makes use of imagery in revealing the themes in his poems, for instance in "Time Bomb"

Mosquito legs, insane pot bellies
The boys are oiling their metals
The magicians are still drinking (34).

The poet makes use of binary opposition to expose class stratification in his society, between the rich and the poor. Dennis Brutus is famous for his protest poems which condemn apartheid policies in South Africa; the themes in his poems include the brutalization of the oppressed by the oppressor and the cruel laws of the apartheid government on black majority. Chinyere Nwahunanya had noted in an earlier study that:

There are many sides to Brutus's protest against apartheid. There is his expression of a sense of identity with the suffering masses of his country in those of his poems which document the injustice perpetrated by the agents of the apartheid regime (88).

In the novels of socialist writers like Festus Iyayi and Meja Mwangi, I perceive the struggle for survival in a very corrupt society. Thus, it appears that the characters in their novels are sometimes disillusioned and revolt against the totalitarian system of government. Bandele Thomas novel *The Sympathetic Undertaken and Other Dream* is a novel the Marxist literary theory is applied; it is a satire on the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Babangida. In the novel, politicians are ridiculed through the character named Rayo. He (Rayo) is disillusioned as a result of the decree that prohibits freedom of press:

But since though had been outlawed by the power that be so that even thoughts, not your words, had to be disguised- coated in layers of honey to their ears, I knew – was left with little choice but to believe that even the codification system of my thought process had expired. Therefore, I was dead (95).

This socialist novel unravels the ruthless nature of dictators through historical manner, although in a fictitious description which makes his style distinct while Festus Iyayi's *The Contract* a Social Realist novel dwells on the theme of man brutality to fellow man, in the novel we see a crazy quest for money:

All our people are not caught up in the intense craze for money; money and women. People are terribly mean to each other now. The old trust, the old handshake is gone. There is so much hatred now, a lot of hatred and a lot of bitterness and a lot of jealousy. In short, a lot of everything that is bad (16).

Greed is another theme Iyayi reveal to us in *The Contract* through the characters in the novel. Iyayi exposes Alhaji Kadi desperation to getting the contract at all cost. The novelist makes use of a simple narrative technique.

Okot P Bitek's *Song of Lawino* is rich in African oral tradition; the theme of the poem could be referred to as culture clash or the ridicule of European values. Charles Mangua contributed immensely to the growth of popular literature in East Africa. Sex is the major theme in Mangua's works. D.G Maillu is another popular author from East Africa who contributed enormously to the development of popular literature in Africa, the themes in his works are revolved around drinking, having sex, and crazy accumulation of ill-gotten wealth. Themes in children literature and adolescence fiction dwell on morality, they are didactic and entertaining, Achebe's *Chike and the River* is a major children literature that delights and excites, and the language is simple. Mariama Ba one of Africa's greatest feminist wrote the novel entitled *So Long a Letter*, she makes use of the epistolary style in writing the novel, the major theme in the text is the harsh cultural practices on women in Africa, she is a strong voice to be identified with among female writers in Africa and the world in general. J.P. Clark Bekederemo's play *All For Oil* is a play that the central theme is centered on the less privilege people from his region (Ijaw) who he felt have not benefited immensely from the Nigeria's human and natural resources. The playwright adopts historical method and critics the political ruling class. A critical assessment of Elechi Amadi's Trilogy, *The Concubine*, *The Great Ponds* and *The Slave* theme revolve around the influence of religion in traditional African society. Every author is in a way indebted to previous tradition; Amadi's inspiration is deeply rooted in the African oral tradition. Achebe's novels is rich in the cosmology (metaphysics) or world view of the Igbo people, be that as it may, some of his novels like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* major thematic

preoccupations are revolved around culture contact, culture conflict and chance encounter between Africans and Europeans. G. D. Killam argues that Achebe's:

Novels from a sequence and reflect, broadly speaking, the changes which have taken place in Ibo, and by implication Nigerian life as a result of what Achebe calls the 'chance encounter' between Europe and Africa during the imperial-colonial period. The prose writing reveals the same realistic appraisal, the same balance and objectivity as are found in the novels (2).

Again, African writing is disturbed with the major realities inherent in Africa and many African writers themes are gotten from various incidence that might have occurred in the past. They were faced with numerous predicaments and sought realistic solution to them through a fictionalized account of these problems in the novels they wrote just like Achebe has succeeded in doing in his rural novels. The major style he makes use of in achieving his stylistic trend is the lucid use of the oral literature to add to the artistic flavor in his creative/imaginative literary works which has aesthetic and utilitarian value. Achebe's presentation of events in his rural novels using proverbs and folk tales is deeply rooted in the oral tradition. In actualizing Achebe themes in his rural novels G. D Killam comments:

Achebe's prose is worth attending to not only because it illuminates the subject matter and method of his novels, but because it offers, when considered with fiction, an assessment of and an apology (in the best sense of the word) for his adoption of a word language, his choice of subject matter and his obligation as an African to his culture and his craft (4).

Many African writers wrote though the medium of English or French to communicate to a large number of readers and prospective readers who read their creative works. They also sought lucid means to correcting the negative portrayal of Africa which was prevalent at the time they wrote. Achebe's work is rich in proverbs which he adopts as his style in his rural novels; the major themes in his rural novels are clash between African traditional practices and the invasion of foreign or alien culture. Killam states:

... the tragic consequence which result from the clash between traditional Ibo society and British Christian Imperialism. In the second section, as well, the relationship between Okonkwo and his refractory son Nwoye is delineated in such a way as transmute the broader cultural conflict on the personal level (23).

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the theme of disillusionment is extensively illuminated by the author. Okonkwo is disillusioned on his return from exile, he was unable to retain his lost glory and the activities of Christian missionaries had created division within the people of Umuofia and environs. Killam is of the view that "Though disappointed and disillusioned by the blows fate has dealt him Okonkwo begins with characteristics single-mindedness to build a new life for himself along the same principles as he applied in his youth, and to plan against his return to Umuofia seven years hence" (24). All Okonkwo's achievement as a hard working man comes to ruins, he had been cast out of the clan and humiliated, one could conclude that his "Chi" was not meant for greatness, he ends his life by committing suicide when he hung himself on a tree. Achebe's works therefore is anxious about the ways the colonial experience distorted the lives of African people, he re-orientates and educates both Africans and Europeans about Africa's past before colonialism.

African writers reveal the dignity of Africa's past as they perform their role as teachers, reflecting the ills in their society and condemning negative cultural practices. African writers through the various thematic preoccupations explored in their works, performs educative roles by the arrangement of the social, cultural viewpoint and values of society which he does in the most efficient and convincing manner. Achebe also fused Standard English with Pidgin English in some of his novel as his own style of communicating to his readers. This is epitomized in the character Christopher his novel *No longer at Ease* when he says that "Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, to whom and how he wanted to day it" (100). In Achebe's *A Man of the People* the dominant thematic preoccupation is the failure of post-independence Nigeria politics and by extension African in general. The author unravels the corrupt practices that have eating deep into the psych of many Nigerians after independence. D. Ibe Nwoga comments:

It would appear from this that beyond the problem of corruption and perhaps the sparsely treated anti-intellectualism, the issues of national politics which bear the brunt of satire in the novel, are not clearly perceived (146).

In the novel, Achebe through characterization exposes corrupt politicians who steal public funds for their selfish interest, Chief Nanga epitomizes such character. Corruption is now the order of the day while communal living that was inherent before colonization is now almost in extinction. African writers therefore condemn and oppose various forms of greed, dishonesty, selfishness and dishonesty prevalent at the time they wrote their creative imaginative but realistic literary works. Many African writers in their creative works discuss the theme of corruption, this corrupt practice eventually led to the civil war in Nigeria. According to Ernest Emenyonu, he opines that:

The corruption in high places was a kind of boomerang. It became a count force the shattered all

the strategies and idealism of the suffering masses and indirectly overthrew the higher-ups eventually (4).

In “*Somewhere in a War Period*” a short story written by Femi Osofisan, the predominant theme is also on corruption, he exposes the corrupt nature of Nigerians held by Federal forces. The mass majority suffers the hardship and pain associated with the war while “... where there was nothing but grass only yesterday, you suddenly find a palace this morning” (39). In addition, Achebe makes good use of realistic point of view as another stylistic trend in his war stories “*Girls at War*” to show the destructive nature of civil war, as a master story teller, literary crafts man, and teacher. Furthermore, the major thematic preoccupation in Achebe’s short story is revolved around moral decay and massive corruption in Biafra, these we see or is revealed to us in the character and personality of Gladys. Christopher Okigbo, who many have described as a poet, prophet and martyr, explores the theme of political corruption during the first republic in Nigeria:

Parliament is now on sale
the voters are lying in wait
the cabinet has gone to hell
the timbers are now on fire
the cabinet that sold itself
ministers are now in goal.
(Elegy for Slit-drum” 68)

The poet foresaw the emergence of the military era, he criticized corrupt politicians who embezzled public funds, they are greedy, selfish, and have little or no regard for the people they govern. Soyinka once again examine lucidly the Yoruba world view or metaphysics in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Soyinka’s plays are deeply rooted in Yoruba tradition, the major thematic preoccupation in the play is ritual suicide, Elesin must perform this ritual as the late king’s horseman as custom demands but is reluctant to doing do until his son Olunde who was educated in Britain completes the ritual suicide. The Yoruba’s belief in the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, this world view is unraveled to us in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Soyinka makes successful use of the Mythical literary theory to enlighten prospective readers and the Western world in the cosmology of his tribe (Yoruba). In the words of Emeka Nwabueze:

There is no doubt that there are abundant similarities in both Japanese and Yoruba worldviews. Both worldviews involve the worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn, and this is reflected in many of the plays from these two communities. Although the three worlds are not explicated in Japanese literature in the same manners as Soyinka had done in the Yoruba world view, it is obvious that they exist, and that they form the essential components of Japanese or, in a larger sense, Oriental worldview (199).

Moreover, it is obvious that Soyinka must have been influenced by the Noh tradition and worldview. Ifediora Okiche’s *Cosmic Cycle* major thematic preoccupation is revolved around good and evil nature of man, the poet states in the preface that “*Cosmic Cycle* is a collection of poems that seeks to explore the nature of man, revealing his good and evil sides. The Cycle of life, death, burial and rebirth all constitute the great continuities of cultural existence; central to the growing cycles in the *Cosmic Cycle*” (9). Ken Saro Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* is a novel that gives a fictionalized account of the Nigerian Civil War applying New Historicism literary theory. The novelist laments on the futility of war and its destructive nature. This however, is the major theme unraveled in the novel. Wiwa makes lucid use of broken, pidgin and what is referred to as rotten English in writing the novel. These, however, are the main stylistic trends the author employs in the novel. *Sozaboy* is confused and laments on the aftermath of war when he says “We people cannot understand plenty what was happening. But the radio and other people were talking of how people were dying. And plenty people were dying. And plenty people were returning to their village” (3).

Thus, Freud’s psychoanalysis on sexuality is important to understanding Gay theory in contemporary African literature. Homosexuality, manifestation in contemporary Nigerian fiction main objective is purely to expose sexual gratification on the path of homosexuals with no intension for procreation. A new voice that has emerged from Africa to have applied Gay theory is Onyeka Nwelue. In Nwelue’s *The Abyssinian Boy* the novelist engages us in various homosexual activities of some characters in the text. ‘Those boys that fuck boys!’ (90) and ‘These Arabians who don’t have the opportunity to fuck women prefer men!’ (90-91). In addition to this, homosexuality and its spread in the African continent is alarming. Nwelue’s application of Gay theory is relatively new in contemporary African fiction. The writers successfully make use of English, Hindi and Igbo language in writing his first novel *The Abyssinian Boy*, this style is relatively new in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Nwelue, makes use of code mixing, code switching and the folklore tradition in a splendid manner.

Chimamada Ngozi Adichie *Purple Hibiscus* is a novel the writer adopts the feminist literary theory and a strong voice in defense of womanhood. She might have been influenced by feminist writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Ezeigbo, and Glora Ernest Samuel Dike. Adichie’s major thematic preoccupation dwells on domestic violence. The victims in the novel are: Jaja, Kambili and their mother Beatrice. It is

important therefore, to observe Kambili's verbal utterance in our bid to understanding the degree of Eugene's brutality on his wife when she states that:

...we cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone carried a leaking jar of red water-colour all the way downstairs. Jaja scrubbed while I wiped (32-33).

Adichie could be said to have adopted what can be referred to as the Acheberian style of writing in her first novel *Purple Hibiscus*, she makes lucid use of Igbo language, code mixing, and a unique African expression of the English language in her novel.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, writers in Africa have explored various literary trends as it relates to issues in Africa. In addition, they have succeeded in extricating themes common in different countries; more is meant to be done in view to fixing the problems intrinsic in many parts of Africa. African writers, theorize their literary works in the genre of literature such as poetry, prose and drama. Among the various literary theory used in African literary works, Gay theory is relatively new especially in contemporary African fiction. Finally, we have tried to bring to the notice of the literary community the emergency of new voices in the twenty-first century from West Africa (Nigeria).

Author's profile: Ifediora Okiche teaches drama and poetry at Arthur Jarvis University (Nigeria). He has published essays in local and international journals. Okiche is also the author of the anthology of poems *Cosmic Cycle* (2012).

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