MYTH AND HISTORY IN COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

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Abstract - The author's interest in Commonwealth Literature is grounded in a concern about the place of English in post-colonial Malta. The writing of those who have been, like the Maltese, through the process of renegotiating their identity through and beyond Independence is of particular interest to our students. In addition, the fact that the author teaches English Colonial, Australian and African Literature within the Department of English has shown her how quick Maltese students are to grasp different aspects of identity construction in the work of these writers. An exploration of myth and history in Commonwealth Literature showed that the traditional European opposition between mythological thought and historic vision was untenable vis-à-vis the writer's practice in Africa, Australia and other Commonwealth countries. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, Patrick White and Randolph Stow often show a mythopoeic sensibility as well as political consciousness. Such writers utilise myth but do not allow their novels to move outside a time referent. They project indigenous religions with their gods and rituals but remain grounded in their society's actual situation, which they are fully committed to ameliorate.

Introduction

In the late fifties and early sixties, while African states were emerging into independence and nationhood, Europe was experiencing a disillusionment with politics that was accompanied by what has been called a *"flight from history"* (Sheridan 1980 : 198). This movement, associated with the work of De Saussure in linguistics, Lacan's in psychoanalysis and that of Levi-Strauss in ethnology, viewed its object as 'structure,' thus isolating it from the intentions of a creative subject, the effect of external factors on the object and its influence on the environment. This new scepticism towards historicism was directed at all disciplines, including the study of myth.

The study of Myth and of History

Levi-Strauss (1968 : 65) describes myth as being made up of constitutive units that derive their meaning only in relation to one another. He

suggests that the meaning of a myth can never be interpreted on one level, *"for any myth consists in an interrelation of several explanatory levels"*. This implies that a myth must, at least in part, be explained by reference to the ethnography of the society in which it originates. This marks a departure from the method employed by James Frazer and his contemporaries.

Frazer believed that since culture comes from man, and all men are members of one human race, there must be basic ideas and psychic universals in all cultures, and that culture goes through identical stages of development everywhere. This meant that ethnographical variables could largely be ignored (Frazer 1922). The chief problem in evolutionist research in Africa is that despite its insistence on the psychic unity of man, it assumed a condescending attitude towards myth and myth maker that masked and endorsed its imperialist thrust. The insistence on a psychic unity discoverable through a comparative study of myth is typical of the hegemonic thrust that masked itself as universalist (Okpewho 1983).

Levi-Strauss's contribution to the study of myth lies in the disruption of myth as a category of knowledge that is opposed to history. In his essay 'How Myths Die', he shows how, in passing from tribe to tribe, a myth is transformed and finally exhausts itself. This, however, does not mean that the myth disappears. It can either be elaborated into a fiction, or it can be reactivated *"with a view of legitimizing history"* (Levi-Strauss 1968 : 268). Levi-Strauss shows that origin-myths of one group of Amerindian tribes are adapted by another group of tribes as historical tales. The link between myth and history is implicit in the aetiological function that William Bascom (1954) ascribes to myth. In his discussion of the tale, 'Oba's Ear' which has been recorded both in Southwest Nigeria (Yorubaland) and in Brazil, he finds that the tale ensures ethnic solidarity between members of a race that have been separated by history :

In its different versions, the myth explains and validates religious practices, including the taboos on mixing the waters of the Oba and Oshun rivers and on mentioning the name of one when crossing the other; why Oba... and Oshun are enemies; how Oba, Oya and Oshun turned into rivers and became river goddesses; and why Oba dances with her ears covered with leaves or a cloth. (Bascom 1992 : 11)

As Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1968 : 33) show in their study of the genealogies of the Tiv and Gonja of West Africa, the validation of culture

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promotes social cohesion. These tales *"serve the same function that Malinowski claimed for myth; they act as 'charters' of present social institutions rather than as faithful historical records of times past".* Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Elechi Amadi, Ben Okri, Thomas Keneally, Patrick White, Randolph Stow - these writers and many more throughout the Commonwealth use indigenous myths to validate culture, first of all by retrieving the past of their communities from the debris left by colonialism. This is not just nostalgic retrospection or romantic hunting out of an idyllic past to flaunt before foreign readers. Commonwealth authors, at times, explore the mythic line running through from the past through the present to the future - a perceived linearity of time and its forward-moving image embodying the community's destiny as it seeks to escape the nightmare of the coloniser's exploitation and continuing postcolonial oppression towards freedom and independence.

When the object of study is literary, myth has to be seen in relation to the work in which it exists. The main concern in literary studies is not with myth proper but with its presentation in a poem, play or novel. The difference between myth and its representation is crucial because it highlights the gap between literate and non-literate societies. In oral cultures such as the Igbo, the Akan or the Yoruba communities of Nigeria and Ghana, it is believed that words have the power to create reality. This means that words, uttered in appropriate circumstances through, for example, the *Egwugwu* in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or in rituals, can change reality. The introduction of writing creates or helps establish a different kind of consciousness. Abdul R. JanMohamed (1983 : 280) notes the development of a historic consciousness in hitherto oral societies through the introduction of literacy :

...literacy, by permitting the recording of particular facts and thus making available in time a dense and specific past, will not allow memory, the major mode of temporal mediation in oral cultures, to eliminate facts that are not consonant with or useful for contemporary needs.

Writing itself, then, disrupts the traditional orientation to knowledge and interpretation. At the same time, the idea that writing is inevitably alienated from speech has been questioned. See, for example, the work of Dennis Cooley and Ian Adams.

The study of Commonwealth Literature has led to the effort to recuperate oral art as its matrix. Achebe weaves orature into his novels through

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proverbs and folk tales, Armah, Keneally and Ngugi through the inclusion of incantatory rituals and Soyinka through reference to a Yoruba religion which is still a part of the living, unwritten experience of many Southwest Nigerians. Oral tradition in Commonwealth literatures is, however, one 'arm of the cross' on which these writers have their being (Achebe 1975 : 68). The other arm is constructed out of the English language, the writing medium, the novel as a form and the writers' own Western education .

It has been suggested that structuralism often dismantles the concept of myth as the antithesis of reality or of history. Levi-Strauss shows myth to be in a complementary rather than an oppositional relationship with history. He emphasises the "organic unity apparent among mythology, legendary tradition and what we must call politics" and refuses to make history a privileged domain in which man would be sure of finding truth (Levi-Strauss 1968 : 256).

Structuralism has disrupted the concept of the objective study of history. Historical consciousness is called into question and ultimately reduced to prejudice that continues to support and consolidate the established mores of a foreign politico-economic power elite :

It is possible to view historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice, by which the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated (White1973 : 1-2).

History is exposed as having a strong bias in favour of Western notions of progress, and as being a tool in the project of appropriating and controlling the Other. Paul Carter perceives history as the justification of imperial thrust :

The fact is that, as an account of foundation and settlement, not to mention the related processes of discovery and exploration, empirical history, with its emphasis on the factual and static, is wholly inadequate... For the result of cause and effect narrative history is to give the impression that events unfold according to a logic of their own. They refer neither to the place, nor to the people (Quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 1996 : 376).

Achebe directs his writing against this false history of Africa. *Things Fall Apart* is a repudiation of *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, a study being compiled and collated by one of the char-

acters in the novel, the district officer. The recourse to history on the part of Achebe, however, shows that the African writer needs to justify the notion of history as fact, because if all histories are unrelated to truth, what can Achebe pit against European accounts of ignorance, savagery and evil? The need to reassert a belief in history as fact is voiced by Eric Hobsbawm, who sees it as the only possible means of resisting present day barbarism :

I used to think that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can. Our studies can turn into bomb factories. This state of affairs affects us in two ways. We have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticising the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular (quoted in Chambers and Curtis 1996 : 65).

In Commonwealth literature, contrasting attitudes to history as fact and history as fiction are found. Achebe pits his 'true' account of the past, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God,* against the imperial history of pre-colonial Africa as 'triumphant bestiality' such as is found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Achebe1988 : 2). In *Anthills of the Savannah,* however, Achebe explores the past in Igbo myths to help in the formation of contemporary attitudes. In his essay 'The Role of the Writer in the New Nation,' Achebe (1964 : 157) writes, *"the past needs to be recreated... for our own education".* Levi-Strauss (1968 : 268) perceives this process as the reactivation of myth :

Two paths still remain open : that of fictional elaboration, and that of reactivation with a view to legitimizing history. This history...may be of two types : retrospective, to found a traditional order on a distant past; or prospective, to make this past the beginning of a future which is starting to take shape.

Like Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah,* Armah's foremost concern in his 'Histories,' is the creation of vision in the project of nation building. In the same way, Soyinka's treatment of the past in his novels is concerned with the retrieval of a viable identity in the present. Indeed, in 1975, Soyinka and the South African poet Dennis Brutus signed the Declaration of African Writers, in which it was advocated that writers should *"render accessible the reality of an African civilization through works of literature."*

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The declaration urged the Union of African Writers to *"collaborate actively with historians and ethno-scientists for the retrieval of the African past in the quest for self-comprehension"* (Brutus et al.1975 : 8).

Conclusion

Literature, like history, has a vital role to play in nation building. In the Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the development of the modern nation-state was accompanied by the rise of national literatures. What is increasingly recognised is the idea that literature, rather than simply recording social change, is part of the project of creating and impelling developments. Timothy Brennan (1996 : 176) concludes that *"Nations...are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role"*.

This concept of *nation* as an imagined community links *history*, the shared experience of a community, with *myth*, the retrieval or recreation of symbols that help construct national identity. Myth and history are brought together in the development of identity in post-colonial societies, a process which imaginative literature records and creates.

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