

Introduction to african literature essay



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In the dictionary ' Le Petit Larousse 2003' literature is defined as a field embracing written and oral works to which an aesthetic aim is acknowledged. This definition upholds the assertion that African literature has ever existed in the oral form. African forms of literature are interesting not only as far as anthropological perspectives are concerned, but also from an aesthetic view point. Africa is endowed with epics, folktales and praise poems that have gone through the centuries.

It can never be too strongly emphasised or emphasised often enough that African poetry does not commence with the advent of colonial education in Africa; nor does African poetry, properly speaking, begin with the training of native speakers in the use of the European tongues. As in other parts of the world, poetry in Africa, its use and enjoyment by ordinary members of the community, is as old as organised society itself: the African languages, through the ' oral literatures', are repositories of some of the finest verse in epic form as well as in the shorter lyric which has survived to our own day under very testing conditions.

A great deal of this oral poetry, whether it is the praise-poems of South Africa, the sacred songs of the Masai, the Odu corpus of the Yoruba, or the religious chants of the Igbos, or the funeral dirges of the Akan, has fertilised much of contemporary African verse in the European languages: even when it has not palpably done so it has sometimes created a healthy tension between traditional African modes and the acquired western techniques.

Given that the media for communicating inside and outside Africa are the languages brought by the colonial powers, those literary forms can only be

spread around the world when translated into French, English, Spanish or Portuguese. Since translating those literary works into English alters much the social context of their production, writers rarely tend to do so. Ethiopia Unbound (1911) is considered the first fictional text in English by an African writer: J. E. Casely-Hayford (1866-1930), a Gold Coast lawyer and politician.

The anonymous author of *Marita: or the Folly of Love*, published in 1885-88, has yet to be identified, while Liberian writer Joseph J. Walter's *Guanya Pau*, published in Lincoln (USA) in 1891, was discovered only recently. *Ethiopia Unbound* is a strange text, even incoherent to some; at any rate, it is difficult to follow as the plot unfolds on several levels. It tells the story of Kwamankra and his friend Whitely who, at the beginning of the novel, are busy having discussions in London and who meet again in Gold Coast at the end of the novel.

One is a lawyer with nationalistic convictions and the other is a chaplain in the colonial government. The story does not play itself in a linear way: we are taken on an excursion to paradise where Kwamankra discovers his wife; we leave for the United States in the company of the hero, and we hear the speeches and debates that punctuate his travels there. The backdrop of the novel is an often sarcastic depiction of colonial society through the discourse of its principal representatives. The narration is livened up (and sometimes interrupted) by songs, fables and narratives.

Songs in Fantia and poems written in Victorian English are also added to the at times confusing mix. The chief aim of the book is to defend the cause of the Ethiopians whose country, it is suggested, is the cradle of Christianity.

However, this illustrious heritage does not lead the author to a didactic attitude or to proselytize: on the contrary, he is very critical of a religion dominated by whites although it originated with blacks. Being a lawyer and a politician, J. E. Caseley-Hayford can sustain a powerful rhetoric. Inspired by the masters of what was to become the Black Renaissance (E. Blyden, W. E. B. du Bois), the book is primarily demonstrative and polemical.

And yet the strictly political intention of this piece of fiction is enriched by its use of the marvellous and of caricature. The book is filled with driving passion and the debate is never clumsy, even if the same cannot be said of the overall construction. Another Gold Coast novel, *Eighteen Pence* (1941) by R. E. Obeng (1868-1951) the father of Anglophone fiction, is still regarded as ‘the first true novel to be published by a Gold Coaster’ (Obeng, 1998: xi, in the new manuscript-based edition by Kari Dako).

It tells the story of Akrofi, an insolent debtor, who pawns himself to his creditor. He is wrongly accused of rape by his master’s wife and brought to justice. Akrofi’s (female) accuser insists on a colonial instead of an indigenous court. The novelist spares us none of the accusations and defences: the hero is acquitted and proceeds to lead a very successful life, all the while keeping us fully informed of his ideas, which are set out in long, moralizing speeches. The text belongs to the older period in the history of the African novel, that of the pioneers.

An essay from the same period as Caseley-Hayford’s novel eludes classification as an allegory through its precise analysis and its descriptive accuracy. *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) by the South African author Sol

T. Plaatje (1876-1932) was published mid-war to mobilize British and American opinion against the 1913 Land Act. Unfortunately, this timing was ill-chosen and the campaign had no effect on the white's government's determination to pursue the Act's implementation. During this period, Plaatje wrote a novel, *Mhudi*, which lay unpublished for almost fifteen years before it came out in 1930 from the missionary Lovedale Press.

Plaatje was an experienced writer and a journalist; his *Mafeking Diary*, a *Black Man's view of a white Man's War* (1989), published almost a century after it was written, is still a fascinating account. *Mhudi* is probably the first novel written in English by a black South African and is equally worth reading today. It tells of the meeting and the subsequent relationship between the eponymous heroine and Ra Thaga, the courageous Tswana hunter who saves her from a lion's claws in a country devastated by Zulus.

Upon returning to his clan, Ra Thaga marries Mhudi and befriends a Boer, regardless of the hostility of the rest of the white nomadic community (or 'trekkers'). The characters of Mhudi, her husband Ra Thaga, Phil the good Boer and Mzilikazi the Zulu chief are well drawn and allow for the emergence of a coherent historical vision. The story takes place in a society in the process of transformation: the old world is collapsing under Boer pressure and Zulus attacks.

The only way to confront the Boers would be to unite the 'kaffir' tribes, to preserve Tswana clan independence, but this seems difficult to accomplish. The Boer 'Great Trek' is certainly not presented as a central event in Southern African history, but just another tribal migration, involving many

dangers. Plaatje writes in the language of the ‘ fish eaters’, the English, while his heroes speak ‘ Dutch’ or ‘ Rolong’ (Setswana). In the end the ‘ fish eaters’ are Plaatje’s only hope for resistance to the Boer’s exorbitant claims, which will be translated into reality by the Land Act of 1913.

His impassioned eloquence combines with a feeling for nature inherited from the English romantics. His profound knowledge of Shakespeare (whom he would translate into Setswana) lends archaic charm to a slightly old-fashioned prose, redeemed by the strength of his ideas and by his grasp of the situation, so far removed from the concerns of fiction writing in England. Written African literature, included nowadays in the movement of postcolonial literature, has started to impose its aesthetics with the coming of the concept of Negritude.

No work purporting to introduce the student to African literature can be said to have accomplished its task without some explanatory remarks on the theory of negritude. Admittedly such an undertaking is an onerous one, requiring as it does an amount of patience, fairness and impartiality that is often beyond the capacity of critics. Why this should be so can at once be fully grasped by taking into account the mass of confusing, often contradictory statements, the passionate assertions and counter-assertions, that have characterised the negritude controversy over the years.

Samuel Allen, a black American poet and critic, said that the term appeared to ‘ serve in somewhat varying roles’ those who employed it. While acknowledging this difficulty Allen made a brave attempt to provide various definitions of negritude. ‘ It represents in one sense’, he said, ‘ the Negro

African poet's endeavours to recover for his race a normal self-pride, a lost confidence in himself, a world in which he again has a sense of identity and a significant role. '

According to Allen: ' The negro is denied an acceptable identity in Western culture. ' And: (colon) This preoccupation with the situation of the Negro in a culturally alien world common to the vast majority of Negro African poets has given birth in the French language to the central concept of negritude. It is now common knowledge that the man who invented the term negritude is the great Martinican poet, Aime Cesaire, co-founder with Leopold senghor of L'etudiant Noir in the Paris of the 1930s. In a most illuminating interview describing the precise conditions which gave rise to the negritude concept, Cesaire told the Haitian poet Rene Depestre, during the Havana Cultural Congress in 1967:

We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are – that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations.

At the time we began to write people could write a history of world civilization without devoting a single chapter to Africa, as if Africa had made no contributions to the world. Therefore we affirmed that we were Negroes

and that we were proud of it, and that we thought that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity; in sum we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world.

Other definitions of the concept made by pioneers of the movement were controversial and started to provoke acrimonious debates and much criticism from African scholars and artists. For instance, at his most controversial, Senghor distinguishes between what he calls 'African rationality' and that of the European races. The European, says Senghor, is distinguishable from the African by his worship of the 'objective intelligence'. To understand the world he must analyse, and to analyse he must kill and dissect.

White men' says Senghor, perhaps enjoying the inversion of a long-standing joke, 'are cannibals'. The African, on the other hand, is 'shut up inside his black skin... He does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, the tree or stone.' The Negro or the African uses 'intuitive reason', he abandons himself to the object: "Classical European reason is analytical and makes use of the object. African reason is intuitive and participates in the object.' Furthermore, the African, according to Senghor, 'reacts more faithfully to the stimulus of the object.

He is wedded to its rhythm. This physical sense of rhythm, rhythm of movements, forms and colours, is one of his specific characteristics, for rhythm is the essence of energy itself. These and other similar assertions by Senghor have been the source of a major dispute among African writers and

intellectuals. His pronouncements have been variously pronounced as ‘ racist’, ‘ unscientific’ and worse. Wole Soyinka was the major opponent to the concept. The main themes of African literature during the 60’s and 70’s

The writings of English speaking Africa issued during the two decades following independence were moved by the same commitment as that expressed by the negritude defenders. The general theme of the rehabilitation of the African personality, in a westward-focused world, was at the centre of preoccupations. African literature largely deals with the imagery of the colonial world, which evokes the clash between cultural conceptions: the western and the African ones, when their users had to live side by side.

Normality and madness interchange as far as their meaning and the cause of their manifestation are concerned, according to the confronting discourses, from the colonised or the colonisers. The colonised and the colonizers are casting stones at each other imputing to the other signs of backwardness, oddity and madness. Otherness is a theme largely coming out from African novels. Many of those novels depict this period in Africa, when colonisation is considered to be the “ white man’s burden”.

The African novelists of the time are inspired by the ‘ deconstruction’ of would-be scientific research and experiences of all kinds that were said to determine the causes of African backwardness, madness and oddity. So they developed a literature of resistance and rehabilitation for the African personality. The novels having African independence as historical backdrop deal with most of those themes revolving around the conflict of culture,

imperialism, neo-colonialism, racism, corruption, exile, the search for identity, human dignity. Sometimes native characters at the margin confront their community.

The aesthetic subtlety of texts demonstrates that the origin of the problem is located in the essence of the colonial discourses or in those of decolonisation and that the colonised and the non-conformist people are the victims. In the literary works of African writers, colonial domination is pictured as the mental and physical oppression of the colonisers on the colonised. Critics of all fields have brought to the fore the bad sides of colonisation, showing how it has contributed to make natives people hybrid and alienated or even mad as a number of psychiatrists in the colonies have asserted:

La verite est que la colonisation, dans son essence, se presentait deja comme une grande pourvoyeuse des hopitaux psychiatriques. Dans differents travaux scientifiques nous avons, depuis 1954, attire l'attention des psychiatres francais et internationaux sur la difficulte qu'il y avait a « guerir » correctement un colonise, c'est-a-dire a le rendre homogene de part en part a un milieu social de type colonial. However, those who promoted colonization have justified imperialism by the philanthropic need to make higher the efficiency of the primitive African populations, as they were called.

Sciences like psychiatry or anthropology moved the most fervent defenders of civilizing ideology. The latter remained compelled by the colonial exotic representations of African people and unscrupulously looked for evidence of inferiority in being black. Such was the case in the Mathari psychiatric

hospital of Nairobi under the leadership of H. L. Gordon in the 1930s: The problem colonial observers of mental illness had was that, as mentioned before, for them the African was a priori the ‘ other’.

So Gordon, among others, found it difficult to distinguish in Africans between normal and abnormal behaviour. Gordon claimed that ‘ The African had no regard for the sanctity of life, no sense of decency; by European standards he was simply abnormal’. He could not detect any of the ‘ European’ mental disorder among Africans and ‘ was convinced that an effective eugenics programme could solve most social problems, including mental inferiority and the perversion of masturbation and homosexuality’ (in McCulloch 1995: 46-47).

The inferiority of the African in European eyes, his infantile, psychotic demeanour was largely explained as the result of a lesser cerebral mass, about equivalent to that of a seven to-eight-year-old European child (Europeans tried to prove this difference neurologically, by measuring and weighing the brain). Scientific and literary writings have educated the minds of the followers of civilization opposing their ideology to magic, fetishism, wars, sacrifices, savagery, in short, to the mad cultures of Africa.

Even with the so-called liberal writers, the African character remains fundamentally a child at the mercy of irrational forces. He has no vital relationship with his environment, with his past. He does not create; he is created. Elspeth Huxley, that liberal apologist for Kenya settlers, is a case in point. Her novel *The Red Strangers* deals with the encounter between the

Gikuyu people and the new forces of imperialism. But the African characters act rather strangely when confronted by the white man.

Their will to act melts away even without the kind of inner conflict which we would normally expect in any human being confronted with alien forces he cannot comprehend. Her good characters are those who live in stupid perpetual puzzlement about the ways of the White man. Those who rebel against colonialism are nearly always thugs and crooks, whose motives in fighting for the rights of black people are highly suspect. ' The characters in *The Red Strangers*, are very much like prehistoric man to whom so many things happened without stirring in him a will that he would impose on the scheme of things and deflect its course.

From this colonial reality African writers have also described this critical look of the other, which disparage, run down, reject and despise Africans and their culture. Since the western scholar thought upheld the thesis of racial inferiority, there could not be any perspective of African peoples and western ones as being equal. What the African novelist has attempted to do is restore the African character to his history.

Most of the African novelists have turned their backs on the Christian god and resumed the broken dialogue with the gods of their peoples. They have given back to the African character the will to act and change the scheme of things. Chinua Achebe was inspired by novels dealing with such themes. He wrote mainly *Things fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964) out of the desire to educate Africans and Europeans for them to be aware of the wealth

of African cultures even though some of their aspects were to disappear for lack of relevance: Well, there wasn't very much when I was at college.

Joyce Carey had written some of his books. Perhaps he helped to inspire me, but not in the usual way. I was very angry with his book Mr. Johnson, which was set in Nigeria. I happened to read this, I think, in my second year, and I said to myself: " This is absurd...If somebody without any inside knowledge of the people he is trying to describe can get away with it, perhaps I ought to try my hand at it. "