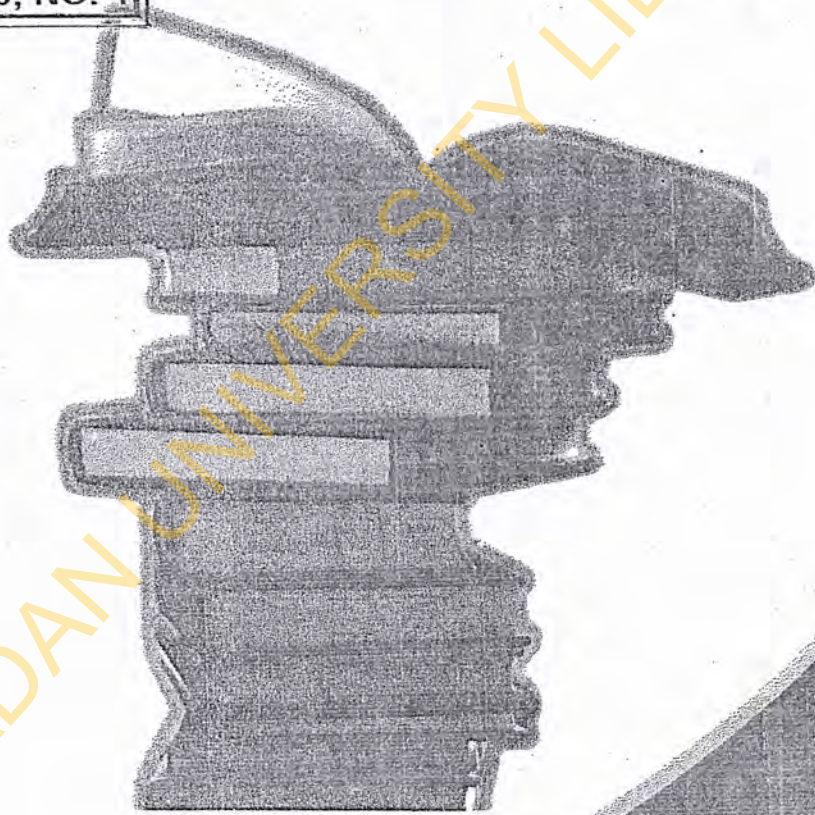


AGORA

Agora: Journal of Foreign Language Studies

2010, NO. 4

ISSN:1117-5670



Published by
Dept. of Foreign Languages,
University of Uyo
P. M. B. 1017, Uyo
Akwa Ibom State Nigeria

AGORA

Journal of Foreign Language Studies
Number 4, June 2010

ISSN: 1117-5670

Edited by
Prof. Dorothy MOTAZE

A publication of the Department of Foreign Languages,
University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State
Nigeria

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The Francophone African Novel: Historical Perspective

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Abstract

A majority of African critics argue that literature long existed in Africa in the form of oral tradition. Novel-writing in Africa, however, can be traced back to the historical situations created by colonization. Suffice it to say that novel-writing in Africa manifested itself in different stages: a.) The French colonial novel; b.) The Emergence of the French African novel; c.) The Emergence of writing by women. Each of these stages was marked by narratives and counter-narratives to debunk the misdeeds of colonizers; attack the new African leaders or correct the erroneous image given to African woman by her male counterpart in his early writings. Leaning on John Beverly's theory on *Subalternity and Representation*, one notes how at various historical/literary stages, the *rapport de force* between the colonizer and the colonized on one hand, and the African man / woman on the other hand, was played out. The paper concludes that novel-writing in Africa since its inception has played a utilitarian function.

Introduction

The development of novel-writing in Africa can be traced back to the historical situations created by colonization. This imperial mission of the Europeans subordinated Africans to the colonizers' rule and imposed new ways of life on them. Colonialism established policies based on what Aduke Adebayo in *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone Africa* describes as "*the prejudiced notion of the innate inferiority and deficiency of civilization of the African*" (2). The civilizing and salvage mission advanced by the colonizers to justify their presence in Africa is a mere pretext for their aim was simply to achieve their political and economic aggrandizement. Drawing instances from John Beverly's theory on *Subalternity and Representation*, one notes how at various historical/literary stages, the *rapport de force*

between the colonizer and the colonized on one hand, and the African man / woman on the other hand, was played out.

Before the colonizers' arrival Africans had their ways of life and their established cultural traditions and literatures. A majority of African literary critics argue that literature long existed in Africa in the form of oral tradition before it was essentially buried and forgotten by European invaders. Colonialism is generally viewed as an agent of destruction. There is no doubt, however, that the colonization of the continent introduced written literature to Africa. This literature was started by the colonizer himself in his language and continued the education of Africans in that Western language, which was eventually passed on to the colonized people. After being armed with the colonizers' language, the African man appeared on the African literary scene to tell his own stories and to attack erroneous colonial writings, combat arrogant views of the superiority of European culture, and expose the colonizer's misdeeds on the continent. Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, Chinweizu among others, believe that colonialism undermined African development. They affirm that the imperial mission destroyed many African traditions and disrupted the once peaceful continent. Similarly, critics are conscious of the asymmetrical power relationship that arose from colonialism as Europe set out to establish its hegemony in Africa. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi vehemently opposes the claims of the colonizer who thinks that he alone is qualified to speak of or for the colony. Memmi thinks that the colonizer sees himself as civilized and the colonized as savage, hence the need for the colonizer to use his civilizing experience to make Africans know about their continent from his perspective.

In his *Course on General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure argues that signs have meaning only through binary opposition to other signs. Bill Aschcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* corroborate this thought and assert that "binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible" (23). In colonized lands, a majority of intractable binaries were created, which today largely determine modes of life in parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Similarly, Aschroft notes that "this pattern of structuration in European and many other languages lies at the root of the ceaseless

pattern of conquest and domination that has formed the fabric of our life” (28). The social cleavages that erupted as a result of colonial conquest had a serious consequence for Africa. First, the colonized people adjusted the way they lived to that of the colonizer. Second, the colonized depended on the colonizer for everything and turned his back on some of his habitual ways of life so that he could be accepted as civilized. The contact between the colonizer and the colonized created paradigms that are still today noted in the games of domination and subordination manifested in all aspects of people’s life socially, culturally, religiously or literarily. Ranu Samantrai in “Claiming the Burden: Naipul’s Africa,” notes that this

Strategy [is] so common to the West thinking about the Rest that is hardly possible to speak of relations between nations without drawing upon the adult-child paradigm.[...]Developed/developing, backward/advanced, First World/Third World: all suggest that if they are obedient and follow the leader of their parents, the Rest will grow up to become just like the West. (56)

As Samantrai asserts, it is common today to see colonized people trying to imitate the West by copying their patterns of life so that they can be seen as civilized. The sad aspect of it is that by trying to be like the other, Africans lost some of their cultural heritage, and furthermore, cannot fully blend in as Westerners. Africa has witnessed many difficulties which were recorded at different stages of its evolution by Western and African writers. Bernth Lindfords in *African Textualities* observes that:

Over the last century Africa has experienced a great deal of turmoil, has heard many war-drums and seen lots of battles. Initially these were colonial conflicts; today they tend to be civil wars or struggles between unelected leaders and the peoples they misrule. The story of these turbulent years has not been an easy one

to tell, but many writers have taken a stab at it, putting on record at least a small portion of Africa's contemporary history in fictional terms. (3)

A close examination of literary production in Francophone black Africa offers a series of narratives and counter-narratives by both colonial and African writers. African writers first attacked the colonial writers on issues of the misrepresentation of African facts. The theme of colonialism has been persistent in African literature. African writers denounced European writings on Africa and argued that Europeans' invasion of Africa disrupted the continent.

The second oppositional stance taken by African writers was directed against the new African leaders who emerged after the colonialists left. These new leaders were not different from the colonizers. The majority of Africans, who dreamed of a better life after the colonizers left, were engulfed in despair and frustration created by the new leadership. One witnesses here a situation in which a subalternized colonial subject emerges as a leader to become a dominant oppressor of the same group to which he formerly belonged.

In a third phase in the development of novel writing, the African female writer wrote in opposition to her African male counterpart on issues of the misrepresentation of African women in fiction. The presence of African female writers on the African literary scene meant that one could begin "*to look at woman in African literature standing on her own rather than in the shadow of men*" (viii), as Anne Adams Graves puts it.

It is pertinent to note at this point that one of the major functions of literature is to create awareness of societal issues and African literary texts have at various stages played this role, with writers acting as spokespersons for their communities.

The French Colonial Novel

The French presence was firmly established in Africa after the Berlin conference of 1884 when Africa was split up among the European powers. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, after the slave trade was abolished, there was a growing need for overseas

markets, and many Europeans thus turned to Africa. Although European presence in Africa was frequently justified as a humanitarian mission, the truth was that these European nations were more interested in economic and territorial gains. During the height of the colonization of Africa, European hegemony was firmly established and Africa became the scene where the continuing drama of imperialism was being staged.

A great number of French colonial writers ventured into the African continent during this same period of colonization, to write fabulous things about Africa. French presence in Africa gave rise to French colonial literature. European writers who wrote about Africa include Paul Adam, André Demaison, Jean d'Esmer, Hans Grimm, J. Francis-Boeuf, Maurice Delafosse, André Gide, Paul Vigné d'Octon, Les frères Tharaud and Pierre Loti. While some of their writings talked about love and exoticism, others pleaded the cause of imperialism. By and large, the ambition of a majority of these writers was to depict Africa from the European point of view and to show the world "the great tasks" accomplished by colonialists in Africa, while at the same time justifying the natural servitude of Africans. African critics view French colonial literature as the literature of officers, conquerors and administrators. Colonialism as a political and economic enterprise was to bring honor to France, and many writers found opportunities to launch propaganda in favor of France by writing exotic literature about her colonial mission.

Pierre Loti's *Le roman d'un spahi* (1881) easily comes to mind as typical of this literature. Paul Vigné d'Octon's *Au pays des fétiches* (1891) is similarly rich in exotic scenes and Paul Adam's *La ville inconnue* (1911) is another striking colonial novel in which the author pleads the cause of France. Adam notes that colonial enterprises were occasioned by France's determination to liberate Africa's suffering and oppressed people.

Colonial writers took advantage of Africans' inability to read and write in European languages to produce fallacious stories about Africa and to sell them in the European markets. As the Nigerian critic Cyril Nwezeh, in his *Africa in French and German Fiction*, notes:

If the colonial writer decides to falsify already false ideas, it is with the precise intention of adapting them to his purpose — notably, to make the black man a comic character for the amusement of his white readers on the one hand and, on the other, to enhance the prestige of the white hero who in the colonial novel pursues his civilizing mission among the savage and comical Africans. (7-8)

Colonial writers reproduced stereotyped views about Africa with conventional pictures of primitivism, savagery and the impenetrable forest, thus exacerbating erroneous concepts and prejudices about the black race simply to justify the need for the civilizing mission of the white man. Nwezeh refers to the literary productions of the colonial writers as “alienated literature,” because it was written by foreigners and not by Africans. These European writers were very conscious of the fact that their brothers in their homeland were ignorant of what was happening in the colonies. To them, it was an opportunity to feed propaganda to those who were thirsty for news about the ways of life of the so-called “savage people” of the colonies. Even the Tharaud brothers, who had never been to Africa, embarked upon writing imaginative stories about Africa after realizing how appealing this material was to European readers.

Emergence of the French African Novel

The French African novel owes much to René Maran’s *Batouala* (1921), considered by many as the first novel written by a black man representing African realities. Branded “*Le véritable roman nègre.*” *Batouala*, is an anti-colonial novel that earned Maran the anger of the French government. In response to colonial fiction and imperialist enterprises in Africa, this black author of Guyanese descent published his novel. Considered a groundbreaking work by many African novelists, it depicts the injustices of colonialism. As Aduke Adebayo remarks: “Some Negritude writers took over from where *Batouala* left off” (12).

Even though Maran did not advocate the end of colonialism, his book helped to prepare the ground for an anti-colonial revolt. African novelists look back to *Batouala* as a turning point in the history of the Negritude movement. Soon after the publication of this work, many of the first generation of African authors born before 1920 launched serious attacks on the misrepresentations of Africa and Africans by colonial writers. To Aduke Adebayo, Negritude is a rallying cry of revolt against the oppression and exploitation of Africans by European colonialists. African writers of the era channeled their grievances against the Europeans through this new movement to champion the cause of Africans. Their mission was not only to envision a new society but also to re-create the Africans whose continual subjection to imperial and colonial ideologies became unacceptable. Soon after its birth, Francophone African novel, to borrow Victor Aire's words,

was saddled with anti-racist battle because slavery and the racist prejudices which allowed it to endure for centuries had resulted in the institutionalized dehumanization of the Blackman. The anti-colonial battle was also imperative because, despite the official abolition of slavery, the colonialists continued to dehumanize the inhabitants of the colonies from where they derived enormous wealth. (153)

Léopold Sédar Senghor, Jean Malonga, Birago Diop, Bernard Dadié, Abdoulaye Sadjji, Camara Laye and Cheikh Anta Diop are among those who laid the foundations for Francophone African literature; their works brought colonialism and African culture to the attention of the outside world. The Negritude movement was their brainchild. Seminal works of these writers include Senghor's *Chants d'ombre* (1945) and *Hostie Noire* (1948), and Birago Diop's *Les contes d'Ahmadou Koumba* (1947). To provide an outlet for their literary productions, Alioune Diop founded *Présence Africaine* in 1947 which is considered a landmark in the Negritude movement.

The second generation of African writers was also male. This is understandable since only men benefited from the formal education

fostered by the colonial institutions and colonial administrators. Among this second generation of writers are Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Sembène Ousmane and Ahmadou Kourouma to mention a few.

One common denominator that binds the two generations together, in addition to being male, is that their works were characterized by anti-colonialism. The attacks on French colonial policies in Africa were strongly echoed in Negritude and fictional writings. Besides, the preoccupation of these writers was to portray their deep love for Africa's rich cultural heritage, which was despised by the Europeans. While uplifting African cultural values, a particular attention was devoted to the African woman depicted as subordinate and docile—attributes some of these writers considered as good qualities.

African novels of the 1950s concerned themselves largely with the miseries of the time. Most African authors wrote to demystify and challenge the erroneous writings of the colonial fictions. These writers were animated with the desire to condemn the humiliations and deprivations imposed on Africans by Europeans, from slavery to the bastardization of African cultures. Femi Ojo-Ade in *René Maran The Black Frenchman*, remarks that:

Born out of slavery, colonialism and human degradation, black literature has grown and persevered in the midst of oppression, first mired in self-denial, and self-hate and later awakened by the voices of self-affirmation and self-love [...] to fight feverishly against the dehumanization imposed upon the colonized by the perfidious colonizer, to reclaim the socio-political independence long denied the race by the so-called civilized dominators. (5)

A majority of literary critics later called the literature of this period a "protest literature" because of the militant tone and harsh condemnation of European deeds. Mongo Beti's *Ville cruelle* (1954) and *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956); Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux Nègre et la médaille* (1956) and *Une vie de boy* (1957); and Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960) give an account of the

colonizers' misdeeds in Africa. In their books, these authors criticize vehemently cultural imperialism and social injustices meted out on Africans by Europeans. These novels were later followed by transitional novels of the post-colonial period, characterized by the disenchantment of the African people deceived by their new leaders. Many Africans expected independence to bring fortune to their homes and farms and provide them with work and food. They thought that their sufferings would be over. All were rejoicing, singing and dancing in advance only to discover later that nothing had really changed for the better. Soon, they found that the new leaders were more terrible than the colonizers. The disappointment of Africans after independence is summed up in the following words by a young character in Alioum Fantoure's *Le cercle des tropiques* (1972) during his conversation with Bohi Di, the novel's protagonist:

- *Tu sais, dans nos villages, nous nous demandons ce qu'est l'indépendance. Notre vie n'a pas changé, nos récoltes sont toujours mauvaises, nous travaillons toujours durement comme avant. Les impôts ont augmenté, ce qui est pire qu'avant, et puis les délégués du Parti nous dépouillent lors de leurs tournées et ils en font plusieurs par mois; si ce n'est pas l'un c'est l'autre. Si c'est ça l'indépendance, mieux valait supporter les toubabs [les Blancs], car maintenant nous supportons et les toubabs et les chefs indigènes.* (168)

Do you know that in our villages, we ask ourselves what independence is all about? Our life did not change, our harvests are still poor and we still work hard as we did in the past. Taxes increased, a situation which is worst than before, and party delegates milk us dry during their multiple monthly visits; it is either one fellow or the other. If that is what independence means, it would have been better we supported the Whites, because now we are supporting both the indigenous chiefs and the Whites. [My translation]

The situation as described in Fantoure's novel, after the new African leaders took over power, is not particular to Guinea but to a majority of independent countries in Africa. The writers were highly critical of these new leaders for their indifference to the endemic poverty of the masses. They denounced their corruption, their incompetence and their complicity with foreign powers. Political leaders were criticized for indulging in opulence. Kembe Milolo summarizes the preoccupations of those novels:

La dénonciation des nouveaux maîtres qui n'ont pensé qu'à régner et à tirer les avantages que leur conféraient leurs fonctions. Ils sont devenus plus tyrans que les colons. D'où l'amertume de la population devant le manque d'organisation économique et politique dont ces nouveaux dirigeants d'Afrique sont les symboles. (10)

The denunciation of new masters who thought of reigning by taking advantages their offices offered them. They became more tyrant than the colonizers. This resulted in the bitterness of the people due to lack of economic and political organizations which these new leaders themselves represent. [My translation]

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (1970) and Alioum Fantouré's *Le cercle des tropiques* (1972) are examples of novels that criticized the new African leaders and societies. These writers cast a dispassionate look at the moral, economic and political decay of newly independent African nations. This new literary tone paved the way for African literature that moved from attacking colonialism to instead focusing its critique on the new African leaders. Besides Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances*, other novels testifying to the African nightmare after independence include Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignées* (1972), Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*, Mongo Beti's *Perpetue* and *Remember Ruben* (1974), and most recently his

Trop de soleil tue l'amour (1999) and *Branle-bas en blanc et noir* (2000). These novels portray African leaders as tyrants and show how Africans may be their own worst enemies as noted by the white man Sept-Saint Siss while talking to Dr Malekê, in *Le cercle des tropiques*:

- *Docteur, il y a une chose que j'aurai apprise pendant mon séjour d'une trentaine d'années sous les tropiques. C'est que vous êtes plus cruels entre vous que ne le sera jamais un toubab à votre égard. Croyez-moi, le venin ne vient pas de l'extérieur. Vous secretez vous-même votre propre poison.* (142)

Doctor, there is one thing I learned during my thirty year of stay in the tropics. You are more cruel among yourselves than a White man would be to you. Believe me, the poison is not from outside. You secrete your own poison. [My translation]

It is an undeniable fact that Africans were the architects of their own downfall after the colonizers left. Problems that emerged after the independence of African nations were created by the irresponsible and insensitive attitudes of many leaders to the people they governed.

Emergence of Writing by Women

Another important and remarkable stage in the sub-Saharan Francophone African literary scene is marked by the arrival of African female writers. The Nigerian feminist critic Chioma Opara discusses Virginia Woolf's celebrated notion that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. Opara notes that at the time Woolf was making this exhortation in the 1920s, the African woman had neither a room of her own, nor a pen of her own, nor the means to write. In fact she was weighed down with illiteracy. Today, with the rapid trend in female literacy, African women not only may have a room of their own, but many spaces and many pens of their own as well.

The emergence in the late 1960s of African women on the African literary scene previously reserved for African men is evident in the inclusion of their names in a number of critical anthologies. Indeed, sub-Saharan Francophone African women writers are today among the most audible voices in the social, economic, political and literary scenes of the continent. Just as the first and second generations of African writers reacted to what went before, this third generation of writers spoke out to condemn the role played by some of their African male predecessors in perpetuating the inferiority of African women in their novels. These women used their writings mostly to seek to redress the situation by portraying a positive image of the African woman and by challenging the domination of African life socially, politically and economically by African men. They hoped through their writing to bring about changes in society, to remove obstacles that had for so long silenced and dominated women. As Aduke Adebayo affirms:

Most African female writers create out of the necessity to tell their own stories in thinly-veiled fictional forms; seeing themselves as representatives of African women and correctors of certain well-worn prejudices concerning African women. In short, they tell it as it is. This explains the predominance of the semi-autobiographical mode and the sociological orientation of their writings. (39)

Through their works, African women writers destroy the culture of silence imposed on African women, a culture that is responsible for their lack of participation in literary and public domains. The arrival of women on the African literary scene is aimed at deconstructing the patriarchal order. In attacking patriarchal traditions and striving to create positive images for African women, these writers sought to bring women out of invisibility. They demystify African cultural as well as Christian and Islamic myths that emphasize the main roles of women as maternity and domesticity.

Francophone women's writings of sub-Saharan Africa date back to the first known published literary piece written by Thérèse Kuoh-

Moukoury, and entitled *Rencontres essentielles* (1969). This novel laid the foundation for later women's writings. The year 1975 is, however, considered a landmark in African women's writings. Aoua Kéita published *La vie d'Aoua Kéita par elle-même* (1975), Nafissatou Diallo wrote *De Tilène au plateau: une enfance dakaroise* (1976), Aminata Sow Fall authored *La grève des Battú* (1976), and Mariama Bâ published *Une si longue lettre* (1979). Since the 1970s, the African literary scene has been flooded with works of fiction by women, including Aminata Ka Maiga's *La voie du salut suivi de le miroir de la vie* (1985), Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1987) and Angèle Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* (1989). In the 1990s, female literary production increased. Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle published *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990), Regina Yaou wrote *Le prix de la révolte* (1997), Fatou Kéita produced *Rebelle* (1998) and Abibatou Traoré published *Sidagamie* (1990). These writers denounce the African woman's condition, her marginality, and address other customs and attitudes that are designed to keep women under men's control. Female protagonists play significant roles in their works for they convey the author's message to the public and aim to initiate societal change.

A number of female literary works emphasize controversial African traditions such as forced marriage, female circumcision and polygamy, traditions which seem to have impeded the progress toward the liberation of sub-Saharan African women. The coming into writing of African women has disrupted the traditional binary of male oppressor versus the oppressed woman. African women writers use literature as a weapon to challenge certain injustices done to women. The re-creation of women by Francophone African women writers of the last decades particularly, helps women to assert their own identity. Today African women achieve visibility not only in literature, but also in society, in politics and in the economy.

Conclusion

French colonial literature dominated the francophone literary landscape for a while and falsified facts, but at the same time, it armed African writers with the colonizer's language which they later used to debunk

the colonial erroneous views about Africa. Francophone African literature written by both male and female writers has since not ceased to play utilitarian role to correct or change societal ills.

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