

UNDERSTANDING THE COLONIAL DEBATE IN POSTCOLONIAL FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

Recent debates on colonialism and its repercussions in contemporary French societies have indicated a high level of postcolonial activities in France. However, the adoption and use of postcolonial theory by French critics is insignificant compared to its strides in the English-speaking world. This study examines recent opinions of French intellectuals on their colonial history with a view to establishing the trends in postcolonial criticism in the French literary world. The study adopted postcolonial criticism in as much as the issues discussed revolve round the aftermath of colonialism on the French societies. The low patronage of postcolonial theory in France was premised on the apathy of the French academics against a perceived Anglo-saxon invention, and the official posture of the French government to praise colonial adventure. The analysis also covered the anti-colonial intellectuals' opinions about the French postcolonial identity, the re-appraisal of colonial history and efforts at decolonising the minds of the French society, including its government. The reflection of postcolonial issues in contemporary French societies provides a background to further the appreciation of literary works by postcolonial French writers such as Le Clézio and Michel Tournier.

Key words: Colonialism, Postcolonial, France, French identity

Introduction

In recent decades, French writers have produced a plethora of novels dwelling on colonial history and adventure of France. Le Clézio's works such as *Desert*, *Chercheur d'or*, and *Onitsha* revisited cases within the postcolonial nation, with the outcast in North Africa, the native Indian in Mauritius as well as the alienated European in South-eastern Nigeria. While the novels - *Onitsha* and *L'Africain* - reflect his childhood experience in Africa between 1948 and 1950, *Le Chercheur d'or* is embedded with myths related to the literary story of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, which is equally re-echoed by Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*. Tournier's *La Goutte d'or* examined the clash of cultures between North Africa and France.

Considering recent and continuing social unrests related to the frictional relationships between the French and the diaspora communities, the re-visitation of French colonial history made by contemporary French writers offers a background for the study of the French identity in the wake of the 21st century, the responsibilities of France on colonial exploitation and crimes as well as the role of the French government in the political crises of its former colonies such as Rwanda and Algeria. A sociological approach to contemporary French literature can help us to examine the French intellectuals' opinions and politicians' activities of vis-à-vis the postcolonial issues permeating the French society. This study uses postcolonialism as a discourse that "analyses how the historical fact of European colonialism continues to shape the relationship between the West and the non-West after former colonies have won their independence" (Sardar and Loon 115) in order to examine the reactions of French intellectuals to postcolonialism, both as subject matter and a theoretical framework.

I. The colonial question and postcolonial criticism in France

Most definitions of postcolonialism, as a theory, emanate from English-speaking intellectuals. Seminal works by French critics usually avoid the term postcolonialism in their analyses of hitherto postcolonial works, preferring terms such as representations, identity, the 'Other', psycho-analysis, deconstruction and the like. Tyson states that:

Postcolonial criticism is both a subject matter and a theoretical framework. As a subject matter, postcolonial criticism analyses literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination, from the first point of colonial contact to the present. . . . However, as a theoretical framework (...) postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the operations – political, socially, culturally, and psychologically – of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies (365)

The French literary space has been deprived of most seminal works on postcolonialism which are mostly written in English. Samoyault (289-91), who stated that French intellectuals have serious reservations towards postcolonial theory, revealed that interests in postcolonial theory started around 2005 with only a few postcolonial works available for the French public, namely, Said's *Orientalism* and books by French critics such as Jean-Marc Moura and Jacqueline Bandolph. Although postcolonial theory was largely influenced by the *French Theory*, from Frantz Fanon to Michel Foucault, it was largely resisted by the French University system: "C'est au sein de l'université française que la résistance aux études postcoloniales semble la plus puissante" (Samoyault 292).

Nkunzimana confirmed the marginalisation of postcolonial theory in mainstream French literary discourses. His study was turned down by a French reviewer because postcolonialism was adopted as a theoretical framework. His personal experience revealed that many French intellectuals and critics believed that postcolonialism was an Anglo-Saxon invention which could not be applied to Francophone discourse and literature. Meanwhile, the most significant sign of the influence of postcolonialism on France is the

on-going debate on the colonial past manifested in the series of public debates, articles in newspapers and book publications, which are intended to document the origins of the stereotypical images and social exclusion of the “Other” represented in the past by the colonised peoples and, recently, by immigrants – the so-called “immigrés”.

Coquio (35) found that the bulk of works that could be said to have heralded serious postcolonial criticism in France, which were produced from 2006, were mere reflections about the colonial issue as a historical fact. This plethora of discussions on the colonial problem could be explained by the fact that France was bedevilled with serious social unrests caused by immigrants and diaspora communities who seemed to have been integrated into the French (social and cultural) system. As a result of these protests, which shook the very essence and definition of the French identity, some intellectuals found it necessary to revisit colonial history, long swept under the carpet by the French government. Until the recent and infamous Dakar speech by Sarkozy in 2007, the colonial question was mostly avoided or simply considered as a mere historical incident. Colonialism was addressed through historical reviews, workshops, seminars, debates, associations and dictionaries. The French government re-engaged itself into the re-visitation of colonialism and even the slave trade by instituting a May 10 Memory Day only in 2006.

II. The colonial mentality in French politics

The speech made by the French President in Dakar, on 26 July 2007, triggered a wave of criticism from anti-colonial intellectuals. Hauser (2008) frowned that Nicolas Sarkozy’s speech attempted to assert that colonialism was positive for African history. Such an idea mirrored the influence of colonial literature written by French men - Pierre

Loti and Jules Romains - on the French understanding of colonial history, whereby colonialism was acknowledged to have existed, but was reduced to the encounter between fearless and courageous white men and strange indigenous populations (68). This colonial mentality was deliberately created by the French government for its citizens. Hauser (65-78) believed that the French government had been using lies and falsehood to impose an official history and a national memory on colonialism for the sake of national cohesion and unity, in a bid to preserve a national identity. He concluded that mastering the colonial past was crucial for the mastery of the future.

Diop condemned Sarkozy's speech as unforgivable. He brought to the fore the colonial mentality which still permeates the lives of current French politicians. Diop berated Sarkozy's refusal to mention the name of the historian - Cheikh Anta Diop - attached to the University as he called it 'University of Dakar' instead of 'Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar' (149). Cheikh Anta Diop was renowned for his anthropological studies on the African origins of civilisation which shook the cultural bias in scientific research. Sarkozy's speech accused Africans of having sold their fellows to the slave merchants. The President also tried to prove that recent plights, including genocides, in African nations were not related to colonisation. Diop asserted that the speech was in contradiction with the reality on ground in the former colonies. After the charade called independence, France has continued to rule in the colonies through coups d'état, dictatorial regimes and control over the economy and the political class. He concluded that France remained the only former European power that was virtually obsessed with its colonial past (152).

The French contemporary colonial mentality was also questioned, considering its role in the Rwandan genocide. Coquio (103) expounded that France displayed its colonial

mentality during the Rwandan genocide, as it did in the Algerian war for independence, and encouraged ethnic massacres during the Cameroonian war of independence. In Rwanda, France was involved in the military, diplomatic and political fronts. Coquio decried that France was yet to rid itself of its colonial mentality, which explained its resistance to independence, its continual meddling in the affairs of its former colonies under the guise of “liens spéciaux” (25), that is, “special relations” and agreements on military assistance. France has successfully been ruling the former colonies through puppet African governments, military interventions in the case of armed conflicts or by supporting major political decisions, as evident in the 1992 botched electoral process in Algeria, where the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS: Front Islamic du Salut) was leading the polls.

III. Revisiting colonial mentality in contemporary France

The need for France to revisit its colonial mentality and reconsider its treatment of colonial history explains why Vergès (277) condemned the absence of colonial features in Pierre Nora’s attempt (in *Lieux de mémoire*) to dress a list of features that forged the French national identity. In similar attempts, whenever a reference to a colony is made, it is done from a French perspective: “Mais dans les deux cas, c’est la position française qui reste la référence. Le colonisé reste en arrière, occupant le second rôle”. Vergès affirmed that France is clearly in a postcolonial situation, because the new contradictions operating in the society has “des traces du colonial” (278), that is, a colonial undertone. Vergès deplored that France found it difficult to grasp the components of its postcoloniality. New cultural identities are emerging. Contrary to the colonial discourse that tried to establish a coloniser/colonised dichotomy, postcolonial theory would come handy to investigate a

world where contacts between cultures are multiplied, a world in constant mutation. Considering that the colonised speak two languages or know two cultures, one of which is marginalised, postcolonial theory would help re-appropriate that perceived handicap and turn it to wealth, hence Vergès advised that:

Il faut tâcher de tenir les deux bouts : observer ce qui fait lien et filiation, et aussi ce qui délie et sépare. Considérée de ce point de vue, la notion de « postcolonie » est un artifice utile : elle permet de développer une technique de lecture susceptible de pouvoir tenir ces deux bouts. (287)

It is necessary to hold both ends: observe what unites and also what separates. From this perspective, the notion of 'postcolony' is a useful artifice: it helps develop a reading technique capable of hold these two ends. [Our translation]

Andersson asserted that the deconstruction of the self by the victims of colonialism under the eyes of the colonialist requires a deconstruction of the self by the colonialist: "Comme les peuples victimes du colonialisme doivent se construire, l'homme occidental doit assumer son histoire, se libérer de sa propre aliénation pour faire lui aussi peau neuve" (214). The White is a victim of his image of superiority. That image justified colonialism and its practices, including enslavement and depersonalisation of the colonised. Up till now, the international community, under the leadership of the Western nations, has continued to downplay the violence meted out on the former colonies. With the French government trying to pay homage to the French patriots who carried out the colonial project, Andersson confirmed that colonial ideology never disappeared from the mentality of the West. He acknowledged the abundance of anticolonial literature in the history of France, but noted that it has been stifled by a dominant colonial discourse. He equally advised the West to stop justifying their colonial adventures and simply admit that colonialism resulted in a crime against humanity.

IV. The importance of postcolonialism for French and Francophone Studies

Mbembé & Blancel (83) confirmed that although postcolonial theory emanated from Western philosophy and disciplines, it took its origins from intellectuals involved in the anti-colonial struggles. They acknowledged that postcolonial studies borrowed from Fanon and Said as well as many other French thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The authors bemoaned the French intellectuals' approach to postcolonial studies as they concluded that France was rejecting its own intellectual heritage. As they remarked:

La situation actuelle peut sembler d'autant plus surprenante que les *postcolonial studies* empruntent largement à des penseurs français de l'altérité, tels Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Michel de Certeau et, plus récemment à Foucault ou Derrida. (Mbembé & Blancel 87)

The present situation is all the more surprising as postcolonial studies borrow significantly from French thinkers of 'otherness', such as Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Michel de Certeau and, more recently Foucault or Derrida. [Our translation]

Besides the resistances to colonial domination, postcolonial studies also delved into the fact that some individuals from the colonised territories helped the colonial domination of their own people and lands. Having fought along the French security forces and army, like some other immigrants and who have finally settled in France, they are considered in some quarters as belonging to the French history and identity. In this regard, applying postcolonial theory to France, from the Slave Trade to colonisation, it is quite impossible to exclude these 'foreigners', qualified as the 'Other' from the construction of French history or a contemporary French identity. As Mbembé & Blancel noted:

Or, si l'on devait appliquer les postulats de la théorie postcoloniale à la France par exemple, on dirait que depuis la Traite des esclaves et la colonisation, il n'y a pas d'identité française ou de lieux français de mémoire qui n'englobent simultanément l'ailleurs et l'ici. (87)

If we were to apply the tenets of postcolonial theory to France for instance, we would state since the Slave Trade and Colonisation, there has been no French identity or memorable French places which do not encompass both the Self and the Other. [Our translation]

This point was corroborated by Sardar and Loon (68) who asserted that social changes that occurred during the decolonisation process had raised the issue new identities in France. Although “French cultural studies was largely concerned with this fundamental question” of ‘who is French?’, it was not encapsulated into postcolonial discourses. Once again, Mbembé and Blancel bemoaned that the French intellectuals do not adequately represent or communicate with the ‘Other, preferring to relegate them to the margin through silence or Eurocentric representations of what they believed the ‘Other’ should be in the line with their colonial mentality:

Aussi, la réflexion française contemporaine ne sait plus comment parler *de* l’Autre, encore moins *à* l’Autre. Elle préfère généralement, dans la bonne généalogie coloniale, parler *à la place de* l’Autre, avec les résultats catastrophiques que l’on sait... (87)

Therefore, contemporary French thought does not know how to talk *of* the other, let alone *to* the Other. It prefers, generally, in its usual good colonial manner, talk *on behalf of* the Other, with the catastrophic results that we know... [Our translation]

Samoyault (289) considered that postcolonial practice redresses the imbalances between the Centre and the Periphery. Some convergences emerge between postcolonial studies and francophone studies: they both analyse texts emanating from the colonial and postcolonial contexts, and they used similar analytical methods such as intertextuality, identity study, hybridity, among others. However, Samoyault blamed postcolonial studies for being too English dominated, thereby reinforcing and confirming the hegemony of the English language, which could be seen as a colonial enterprise. Secondly, postcolonial criticism neglects the rhetorical and textual content and goes in favour of synthesis and

more general political statements. In short, the attitude of resentment towards postcolonial studies is mainly attributed to the fact that the French university system sees itself as receiving some lessons from America.

Referring to a study made by Ferro in *Histoire des colonisations* (1994), Durand revealed that European historiography is yet to do justice to the history of colonisation.

Ferro wondered that:

N'est-il pas symptomatique que dans les grandes œuvres de réflexion sur la mémoire ou sur le passé – de la France - , il n'est jamais question de sociétés coloniales : est-ce une omission, un acte manqué ou un tabou ? (5)

Is it not symptomatic that in the great works on reflection on the memory or on the past – of France - , no reference is ever made to the colonial societies: is it an omission, a missed act or a taboo?

Durand highlighted the need for France to look back into that past, to ask new questions and reassess its role in the Empire era, as suggested by the historian Eric Hobsbawm. Durand beckoned the reader to place the search light on some forgotten personalities, some issues that are little or not well known.

Moura, as a foremost French postcolonialist, wanted postcolonial theory to be applied to the Francophone literatures. He proposed that not only a Francophone postcolonial corpus should be adopted (in inspiration) from the English-speaking model, he envisaged that the constituted corpus of postcolonial literatures written in French be included in the group of the postcolonial literatures in European languages. Language should no more be the factor of classification of postcolonial literatures, rather the various contexts of productions in relation to the colonial expansion, with reference to history, geography, sociolinguistics and sociology. This new grouping leads to the exclusion, for instance, of the literatures in French from Belgium, and Switzerland, which used to be

admitted into the Francophone literatures, but to the regrouping and fusion of the English, French, or Portuguese-speaking African literatures.

Moura explained that France still functions on the 'assimilationist' model, which means, ignoring cultural specificities, which are supposed to fade. He highlighted the advantages of postcolonialism from which the notion of hybridity could help analyse and enjoy such novelists as Ahmadou Kourouma. 'Francophone literatures' are all literary studies produced outside the French metropolis. Moura intended to open and expose Francophone literatures to the world and establish them as a part of world literature.

Moura rejected a Eurocentrist approach, which is very common in most discourses on the Francophonie. He advocated a Franco-centred approach, which brings together and place them on the same level all writings in French language, be it from colonial writers, Western travellers in search of 'exotism', African or West Indian writers. Acknowledging the confusion that might result from the grouping of all writers in French under the Francophone umbrella, postcolonial study is proposed as remedy (Moura 35). For him, postcolonialism helps to unveil the peculiarities of literatures written in French vis-à-vis other literatures in European languages and to define the literary group carved out by this critical theory (Moura 9).

Coquio noted that colonialism has always been present in France. The difference in postcolonial movements between the English-speaking and the French-speaking world is in the approach:

Là où, dans le champ universitaire américain et anglais, des intellectuels issus des populations colonisées ont forgé leurs instruments critiques à partir d'une culture d'élite déconstruite de l'intérieur, les protestations des beurs et des Antillais en France passent par la rue ou par des formes populaires davantage que par les milieux académiques... (Coquio 28)

Whereby, in the American and English universities, some intellectual who emerge from the colonised populations have created their critical instruments from an elite culture deconstructed from within, the protests of the Beurs and West Indians are carried out on the street or by popular forms rather than the academic environment [Our translation].

Coquio agreed with Mbembé and Blancel that French-speaking literatures could contribute to the postcolonial theory through their critical reflexions on colonial and postcolonial history. They joined the Latin-America literatures to forge a unique critical way, which attempts to integrate a perspective of resistance to the English-speaking inspired theory by appropriating concepts such as ‘transgression’, ‘subversion’, ‘minor literature’ and ‘cultural anthropology’.

Mongo-Mboussa (2000) noted that critics such as Bernard Mouralis recommend a re-reading of the colonial past in order to ascertain the nature of the relationship between France and Africa. Nevertheless, some French critics have embraced postcolonialism. Mongo-Mboussa proposed Lydie Moudileno’s classification of postcolonial writers into four periods: the pioneers (1910-1930); the Négritude Movement: (1930-1960); the decolonisation and postcolonial disenchantment (1970-1980) and the children of the postcolony some of whose characteristics are: being born after the independences; acceptance of their hybridity (their double identity as African and French); tagging themselves as international bastards – " bêtards internationaux " – unlike their predecessors such as Sembène, Ngugi wa Thiongo. However, Mongo-Mboussa asserted that Lydie Moudileno, wishes that the word "Parisianism" be used in conjunction with "Post-colonial". For her, African artistes do not want to be confined to physical boundaries, thereby rejecting the label of ‘African creators’.

Conclusion

Postcolonialism is not strictly restricted to English-speaking literature. As a result of France's strong colonial history and its continued relationships with its former colonies, France could be labelled as a full postcolonial entity, by the composition of its society, its international policy and its literatures. It is possible that the French government's denial of colonial atrocities and efforts to rebrand its colonial history are efforts to protect the country from the financial implications of reparations to the victims of its colonial rascality.

However, the current debate on colonialism in France shows that the references to the colonial past of Africa are not an attempt to determine who is guilty of Africa's woes, but they represent different perspectives into understanding the past of the African continent and efforts to forge a better postcolonial French society.

With the use of African novels for their literary analysis of the colonial and the postcolonial contexts, French critics intend to present the views of the victims of the colonisation from all over the world. They want to educate the French public and free it from the ploy of government to present a distorted and embellished version of France's mission in the colonies. Secondly, the use of works authored by African and French writers who have lived in the colonial world shall help give a more authentic view of colonialism and its effects.

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