

The Search for Autonomy of African Literature: A Critical Appraisal

Mr. Michael Akenoo

Lecturer

Department of Journalism and Mass

Communication

Academic City College

Accra, Ghana

makenoo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: *Since the dawn of serious writings in all the genres of literature by Africans somewhere during the period immediately before the end of the Second World War and after, literary critics of modern African literature had been describing this kind of literature as “A Child of Two Worlds” by Mutiso. This apt description of modern African literature emanates from the fact that African writers are torn between what their own societies stand for in the context of environment, cultural practices traditions and values; and on the other hand, the European environment and culture in which they had received their formal education and training. To express this kind of dilemma in analogous manner in which African writers find themselves as far as modern African literature is concerned, they behave like the bat—they are ‘neither here nor there’. That is African writers are neither tied to their own roots and culture and society nor are they tied to the European environment and culture.*

Keywords- African Literature, Modern, Writing, Writers, Critics, African Feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

In fact, it is unpleasant and for the matter, raises much concern about African literature when one reads negative comments on African literature such as the one captured in the following from the three notable Nigerian literary critics who describe themselves as “aggressive” in their co-authored work: “Toward Decolonization of African literature” published in 1980. The three critics are Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike[8][10].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The African writer is seen as an apprentice European whose literary production of which ever tradition the critic happen to adhere to. These critics do not see the autonomy of African literature. They do not grant it the elementary right to have its own rules and standards but insist rather on viewing it as an overseas department of European literature[8].

A. Colonialism and Imperialism

The advent of colonialism and imperialism[20] on the African continent as a result of the Slave Trade and the

Partition Of Africa during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ respectively contributed immensely to the shaping of the mentality of Africans to imitate Europeans and behave in the same way as Europeans[7].

Colonialistic and imperialistic ways of thinking and doing things had adversely affected Africans in the past; and in fact these evil effects do persist today in the lives of Africans. This negative situation prevailing in Africa today does not augur well for the advancement of African literature because their life styles seem to be a copy of Europeans. As a result, Africans look up to Europe to measure almost all that are considered to be good for living in a society. This way of thinking is indeed detrimental when one considers what God has endowed the African natural environment with to be tapped and harnessed by Africans for their own good and welfare. The fact that Africans are yet to wean themselves completely from European influences and values does not augur well for the advancement of Africans as a people[16].

B. Europeans Influence

If Africans are politically independent today as compared to their colonial past when they were ruled by Europeans and so they depended on Europe for almost everything, why is it that after gaining political independence, many years ago, Africans should still be looking up to Europe for direction in everything that they do?

In this kind of situation the question is posed: What is the validity of African political independence today? Africans should now be seen as completely free people from Europe intellectually, economically, socially, morally, spiritually and any other form of influences from Europe which have the tendency of negating the attainment of the African ideal.

The notion or idea of African people weaning themselves completely from any form of European influence and practices should as a matter of necessity manifest in African literature so that Africans will be regarded as a totally liberated people who are capable

of directing and controlling their own God given destiny.

C. Power of Great Literature

Literature and for that matter great literature has great impact and influence on people living in a society[5][6]. Sir Francis Bacon, the famous English philosopher once stated: 'Knowledge Is Power'. Knowledge is certainly attained through wide, vigorous and intensive reading. And for this reason if African writers will write any good and valuable literature that will benefit their society[9], they must root this kind of literature in their own indigenous environment and cultural practices and values which will address the nuances of the African society. This kind of literature can be considered great as it will contribute immensely to the enlightenment, progress and development of the African continent[11].

D. African Feminism

Searching and reaching for autonomy of an authentic African literature that will be distinct from Western literature, I am of the opinion that in order to establish a viable and credible autonomous critical canon for the critiquing of African literature in the 21st century, African Feminism must be adopted by African literary critics. I am convinced that African feminism will be the most ideal critical canon for the critiquing of African literature due to the fact that the hitherto age-old dominant patriarchal critical canon for the critiquing of literature worldwide including of course African should be seriously questioned and challenged by literary critics in the present 21st century of human evolution and development[1]. This is due to the present numerous radical and revolutionary ideas that are taking place in the world and which have greatly affected the psyche and thinking of man. Thus, it logically follows that the adoption of African feminism as an autonomous critical canon for the critiquing of African literature will tremendously benefit the African people since African countries are considered to be developing now as compared to the countries of Europe and America[12][14][15].

E. African Literary Criticism

As I advocate for the adoption of African feminism as the most suitable critical criteria for the evaluation of African literature in the 21st century it will be appropriate to look at the other critical canons that are also being pursued or advanced for the critiquing of African literature[18]. The first critical criteria used as the canon for the critiquing of African literature are what are described as Larsonic[2]. Larsonic critics of African literature usually use Western standards to evaluate African literature. They represent Eurocentric criticism of African literature. For example, Eustace Palmer and Larson belong to this school of thought. The next school of criticism of African literature is described as "Bolekaga" criticism. This school is

championed by Chineweizu, Jemie and Madubuike who describe themselves as "aggressive"[15][11].

These three critics who are all Nigerians rebel against obscurantism and Eurocentricism in African literature and its criticism and call for an autonomous African aesthetics based on African Orature. Ogunism is the next school of African literary criticism. This school is led by Wole Soyinka, the renowned Nigerian literature Laureate. The Ogunist critics who apply Ogunism critical criteria in evaluating African literature describe themselves as pseudo-traditionalists but they are basically individuals writing in the tradition of European modernism[19].

The next comes Marxist critics of African literature such as Ohege and Kamenju who look at literature function and demand social change and amelioration. Eldred Jones and other critics maintain that African literature should be examined by its mode of creation only[14][13]. There is yet another school of critical canon being pursued for the evaluation of African literature. This school of criticism is yet to be labelled. [4] They show interest in Marxism who generally arrive at rather objective observations before evaluation of African writers [11].

In the context of continued controversies over the search for a truly authentic African literature, it is of significance in this direction to capture from an article titled. Bobokiyiki Lament by Ben Abdallah a prominent Ghanaian and African writer[1][2].

Needless to say, I write with a specific African audience in mind. While I believe in the power of words of artistic merit to achieve universal appeal, I do not trust the judges and their criteria of universality, criteria born of a certain imbalances within the psyche of the western man where as Peter Brook put it: The golden calf of the intellect is worshipped at the cost of true feeling and experience criteria which like many western values, norms, tradition and even institutions, are being rapidly and indiscriminately grafted into African and other post colonial cultures. All my play writing so far has been a series of difficult steps towards the realization of the African theatre I envisage. This search has taken me so far into the domains of history, myth the festival, religions ritual and the tale as a literary form Abdallah [1].

The above stated philosophical ideological orientation of Ben Abdallah leaves much food for thought as far as Africa literature is concerned. In the conclusion of Bobokiyiki Lament Abdallah points out the following:

Of course African theatre is and will continue to be part of the world heritage of performance arts and can therefore not afford to isolate itself from all western influences specially those technical influence that must be adapted and properly used. Nor can African theater

continue to be measured by the Western criteria or this will only lead to chaos and eventual doom.

Considering the views of Ben Abdallah in his Bobokyiky Lament and furthermore, the radical and revolutionary ideas articulated jointly by the boleka critics - Chinewiezu Jemie and Madubuike in their co-authored book: 'Toward The Decolonialization of African Literature'. I am of the opinion that in the search for autonomy of African literature one must be cautious as far as that kind of search is concerned. This is due to the complexity of the problem with its varied positive and negative factors that are involved in the search. With this kind of thinking behind the search, it will be certain that the end result will be clear and devoid of any ambiguity that will undermine or defeat the ultimate purpose of adopting the appropriate critical criteria for the critiquing of African literature.

F. African Women and Literature

It must be noted that my concern for the search for autonomy of African literature is the idea of taking into serious consideration the African experience, environment, culture and traditional practices and values. Deciding on a critical criteria based on these characteristics will be truly African- oriented and acceptable as far as I am concerned. Within the concept of the age- old dominant patriarchal or traditional criticism there are some features that address indirectly the issue of women although negative, can be reviewed to favour the cause of both Western and African feminism. African feminism in African literature had been virtually ignored by African literary critics in their evaluation of African literature up to date. This situation seems to me to be a serious flaw and an omission in the context of critiquing African literature since women all over the world are a serious issue for attention by all nations for their importance In the society today. The role that women play in the society today as far as development is concerned is highlighted in the following message delivered by Mr. Kofi Annan, the immediate past Secretary- General of the United Nation Organizations on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8th March 2003[3].

Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved the benefits can be seen immediately. Families are healthier and better fed; their income savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and in the long run of whole countries.

That means all our work for development from agriculture to health from environment protection to water resource management must focus on the needs and priorities of women. It means promoting the education of girls who form the majority of the children who are not in school. It means bringing literacy to the half billion adult women who cannot read or write –

and who make up two thirds of the world's adult population.

The above stated message delivered by Kofi Annan is a clarion call for women to be recognized and given priority attention so that development can take place in the society. For this reason, African literature must preoccupy itself with women positive roles that they can play in the development of the society. If this is the case, then African literary critics must choose African feminism as the new vibrant critical criteria of critiquing African literature. This is because all literature to some extent deals with individuals in the society[17]. It therefore contains elements of social and political theory. African literature cannot be exception to this perception.

Obviously, the creator does not always write with the intention of propagating a particular idea but he cannot create in a vacuum. When he depicts a character or an incident his judgment comes into play thereby revealing some of the value choice he has made either consciously or unconsciously [19].

In the modern African society women are beginning to assert themselves and are fighting for their rights, equality and empowerment to enable them to rub shoulders with their male counterparts, in all fields of human endeavour. Various women's organizations and movements such as the 31st December Women Movement in Ghana and others in Nigeria, Kenya and other African countries are focused to champion the course of women in the society as to their importance and contribution to development. Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey of Africa once said. 'If you educate a man, you educate an individual but if you educate a woman you educate a nation'. To this end, women must be highly recognized and as a result, African feminism should be the obvious choice for the autonomy of African literature.

Edgar Wright in his work: Critical Evaluation of Africa Literature asserts the following:

The present practice of judging African literature by western standards is not only invalid; it is also potentially dangerous to the development of African arts. It presupposes that there is one absolute artistic standard and that of course is the western standard. Consequent any good African literature is taken to be that which most approximates to western literature. The primary criterion of African arts must come from Africans using African standards[17][19].

In fact, African Literature has been made to appear as if it must be strictly be dependent on Western Literature so that it can be accepted as good and valid. To me, this is great injustice and damaging blow to the advancement of African literature. This unpleasant situation calls for a change in the present 21st century! And this change should seek to anchor on African Feminism as the most suitable critical canon for the

critiquing of African literature. I assert that the search for autonomy of African literature can be found wanting and invalid if it is not steeped in the African environment and cultural values and the crucial role that women play in the development of the African society as echoed by Kofi Annan the immediate past Secretary-General of the United Nations Organization on the occasion of the International Women's Day as mentioned in the foregoing.

If women are now given attention all over the world owing to their indispensable role they play in the society in its advancement and development, then, they must occupy a special place in all fields of human endeavour. Thus, the literary field must recognize women's importance and create a worthy and beneficial material that will reinforce their crucial role they play in the society. I hereby revisit the fact that any good literature should address the nuances and values of a society in which it is created; and for this reason, since women in the African society are known to be the instruments through which its cultural values and practices are effectively transmitted to enable the society to survive, African Feminism should become the bedrock on which Africaneity and aesthetics can issue to benefit the African society.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it will be significant and appropriate in the context of this discourse to capture the following to re-emphasise the fact that African literature continues to be dependent on Western literature; and therefore there must be a drastic change for this established order to give way to a new order:

It is our contention that criticism of African literature should cover new dimension in the 21st century. It has been realized that some of the current theories and methods proposed by African critics are basically eurocentric, half baked, illogical and parochial. What is even more disconcerting is the outright misinterpretation of African literary texts by some western critics. In order to avoid modelling African works on European texts, African critics must begin to develop and evolve an acceptable African aesthetics based on African sensibility. (Azasu and Geraldo 2005:79).

Responding to this demand for African aesthetics based on African sensibility what can be more than the choice of African Feminism which in my opinion is fully pregnant with African sensibility, as I have attempted to establish on the above subject in my discourse.

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