

Themes and Perspectives in African and Caribbean Writing

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Abstract

This paper will examine the differences between African and Caribbean literature. The writers hope to undertake a thorough comparative analysis of the core concerns of literary artists from Africa and the Caribbean. The historical past of the two regions tend to highlight the differences in their literary approach. The key motivating factors for writers from Africa has been identified as their culture, the colonial and the post-colonial experience. The African culture has been affected by the more recent history of colonial subjugation and by European post-colonial domination of the continent. So, in essence the motif in African writing has been the critical changes that ensued as a result of the culture clash between the continent and Europe. Literary artists from the Caribbean want to highlight the unique West Indian experience. The slave past and the attendant brutalities that led to the recurring trauma of that inhumanity is the main motif of these writers. Thus, the core concerns of writers from the Caribbean has been identified as the brutalities of slavery and the exploitation of colonialism. Another equally important focus of writers from the Caribbean is the cultural diversity of the Islands. From African slaves to Indian and Chinese indentured laborers and other races; all these peoples were brought to the Islands where they met the native Islanders. Both African and Caribbean literatures has drawn inspiration from their checkered history. In the Caribbean the slave past led to a search for identity. In Africa the viable cultures of the people became a reference motif. The colonial subjugation of these two areas also led to a large body of literary works.

Keywords: African, Caribbean, Colonial, Culture, Post-Colonial

I. Introduction

There is a marked difference between African and Caribbean Literature. This difference is quite clear in their treatment of the historical past. Writers in both areas derive their inspiration from critical events that occurred in their societies. They are thus, motivated by the urgent need to express to local and international readers concerns that are both individual and societal. Writers from sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of Africa are motivated by their culture and by the more recent colonial and post-colonial experience. For these writers, one would dare say, they write from a deep cultural past which has been affected by the recent facts of history. One would also posit that, even though, ancient African traditions have been radically affected and also 'disrupted' by European adventurism in Africa; yet, these writers are not basically, in search of identity.

The motive of their writings are not in essence a search for their roots. Their concerns has been the fundamental changes that their societies have undergone and are undergoing as a result of the clash of African and European cultures. They were also deeply concerned about the feelings of disillusionment with post-colonial African leaders and society. Writers from the Caribbean on the other hand, are inspired and

motivated to write about the unique West Indian experience. On the one hand, these writers are expressing to readers the deep feelings of their slave past. This past of slavery and the brutalities it evokes, tended to highlight the trauma in the individual and collective psyche of these societies. In addition to this critical theme, there is the more recent colonial past of these islands. The brutalities of slavery and the exploitation of colonialism are core concerns for writers from the Caribbean.

Closely intertwined to these issues is the cultural diversity of the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands. Different races were brought from across the world to populate these islands. From African slaves to Indian indentured laborers, to the Chinese and other races; all these peoples were brought to the islands where they met the native islanders. In addition, there are the European slave plantation owners and later colonial administrative powers. These conglomeration of races tended to pose a serious challenge to the Caribbean islands. As a result of this therefore, writers from these islands are concerned basically, about the issues of identity. They are also concerned about important issues such as the inherent poverty and underdevelopment of these areas in the wake of political independence and the virtual abandonment of the areas by previous colonial powers. The core concerns therefore, between African and Caribbean literature is different when we consider the exigencies of historical experiences of these two areas and the way these issues are treated in the two literatures.

II. Analysis of Caribbean Literature

Caribbean literature has over the years developed into the varied and advanced genres of expression that we now have in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the writing from this part of the world has reached a high level of maturity with the award of the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature to two of its prominent writers – Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul. This honor is indicative of the extent of regard accorded Caribbean literature. However, despite this laudable achievement; it is important to note that writing from the Caribbean has not been an easy enterprise especially for literary artists. According to Udofia:

The history of the Caribbean is peculiar. It does not evolve gradually and naturally out of a remote mythological and archeological past, but begins abruptly with the “discovery” of the Bahamas in 1492 by Christopher Columbus (Naipaul as cited in Udofia 56).

As a result of the above therefore, writers and historians from this area are hard pressed to begin their endeavor on a virtually, ‘clean slate’. Unlike in African literature where a whole body of mores and values exists and subsists within the diverse communities; here, there was an absence of an authentic body of shared traditions, lore, myths, and legends from the past with which to draw from. This conundrum led literary artists like V. S. Naipaul to caustically remark: “that the Caribbean is merely a geographical expression which lacks a noteworthy history.” (Naipaul as cited in Udofia 56). Naipaul went further to say that “history is built on creation and achievement and nothing was created in the West Indies” (Naipaul as cited in Udofia 56). This intense feelings underscores the frustrations of both writers and historians in the Caribbean islands. In place of an established cultural history; all they have are “remains of old plantation houses and memoirs of the slave experience” (Naipaul as cited in Udofia 56).

The slave experience and the subsequent colonial subjugation of the Caribbean became twin evils that has been haunting this area for many years. Like Christopher Columbus before them; the European colonial powers were in the Caribbean for the economic exploitation of the area. Their intention has never been to develop the area thus, making it habitable for the different races they brought in to work for them. They simply, wanted to tap the resources for use in various European nations. Aside from the economic exploitation and impoverishment of the Caribbean; there is the serious problem of the diversity of the different races which were brought to the area from Africa as slaves and Indians from east India as indentured laborers.

There were also races such as the Chinese and many others. In essence, the islands were populated by people with different cultures and religions. This diversity became a problem rather than a blessing to the area. The European powers were constantly at each other's throats for greater control of large chunks of the Caribbean. These wars inevitably led to the further impoverishment of the islands. By the end of colonial rule the West Indies was virtually abandoned by these colonial and imperial powers. This was the scenario that literary artists and historians were faced with in the West Indies. Each of the writers in the Caribbean as would be noted from individual works responded quite differently to the fundamental issues confronting the area.

The critical point though, is that, many of the writers wrote from outside the Caribbean. This may be attributed partly to the publishing climate in the Caribbean – which is unfavorable – and to the general conditions of the islands. Thus, in Caribbean literature there is a large body of work on West Indians in the diaspora. Many of them decided to leave the islands for Europe. Although, exile for the West Indians has been a very difficult life as most writers from the area had clearly pointed out.

III. Major Themes and Concerns in Caribbean Literature

It is imperative to note that responses to the Caribbean contemporary realities and historical experiences have not been the same among literary artists. While white West Indian writers are apologetic about the history; “some reject the West Indies and claim Africa as their spiritual home” (Udofia 59). There are yet other writers who look to Europe for inspiration (Udofia 59). Thus, it is quite obvious that writers from the Caribbean have different perspectives of both the history and the current realities within the islands. What is critical though, is the fact that these literary artists, despite their individual viewpoints have become the spokespersons of their society. They try to analyze and interpret the inherent ills within the society and hence expose these grave “shortcomings and so seek positive and enduring responses to the milieu” (Udofia 59).

One of the key themes in this literature is that of alienation (Udofia 59). Writers tend to reflect this all-pervading issue through different forms such as homelessness, rootlessness and exile. So, questions about identity, about belonging, and the confusion in appraising concepts as community and nation-hood have remained recurring decimals in West Indian literature. It was not until the middle of the last century that there emerged a visible national consciousness within the West Indian milieu. Hitherto, what existed was essentially, ‘a geographical expression’. This underscores the fact that all the major racial groups in the area: Africans, Indians, Whites, West Indians of mixed blood (colored, mullato), all considered themselves

as ‘aliens’ living in a ‘foreign land’. However, the fundamental events that shaped the mid-twentieth century such as the first and second world wars, and the anti-colonial struggles has tended to challenge this perspective considerably. These fundamental events therefore, saw literary artists in the area being literally caught up in the throes of designing a viable base for the takeoff of an independent West Indian society.

This meant that for the first time sustained attempts were made to come to terms with the West Indian reality, a reality which is traceable to both the “discovery” of the West Indies more than four hundred years ago by Christopher Columbus; and the life defining socio-cultural, political and economic developments that have occurred through the centuries. As has been stated earlier, we see major writers from the West Indies approaching the historical motif in different ways but with characteristic seriousness and objectivity. They employ the past as a reference point in order to give meaning to contemporary life and society. Their primary cultural commitment for their societies has been the search for identity and self-discovery. They want to celebrate a new ethos and identity by highlighting the fact that the West Indian identity is different from the European. It is also different from that of Indians, Africans, and Chinese. A mixture of all these diversities tend to define the contemporary West Indian personality and reality.

IV. Analysis of African Literature

Written African literature has its roots from the oral traditions of the diverse peoples that inhabit the African continent. Indeed, it is a fact that paintings, symbols, drawings, etchings and scratching on rock faces and on tree backs are precursors of modern written African literature. The underlying point however, is that African literary artists are heavily influenced by the culture and history of their individual societies. The pressure of history and the demands of a cultural reorientation are core issues for the African writer. Unlike writers in the Caribbean; African writers are not fundamentally concerned about a search for identity but they are rather, attempting to explicate to readers especially, those outside the continent that there is a viable and altogether rounded way of life within the African milieu. In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe is presenting the culture and traditions of his *Igbo* people in the South East of Nigeria. He chronicled the culture clash that resulted in *Igbo* society at the end of the nineteenth century when the first white men set foot in that society.

The novel highlighted the stark contrast between African religious practices, traditions, values and mores with that of the European. Needless to say that readers of that work from other parts of the world had gotten the point that Achebe was trying to put across: that Africa and Africans are not the savages that they are thought to be. With colonization came the physical and psychological brutalization of the continent and its people. European colonial masters after sharing up the African continent according to artificial boundaries proceeded to systematically, rape the vast region. At the end of the Second World War European colonial powers could no longer continue to hold territories in Africa. This can partly be attributed to the anti-colonial struggles raging from Algeria in North Africa to Kenya in East Africa; there is the heavy economic toll on the fragile Metropolitan European economies who were trying to recover from the devastation of the Second World War.

Thus, it became quite prudent for the colonizers to grant the colonized political independence. Before they left Africa though, the colonizers ensured they had given the political leadership to a small local elite whom

in nearly all the African countries are Europe trained. The euphoria of political independence in Africa soon turned to disillusionment across the continent. Violent Military coup detats, civil wars, and civil disturbances ensued. Meanwhile, the evil policy of apartheid in South Africa has become an official government stance of separating the races in that country. These myriad of critical issues became the central motifs of virtually, all creative endeavors emanating from Africa.

V. Major Themes and Concerns in African Literature

According to Owomoyela (1993) if we should consider Africa as a cultural entity and not a geographical entity then the countries of North Africa cannot be seen as African. He maintained that countries in North Africa are Arab both in culture, outlook, and lingua franca. That they perceive themselves to be a part of the Arab world. So to him countries of sub-Saharan Africa who by reason of their shared cultural unity can be regarded as truly African and their literatures taken to authentically, represent the continent. In addition, the literatures of Europeans and other settlers in Africa both past and present should not be seen as African literature although, with ‘a partial exception’ of the white community of South Africa (Owomoyela 1). It should be noted however, that North Africa has had a long history of close relationship with sub-Saharan Africa.

Apart from the geographical reality, there is a very close link in both commerce and religion between these parts of Africa. Through the facts of history the Islamic religion has become a unifying factor between Arab North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Writers from both regions would do well, I dare say to explore these themes of religion and commerce. A large amount of poetry was written in Arabic and also ‘transliterating vernacular languages in the Arabic script’ (Gerard 16).

“Studies of African literatures implicitly or explicitly argue a continuity with traditional verbal artistry, which, in the absence of a popular writing tradition, was exclusively oral.”
(Owomoyela 2)

However, the relationship between modern African literature and traditional oral artistry is quite tenuous. The coming of the white man to Africa has had a fundamental influence on written African literature. But just like in Caribbean literature, African literature has been greatly affected by the historical events of the twentieth century. Literary artists from the continent also differ in their presentation and interpretation of these events.

“...but transcending their differences are certain constants: the literatures they produce have in common an undeniable European inspiration and a necessary preoccupation with the vicissitudes that European activities have unleashed all over the continent, activities whose disorienting ramifications persists.” (Owomoyela 6)

Writers from Africa are concerned with the effects of slavery on the continent. While that inhuman enterprise lasted millions of Africans were forcefully abducted and taken to the Americas (the new world), Europe and other parts of the world where they served as slaves. Another area of deep concern to African writers is colonialism and post colonialism. Africa was physically and psychologically raped of her vast

human and material resources. Colonial rule also deeply affected the traditional African cohesiveness inherent in the cultures of the diverse peoples of the continent. Europe had also bequeathed to Africa at independence political structures that are clearly alien to the African way of life. Thus, the resultant effect of this imposition of non-workable systems of administration has created chaos and the general impoverishment of the people.

In South Africa writers are deeply concerned about the policy of the white minority Afrikaner government. The official policy of 'apartness' or *apartheid* sought to segregate the races of the country. Black Africans and other non-whites such as Indians, Chinese, Arabs, and Coloreds were brutalized and dehumanized under this evil philosophy. Other thematic concerns of writers in Africa from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century centuries border on socio-political issues. Almost all the countries on the continent are grappling with issues of massive official corruption and the attendant poverty. They are also concerned about environmental issues and terrorism.

VI. Conclusion

Caribbean and African literatures has drawn inspiration from their checkered history. In the Caribbean the slave past led to a search for identity. In Africa the viable cultures of the people became a reference motif. The colonial subjugation of these two areas also led to a large body of literary works. Literary artists from these areas however, differ in their presentation and interpretation of historical and contemporary events. The difference in perspectives tend to render the creative endeavors of these writers more viable and worthwhile. The feeling of disillusionment is quite apparent in both literatures. In the West Indies, this feeling stems from the virtual abandonment of the islands by white plantation owners and European colonial masters after they have exploited the area. They thus, left behind a scene of utter devastation, impoverishment and backwardness.

In Africa the feeling came about as a result of failure by post-independence nationalist leaders to translate the euphoria of colonial freedom into more concrete terms. This means, people were expecting a more equitable, progressive and developed society. In essence therefore, literary artists from these two areas are fundamentally attempting to present and interpret their societies taking into consideration historical and contemporary events that shaped the socio-political and cultural lives of their peoples

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