



WITNESSING AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT AS PROTEST LITERATURE: EXPLORING BESSIE HEAD, CHINUA ACHEBE AND WOLE SOYINKA

ROHINI JHA

Research Scholar, Department of English, V.K.S. University, Bihar, India
rohinienglishliterature@gmail.com



ROHINI JHA

ABSTRACT

This paper will analyse the selected texts by some African writers which provide an exploration of the ill treatment of Africans by Whites. The data is collected through content analysis of the texts. It is not actually that strange as how the African Literature was fused with protest theme and gradually known as Protest Literature in the world. Literature could be called as a powerful tool and a magical weapon for the African folks as well as for the writers to stand firm against the Colonisers. This article thus sheds light on how the Europeans acted as parasite and ruined Africa making it weak at length. Protest starts when Africans became literate in their own languages, and they reacted against colonial repression in their writings. African literature is now in progress establishing its identity in the world. No doubt, protest was a mandatory substance for their freedom. And for achieving this freedom many platforms were provided to them. African writers never craved for credit as they wrote the real truth of their time of their society and nonetheless about their people. Africans have gained wide recognition and created history so that we could not only read but feel them too.

KEYWORDS: Black People, Maltreatment, Racial Bias, Apartheid, Identity, Protest

KY PUBLICATIONS

BACKDROP

There has been much debate and discussion on why African Literature is so important and no doubt still the research is going on. Researchers and scholars are opting to explore African past which is nevertheless very fierce and terrible. Till today it haunts the reader who goes through the works of Bessie Head, James Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka and many other African writers as well as writers who are non-African as Doris Lessing. These writers have written not any ordinary novels but something which the world sees as word representation of pangs and turmoil's of Blacks living in colonial Africa. Their wound caused due to imperialist policies of European was so deep

that writers could not escape from writing and they have shown the world that even if their own language was silenced they are capable in their expressions. The importance and relevance of African literature is beyond debate because it is an inseparable segment of World Literature. It is quite evident in the writings of African writers. The aims and objectives of African writes was not to celebrate or portray any simple story rather it was to portray the bitter historical truth about their country's political situation, culture, education system, their people's lives in the hands of European power, Writers showcased the Africa's predicament during the colonial rule and it's particularly harsh and the culture shock it had undergone. The African writes

were able to arrest the attention and interest of the world audience due to their extraordinary skill on conveying the hitherto unknown phases and facets of Africa. The biggest possession of any community to survive and flourish successfully is their language and culture. And it comes to us with no surprise that it was snatched from Africa leaving it with a mere skeleton of hollow economy and dependent people. Today, one cannot fully imagine the true situation of colonial Africa but if we take a look at the backdrop of its colonization process; it is possible that one would develop sympathy for the African's predicament and outright reject the imperialist policies of the Whites and its responsibilities towards civilizing the black African. It is a sine qua non to be acquainted with the starting point of colonization of Africa. Actually the colonization process of Africa started during the ancient period. The continent of Africa and in particular the coastal African cities like Carthage which was found in modern Tunisia, were exposed to frequent plundering by Phoenicians in the 4th century. It was during the early European expeditions that African coast were colonized and trade bases were established. But the vast interior of Africa was not known to European till the late nineteenth century. In the Berlin conference the introduction of a policy known as "New Imperialism" granted Europeans the power to regulate colonial expansion. Africa became the prime target for the new imperialist expansion. It was during the 1930s that the famous negritude movement began. It was a literary movement founded by Leopold Senghor, a poet from French-speaking Africa. Other important poets who actively participated in this literary movement were Leon Damas from Guiana and Aime Cesaire from Martinique. Their poetry condemned colonial rule and questioned its validity. Furthermore, it asserted the pride and dignity of African native cultures that the colonials tried to crush. It is obvious why the colonials would encourage the natives to be aware of their rights instead they tried to keep them in dark and convinced them with great prudence that blacks are uncivilized. And only whites can civilize them. Development of Black consciousness and an understanding of racial identity did not occur suddenly as a period of awakening and

consolidation: from early on, attempts to constitute an invigorated view of racial identity were embattled by beliefs about class and national affiliation.

Du Bois wrote his famous 'Souls of Black Folks' (1903), which stressed the importance of an education which would support the innate intellectual powers of the Negro race. In this book he promoted his theory of the 'Talented Tenth', a petit-bourgeois educated class of African Americans who would be cultivated as the natural leaders of their people. Du Bois's interest was in building an educated class that could lead the Negro people and participate in political decision making. Since the early 19th century, writers from West Africa started using newspapers to express their views on colonialism and nationalist feelings. Writers' views and their expressions on colonialism was mouthpiece of general mass and natives. The spark of rage gradually turns into protest and simultaneously literature was also flourishing and came out as protest literature. Writers emerged from all parts of Africa after Second World War. Some west African writers are Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ousmane Sembane, Kofi Awoonor, Ben Okri. Some East African writers Ngugi wa Thiong'o and P'Betek are famous. Some South African writers Nadine Gordimer and Dennis Brutus are famous. Doris Lessing was one of the most powerful and significant writers to have emerged on the international literary scene. And Bessie Head's contribution in the realm of African Literature is appreciable. All were educated and could produce world class poetry, short stories, novels, essays and plays. Almost all of them had common concerns, i.e. the clash between indigenous and colonial cultures, condemnation of European subjugation, pride in African past and hope for Africa's independence. Writers like Bessie Head and Doris Lessing had experienced the traumas of Apartheid. Bessie Head is considered as Botswana's very famous and realist writer. Head's whole life was devastated due to the dirty and violent game of apartheid. Head had herself suffered brutality, abuse and mental trauma during her lifetime. Her novel 'A question of Power'; it is heart wrenching story of a girl born of a white mother and a black father. Honestly, a person who

has gone through such trauma could write in such a phenomenal way like Bessie Head did.

Thus literary endeavour in Africa, unlike most other places, was not born out of aesthetic appreciation of nature or philosophic contemplation of human nature or metaphysics. It was the result of the agony and crisis in the soul of the African who became an unfortunate scapegoat in the hands of the ambitious colonials. Writers work came out like a song sung in painful situation. Writers had to mirror the social problems they could not find their expressions to flow in other directions but to remain confined within the social boundary which was shaking due to Imperialism or better to say colonialism. There is not a scintilla of doubt about it that colonialism was a nightmarish scene for the people of Africa. The colonists imposed their language and religion. Therefore there was implementation of English language. The first West African novel in English was "The Palm Wine Drinkard" written by the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola and published in 1952. It is in this novel the heat strokes of protest could be felt. And after imposing English as language and banning their native language; Europeans thought African natives could never ever know about this whole fishy plan. And what happened was really a shock for them and Africans celebrated their independence under a sky free of smog called colonialism.

Chinua Achebe known as the Father of modern African Literature was born in a village called Ogidi in eastern Nigeria. Achebe's first novel is the trend setting 'Things Fall Apart'. It tells the story of an Ibo warrior whose tragedy exposes the clash between the narrative and western values. Its protagonist Okonkwo's rigidity in asserting the tribal values causes his tragic death by suicide. 'Things Fall Apart' truly is a tragedy of an individual as well as the society. It is set in the early days of colonization and Achebe uses fictional medium to counter the European myth and literary stereotype of Africa. It was also aimed to re- educate his fellow Africans whose self- esteem was at its lowest ebb due to the shattering effect of the colonial period. Achebe made it a mission for himself exhort fellow Africans that there is nothing wrong with the African culture, and that the African societies had their set of values,

great dignity, philosophy and beauty even before the material West colonized them and displaced them. Achebe has been a firm believer in the fact that African literature should aim at educating the society. The writer in a new nation like Nigeria should be even more concerned about the human tragedy in their society. Therefore we see in "Things Fall Apart", Achebe's successful effort to restore the true image of Africa. His own experience is reflected in his fiction. So, it would not be wrong to say that most of the African writers wrote in realist tradition because of their bad experiences of colonialism. It gives very real experience to any Achebe's reader as his novels deal with the central theme of the traumatic encounter between the native and European cultures. The scenes and situations in his novels are less imaginary and more real life experience. All the scenes are very real and heart wrenching. His novels also challenge Europe's racial myths behind colonialism and present its consequences for Africa and talk about the role of western influence in the fundamental transformation from oral ethnic cultures to literacy and nationwide cultures. After having dispensed with the 'fundamental theme' of showing his countrymen the cultural wealth of their past and reasons thereof, both external and internal which caused their loss in his village novels, Achebe set out with the same determination to expose the corruption and degenerated values embedded in the modern Nigerian government and society. What we see and read as Protest Literature in context of African Literature has been born out of the violent uncontrolled anger for the European's wrong policies and unjust laws.

Doris Lessing was a fascinating novelist. She was born in Persia and grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Lessing's work greatly deals with race, gender, communism and feminism. One unique characteristic should be mentioned here that is Lessing has a strong love for Africa and a strong hatred for 'White Supremacy'. This experience is fully reflected in her work 'Going Home'. The concept of colonialism is important in Doris Lessing's fictions. It applies not only to the African settings of some of her novels but also to the very model of her novelistic perception. For her

there are two Africas: the country which has always belonged to the African; and the power the white colonizer has imposed upon it. She belongs to neither in any real sense, and it is this marginality which enables her to act as an observer, and gives an additional clarity to that detachment which is an essential pre-requisite of the artist. In one of her interviews, Lessing says "South Africa is a fascist paradise". (Lessing, A small personal voice).

CONCLUSION

Really, African writers, with their best effort and calibre successfully made the world see that the African is not the 'savage', leading a 'beastly kind of life'. Africans patience and continuous effort to uproot European power has finally paid them off. It takes a lot of time and toil to create any history. And I can say that Africans have definitely created history. They have a lot of stories and incidents to share it with the world and now the African writers are in their best mood and platform to express them. African literature is now rich for its numerous episodes and also because of its journey of protest to decolonization and subsequently restoration of peace.

I think now the world must have learnt one thing for sure that is 'black is no colour' and so there should be no discrimination on the basis of colour. At no cost black should be treated like slaves and be kept in the lowest rung of the world. And the glory of literary world is not far from them in fact they have glorified the world of Literature by their contributions. They are not just writing for themselves but for the world too. Last but not the least I would add that literature of protest and peace is two facets of the same coin.

References

- [1]. Rao, Jaya Lakshmi. Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2006. Print.
- [2]. Waugh, Patricia. Literary Theory and Criticism. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- [3]. Du Bois, W.E.B.' Criteria of Negro Art', in M.H. Abrahams(ed.), The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism(New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993),pp.977-87. Print.

- [4]. Du Bois, W.E.B.'To the Nations of the world', in David Levering Lewis(ed.), W.E.B. Dubois: A Reader,(New York: Henry Holt, 1995),p.639. Print.
- [5]. Du Bois, W.E.B.' The Conservation of the Races', Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p.4. Print.
- [6]. Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. Print.
- [7]. Badode, Rambhau M. The Novels of Doris Lessing: Catastrophe and Survival. New Delhi: Creative, 2004. Print.
- [8]. Lessing, Doris. A small Personal Voice, p.75. Print.