

The Contribution of Eurocentric Literature to the Emergence of African Post Colonial Literature

Dr. Houria Mihoubi . E-mail: mihoubi78@yahoo.fr

Department of English language Faculty of letters and Languages

Mohamed Boudiaf University, M'sila. Algeria

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Abstract

This research paper is principally intended to comprehensively examine the contribution of Eurocentric literature to the emergence of African Post colonial Literature. Most Western critics had a firm belief that African literature was a reaction to the distorted image of Africa as portrayed in the Western Eurocentric literature. The present article thoroughly discusses the African reaction to the Eurocentric portrayal of Africa and the Africans which had often

tended to portray all that is African in an extremely negative way to the Western reader. The research focuses on Algerian literature as a case study.

Keywords: African literature, European literature, Euro centrism, Afro centrism, colonialism.

Introduction

المخلص: عمد الأدباء الغربيون في كتاباتهم إلى تصوير إفريقيا على أنها بلاد لا يسكنها سوى البرابرة و البدائيين فحتى الكتاب الدين ابدوا ولو ظاهريا تعاطفهم مع الأفارقة كشعب مضطهد ومستعمر لم يتمكنوا من التخلص من عقدة التعالي الأوروبية. لقد شهدت فترة ما بعد الاستعمار ظهور رواء بين أفارقة اخذوا على عاتقهم الرد على ما جاء في الأدب الغربي من محاولات تغليب للقارئ الغربي. يتناول المقال الحوار بين الرواية الغربية و الرواية الإفريقية وكيف عمد الرواء بين الأفارقة على رسم الصورة الحقيقية لبلدانهم و شعوبهم من خلال كتاباتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مركزية. الأدب الاوروبي. الأدب الافريقي. الفن. الآخر

Undoubtedly ,the image of Africa in Western literature has often constituted a wide space of debate . Thinkers working in a remarkable array of ideology ,history , and politics have taken an intense interest in questions concerning this important issue .As far as literature is concerned one can notice that the great bulk of critics from both Africa and Europe have agreed that in Western literature, Africa was often portrayed as the antithesis of Europe and as a place of negation.

After independence; the African intellectuals were shocked by such a racist representation of the other in the Eurocentric literature. Consequently, they tried to create a purely African literature that would criticize, debate, and even undermine the racist Western literature. The present paper thoroughly discusses the contribution of Albert CAMUS and Joseph CONRAD to the emergence of post colonial literature. In fact, the primary focus of the article is the analysis of the two writers' representation of Africa and how the African writers responded to this representation.

1-African Literature through a Euro Centric Eye

Since the nineteenth century the European reader knew little about Africa through what he used to read in Western literary works .In fact , Western novels and tales often gave him a highly negative image of Africa simply because Africa in Western literature was always seen with a racist Eurocentric eye. Indeed, Western writers wrote huge volumes about Africa ,but they often portrayed it as a jungle, a primitive continent ,and a place of negation. In other words, they presented it not only as the antithesis of Europe but as the antithesis of civilization. Perhaps , this reason why it is found that the great bulk of Western writers when writing about the African world they tend to argue that the major source of African history was Europe .

In addition , they often tried to prove that the African individual was a mindless man who had totally ignored what is meant by civilization or culture till the fortunate coming of the European colonizer. In fact, the European men of letters created a myth that would justify the European arrogance when colonizing an alien territory .It is the myth of *la mission civilatrice* which put Europe in the centre and Africa in the periphery. About the difference between the image of Africa in the Western eyes and Africa in the African eyes .In this context , Curtis KEIM, a British Professor of History and Political Science writes:

Many such images overemphasize what are considered to be African problems and are thus defined as cultureless, because they focus on cultural differences and attempt to explain those differences in terms of Africa's supposedly less-evolved cultures. By contrast, the images that have emerged in modern Afro centrism, a movement among African Americans, tend to overemphasize and romanticize the achievements of Africa's societies and their cultural contributions.(KEIM)

2-The Emergence of Afro Centric Literature

There is no denying that After independence ,the African intellectuals who have been exposed to the European literature were choked by its racist representation of the other or the African and they hated its defense of imperialism and colonialism since most of the Western writers and novelist hailed colonialism and tended to launch its echoes through their literary works.

As a retaliation ,the African writers like the Nigerian Chinois ACHEBE and the Sudanese Tayeb SALIH and many others did not stand aloof from this Western literary policy; rather they started producing literary works that would represent Africa as it is and not as the imperialist European wanted it to be the result was Anglophone and Francophone literature that aims at deconstructing and demythologizing Euro centrism and replacing it by Afro centrism at least in the African literary sphere (SMITHE , 2002:123).

From the foregoing ,it becomes important to understand that Western literature contributed in a way or another to the emergence of the African post colonial literature .As a matter of fact, one can easily notice that the discourse in modern African literature is a counter hegemonic discourse which often reacts against the hegemony of the West.

The Western novelist Joseph CONRAD ,for instance, despite the fact that he wrote against European imperialism in Africa and he even attacked colonialism in his *Heart of Darkness* through his direct indictment of the imperialist policy of Europe he could not , as a European ,shift the centre of his vision . In other words , CONRAD was bound with Europe, the centre of his upbringing and culture and this that made him consider Europe as a centre and Africa as a periphery .

In this respect, it is important to note that *Heart of Darkness*, though considered by Louis NKOSI, the Southern African critic and writer as an indictment to colonialism and as a non racist novel because it offers a valuable and a skeptical account of European imperialism, it has been considered by most of the African writers of the sixties as a genotext which should be reacted against. (ELDRED,1996:123) ACHEBE states that "The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph CONRAD was a thoroughgoing racist"(ACHEBE,1961:251).

Indeed, one can confirm that *Heart of Darkness* reveals CONRAD as, to use ACHEBE's words, "a thorough going bloody racist"(Ibid) simply because CONRAD seems to use the Africans as a décor for his novel he did not concern himself with the natives in the Congo but he used them only to justify his political and social beliefs expressed in the novels. This belief is strengthened by the fact that he represented Africa as a jungle whose people were jumping on the beaches like beasts:

White men view the native Africans as "savages" in their paint and armed with their strange weapons. Their language is so alien that it sounds like a "satanic litany." Which, unless it says "here's to my sweet Satan" when played backwards, sounds like a stretch to us. (CONRAD, 67)

To understand how CONRAD viewed the Africans, it is important to recognize that in his novel, he did not give the right to the voice of the African to be heard nor to his way of thinking to be known. He did not give them names and they seemed to be mere shadows making noise by drums:

[When leaving the Inner Station with Kurtz]: "In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to foot, strutted to and fro restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendant tail— (ibid.,3.30)

It is worth noting that the Nigerian novelist Chinua ACHEBE was among the African men of letters who responded to the imperialist echoes of *Heart of Darkness* through writing *Things Fall Apart* and *The Arrow of God*. In both novels, ACHEBE wanted to show that those natives who were neglected in CONRAD's novel had their own

culture and their own identity. Their life was organized by customs and traditions and he tried to prove to the reader how the Africans had been living a peaceful life until disorder and disruption came with the coming of the European colonizer.

In this regard ,there is a need to draw attention to the important fact that in his *The Arrow of God*, ACHEBE uses irony to put into question *la mission civilatrice* of *Heart of Darkness* Winterbettem ,the embelemic figure of the West is mocked at and is portrayed as worth not being respected . His downfall is much less dignified then that of Ezeulu the embelemic figure of e of the African culture . In fact, Winterbettom can be seen as a degraded replica of *Kurtz of Heart of Darkness* .

Interestingly,the Ghanaian writer ,Ayi Kwei ARMAH also reacted against *Heart of Darkness* through his brilliant novel *Why Are We So Blest* .In this novel ARMAH seems to use the Conradian scheme to demythologize Euorocentrism . In *Why Are We So Blest*, it is Europe that is portrayed as a place of negation and a hell .Modin and Solo are Africans who are sexually devoured by the Western civilization .In reality, *Why Are We So Blest* can be considered as the rewriting of *Heart of Darkness*. Simply put ,it is rather the Heart of Whiteness. (GILLARD,1992:4) :

Place-identity, in this collage of superimposed spatial images that implode in upon us, becomes an important issue, because everyone occupies a space of individuation (a body, a room, a home, a shaping community, a nation), and how we individuate ourselves shapes identity. (HARVEY, 1987:302)

The same thing could be said about the Sudanese writer Taib SALIH(Arabic: الطيب صالح).In reality , SALIH has been described by many critics as the "genius of the modern Arabic novel." He has lived abroad for most of his life, yet his fiction is firmly rooted in the village in which he spent his early years. His most well-known work is the modern classic *Mawsim al-hijra ila'l-shamal* (1967; *Season of Migration to the North*), which received great critical attention and brought new vitality to the Arab novel

In connection with this , it is worth noting that SALIH has not been a prolific writer; his early work, including *Season of Migration to the North*, remains the best of his oeuvre. He has received critical acclaim in both the West and the East. In Sudan he is without rival, and his writings have played a considerable part in drawing attention to

Sudanese literature. Arabic literature has been dominated by social criticism, social realism, and committed literature depicting the bitter realities of life; SALIH managed to break with this trend and return to the roots of his culture, capturing the mystery, magic, humor, sorrows, and celebrations of rural life and popular religion. He expressed his opinion about the West in his novel *Season of Migration to the North* in which he tended to portray the European world as the cause of the protagonist ,Said 's dilemma :

I preferred not to say the rest that had come to my mind: that just like us [the Europeans] are born and die, and in the journey from the cradle to the grave they dream dreams some of which come true and some of which are frustrated; that they fear the unknown, search for love and seek contentment in wife and child; that some are strong and some are weak; that some have been given more than they deserve by life, while others have been deprived by it, but that the differences are narrowing and most of the weak are no longer weak.

Here, SALIH (P.5) intelligently reveals one of the most important messages of the novel—that despite the differences wrought by culture and centuries of imperialism, individuals in Europe and the Islamic world are more alike than they are different. Although Europeans are blamed for the damage done by their occupation of Africa, the Sudanese politicians who come to power after the British leave are just as corrupt as their predecessors

In this regard ,it should be equally added that ,for his part, Louis NKOSI, also reacted to *Heart of Darkness*. Through his novel *Mating Birds* in which he dealt with the cruelty of the Europeans *vis a vis* the African Sibyi. He shows how the central character has been executed more for what he is than for what he has done (raping a white woman)

Undoubtedly , all those writers contributed to the creation of an African literature through which they aimed at debating what was written in CONRAD's *Heart of Darkness*, and Algerian literature of that period does not seem to be different.(PALMBERG 2001:234)

3-Algerian Postcolonial Literature and Afro centrism

Interesting is the idea that Algerian literature, as part of African literature, was not aloof from the African literary policy of writing back to the Europeans .This leads us to shed light on the French writer Albert CAMUS and his provocative role in the emergence of this part of North African literature. In fact, CAMUS' views of the African world ,or in a more particular sense , the Algerian environment and community is quite obvious in his novel L'etranger or *the Stranger*.

Simply put, *The Stranger* traces a year in the life of a young clerk working for a shipping company in 1940s Algiers. The setting – both time and place – are important to understand one vital piece of background information about *The Stranger* .In this novel CAMUS seems to totally undermine the Algerians .He does not give them names and more than that he associates the Algerian man with violence and the Algerian woman with prostitution .

Historically speaking ,the French started "colonizing" or in other words invading Algeria in 1830. By the time we get to the 1940's, Algiers, the city in which *The Stranger* takes place, is French territory. The protagonist Meursault kills an Arab but because in Meursault's world, the French are considered superior to the Arabs here it is meant the Algerians ,Killing an Arab was a minor offense, but not obeying French and Christian customs was apparently punishable by death. That's why Meursault's trial is so important – and so interesting to watch.

Consequently , it should be readily apparent that when Meursault himself says that he has been convinced of his own guilt, he was probably not talking about murder at all .In fact, this novel portrays the Arabs in general as people without culture and without identity. Undoubtedly, CAMUS tended to use them as a background or as a décor through which he wanted to express his discontent with the Vychist government .

Taking the novel from this prospective ,it becomes obvious that the protagonist Meursault is executed more for his nonconformist attitude towards the Vychist government than for his criminal act against the Algerian or to use CAMUS 's words the Arab . It is interesting to see racism and colonialism in the background throughout the first part of *The Stranger*. Obviously, it becomes more obvious when Meursault kills the

Arab, but even before that, the book is making an interesting commentary on race.(GULLETTE,1979).

When one looks at the image of the other in the novel , it becomes obvious that Meursault is clearly not giving race a lot of thought. Algeria seems to be pretty segregated against and there are not a lot of interactions with Arabs. The only interactions that Meursault has with Arabs are through Raymond, who does not seem to be the most scrupulous character. The Arabs are all portrayed negatively and as part of the underworld; Raymond's girlfriend cheats on him and the Arab men who follow Raymond and Meursault are described as indifferent.

On the other hand, the book does reveal the prejudice that Arabs in Algeria had to deal with. The police let Raymond off with a warning after he savagely beats his girlfriend. They accept Meursault's claim that she was cheating on him without question. And, at the end of part one, Meursault kills an Arab without remorse.

For her part ,the critic Jacqueline ARNAUD maintains that Algerian literature with the outbreak of the Algerian war of independence in November 1954 broke away from mimeses and folklore to become a literature of denunciation (AOUDJIT, 2010:25)

Perhaps ,this is reason why CAMUS's view of the Algerians was attacked by many Algerian writers .One of them was Mouloud MAMMRI who seems to parody or to question CAMUS's *The Stranger* in his *Le sommeil de Juste* because he tended to portray the Algerian who was denied the right to speak in CAMUS's novel as one who has his own culture , identity, and origin .In MAMMRI 's novel, Europe was portrayed as a hell for the Algerian who goes to study and to acquire the Western culture . Areski , the protagonist who is jailed for what he is. Perhaps, this is the reason why most Western critics and readers saw Maammri 's novel as a reaction to CAMUS' *The Stranger* .

Certainly ,it is through *Le Sommeil de Juste* that the reader can clearly perceive the difference between the Algerian society as it is and the one the French wanted it to be. Simply put, the hidden polemic between CAMUS' *The Stranger* and Maammri 's *Le Sommeil de Juste* can easily realized by any reader.(Ibid.)

It is certain that when one looks at all that was said by the critics about CONRAD and CAMUS, it becomes obvious that both adopted an escapist attitude. Simply put, one can easily observe that both preferred to escape from their historical context to a metaphysical, philosophical one. Undoubtedly, their philosophy depended more on neglecting the other. Additionally, both were existentialist concerned more with their own beliefs than with the others' beliefs. In other words, CONRAD wrote to criticize imperialism while CAMUS wrote to attack the Vichist government. Both criticized what goes against their existentialist philosophy.

As it has been pointed out earlier, the two writers tended to put the African, or the other in general, in the periphery while the European is always put in the centre, and this what led the African writers to try to answer back to all the European prejudices against all what is African. To use NGUGI's words "...culture is the result of history but it also reflects it because it offers a set of values through which people know their place in the world (Ashcroft, 2006: 23). It seems that both CAMUS and CONRAD have neglected this fact while the African writers among them the Algerian writers of the post colonial era who being aware of this fact created postcolonial literature through which they wanted to move the center from Europe to Africa by emphasizing their own culture and putting it in a historical context.

Conclusion

After thoroughly analyzing the image of Africa in Western literature and the African literary response to it, one can finally establish the important fact that Western writers such as CONRAD and CAMUS were catalysts to some extent of the emergence of post colonial literature in Africa. When one examines Algerian post colonial literature, it becomes clear that, like the major part of post colonial African literature, it can be considered to a great extent as a reaction to the Eurocentric French literature that tended to portray Algeria and the Algerians in a very negative way.

It should be clear from the foregoing analysis that the Western readers and critics who have long been the victims of euro centrism could easily perceive the dialogue between Western literature and the African postcolonial literature and then take a final critical judgment and even perceive Africa and the Africans as they are and not as the European men of letters wanted them to be.

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