

THE AFRICAN PALIMPSEST: NATIVIST POLEMICS IN NGUGI WA THIONGO AND AMOS TUTUOLA

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Abstract:

Ngugi and Tutuola, according to ordinary perceptions are post-colonial writers because they belong to Africa in the post-colonial period. But in today's contemporary theoretical discourses the term post-colonial is problematized because it shows the permanent relation between the colonial and the post-colonial, that is, the post-colonial is given more permanence than the colonial. So Ngugi and Tutuola have taken a new nativity perception were they do not abide by the binary oppositions of colonial and post-colonial, they do not look upon themselves as post-colonial. Rather they are engaged in exploring diverse expressions of Africa like religion, morality, culture, mythology, tradition etc. By exploring the indigenous recourses of Africa, they wanted to evolve an authentic African identity.

Keywords: Palimpsest, Nativism, Polemics etc

Media has played an enormous role in perpetuating African myths, making it easy to believe that Africa may be a continent with savages, unlearned peoples, and utter destitution. Watching National Geographic, one sees half naked people hunting and gathering and participating in traditional rituals, but rarely does one see Great Pyramids that are part of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient world, or the coral of Cairo. However, Africa is far quite the pictures of famine and war we frequently see within the international media. Africa features a very rich diversity in culture, traditions, languages, history, and ideas. However years of colonization destroyed any hope of Africa building their societies fully, and their history was rewritten to suit the ecu narrative. That hope is being gained day by day as people partake in the making of their history. It is proof that change can happen but it will take a mobilization of the people. Therefore, Africans must find meaning and pride in its history if there's to be any hope in rebuilding their societies after the deprecation of colonialism. There is still room for growth for Africa and regardless of the past, Africans have a chance to remake their history drawing from their past experiences.

The term African Literature generally refers to a comprehensive, complex and artistic literature of and from Africa. But different critics belonging to different schools of thought

have provided varying interpretations about African literature. Chinua Achebe “see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units in fact the sum total of all national and ethnic literatures of Africa.” (Gill,9) Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer believes that “African writing done in any language by Africans themselves by others of whatever skin colour ... who share the African experience and who have Africa centred consciousness” (Gill,9)

African literature is classified into three categories- traditional oral literature of Africa, literature written in indigenous African languages and literature written in European languages. Pre-Colonial Africa was divided into various ethnic groups. During that period different communities developed distinct oral literature of their own. Africa’s literary tradition was predominantly oral until the twentieth century. The tradition comprises of specialized verbal art forms-proverbs, riddles, chants, riddles-through African societies have ensured cultural continuity. Orature flourished in Africa primarily in absence of widespread literacy and was handed down the generations through memorization and recitation. The oral tradition is the vehicle and store house of Africa’s values, rituals, philosophies and mysteries with special emphasis on cultural memory.

Post colonial African literature is very much seized by the traumatic experiences of colonialism. African fiction emerges as a kind of reaction to the Eurocentric version of the African portrayed in terms of a savage inhabiting a dark continent. For Europeans there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness and darkness is not a subject of history. At this time, writers like Franz Fanon assumed that it was their duty to recover the natural and holistic entity called “African Culture” which has been subjugated by colonialism. Like all other art forms in Africa, African fiction has a fundamental value. The African novelist is part of the mainstream of his society. African fiction has able to establish a tradition and an aesthetic of its own in a short span of time. It is committed to drawing and involving its people in nation building activity.

During the late colonial period writers such as Ngugi wa Thiongo (b.1938) gave up writing in English and began to write in African languages, with translations into English and Swahili, and other languages, following the publications in the mother tongue. Amos Tutuola (b.1921) is immersed in the cultural consciousness of traditional Africa as embodied in cosmology, moral values and attitudes. In many parts of Africa, in the literary, political, and educational circles, people generally began to believe the fostering of literature in indigenous African languages as important, especially in creating new national models that reflected the culture and history of the people. The success of writing in indigenous languages depended largely on factors like government policy, the stand taken by publishers, translatability etc. Despite severe financial constraints, most African countries now have indigenous publishing houses that cater to local readers. Apart from this, the huge popularity of stage and radio dramas in countries like Nigeria, South Africa,

Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania demonstrate the popular interest in verbal art and in the revival of African traditions.

This paper entitled **The African Palimpsest: Nativist Polemics in Ngugi wa Thiongo and Amos Tutuola**, proposes a new perception of Africa. Ngugi and Tutuola, according to ordinary perceptions are post colonial writers because they belong to Africa in the post colonial period. But in today's contemporary theoretical discourses the term post colonial is problematized because it shows the permanent relation between the colonial and the post colonial, that is, the post colonial is given more permanence than the colonial. So Ngugi and Tutuola have taken a new nativist perception were they do not abide by the binary oppositions of colonial and post colonial, they do not look upon themselves as post colonial. Rather they are engaged in exploring diverse expressions of Africa like religion, morality, culture, mythology, tradition etc. By exploring the indigenous recourses of Africa, they wanted to evolve an authentic African identity.

In Ngugi and Tutuola there is no rebellion or resistance to colonization. They have transcended the resistance stage. They are exploring Africa in two different ways. Ngugi has been a post colonial writer, he wrote primarily in English. Later he began to write in Gikuyu. Now he has taken a nativist identity and as a nativist he believes in the authenticity of his language and culture. He realized that languages are permanently tainted. Writing in another's language discards one's own native space and identity because languages invariably contain the world view, history, culture in it. So Ngugi regards his language as the primary language because he wants to project himself as a Gikuyu writer, not an African writer writing in English. For him the local is the felt reality and the national/global are only virtual realities. Unlike Ngugi, Tutuola wrote in English rather than his mother tongue Yoruba because he wanted to reach a wider audience to which this local material may have more general interest. The English he uses is not polished or sophisticated. He captures the way English was spoken in Nigeria by ordinary people.

Nativism is "a form of indegenism whose agenda can e summed up as a cry for cultural self-respect and autonomy" (Paranjape xii). Paranjape further notes:

Nativism is a part of a world-wide phenomenon of cultural nationalism and self-assertion in which colonized and other marginal literary cultures began to vociferate their differences from Euro-American universalist critical discourses.... Those who are anti-imperialistic, those who believe in the value of indigenous and local cultural resources, those who are opposed to centralizing and homogenizing authoritarian structures whether traditional or modern, may broadly be nativists (xvi)

Adeeko Adeleke divides Nativist tendencies into three: Classical or thematic Nativism, Structuralist Nativism and Linguistic Nativism. Of the three Ngugi wa Thiongo's work can be classified under linguistic nativism. Adeleke explains: "In linguistic nativism, literatures are taken to be second-order language use defined and described by the material languages in which they are written. For the linguists, to be called African a body of works must be written in languages that are native to Africa" (ix). Tutuola's fiction pinpoint the peculiar enlightenment potential of classical nativism. His narratives subsist on a philosophically distinct concept of time, space and person and on a story-telling tradition formed in an unmodernist milieu.

Ngugi wa Thiongo is an uncompromising champion of African identity and culture. He was born in 1938 in Kamirithu village, Kenya. In 1970, he rejects his Christian name James Ngugi and revert back to his Gikuyu name, Ngugi, son of Thiongo. During his education his play *The Black Hermit* (1962) was produced. There after he joined the University of Leeds in England, which opened a new perspective for him. As a novelist, playwright and critical thinker, Ngugi has dealt with the concerns most affecting his native land Kenya. Ngugi's other works include *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), *Matigari* (1989), *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). His critical writings include *Home Coming* (1972), *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary* (1981), *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) etc.

Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* is designed like a fable and it is set in a mystical land called the African Republic of Aburiria. The story feels as though it is being told orally. *Wizard of the Crow* is only a transcribed version of a story told and retold across Aburiria. Story telling is also blended into the narrative and the characters are continually telling other improvised version what has just happened to them. There is even a character named Arigaigai Gatherer, who pops up throughout the book telling key parts of the narrative to a packed Kenyan bar at some indeterminate point in the future. Constable Arigaigai Gatherer always surrounded by crowds wanting to hear story after story about the *Wizard of the Crow*. Constable Arigaigai Gatherer felt charged with energy on seeing the rapt faces men, women and children waiting to catch his every word.

Thiongo's continual return to the theme of story telling is meant to convey a respect for and understanding of the Kenyan story telling tradition. In *Wizard of the Crow*, Thiongo explores at least three new ways that story telling can be vital to the present: it is a means of divulging the mechanisms of politics in an African dictatorship, a method that people used to discover and renew themselves and a tool for constructing new ways to plot a novel. Story telling exemplifies the techniques and the architecture used by political actors in Aburiria as they continually invent tails, with breaking speed, they become the new realities that the country must live by. Either it is the Ruler purposefully creating realities with an iron hand, or the business man doing it in ignorance as they arrange goals,

the creation of stories remains central. For instance, Thiongo tells us that the Ruler delights in playing his two principal ministers, Sikikuu and Machokali, off one another. The two well know that the price for falling out of their Ruler's favour is likely death, but they are both inexperienced and incompetent, completely unfit to execute the task the Ruler sets before them. When they inevitably fail, they fall back on the only resource they have, their tongues.

Thiongo sees in story telling an allegory for the mechanism of power that have held down his nation for so long, he also sees in it a potent engine for renewal. Ngugi's emphasis on dynamic self-fashioning and cultural renewal- he has long conceived his own relationship to indigenous African forms, particularly story telling as productive dialogue that complements the value placed on the quest for an authentic voice, whether individual or collective, that is at the heart of the novel's politics and morality.

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi revives the African story telling tradition, which accepts magic as an element in life. In a society where the government fails, magic and exploitation of the people's superstitious beliefs can be used as the powerful weapons to carryout transformation. According to Gikuyu people of Kenya, the strongest sorcerers are the 'Wizard of the Crow' those who can bring down a crow, dead, with a single glance in to the sky. Thus in his sprawling force Ngugi makes his hero wear the mantle of 'Wizard of the Crow', which ultimately brings about the demise of the dictator and gives hope to his country. Kamiti becomes a reluctant hero in the unavoidably political world of Aburiria and merges himself with the person of Wizard of the Crow, a guise that entails inevitable risk and responsibilities. Kamiti is sure that he is not playing trick on the people through sorcery and his confidence is evident in his words.

I was proud that I never once dispensed magic that could harm anyone, and I never really lied to my clients. I never employed conjuring tricks to mesmerize. I worked with thoughts and images already in their own minds (207).

Wizard of the Crow, as a diviner, cannot participate in an open protest, but still he maintains his own method of resistance with magic as his weapon. His sole purpose is to enrich the world with a soul, the first step of which is to make the people aware of their own potential. Ngugi's Wizard, thus, is not an enchanter, but a healer of the mind's wounds who considers lack of self-realization as real obstacle to the path of liberation. Realizing one's own power and the dignity of one's race is the most essential step towards liberation from any dictatorship.

Amos Tutuola (1920-1997) was a central figure in the history of modern Nigerian literatures. Tutuola's writings are recognized as a unique example of a hybridized interface between Nigeria's pre-colonial oral folklore and literary modes of discourse. Traces of

indigenous cultural resource-base are evident in their employment of episodic narrative structures and mythic landscapes populated with animist deities, supernatural beings and the ghosts of ancestors. His major works include *The Palm Wine Drunkard* (1952), *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), *Brave African Huntress* (1958), *Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* (1982) etc.

Amos Tutuola inaugurated West African literature in English with *The Palm Wine Drunkard*. It is a sequence of thirty episodes of quest, endurance and the achievement of wisdom, mainly adapted from Yoruba folktales. Tutuola worked in the traditions of village story teller, but instead of telling his stories in Yoruba, he wrote them in the best English his scanty schooling permitted. His linguistic idiosyncrasy proved a strangely suitable means of conducting his readers into the rich experience of the Yoruba imagination. At first glance, the story seems no more than a mythical romp by an unnamed picaresque hero through a dream world in search of his dead palm-wine taster. On this fairytale of quest, all normal laws of time, place and nature are suspended. The hero changes his own physical form of will, moves effortlessly between the lands of the living and the dead and encounters varied and wonderful creatures many of whom he must fight or flee.

In, the *Palm Wine Drunkard* Tutuola employs traditional folktales with some modifications. Historically Africans tales have always been adapted and molded by their tellers so that they would have particular relevance the specific social and moral climate in which they were told. He alters traditional plots intentionally in order to speak more directly to the particularized concerns of the African setting in which he wrote. Thus Tutuola creates an episodic allegory through which he can vent his personal frustrations with life under British domination.

Tutuola's quest both for his hero's and his own identity, which he recaptures by taking charge of the alien environment established by colonial discourse, may help account of the fantastic and infinitely mutable landscape of the *Palm Wine Drunkard*. Tutuola struggles to mold and shape his hero's world into one that make sense. Through the manipulation and reformulation of foreign tongue, Tutuola attempts to re-familiarize and reclaim the environment. In developing such a usage, Tutuola invents and employs an inter-language, a regionally specific version of English. The establishment of such a climate is central to Tutuola's nativist project.

The most striking and memorable of all the traditional tales recounted in the *Palm Wine Drunkard* is that of a beautiful complete gentleman. In this story, a girl is enthralled by physical beauty of a man market place. Despite the man's apparent beauty, when the enamored woman follows him to his home, she witnesses an amazing spectacle. Along the way, the man proceeds to remove various parts of his body and return them to the people from whom he has rented them. Ultimately, the man is reduced to a terrifying shrilly

humming skull that takes the girl prisoner by tying a magical cowrie to her neck. This enchanted bit of currency not only render the girl unable to talk, but emits an awful noise if she attempts to escape. If Tutuola's version of this story is read allegorically, then it can be interpreted as a warning about some of the dangers of and temptations offered by colonial/transitional life in Nigeria. Through his retelling of this tale, Tutuola suggests that although western ideas and projects might at first seem tempting and attractive, these things ultimately prove little more than deceptive. Once stripped away, they reveal the true underlying structures of colonialism: death and enslavement. Through this tale Tutuola hints at the way in which colonial and subsequently post colonial socio-economic systems serve to chain their African victims to money and other seemingly positive trapping while simultaneously trying to remove their ability to recognize their innate potentials.

Tutuola's stories recapture the essential humanism of the folktales. Within it all nature is imbued with vital force and is humanized and humans are the central figures. In him man is at grips with hostile elements, the jungle, the vicious masters, supernatural beings, thus struggling to escape from the surrounding evils. The goes against the popular image of the traditional African as the helpless victim of his hostile environment. Thus the basic confidence in an African is pictures in folktales. Without this important element, traditional societies would have perished from a lack of stimulus and inspiration to overcome the hostile forces that surrounded them.

Tutuola's employment of anti-realism makes *The Palm wine Drunkard* a powerful socio-political critique. Realism encourages the readers to accept the conventional perspective it offers as the only appropriate way of decoding reality. The book's very absurdity is what frees it from the discursive and cultural center and enables the readers to reclaim the past. It is this quality that has made the book a classic in African literature.

To conclude, both Ngugi and Tutuola have shown the potentialities of African culture, folklore, mythology, language etc. as a vitalizing force in African literature. Apart from propagating the oral literature of their people, they have also been preoccupied with examining and enriching their own cultural heritage through nativism. Thus by reverting to their tradition they can evolve a native culture and identity.

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