

Defining African Literature within the Context of the Emergence of the African Novel

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Résumé

Cet article démontre que définir la littérature africaine n'est pas une tâche facile car, chaque spécialiste ou écrivain a sa propre définition de cette littérature africaine. En dépit de tout cela, il revisite les différentes définitions données par certaines figures emblématiques de la littérature africaine telles que Achebe, Ngugi et Gordimer dans leur quête d'une définition acceptée et authentique de la littérature africaine. Par exemple, lorsqu'Achebe fait référence à la littérature africaine comme une littérature qui est soit écrite dans les langues Européennes (de façon africanisée or hybridée), soit dans les langues africaines, Ngugi par contre la définit comme une littérature qui n'est écrite que dans les langues africaines et la prétendue littérature africaine qui est rédigée dans les langues européennes est une littérature euro-africaine plutôt qu'une littérature africaine en elle-même. Au même moment, Gordimer la définit comme une littérature qui est écrite dans n'importe quelle langue par les africains sans aucune considération de la couleur de la peau de l'écrivain/e pourvu qu'il ou elle soit africain/e d'identité. Cependant, ce travail fait aussi la synthèse des définitions déjà revisitées tout en définissant la littérature africaine comme toute forme de littérature, écrite ou orale, qui a une valeur artistique et qui est faite par les africains pour les africains et, est basée sur l'Afrique sans aucune considération de la couleur de l'auteur/e ou de la langue dans laquelle elle est produite. En outre, il démontre que la question de la langue la plus appropriée pour véhiculer la littérature africaine demeure pendante car les écrivains et spécialistes africains n'arrivent toujours pas à se mettre d'accord sur une langue qui pourrait peindre l'Afrique sans altération ou falsification des réalités socioculturelles africaines. Aussi, cet article retrace le début historique du roman africain et son évolution à travers trois époques majeures de l'histoire africaine qui sont : l'époque anticoloniale, celle des indépendances et la période néocoloniale ou postcoloniale. Cet article montre que chaque époque a influencé et déterminé le rôle et le thème, à la fois, du romancier et du roman africain. L'article se termine sur les aspects et thèmes récurrents de la littérature africaine qui sont inspirés des réalités quotidiennes de l'Afrique, et basés sur les valeurs de la tradition orale africaine.

Abstract

The paper demonstrates that defining African literature is not an easy task for, each scholar or writer has his or her own conception of what is African

literature? In spite of this, it exposes and revisits a set of definitions provided by some well-established African writers such as Achebe, Ngugi and Gordimer in their search of an accepted and authentic definition of African literature. For instance, when Achebe sees it as a literature written either in Africanized or hybridized European languages or in African languages, Ngugi rather defines it as a literature only written in African languages by Africans and, the so-called African literature written in English or French is a Euro-African literature not an African literature per se. Gordimer, at the same time, views it as a literature written in any language by Africans regardless of the color of the writer provided that he or she is African in identity. The paper however makes a synthesis of the foregoing definitions by framing African literature as any oral or written material of an artistic value produced by Africans about Africa and for Africans, beyond everything, regardless of both the color of the writer and the linguistic medium in which it is produced. In addition, it demonstrates that the question of the most appropriate linguistic tool for African literature is still unsolved because of the disagreement among African scholars and writers on the language that could paint Africa without any distortion or falsification of African socio-cultural realities. The paper also retraces the historical beginning of the genre of the African novel and its development throughout three major epochs: the anti-colonial epoch, the period of independence and the post-colonial or neo-colonial epoch. Each epoch has influenced and determined the role and the theme of both the African novelist and the African novel. The discussion ends with the major concerns and aspects of African literature which are inspired and taken from African realities and orature.

Introduction

The present paper seeks to problematize the question of the definition of African literature and the way the genre of the African novel emerges and develops to the present through three key historical periods: the anti-colonial epoch, the period of independence and the post-colonial or neo-colonial epoch. In like manner, it strives to explore and account for the thorny issue of the language of African literature which is of high importance to several African scholars. It is also worth noticing that this has given birth to an everlasting debate in the literary and academic spheres in Africa since the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. In addition; it intends to foreground certain salient particularities of African literature in relation to African orature which is regarded as the source of the present written African literature. Before engaging the discussion, it would be evident to define and re-trace the actual beginning point of African literature in the first place because of its importance to the issue tackled in the paper. It is actually from this angle that the paper strives to define African literature

within the context of the genre of the African novel in relation to the African novelist.

1. Emergence and Definitions of African Literature

From the outset it would be interesting to specify that before Africa's encounter with the West, the literature produced by Africans was chiefly oral. With the advent of writing on the continent through formal education, African literature got divided into two: oral and written African literature. This signifies that without the colonial system, contemporary African literature would not have taken the shape that it has taken today, especially in the twentieth century. This is evidenced by the fact that the earliest African men and women, who were to become writers, are all the by-products of the colonial system. For instance, the Nigerian, Chinua Achebe, first discovered written literature through the British colonial school, and his countryman, Wole Soyinka, also got involved in drama at the Government College of Ibadan. In the case of African Francophone writers, the Ivorian dramatist and poet, Bernard Dadié, actually started writing plays at the French established school called William Ponty of Senegal and, the Algerian female writer, Assia Djebar, started her literary career when she entered the French school of Algeria during the colonial period. Furthermore, the colonial system, whether British or French, also provided the means and possibilities through which written African literature developed. This means that written African literature emerged thanks to European publishing houses and languages which made African culture and literary aesthetics available to the world. However, what is important to know from the very beginning of the emergence of written or modern African literature is that, before and during the colonization of Africa or the establishment of the European empires, there was no African literature as we know it today. Thus, the literature produced by Africans about Africa tends to be considered as part of the sum total of European literatures. In the case of the French for instance, the literary works from their colonies were identified as *littérature d'Outre-mer* meaning, the *overseas French literature*. This overseas French literature was in the French language by Africans or people of African descent. Likewise, the literature produced in English by Africans and people of African descent in the British colonies was also considered as part of the whole body of British Literature or English Literature. This literature produced by British colonized Africans and subjects was consequently called *commonwealth literature*¹. This clearly shows that African literature, like the Africans themselves, was not an independent

¹ The term *commonwealth* means the literatures produced by British colonies in Africa before the independence of African countries.

literary genre but rather a dependent literature which drew inspiration from European literary practices and traditions. Hence, all the literatures produced by colonized people or people of African descent were judged and evaluated according to the literary norms and standards of Europe.

People really started talking about African literature when *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe got published in 1958. This is an important date in the recognition of the existence of a fully-independent African literature because of the content of *Things Fall Apart* which explores the theme of culture clash between Africa and Europe. The success of *Things Fall Apart* was phenomenal and heralded the feeling that Africa can now represent herself to the whole world by showing that Africans are civilized people who did not hear of culture or civilization for the first time from Europeans. It is pertinent to remark that Achebe's work is ranked as the most important anti-colonial discourse ever written by an African writer because it blazed the trail for most of the novels published in the fifties and early sixties, and got enshrined in a new type of African literary discourse which consists of dismantling the false colonial views that:

Africans were seen as radically different from Europeans, yet the African road to civilization was assumed to be the same as the European road, so, Africans could become civilized only by discarding their own primitive ways and seeking to become like Europeans. Modern Europe was seen as the only possible model for civilization, thus discounting any possibility that African culture might present viable alternatives. (Booker, 1998,p.10)

This new body of African literature was symbolically, semantically and aesthetically different from the aesthetic norms of Western literary tradition for, it was founded on narrative techniques and didactic values of African oral literature. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that African literature emerged and got accepted due to the influence of several other anti-colonial and nationalist movements² which tend to advocate a free and independent Africa. As a result, literary pioneers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Grace Ogot and others (through the content and form of their literary works) advocate the establishment of an independent African literature that defines itself by the literary traditions

2 Among these anti-colonial and nationalist movements, we can cite two main ones which are: FLN and Mau-Mau Movements. The FLN stands for the Algerian National Movement of Liberation and the Mau-Mau Movement is also the name of a Kenyan revolutionary and anti-colonial movement which fiercely fought against the British colonialization of Kenya.

typically relevant to African social norms and culture. Besides, the different anti-colonial movements which took buds on the threshold of African independence days are further discussed below in the part devoted to the African novel.

The question of defining African literature has always been a problematic issue to be solved because each and every African literary scholar, writer or even critic has had his or her own definition of it. In spite of this situation, the paper tries to account for certain definitions provided by some well-established African writers and scholars before proposing a definition that might be accepted as a genuine definition of African literature. For instance, in a first conference of African writers in English, organized in Makerere in the early sixties, African scholars failed to provide a satisfactory definition of African literature because of the different definitions brought by the numerous participants. This makes the task difficult for the participants and they left without any agreement on an accepted definition of African literature. However, it was during another conference held on the definition of African literature that it was defined as a 'creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or, to which experiences originating in Africa are integral'. This definition is accepted by the participants because it is inclusive and allows white African writers to be included within the framework of African literature as a whole. Contrary to this definition is the Francophone Negritude school position in defining African literature, it accordingly defines African literature as 'the sum total of all that pertain or deal with the black color'. For the negritude school, the very defining feature of African literature is 'Blackness' which is to show the relevance of the true identity of the African culture, values, arts and literary productions. But, when the reader closely looks at the nature of such a definition, it becomes obvious that it is essentialist and narcissistic which at heart denies and negates the African identity of white African or even Arab African writers whose literary works are part and parcel of the entire body of African literature. As a result, Nadine Gordimer, a white South African writer and a Nobel Prize Winner for literature, expresses her disagreement with such a discriminatory definition of African literature. Instead, she explains that 'African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin color, who share the African experience and who have what is Africa-centered consciousness'. In other words, it is evidenced in the above definition that she is castigating the negritude movement's idea of blackness by demonstrating that to be African consists of being born, raised and framed by Africans and into an African being regardless of the language used to convey the African experience and 'centered consciousness'.

As in the foregoing, another salient feature in defining African literature is the choice of the language, that is, which language should be used as the relevant vehicle of African literature? Or which linguistic tool would be able to bear the African local, cultural values without an iota of distortion? For the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, African literature is 'the literature produced in African languages' which are the locus whereby African true and genuine values, cultures, traditions and realities can better be represented and revived without any alteration. The position of Ngugi in defining African literature is that the literature produced in European languages is a 'Euro-African literature' which is part of European literature as a whole rather than an African one. This stance of Ngugi is a little bit radical and categorical in defining African literature whereas, his counterpart from Nigeria, Chinua Achebe, provides a definition by saying that 'I do not 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. To dissect this definition, by national literature the Nigerian writer refers to the literature written in the national languages of Africa and by ethnic literature he entails the literature written in one of the 'indigenous' languages spoken by one community within the nation. It has now been clear that African literature cannot be defined by just focusing on a given factor because of its complexity and the ideological positionality of the different African intellectuals and writers. Although it is true that the oral repertoire or orature has always been an important ingredient in the emergence and defining feature of African literature, it should globally be seen as any oral or written material of an artistic value produced by Africans about Africa and for Africans in the first place regardless of both the color of the writer and the linguistic tool in which it is produced. Yet, it cannot be denied that written African literature is the output of the contact of Africa with the West as well as her encounter with Arabs. It is therefore in this state of things that African literature can be defined and construed within its history of emergence. In a slightly different manner, the coming section develops the discussion of the issue of the language of African literature to show the extent to which language is important in the representation of peoples' cultures and world's views, as well as demonstrating the extent to which it is central in the definition of African literature as an academic discipline of study. However, it actually seeks to evidence the divergent views of African literary scholars on the kind of language that may be regarded as the most appropriate vehicle of written African literature.

2. Language: a Problematic Issue in the Definition of African Literature

Since African literature emerges as an appropriate literary terrain against the various misrepresentations and stereotypes about Africa in Western literary and philosophical discourses as well as in the mass media of the same

West, African literature should first advocate an African identity that is rooted in the cultures of the continent, and its tradition should depart from that of the West for the sake of foregrounding a true image of Africa and that of the African. Since it is also true that language carries culture and, no people can ever be developed with the use of a foreign language, it is, therefore, pertinent to tackle the issue of the language of African literature in its valorization of African culture as well as its assertion of an authentic African identity as already mentioned.

In the different scholarly spheres and universities in Africa, the issue of the most appropriate vehicle of African literature has been the subject of many debates all around the continent. This signifies that the discussion of the language of African literature has not, till the present days, found a unanimous and consensual agreement among African literary scholars and writers upon a given language which could be accepted as the most relevant medium of valorizing African cultures as well as accounting for the realities of Africa without any intentional or unintentional distortion. This gives way to two categories of scholars, critics and writers to emerge because of their conception of the kind of language that could be used as the most appropriate and relevant medium of African literature. For instance, when a first group of African writers and scholars have claimed the complete and total rejection of European languages as the primary means of African literature, the second group has propounded the unavoidable necessity of using the colonizer's language to fight against him by altering the very nature of that language which is no longer a European one in color and content but rather an Africanized one bearing the cultural values and beliefs of Africa without great damage to the culture being delineated. Although, many African scholars and writers have written about this issue to show their views, in the paragraphs to come, the focus is put on two well-established African writers whose positions are completely and nearly different. The reference is being made to the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, and the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, because the former is much more open to the validity and relevance of the use of English or French as the medium of African literature in an Africanized manner whereas the latter is radically against such an acceptance. These two giants of African literature actually represent the leaders of the two categories of African scholars, critics and writers who have developed their views either for African languages and against Western languages, or merely in favor of the re-appropriation of European languages as the means of African writers' expressions and literary productions.

To begin with, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o; a Kenyan Marxist, does not believe in the fact that African literature should really be written in Western languages because of their inability and inappropriateness to faithfully and properly delineate African identities and Africa with all her specificities. His position

is very interesting due to the fact that language is, for him, the fountain and the bearer of a particular culture. This entails that any language is the result and the reflection of the specificities of the culture that it carries. To him, African realities and culture cannot truly be conveyed through foreign languages such as English, French or others which were primarily used to alienate the African cultural consciousness and awareness from his culture and society. Beside the use of force and the colonial administration, the British and French colonialists imposed their languages on local African peoples through the colonial school and church so as to make their conquest of Africa effective and efficient by formatting the cultural consciousness and awareness of the African. They knew that the obliteration of African languages could easily enable them to have an upper-hand over Africans by mentally controlling their minds. This is related to the fact that when a people's language is undermined, it is their culture that is lost. If this happens, that people therefore becomes docile and easy to dominate and manipulate without any resistance or reaction. In regard to this, Ngugi opines that:

Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was gentle, a process best described in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, where he talks of the methods of the colonial phase of imperialism as consisting of knowing how to kill with efficiency and to heal with the same art. (1986, p.9)

In a very simplistic manner, Ngugi means that the real power of the White colonizer does not reside in the power of the cannons and swords, but it lies in what comes after them with the creation of the colonial school, mainly. To him, the colonial school is tantamount to the cannon and the magnet which render the conquest and domination of Africa and Africans permanent and more effective than brutal force. In other words, Ngugi implies that the cannon forces the body and the school fascinates the soul because of its subtle destruction of African languages.

As it can be seen in his arguments about the irrelevance of European languages, as the adequate medium of African written literature or literatures, Ngugi demonstrates that it was through European languages that the colonizer destroyed African languages by imposing his culture and manners on native peoples in Africa. According to Ngugi, writing in English or French is the evidence that the African is still mentally colonized and uprooted to his

own values. To elucidate this point, Ngugi further explains that African literature cannot be dissociated from its essence which is the African culture and the oral tradition from which the African writer draws his plots, styles, characters, themes, settings, metaphors, etc. This fact, according to him, cannot accurately be accounted for in Western languages which sometimes and most of the time distort African realities because of the lack of the cultural elements that are described in this or that European linguistic medium. In like manner, he emphasizes the uniqueness of each culture in which socio-cultural realities and beliefs are not the same. Beside this, in his book, *Decolonizing The Mind* (1986), Ngugi displays that in many Western languages, the African setting is always misinterpreted and misrepresented due to the fact that whatever ever happens in Africa is automatically linked to tribalism or barbarism which is considered and believed by Westerners as synonymous with wars, ethnic conflicts and backwardness. Or, in African languages, the true meaning of the word tribal or tribalism does not imply or bear any sense of ethnic conflict or clash but rather showing the diversity of local cultures in Africa. He demonstrates this in relation to his Swahili language and this is also true in the Bamanan language of Mali. The remark of Ngugi is that the way Westerners have distorted African social, cultural and political realities in their languages, the kind of African literature which is produced in European languages will consequently continue to vilify the same stereotypical representations of Africa and African local cultures. As an illustration, Ngugi opines that:

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence, language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century. (1986, p.18)

It, therefore, becomes important to notice in the above that language is vital to the self-definition of any people and his culture, without which one cannot assert and position himself within the spectrum of different cultures. Hence, writing in English or French entails assimilating oneself to the English or French culture at the expense of one's own culture which can only be reflected in African languages. Ngugi's point is that producing African literature in European languages is devastating to African culture and psychology owing to the fact that language carries culture and culture carries the entire body of values and knowledge by which people can perceive themselves and their place in the world. And he goes on to interrogate the relevance of European languages as the primary medium of African literature by saying that to what extent the African experience and culture can properly

and authentically be expressed in another hostile language? In the same dynamics, this Kenyan writer's stance for the use of African languages is that it is a necessary step toward cultural identity and independence from centuries of European exploitation and control. In order to achieve this, African literature should be written in African languages which is a vital step toward decolonizing the African mind which is, somehow, even today, colonized due to the fact that many African writers use European linguistic tools as the vehicle of African literature and culture. He qualifies this kind of literary production and practice in the following terms:

What we have created is another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature; that is, literature written by Africans in European languages (Ngugi, 1990, p.73).

To him, African literature should not be a mere mimicry of the ex-colonizer's way of writing literature because it is synonymous with colonial alienation. This type of colonial alienation is responsible for tearing Africans between two cultural fires or worlds where the African is seen through the eyes of others and he is cut off from his people. This signifies that this particular type of African can no longer help his people break the shackles of their mental and cultural domination, or even subvert the neo-colonial order and set everybody free. To Ngugi the way that you are cut off from your people, it is in the same way that your people are disconnected from you. He goes on to explain that writing in the language of the colonizer by an African writer also consists of robbing him from his work and talent because he has become part and the by-product of a neo-colonial culture. He therefore serves the interests and enriches the neo-colonial culture of the White man by rejecting his mother tongue, his people, his culture and all of them become a point of shame for him as seen in the personality of the post-colonial African.

It now becomes obvious that Ngugi is, to some extent, radical about the use of the English language or any other European linguistic tools as the vehicle of African literature. Although the position of Ngugi seems to be a radical one, it is also true that a foreign language can never ever be used to preserve the actual cultural meanings of certain literary depictions of Africa.

In the same manners, and before Ngugi's advocacy for the adoption of African languages as the most relevant and appropriate medium of African literary productions, Obiajunwa Wali developed in his polemical article, titled "The Dead End of African Literature" in 1962, the idea that no literary work should really be done in a non-African language and still be considered and praised as African literature. He actually wrote this article following the famous conference held in Makerere College, Kampala Uganda by African

literary scholars and critics to provide a definition of African literature as mentioned earlier in the paper. To this Nigerian scholar:

African literature as now understood and practiced is merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature [1] Any true African literature must be written in African languages. (*Transition*, 1963, pp. 13-14)

It is pertinent to comprehend that Wali, like Ngugi, is a fervent proponent of African languages, for, he also argued that any literature is identified and defined in relation to the kind of language in which it is written or produced. This clearly unveils that any literary genre (a novel, a poem, a short story or a play) written by an African writer and about African experiences and culture in English or any other European language must not be seen and valued as African literature. To him, it is literature that contributes to the richness, development and growth of a language. If African literature is done in African languages, it is the death of African languages that is programmed. In the same mindset, he maintains that if African writers continue to write in Western languages such as English, French or Portuguese, they are blindly contributing to the obliteration and impoverishment of their own African languages at the benefit of European ones. Like Ngugi, Wali's main stance is that writing African literature in African languages will greatly and incontestably enrich and rehabilitate African local languages which were the subject of denigration and destruction under the colonial governments in Africa. To him, this is actually a question of the responsibility of African intellectuals who are mainly writers. Their responsibility therefore lies in taking the lead in the struggle for the rehabilitation of African languages which constitute the primary vehicles of communication and preservation of their rich and diverse cultures all over the mother African continent.

In opposition to the views propounded by Ngugi and Wali about the language of African literature, another category of African writers exists which is led by one of the most famous Anglophone writers, Chinua Achebe. Achebe is actually recognized as the most known African writer and the father of modern African literature because of his first novels and essays in which he accounts for the ways in which African novel should be written and represented. He is also the one who advocates the Africanization of European languages for the sake of deconstructing the negative Eurocentric views of African realities and cultures in African literature. He advocates the re-appropriation of the English language for many reasons which are due to the many languages that exist in his Nigeria where people can count more than two hundred languages. Another reason is that the colonial language can also

serve and play the role of Lingua Franca among and between Nigerians and Africans at large, as well as facilitating a worldly cultural dialogue between Western and non-Western cultures. As to support what is being tackled in this paper, Achebe contends that:

Of course there are areas of Africa where colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or even three powers. But on the whole, it did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing. There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Therefore, those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart Ales with an eye on the main chance outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new states of Africa.

You can take this argument a stage further to include other countries of Africa. The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in-English, French, Arabic.(1975 p,58)

In many writings, Achebe has always defended the relevance and the validity of the use of English or any other Western language as the medium of African literature. This position of Achebe does not mean that he just blindly accepts all the rules and ideological mechanisms of the English or any other European language but, he rather prefers to use this language of the former colonizer to subvert and fight against him by showing him that Africa had a history, a culture and a philosophy before his arrival. In this dynamics, Achebe indicates that:

Can he, the African writer, ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say no, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. I have in mind

here the writer who has something new, something different to say.(1975,p.61).

The idea of varied or hybridized English suggested by Achebe in this excerpt is meant to show to the reader of African literature that European languages can be used to establish a cultural dialogue between different worldly literatures. But, the English language which is used is a different one. Achebe's point, which is related to the choice of learning English and eventually to write in English as a means to express African literature, is at heart entitled to 'infiltrate the ranks of the enemy so as to destroy him from within' by prevailing one's own culture and values. Subsequently, for him, it does not matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good and worth defending. Beside this, Achebe also admits and recognizes that English is symbolically and politically linked with the colonizer but it can be altered to meet what an African writer intends to convey. In this locus, he goes on to explain that the different languages of the colonizer, used as the vehicle of African literature, should objectively and purposefully be used as a weapon of defense and of promoting African cultures instead of rejecting it totally. This denotes that the French or English language should be manipulated and used by African writers to interrogate Western stereotypes and racist theories about Africa. It must also be a means of restoring the distorted history and realities of Africa. For Achebe, it is actually pointless to fight against a language since it can bear the different specificities of one's culture. In clear terms, Achebe propounds the Africanization of English which will also help his culture to be open to other cultures as well as being known by different peoples. Although he propounds the Africanization of English or French, Achebe criticizes the African writers who choose the path of a literature of mimicry. The literature of mimicry means that these categories of African writers who are mimic writers since they are inspired by Western traditions of writing. As a result they promote the same denigrating and derogatory images and views of Africa such as *Bound to Violence* of Yambo Ouologuem, Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and the like.

People may now propound the idea that the question of the language of African literature is an ongoing issue which has not yet found a given agreement to either write in the languages of the former colonizers or, in African languages. The fact is that neither Achebe nor Ngugi have had a convergent view about the most appropriate medium of imparting African cultures and values based upon the oral tradition. However, like Achebe, many other African writers have advocated the use of a European language in African literature to resist to the hegemony of European civilization and to therefore foreground African culture through an Africanized English or

French. At this point of the discussion, the reader should actually bear in mind that African literature is not only the literature produced in European languages or hybridized European languages but also in African languages. As in the above, the below section also seeks to provide a brief historical survey of the African novel and a general overview of some of the major works within this genre of African literature. It actually consists of determining when, where and who were the pioneers of the genre of the African novel?

3.The African Novel in the Context of the African Novelist

The actual understanding of the history of the African novel is not only a simple task but rather a much more complicated one because history itself is a complex phenomenon. That is to say, historians, themselves in their works and investigations, have sometimes to make important decisions about when and where they want to begin or end the stories that they generally intend to tell. As a matter of fact, they also have to select the events and phenomena that convey what they think are the most important features of the movement of history between both the beginning and ending points in time and space. In like manner, the history of the African novel is no different because we have different views about the historical beginning of the African novel. In spite of that, the paper therefore tries to trace the beginning of the African novel by taking Amos Tutuola as its historical beginning point.

The genre of the novel in West Africa is a milestone in the development of the African novel at large, especially in English. It is in this part of the African continent that the first African novelist in English was revealed thanks to his literary narratives. The reference is here being made to Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian and Igbo born writer, who is actually regarded by many scholars and critics of African literature as the first African novelist in English even if he himself followed not only many Yoruba folk tales writers but also by the works of his countryman D.O. Fagunwa. This latter Yoruba's narratives were published in the early 1938. As the first African novel in English, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was first published in 1952 by the well-known British publisher Faber and Faber and it recounts the fantastic adventures of an unnamed narrator who is inside the story as the hero. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard's* narrator is an inveterate drinker of palm wine. He travels to the land of the dead in an attempt to bring back his recently dead palm-wine tapster from the dead. He actually dies following his fall from a tree. In the eyes of the drinkard this tapster is the only person capable of tapping palm wine the way he may or will wish it to be. Although the premise of Tutuola's work has some precedents in Western and South American literatures that comprise the trips to the underworld such as in Homer's *Odyssey*, the several fantastic elements and magic realism that are

found in the works of Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Juan Rulfo and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the story of the drinkard's several adventures and meetings with fantastic otherworldly creatures, such as demons, ghosts and supernatural beings, remains strongly coalesced in the Yoruba folktales narrative tradition because it is mythical in tone. Despite this fact, Tutuola's works were and are still the subject of some scholarly disagreement whether his works can be regarded as novels or not because of the kind of English used by Tutuola. For instance, Western critics have rated his works as 'primitive' due to his 'extensive focus on traditional oral narratives for his subject matter and his influence of local Nigerian rhythms and inflections on his language and style.' He has also been rejected by many African critics who believe that the work of Tutuola 'lacks originality and perpetuates the same Western stereotypes about Africa and Africans while talking about witches, wizards, and the violence of the jungle life.'

However, there are more and more raising voices, in Africa today as well as in the West, which recognize and acknowledge Amos Tutuola as one of the early important pioneers of the genre of the African novel. He is particularly identified as a kind of 'bridge between traditional African oral narratives and the more conventional literary African novels that started to be published soon after his first novel appeared.' In this sense, it may be uttered that Amos Tutuola is a traditional or pre-modern African writer and the beginning point of written modern African novel. Such a point of view may also be supported in the following words:

Obiechina notes that Tutuola seems to have a unique ability to assimilate elements peculiar to the oral tradition with elements peculiar to the literary tradition : in other words, to impose a literary organisation upon essentially oral narrative material.(Booker,1998,p.31)

At this point of the discussion it is also salient to specify that although Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* can be considered as a major work in the history of the African novel, his countryman, Chinua Achebe at the same time, is regarded by many critics and African writers as the founding father of modern African literature, especially contemporary African novel. The importance of Achebe lies in the fact that his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was 'a real breakthrough' in its direct confrontation with the cultural traditions of colonialism. His originality was seen in his ability to create and evolve narrative procedures via which the colonial language, which was previously meant to designate and reproduce colonial ideology, now, establishes new forms of expression and gives way to an oppositional discourse. This oppositional discourse was deliberately intended to deconstruct the false consciousness created and promoted by Western colonial discourses on a so-called 'primitive' Africa. By doing this, Achebe

actually became the first African writer to be self-conscious of his responsibility as an African writer who should defend Africans and their cultural values. In the same vein, he was also capable of using the colonial language of English and the Western genre of the novel to interrogate the validity of the myth of the Western cultural superiority. All the foregoing arguments are also evidenced as follows in Gikandi's words:

That Achebe was possibly the first African writer to be self-conscious about his role as an African writer, to confront the linguistic and historical problems of African writing in a colonial situation, and to situate writing within a large body of regional and global knowledge about Africa. (Booker, 1998, p. 32)

As a reminder, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* relates the story of a traditional village òbig man ò Okonkwo and his downfall. The novel depicts the pre-colonial and democratic organization of an African Igbo society and shows the pitfalls of colonialism on local culture and on the psychology of the African as seen with the protagonist of the novel. This novel is a genuine testimony of the existence of civilization and history in Africa many years before the arrival of the White man with the cannon and the Bible. When Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was published, it received international acclaim and was translated into more than 50 languages across the continents. Achebe is generally rated as the father of the modern African novel not only owing to his originality and self-consciousness as an African novelist but also due to his numerous critical and theoretical statements and articles about his own works and on African literature at a larger scale. Achebe's critical and theoretical essays, articles or works have allowed him to establish the standards and conventions within which African novelists can work and the way the African novel should be written. Now that it is successfully demonstrated that the genre of the African novel in English began with Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and grew with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* into the modern era, it becomes pertinent to unravel the historical context in which the different African novelists have emerged, evolved as well as the socio-cultural and political influences on their works throughout three major epochs of the genre of the African novel.

Since human beings are the fruit of their environment, the African novelist is also the concrete by-product of his socio-historical context. Historically, the African novelist has emerged and developed under three important periods. To put it in another way, he has gone through three remarkable epochs, the period of anti-colonial struggle, the period of independence and that of neo-colonialism or postcolonial period. These three historical stages have therefore shaped and directed the task and the purpose of both: the African novelist and the African novel. Hence, the understanding of these

different stages in the history of the African novel shall therefore endow the reader with a certain solid background to fully grasp the evolution of the African novelist in relation to the African novel from anti-colonial struggle to the present Africa.

Cogently, each period has got its own specificities which have also framed and oriented the directions of the African novel. By this token, the fifties is the period which is generally regarded as the first stage of the emergence and development of the African novelist. At that period, and even some years before, people experienced great revolutions all around the world. In Asia for instance, people experienced the independence of India in 1947 and the triumph of the Chinese revolution in 1949. In like manner in the United States of America, the numerous numbers of civil rights struggles, led by African-Americans, have all greatly contributed to the raising of the African nationalistic consciousness to revolt against colonialism and imperialism. In the same dynamics, in Africa, the period was characterized by the Nasserite national assertions and struggles in Egypt which led to the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Other examples were seen with armed struggles by the Kenyan land and freedom fighters, called the Mau-Mau, against British colonialism in Kenya, and by the F.L.N. against the French colonialism in Algeria. This latter saw the death of several people on both sides and enticed many other African countries such as Ghana, Guinea, Mali and others to claim their independence. The period was as well marked by an intensified resistance of Black South-Africans against the South African Apartheid system which culminated in the horrendous Sharpeville massacre.

The sum total of these anti-colonial movements saw the birth of anti-colonial novelists in Africa. This signifies that the African novelist, who emerged at that time, was out of the crest of anti-colonial claims and revolutions. In the same locus, the African novel of the fifties became the platform whereby the anti-colonial energy and the optimism of African masses were expressed and foregrounded as well as the ideology of the total decolonization of colonized African nations. Such a novel was assertive in tone and it was Africa, for the first time, explaining herself to the entire world by speaking for herself and interpreting her own past. The African novel therefore became an efficient weapon in dismantling the misrepresentations and stereotypes created by Western and colonialist writers whose works were based on a presumed primitive African past. By deconstructing such a falsified view of Africa, the African novelist has dared to use the language of the colonizer or oppressor in a way that was meant to subvert the master himself. This kind of thought is well-grounded in the following words of Achebe, especially when he opines that:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to...help my
society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes

of the years of denigration and self-debasement...Here I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet...You have all heard of the African Personality, of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of Negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them anymore. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but we are much better. (Achebe, 1975, pp. 44-45)

It is now clear that the African novel which emerged in the fifties was that of anti-colonial discourse and of nationalistic assertion. The literary works that can ultimately exemplify the general consciousness of the period are: Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1954) which describes life, growing up as an African child in Guinea, West Africa. It is an autobiography depicting a vision of Islamic and ancient African community in the pre-colonial era during which tradition engendered mutual understanding and respect for all. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which describes the ways through which Europeans' colonisation undermined African cultures and societies, and Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) which is about a railroad strike in the colonial Senegal of 1940s and deals with several ways that Senegalese and Malians reacted to colonialism. This novel depicts the ways via which Africans were now consciously struggling for their rights and freedom. These different literary works therefore illustrate and concretize the general revolutionary attitudes of the African novelist of the fifties.

The second stage of the African novelist's development refers to the sixties. It was during this particular period that many African countries were able to get their independence. Thus, several African countries such as Mali, Senegal, Nigeria and many others finally won the right to a national flag and to sing a national anthem composed by Africans. It was, to some extent, the epoch of hope and renaissance due to the fact that only very few African countries were remaining colonized and, of course, because of the establishment of O.A.U. (the Organization of the African Union) which was promoting the unification of Africa as one country so as to face colonialism, imperialism and the challenges of Western capitalism. In the light of all these happenings, African peoples were hoping that with this advent of independence a new ethos would be possible, a new society be created whereby Africans would be free, proud of themselves and their culture would be respected by other cultures and civilizations all around the globe. But, all these hopes and aspirations were abruptly disrupted by the practices of the

newly African leaders, the comprador. They, instead of ruling for the sake and the welfare of African peoples, failed to break the shackles of neo-colonialism by conniving with Westerners to exploit and oppress their own African populations. That is to say that the native African leaders were òpuppetsö in the hands of the West. These newly native African leaders were generally educated in accordance with Western cultural standards and were also alienated from their local cultures. This has enticed them to reinforce and perpetuate the same colonialist system of exploiting the African masses. For instance, the sixties saw the coming to power of several hideous African leaders, Bokassa, Mobutu, Idi Amin Dada and Blaise Compaore in the eighties, who were the cherished darlings of the West and they were the symbol of all the broken promises of the African independence. Subsequently, the novelist, who emerged in the sixties, was disappointed and taken aback by this new state of affairs which led him to produce a novel of disillusionment. The cynicism and disenchantment of the African novelist of the period is exemplified in the following novels of disillusionment: Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* (1968).

The last stage of the development of the African novel in relation to the African novelist is generally referred to the seventies. It marks the transition from the colonial period to that of neo-colonialism and it can also be split into two sub-periods, the democratic and post-democratic periods. In addition, it becomes pertinent to specify that this last epoch of the African novel starts from the seventies to the present. However in the wake of neo-colonialism or globalization, the African novelist who emerged became assertive and committed to the cause of the exploited and oppressed African masses by awakening their consciousness vis-à-vis the neo-colonial situation in which they are all caught. To put it in another way, the African novelist of the neo-colonial or post-colonial period was primarily òinterpellatedö³ to make the sons and daughters of Africa aware of the new reality prevailing in their society so that they could challenge the order for a better and humane African society. So, the novel which bloomed in this period was therefore that of anti-neo-colonialism and anti-sexism; this revolutionary and fervent commitment of the African novel of the seventies down to the present is better evidenced in the political and ideological content and style of works such as Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977), Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Chimamanda's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and many others.

³ It is a term coined by the French philosopher Louis Althusser to describe the process by which ideology addresses the individual.

It may now be said that the historical context in which the African novelist was born, has influenced and framed the very nature and purpose of the African novel. Hence, from the fifties down to the present the different types of African novels which emerged, therefore, epitomize the general consciousness and the socio-political reality of the three stages starting from the age of the anti-colonial novel, through that of disillusionment or disenchantment to that of the anti-neo-colonialism or post-colonial novel. This is, in short, the way according to which the African novelist in relation to the African novel can be framed and construed within their African and historical context of development.

4. Aspects and Concerns of African Literature

Before delving into accounting for the various aspects of the African novel, it is useful to substantiate for the different concerns that are generally the subject matter of African literature. Hence, the African novel, like the entire body of African literature, is concerned about African society and people. This is the first thing first and it means that the African novel is the account and the representation of the realities and problems of Africa. To elucidate this point more, African literature is concerned with the idea of liberation, nation-building, decolonizing the African culture and mind. It is also meant to defend the African masses, to give a voice to the voiceless regardless of the sexes and classes throughout the continent. Moreover, seven prominent and relevant concerns within the spectrum of African literature may also be identified among which: the clash between Africa's past and present, between tradition and modernity, between native and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance and between 'Africanity'⁴ and humanity. They also encompass other social problems such as corruption, the economic disparities in newly independent countries, and the rights and roles of women. As a result, female African writers are nowadays becoming more, and better represented in written African literature, than they used to be prior to independence. In fine, the African novel is that of commitment, resistance and protest which is the core purpose of African literature in its totality and it is also meant to reflect the various thematic, linguistic and aesthetic issues which are peculiarly African springing from its African social and historical conditions.

Apart from the concerns of the African novel, the main aspects of the African novel reside in African orature and cultural elements. The fact is that the oral tradition, which encompasses folktales, riddles, songs, proverbs, legends, and many other components, is indeed the relevant feature of the

⁴ It means the appreciation and valorization of African values and identity which determine the way Africans think, act, exchange and define the world around them.

African novel. Nearly, all African writers have, as a fountain of their inspiration, the oral tradition wherein they draw their different literary styles and narrative techniques. For instance, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* illustrates and concretizes the relevance of such a fact inherent in the genre of the African novel because it is fraught with proverbs, riddles, Igbo words and the Igbo cultural landscape. This view is supported by the following examples taken from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

- The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. (p.7)
- When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk. (p.10)
- Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break. (17-18)
- An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. (p.19)
- A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm. (p.61)
- I cannot live on the banks of a river and wash my hands with spittle. (p.150)
- Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing and he replied: 'Men have learnt to shoot without missing their mark and I have learnt to fly without perching on a twig' (183)

The use of these proverbs and riddles by Achebe in this novel and as in all his writings is primarily meant to show the distinctive nature of the style of the African novel which should not abide by Eurocentric literary standards. However, it is also crucial to specify that Achebe could not avoid using African local proverbs and riddles since they are highly prized and praised in the society whereby he has the task to represent and defend. Consequently, by depicting the artistry realities of his society which is deeply rooted in the practice and preference of the oral artistry, Achebe, like all Afrocentric African writers, produce their literary works in accordance with the tradition of African orature which is the heart and soul of all African literary productions which are not disconnected from the cultural essence and realities of Africa. By doing so, Achebe has been regarded as one of the foregrounding fathers of such a literary tradition which is enshrined in the values and principles of African orature.

Another important aspect of the African novel is the way African novelists make different uses of languages. In the African novel, it is frequent to come across African local languages mixed up with Western languages. Such a mixture or combination of two languages into one linguistic tool is meant to place the emphasis on the Africanity of the work produced by the African

novelist or under discussion. The language used in the African novel therefore becomes a hybrid and Africanized one which abides by the linguistic structure of the European language but which consciousness and meaning are coalesced in the native language of the writer. This is as true with Achebe as with Ngugi Wa Thiongø and Ahmadou Kourouma. For instance, in *petals of Blood*, Ngugi wrote:

-Uhuru!ø
-Uhuru na Kanaø
-Uhuru na Kanaø
-Down with the enemies of our hard-won freedom!ø
-Down with our enemies!ø
-Down with rumour-mongers and trouble-makers!ø
-Down with rumour-mongers and trouble-makers!ø
-Harambeeø(p.181)

From the above, the reader to some extent can comprehend the way according to which the African novel is characterized by certain elements inherent in Africa as a geo-cultural location adrift of its thematic issues which are based on local realities. For instance, *Petals of Blood* is fraught with items such as the above to typify the African sense of the novel. This kind of aspect, evident in the African novel, is done on purpose by African novelists to create a kind of cultural gap which requires, from foreign readers, to develop a certain sense of African cultural knowledge which would probably help them fill in the gaps left by the novelist. In so doing, the foreign reader would therefore be enticed to construe the cultural difference between their own linguistic meanings and the new meaning attributed to the hybrid language used in the African novel. In fact, the two major features, orature and an Africanized language use, elaborated in this paper, as the main concrete aspects of the African novel apart from its concerns which have also been explicated, can actually be more illustrated and found in many other African novels. In spite of this fact, the reader may content himself or herself with the two illustrations entangled upon the novels of Achebe and Ngugi who are two great and well-established African novelists.

Conclusion

It now becomes pertinent, to sum up, that defining African literature is not an easy matter because of the variety of definitions advocated by African literary scholars in their search of an accepted and authentic definition of African literature. It should however be construed as a literature written by Africans about Africa and for Africans regardless of the language in which it is written or the color of the person who writes it. This unveils that it is the Africanity or the African identity of the writer and Africa as a geographical

and cultural setting which are salient in the understanding and definition of African literature. In addition, the beginning point of the African novel is traced to Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe owing to the trail-blazing values of their first novels. When the former is regarded as the bridge between the traditional and modern genre of the African novel, the latter is rated as the father of the modern African novel or contemporary African literature. In sum, all the concerns and characteristics of African literature are coalesced in the everyday socio-cultural, political and economic reality of Africa as well as in the African oral artistic values or orature.

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