

Individualism in Both the African and the Western Novels

Dr Abdelkader NEBBOU/ University of Tahri Mohamed Béchar

Abstract

The novel is a literary imaginative work of art concerned with human experience. The novel in West Africa was unknown in the traditional society, which depended much on oral literature, i.e., oral plays and poetry (Seymour, 1985, p 6). With the growing pace of Western education in colonies in the late 1940s, the novel became a very important medium bearing the authors' records of their sadness and reaction towards what was going on in their societies.

Although the proper African novel in English is of English origin, it has preserved the author's social status and his contribution to communal life as a part of a corporate-whole unaffected . On the contrary, the Western novel, from which the African novel emerged, has reflected the Western author's individualism to account for the novelist's detachment from his 'ruined' society and his non-conformity to it .

To illustrate this view I will take Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria as counterpart to Kate Chopin and T.S. Eliot from the USA. in their novels: A Man of the People (1965), The Interpreters (1965), The Awakening (1899), and The Wasteland (1922) respectively.

Keywords : West African novel, Western author, individualism, social groups , Achebe and Soyinka, Kate Chopin and T.S. Eliot

Resume En Français:

Le roman est une œuvre d'art imaginative littéraire concernée avec l'expérience humaine. Le roman en Afrique de l'Ouest était inconnu dans la société traditionnelle, qui a dépendu beaucoup de la littérature orale, c.-à-d., le théâtre et la poésie orale (Seymour, 1985, p 6). Avec le rythme croissant de l'éducation occidentale dans les colonies vers la fin des années 1940, le roman est devenu un moyen très important soutenant portant les dossiers de tristesse et la réaction des auteurs vers ce qui se passait dans leurs sociétés .

Bien que le roman africain approprié en anglais soit d'origine anglaise, il a préservé le statut social de l'auteur et sa contribution individuelle à la vie communale comme une partie d'une corporation-entière inchangée. Au

contraire, le roman occidental, d' où le roman africain a émergé, a reflété l'individualisme de l'auteur occidental pour tenir compte du détachement du romancier de sa société 'ruinée' et sa non-conformité à lui .

Pour illustrer cette vue je prendrai Chinua Achebe et Wole Soyinka du Nigéria comme contreparties à Kate Chopin et T.S. Eliot de l'USA. dans leurs romans: A Man of the People, Un Homme du Peuple (1965) ; The Interpreters, Les Interprètes (1965) ; The Awakening, Le Réveil (1899) ; and The Wasteland, de la terre en friche (1922) respectivement.

Mots-clés :

-roman africain occidental - auteur occidental - individualisme - groupes sociaux

- Achebe et Soyinka - - Kate Chopin et T.S. Eliot

المخلص

الرواية هي عمل من الخيال الأدبي الفني المعني بالتجربة الإنسانية. كانت الرواية في غرب أفريقيا غير معروفة في المجتمع التقليدي، الذي اعتمد كثيرا على الأدب الشفوي، أي المسرحيات والشعر الشفوي (سيمور، 1985، ص 6). لكن مع تزايد وتيرة التعليم الغربي في المستعمرات في أواخر 1940، أصبحت الرواية وسيلة مهمة جدا تحمل سجلات المؤلفين من الحزن ورد الفعل تجاه ما يجري في المجتمعات الأفريقية.

على الرغم من أن الرواية الغرب الأفريقية هي من أصل إنجليزي، إلا أنها تتميز بالحفاظ على الوضع الاجتماعي للمؤلف باعتباره جزءا من مجتمعه وشريك فيه و مساهمة الفردية في الحياة المجتمعية

على العكس من ذلك في الرواية الغربية، والتي من الرواية الأفريقية ظهرت، والفردية للمؤلف الغربي لحساب مفرزة الروائي من مجتمعه¹ خراب وعدم مطابقة له لذلك.

لتوضيح هذه الفكرة سأتناول تشينوا أتشيبي ، وولي سوينكا من نيجيريا مقابل لكيت شوبان و ت.س إليوت من الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. في رواياتهم: رجل من الشعب (1965)، والمترجمين (1965)، والصحوة (1899)، والقفار (1922) على التوالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

- رواية غرب أفريقيا - المؤلف الغربي - الفردية - الفئات الاجتماعية
- أشيبي وسوينكا - كيت شوبان و ت.س إليوت

Introduction:

Transcendentalists like Emerson conclude that behaviours inherited from genteel traditions have done more harm to society; therefore there must be a retreat from the world of public realm to private realms (Mitchell, 1977 .(

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary explains the word individualism as "the quality of being different from other people and doing things in one's own way; individual people in society should have the right to make his own decisions rather than be controlled by the government." This means that a person taking part in society attempts to further his or her own interests, or at least demands the right to serve his or her own interests, while ignoring the interests of his / her society. The advocates of individualism maintain that it is the individual's right to oppose the society and social groups. Individualism is valued from the weight of the individual within his social milieu. Where in the West, among the Americans for example, individualism is seen as rooted in the view that human nature is sinful and needs to be changed, in other societies such as the Africans and Japanese it is believed that the individual is good by nature. Consequently, children who, in a Western society are held to act according to their wills, are in fact assumed as immature and not responsible for their acts by non-Western societies (Nelson, 1989, p 46.)

The true modern West African novel which is an imaginative work whose lessons must conform to or derive from ideals of human conduct started in the mid-twentieth century. The authors Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Wole Soyinka were urged to talk of their

experiences within their societies, to reveal the sufferance of their people, and to refer to their ancestry life to assert their African identity. In spite of these African novelists' exposure of Western culture, they fought strenuously lest they would succumb to the events and fail to assert their individual viewpoints and lose connection with their communities .

In traditional African society the individual's contribution to communal life and welfare was considered good because individuals were seen as parts of a corporate whole. In such public life, the social pattern would overwhelm a man's own consciousness, confine his private life and think his keeping secrets as something eccentric and therefore deplorable. Any emotional passion for personal goals that broke with the social conventions setting authority over people would be seen as evil, and hence was suppressed. Therefore, most of the African literary works, mainly novels and plays when are concerned with individual achievements or expressing personal behaviour, are most often contributing roles to a social pattern where an 'individualist' is looked upon as an outcast .

The individuals' true participation in life did exist prior to colonization as relationship between the African societies members had been centred on one's role in rural society. Odili's father was an important man in the village. He was skilled in traditional medicines and managed to keep protective treatments in a safe room in the house so as to cure the sick. In spite of the large size of Odili's family, his father was able to take care of its members and the food was plentiful. The father was so important in his society the fact that exposed him to jealousy from the part of some neighbours.

Our father had protective medicine located at crucial points in our house and compound. One, I remember, hung over the main entrance, but the biggest was in a gourd in a corner of his bedroom... But we also had many friends who brought my father gifts of yams, pots of palm-wine or bottles of European drink, goats, sheep, chicken. Or those who brought their children to live with us as house-boys or their brides-to-be for training in modern housekeeping. (Achebe, 1966, p 28).

In traditional African societies, for a man to gain importance and respect from other members of the clan requires doing services for them and duties. Opposite to Odili's father, Odili and Sekoni who are presented as Western-educated members of the post independent society are idle people. Their life has been decided by elders in senior positions who act on behalf of the social

institutions in the urban resorts. Their role is very limited to seeking for opportunities to bring up important issues. The rest of the clan members do not expect anything from the youth as they are unable to find a place in their modern country, let alone help the rest of the citizens .

In the Western fiction, the situation is different. The main character is non-conformist. He holds views that are in fact individualist totally in discrepancy with the social trend. Such individuals with this behaviour are cut off from the prevailing social order imposing a system whose aim is not to bring people together but to engender a social climate keeping individuals apart. I can list Kate Chopin's book, *The Awakening* (1899). The novel was about female repression in the American society. In her trial to break the taboos, the protagonist, Edna left home to run away with her lover Robert. When Edna felt that there was no escape from the overwhelming patriarchal social norms ensnaring women, she attempted to transcend her society's bonds by surrendering to the waters of the Gulf of Mexico (Ruland, 1992, p 191). The writer presents the society as being oppressive, in need of moral standards. The character Edna, impersonating the author, is separate from others fighting her own frustration. Another example of an outstanding American poet and critic, T.S. Eliot who, in a world characterised by castration and the decrepitude of bankrupt Western society in the death of any spiritual meaning in modern life, stood quite apart from the people in his influential poem *The Wasteland* (1922). Eliot portrays a Western society which has lost social cohesion and whose individuals are living intermittent, long times of boredom. Each man is lonely in a compartment because of mystical conflict between faith and doubt in modern Western society .

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
 Turn in the door once and turn once only
 We think of the key, each in his prison
 Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
 Only a nightfall aethereal rumours
 Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus
 (Long, 1985)

However, in the African novel, such as in the case of Achebe's and Soyinka's books, the character endeavours to assert his own viewpoint among his people featured in an urbanised minority. The West African writer

takes his corresponding fragment (the Ibo society/ the Yoruba society) as his milieu where he has to cohere (Cook, 1977, pp 16-7). There is no matter how much the African society is disintegrated. For the West African author, it remains a close-knit fabric, of which the majority of people are part. The author's vision is that he is an individual tied strongly to his community in which he emerges as a social prophet warning people of the consequences of pursuing the Western path or one of its advocates. Both Chinua Achebe and Soyinka draw on their cultural inheritance to make sense of the postcolonial world they inhabit. Upon reading in advance copy of *A Man of the People*, Achebe's friend John Pepper Clark, a Nigerian poet and playwright declared: "Chinua, I did not know you were a prophet. Everything in this book has happened except a military coup!" (McGrail, 2012, p 4)

Achebe's reputation as a great novelist became manifest due to his impartial understanding of, and ability to present the Nigerian environment to the world readers. His realistic characterization and diagnosis of his country's malaise have placed him as a prophet with the power to foresee exactly what the fate of Nigeria would be. The accuracy of the writer's vision cannot be disputed. According to critics the last chapter of the novel corresponds much to what was written to newspaper accounts of Nigeria in the early months of 1966. Likewise, the political scene after the coup looked like Achebe's image in *A Man of the People*. The Federal Military Government (FMG) under the leadership of General Ironsi destroyed the former political federal system, suspended the constitution and regional governments, banned political parties, and announced the impending trial of the public servants who had enriched themselves by defrauding the State. These events placed Achebe as a seer picturing a period of Nigerian history as it was. The novel climaxes with the satirical image of presenting scenic people siding with the 'eat and let eat' regime of the Prime Minister Nanga while very few citizens remained decent and were seeking for justice to be done. Still, the author feels involved rather than running away from those social evils

Overnight everyone began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime, at its graft, oppression and corrupt government..., everybody said what a terrible lot... And these were the same people that only the other day had owned a thousand names of adulation... Chief Koko in particular became a thief and a murderer, while the people who had led him on, in my opinion,

the real culprits, took the legendary bath of the hornbill and donned innocence. (Achebe, 1966, p 148)

As the traditional order in Nigeria was disrupted by the colonial presence, Achebe and Soyinka, as novelists, emphasized the conflict that existed between the African and the Western traditions. The folks in the Ibo-land and Yoruba-land favoured the most powerful culture, the Western culture, at the expense of their own values. The aspect of this alien Western culture was the mental indoctrination, i.e., colonialism of the mind. The African subjects were at the dangerous crossroads because a man might perish while wrestling with multiple-headed spirits. Lucky are the ones, as Achebe and Soyinka, who managed to return to their people with the boon of prophetic vision. In fact, for both authors, it was only enlightenment that saved and prevented natives from giving in to the alien cultural wave that had begun to wipe out anything indigenous (Ifedilichukwu, 1999, p 15 .)

In *The Interpreters* the two forces 'relationship' and 'isolation' often confront, and relationship in this book, which is supporting the other members of the society, seems to triumph. The character Sagoe appeared to be more powerful than Nwabuzor, the editor when he had other options to defend the murdered Sekoni by publishing the latter's story under the title: *Who Engineered the Escapade?* elsewhere. Therefore, he challenged Chief Winsala and his corrupted clan from a position of strength.

And what about my friend.?

Nwabuzor shrugged as much as to say, What can I do?

Sagoe stood up. 'I hope you won't object if I send it (the article of Sekoni) to another paper'.

'Sagoe, look, I have been in this game for thirty years... But look man, journalism here is just a business like any other. You do what your employer tells you. Believe me, Sagoe, just take any word'.

Sagoe took the manuscript. 'I am sending it to the other papers'.

Nwabuzor shook his head with the hopelessness of it.

(Soyinka, 1970, p 100)

Similarly, in *A Man of the People*, young intellectuals like Odili, Max and the Minister of finance were taken as a threat to the whole nation and Nanga, the Prime Minister addressed them as 'Miscreant gang ...snobbish intellectuals' (Achebe Chinua, 1965, 5). The people in senior position, the Nanga type are portrayed as vultures by Achebe. All the vultures were

doomed to fall: Chief Koko, the bribe supplier, was shot dead by Eunice after the death of Max; Nanga was arrested and his government was toppled. Besides, Odili, who shows his tendency in Nanga's world of opulence, failed to convince people and was subject to repression. Odili wished to be a minister to rank with Nanga, so that he would be 'one forever'. The vultures compete over the remnant of a once-being British colony, Nigeria and they intend to devour the country's stinky carcass.

They want to share out the wealth of the country between them... once upon a time a hunter killed so big-game at night. He searched for it in vain and at last he decided to go home and await daylight. At the first light of morning, he returned to the forest full of expectation... he saw two vultures fighting over what still remained of the carcass. In great anger he loaded his gun and shot the two dirty uneatable birds... he was angry and he wanted to wipe out the dirty thieves fighting over another man's inheritance. That hunter is yourselves. Yes, you and you and you .

(Achebe , 1965, p 124)

CONCLUSION

Because it is the individual who makes the society from the African native's point of view, the African novelists such as Achebe and Soyinka and others have stood out as prophets in their societies to warn against the consequences of running after one's ambitions and turning one's back to his clansmen. For the African writer the Western model of individualism that searches for personal interest by establishing negative relationship to other individuals in the social group remains an alien conduct. The adherents of individualism contribute to the weakening of the social cluster which the imposed Western culture had aimed at for very long in Africa. Moreover, Modernism whose effects have led to individuals' scepticism of social progress in the West has increased many writers' disillusionment. The authors' isolation is but an expression of their denial of the dehumanising attitudes that diminish the individual's role in his social environment. After all, a person has to avoid participation in social evils if he / she cannot devote oneself to eliminating those evils from one's world .

References

- Chinua, A. (1966) *A Man of the People*, Heinemann, Ibadan
- Cook, D. (1977) *African Literature*, Longman Group Ltd, London
- Hornby, A.S. (2002) *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 6th ed., edited by Sally Wehmeier, Oxford University Press
- Ifedilichukwu, C. O., (1999) *Literature as History, A Study of the Novels of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*, University of Wisconsin, Madison
- McGrail, M. A., (2012) *Language, Dignity and Democracy: The Works of Chinua Achebe*, All Academic Inc. in : [www.http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/5/2/6/1/pages152614/p152614-4.php](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/5/2/6/1/pages152614/p152614-4.php)
- Mitchell, C. E., (1977) *Individualism and its Discontents*, the University of Massachusetts Press, USA.
- Nelson, C.E., (1989) *How Faith Matures*, Westminster, Kentucky, USA.
- Richmond, C. B., & Long, E.H., (1985) *The American Tradition in Literature*, edited by Sculley, Bradley, 3rd Ed. Vol.2, W.Norton & Company Inc ., New York
- Ruland, R., (1992) *A History of American Literature*, Penguin Books, USA
- Seymour, M. S., (1985) *Guide to Modern World Literature*, Macmillan, London, UK.
- Soyinka, W., (1965) *The Interpreters*, Collier Books, The Macmillan Company, USA