
Art for Africa's Sake

The African Novel and Aestheticism

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Abstract

The current paper discusses the relevance of the principles of aestheticism to the African novel. Drawing on some ideas expressed by Fredric Jameson in his book *The Political Unconscious*, this article argues that the claim of an autonomous art is yet another ideology spread to bury the history of colonialism, oppression and suppression. The literature of the colonised countries tends to maintain a political atmosphere that reflects ideological conflicts or tensions. Nevertheless, when a novel is overwhelmed by political thoughts, or represents them, it does not seem to appeal to the Western world - that is, not aesthetically mature enough. If universal or conventional standards of writing novels warn against political indoctrination, on account of being very subjective and biased, does this mean that African writers must give up writing about their own countries or beliefs to be accepted as good writers? What is the true object of literature if it does not voice the nationalist sentiment of the colonised?

Keywords: Aestheticism; African Novel; Colonialism; Ideology; Literature; Literary Criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

African authors have sought to use their novels to raise the consciousness of marginalised and oppressed classes in society and encourage them to bring an end to colonial domination. They often reflect an uncomfortable fact that the colonizer has caused political and social unrest. What one notices is that most of, if not all, African novels are imbued with ideological, political, or even religious doctrines. They have their own definitions of what literature or a good novel is. For example, Ngugi Wa thiong'o wrote many revolutionary novels that had depicted cultural and social conditions of the African society. He consistently rejected all the principles of "art for art's sake".

Literary criticism, however, emphasises the artistic and aesthetic dimension in writing fiction. The autonomy of literature necessitates that literary works avoid any reference to reality outside the text. As the formalists claim, the focus should always be on the "literariness" of the text, not on authorial intention¹. As the structuralists also maintain, the literary text must have an "underlying" closed system that has no referents outside the boundaries of the structure of interconnected words². So, literary criticism has already determined the universal standards of the accepted novel. It must not lend itself to any ideological commitment. Literature must not serve any revolutionary concepts. The only way for the African novel to gain acceptance is when it draws the attention of the reader to language and beautiful styles rather than hidden messages about colonisation or freedom. This article is an inquiry into the true meaning and object of the African novel within the context of aestheticism.

I. "ART FOR ART'S SAKE" AND IDEOLOGY:

Aesthetics is "the formal study of art, especially in relation to the idea of beauty"³. The advocates of aestheticism argue that an artistic product must be "self-sufficient and has no use or moral aim outside its own being"⁴. For Kant, however, "aesthetics holds out a promise of reconciliation between Nature and humanity, [...and for] Kierkegaard the aesthetic [object] must yield to the higher truths of ethics and religious faith"⁵. From all these definitions, we can understand that the idea of aestheticism has different interpretations. It is not only about isolated beautiful forms, but also about "Nature and humanity", and "higher truths of ethics and religious faith". This shows that even the appreciation the beautiful or nature needs a resort to human faculties.

"Art for art's sake" is one of the many strategies of domination exercised on the oppressed people in order to blind them to the reality of capitalism and alienation: "art's for art's sake", therefore, is an ideology in itself that tries to "contain" or "suppress" literary works that disdained aestheticism. Paraphrasing Regarding Fredric Jameson's understanding of aestheticism, William C. Dowling remarks that "the ultimate aim of Marxist criticism remains, as always for Jameson, the isolation and dismantling of the strategies of containment embodied in literary works"⁶. Aestheticism is thus construed as an ideological apparatus aimed at literary works that blur the boundaries between life and fiction. Ideology, as Orthodox Marxism defines it, is "a form of false consciousness, a great lie about the world within which people live out their lives of domination and oppression"⁷. Jameson's definition of ideology, as Dowling illuminates, approximates that of the orthodox Marxism in focusing on the idea of a lie, but adds that it is a "repression of those underlying

contradiction that have their source in History and Necessity"⁸. This contradiction is the history of slavery, exploitation and class struggle masked in the text. Any text contains a hidden ideology that attempts to conceal itself in various forms. Literary works that advocate the autonomy of literature are committed to imposing all the doctrines and principle of capitalism on other literatures of the world. In this regard, if "All ideologies are 'strategies of containment'"⁹; then, aestheticism must be an ideology.

II. THE AFRICAN AUTHOR'S OUTLOOK ON AESTHETICISM :

African authors are fervent nationalists who use literature to criticise corruption, dictatorship, political systems etc. As novelists, poets and, or even, non-fictional writers, they consider writing as a sacred mission to teach and enlighten their communities. People often think that the writer should speak eloquently and listen attentively to the unwieldy burdens of weeping souls. It is difficult to distance one's emotional engagement from what one writes about. Sue Monk Kidd is convinced that the writer should show human empathy in his writing:

While, as a writer, I want to affect the reader's mind-to educate and enlighten-what I wish for even more is to jolt the reader's heart. I want my words to open a portal through which the reader may leave the self, migrate to some other human sky and return 'disposed' to otherness.¹⁰

The shortcut to convince one's reader is to tickle and prickle their hearts, because other means of reasoning can be through its counterparts-emotion. According to Sartre, "The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates"¹¹. Here the focus is not on the literary qualities of literature, being an aesthetically human product or reflecting abstract concepts, but instead on being an achievement or a commitment.

Loathing the idea of "art for art's sake", Chinua Achebe, taken as an example, had bitterly criticized it, saying "Art for art's sake is another piece of deodorized dog-shit"¹². When the oppressed are seen as 'oppressors,' the jailed as 'jailers,' the violated as violators, the exploited as exploiters, literature has an important role to play and many services to render. Alex La Guma also comments:

The proposition art for art's sake of art finds no foothold in the atmosphere of racism, violence and crude exploitation which is the day-to-day experience of the South African people.¹³

Therefore, the African writer is more of an advocate than a fictional writer, for not only did he strive to defend a personal belief, but also to nurture a country that had been torn apart. The African novelist's national concerns shape the aesthetical aspects of their novels. They attempted to awaken the African audience to their subjugation to and oppression of colonial regimes. Being otherwise is always construed as writing about something that does not represent or belong to Africa. As Achebe words it, "An African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant"¹⁴. In the African context, literary works that claim autonomy and self-containment are a representation of racial and discriminatory practices of the coloniser and betrayers¹⁵. They are a desperate attempt to create seemingly objective novels that aestheticize the history of colonialism in Africa, i.e. an abstract image of Africa that

has no referents outside the text¹⁶. Commitment is displayed in a person who dares to challenge, oppose, and write against those who usurp the lands of others or displace their people.

III. JEAN PAUL SARTRE: COMMITMENT AND AESTHETICISM

Jean Paul Sartre asserts that "Prose is, in essence, utilitarian"¹⁷. Literature has functional and practical roles. In other words, literature should emphasise performance rather appreciation. Sartre defines "prose writer as a man who makes use of words"¹⁸. The "committed" writer, Sartre writes, is the one who distrusts the idea of drawing an "impartial picture of society and the human condition"¹⁹. To draw an analogy, the writer is a shooter whose 'loaded pistol' is ready to fire; if he decides to fire he is shooting as a man at his target, but not like a child who closes his eyes and fires at random or only for pleasure²⁰. After having awkwardly loaded his pistol, and hesitantly squinted at his target, he, the writer, has to blow some heads off; whose heads were those blown off? And were those just any heads? If he did not kill the ones who first shot him, he must have made a mistake and killed some innocent passers-by. He, thus, who did not take side with those whose families were shot dead, took part in that massacre: "He is the accomplice of the oppressors if he is not the ally of the oppressed"²¹. Sartre clearly states that being impartial, as some argue, and not writing against or contributing to any party, does not hold water in literature:

There is no writer practicing today who did not cooperate directly or indirectly with one resistance movement or another; at the very least he had a cousin in the underground. As a result, in literary circles, writing and having resisted are now synonymous. No author offers up his new book bare as a new babe.²²

The beautiful, according to Marxism, when it is associated with alienated workers, becomes ugly. Marx considered art produced under the oppression and alienation of Capitalism as an art that has no sense of beauty. It is widely held that "most of the so-called art produced under capitalism did not harmonize the faculties, but instead anesthetized the people to their own suffering"²³. Capitalism supports all new forms of "beautiful" arts detached from the reality of imperialism and exploitation of the working classes. Instead, it has destroyed every beautiful thing in the world, and is "anesthetizing" people to the reality of impoverishment and oppression²⁴. To curb its alienation the onus is on the writer to magnify this alienation through his or her writings. Following the steps of Kant in explaining "the beautiful", Walter Benjamin elucidates that beauty comes from the thing "in itself"²⁵. As far as beauty is concerned, artistic forms, however, do not exist just in a vacuum, but also have other "dimensions", from which they are inseparable. Benjamin believes that "Artistic form has existential, cognitive, ethical, and political dimension"²⁶. Aestheticism is therefore perceived to alienate people from the real environment in which they exist and construct a linguistic or ideal world completely disconnected from historical and social experience.

Avant-garde art should not disregard "the addressee' to whom one commits oneself. Nor should its language be monopolized by or "enclosed...in its being or its substance"²⁷. The truth of art should be elicited from "its action on the receiver or through its function"²⁸. If one ingenuously believes in the transcendental function of art, and is blind to other services that it can render, it means that he or she misses or excludes the transformational service of art. The belief in the role of language as an

instrument of transcendence, or as an escape from concretisation chains, is no longer valid because it has no constructive or practical function.

IV. LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE SUPPRESSION OF THE AFRICAN VOICE

The explanation why works of African literature are often dismissed, as not having the required quality to be as of those of European writing, is due to the fact the West have always been sceptical of newborn literatures, as it were. For instance, the Americans created New Criticism as a reaction against a former colonialist (the British), and as an assertion of “the legitimacy of its literary canon against the persistent domination of the English tradition”²⁹. When African literature displayed some maturity and gained ground somewhere in a culture that seemed indifferent to it at first, Europeans dreaded the possibility of being marginalised in their literature by other civilizations.

Only in using postmodernist and post-structuralist critique could the Americans “recapture and appropriate their own writing from a false history of explication”³⁰. Admittedly, accepting the fact they were then called ‘postcolonial’, American literary criticism, for example, proudly came to see “postcoloniality’ as a distinctive, exclusive feature specific to America than to the rest of the world. It was “then no longer ‘a badge of shame’ or of immaturity, but a sign of distinction and difference, a difference which has been potent in American culture as a creative force”³¹.

According to Fredric Jameson, the relationship between movements of literary criticism, even the incentives behind their presence may be attributed to the external, harsh, painful “unbearable conditions they once endured or are still experiencing. — capitalism. Jameson views literary criticisms as a kind of “return of the repressed”³². What the then called Romanticism was only a production of an inescapable reality identified by the growing of capitalist industrial society (White 154). Modernism, like Romanticism, was only a manifestation of fear and disgust oscillating from a “specific psychological obsession, anxiety, modes of sublimation [...] to a characteristic projection of politics (anarchistic-totalitarian)” through “linguistic and stylistic features”³³. These movements, including post-modernism, are but a projection and reflection of a state of the unconscious, of a historical force—that is, to quote his words, the “absent cause”³⁴. Jameson demands that the unconscious be known and alluded to as a history, hidden in the story in the text, which can only be identified by disclosing a “subtext.”³⁵. Therefore, any written text comes to function in the present as telling an old story — that is, the history of class struggle (ideology). Karl Marx further explains:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle [...]. It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of the political unconscious finds its function and its necessity. ³⁶

Jameson proposes that the political unconscious be understood as a way of analysing texts to “explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artefacts as socially symbolic acts”³⁷. Class struggle does not necessarily reside in the surface (text), but can also be found by “the narrativity of that structure”³⁸.

Michel Pêcheux rejects the idea that meaning resides solely in the confinement of language itself—that is, decontextualized or de-historicised. He maintains that meaning is created "by the position of the language as a signifier in social, political, and cultural struggle"³⁹. Terms and phrases change their meaning depending on the position of the person using them. Literary criticism attempted to disguise the ideological apparatuses and contradictions hidden in the text through yet another "ideology", namely aestheticism or other literary movements. Fredric Jameson explains that these strategies of containments, for example aestheticism, always resort to synchronically closed texts or systems⁴⁰. Jameson sees aestheticism as an emphasis on elegant, complex and subjective forms, and calls it the "unintelligibility" of history in the text. African authors are constantly reminded to forget about the colonial period and its painful memories of violence and oppression, and write innocent artistic artefacts.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the ideological roots of literary criticism that have claimed a total detachment from the social and historical reality. Aestheticism, as many Marxist theoreticians think, represents the culmination of a systematic exclusion of all the voices who have attempted to write against colonial or capitalist domination. The development of literary criticism depends heavily on socio-economic changes that require new forms of literature. Aestheticism is an implicit attempt to stop the diachronic progress of history. Fredric Jameson suggested that many literary theories were strategies of containment. He argued that the insistence on the aesthetical dimensions of literature was a deceptive movement to conceal class struggles. African writers were not authorised to re-tell their history or stories of injustice and repression. They had been colonized mentally, discursively, psychologically and physically. The literature of the colonised is different from that of the colonizer's, because the relationship of each to the other is of a victim to an assailant, or of a slave to a former master. What gave one satisfaction may cause an agonising pain for the other. What one views as the most beautiful, others as the ugliest. African literature cannot but be impartial and biased, for it is simply a literature that has created its own black aesthetics.

¹ ABRAHMS, M.H, & Geoffrey, GALT, Harpham, (2012), *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed., New Delhi: Michael Rosenberg, p.139.

² ABRAHMS, p. 359.

³ *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2004) 3rd ed., India: Thomson Press, p. 19.*

⁴ ABRAHMS, p. 6.

⁵ EAGLETON, Terry, (2004), *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd: p. 1.

⁶ DOWLING, W. C. J., (1984), *Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to the Political Unconscious*, New York: Cornell University Press, p. 84.

⁷ DOWLING, p. 76.

⁸ DOWLING, p.77.

⁹ SU, John J., (2005), *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 106.

¹⁰ As quoted in KEEN, Suzanne, (2007), *Empathy and the Novel*, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

¹¹ SARTRE, Jean-Paul, (1988), *What is Literature?" and Other Essays*, Trans. Steven Ungar. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p.34.

¹² As quoted in NEWELL, Stephanie. (2006), «Are West African readers 'natural' Marxists?" *West African Literatures*, Ed. Elleke Boehmer, New York: Oxford University Press: 167-71. (p. 169)

¹³ As quoted BALUTANSKY, K. M., (1990), *The Novels of Alex La Guma: The Representation of Political Conflict*, Washington, Dc: Thress Continents Press, p. 144.

- 14 As quoted in OKOLO, Mary Stella Chika, (2007), *African Literature as Political Philosophy*, New York: Zed Books: p. 2.
- 15 MOSS, Joyce, & VALESTUK, Lorraine, (2000), *World Literature and Its Times: Profiles of Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*. New York: Gale Group, p. xvi.
- 16 (ibid.)
- 17 SARTRE, p. 34.
- 18 (ibid.)
- 19 SARTRE p. 37.
- 20 SARTRE, p. 38.
- 21 Sartre, p. 286.
- 22 Sartre, p. 282.
- 23 RAMUSSEN, Chris, (2006), "Ugly and monstrous: Marxist aesthetics," James A. Rawley Graduate Conference in the Humanities. Paper 7. University of Nebraska–Lincoln: 1-14. (p. 2)
- 24 (ibid.)
- 25 ROCHLITIZ, Rainer, (1996), *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, Trans. Jane Marie Todd. London: The Guilford Press, p. 181.
- 26 (ibid.)
- 27 ROCHLITIZ, p. 115.
- 28 (ibid.)
- 29 ASHCROFT, B., GRIFFITHS, G., & TIFFIN, H. (1994), *The Empire Writes Back*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 160.
- 30 ASHCROFT et al., p. 162.
- 31 ASHCROFT et al., p.163.
- 32 JAMESON, Fredric, (2002), *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London: Routledge, p. 92.
- 33 JAMESON, p. 153-54.
- 34 JAMESON, p. 132.
- 35 JAMESON, p. 172.
- 36 As quoted in Jameson, p. 4.
- 37 JAMESON, p. 5.
- 38 WHITE, Hayden, (1987), *The Content of the Form: Narrative. Discourse and Historical Representation*, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 148.
- 39 ASHCROFT et al., p. 171.
- 40 DOWLING, p. 89.

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