El Omda Review in linguistics and discourse analysis

Issn:2572-0058/E-issn:1969-2676

https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/485

Volume: 05/ N°: 02 June (2021), p 520/ 532

Counter-discourse in Postcolonial African Novel

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Abstract ;

Post-colonial African novel has become an effective means to revise the dominant colonial discourse and to write back to the empire. In this sense, this literature's endeavor is to give voice to the voiceless and to restitute the right to denounce the traumatic outcomes of colonialism and to unveil years of oppression, violence and destruction. The aim of this paper is to show how African postcolonial writers rely on counter-discursive strategies for decolonizing their peoples' minds. These writers devote themselves in producing counter-narratives that challenge cultural imperialism and help to reconstruct their identity and history.

Article info

Received 26./04/2021

Accepted 16./05./2021

- ✓ *Postcolonial*
- ✓ *discourse,*
- ✓ *African Novel,*
- ✓ *Resistance*

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Introduction

In his essay " Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", Althusser argues that ideologies are derived from social conflicts and these ideologies are supported, in turn, by these social conflicts. Althusser presents a contrast between two categories of state apparatuses which convey the ideology of the ruling class: The Ideological State Apparatuses and the Repressive State Apparatuses. The Repressive State Apparatuses comprises the police, the military, etc, which are externally compulsory forms of social cohesion. Ideological State Apparatuses include education, religion, family, culture etc., which are more conclusive and constant because they emanate from acceptance and do not depend on force and it is through them that a society transmits its knowledge and assures its existence. Then, the term "discourse" employed by Foucault is associated with the term ideology as employed by Pécheux and Althusser.

Colonialism brought consequential sociological and psychological transformation. It altered the collective identity of the colonized. The discursive systems of education, religion and other methods of social restraint worked closely together to create the fallacy of white superiority, to justify invasion and sanction the continuance of the colonial rule.

In *Prospero and Caliban* (1968), 0ctave Mannoni considers the principal issue in a colonial context as mutual misapprehension. The colonizer's domination stems from his belief that he is superior and that he represents civilization. The colonized believes that he is weak and subservient and he remains so. This reasoning, however, does not stem from a vacuum.; it is rather constructed by the different discourses that convey the colonizer's ideology. Indeed, the colonial discourse stuffs the colonized mind with ideas of inferiority and self-hatred.

In his book, *the Wretched of the Earth* (1990), Fanon presents the colonial condition as a "Manichaean world" (31), where the colonial context is described in connection with a Manichaean dividing along the binary oppositions of colonizer/colonized, white/ black, good/evil, civil/savage etc. The colonialist does not see the new world as one of diversity, but as the opposite of all that is human and civil and "paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil…he is let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. (Fanon, 1990, p. 32). This radical division

into binary oppositions leads to alienation.

The discursive apparatuses of the colonizer included various writings such as government papers, trade documents, religious pamphlets, scientific literature, and fiction. Among these, fiction did the most harm in changing the African societies.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Edward Said argues that the power to narrate is very important to culture and imperialism. It is through narratives that the colonialists, writers, historians and travelers, told Europe of its cultural Other (xiii).

It was during the heyday of colonialism, which spans between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century that English writers like Joseph Conrad, Rider Haggard and Edgar Wallace, with their exotic romances did great harm to Africa. For instance, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joseph Conrad depicts Africa as the heart of darkness. For the protagonist Marlow, travelling on the river Congo is like " travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad, 1992, p.39), and the 'savage' who was trained to be the fireman of the ship looked like "a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hunch-legs" (43). Marlow says:

> We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there--you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours-- the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. (42)

According to Chinua Achebe, Conrad's novel describes Africa as " the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe, 1978, p.3). Conrad was thus conveying the colonial image of Africa in the western mind. As natives did not have access to fiction, and the European reader had no direct contact with the natives, writers could distort the image of the native subject to any degree and commodify him into a stereotypical object and employs him as a 'resource' for colonialist fiction (JanMohamed , 1986, p.83). Hence, accordant with the imperial ideology, the colonial fiction constructed a twisted image of Africa for the supremacy of the empire.

3- Postcolonial Discourse

Arif Dirlik notes three uses for the term 'postcolonial' : as a

> "literal description of conditions in the formerly colonial societies," "as a description of a global condition after the period of colonialism" and 'as a discourse on the above named conditions that is informed by the epistemological and psychic orientations that are products of those conditions (332).

Then, postcolonialism means the study of the undeniable consequences of colonialism on the literature and arts of the ex-colonies. However, the term 'postcolonial' is chiefly used to refer to the literatures produced from the former colonies of Europe and has been recently substituted with terms like ''Third World Literature,' 'Commonwealth Literature' and 'New Literature in English'. In *the Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin use the term " to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin,1991,2). Thus, 'postcolonial' literatures could refer to any literatures produced from the different ex-colonies of Europe, both before and after political independence.

As strategies of power, Foucault's theory of discourse has been used by postcolonial critics like Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Abdul R. JanMohamed in studying colonialism as a discourse. These critics offer different perspectives for re-interpreting and undermining the colonial discourse which has oppressed the colonial subject.

Frantz Fanon's works were also crucial in the development of postcolonial discourse theory. Even though Fanon has highlighted the power of the colonial discourse in weakening opposition, he has admitted its power as a "demystifying force and as the launching-pad for a new oppositional stance which would aim at the freeing of the colonized from this disabling position though [sic] the construction of new liberating narratives" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1991, p.125).

Abdul R. JanMohamed's arguments are also based on Fanon's theory. In fact, Janmohamed argues that the dominant standard of relationships in all colonial societies is the Manichean opposition between the alleged supremacy of the European and the presumed subservience of the native. This binary opposition provides "the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: The Manichean allegory--a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black . . ." (Janmohamed, 1986, p.82). Such a duality makes colonial societies subject to constant conflict.

Some critics like Bhabha and Spivak have refuted this theory of Manichean opposition. In "Signs Taken for Wonder: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," Bhabha contends that colonial authority is best conveyed through its ambivalence. The contact with the colonizer inevitably creates an ambivalent condition which in turn creates a colonial hybrid. Moreover, the colonial society is naturally ambivalent, as it is 'double duty bound' because of the proclaimed civilizing mission of the colonizer on one hand and the use of force on the other hand. Actually, it is divided between its aspect as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. According to Bhabha, the colonial discourse fails to create permanent identities, and the duality that opposes the two groups is certain to collapse because there are huge racial and cultural differences within the two groups. Therefore, the relationship is more ambivalent than binary. This ambivalence makes the dualism colonizer/colonized different from the Hegelian master/slave dialectic (Bhabha, 1986, p.169). Accordingly, Bhabha allocated a space for the colonized subject to question and confront the authority of the colonial discourse.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak", the historically silenced native subject is a woman. Gayatri Spivak considers imperialism as a type of epistemic brutality that suppresses the native subject. She notes: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (Spivak, 1985, p.28).

Thus, both Spivak's approach of 'silence' and Bhabha's 'ambivalence' reject the colonial dichotomy suggested by Fanon and other theorists and weaken the postcolonial attempt to subvert the colonial discourse.

4- Resistance and Counter-discourse

A counter-discourse is a re-writing, a re-evaluation to reclaim and regain one's life, which had been hijacked by the colonizers; it is a discourse that questions and challenges the concepts of imperial power. Richard Terdiman coined the term 'counter-discourse' "to characterize the theory and practice of symbolic resistance" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007: p. 50). The term was integrated into postcolonial theory "to describe the complex ways in which challenges to a dominant or established discourse (specifically those of the imperial centre) might be mounted from the periphery" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007, p.50). The key point is to recognize that colonized peoples

were not only ‘prisoners on their own land’ (Said, 1994, p, 214), but were also aware of being constricted by structures of race, gender and class.

In his book, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, Terdiman presents a study of the caricatural images of early nineteenth century French literature as counter-discourses to bourgeoisie ideology and conceit. He demonstrates how the caricatural images could discredit bourgeoisie culture. He asserts: “ A counter-discourse is counter-discourse because it presupposes the hegemony of its Other. It projects a division of the social space, and seeks to segregate itself in order to prosecute its critique" (Terdiman, 1985, p.185). In other words, a counter-discourse seeks to represent reality in a different way and to challenge the dominant discourse which control the understanding of social reality.

In his article "0ccidentalism as Counter-discourse: 'He Shang' in Post-Mao China", Xiaome Chen explains the way counter-discourses question the dominant discourse and discard its rules. He presents *Occidentalism* as a discursive strategy in post-Mao China to construct the Western Other. The aim of this *Occidentalism* was to conceive the West as Other in order to reinforce nationalism. At the same time, opponents of the government believed that the Western Other is superior to the Chinese Self. Chen explains that the controversial series ‘He Shang’ functioned as anti–official Occidentalism because it presented a positive image of the West. In fact, this series served as "a counter-discourse that attempted to subvert the dominant and official Orientalism and Occidentalism prevalent throughout Chinese culture" (Chen, 1992, p.693).

Postcolonial discourses are obviously counter-discursive, and their aim is not just to question, but to resist and to subvert too. They consist of revising the colonial discourse in order to undermine its hegemonic concepts and thus to instigate a decolonizing process, because decolonization "invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them. . ." (Tiffin, 1995, p. 95). The postcolonial also seeks to reexamine the post-colonial literatures as counter-discourses because they "are . . . constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer 'fields' . . . of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse" (96). Therefore, postcolonial serves as a counter hegemonic discourse that challenges Europe’s claim to be the culture of reference for the rest of the world. Producing a counter-discourse is achieved in different ways by different writers. Edward Said explains:

> The tentative authorization of feminine experience in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, or the fabulous reordination of time and character giving rise to the divided generations of [Salman Rushdie's] Midnight's Children, or the remarkable universalizing of the African-American experience as it emerges in such brilliant detail in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby and Beloved. The push or tension comes from the surrounding environment. (Said, 1994, p. 334)

These texts are not master discourses, as he explains, but they produce a counter-narrative of resistance in their own terms. Said is implying here that these writers used creative means to undermine the dominant discourse. In fact, many writers from the former colonies are experimenting with genres and forms like parody, satire, comedy, irony, humor, use of indigenous languages, and dialects to produce a counter-discourse that would undermine the master discourses of the empire.

Postcolonialism has produced a whole new genre of writing back, of rewriting the master narratives. For instance, novelists like the Kenyan Ngugi and the Sudanese Tayeb Salih appropriate topoi of colonial culture such as the quest and the voyage for their own postcolonial purposes. In this vein, Said notes:

> The River Between by James Ngugi redoes Heart of Darkness by inducing life into Conrad's river on the very first page. "The river was called Honia, which means cure, or bring-back-to-life. Honia river never dried; it possessed a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes.... People saw this and were Happy." (Said, 1994, p. 211)

This is clearly a type of postcolonial resistance to the narratives of the empire. Indeed, unlike Conrad's river of darkness, Ngugi's river represents healing, producing thus a completely opposite ideology. Similarly, in Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North, "Conrad's river is now the Nile whose waters rejuvenate its peoples" (Said, 1994, p. 211). This reversal of the theme of the river as reviving and healing is in stark opposition to the dark and sinister river of *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, the direction of the voyage is itself reversed, going from Sudan to Europe, thus undermining the traditional trajectory of colonial discourse from the metropolis to the periphery.

Another recurring motif in postcolonial resistance is that of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's allegorical tale of the powerful Prospero and his follower, the dark Caliban.

There are many versions of *The Tempest* and each version tells a different

story of oppression and slavery, by an outsider who takes over the native's land. As Said notes: "Every subjugated community in Europe, Australia, Africa, Asia and the Americas has played the sorely tried and oppressed Caliban to some outside master like Prospero" (Said, 1994, p.214). As a matter of fact, Prospero and Caliban have become allegorical figures representing a master/slave relationship. Indeed, many writers with a past of colonialism replay Prospero/Caliban in innovative ways to acknowledge forgotten histories.

5- African Novel as Counter-discourse

The postcolonial novel can be considered as a historical record of the shifting perception of Africa. It represents three important periods of time in Africa's history. Novels of the first phase are anti-colonial and focus on the cultural purity of African societies before colonialism. The writers assert that their past " was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Achebe, "1975, p. 45).

All along the years following independence, the focus of the postcolonial African novel shifted to criticize the Western capitalist economy and the upcoming threats of neo-colonialism.

In the third period, "liberation phase", the novel has become more engaged in healing the African self from its harrowing experiences of colonialism. These novels are more constructive and have the mission of decolonizing the minds of their people.

Ngugi describes decolonization as the rejection of the entire colonial rule and the deconstructing of the psychological elements generated in the minds of the people through colonial discourses. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin concur:

> Decolonization is he process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power arid that remain even after political independence is achieved. (1998, p.63)

Then, decolonizing the mind means rejecting the perverted reality of one's past in order to recover one's lost African identity.

The novels of Wa Thiong'o Ngugi and Ayi Kwei Armah are counter-discoursive narratives and have proved themselves as proponents of decolonization. "They are engaged in liberating the African from slavery disguised as freedom" (Armah, 1979, p. 104) and to make out of him a new man without chains on his legs, without chains on his mind, without chains in

his soul (Ngugi, 1986, p. 263). They try to reconceive and to reconstruct their people's sense of themselves in a more effective way by contesting cultural imperialism. To do so, both Ngugi and Armah use various counter-discursive strategies.

4-1 Inverting the Binarism of Colonial Discourse

In Western thinking, imperialism perceives the colonial world according to a binary opposition. As Edward Said explains in Culture and Imperialism: " …the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with such words and concepts as 'inferior' or 'subject races, ' 'subordinate peoples, ' 'dependency, ' 'expansion, ' and 'authority'" (Said, 1994, p.8). Thus, colonizers who were white, good-looking and civilized were opposed to colonized natives who were black, hideous and wild.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the white character John Thompson represents the colonialist's stance towards the natives. His work *Prospero in Africa*, is a typical example of Europe's effort to apply "the principle of Reason, of Order and of Measure" on the foolishness, the incoherence and superstition so typical of the African and Oriental races (Ngugi,1985, p. 47). Thompson's diary contains many examples of this binary opposition; for instance when he notes: "'the Negro is a child, and with children, nothing can be done without the use of authority"' (p. 49). "Every white man is continually in danger of gradual moral ruin in this daily and hourly contest with the African" (49). In this way, Thompson conveys the cultural and moral superiority of the white colonialist and the inferiority of the black native.

This binary opposition was effective not only in showing a relation of domination but also in affecting the native's sense of himself. In this vein, Frantz Fanon explains: "the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. It is the racist who creates his inferior" (Fanon,1986, p.93). So, it is the mindset of the colonizer that establishes the colonized sense of himself. Then, decolonizing the mind will be possible only when the black man gains more confidence in himself and cease to perceive the colonizer as superior.

Skin color is the most prominent indication of a race. In the colonial world, it has meant stigmatization and objectification. As Fanon notes: "I am over determinated from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (Fanon, 1968, p.116). Hence, skin color becomes the first reason for denigrating the native.

Ngugi and Armah change the color symbolism and relate positive virtues

with blackness and evil with whiteness. For instance, in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, white is associated with death. "All around us the world is drugged white in a deathly happiness . . ." (1979, p. xi). "We wander now along steep roads declining into the whitest deaths" (52). White is associated with the desert and black with spring water, the symbol of life and fertility.

Armah also reverses the standards of beauty. Anoa, a black woman, is described as beautiful:

> She was slender as a fale stalk, and suppler. From her forehead to her feet her body was of a deep, even blackness that could cause the chance looker to wonder how it was that even the surface of a person's skin could speak of depths. Her grace was easy in the dance. (15)

Whereas Bentum's wife, a white woman, is described as pale and unattractive:

> [Aln apparition exactly like a ghost: a pale white woman in white clothes moving with a disjointed, severe, jerky walk. . . . Her face was squeezed in a severe frown. . . . She had no eyebrows. Eyelashes she had, but they were hard to discern, being white and therefore merging into the pallor of her face. (119)

Similarly, in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, Jacinta is the black beautiful woman who has "dark eyes radiating the light of an inner courage . . . " (1982, p.218). Conversely, the white delegates who attend the Devil's Feast are described as having red skin, "like the skin of a black person who has been scalded with boiling water or who has burned himself with acid creams (91).

Thus, the division into binary opposites of black/white in the colonial discourse is reversed by Armah and Ngugi. In their novels, both writers favor black over white and create opposing images to undermine the myth of white supremacy. In doing so, they attempt to decolonize the minds of their people.

4-2 Reconstructing History

Colonialist discourse denied a true history to Africa and created a past for the natives. The operation was simple in the absence of an official written history. Consequently, the history of Africa came to the modern African twisted through the colonial discourse. As Armah explains in "the Caliban Complex", what the African knew of his continent came from " a judicious selection of negative misinformation, savagery, wars, famine, drought, the jungle and the tribe" (Armah, 1985, p.521). Then, the main purpose of post colonialist writers was to reclaim and to reconstruct that history.

Ngugi and Armah used the recovery of history as a counter-discursive strategy. Armah desires to rewrite "the truncated tales" (Armah, 1979, p. 1) of

his peoples' origins, while Ngugi wants to prove that before colonialism, the history of Kenya was not "one of the wanderlust and pointless warfare between peoples" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 199).

Many historical events in the colonial history have been altered to the convenience of the empire. For Ngugi, the most important historical event he wanted to correct was the Mau Mau rebellion. Indeed, this event was distorted by the British historians and presented as a Gikuyu peasant revolt and has been presented as a violent group of terrorists. In *Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi attempts to put the events in their true perspective. He achieves that through the use of a set of flashbacks. For instance, in the scene where Kihika meets Mugo, Mugo is afraid to be caught for hiding a terrorist; he shouts:" ‘Do you want to kill me? I have done nothing,' Mugo appealed . . ." (Ngugi, 1985, p. 165). Kihika replies: "'We don't kill just anybody.' . . . 'We are not murderers. We are not hangmen--like Robson--killing men and women without cause or purpose'" (166).

Ngugi describes how the acquisition of lands by the white settlers was the source of all the struggles. Mumbi remembers how her mother’s hut and hers have been set on fire. How the villagers, principally women, children and old people, have been constrained to dig trenches. She recalls:" we were prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all round to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear'" (126). Similarly, Armah’ novel the Healers (1978) reconstructs the second Assante war (1873-74) which has been described by European historians as only a minor British military operation to annex the territory of an antagonistic people. Armah claims that the Assante resisted the British and that the Assante was not an antagonistic people. He describes the true causes of the collapse of the Assante empire.

Hence, both Armah and Ngugi use different counter-discursive strategies to undermine the colonial discourse.

5- Conclusion

The main purpose of the counter-discourse is to undermine the dominant discourse and attempts to create new narratives of empowerment and resistance for the colonized peoples. The African postcolonial novel has been an answer to and a riposte against the colonial discourse. It questions the western representation of African reality and displays cultural resistance to European hegemony.

Postcolonial writers such Ngugi and Armah subvert the dominant

discourse of colonialism by using counter-discursive strategies such as reversing the binarism of colonial discourse and reconstructing history.

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