

**EUROCENTRICISM AND THE LITERATURE OF AFRICA: AN  
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**Abstract**

*This study reflects upon and questions the issue of 'representation' of the colonized nations as presented in historiography of colonial narratives through the eyes of the colonizers in their writings, which led to a homogenized view of the colonized nations' culture and traditions. This paper presents a study of viewpoints through the writings of African writers and how they have appropriated English language through the fusion of European forms with Africa's oral tradition and thus shaping the political consciousness of Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Representation, Exoticism, Othering, Colonization, African Literature, Eurocentric versions, oral tradition.*

Literature is a medium through which a variety of cultures are interlinked throughout the world. Derived from the Latin word 'litaritura', writing formed with letters, literature has been variedly defined as the framework comprising of written works; expressing the idea of universality of human values.

According to Kenneth Rexroth, 'literature is first and foremost humankind's entire body of writing; after that, it is the body of writing belonging to a given language or people; then it is individual pieces of writing.<sup>1</sup>' Hence literature is spread worldwide and consists of varieties among nations, each having an individualistic approach toward their cultural proximities. However, British Empire with its history of colonial rule over the East highly influenced the cultural and mental status of the ruled nations. Among the ruled regions, Africa had to go through a myriad of changes under the colonizers. The issue of 'representation' of the colonized nations through the eyes of the

<sup>1</sup> *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow. pp 275, New Directions Publishing: 1987



colonizers in their writings, led to a homogenized view of the colonized nations' culture and traditions.

Edward Said's work *Orientalism*<sup>2</sup> focuses on the western study of the Orient from the point of view of Islamic nations and highlights the idea that much of the western scholars' study of Islamic civilization was an exercise in asserting 'European identity' through the definition of the 'Other'. It was a method of multiple levels of discrimination in order to establish European domination over other civilizations, thus producing a rather distorted image of the East, in order to claim that they know more about it than the Orient itself. This process of 'knowing' the East, depicts it as 'irrational, weak, and feminized, the Non-European Other'; whereas its counterpart, the West, identifies itself as enlightened, strong, and masculine; resulting in a cultural inequality in order to highlight itself as the superior civilization, and homogenizing the Eastern world, depriving it of its vast and unique cultural traditions. In this manner, according to Said, 'Othering' takes place, in which the weaknesses of a particular group on the periphery are highlighted in order to emphasize the superiority of the ones in powerful positions. In this manner, 'Othering' suggests all the cultures except the one chosen superior group are powerless and worthless. Thus, it leads to Exoticism, which is basically a mode of representation, i.e. a representational issue that presents the perception of the 'Otherness', or, the difference of the 'Other' from the 'Self'.

Africa was invaded by the Empire during the seventeenth century and continued to be under its rule until the nineteenth century. The Imperialist forces along with the imposition of a religion foreign to the natives affected their ancient culture and traditions. Moreover, the accounts of colonizers denied a voice to the history of African culture. Africa had its roots in oral traditions and thus lacked a written history. Therefore, the colonizers assumed them as a savage and uncouth race and without a literature to call their own.

Oral tradition in African societies incorporated the method of passing on the values and ethics from one generation to another through a myriad of vocations. These vocations included storytelling, folktales, proverbs and morals associated with the ideal ways of life which would help the individual believe in the notion of a collective approach towards the growth and development of a community.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.



The emphasis lay upon the performance which would let people inherit the culture directly and pass on to the next generation. The spoken word becomes the core of the oral culture of Africa, and therefore, because of the lack of written word, it lacked a written history. Along with spoken word, music is another important aspect of African oral tradition. The association of musical instruments like a drum with a performance allows the listener or spectator to understand the gravity associated with that particular moment. Not only is the drum an integral part of the performance, it was used to pass messages and announcements of all kinds, and particular rhythms were performed and designed for certain events. Thus, African culture was, before colonialism, closely bound to oral tradition.

It is only after the colonization of Africa that the written word entered here. With a variety of indigenous languages, African communities had to struggle to learn a language foreign to them, imposed upon them by the colonizers. Along with a new religion, to learn a new language would have been to learn a new culture, different from the spoken word that they dealt with in their indigenous languages. The colonizers discarded the African traditions as far from the idea of true knowledge and therefore imposed their own language and religion in the name of uplifting the people of Africa. Thus, the written word entered through the intervention of British forces and demarcated the oral tradition of Africa by questioning its significance.

The lack of a written history led to a questioning of Africa's existence as an uncouth entity. The accounts of European scholars depicted them as a savage continent without a past. Literature of Africa is truly post-colonial because it was written after the shackles of tyranny bound to the continent by the Empire were broken. The earliest written literature of Africa was in French and other languages, but soon English took over in dominating the literature of Africa. D.E.S. Maxwell (1965) questions the appropriateness of an imported language to describe the experience of place in post-colonial societies<sup>3</sup>. According to Maxwell, in the case of invaded colonies, people had responded to their landscape since ancient time in their indigenous languages. Maxwell explains, that they had their own responses to it which were forced on to the periphery because of the imposition of a different worldview expressed through an alien language, leading to an 'intolerable wrestle with words and meanings' which has at its aim to subdue the experience to the language, the exotic life to

<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin; *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Taylor and Frances: 2002



the imported tongue. However, it needs to be mentioned that these modern written literatures came into existence under the influence of western education system imposed during colonization. The relationship between the oral and the written remains complex, and therefore, the writings of African writers are not distanced from the oral. Instead, the influence of the oral tradition is inevitably seen in their writings.

The issue of representation has evoked the views of a lot of writers, of both western and non-western countries. An example of this could be *An Image of Africa*<sup>4</sup> which was Chinua Achebe's criticism of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*<sup>5</sup>, on the grounds of a dehumanizing portrayal of Africa:

Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. (Conrad 213-214)

Achebe's accusation against Conrad's xenophobic point of view throws light on the western standpoint in lieu of anything that is non-western. The Eurocentric versions of history are questioned by African writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o through their writings. Through the incorporation of the oral tradition in their writings, they challenged the Eurocentric versions of Africa's history.

According to Robert Hampson<sup>6</sup>, the casual demonizing of the 'other' suggests the unthinking metaphors of stereotyping, such as Marlow making a devilish stereotype in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, 'We were within thirty yards from the nearest fire. A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns - long antelope horns, I think- on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, And no doubt: it looked fiend-like though' (Conrad 74). Thus, Hampson maintains that *Heart of Darkness* offers not a representation of Africa, it offers a

<sup>4</sup> Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa*: 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Sumanyu Satpathy, 2009. World view Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hampson, *Heart of Darkness* and "The Speech That Cannot Be Silenced." From *English: A Journal of Literary Criticism*. 39; 163, Spring 1990, pp. 15-32, 1990.



representation of representations of Africa (304). Edward Said has described ‘Orientalism’ as more a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than a discourse about the Orient and that distinction is also important in this context, according to Hampson (304).

*Thing Fall Apart*<sup>7</sup>, a novel by Chinua Achebe comprises of an amalgam of Igbo customs, myths, beliefs, legends, rites, and proverbs, in order to show how the life and consciousness of people are shaped by them. Providing his novel with a regional flavour, Achebe manages to be able to manipulate a western language by balancing it with a mingling of the elements of the oral tradition of Africa. Achebe not only throws light upon African oral tradition but also highlights the plight of a nation which goes through changes under the British colonizers and is destroyed by the imposition of a foreign religion and culture. The fact remains that the novel in Africa was borrowed from the European tradition. However, Achebe’s writing does not conform to the European language idiom and syntax as he manages to balance the language with the weight of his Igbo imagination and sensibilities. The idea of reprimanding the European mindset of measuring the African sensibilities against its own yardstick of the binaries of right and wrong is strongly felt in modern African writings like that of Achebe.

Ngugi wa Thing’o and Micere Githae Mugo through the play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*<sup>8</sup>, seek to show to the reader and the audience a new facet of Kenyan history, by presenting the trial of the most celebrated hero of the Mau Mau rebellion along with a revelation of the hypocrisy and cruelty of the European colonizers, thus challenging the Eurocentric versions of history. According to Oyeniyi Okunoye<sup>9</sup>, the reality that authorizes the creation of the play is the debate as to what led to the constitution of Kenyan history. The reframing of history is central to Kenyan writing because the colonial interpretation of the nation’s history misrepresents the masses who fought for independence. Thus, Okunoye maintains that Kenyan history may, therefore, be seen, like any other, from different perspectives (*History in Africa* 229); and the making of the play should be seen as an act of cultural self-definition and resistance (231). Ngugi and Mugo’s attempt at presenting the neo-colonial endeavors of Europe also urge the reader for a Marxist interpretation of the text and a detailed

<sup>7</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. African Writers Series, Heinemann Educational Publishers, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Micere Githae Mugo; *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Heinemann Educational Books: 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Oyeniyi Okunoye, *Dramatizing Postcoloniality: Nationalism and Rewriting of History in Ngugi and Mugo’s “The Trial of Dedan Kimathi”*. *History in Africa*, Vol.28 (2001) , pp.235-237.



analysis of the capitalist structures that underlie the colonial rule. The oral tradition is as much a part of the play through an incorporation of the nationalist songs in the indigenous language Gikuyu.

On another extreme, J. M. Coetzee's "The Novel in Africa<sup>10</sup>" presents another side of the modern African writer. A character Emmanuel Egudu who is a Nigerian novelist highlights the plight of modern African writers, who are a misfit in the great African panorama because they belong neither to their roots nor to the postcolonial purview of the west. Therefore, resulting in a diasporic situation, they are writing for the Western audience, in order to earn a living, because these dissident intellectuals have no place to grow in their native countries (Coetzee 7). This elusive situation then leads them to incorporate their cultural traditions in their work in order to consolidate their position in the Western literary tradition and ensure that they remain distinguished from them, as well as a suit to the taste of the western nation of the 'exotic' to survive as the intellectual. Thus, he has temporary addresses but no fixed abode, according to Egudu, and can never be true to his potential because he has to produce what they want him to produce in a novel, which is why they have to incorporate the element of the African exotic in their novels, to please the western audience; and hence they can never be true to their essence. According to Egudu, in the case of Amos Tutuola, the novels of foreign writers are translated with a sense of corruption in order to exoticize them and retain the "Africanness" for the western audience. However, if we cast a glance at Achebe's work, we find that he chose to write in English while at the same time retaining the essence of cultural traditions of Africa, in order to challenge the Eurocentricism that lies in the perceptions of Africa in the eyes of the west. Thus, Egudu's viewpoint on the African writer's need to exoticize his writings to earn a living stands in contradiction with Achebe's viewpoint. However, one cannot negate the assumption that a writer's appeal to the market does affect his work. In the case of foreign writers, the overseas market plays an ever-important role in the livelihood, and especially so if the writer comes from a nation with an extensive history in oral tradition and can strive for little in his native country, like Africa.

Though the consumerism that underlines the market limits universally the writers in order to survive the crisis of being unappealing to the regime, we can conclude that the scope of this paper lies

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel in Africa". Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, *Occasional Papers*, Paper 17, University of California, Berkeley: 1998.



in understanding the importance of literature and the idea of representation. The fusion of European forms with Africa's oral tradition helps in shaping the political consciousness of Africa, and the further strengthening of its traditions is possible with an assimilation of the written and the oral, shaping the identity of the continent. One can say that Africa with its history of colonization under the British Empire, nevertheless, developed on the literary forefront, with the incorporation of its unique oral and cultural tradition in the African writings, thus appropriating the western category of literature, leading to its transition from the spoken word to the written word, in order to subvert from within the Eurocentric versions of history.

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