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LICENCE 3 (LCAPA)

Prison Literature

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OUTLINE

-Preliminary Remarks

-Prison as a Sign

-Generic Considerations

-Prison Literature as Historiography: Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka

Objective: Theory-based, this course aims at acquainting students with the fundamentals of what is known as “prison literature.” For this to come true, the course will draw on narratology as postulated by Gerard Genette.

Preliminary Remarks

The syntagm “Prison Literature” is an umbrella term for any text that addresses the experience of incarceration. This perspective is abroad one, as it suggests that whenever a prison experience is related within a given work, it falls within the rank off “prison literature.” In other words, this is “prison literature” understood *lato sensu*.

No wonder Joe Lockard contends: “literature that emerges from, records, or imaginatively engages the experience of incarceration.” Such works as Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow* and Wole Soyinka’s *King Baabu* may fall within this perspective.

Conversely, in this course, “prison literature” is construed in a restrictive standpoint as it highlights writers who have spent time behind bars and as a consequence tell their harrowing experience in papers through different texts. This is “prison literature”, understood *stricto sensu*.

In other words, three (3) elements are taken onto consideration to label a work as “prison literature”:

1. Locus: the place of writing is the limit of the prison cell
2. The identity between the narrating self (I) and the narrated self (Me & My)
3. Subject matter: it unveils the secrecy of life in the prison cell. In the words of Joe Lockard it “brings visible what is invisible”

In a word, “prison literature” is nothing but the realistic account of what writers went through while under house arrest. It is therefore clear that there is a huge difference between *writings about prison and prison writings*.

For the sake of clarity, it must be made plain that the term “prison” sometimes takes on a metaphorical ring.

Eg: a country can be seen as a prison, meaning there is no freedom there.

To quote Ama Ata Aidoo, “Marriage is like a prison for a woman, “meaning it erodes her freedom

Prison as a Sign

In the Saussurean perspective, a sign encompasses the signifier and the signified.

The signifier is the graphic representation while the signified is the conceptual content of the sign.

The substantive “prison “ is suggestive of lack of freedom:

- Voice stifled

- hands tightened

- eyes closed

Prison is restriction, lack of movement as opposed to movement and openness.

How come that a literature thrives in this environment of freedom deprivation?

Hence the motivations of a writer to embark on this specific type of writing:

- resistance: as a means to uncover the inhumane condition of prison life

- survival: before the horrendous conditions of prison life

- testimony: to unveil the history of the country in a form of a testimony

- mission: In a Christ-like mission, African writers made it their duty to contribute to the betterment of their community

Under this backdrop, writing is seen as a verbal action against the policies of oppression thriving in their midst. It becomes a powerful deed to reject the notion of limitation invested with the word “prison.” The mere fact of writing takes on the meaning of subversion in order to reject the established order. One may recall here the pact made by Jack Mapanje and his fellow prisoners:

The decision was this: survive, and you will embarrass the dictator with your life. Die and give up, then he has triumphed. Victory for you is first, survival. Second, if you have the opportunity, tell your story.

Generic Considerations

Considering"prison literature, "*stricto sensu*, two (2) main genres will be uncovered here:

- poetry
- narratives, above all in the form of documents

As examples, one can refer to:

- Dennis Brutus, *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison*, 1969
- Kofi Awoonor, *The House by the Sea*, 1978
- Wole Soyinka, *Poems from Prison*, 1969
- Jack Mapanje, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, 1993
- Chris, Abani, *Kalakuta Republic*, 2000

Throughout their different poems, these writers recall their ordeal in the hands of both civilian and military rulers in Africa. For instance Abani in his poem"Ahimsa" denounces the experimentation of Torture:

"He kicks me repeatedly; unprovoked."

As to the narratives, they are centered around non –fiction. To be specific, we may consider the coming into being of memoirs as a means for someone who played a part in historical events, either as a witness or an actor to relate his own experience. Examples are:

- Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, 1981
- Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*, 1972

Prison Literature as Historiography: Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*

The notion of historiography boils down to the writing of history. To what extent can we liken *The Man Died* to a historical document?

Like the historian, Soyinka set out to unveil the past history of his country, precisely the sad period of the Nigerian civil war during what is known as the Biafran war (1967-1970). A look at the paratext, intertext, the narrative voice as well as the plot of *The Man Died* may prove fruitful.

1.The Paratext: All the surrounding information around the text having nothing to do with the text.

-Title, precisely the subtitle, points to the fact that the book is about the personal experience of Soyinka while he spent time behind bars. This becomes a historical event as it shows that the writer experienced at least prison once in his life time.

-Caption: Anyone conversant with African literature knows for sure the face is actually Soyinka's. The implication is that the writer wants to share in his own prison experience with the reader, as evinced by the iconographic reference.

-Critical comments: On the back page cover, one can read:"the distinguished African writer, Wole Soyinka, was imprisoned without trial by the Federal authorities at the start of the Nigerian civil war." This quotation comes to shed light on the fact that Soyinka wants to bring to light the predicament he went through while under house arrest. Here again, the text becomes a document of which the ultimate aim is to reveal one aspect of his life, including his country.

2.The Intertext

Through an extract from the Nigerian newspaper "New Nigerian" of from January 1967: (p.23)

No. 330 New Nigerian Monday 30 January 1967 page Five

MAN TO HANG, EIGHT OTHERS JAILED FOR KILLING A BOY

This clearly shows that with the incorporation of this newspaper within *The Man Died*, the writer deems it important to historicize this period of his country as the historian would have done it.

3.The Narrative Voice

In *The Man Died*, one can clearly understand that Soyinka is narrating his own story. This is evidenced through such references as the subject pronoun (I) or sometimes the possessive adjective (My) or the possessive pronoun (Me).

Eg: My arrest / I was framed (p.19)

Since there is clearly an identity between the narrator, writer and the central character, one can argue here that the narrator is autodiegetic.

4.The Plot of the Nigerian Civil War

The Man Died examines the trauma experienced by the Nigerian society from 1967-1970 in the form of the secession war when Igbo people wanted to get out of what is known as Nigeria, as a country. One can recall the quote on page 20 here:

It is appropriate therefore that the text of the latter should serve as preface to this book, for its subject matter made the secession, the war.....

Bibliography

Abani, Chris, *Kalakuta Republic*, 2000

-Genette, Gerard, *Narrative Discourse*, 1972

-Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 1988

-Soyinka, Wole, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*, 1972