Felix Houphouet-Boigny University

Department of English

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Master II

Crisis and Aesthetics

DJIMAN Kasimi, Professor

OUTLINE

Introductory Words

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**Introductory Words**

A crisis can be understood as a period in which things are going in an unusual way. With such a definition, it is all too clear that one is dealing with a specific time which claims its own words and phrases. In other words, the way or aesthetics of a moment of crisis is starkly different from that of a crisis-free period.

In this course, the point is to deal with the expression of crisis through its peculiar form. For that, I will be insisting on

In-betweeness as a revelation of the crisis present in African literature

Discursive tonality in that the potency of the speech is also invested with meaning

Despatialisation as this specific way of dealing with space sheds light on the trauma unfolding.

Objective: Theory-based, this course of which the aim is to bring to light the characteristics of such an abnormal time that the crisis is all about. Theorywise, I will draw mainly on postcolonial lens as the literary tool to examine this peculiar rendition of the crisis.

**In-betweeness**

The term “in –betweeness” is meant to address the fact Africans are caught between two modes of life: that of their ancestors and that of the former colonizer. Here is unveiled the root cause of this in-betweeness this course will address. Two directions will be considered here:

-“Baabu kudi” in Wole Soyinka’s *King Baabu* and “akara” (124) in Buchi Emecheta’s *The New Tribe* readily draw the attention of the literary critic that the texts refuse to observe the all‐powerfulness of the English language. The regularity with which one witnesses the irruption of African languages in a text written in English is tantamount to expressing the writers’ refusal to succumb to the so–called superiority of English as the prescribed language. Contrary to the discourse in force during the colonial era, writers are doing their utmost to challenge this hegemonic proclivity which lies at the heart of the colonial enterprise. In that sense, their writings take on a functional significance of which the objective is to rectify what is seen as a loud anomaly. Indeed, through this, writers are keen on addressing, or responding to the view that holds that their languages are despicable and as such, are not worthy of any consideration whatsoever.

-African writers not only blend African words with the English language, they take their move a step further as they try to appropriate the English language per se. A good case is found in the novel of Buchi Emecheta, *The New Tribe*:

Dad, what does ” pirezenti” mean? Rufus wanted to know.

That’s how a Nigerian would say the word “present.” We like to Nigerianize

English words, especially in the villages. We do that to make the words our own. (87)

Through this statement, one has to come to terms with the purposeful intention to appropriate the English language via innovative, subversive ways.

-Pidgin English is another living proof that attests to the linguistic subversion unfolding in the field of African literature. This communication tool seems to be limited to West Africa so that Pidgin English is only displayed in the literary productions of this geographical sphere. A good case in point comes readily in mind in Buchi Emecheta’s *The New Tribe*:”’Dat one na true’, said Jimoh. Me sel, I be born again and I get chrstian name: Jeremiah, but when I dey levae Nigeria, I tink say I no for use that one for travel.” Similarly, Wole Soyinka’s drama release is also pervasive with pidgin references. A relevant case being King Baabu’s statement to legitimize his corrupt practices: “You give her chop money to spend every day, not so?” (p.52). Pidgin as a mingling of both English and African languages points to the prevalence of what may be termed linguistic hybridity, a process whereby two process whereby two distinct languages are reconciled into a new one.

-The Promotion of African culture

The display of African culture is a living reality as if to undermine the magnitude of the cultural crisis. What is being implied is that the writers portray the forcefulness of their culture as if to throw overboard the colonialist view which holds that Africans are culture‐free. It may be of interest to recall one aspect of this nihilistic rhetoric coming from the West:”The Europeans claimed that they were the only ones who had thought out a civilization to the level and dimension of universality” (Newell, 2006:26). It follows from this Euro‐centered discourse that Europe is the yardstick and the rest of the world must simply conform to its values and cultural criteria. This is the backdrop against which one can fully make sense of the different cultural references African literature is rife with. Two elements will be brought to the fore in order to highlight the cultural urge underpinning the literary creations of African writers.

Chief among these cultural elements that so often percolate African writers’ output is, arguably, the incorporation of proverbs. No wonder that in such works as Wole Soyinka’s *King Baabu* and Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, one can spot so many proverbs of which one example is ”A father has no equal ”(47). This saying calls attention to the due respect and consideration one owes to a father. More importantly, it must be argued that these proverbs are not a legacy of colonialism; rather they are drawn from African oral traditions. One must therefore come to terms with the fact that through the display of proverbs, African writers are expressing their uttermost desire to impart their culture to the outside world. It seems that time is ripe to dismiss and dissociate oneself from the accusation of cultural paucity Africa has so long been associated with.

**Discursive Tonality**

This phrase is meant to address the powerful tone through which writers are bringing into the open the problems of their different communities. Two aspects will be examined here to deal with this trait of writing:

-The nudity of the language

The point is that writers are calling a spade a spade without any restrain whatsoever. Let us consider the poetry of Timothy Wanga, *Africa’s New Brood*, as an example. A good case in point is that of Yuweri Museveni, the current Head of the State of Uganda:

Opposition‘s Besigye the hammer

Proposition’s Museveni the anvil (p. 25)

The substantives «hammer» together with «anvil» are vituperative terms suggesting the sheer destruction which is the doing of politicians, embodied here by these two prominent leaders of the Ugandan national political scape. Bearing in mind that the name «Museveni» is that of the reigning Head of State while «Besigye» hints at the leader of the opposition in the country, one gets a full sense of Wangusa’s audacity bordering on a form of thoughtfulness. For the poet, in a nation adrift, the perils threatening one’s personal life do not rate much compared to the hangovers stunting the social formation. In that sense, keeping silent is tantamount to a sort of betrayal he cannot afford. In Wangusa, poetry is served as a discursive weapon that calls a spade a spade. Mindless of the threat of censorship writers tend to cushion themselves against, the poet is bold enough to lash out at those he reckons are the root cause of the collectivity’s predicament.

-The violent Tone

The point is that the tone of the narrative is far from being soft as it deals with war-like terminologies as if to underscore the magnitude of the crisis confronting the society under consideration.

Here Ngugi wa Thiong’o s’ *Matigari* is a fine example. No wonder that the novel has been labeled by critics as a “barbaric” one in that it seems to promote the use of violence as a key to deal with the different problems the collectivity is faced with. The eponymous‘s hero disillusion in the face of the prevalence of oppression is worth considering at this stage. In the novel under discussion, Matigari has come to realize that the best way out lies in the use of massive force to better the lot of his counterparts. The clarity of his words is illustrative of this fact:

The enemy can never be driven out by words alone, no matter how sound the argument. Nor can the enemy be driven out by force alone. But words of truth and justice, fully backed by armed power, will certainly drive the enemy out. When right and might are on the same side, what enemy can hold out? In a wilderness dominated by beasts of prey, or in a market run by thieves, robbers and murders, justice can come only from the armed force of the united oppressed. (pp.138-139)

Through his speech, Matigari is clearly advocating the use of armed force to dwarf all those political regimes which are destroying its citizens. When a crisis is so acute, one must also face it with an acute response. Indeed, the post-colonial state seems to be the sequel of the colonial sate in that the practices of oppression are always present. With a speech of his, Matigari is adhering to what Wendy Knepper terms “ the voice of the disenfranchised”

**Despatialisation**

Despatialisation has to do with the use of a wide range of techniques to eschew a clear-cut referential locus. By so doing, the writer is keen on blurring the inner setting of his work. Here, I will lay the emphasis on the techniques used and its significance.

Though the narrative does not take place in an unnamed locus, the setting is utterly fictitious. That said, one must hasten to posit that *Anthills of the* Savannah is suffused with referential elements: USA (11), Norway (17), Queen of England, Nkrumah (74)… The point here is to reflect on this way of writing and its ensuing significance.

1. Techniques

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, one can lay the emphasis on 3 elements in keeping with the notion of despatialisation:

-a non referential topography meant to designate both the country and its capital city (Bassa). It is public knowledge that Kangan is non existent in Africa, nor in West Africa as the narrative seems to sustain on page 183. Put simply, the setting does not portray whatsoever “the referential society.”

-linguistic blurring akin to a periphrasis through which the reader is provided with such vague references as “a West African State”(144). The “sociotext” does not expatiate on its borders, nor on the population of the country; such clues would have allowed the reader to be knowledgeable about the state at stake.

-Kangan can also be seen as a synecdoche, meaning a technique to designate the misdeeds associated with Africa as a whole. This is borne out by the omniscient narrator on page 183: “… in the absurd raffle-draw that apportioned the destinies of post-colonial African societies…”

2. Significance

To what extent can we understand the use of such a technique?

-To guard against the plague of censorship as one of the problems the African writer is faced with. Seen in this light, the “co-text” stresses the fact that in this part of the world, fear is a living reality threatening the safety of the writer. To quote from Achebe: “And the story teller is bound to have problems with, not just the emperor as one person, as a king, as a president, but emperor in the many manifestations of power.” In other words, this technique allows the writer not to run into trouble as a result of his literary art. As a result, it shows the repressive nature of the political regimes in which writers are.

- To lay the emphasis on the sameness of problems, from one country to another.

The main hypothesis being that this appalling rule is the number one issue anywhere on the continent. As Achebe contends: “my theory is that the failure in Africa is basically a failure of leadership”

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