Felix Houphouet-Boigny University

Department of English

Master I

History of Ideas

 DJIMAN Kasimi, Professor

**Outline**

**Preliminary Remarks**

**African Literature**

**African Literary Criticism**

**Preliminary Remarks**

The objective of this course is to shed light on the barrage of ideas that have shaped the history of African thought and culture. To narrow down the extent of the course, I wish to choose as timeframe the 19th century up to date. Again, another restriction is brought into play as I decide to focus on the field of literature. In other words, this course will concentrate on history of ideas having a rapport with literature.

**African Literature**

This field cannot be understood without paying attention to an important part, that is to say oral literature.

1. **Oral literature**

It is defined by Pius Adesanmi throughout the following words:

 It is the repository of a community’s core values, philosophies, mysteries, rituals, and, most importantly, memory

 In other words, this brand of knowledge, though transmitted from one generation to another remains a vehicle to better understand the ideas in keeping with Africans. In order to illustrate this indebtedness vis-à-vis oral literature, one may consider some examples:

* Proverbs

Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, they say” Nothing lasts forever” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*)

* Folktales

In Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, the reader is briefed about the tale of the leopard and the tortoise. The end objective of such a narrative is to insist on struggle as a necessary step in life

* Myths

In Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, the reader is informed about some of the myths of the Igbo people.

1. **Written Literature**

To quote from Pius Adesanmi, “discussions of written literature tend to take the late 19th century as a rough starting point.” From this point of view, the following points will be discussed here:

* Indigenous Language Literature

Examples are the Yoruba fiction of Nigeria’s D.O. Fagunwa and Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*.

* European Language Literature

In the poetry of Wole Soyinka (*Idanre*) the reader is sensitized to the feeling of disenchantment through the following verse:”Where are the flowers gone?”

The same idea is expressed throughout the poetry of Christopher Okigbo (*Path of* *Thunder*) under these terms: “If I don’t learn to shut my mouth I’ll soon go to hell”

As to the novels, one can quote the following examples:

Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

*A Walk in the Night* by Alex La Guma to criticize the Apartheid regime in South Africa. In South Africa, one is forced to mention what is known as the “Afrikaner novelists,” that is to say those White writers who are against the Apartheid system. In that respect, one can name J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

In the field of Drama, one can quote Wole Soyinka’s *King Baabu.*

* Women’s Writing

One can give here the example of Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* in which she highlights the lot of women in an African context.

* The New Generation

Born after 1960 these writers are preoccupied with concerns of their time. Such names as the poet Chris Abani through his text *Kalakuta Republic* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah* are notable examples. In the words of Ernst Emenyowu:

 New voices are emerging from all parts of the African continent not only to

 reinforce the voices of the generations before them, but also to reveal the

 new realities, visions and concerns of Africa and its people

**African Literary Criticism**

Here the point is to examine some specific issues in keeping with African literature. Two points will be examined here:

* Language in African Literature
* The Role of the Writer in the Society

Language

For Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the literature written in European languages did not quality as African literature. For him, it is important to return to African languages. In his words”The spirituality of any society is best expressed through its speechuality”. This is the reason why he holds that whatever is written in European languages is what he calls europhone African literature. He therefore calls on his African counterparts to promote what he terms national literature, that is to say written in local language

Such a view is not shared by Chinua Achebe who holds that African writers should not be ashamed of writing in English. Rather, they should display the specificities of their culture throughout their rapport vis-a-vis that language. For him, writing in an African language is simply seen as using ethnic literature.

The Role of the Writer in the Society

This will be examined by paying attention to the quotes of some writers.

Chinua Achebe:

It is clear to me that any African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant.

Wole Soyinka:

When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o:

It seems to me that the African writer now, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival.

**Bibliography**

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