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Master II

Words in Crisis

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OUTLINE

Introductory Words

The Linguistic Dimension

Ambivalence

Semantic Indifference

Objective: Theory-based, this course examines the erosion of meaning affecting many words in the field of African literature. Sociocriticism, as understood by Pierre Zima, will be the reading material in this course so as to reveal the social significance attached to the loss of semantics.

**Introductory Words**

As it is obvious that literature is made up of words, a scrutiny of these words will undoubtedly shed light on the literary object.

A crisis is nothing but a period of reconsideration during which things are going in an unusual direction. In other words, during a crisis things are going upside down. This is perfectly seen in the domain at stake here, meaning in African literature. Many avenues can be addressed if one is to assess what this actually means.

The first point is what is known here as the Linguistic Dimension

The second is all about the notion of Ambivalence

The third will address what is known here as “semantic indifference,” to quote from Pierre Zima.

**The Linguistic Dimension**

The reader can easily notice that when it comes to writing, at the graphical level, many words are inexactly written in the field of African literature. The issue is quite important as it goes above genres and in so doing affects such diverse field as poetry, theatre and prose writing. To better understand the prevalence of this linguistic phenomenon, I will concentrate first on the destruction of the notion of orthodoxy in the writing of words and thereafter reflect on the innovative trend that one can witness in the field.

1. Down with Orthodoxy

The reader familiar with African literature is unquestionably aware of this rape of the English language that one can decipher in the field. For this course, I will give a few instances by way of illustrations.

-Notorious among these graphical phenomena, one can give Ayi Kwei Armah’s title, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The wrong writing of “Beautyful” is for sure pregnant with meaning as it unveils the problematic nature of individuals who are not immune from criticisms when it comes to good behaviours in society. “Beautyful” is therefore a testimony of a diseased community the reader is confronted with in the novel under discussion. It epitomizes all the characters such as Koomson and the likes who readily disrupt the moral norms. In the theory of Pierre Zima, the linguistic malady affecting words is only illustrative of the social pathologies destroying the collectivity. This is a good case of the destruction of the “code.” (system of oppositions, distinctions and definitions operating in any given language)

1. The Den of Innovations

Innovations, construed as getting away from tradition, are also one aspect to better grasp the linguistic dimension of the crisis.

-In Wole Soyinka’s *King Baabu*, the minister is no longer referred to as the minister of Finance. Rather he is seen as the ministry of “Fee-Nice” to match his propensity to satisfy his personal needs at the expense of those of the State. In other words, here is a minister whose sole concern is to amass quick and sudden wealth instead of contributing to the welfare of his counterparts.

-In the poetry of Timothy Wangusa, *Africa’s New Brood*, the word “dartricity” is yet another evidence of the innovations affecting the writing of words in African literature. This word is nothing but a loud denunciation of the inexistence of power light. Under these conditions, the word electricity is utterly meaningless at it divorces from the sad reality of a community in which darkness is the prevalent reality as light is simply non-existent.

With the coming into being of new terms, it goes without saying that old words seem unfit to translate the realities at stake. Therefore, the sheer existence of these new words is a clear evidence of the crisis eating up the social construct. These linguistic creations sharply contradict the traditional meanings contained thus far in the words”Finance” and “electricity.” For Pierre Zima, innovations are tokens that the ordinary meanings of words are no longer “relevant.”

**Ambivalence**

Ambivalence, seen as the reconciliation of opposed realities, is used here in order to describe another dimension of the crisis. For the sake of clarity, one can keep in mind that this description will deal at once with the elite and the ordinary masses. This will be illustrated by paying attention to the scrutiny of the titles of two literary publications.

-The Elite:

In Wole Soyinka’s *King Baabu*, the elite is unquestionably under attack as the military ruler is no example. The vacuum associated with his function is best illustrated in the syntagm ”King Baau”. Indeed, in the Haussa language “baabu” means “nothing”. How can a King worthy of this name be associated with nothing? The reader can therefore understand that Soyinka wants to underscore the vacuity of these political leaders who are rather doing a great disservice to their societies instead of helping them go ahead.

-The Ordinary Citizen:

In *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, politics is associated in the mind of the character of Rayo as the easy shortcut to quick wealth. In other words, instead of developing their societies political leaders are rather helping themselves in the coffers of the state. One can easily get the root cause of the oxymoron vested in the title of the novel under discussion. The point is that political readers take advantage of the suffering of their counterparts to get their own prosperity.

**Semantic Indifference**

This is a reference from Pierre Zima meant to address the fact that words have come to lose their common, ordinary meaning.

-In Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana*, the following sentence is illustrative of the erosion of meaning I am dealing with in this course: “All policemen be thieves.”By definition, a policeman is the representative of the law. As such, expectations are that he should contribute to the enforcement of the law. Conversely, the fact that policemen are likened to thieves is a good token of the fact that things are upside down in the society under discussion. This is a good example of what Pierre Zima would have called “desementisation”

In Kibuuka’s text, the minister of State is rather preoccupied with getting rich instead of serving his counterparts. By definition, a minister is supposed to be “at the service of“instead of serving his own selfish interests. This is meant to address the fact that the usual semantics attached to the word “minister” is no longer in force as it seems to be null and void.

In Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross*, the reader learns that “to be smiled at is not to be loved.”The point is that hypocrisy is a living reality as appearances are merely deceptive. In other words, “smile” is not necessarily associated with happiness and love. One can therefore understand that the meaning of smile has undergone a profound change to the extent that it means its exact opposite.

**Works Cited**

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