Colonialism- a policy of subjugation and the Modern African Fiction

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Abstract—Africa, the world’s second largest continent has witnessed the most far-reaching socio-political transformations in the present century. It emerged as a community of independent nations and a great force in world politics in the wake of World War II that the spirit of nationalism brought here the political emancipation, economic growth and social-cultural revolution; being a part of the process of decolonization that was taking place in many parts of the world. The modern African writers played a significant role in boosting up the rebel spirit of their people against colonial powers. Modern African novel has become a historical document that projected the struggle for socio-cultural freedom.

Keywords— Colonialism, Imperialism, Modern African Fiction, History, Culture, Traditions, Literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

As for us who have decided to break the back of colonialism, our mission is to sanction all revolts, all desperate actions, all those abortive attempts drowned in rivers of blood.

Africa, the world’s second largest continent has remained the scene of the most far-reaching socio-political transformations in the present century. Africa comprises a large group of ex-colonies that were appendages to the western Imperialism. This continent emerged as a community of independent nations and a great force in world politics. In the wake of World War II, nationalism swept through Africa, bringing with it not only political emancipation, but also economic growth and social revolution. In fact, the African revolution was a part of the process of decolonization that was taking place in many parts of the world. Colonization, decolonization and its effects in Africa have been all the more striking because of the outside world’s relative ignorance of the continent till the turn of the century. The rich and glorious past of Africa has been recorded in the oral-traditions by the tribal elders. Thus the discovery of African past is a vital part of the contemporary struggle by Africans for the recognition of their newly won independence. The World War-I provided an impetus for political protest and socio-cultural awareness among the subject people to certify the validity of the ethnographic and cultural identity and racial selfhood in history through the rediscovery and reassessment of the past experience. All this points towards the reconstruction of the African history and re-evaluation of the influences of Colonialism on the African people, society and culture. It is pertinent to define ‘Colonialism’ in order to examine this phenomenon in connection with African history. The colonizers formulated a policy by which, “They assume the existence of a better alternative to empire and Colonialism—a world of independent states pursuing their own best interests within the security of assumed international order. Colonialism as a historical fact must be assessed morally as a part of a world order constantly changing over many centuries.”

Thus, colonialism as stated above is a multi-faceted policy/ideology that was wrought upon the third world nations, and which left un-forgetful as well as easily distinguishing marks in the pages of human history. It can be defined on different levels:

Colonialism is a form of imperialism based on maintaining a sharp and fundamental distinction between the ruling nations and the colonial populations. Such an arrangement,… based on factitious racial differences. Colonialism always entails unequal right. The British and Dutch empires of the last century provide the purest examples.

To move on to another functionary economic ideology view of Colonialism that is more prevalent:

Another fundamental feature of colonialism has been the policy of perpetuating the economic differentiation between the colonies and the metropolis with the former supplying the raw materials with the latter remains the chief source of manufacturers.

On the other hand, in ABC: What is what? Colonialism is defined as:

The colonial and dependent countries were exploited by the imperialist powers. It was established in the late 19th century and early 20th century. With the conception of the territorial division of the world between largest imperial states....It was the most important a market raw material sources, investment spheres, sources for extra-economic income, military strategic bridge-head, and army reserves.

II. SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND:

More than that, colonialism as a policy has transformed its shapes into new form of ‘Neo-Colonialism at different levels to validate its existence in the contemporary age. But this term
is not so easy to define, because its usage has tended to reflect the changing moral as well as economic judgments of colonizers. In its earlier stage Colonialism was an expansion of territory just for the sake of economic benefits. But within a passage of concern to materialize the idea it build empire for the cause of colonizers’ domination over the third World inhabitants. And which further transformed into socio-political subjugation, ethno-cultural as well as religious enslavement by which the subject people were severed from everything their own. An African poet, Leon Damas states the situation:

They have stolen the space that was mine customs, days, life, songs, effort, path way, water, home, wisdom, words, palaver, Ancestors, cadence, hands-stands-lands trampling the soil.

Thus, as a ruling policy of Imperialistic Nations or Capitalist empires, Colonialism was imposed and asserted in all the colonies. Colonialism regulated itself in a different form of the Imperial powers to subordinate and to exploit their dependencies. A reader on social sciences views ‘Colonialism’ as :

A political, economic and spiritual enslavement of countries that are less developed socially and economically by ruling classes of exploiter states.

It is useful to look at some of the recent formulations in the academic study of Colonialism. For instance, Edward Said states that Orientation as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient. He uses the metaphor of radiation to characterize an imperialistic view of empire (Here it is important to understand the notion of the darkness of Africa-a view standardized and monopolized by the Imperialists for their strategic advantages to hold on to the power). Critics like Homi Bhabha, Abdul Jan Mohammad and Gayatri Spivak have sought to offer ways of Colonialism’s as a ‘Discourse’ signifying system a text without an author. In their view, Colonialism is an encounter between a colonized system on the deconstructive techniques fashioned by Derrida and Foucault, that seek out textual suppressions and silences have helped to shift the emphasis from the representation of the colonizers to those of the colonized. This tendency has been reinforced by Foucault in instruction to analyze the rationality of power, not from the centre outwards and downwards, but from the bottom up from the periphery. The mechanisms of empire, the nationalisms at home that made it possible whether in Africa, India, West Indies or elsewhere, is a question that critical theory does not answer satisfactorily. The answers must be sought in history of Imperialism.

However, it is not just the colonial past, but its relation to the present, that most concerns the modern African writers. Colonialism and its aftermath have changed the African world irrevocably. Marx describes Colonialism as a stage in the development of the complex phenomenon of capitalism and the child of the manufacturing period of modern industry.

Thus, the Colonialism not only become a historical reality of African history, but also worked as a socio-economic and ideological force that evolved and progressed under the basic principle of alienation of African natives from their traditional value-system and pattern of life. In fact, it worked as a catalyst to reshape the socio-cultural rhythm of life and their history. Different African writers reflect the un-forgetable colonial experience through portrayals in the various works of fiction. At the same time, we can list western writers who wrote about colonialism and oppressive conditions in the colonized nations. Western writers viz. Joseph Conrad, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Ernest Hemingway and many others depicted the process of transformation from traditional to western or industrialized value based social setup in different colonies. Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902) is a better example which portrays various colonizing traits of the settlers through characters like Kurtz or Captain Marlow, “Captain’s different expeditions through the hot, barbaric interior of Africa inspires revulsion at the dehumanizing effects of Colonialism, disgust culminates when he discovers that Kurtz….has degenerated from an enlightened civilizer into a deranged, power-hungry subjugator of the African natives. Marlow’s Journey forces him to confront not only Kurtz’s corruption, but also those elements within himself which are subject to same temptations that effected Kurtz”.

III. REFLECTIONS:

On the other hand, the African writers showed similar sense of ingratitude and dis-honor wrought upon Africans. Bernd Lindfors states that Chinua Achebe, “Whose classic novel Things Fall Apart examined the impact of Europe’s initial penetration into African heartland felt that it was necessary for Africans to re-appraise their past in order to assess for themselves what they had gone through.” In Achebe’s Things Fall Apart an old man’s warning to people against quick degenerating impact of Colonialism is deep anguish when he says, “An Abominable religion has settled among you. A man can leave his father and brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers. I fear for you”. Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, the Kenyan writer reiterated Achebe’s position when he expressed the view:

The African novelist is haunted by sense of the past; his work is often an attempt to come to terms with the thing that has been ‘a struggle, as it was, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people’s history.

Thus, Ngugi was one of those writers who tried to chronicle his peoples history by writing novels set in colonial Kenya. He described the emergence of kikuyu-Independent school in The River Between and the of Mau-Mau movement in Weep Not Child. Like Achebe’s works these novels tell people not only of Kenya, But also all the east Africans of their stormy past and where ‘the Rain began to beat them’, meaning thereby, how Colonialism worked as a force to transform their traditional life on different levels. Colonial regime eroded socially tied up society disrupted and destroyed the cultural values, traditional Institutions and sense of Ibo identity by imposing alien religion, culture, social values. The colonizers did not peep into the African mind and ethos. That is why,
there is a dialectical conflict between European idea and the age-old African culture. Thus, African writers have depicted this crises and contradictions faced by their people. Frantz Fanon observes the situation:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip emptying the natives’ brain of all form and content. By a kind of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.13

In fact, the World War II became a turning –point in colonial history of Africa. Through it a new phase of de-colonization started which shattered all the illusions of the colonizers’ and a new phase of independence took a start. De-colonization is the meeting of the two opposing cultural forces, so it never takes place unnoticed. Rather, it influenced African individual as well as society as a whole from varied angles, modifying various traditions and patterns of life all over the African continent. Fanon observes:

It transforms… glare of history’s floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by a new man, and with it a new language and new humanity. De-colonization is veritable creation of a new men.14

Thus, the bane becomes the boon for Africa. Due to such repressive and uncivilized circumstances the colonized people resorted to revolt and intellectual dis-satisfaction against the colonizers and their system. That is why, the modern African fiction is a protest against the colonial rule. Being dedicated to their land and people African writers fulfilled the requirements of good artists both aesthetically as well as politically and socially. The African writers portrayed such themes through their imposition about subjugation of the indigenous culture and traditions by aliens. The impact of colonialism can be clearly seen in different walks of the life. Wole Soyinka, the famous Nigerian poet, dramatist and novelist, in his novel The Interpreters examines the deep-rooted impact of colonialism on Nigerian people. Through a group of characters who have returned to Africa after being educated in the West as Sagoe feels incapable to form his future without due consideration of his past. Similarly, Egbo feels that the past will never let him go. He utters:

It (the past) should be dead. And I don’t just mean bodily extinction. No, what I refer to is the existing fossil within society, the dead branches on a living tree, and the dead runs on the bole. When people die, in one sense or other, it should not matter what they were to us. They owe the living duty to transform his society with the magical skill of new technology. His dreams remain unfulfilled and he finds himself merely signing the leave applications and the bicycle advances. So, being a broken man his suffering is described very artistically:

Taut sinews, nearly agonizing in excess tension, a bunched python caught at the instant of easing out the balance of strangulation before release, it was elasticity and strain.18

Thus, Soyinka presents the conflict among characters in a changing African society. He projects the Nigerian society that is caught in a fluid state, where the interpreters have to play the role of pathfinders for African people. The novel depicts Nigerian society unsettled in many ways under colonial regime.

Similarly, Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart is a classical example that portrays African society torn under colonial rule. The whole traditional spirit as well as traditional life –pattern is transformed under alien onslaught. The colonizers not only intruded into their religion, but also transformed the whole web of customs, rituals and relationships. Achebe’s Arrow of God is a more ambitious novel than Things Fall Apart, that gives both a deeper and fuller account of traditional Igbo civilization in decline. Akeebue warns his friend Ezeulu, about the arrival of Winter Bottom’s messenger and the central crisis of the novel:

“You forget one thing: that no man however great can win judgement against a clan. You may think you did in that land dispute but you are wrong. Umuaoro will always say that you before the White man. And they will say that you are betraying them again today by sending your son to join in desecrating the land.”19

Akeebue’s wisdom certifies that Ezeulu’s power and spiritual fervor will be now controlled by new religious centers i.e. Church. Gerald Moore observes, “The social fabric of Arrow of God is also denser than that of any other Achebe’s novels. The novelist concentrates less exclusively upon his hero’s development … and gives us many scenes which enrich our perception of Igbo village life at a time when rituals and belief – system are still largely intact.”20 Thus, the novel portrays the spiritual subjugation of the Africans through Ezeulu’s character.

Ngugi Wa Thiong O portrays the cultural and political awakening of the Kenyan people and their struggles to authenticate their selfhood and ethnic identity that was endangered by the colonial intrusion. Like Soyinka’s characters, Ngugi’s Waiyaki in The River Between and Njoroge in Weep Not Child are heroes who have harmony of character and action. They represent their people in face of socio –political turmoil towards i.e. total cultural as well as political emancipation from the colonial yoke. As Ngugi himself remarked:

Education was not an adequate answer to the hungry soul of the African masses because it emphasized the same Christian values that had refused to condemn the exploitation of the African body and mind by the European Colonizer. 21

Waiyaki’s ideas that are influenced by colonial Biblical
allusions confront with the tribal assumptions and the pattern of life. The colonially imposed education system is utterly rejected by the tribal belief and customs. In fact, the historical Jomo Kenyatta, the Leader of Mau Mau, is projected through Waiyaki’s character. Perhaps he is an important and significant, for Kenyans and their spirituals emancipation, as Christ through Nyambura.

Nyambura knew then that Christ could never save her; that Christ who died could only be meaningful if Waiyaki was there for her to touch… She could only be saved through Waiyaki. Waiyaki then was her Savior, her black Messiah, and the promised one who would come and lead her into the light.22

More than this, the opening pages of Weep Not, Child actually refers to Waiyaki and his mission of pre-war (War of independence in Kenya) days:

Once in the country of the ridges where the hills and the ridges like together like lions, a man rose, people thought he was the man who had been sent to drive away the White man. But wicked people killed him because he said people stand together… 23

Thus Ngugi’s heroes stand for African Unity and Colonial rejection. Whereas the central theme of Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is social corruption i.e. after math of colonial regime. He portrays the degraded living standards of common people in contrast to the luxurious life of politicians and the elite. With a sharp sense Armah draws a picture of the invisible filth and accumulation on the floor of a communal bathroom in a working – class quarter of Accra:

Under his feet the cement floor was covered with some sort of growth. It was not the usual slippery growth….The hole leading the water out was again partly blocked with everybody’s sponge stands…. 24

On the other hand, this novel has remained the clear attack on those self-oriented interests of political functionaries that have led to the betrayal of the real independence dreams of the under privileged Africans. Ode, Odege observes that “The impact of the novel derives from the consistency with which Armah uses the quest motif to present Africa’s post-independence maladies through the experiences of a particular African country. The action of the novel is woven around the protagonist, the man, a vehicle through when the disorder, filth and irresponsibility in Ghana are examined.” 25

In the similar vein, Cyrian Ekwensi also portrays the post-independence city life. In his novel People of City depicts the corruption on moral and physical level. It tells the story of a young crime reporter and dance-band leader Sango in a great West African city. He comes to see that what he can do for the development of his country in which he lives. It is all more important than varied personal pleasures he can find in the hectic life of the city. In fact, Sango being a media-person becomes a spokes-man for those indulged in westernized value-based set-up and socio-political corruption and immorality.

Nadine Gordimer, the South African Nobel Laureate novelist in her July’s People depicts the humanism and co-existence of two warring races, the whites and the native Negroes. July, a Negro and ex-servant to Smales, who are White liberals helps his masters in every possible way in the time of crisis. Maureen believes:

The human creed (Maureen, like anybody else, regarded her own as definitive) depended on validities staked on a belief in the absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings. If people don’t all experience emotional satisfaction and deprivation in the same way, what claim can there be for equality of need? 26

IV. CONCLUSION:

To sum up, the real significance of modern African fiction, in particular and African Literature, in general, is that writers played a significant role in boosting up the rebel spirit of their people against colonial powers. Modern African novel in this sense becomes a historical document that displays the struggle for socio – cultural freedom. African fiction has a special identity and place in the world literature. Modern African fiction is also a historical record of the evolution of African society, having its own unique identity and ethno – cultural roots. Africans have suffered most from other people’s misguided attempts to ‘modernize’ them much of their literature in the 20th century has been inspired by a reappraisal of their own present place. Above all, it is both important and interesting, in the face of the Western criticism of African fiction and the African writers have produced fiction that is fully contemporary, both in its form and content.

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