



REVIEW ARTICLE ON *CRITICAL ESSAYS ON THE NOVEL IN FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA* (VOL. 2)

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to review *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone West Africa* (Volume 2), a collection of essays on critical literary academic endeavours of over 40 years of Grace Aduke Adebayo. It was first published in 2020 by GRADUKE Publishers with ISBN 978-978-979-43-8-6. Adebayo was a Professor of French Language and Comparative Literature at the Department of European Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

The book is made up of 218 pages divided into 18 chapters. The introductory chapter establishes the historical Background to Francophone West African Novel and its systematic evolution in the first quarter of the twentieth century up to the twenty-first century. It discusses the foundational figures, philosophical underpinnings and critical themes that contributed to establishing the authenticity of African reality. Thereby, Adebayo distinguishes between literary writings about Africa by the West and authentic Francophone African literature. In the course of doing a comparative analysis of Francophone African novels, discussions on some novels by Anglophones filtered into the author's thoughts as would be observed in the book. While this may not have been reflected in the title of the book, it adds some depth to the understanding of the novel on both the Francophone and Anglophone divides.

1. Debunking Imperialistic Myths

The author foregrounds the contributions of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Lamine Guèye, Alioune Diop, David Diop, Leon Gottron Damas, among others, to Negritude movement and other nationalist struggles in the 30s and 40s. She postulates that with the birth of Negritude as a poetic and literary theory, the 1930s saw the first attempt to establish critical standards for the African novel. She equally identifies two generations of Francophone African writers. The first generation being those born before 1920 like Jean Malonga, René Maran, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Birago Diop, Cheikh Anta Diop and others who laid the foundation of Francophone African Literature. The second generation of writers were those born between the two world wars who protested against the vices of French colonial enterprise. In this category,

Adebayo names Camara Laye, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Olympe Bhêly-Quénou, Ferdinand Oyono, Sembène Ousmane, U'Tamsi Tchicaya and Mongo Béti.

To debunk the myths formulated by the West about the Black man, his culture, his tradition and his values, she advocates for an authentic theoretical approach of African origin that adequately addresses the condition of the Black man when writing back to the West. The book thus elucidates the struggles that led to the Negritude Movement, Post-Negritude and Neo-colonialism.

2. Social Functions of African Novels

In her discussion of the social functions of the African novel, she opines that African man's situation can scarcely be pragmatically understood outside of his social context. She explains that heroes in African novels function as aesthetic constructs who with other characters interpret the environment in its historical, temporal and spiritual dimension. In her opinion, African characters become "faceless types-which explain why heroes do not evolve in the course of the novel" (Adebayo, 2020, p. 15), citing Femi Osofisan's view about Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* that "the real hero of the African novel is not found among the human personalities. Rather the focus is on "la situation" or the environment itself" (Adebayo, 2020, p. 15). From the lot of African social novelists, she discusses Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sembène Ousmane whom she adjudges accomplished sociological writers whose works have become classics and involved with history; thereby adequate for the interpretations of African social life.

3. Choosing the Suitable Theory for African Literature

As the novel evolves, efforts at authenticating African reality would also require theories that speak to Africa, its people, cultures and philosophies. Hence, she takes a cursory look into the evolution of the criticism of African literature and the efforts of Scholars to propound appropriate theories. She argues that production of African literary works began in the 1920s. Parallel to eurocentric criticism by European and American critics – German Jahnheinz Jahn, Gerald Moore, Victor Bol and Jacques Chevrier, among others, Afrocentric criticism was proposed as counter theory to promote African authenticity at the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959. African artists, writers and critics like Chinua Achebe, Eldred Jones, Kofi Awoonor, Abiola Irele, and Dan Izevbaye on the Anglophone divide and on the Francophone divide, she mentions Mohamadou Kane, Thomas Melone and Olympe Bhêly-Quénou, from then up to the 80s, were mandated to adhere to and render true account of the socio-political situations of the African society. *Présence Africaine*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *African Literature Today*, *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, *West Africa*, *Abbia Transition* and *Diogenes* among others served as outlets for the publication of their works. Despite the applause received by this critical theory, Adebayo maintains that sociological criticism, regardless of its valid status as

a critical tool of African Literature, lacks authorial freedom and that artistic value is lost in the process of searching for the authentic African situation. Contributions of Anglophone neo-marxist critics such as Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike are equally noted.

4. Perspectives on Francophone West African Historical Novels

On Francophone West African historical novel, Adebayo chooses Paul Hazoumé's *Doguicimi* (1938). She emphasizes the authenticity of the history of the Dahomeans and a well laid out economic and socio-political structure that served African societies before the advent of the colonist. She discusses King Guezo's war against the Mahinous and Doguicimi's enduring love for Toffa, her husband. Adebayo opines that Hazoumé portrayed African culture to negate the false claims of the West about Africa illustrating the sophistication of socio-political administrative institutions, economic structure, African women's revered status and the relationship between the people of Dahomey and the throne before colonialization. As a feminist novel, Adebayo underscores the fact that Hazoumé illustrates King Guezo's dogged attempt to rehabilitate the African woman.

Adebayo (2020) testifies to Leo Frobenius' 1922, 1926a and 1926b account of African culture as a valid culture not in any way inferior to that of the West and the latter's claim that similarities exist among cultures. She makes reference to his work with other ethnologists such as Maurice Delafosse, Georges Hardy and Theodore Monod on the theory of cultural relativism and debunks the claim that European culture is the only model for other worlds. It should be remarked, however, that Adebayo (2020) does not adequately cite the exact works of Delafosse and Monod being referred to in her study. Leo Frobenius' works and those of his counterparts, Maurice Delafosse, Georges Hardy and Theodore Monod, are noted by Adebayo (2020) as predominantly influential on the young African and Caribbean writers of the Negritude movement who had wanted to affirm their dignity as Africans.

Selected works of Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Béti are used to illustrate the historical background and themes of French colonial enterprise in Cameroon. Their acerbic criticisms of the hypocrisy of the French civilizing mission dwelling on failed missionary activities, education and administration including the moral and psychological injury inflicted on Africans in the Cameroons are unearthed. In addition, Adebayo analyses the psychological and socio-economic dimensions of the oppression of the Black man as portrayed in Black American and African Literatures. She attempts a diachronic analysis of black literatures and distinguishes between the three levels of commitment in literary works namely:

- a. The commitment of the Whites who wished to give back to the black man what they cruelly took from the latter, i.e. his self-respect and authenticity.
- b. Literary combat in novels

c. The revolutionary phase of African literatures.

In her effort to foreground the theme of the destiny common to both, the author compares Black condition in Black American and West African writings. She situates it within the matrix of black experience and destiny resulting from the historical perspective of slavery and colonialism, marked by moral and psychological disillusionments, feelings of insecurity, inferiority including the ineptitude ascribed to him by white supremacists. She sheds light on efforts of Black American and West African writers to rehabilitate oppressed and disillusioned black man. Some of the Black American writers like Phyllis Wheatly, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and W.E.B. Du Bois, are however presented as apologists of the White master, for speaking from black elitist standpoint. Comparing Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Sembène Ousmane's *Le Docker Noir*, Adebayo (2020) opines that both novels provide an elaborate description of class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariat thereby giving insights into the inspiration and goals of Marxist tendencies in their works. Through her analysis of Emmanuel Dongala's *Jazz et vin de palme*, she identifies the latter as a committed writer in similar class with Sembène Ousmane. According to her, Dongala deploys satire to explore the themes of disenchantment with power abuse by the ruling class, their hypocrisy and opportunism. She critiques the woes of poor governance, socio-economic ills and lethal effects of polygamy, among others, that befall the Senegalese postcolony, as portrayed in Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des Bàttu*.

5. Authenticating African Realities through Hybridization

On the theme of hybridity, Adebayo notes that the new generation of African writers' interests has shifted from the desire to imitate European audience as did some of their predecessors to concentrate on reflecting African realities by infusing their African local languages to authenticate African worldview while painting its contemporary realities. In this light, she supports her position with the works of Ahmadou Kourouma, Calixthe Beyala and Sony Labou Tansi. She concludes that hybridity in African novel has come to stay because of its growing reading public.

With respect to Feminism in African literature, Adebayo traces the debut of African women's quest for liberation to the late 70s, decades after male African writers had appeared on the literary scene. She links the private sphere in Francophone women's writing to the preponderance of female autobiography. Aminata Sow Fall's political commitment to the feminist venture, deconstruction of patriarchy in revolutionary stances, engagement of militant African female writers with discourse of the body and other techniques for subverting male dominance are treated including the roles of African female writers in tearing the veil of invisibility that occludes the African woman.

CONCLUSION

Some of the chapters contain investigations into literary works of African writers from other regions such as East Africa and Central Africa, illustrating Adebayo's scholarly astuteness in the field of comparative literature. The language is clear, direct and simple while giving insights into critical analysis of African literature as a whole. The book provides an overview of the evolution of the novel across Africa thereby making it educative in nature and structure as a scholarly resource for scholars of African Literature. Adebayo's approach establishes the interrelatedness of literature, literary history, literary theory and literary criticism in African literature.

Despite the significant contribution of this publication to the historical background of African literature, it needs to be updated. Adebayo (2020) situates the emergence of African Literature in the 1920s. Further research could have been conducted to enable her to discover the actual period it began. To further drive her argument home, Adebayo (2020) could have made reference to Francophone literary productions of Thomas Mofolo's (from Lesotho): *Le pèlerin de l'Orient* (1906) and *Pisteng la vallée heureuse* (1910). This perspective will correct the notions of some African literary historians, such as Jacques Chevrier (1999), who hold that African literature was birthed in the 1930s. In addition, providing data on the existence of African written literature before the 1920s such as le *Tarik-el-Fettach* and le *Tarik-es-Sudan*, the manuscripts found in Timbuktu, Mali, in the XVIth Century, Lyongo Fumo's epic poems written in Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, and the Koranic mythological poems and epic texts in the 19th Century (Kesteloot, 2001), would have given more credence to Adebayo's (2020) viewpoints.

Recommendations

Modification of the title of the book to reflect the themes discussed on African literature across different African regions should be considered. In addition to the works of anglophone Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike on sociological criticism and neo-marxist criticism, Francophone West African neo-Marxists such as Sembène Ousmane and Mongo Béti, should be cited to balance the reference.

Editorial Insights

Typographical errors and omissions should be corrected: e.g.: change "Benin republic" (p. 43) and "Benin Republic" (p. 44) to the Republic of Benin; "these" (p. 55) to those in the sentence "he specifically affirmed analogy between Guinea-Congo cultures and these of Australia"; "Cameroon" (p. 71) to "the Cameroons". "exercabates" to exacerbates (p. 114); "Lagos" (p. 156) to Logos; "Galhmore" (p. 156) to "Gallimore"; "buy" (p. 101) to "by".

Add possessive apostrophe to "Frobenius" (p. 61).

Omission of the preposition “to” to “... affinities pointed pre-historic origins” (p. 55). Quotations in French may also be translated into English considering English-speaking readers.

A good number of references are missing. For instance, Maurice Delafosse’s, Georges Hardy’s, and Theodore Monod’s works referred to in Chapter Five are not in the reference section. This makes it complicated to know the exact works, their dates of publication and publishers Adebayo (2020) intends to mention. This should be addressed in the next edition. In addition, a consistent referencing style should be adopted.

Doguicimi’s date of publication to be cited on page 44.

References

- Adebayo, Aduke. (2020). *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone West Africa*, Vol. 2. Graduke Publishers. ISBN: 978-978-97943-8-6.
- Chevrier, Jacques. (1999). *La littérature nègre*. Arman Colin. ISBN: 2-200-25100-9.
- Kesteloot, Lylian. (2001). *Histoire de la littérature négro-africaine*. Karthala. ISBN: 2-84586 112-5.