

PRE-TEXTS OF BLACK INTELLECTUAL TRADITION: SOME EXAMPLES

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Abstract

Any intellectual tradition, it may be argued, emerges through constant acts of transgression, translation and appropriation of prior epistemological positions. These prior epistemological positions may be thought as constituting points of reference for emerging traditions, in fact as pre-texts around and against which new textualities (traditions) announce their presence and distinctiveness. In the context of African literary tradition, which is my concern here, I use the term pre-texts to refer to both oral (African) and written (European) traditions, themselves already inscribing multiple traditions, and whose presence in African texts give the later a hybrid identity.

Key Words: Pre-texts, Orality, Tradition, hybridity, Identity

Introduction

In African literary traditions, the process in which emerging traditions frame and are in turn reframed by earlier ones imply far more than the issue of literary influences; it refers rather to a process through which African literature creates its own terms of reference without totally erasing the pre-texts. In his discussion of change in African literature, Kenneth Harrow has noted, for example, the significance of recognising “the reality of literary creation in Africa as entailing the transmission of literary lineages along with each language, and the reality of previous literary traditions, along with previous literary texts, that also have borne on all African writers” (Harrow, 1994, p.5).

Hybridity in African Literary Tradition

African literary tradition, it can thus be argued, is in a sense hybrid and it is the nature and the signifying function of this hybridity that I discuss below. I use the term hybridity in the sense conceptualised by Homi Bhabha in his readings of cultural productions from marginal locations. Bhabha develops the concept of hybridity as a way of addressing the mingling of cultural signs and practices that he sees reflected in those polyglot, diasporic and multivalent cultural sites marked by their constant transgression of the ‘original’. All forms of culture, he argues are continually in a process of hybridity since cultures are always subject to intrinsic forms of translation that denies the essentialism of a prior given originary culture (Bhabha, 1990).

. . . the act of signification, the act of producing the icons and symbols, the myths and metaphors through which we live culture, must always—by virtue of the fact that they are forms of representations—have within them a kind of self-alienating limit . . . it follows that no culture is full unto itself (p.211).

The 'self-alienating limit' within culture as a meaning-constituting process is what permits the articulation of a disruptive cultural praxis that subverts myths of pure origins and identities. It follows then that a cultural absolute is not possible

However, to talk about African literary traditions as hybrid, is to set oneself against essentialist positions in African literary scholarship that have always argued for and sought to construct authentic black intellectual practices or expressions. One is reminded of the debates of the 1960's and early 1970's when it was urgent not only to define the nature and function of African literature but also to bestow upon it the task of reclaiming or reconstituting African identities that had been disfigured by colonialism. The cultural dilemma then was how to produce a national literature that would define a cultural identity outside the dominant modes of literary production associated with Europe, which was denying the possibility of an African literary heritage in the first place.

Two rather antagonistic positions of negotiating around this dilemma emerged: there were those like Obi Wali, David Diop, Ngugi waThiong'o and the bolekaia troika of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa, Ihechukwu who saw the possibility of a 'truly', pure African literary expression, not adulterated by Europe. Similar positions can be detected in the many other practices informed directly or indirectly, by the aesthetic philosophies of Negritude. In this respect the epistemological project assumes the existence of an essential; stable Africanity that is recoverable and any acceptance of the influence of European ways of knowing would be a denial of a truly black intellectual tradition. Contrary to the above position was the stand espoused by Chinua Achebe. While admitting the sense of betrayal that came with abandoning one's mother tongue for an alien one in telling one's own story, Achebe nevertheless saw opportunities rather than impediments in using a worldwide language to communicate an African experience provided one,

. . . used English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost (and provided one) fashioned out an English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience (Achebe, 1988, p.61).

I want to think of Achebe's phrase 'fashioning out an English' to refer to the inevitable process of hybridisation which appears as a strategy that the writer uses to undermine the linguistic pillars of the imperial system of domination. Ngugi's stand in this regard is well known. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi (1986) dismisses those African writings and by extension, cultural products done in European languages as belonging to "an Afro-European

literary tradition" (p. 27). For Ngugi the literary tradition established by pioneer African writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Senghor, Armah, etc, "is another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature; that is the literature written by African writers in European languages." (Ngugi, 1986, pp. 26-27)

Ngugi like Obi Wali and David Diop before him, rightly saw the irony of trying to reconstitute African identity using the language of the colonizer; for them hybridity and 'bastardisation' (Ngugi, 1986, p.25), the results of such an enterprise, were telling metaphors for the failure of reconstituting a genuine and uncontaminated African intellectual tradition. In this thinking, hybridity (Ngugi) or bastardisation (Diop) as characteristic scars of the uniqueness of emerging African literary tradition, are not appreciable elements of colonial encounter nor are they signs of a colonised culture's resistance to total colonial emasculation¹ they are instead manifestations of the violated authenticity of African cultural products.

And yet, as the African language writings of Ngugi themselves attest, the task of reclaiming or reconstituting a purely African identity and experience is undercut by the fact that what is being reconstituted is always already changed and hybridised and no mode of representation can escape contaminations of European cultures. Even the very Gikuyu language used to represent that reality is not itself 'pure' for it is ultimately 'bend' in order for it to domesticate and in domesticating, subvert the discourses of domination.² Of course as a defining feature of postcolonial cultures hybridity in African literature is not as fundamental as, say, in the Caribbean where the local cultures exhibit a series of mixtures of languages and communities. With regard to African literature, hybridity is present in the very intertextual nature of, for example, the African novel so that even a Gikuyu novel like Ngugi's (1989) *Matigari* is an inscription of competing discourses where the hero, Matigari ma Njiruungi, criss-crosses both African and European thought systems as he seeks apt metaphors for addressing the postcolonial dystopia.

Hewed from the Agikuyu folklore, Matigari ma Njiruungi is resurrected as the anticipated Mau Mau hero whose return from the forest will mark the start of a new struggle that would bring into fruition the thwarted project of Uhuru (Independence). His messianic mission which constitutes his vision, we are told, was once decreed by the "Iregi revolutionaries" thus locating it within the indigenous systems of justice, but this locally inspired vision is reconfigured in a domesticated socialist discourse so that the modest ideology of land and freedom that had inspired the Mau Mau revolt is imbued with socialist politics of class

¹ I am thinking here of how postcolonial writers often hybridise what they adopt outside their cultures by juxtaposing it with indigenous ideas and in the process coming up with a totally new material that explains their social-political condition better.

² I am thinking here of the Gikuyunisation of English concepts and terms in Ngugi's Gikuyu writings.

struggle. This recasting of original ideology (Iregi revolutionary thought) of liberation in socialist terms is reflected in the way Matigari's idiom of communalism and folkloric metaphors gradually develop into socialist rhetoric while Matigari himself, though initially portrayed as a folkloric hero, represents his role as a saviour in a mix of Gikuyu and Judea-Christian messianic language.

However, whether we are talking about the essentialisms of Senghor's and Césaire's *négritude* or the Nativism of Ngũgĩ's monolithic nationalist ideologies, the undeniable fact is that these positions and practices were themselves acts of inversions/subversions of colonial epistemic and ontological erasure of the Black wo/man and to the extent that this was so, it can therefore be said that these ways of knowing the world can not escape the influence of European conceptions of reality. But most importantly is that despite their essentialisms these acts of knowledge production, were significant liberatory acts in relation to the self-liberation of the Black wo/man.

Which leads me to one important generalization about the nature of Black intellectual traditions: That, whether you are talking about Africa or its Diasporas, the Black intellectual traditions have been shaped fundamentally by the need to rethink epistemological foundations of European supremacist ideologies. Perhaps I am here positing the obvious, that black intellectual traditions are oppositional practices that conscript not only the tropes available within black cultures but also the ironic modes of the western hegemonic culture to overturn white normativity in order to create a space for articulating blackness.

Examples of this abound in African, Caribbean, and African-American literary productions, both creative and critical. However, I am not intending to see in Black intellectual practice endless engagement with European supremacist ideologies. I am arguing that the emancipatory nature of black intellectual practices is at its best when it is not merely tied to a Manichean dialectic where Europe provides the "positive" sign while the black world, re-articulates itself through the negative within which Europe has located it. What I consider significant in the Black intellectual tradition is the emergence of an oppositional subjectivity itself, a subjectivity that is born out of suspicion of how the production of knowledge has been used and can be used to legitimate hegemonic structures of power in general.

This Black intellectual engagement with dominant Eurocentric scholarship unearths one significant lesson: that knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power, that literary texts or in our case, dominant intellectual traditions, inscribe dominant ideologies and consolidate ways of seeing and thinking which in turn contribute to the functioning of hegemonic structures be they slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism or globalism. This is of course a Foucaultian insight eloquently appropriated by Edward Said in his dissection of colonial authority (Said, 1978). But even as Edward Said was re-articulating this Foucaultian insight, Chinua Achebe was talking about it as a matter of fact. Indeed, Achebe's contribution to black intellectual tradition lies not only in his

contestation of the epistemologies of colonial authority but also in the emancipation of criticism of African literature from the ideologies of the "master" narrative.

If his fiction was central in defining future directions in the development of the African novel, even as it recast the Western canon in new light, his critical essays, particularly those collected in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* and *Hopes and Impediments* directed the focus on the complicity of European literature and scholarship in the promotion of beliefs and assumptions that constructed Africa as less civilised and hence in need of Western paternalist assistance. In this sense, Achebe joins the ranks of theorists like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon whose work constitute the genesis of what has come to be known today as postcolonial criticism.

The lesson of which I have talked about; the lesson about the relationship between the production of knowledge and institutionalisation of domination, this lesson that is learned partly through desecration or hybridisation of the western canon—can be seen at work in Toni Morrison's manoeuvrings around the exclusions and silences of mainstream American literary scholarship with regard to African presence. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison (1992) notes how American literary discourse erases the presence of Africanism from view through silence and evasion and in the process this discourse refuses to acknowledge the fact that even the best of mainstream American literary creations cannot escape the taint of racism.

Such critical dishonesty, which advances the absurd view that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States", impoverishes even the literature it is trying to protect. Morrison comments: "A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only "universal" but also "race-free" risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist (Morrison, 1992, p.220)."

But Morrison does not stop at merely identifying "those moments when American literature was complicit in the fabrication of racism" she goes ahead to locate that ironic disjuncture where and when the same literature "exploded and undermined it (racism)". And more importantly for Morrison is her "contemplation of how Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom moved and enriched this mainstream American text in self-conscious ways (p.220)."

I want to suggest that what Toni Morrison is uncovering here is the ambivalence and hybridity of the American literary canon, not its monolithic purities and the reason for doing this, I suspect, is not so that she can insert the African presence into the mainstream American culture, but rather so that she can redefine this presence away from the entrapments within categories of racial domination. The lesson I am reading in Morrison's critical strategies is that oppositional discourse need not lock us in an eternal dialectic of opposites. Morrison does not only pinpoint at the hybrid nature of American culture and

texts that makes the idea of pure culture impossible, she certainly imagines historical experience as a layered, multi-faceted, and as a gathering of differential moments.

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