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Paper 06: African and Caribbean Writing in English

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Module No. 03: African and Caribbean Writing in English - An Overview

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African and Caribbean Writing in English: An Overview

Aim of this section: To create a framework for the different modes of literary expression, by placing them in the culture created by colonialism, a specific form of 'contact'. The literary field thus constructed shapes the writing as well as the reception or 'reading' of the literatures. After having considered the extra-literary situation, i.e. the political and social context and the historical and geographical locations in Modules 1 and 2, this section sketches the literary milieu of Anglophone African and Caribbean literatures.

Importance of the section for the rest of the course: As in the other modules of this set, the material provided is meant to form a continuous reference point for reading the literary texts. This section especially focuses on the understanding of the sources of genre and theme in both local and colonisers' cultures, thus also providing a 'located' comparative method of reading literature.

1. What is 'African Literature'?

The people of African descent have a palpable presence in innumerable local cultures across the world, as the historical fact of slavery is one of the general bases of social stratification in the Americas and Europe. Africa's ties with Asia are more intellectual though the fact of labour remains present. In any case, what Achebe defines as 'African' relates to our discussion on 'What is African literature?'

... you cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition. I do not see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units—in fact the sum total of all the *national* and *ethnic* literatures of Africa.

The ethnic component comes from oral cultures mainly – the cross over from a purely oral culture to a script culture has been considered in detail elsewhere in the course (See Module 2 and below). The ‘national’ element is the response to colonial culture, the negotiations with European colonisers and crafting one’s own position, first as a subject people and then as aspirants for freedom from foreign rule. So ‘African literature’ is composed of many languages and in many media. This is no surprise since Africa is a continent – our tendency to homogenise it or reduce it to only the part that we know is one of the problems that besets the study of African literature. *Anglophone* African literature, on the other hand, clarifies what we are looking for and suggests ways of getting there. What follows is intended to be an ‘over-view’ of this kind. We consider specific points in the relation between English and the African continent, to show how verbal arts are produced in a situation of cultural contact.

2. ‘English’

Let us remember Achebe’s defense of writing in the coloniser’s language, albeit that the local languages did not have scripts and hence could not produce ‘literature’, i.e. verbal art in the written form:

African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecks with an eye on the main chance—outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa.

Thus Achebe defines his ‘English’, which is arguably foundational to Anglophone Africa, if not the Anglophone world. Achebe’s view of the relevance of the English of the colonies, including his own, is clear though quiet. It is difficult to think of anything clearer than his naming of the players in the game:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use 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. He should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience (“The African Writer and the English language”).

Achebe seems to be stating with cold rationality that exuberant pronouncement of Louise Bennett:

Jamaican people colonising

England in reverse.

What does this mean for language, the medium of literature?

3. 'African' English

We have discussed the role played by English as a means of social and economic mobility (See Module 2). In this section we will consider the forging of a literary language and the influences that contributed to this process.

An obvious way to understand this is to look at texts in English from both cultures: the difference between say Amos Tutuola and R.K. Narayan, both "pioneers" of non-British English writing, is illustrative of this difference. In fact, one might take this comparison further to understand inter-colonial difference. Tutuola was certainly a first generation English writer in Nigeria, while Narayan was preceded by a number of other Indians who wrote in English, stretching back to the end of the 19th century. Clearly, Narayan was writing within a tradition that had begun to form itself, even if he was considered one of the pioneers by later critics. Tutuola, however, had no indigenous English tradition to fall back upon: in the middle of the 20th century, he began to write in the colonizer's language before Nigeria gained independence.

The distance of the English-educated writers from the oral cultures that existed in India at the time of the British colonization, and even after the English had left, was much greater than that of the Nigerian writers who belonged to non-script societies and for whom the Roman script was just a way of writing what they were close to in daily life. Tutuola's work functions thematically within a local tradition of orature, and its language is the language of the chap-books that flooded the Onitsha market in Igboland in Eastern Nigeria, a language that could be identified as English, but was creatively accommodated to suit the needs of the nesting culture from which the themes were drawn. Not even Nigerians living in England, and no doubt obsessed with Queen's English, were willing to grant that Tutuola had written in English or done anything of any remote significance in the realm of English or Nigerian literature.

Chimamanda Adichie's book *Americana* recounts experiences of a Nigerian and a Jamaican, who had similar reading habits in childhood – Enid Blyton. The difference in the English spoken in Britain, the US, Anglophone Africa and 'black' America are also part of this author's observations. The intrusion of the member of the 'commonwealth' of 'British' nations into the 'mother country' is described by Wole Soyinka's poem "Telephone Conversation", where the prospective British landlady tries to gauge the degree of her prospective 'African' tenant's 'blackness' from his accent. The commonwealth was an

economic ploy to keep the raw material wealth of the former colonies in partial control through a preferential relationship with the newly independent states. English and ‘correct’ English were standards of honour, as Adichie’s heroine Ifemelu observes about her father’s use of words; a similar comment is made by the expatriate Nigerian author Tope Folarin in “Miracle” which won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2013, regarding the accent of his Nigeria-educated father, which no one can understand in America. The effects of English on the Empire have received much attention. Anglophone African and Caribbean literatures thus fulfill the demands Achebe placed on English as a ‘world language’, charting the effects of the empire upon it.

3.1 English and the Colony

The position of English in African colonies has come under great debate (See Module 2), with the two positions being espoused by Achebe and Ngugi. The reason for this is that the colonial policy espoused by the colonizer: viz. the English in Kenya and in Nigeria were different, because Kenya was a settler colony and Nigeria was not. The issue of land, therefore, proved strongly persuasive in Kenya, and it was linked directly to economic deprivation; whereas in Nigeria, the struggle was more for citizenship rights, freedom and democracy, as abstract “modern” concepts that defined ‘nationalism’ (Module 2). The reference to the babus of India, and their counterparts in Nigeria is enough to indicate the nature of the anti-colonial struggle in both India and Nigeria.

There were no babus or their equivalents in Kenya. Though the struggle was spearheaded by English educated leaders like Dedan Kimathi and J.M. Karuiki, the militant Mau Mau nationalists were peasants, fighting for their very livelihood, not for what Ngugi, in the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, calls “flag independence.” Little wonder then that Ngugi’s position on English as a language for African literature is different from Achebe’s. It is out of the history of colonization and of the anti-colonial struggle peculiar to Kenya that Ngugi proposed the abolition of the English Departments (See Module 2).

Thus the influence of English as a system of education as well as the tool to access a world of an alien culture differed according to the local conditions. In certain areas, like Igboland in what is now eastern Nigeria, the Christian culture and book culture entered hand in hand - norms of civilised living as well as mores in transition find expression in the vast body of slim printed volumes with rough and ready production values which make up the Onitsha market literature. The newly literate Igbo, responsive to the faith and the language of the colonisers, tried his hand at composing in English, and the books found a huge market in the periodical marketplace at Onitsha, where they were sold like other produce. This is an

instance of a flourishing literate culture in English that formed the nesting culture of a representative African writer like Chinua Achebe. Some, like Cyprian Ekwensi, wrote for both the Onitsha reader and for the more sober international reader of the Heinemann African Writer series.

3.2 Cultures of Orality

Another strong influence on written book production in a scriptless milieu was the impulse to record oral tales as well as performances: in societies like the Yoruba, where no scripts existed, the Roman script used for English was also used to write Yoruba narratives, using the resources of oral forms. Those, like D.O. Fagunwa who wrote in Yoruba using the Roman script or Ala Bingo and Omenuko, who did the same in Igbo, were pioneers of a shift to written culture and reading. Besides they also used the resources of oral verbal art in their written texts. D. O. Fagunwa, in his stories written in Yoruba and published in the 1930's and 1940's drew inspiration from such diverse sources as the Bible, European classics, Christian religious literature, as well as from Yoruba folktales.

They thus created a tradition of crossing between oral and scriptal worlds and traditions and conventions in their written texts. For example, in Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, the story-teller Akara Ogun comes to the narrator and asks him to write down his stories of adventure in the forests, so that they are not lost. Thus a story-telling situation is created in the written text itself through the frame story in which the situation of Akara Ogun's narration, lasting for three days, is described, including the audience attracted to the narrator's house by Akara Ogun's masterful narrative technique.

Thus an oral situation enters the written text in the form of a frame story. Besides this, the stories are cast in the mould of the hunter's *ijala* or praise song. This is another oral resource, a special form of *oriki* or praise song popular among the Yoruba. Hunters are praised by the singer, but they themselves sometimes address these songs to the animals in the forest, the spirits of the forest or other hunters. Fagunwa's work has influences stretching from the writings of Wole Soyinka and on to Ben Okri particularly for his Booker Prize winning novel *The Famished Road* (1991) and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* (1993).

Amos Tutuola's son says of him in an interview that the writer lived steeped within the oral culture, collecting stories from his village on an old Pye reel-to-reel tape recorder, buying palm wine to entertain his guests who would be competing to tell the best stories they could. But he used very few of these stories in his books, for he himself could develop a story from just about anything, any event. His life was just intertwined with stories—collecting, forming, writing or telling them. Tutuola's greatest achievement was that he wrote Yoruba

speech into English without allowing the English language to exercise its power as a medium. His English was shaped to fit his experience and that of his audience which thought and felt in Yoruba but could read English. The rhythms of spoken Yoruba resound in Tutuola's English – and like the rhythms of Caribbean Creole, this English is made a vehicle for the voice and presence of the colonized. Recent critics describe Tutuola's work as African magical realism, or as it has African animist realism, and trace in it the tradition in which Ben Okri writes. Though Okri and Tutuola do not belong to the same community, the incorporation of aspects of their traditional metaphysical belief-system and its syncretic blend of elements from the real, the esoteric and the supernatural, are common to their works.

Use of idiom inversion: The refiguring of images and symbols received through the English language and reflecting colonial culture were inverted to express the realities of colonial oppression. In Ngugi's *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, we see the redefinition of a number of hero-figures, and of patriotism and 'nationalism' as concepts. Kimathi was a Mau Mau guerilla leader, labeled a terrorist by the colonial administration. But in the play of this name, the writers refigure him as a true nationalist, judged according to an indigenous set of values. He fights for the liberation of the land and its equal redistribution rather than for a flag and an anthem, the cosmetic attributes of a newly independent nation.

In both this play and the novel *Devil on the Cross*. In this novel first written in Gikuyu, Ngugi inverts the religious symbolism of Christianity. The 'Trial' of Dedan Kimathi is planned like the trial of Christ on Gethsemane—the temptations and the passion of Christ form the model of the episodes as Kimathi is tempted by different colonial officials to give up his struggle for land rights and take liberal democracy instead. In *Devil on the Cross*, the name itself suggests the inversion: Christianity was a weapon of oppression for the colonies, and Christ on the cross could not represent the suffering colonised peoples, because they had been colonised in his name.

Local verbal resources: the use of proverbs which according to Achebe, are the palm oil with which words are eaten, is common to African writers' craft. Compound words, like “the mouth-that-eats-salt-and-pepper”, or given names which describe the qualities of the bearer of the name and connect him or her to particular incidents in the individual or community's life are also common. Idiomatic usage in the local language is translated directly as well: the moon ‘showed its face’.

The mixture of languages in a single text also marks this writing: pidgin, English used as locals use it, the local language - all exist simultaneously in the text according to the position and background of the characters and/or the speaking voice. For example, in

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* or Soyinka's *Season of Anomie*, pidgin, Igbo English, Yoruba English and the narrator's own voice intermingle. In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy: Memories of a Black-eyed Squint*, the difference in the English spoken by the Indian expatriate and the Ghanaian expatriate contributes to the poetic nature of the work.

4. English Writing in the Caribbean

4.1 Formation of Caribbean English

The “boom” in Anglo-Creole literary production of the 1960s led to Sylvia Wynter and Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite’s strikes against Louis James’s failure to speak meaningfully of resistance and community in his edited 1968 collection *The Islands In Between*. Caribbean English consisted of elements inherited from colonial institutions and, as Brathwaite named it, the “Little Tradition,” nurtured from folk traditions, vernacular languages, and the politics of social engagement. These factions collided spectacularly at the 1971 Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies conference in Jamaica, starting a memorable decade of debate and dispute in terms of emergent critical agendas in the Caribbean.

In this context, Louise Bennett is defined as the first great “nation language” poet by Kamau Brathwaite. Like Dante in Italy or Langston Hughes in black America, she helped legitimize the use of a national vernacular, when dominant norms deemed the local language unworthy of poetry. In this sense, Bennett can also be seen as a “national poet” of the broader Anglophone Caribbean, with the use of a special kind of English defining the nation. Her work puts Jamaican English in a global Anglophone framework, comparing it to other dialects legitimized by “de Oxford Book / A English Verse”:

Dat dem start fi try tun language
From de fourteen century
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialec dan we! (4)

The Caribbeans were colonised by a number of European powers, and the shared Caribbean culture was based not on the colonisers' culture, i.e. English or French, but the colonised culture: in this case, African. So Francophone Caribbean literature may share traits with French literature, rather than with English literature, taught and practised in Anglophone colonies. But certain common traits may be identified in both, which are related to the 'African' experience and heritage. In literary terms, the reaction of the African-Caribbean people to the denigration of their race in Eurocentric art and criticism took different forms across time. Broad movements can be identified thus:

1. Assimilation of European aesthetic paradigms, i.e. use the critics' own cultural codes to prove their own abilities. The mimic aspect of Caribbean cultures derives from this. However, what is included within the scope of mimicry and its tone, satirical or slavish, changes the effect of the representation.

2. Response to the negative racist representations of slave societies by forging or approximating an African aesthetics as perceived by the post-slavery society. The quest for an African home and a reaction against this, asserting, with Walcott, that we are 'here', in the islands, highlights the brutal condition of the slaves brought by force for whom the way back was forever sealed. This reality shaped cultural expression as much as the 'passage through' the islands had done for those who were free to leave them.

3. Out of these streams, **a synthesis characteristic of 'post'colonial societies** is forged by Derek Walcott who among others attempts to derive a special Caribbean aesthetics. Proudly accepting the islands as home, this school of thinkers concentrate on crafting a common imaginary in the face of the constant movement and the diversity of the population. CLR James' history of Caribbean cricket is one of the early instances of this requirement. Rather than project an image of vengeance, recrimination and despair, this would appear to be distinctly Caribbean way of thinking old frames like 'nation' and defining new ones like 'plurality'.

4.2 A Caribbean 'Past'

We have referred to the historylessness of both Caribbean and African peoples in the intellectual estimation of the west. The narratives of establishment of empires (*Sundiata*, *Chaka*) or legends of heroes (*Ozidi* saga, *Mwindo* Epic) being oral, were not considered worthy of being called epics by the colonisers. In the Caribbean, the oral traditions were built up from memories of slaves, with very little written, as slaves were deprived of education until after emancipation.

The other thrust of Naipaul's criticism referred to the Caribbean as a passageway – people who lived there had been wiped out, those who passed through did not have any commitment to it and those who were forced to live there, i.e. the slaves brought over and kept by force. Naipaul devalued the African forms of recording knowledge, and so he pronounced that these slaves had no past and the Caribbean was 'historyless'.

Naipaul's Caribbean vision is the negative frame against which Walcott's and Lamming's writings can be read as marks of their cultural commitment. They insist on their ability to render a West Indian world that could understand the stakes of its own history, however much it was damaged by the brutalities of the past. The force of Walcott's claim that

“what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races; what has become necessary is imagination” is now fully recognized within Caribbean literary history. The imagination has been considerably broadened by the wealth of traditional cultures available due to the diversity of race. The “two histories of the island” living side by side, detailed by anthropologist Peter J Wilson and recorded in his *Crab Antics*, points out this characteristic of the Caribbean.

4.3 Orality: Language and Voice

An indigenous voice develops out of Anglophone African and Caribbean societies when the rhythm of local speech may be heard through the English language. Conjoined ballad stanzas creolize a poetic structure from the British Isles with Jamaican diction, orthography, and rhythms, inverting the earlier penetration of Jamaican space by European colonialism.

The oral performance traditions are replicated in Caribbean voice poetry, dub poetry and in the Jamaican DJ tradition. Baugh's *Caribbean Writer and the Quarrel with History* brought dreadtalk to the page. The renaissance of Jamaican local theatre, with playwrights Dennis Scott and Trevor Rhone and the creative zenith of roots reggae all structured a self-consciousness about history and the demands of the future. From Claude McKay and Louise Bennett to Grace Nichols and Linton Kwesi Johnson poets and singers of the African diaspora have creolized metropolitan Britain with African and Caribbean spaces and styles, remaking London, in the words of Lord Kitchener's buoyant calypso, as “the place for me” (Kitchener) and given rise to a group of ‘transnational’ poets of African origin like Michael Smith, Jean Binta Breeze and Benjamin Zephaniah. They may be from different nations and locations but they all use the oral resources gleaned from their African origins and the common experience of racism and the common history of slavery.

5. Issues in Criticism

5.1 Local criticism: The response among the English speaking Nigerians to Amos Tutuola's replication of Yoruba speech rhythms in *The Palmwine Drinkard*, was puritanical, comparable to the first generation of Caribbean mimic men. These Anglicised Nigerians took it upon themselves to defend the English language with greater zeal than the English and the Americans combined, and refused to see anything good in the efforts of a semi-illiterate writer (by Western standards) who was nevertheless an undeniable professional raconteur (by Yoruba standards). To them anything, everything, had to conform to Western tests and standards in order to be acceptable. Tutuola's work was not known in Nigeria until *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was published in 1952 in England by Faber and Faber.

5.2 Chinua Achebe dubbed as '**Colonialist criticism**' the standards imposed upon Anglophone African writing by the establishment of British critics; his view was that African writing had its own standards and did not aim to imitate British writers:

The colonialist critic, unwilling to accept the validity of sensibilities other than his own, has made a particular point of dismissing the African novel. He has written lengthy articles to prove its non-existence largely on the grounds that the novel is a peculiarly Western genre, a fact which would interest us if our ambition was to write 'Western' novels. But, in any case, did not the black people in America, deprived of their own musical instruments, take the trumpet and the trombone and blow them as they had never been blown before, as indeed they were not designed to be blown? And the result, was it not jazz? Is anyone going to say that this was a loss to the world or that those first Negro slaves who began to play around with the discarded instruments of their masters should have played waltzes and foxtrots? No! Let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world's cultural harvest and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings.

5.3 Romanticist criticism: The response to colonialist criticism was to emphasise the indigenous basis of African writing and pronounce standards based upon them. This was called Africanist literary criticism. In this critical scheme, orality is treated as both a source - the origin and precursor of 'modern' literature - and a resource - a rich heritage or fund of themes, motifs, images, and techniques upon which the 'modern' author can draw. But scholars of orality, like Karin Barber, have pointed out that romanticism still surrounds the notion of 'orality'. Even in post-colonial critical discourses informed by destabilising irony, 'orality' sometimes remains the last unexamined, essentialist concept, projected as an imagined antithesis of writing. She calls this tendency 'Romanticist' (Barber 1995).

5.4 Nativist or Africanist Criticism: The combative position taken by Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie in their book *The Decolonisation of African Literature*, is inspired by Obi Wali's position that the real African literature is written in African languages (See Module 2) - this is supported by writers like Ngugi wa thiong'o and Taban lo Liyong.