

POSTMODERN AESTHETICS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This article examines contemporary critical positions in African literature that mark off perceptible shifts in focus from issues of primal postcolonialism to a more self-reflexive treatment of postmodernism in contemporary African literature. Contemporary African literary works, novels, and plays have become markedly self-reflexive in the way they rewrite one another and draw attention to their own functionality and fictionality. These works present stylistic and thematic departures that challenge the nationalist and realist trend of earlier writing. Creative works further depart from the tradition of “writing back” to the European colonial center by focusing their gaze on local forms of oppression that are seen to parallel classical colonialism. Yet, while critics have separately studied postmodernism and self-reflexivity in African texts, the intersection of the two has not been given sufficient attention. The purpose of this analytical paper then is to decipher postmodernist aesthetics in African literary works, novels and plays, as developed to a higher level of self-consciousness. The specific question I address is to what extent postmodernism expresses itself as an outgrowth of modernism and postcolonialism?

Keywords: Modernity, postmodernism, postcolonialism, African literary theories and criticisms.

ESTÉTICA POSMODERNA EN LA LITERATURA AFRICANA

Resumen

Este artículo examina las posiciones críticas contemporáneas en la literatura africana, que muestran cambios perceptibles de enfoque, de un poscolonialismo primario a un tratamiento más autorreflexivo del posmodernismo en la literatura africana contemporánea. Las obras literarias africanas contemporáneas (novelas y obras de teatro) se han vuelto visiblemente autorreflexivas, en la medida en que se reescriben entre sí y llaman la atención sobre su funcionalidad y ficcionalidad. Estas obras presentan una evolución estilística y temática que desafía la tendencia nacionalista y realista de los textos anteriores. Las obras estudiadas también representan una ruptura con la tradición de responder al centro colonial europeo al poner el foco en las formas locales de opresión, paralelas al colonialismo clásico. Sin embargo, aunque los críticos han estudiado por separado el posmodernismo y la autorreflexión en los textos africanos, la intersección entre los dos no ha recibido suficiente atención. El propósito de este artículo, pues, es estudiar el posmodernismo documentado en las obras literarias africanas, en la medida en que es desarrollado con un grado superior de autoconciencia. La pregunta específica que se intenta responder es hasta qué punto el posmodernismo en la literatura africana debe leerse como un desarrollo del modernismo y del poscolonialismo.

Palabras clave: modernidad, posmodernismo, poscolonialismo, teorías y críticas literarias africanas.

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Introduction

Many critical positions in African literature have tried to locate the postmodern and showcase its functions but have arrived at diverging views that further complicate the critical apprehension of postmodernist aesthetics. New approaches have emerged that attempt to reconfigure the theoretical claims of postmodernist literature. Steven Connor, for instance, suggests that “Postmodernist theory responded to the sense that important changes had taken place in politics, economics, and social life, changes that could broadly be characterized by the two words delegitimation and dedifferentiation” (Connor 2004: 3). He argues in favor of decentralizing the authority and legitimacy of grand narratives and adds: “Authority and legitimacy were no longer so powerfully concentrated in the centers they had previously occupied” (3). Emmanuel Obiechina points out the fact that postmodern aesthetics in African literature stems from the African writers’ expression of “differences that derive from culture, experience, language, outlook, and so on. Thus, because the social and cultural background of the West African novel and the major impulses that bring it about differ from those of the English novel, we notice obvious differences between them” (Obiechina 1990: 53). Charles E. Nnolim, theorizing the postmodern, adopts a different position by saying that “The African writer in the 21st century should forget the complexes of the past and be more imaginatively aggressive, invading other continents and even the skies as new settings striving to have a global outlook in his creative output, mounting a new international phase and not limiting his canvas to the African soil” (Nnolim 2006: 4). On his side, Evan Maina Mwangi postulates that postmodern African literature occurs when “The [African] literatures mix local values with global desires and anxieties to signal what Bhabha has called ‘interstitial spaces,’ locations in which precolonial practices are not separated from colonial modernity but are mediated through mutual exchange” (Mwangi 2009: 138). These critics do not reach a consensus as to what aesthetics or ethics guide the postmodern African literature and the debate is still open to postulate new directions of

African literature criticism in postmodern aesthetics. I will use a metacritical approach to highlight the interface between postmodernism, postcolonialism and modernity. The specific question I aim to address is the extent to which modern African literary critical reception embraces postmodernism as a guiding framework to explore new horizons for fresh critical approaches in the 21st century. Two points will be discussed: how to circumscribe the postmodern in African literary theory; and the development from modernism to postmodernism.

Circumscribing the Postmodern in African Literary Theory and Criticism

The 1950s were a formative decade for writers of Achebe's and Ngugi's generation. During this period, there was a significant literary movement aimed at reclaiming African identity, dignity, and cultural revitalization. Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike's manifesto-book *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 1980), in the words of Charles Nnolim, "made waves in the critical annals of African literature" (Nnolim 2006: 5). Nnolim's stance highlights the issue that the language debate and the determination of the accepted standards of aesthetics in African literature have created a division among African writers and critics. Consequently, a range of perspectives leads to diverse interpretations of the African literary canon. Within this framework, Catherine Fishburn advocates for an approach to literary analysis that allows critics to engage with African texts from a postmodern standpoint (Fishburn 1995: 1). Another critical response is presented in *New Directions in African Literature*, edited by Ernest N. Emenyonu, which offers an in-depth view of the position of African literature at the end of the 20th century and an examination of the directions that African literature is now taking with new and emerging writers and the growth of writing by African women (Emenyonu 2006). Contributions examine the impact of new concerns such as globalization and perspectives from Diaspora. Additionally, they explore established themes like childhood and war. After the debate over African cultural identity has been sufficiently advanced, new critical standards have emerged to question the uniformity of African ideology and to assert the necessity to have pluralistic views of African society that rhyme or dissent with Western standards. Stuart Sim in his introductory preface to an edited book about postmodernism asserts:

In a general sense, postmodernism is to be regarded as a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the last couple of centuries. It has called into question our commitment to cultural 'progress' (that economies must continue to grow, the quality of life to keep improving indefinitely, etc.), as well as the political systems that have underpinned this belief. Postmodernists often refer to the 'Enlightenment project', meaning the liberal humanist ideology that has come to dominate Western culture since the eighteenth century; an ideology that has striven to bring about the emancipation of mankind from economic want and political oppression. (Sim 2001: vii)

This critical ground is based on the idea that at the heart of the postmodern thought in African literature stands the aesthetization of critical standards that reformulate African values in the context of globalization. The postmodern African literary text embraces the ethical values cherished in Africa, assesses them within the broader context of global changing scene and redefines critical standards that put writers, critics and society in equilibrium. One may raise the question of whether it is possible to speak of authentic African values in the 21st century. African aesthetic values were defined by the Achebe generation of writers and encompass African morality, communal values of solidarity, intercommunal help, political wisdom and a pragmatic and intellectual approach to change. They were summarized by the author of *Arrow of God* through Ezeulu's voice: "The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place" (Achebe 1964: 46). Here the postmodern perception of society is encrusted in the statement that the world is constantly changing. It is engaged in an irreversible race of change, modernity, postmodernity, construction and deconstructions of values, facts and experiences, to which man has to adapt. In the African context, as Abdul R. JanMohamed foregrounds, the colonial praxis has produced "the dilemma of denigration and historical catalepsy" (1983: 151-152).

Because the moral validity and the social momentum of the indigenous culture, have been negated by European denigration and by the autocratic rule of the colonial and postcolonial government, the African finds that if he adheres to the values of his own culture he chooses to belong to a petrified culture. (JanMohamed 1983: 151-152)

However, if he accepts only the Western cultural ideology, he finds himself engulfed in a form of cultural catalepsy, because, by rejecting his

own past, he belongs to a society that has no direction and no control over its own historical evolution (151-152). Achebe's critical response to these aspects of colonial pathology foregrounds the imperatives underlying his fiction. From a postmodern approach, one can postulate that, as an intellectual and a writer he is more sensitive to cultural denigration and the necessity to preserve African values that were falling apart from the European imperialist sword. For him, the lack of self-confidence in the face of Western wind has become a pervasive ailment that is challenging to remedy.

This critical position is corroborated by Stuart Mill, who asserts:

In the view of postmodernists this project, laudable though it may have been at one time, has in its turn come to oppress human kind, and to force it into certain set ways of thought and action. It is therefore to be resisted, and postmodernists are invariably critical of universalizing theories ('grand narratives' or 'metanarratives' as they have been dubbed by the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard), as well as being anti-authoritarian in their outlook. To move from the modern to the postmodern is to embrace skepticism about what our culture stands for and strives for (Mill 2001: vii)

Theorizing the poetics of postmodernism in African literary and cultural practices involves a critical reformulation of the African artist's function because Postmodernism as a literary movement is a border crossing theory that assembles cosmopolitan writers and different disciplines. Edward Said has argued in favor of such a border crossing theory, which he refers to as "supervening actuality of 'mixing', of crossing over, of stepping beyond boundaries" (Said 1985: 43). For Linda Hutcheon, postmodern theory enables an intertextual play and acknowledges the intellectual contingency, which reflects the intertwining nature of literary, philosophical, and critical discourses as a characteristic of the postmodern phenomenon. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, she offers a perspective of postmodernism:

What postmodern aesthetic practice shares with much contemporary theory (psychoanalytic, linguistic, analytic philosophical, hermeneutic, poststructuralist, historiographical, discourse analytic, semiotic) is an interest in interpretative strategies and in the situating of verbal utterances in social action. Although the names of Lacan, Lyotard, Barthes, Baudrillard, and Derrida tend to be the most cited in discussions of postmodernism, the other perspectives listed are just as important to any consideration of contemporary theoretical discourse and its intersection with art. We cannot ignore Marxist,

neo-pragmatist, and feminist theory, to add only three more important ones to the list. (Hutcheon 1988: 53)

Hutcheon's critical perspective encompasses an intellectual pragmatism that forms the foundation for the reevaluation and reformulation of African literary theory. That theory should not arise from what the Westerners have chosen to believe about Africa but from a more cognitive apprehension of African socio-political and cultural positions in the present world's geopolitics. It is an intellectual momentum that will gear the synergy of developmental praxis of African thinkers toward a rhetorical assertion of self to cohere with the other in a redefinition of new values for a better world. Implicitly, it is to see Africa not only as part of what Chidi Amuta calls "the changing world" but also as "a highly heterogeneous and multivalent geopolitical entity whose problems need to be confronted at the level of theories with practical implementations for both the present and the future" (Amuta 1989: 35).

Sara Mills has advocated the kind of postmodern discursive agendas that mark out African postmodern aesthetics:

An extensive body of theoretical work has been developed, mainly building upon the work of Edward Said (1978, 1993), who attempted to fuse Foucauldian discourse theory with insights from Antonio Gramsci's political writings. Some of the work by theorists such as Peter Hulme (1986) and Mary Louise Pratt (1985, 1992) is detailed... to exemplify the use of the term discourse and to show the ways in which discourse has been modified. In general, this work is described as colonial discourse theory. That work which tries to question some of the assumptions of Said's work on discourse and representation, which is largely informed by psychoanalytical theory rather than discourse theory, and which is more concerned with the effects the colonial enterprise has had on current social structures and discursive formations, is known as post-colonial discourse theory. (Mills 1997: 105)

In this excerpt, Mills advocates that Edward Said has sparked the beginning of postcolonial criticism, based on the premise that European imperialist literature has severely misrepresented the realities of Third World nations, Africa included. Consequently, these nations have had to respond and react to such distortions. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) discusses the idea of the worldliness of imperial texts. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwhalia attempt to interpret Said:

What is crucial about the cultural productions of the West is the subtle way in which the political realities of imperialism are present in them. In the British novel, for instance, the issue of empire and imperial dominance is continually, subtly and almost ubiquitously inflected. The significance of the worldliness of these texts is that, in their writing by authors who may have had no conscious idea of the way in which the empire was represented in them, they demonstrate that there is no empire without its culture. (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001: 8)

Culture and Imperialism also revisits one of Said's favorite subjects: how should the post-colonial world react to the dominance of imperialism? Said's focus in this book on Western classics seems to have led many critics into the belief that he does not have a theory of resistance. But his position is more subtle. Recognizing that a "rhetoric of blame" is ultimately stultifying, he advocates a process he calls "the voyage in", where post-colonial writers take hold of the dominant modes of literary writing to expose their culture to a world audience (Mills 1997: 106). Edward Said has shown that there are a number of features which occur again and again in texts about colonized countries and that these cannot be attributed simply to the individual author's beliefs but are rather due to larger-scale belief systems structured by discursive frameworks, and are given credibility and force by the power relations found in imperialism. This aesthetic reformulation describes colonial discourse as an ensemble of linguistically based practices unified in their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships. The concept of colonial discourse is based on the assumption that, during the colonial era, significant portions of the non-European world were constructed for Europe through a discourse that interwove various questions and assumptions, methods of inquiry and analysis, and forms of writing and imagery. Hence, colonial discourse does not solely pertain to a collection of texts sharing similar subject matter, but rather encompasses a range of practices and principles that generated those texts and shaped the methodological framework underlying them. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said described the discursive features of that body of knowledge which was produced in the nineteenth century by learned scholars, travel writers, poets and novelists, which effectively created the Orient as a repository of Western knowledge, rather than as a society and culture functioning on its own terms. The Orient was generated in relation to the West and was described in terms of the way it differed from the West. Said argues that these colonized countries were described in ways which denigrated them, which represented them as a negative image, an Other, in order to convey a positive, civilized

image of British society. These representations were structured largely according to certain discursive formats which developed over time, but which accrued truth-value to themselves through usage and familiarity. Each new text which was written about the Orient reinforced particular stereotypical images and ways of thinking. As Said argues:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself [sic] vis-à-vis the Orient, translated into his text; this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kind of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text—all of which adds up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient and finally representing it or speaking in its behalf. (Said 1978: 20)

This struggle for representation had profound consequences as it influenced racist knowledge and practices. It established the framework within which discussions about race predominantly took place and shaped the classifications to which indigenous people and their descendants were compelled to conform and self-identify, as exemplified in works like Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* or Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*. The apparently linguistic and textual choices regarding racial categorization had extensive real-world ramifications that impacted the rights and livelihoods of indigenous populations. These consequences included the denial of human rights to certain groups, the exploitation of others as slave labor, and the dehumanization and targeted extermination of certain communities akin to the hunting of animals. Furthermore, these representations played a significant role in determining which countries were perceived as being receptive to colonial expansion, and thus deemed to require the 'civilizing' influence of European powers. I will now describe the discursive structures which Said has identified as constituting imperial knowledge, in order to delineate the ways in which his definition of discourse has modified Foucault's discursive model.

For instance, Chinua Achebe in his *Hopes and Impediments*, a collection of essays which x-rays the literary and cultural dimensions of colonial and postcolonial literatures, does not simply focus on the jingoistic, openly propagandist texts which circulated within the colonial period; he also analyses the texts which were produced in the name of scholarship: linguistic and philological analyses, history and ethnography, together with travel writings (Achebe 1989: 30). Achebe argues that those countries which had been colonized were reduced to being seen as objects of knowledge (Achebe 1989: 65). Their reality was not portrayed as being on par with that of

Western Europe. Instead, the task of colonizers, when they wrote accounts of colonized countries, was to produce what they themselves referred to as information.

Achebe argues that discursive structures circulating within the nineteenth century informed the way that knowledge was produced, so that seemingly ‘objective’ statements were, in fact, produced within a context of evaluation and denigration. Value laden statements about the inhabitants of colonized countries were presented as ‘facts’ against which there was little possibility of argument. Once this process begins, even anecdotal or fictitious information begins to accrue to its own factual status because of its production within the colonial nexus of power relations. For Said, the colonized people are dehumanized by a series of generalizations made about them within colonial texts. The practice of making sweeping generalizations about specific cultures reduced them from communities of individuals to an undifferentiated mass. This approach facilitated the accumulation of ‘knowledge’ or the application of stereotypes to these cultures. To garner the essentials from the above statements, one can say that Postmodernism includes the following phenomena as enlisted by Sky Marsen, quoted by V. Nithyanantha Bhat:

1. A conception of personal identity as fragmented or dispersed owing to our participation in various contexts, such as geographic dislocation, drastic career changes. An instance of this can be read in Ade Solanke’s *Pandora’s Box*, where the heroine Toyin and her teenage boy Timi experience cultural fragmentation and dispersal in London.

2. An abandonment of the search for origins, the original, universal, or transcendental cause. This includes the dislocation of the modernist–romantic notion of genius, the inspired creator of the new. The original work displaced by intertextuality (cross reference), parody, self-parody, and acceptance of contradiction as having no resolution, and a strong use of irony. An illustration can be found again in *Pandora’s Box* through the experience of the heroine as she finds it difficult to reconnect with her cultural roots. She relocates her dreams in London, and yet seeks a remedy for her cultural nostalgia in imported Nigerian movies.

3. A questioning of notions of linear reality and linear causally-based narratives, opting for parallel universes or multiple realities. Here, Sefi Atta gives an example through her narrative verve in *Everything Good Will Come* (2005). The protagonist Enitan Taiwo’s story is told not in a linear ethos, but is interrupted from time to time with flashbacks that reinforce the progression of the plot.

4. Socio-cultural developments associated with the mass media, such as internationalization of information (through global channels) and a dramatization of information that tends to blur the distinctions between truth and fiction. This aspect is emphasized in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*, where the characters are created in a mass media dominated and information and communication techniques sprawling world. Thus, through a highly advanced assimilation of mobile phone applications, the manipulations of complex electronic devices, characters like Dike, Efemelu, Aisha and Mariama tend to blur the distinction between truth and fiction (Sky 2006: 30).

These points highlight the presence of postmodernism in African literature as an innovative and evolving sphere that embraces progress and change. It equates what Karin Barber says:

The literature is permeated with the vocabulary of novelty: almost every study speaks of innovation, freshness, inventiveness, modernity, topicality, change or fashion. This is not to say that popular arts are seen as being necessarily recent, only that at any given period in the past they were perceived as something new, the latest fashion. What gave them their claim to novelty, it seems to be agreed, is principally their incorporation of elements not previously present in the indigenous traditions — that is, elements imported from other cultures, usually the metropolitan ones. We have already seen that when popular arts are defined against the traditional arts, what makes people see them as popular is their syncretism. This identification is so strong that anything syncretic almost automatically qualifies as popular... What are identified as popular arts are in effect the new unofficial arts of colonialism and post-colonialism, produced by the profound and accelerating social change that has characterized these periods. (Barber 1987: 12-13)

The significance of this assertion is that many first and second-generation African writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Femi Osofisan, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, particularly in the Anglophone context, have sufficiently reacted against the West (Europe) as the center. They have written back to the West giving the right account of African identity, personality and cultural lores. Staying in the logic of Edward Said, Ngugi wa Thiong'o advocates the imperious necessity to move the center by struggling for more cultural freedom. He has advocated the importance of African artistic creativity that has nothing to envy to the Western Eurocentric literature. Chinua Achebe asserts that it is his responsibility to educate his audience about the fact that Africa was not introduced to culture by Europe for the first time.

The 21st century recent trends in African literature and theory have advocated the necessity to write back not to the West (Europe) but to their self. The act of Africa writing back to itself presupposes a reconsideration of critical objects to react against. Writing back to self is a new theoretical trend in African literature that goes beyond the post-independent disillusionment discourses. It is already established by most postcolonial writers that the general malaise that befriends African intellectual analysts of the post-independent period is the problematic mismanagement of African politics imprinted by the general leadership incompetence, the neglect of women's rights, the inhuman child treatment and labor, the armed conflicts on the continent, the unemployment challenges and the general poverty conditions that put the underprivileged masses of the society in confrontation with infectious epidemics and diseases.

These problems previously perceived as the direct consequences of the mismanagement of the postcolonial state by African leaders, themselves ruling as the remote-control sets of European ex-colonialists, should now be shouldered solely by the African political intelligence. In other words, there is no point indicting the West for problems whose solutions can possibly be designed by African leaders and intellectuals.

Postmodernism in African context should be a reconfiguring of critical positions that consider the self-indexation of Africans in the resolution of our own problems. Maina Mwangi suggests:

It is therefore crucial to define the term metafiction in relation to postmodernism and African literature, not only because postmodernism has a vexed relationship to indigenous African literature but also because of the various shades of meanings the term metafiction takes in different contexts. Following Dilip Gaonkar's (2001) and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (1998) questioning of Wallerstein's view of modernity as a Western virus spreading to the rest of the world, I view metafiction not as an exclusively Western phenomenon but as an aesthetic practice that has grown simultaneously in different parts of the world. (Mwangi 2009: 8)

And adding to this, he says:

Metafiction in African literature is situated, interlinked with similar practices across the globe but entailing unique disruptions of Western postmodernisms. There are, of course, links between the different practices of metafiction, but metafiction in African literature, as in other literatures, is conjectural. It gestures to its own indigenous specific location, even when it is linked to global metafictional productions. (Mwangi 2009:8)

Postmodernism permeates African cultural theory as many African art works grapple with how to keep the essence of originality, commonality, and sameness. Postmodern temperament in African literature is self-conscious. It subjects itself to the most glaring scrutiny and to endless commentary on language question, feminist pluralism, cultural identity, and ethnicity. Writers, including novelists, playwrights or poets and independent thinkers, play a significant role in this process, alongside academics and other intellectuals. So far, the cast-list of these scrutinizers and commentators is a familiar one. What has changed is the role of these agents in the age of globalization and mass media. The postmodern age is one in which cultural activity is dominated by media industries capable of appealing directly to a public (itself the beneficiary of ‘mass education’) over the heads of any cultural elite. Katherine Fishburn in her approach to Buchi Emecheta’s fiction has underlined how Catherine Belsey rebukes Stanley Fish for failing to recognize that a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings (Fishburn 1995: 22).

African postmodernism is a pluralist confrontation of dissenting voices, diverging opinions and cosmopolitan interpretations of postcolonial issues in literature. To begin with, the language question has been much debated among African writers and dissenting voices have raised to suggest the type of language to adopt in writing African literature. While Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Fagunwa opted for writing in African language, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Alex La Guma, Nadine Gordimer, Buchi Emecheta, to mention but a few on the Anglophone side, wrote in English the colonial language. Some of Ngugi’s works were originally written in English before being translated. Examples include *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*, *Caitani Mutharaba-ini (Devil on the Cross)*, *Maitu Njugira (Mother Sing for Me)*. Wole Soyinka translated Fagunwa’s novel *Forest of Thousand Daemons* (originally written in Yoruba) into English. Since any colonial language is inadequate in capturing the true essence of the African experience, incorporating African local names and telling African stories accurately, these writers opted for a transgression of linguistic norms, translation techniques, pidginization, and transliteration. Achebe and Soyinka are famous for their pidgin languages and the translation of Igbo and Yoruba proverbs and folktales, while Gabriel Okara is known for his hybrid Yoruba-English grammar. From a postmodern standpoint, the African writer is still grappling with the question of originality in transmitting African experience in foreign languages. From a textual

perspective, there is a notable presence of hybrid works within African literature, evident through the diverse languages employed, the usage of characters' names, the selection of settings, and the thematic considerations.

The Growth from Modern to Postmodern: A Landmark for Literary Aesthetics

The postmodern creative aesthetics feature in the images offered by the settings of African creative works. Most of the urban novels by African writers, like Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City*, *Lokotown* and *Jagua Nana* or Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* are set in cities like Lagos and Nairobi and try to capture the physical and social atmosphere of the city and to show how the characters are influenced by it. Emmanuel Obiechina infers that the reader is made aware of the constant noise of the traffic, the honking of cars, the loudspeakers blaring out high life or hip-pop tune from record shops or advertising articles from commercial vans (Obiechina 1975: 149). The hawkers are crying their wares along the streets; and there are unstable crowds massing wherever there is a pedantic magic maker, or an accident or any other short-lived street spectacle, holding up traffic, and adding to the hubbub. There are crowded slums side by side with ultra-modern office blocks. At night, there are radiant streetlamps, the desperate gaiety of nightclub life and the sordid activities in the dingy, ill-lit areas inhabited by the underworld, the pimps and the prostitutes (Obiechina 1975: 149). All these provide a setting background against which the postmodern African writers portray some of their characters playing out the hectic game of survival. Ekwensi is very successful in relating his characters to their physical and social environment of Lagos. Obiechina further maintains that he knows the Lagos of the underworld and the slums better than any other Nigerian writer (Obiechina 1975: 149). His success in relating social situations with the physical environment and at revealing characters through the setting seems intermittent, which gives rise to a panoramically developed narrative.

The postmodern African texts highlight the difficulty of the survival of genuine values and characters. The postmodern African character in novels like Sefi Ata's *The Man of Two Worlds* or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americana* is hybrid, trapped in-between home and foreign values, in search for an identity. Pressed between ideological stands and the emergency of survival, he/she opts for the current needs of life. By crossing borders through immigration, the characters embrace new values, borrow beliefs, while abandoning their original ones. In the process, the old self reloads and leaps

into the surface, so that the individual subject lives through a cultural simulacrum. As V. Nithyanantha Bhat states, “Postmodernists question notions of objective reality” (Bhat 2010: 4). Jean Baudrillard, a well-known postmodernist theorist, believes that “reality” cannot be known or accessed in an immediate fashion through the senses or through the intellect. Instead, we know it through its representations, especially through its media representation. Baudrillard uses the term “simulacrum” to describe the various artificial environments that mediate our perception of the world. The critical debate in process in African literary circles is whether the African characters in works of fiction should be termed postcolonial or postmodern. Since the publication of two important books, *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka* by Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, and *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*, by Evan Maina Mwangi, there has been a landmark turn taking in the postmodern aesthetics in African literature.

Sefi Atta’s *A Bit of Difference* can be rated a postmodern novel since it depicts the condition of a Nigerian expatriate in London in quest of an identity: material, spiritual and cultural. The information on the back cover page unveils the notes that, at thirty-nine, Deola Bello, a Nigerian expatriate in London, is dissatisfied with being single and working overseas. Deola works as a financial reviewer for an international charity, and when her job takes her back to Nigeria in time for her father’s five-year memorial service, she finds herself turning her scrutiny inward. In Nigeria, Deola encounters changes in her family and in the urban landscape of her home, and new acquaintances who offer unexpected possibilities. Deola’s journey is as much about evading others’ expectations to get to the heart of her frustration as it is about exposing the differences between foreign images of Africa and the realities of contemporary Nigerian life. Deola’s urgent, incisive voice captivates and guides us through the intricate layers and vivid scenes of a life lived across continents. With Sefi Atta’s characteristic boldness and vision, *A Bit of Difference* limns the complexities of our contemporary world.

Femi Osofisan advocates the overlapping decline of drama/theatre tradition to the detriment of film industry as an important landmark of postmodernism in African literature, culture and theory. Leaning on Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum, he explains that as far as painting or sculpture is concerned there is an original work by an artist and there might be thousands of copies. But the original is the one with the highest value (particularly monetary). He contrasts this with CDs or Music records where there is no “original” as in painting; there are only copies, all of them the same. When for instance, the Nigerian born English playwright Ade Solanke

has her character Bev exclaim: “There are over 40 million mobile [phone] subscribers in Nigeria, right? That’s millions of people with phones but no bank accounts. Why not serve them with mobile wallet?” (Solanke 2012: 53), the writer insinuates the postmodern effects of technology that not only impoverish Nigerian citizens, but also turn out to be fake copies with no original designs. The concept of virtual reality is another version of Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” – a reality created by emulation, for which there is no original. A prime example of this is found in computer games (Baudrillard 2004: 369). What we know about reality is influenced by the way we know it – the media through which our objects of knowledge are represented and communicated. In this conception, signs function as commodities and operate in a universal code that generates, as all aspects in modern societies depend on these grand narratives. But postmodernism is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradiction and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice (Lyotard 2004: 355).

Modernity in African literature has often been associated with the refined ways and styles in human life and activities. In works like Ade Solanke’s *Pandora’s Box*, Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*, new technologies, the replacement of manual labor by machinery, the shift from traditional mud house with raffia thatches into modern cement, copper and zinc buildings, the use of mobile phones, the airplane in Ola Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, mark a new landscape of the footing of postmodernism in African literature. These technological shifts contrast with the traditional lifestyle and values of values portrayed in works with precolonial settings like Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers*, Elechi Amadi’s *The Great Ponds*, and Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*, where the traditional mode of life is imprinted with cultural practices that point to genuine and authentic African traditional life: instruments like the drum, the *ogene*, dressing style like the goatskins, and the loincloth. Mpalive-Hangson Msiska postulates that “While affirming the value and integrity of African culture, Wole Soyinka has endeavored to foreground the contradictions inherent in it using his critique as a basis for constructing a new critical consciousness not only for the colonial cultural heritage but also of the indigenous culture” (Msiska 2007: 45). For instance, in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka examines the relationship between tradition and modernity and finds that a modernity that fetishises surface things rather than its essential spirit ends up being inimical not only to the progressive elements within the discourse of modernity itself but also to those of tradition, creating

conditions for more exploitative interpretations of tradition to assume a validity that a more critical view of modernity would easily have undermined. Lakunle's desire to cut down all trees so that he can create parks in which modern lovers can have their romantic strolls is self-evidently not only superficial but also environmentally destructive. As for Baroka, he is not a simple antithesis of the shallow village schoolteacher but part of a mercenary breed of politicians, traditional and modern, who have found a way of seeing cultural hybridity as a means of pursuing an individualist project in a manner inimical to the postmodern public good. In this respect, Soyinka goes beyond the conventional tradition-versus-modernity opposition, exposing both negritudist return to the past and the ruthless mindless modernism of the tree cutting variety as representing infertile soil for the necessary reconfiguration of postmodern society (Msiska 2007: 45).

In other words, there is no longer any faith in the great belief systems of the past, in history, progress, or truth. Our capacity to hold such beliefs has been eroded by the constant bombardment of images and information available to us through the new technology and the mass media. We can no longer make sense of the world because there is no cohesive world to make sense of. Instead, we occupy a state of what Baudrillard calls "hyper-reality", an unreal world of dreams and fantasy, of "simulacra"—the world of TV, of the shopping mall, of video games, of Disneyland. People have been reduced to mindless consumers, and the dominant language is the language of packaging and advertising. According to Baudrillard, there is no point in trying to resist the hyper-real, we should simply enjoy it.

Such a view has of course been criticized as being absurdly negative – apocalyptic even. But Joe Staines feels that as a cultural critique, though of an exaggerated kind, postmodernism functions best when it analyses the extremes of mass-consumerism and the media. (Quoted in Linda Hutcheon 1988: 55)

The evolution of popular forms of entertainment in Africa nowadays has taken new turns with the development of new information and communication technologies. The film industry, the home video industry, and the Internet have modernized and facilitated the recording, performing, marketing and distribution of CDs, DVDs, and Diskettes so that the live theatre consumerism has lost its audiences to the detriment of modernized dramatic performance, the TV movies and serials. In addition, these new technologies have introduced a form of counterfeiting of works of arts, namely CDs, DVDs, sculptures, mobile phones and other electronic

appliances so that it is very difficult to distinguish the fake copy from the original or the genuine one. This has given rise to new drama elites, actors and spectators who no longer need to go to theatre halls to watch performances. Femi Osofisan in an influential article “African Theatre and the Menace of Transition: Radical Transformations in Popular Entertainment” stresses the point:

With particular reference to the discipline of theatre, however, and to the phenomenon that has come to be called the ‘home video industry’ –the industry which now goes by various names such as ‘Nollywood’, ‘Gollywood’, ‘Riverwood’, and so on, depending on which country one is focusing on– Nigeria becomes even more glaringly significant . . . For theatrical activity –defined, that is, as live performances before live audiences– is in a state of crisis on our continent. It has lost its popular appeal, and is rapidly on the wane. In its place, bubbling and noisy like a newly sprung waterfall, is this new shock stock of video films, which has completely overwhelmed the culture market. (Osofisan 2012: 362-363)

The premise of Femi Osofisan here is that the modern African theatre develops in a lively and ebullient setting in terms of theatrical activity especially in places like Southwestern part of Nigeria. Certain factors make me advance the proviso that African theatre has attained the age of post-modernism. The factors of its blossoming are rapid progress of modern technologies of information and communication as favoured by the wide spreading of home videos, so that film makers use accessible digital video technology, especially as the old video cameras have given way to their digital descendants and the new High-Definition cameras. The editing, music and other post-production work is all done with common computer-based systems, thus reducing the total cost of production by almost 80 per cent. Afterwards, the films go straight to DVD and VCD disks, which are also cheap to reproduce and distribute.

According to J. A. Cuddon,

Postmodernism beckons changes, developments and tendencies which have taken place (and are taking place) in literature, art, music, architecture, philosophy since the 1940s or 1950s, postmodernism. In drama one might cite experiment with form, content and presentation in such developments as the *Theatre of the Absurd*, *Total Theatre*, the ‘happening’ and, latterly, the *Théâtre de Complicité*. Other discernible features of postmodernism are an eclectic approach, aleatory writing, parody and pastiche. Nor should we forget

the importance of what is called magic realism in fiction, new modes in science fiction, the popularity of neo-Gothic and the horror story. (2013: 552)

The burgeoning of Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytic criticism since the 1970s is yet another aspect of postmodernism. It also shifts to a critical position in criticism, in which a complete relativism exists —hence its proximity to post-structuralism. Perhaps among the most significant contributions are the revolutionary theories in philosophy and literary criticism encapsulated in structuralism and deconstruction.

Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith seem right when they approach postmodernism from the perspective of the ability of modern man to cope with technological changes and especially the nation building challenges:

A [post]modern nation needs participating citizens, men and women who take an active interest in public affairs and who exercise their rights and perform their duties as members of a community larger than that of the kinship network and the immediate geographical locality. Modern institutions need individuals who can keep to fixed schedules, observe abstract rules, make judgments on the basis of objective evidence, and follow authorities legitimated not by traditional or religious sanctions but by technical competence. (Inkeles and Smith 1976: 4)

This position holds that postmodern criticism in African literature projects the image of modern institutions and characters who win more and more freedom of choice in residence, occupation, political affiliation, religious denomination, marriage partner, friends and enemy. They have sought to replace a closed world, in which their lives tread the narrowest circles, with a more open system offering more alternatives and less predestination. From a desperate clinging to fixed ways of doing things, some characters have moved to postmodern ideological stand. In place of fear of strangers and hostility to those very different from themselves, they have acquired more trust and more tolerance of human diversity.

J. Ndukaku Amankulor in his article “English Language Theatre” has offered a critical survey of the development of African dramatic performances, an approach that lays much emphasis on western cultural domination of African theatrical scene. This provides me with the opportunity to assert that African drama has forged new paths and directions in postmodern times. These directions operate in three basic modes in which various scenes of performance characterize postmodernity: the dramatization of life by the indigenous traditional performances before the intrusion of

European culture, the theatrical playfulness of African art appearing in masquerades, ritual dances and festivals and a focus on cultural practices. In the words of Amankulor,

The strength of indigenous African theater before the coming of the Europeans and Arabs resided in cultural associations and community institutions. These associations, which were community-based, were often distinguished in their varying functions by the age, sex, and sometimes occupation of the members. In addition to the political, social, and artistic obligations they fulfilled for their people, which included the initiation of new members, the associations formed performance groups for drama, music, and dance, as well as sculpting, decorative, and other artistic groups. Drama, dance, poetry, storytelling, music, and the creation of sculpture lent themselves readily to performances, which naturally exploited contemporary religious and social realities. (Amankulor 1993: 138)

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard formulated the postmodern critical theory of ‘drama’ as an act of performance. According to Iain Hamilton Grant,

Announces in drama the type of performance that has had perhaps the greatest impact concerning the status of the plays he calls ‘meta-’ or ‘grand narratives’. While grand narratives such as the Enlightenment narrative of infinite progress in knowledge and liberty, or the Marxist narrative of progressive emancipation of laboring humanity from the shackles imposed upon it by industrial capitalism, have played a crucial role in anchoring knowledge and politics in modernity, postmodernity has entailed a crisis of confidence in them. (Grant 2001: 28)

In other words, as Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis say, “he suggested that Western thought has grounded its truths in ‘grand narratives’ such as Marxism, Christianity and Freudianism. These conditions of knowledge were now generally apparent and that defines the “postmodern condition”. To live postmodernity is to live the performative nature of ‘truths’” (Shepherd and Wallis 2004: 134). In *Postmodernism and Performance* (1994: 5-23) Nick Kaye takes a closer focus and specifies the aesthetic genre performance as a postmodern phenomenon. So, performance is twofold. It is first the generic term that defines the field of performance, and especially here art performance. And secondly, it is an operational term since the argument revolves around the performativity and rhetorical strategies of live art within the context of postmodernism.

Conclusion

The contribution of this article has been twofold. First, the postmodern African literary politics is becoming reconstructed and redefined. Beyond these two key elements, identity becomes a modern innovation. In the postmodern African literary aesthetics, the issue is how to construct and maintain our identity to secure our place in the globalized world and better face uncertainty. This is because in the modern world the avoidance of uncertainty has been considered an individual problem. With novelty issues like covid pandemic it becomes a collective problem. Secondly, given the predominant view that African literature is about “writing back” to the European canon, my suggestion is that African arts are primarily writing back to themselves. In doing so, I am further developing the ideas presented in authoritative and influential analysis, following the direction they have suggested, particularly in their discussion on rethinking postcolonial studies. Noting the shortcomings of postcolonial studies and charting the way forward toward postmodernism, the postmodern aesthetics underscores that, as the field has developed over the last decade or so, it becomes clearer that perhaps postmodern theory in African context needs to be further grounded in specific analyses of the effects of large movements and ideologies on particular localities.

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