

History as Aesthetics in the African Novel: a Reading of Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*

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Introduction

African literature is as unique as the African people themselves. This is because, among other reasons, there is no way it can be interpreted outside the people and their past experiences. This is why it seems as if every African novel is a piece of history. Hyppolyte Taine, the father of historical determinism in literary criticism, has postulated that the best critical outfit which can evaluate the works of literature will first consider the history that is behind the author of the work, stressing that:

It was perceived that a work of literature is not a mere play of imagination, a solitary caprice of a heated brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners, a type of a certain kind of mind. It was concluded that one might retrace from the moment of literature the style of man's feelings and thought for centuries back (1971:602)

Although we have some pieces of literature that are cut out of historical facts, Taine wants us to accept any literature as an evolution of the "embalmed" facts of the writer's past. He, therefore, recommends that history forms the most crucial index for the understanding of any piece of literature. Hence, he further asserts:

- a poem, a code of laws, a declaration of faith? This you say was not created alone. It is but a mould, like a fossil shell, an imprint, like one of those shapes embossed in stone by an animal which lived and perished. Under the shell there was an animal and behind the document [literature] there was a man. Why do you study the shell, except to represent to yourself the animal? So do you study the document only in order to know the man? The shell and the document are lifeless wrecks, valuable only as a clue to the entire and living existence... It is a mistake to study the document as it were isolated (1971:602).

This, no doubt, re-echoes my intention expressed elsewhere in a paper titled "Psychoanalytical Criticism: Evincing the Dynamics of the Mind in the African Novel", to view most African literary works as products of writers whose minds have already been fossilized by historical experiences.

Taine tells us to study the historical background of the author and place of the text in focus because he believes that as a dead animal lies behind a fossil, there is a history behind the work and its author. To him, therefore, an author's historical experiences are germane in the metamorphosis of his creativity. The historical critic believes that it is logical for any reader to assume that an author's experience always shapes his writings. To limit the scope of analysis to Africa, we discover that African novelists, at certain points of their artistic endeavours, concentrated on the colonial experiences of the people. Then, the emphasis was on an Africa under the colonial grip. The focus later shifted to the post-independence mess that characterizes post-independence sovereign Africa countries. Both of these commitments of the African novelists have their sources in Africa's history.

According to Oyegoke, general literary theories often reveal setting, plot, character and dialogue as "some essential elements" that are the discoverable "general aesthetic rules and canons" of the novel (265). If this is universally true, then it is true of the African novel only that the proper application of these rules lies in the operation from a historico-literary standpoint when the text in focus is the African novel (1996:268). This observation is credible because, "nothing exists through some individual man: it is this individual with whom we must become acquainted" (Taine, 1971:602). The understanding of the "individual man" and, to a large extent, his works is contained in the understanding of his history. This had led us to my acceptance of the historical approach to criticism

i.e Historical Determinism, which I believe has a lot to offer in the evaluation and interpretation of the African novel.

Historical Determinism: Theory and Principle

Historicist critics often analyse literature from two angles:

- (i) they provide necessary contextual information necessary for the understanding of the background of the literature
- (ii) they show how literary texts reflect the ideas and attitudes of the time in which they have been written.

According to Di Yanni (2002:2082), "these two general approaches to historical criticism represent methods and approaches that might be termed "old historicism" and "new historicism". Old historicism insists that a literary text must be read with reference to the time and place of its creation. This, the historicist believes, is necessary because "every literary work is a product of its time and its world" (Di Yanni, 2002:2082). It is thus assumed that the understanding of the socio-economic and political background and, perhaps, the "intellectual currents" of the time of the preparation of a work, will go a long way in the illumination of the work for generations of readers.

An insight into some historical facts about the pre-colonial Igbo society, and those of the ensuing colonial presence, for example, will shed light on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and this will enable readers to properly appreciate the novel. Similarly, the understanding of most of the Francophone African novels, more often than not, necessitates constant reference to the Assimilation Policy and the Negritudinist historical antecedents.

Historicism and the African Novel

Like the old historicist, the new historicist critic also "considers historical contexts of literary works essential for understanding them" (Di Yanni 2002:2082). However, a significant difference between both varieties of historicism is that new historicism emphasizes the analysis of historical paraphernalia with the same intensity and scrutiny given the literary artefacts that abound in the text. Hence, the new historicist analyzes and evaluates the historical materials that explain the literature along with the literature, and will not merely consider it as a form-giving tendency. Part of the important features of the new historicism is its concern for the examination of "power relations of rulers and subjects". This is an

attribute it shares with the Marxist "node" of historical trajectory which entrenches all socio-political happenings into the frame of history. The assumption here, therefore, is that

texts, not only literary works, but also documents, diaries, records and even institutions such as hospitals and prisons, are ideological products culturally constructed from the prevailing power structures that dominate particular societies (Di Yanni"2002:2083).

It thus appears that new historicism, in valuing historical materials in the analysis of any literary text, still appropriates some of the methods of the Marxist. This is what further reveals to us that history not only constitute mere background for the new historicist critic but rather an equally important text which is

inseparable from the literary work, which inevitably reveals the conflicting power relations that underlie all human interactions, from the small-scale interactions of social institutions (Di Yanni 2002:2083).

Both variants of historical criticism contradict the stiff tenets of the formalists or the structuralists who often limit their analysis of a literary work to its language and semiotic structure. The historicist critic spends his time and interest on non-literary materials – history – from the same time in which the work in focus was produced with a view to getting a vital clue that will facilitate its evaluation and judgement.

When we narrow all these down to the African literary tradition, we may be forced to agree with Irele who posits:

To be meaningful, any kind of discussion of literature implies a responsiveness not only to the text, in its inherent capacity for suggestiveness through a unique structure of signs and meanings, but also to those areas of experience – of feelings, attitudes and insight – which that structure evokes to take on significance (1981:24)

Irele's historical posture here is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that any examination of the African literature must place it in the context in which it can be meaningful. Irele's position also has its foundation in Howe's assumption that

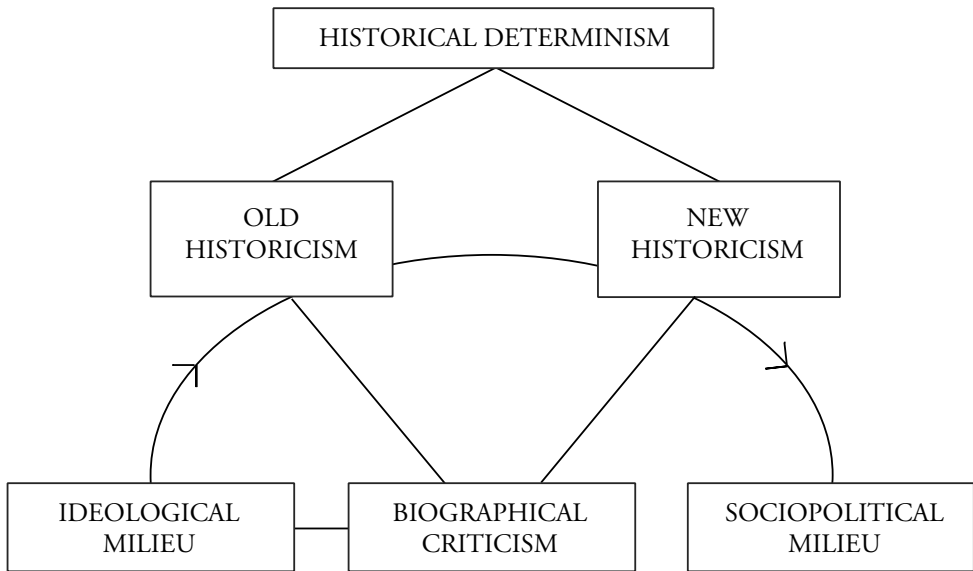
criticism is not a child's play "secondary though it always is to the work itself, criticism offers seemingly endless possibilities for the discrimination of values, the sharing of insights, the defence of a living culture" (1958:37). Invariably, all African novels seem to provide "insights" into the culture, ideology, and politics of the African people as these societal indices are the denominators of history. A historical critic has the right to view literature as that which exists "to bring us a sense and a perception of life to widen and sharpen our contact with existence... And to know the experiences of others and to understand our own experience better" (Perrine 1987:04).

A typical historicist critic of African literature will accordingly, not isolate some novels as "historical" but will perceive all novels as portraying the history behind their authors. Little wonder Gordimer in *Black Interpreter* observes that "... if you want to know what war is like, and how people of a certain time and background dealt with it as their personal situation, you must read *War and Peace*" (8). Gordimer's submission here is clearly supported by Clingman when he asserts lucidly that her opinion is that "fiction can present history as historians cannot" (165). Like Gordimer, Clingman believes that novelists are historians who are "themselves limited historically by being caught up in the process which they attempt to describe". Far from being neutral or innocent assessment of reality, "novels effectively take up ideological positions according to which that reality is learned" (165).

It is clear, then, that history is the primary material which a novel offers. This perspective is given adequate exposition by Mensah in his article, "The Use of History: Three Historical Novels from West Africa" in which he posits that the purpose of the novel is "to make the reader experience the psychology and ethics of the past, not as a curiosity, but as a phase in mankind's development which is of concern to the reader" (1996:69). Though Mensah, like Lukacs, has identified what he calls "a tiny sample of the large corpus of 'historical fiction'" in the canon of the novel, historical criticism is of the belief that all literatures are historical since the purpose of every literary text is the "creation of the individual" whose history is most likely that of the author (Goodwin René "Literary Criticism" [http:// literary explorer. Blondelibrarian .net/crit.literal](http://literaryexplorer.blondelibrarian.net/crit.literal)).

Any novel is constituted of a "textual world" of conceptual relation where text agents relate syntagmatically and paradigmatically. But there is always an "outside world", which determines the novel's form though which is external to it. One of the materials of this outside world is history, which the historicist believes is the most credible aesthetic material. Quite often, in applying the tenets

of historical determinism to literature, we are bound to explore the possibility of the author's own history in his work. The result of this is biographical criticism which brings to bear the author's life in the interpretation of a work. The following scheme represents the point being made:



In the scheme, the nodes from both variants of historicism touch biographical criticism to give the explanation that all variants of historical criticism may see the author in his work and the result is biographical criticism. The curve that cuts through the two variants extends clock-wise from the ideological milieu to the socio-political to reflect how the historical approach to criticism entails recourse to the ideological and socio-political milieu. The straight horizontal line that connects the ideological milieu to biographical criticism is a reflection of the fact that both are intertwined because a discussion of a work as the author's biography is an indication of the author's ideology.

***Ambiguous Adventure* and the History of Cultural Genocide**

The radical approach to the search for self-identify and self-determination has a place in the literary formation of Francophone novelists. Omolafe explains the situation thus:

In the search for cultural identify, various attempts have been made by the African intellectual elite to reflect on the topic of what has come to be known as

the "African personality". This preoccupation arose as a result of a number of factors.

On the one hand, it was a reaction to the biased view of the western world which, until recent times, has been one of contempt or denigration of the African person (17).

This insight explains the temper of Francophone African novels. Abiola Irele further elucidates this phenomenon in his book, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* when he opines that

creative writing has been so consistently employed by French-speaking black intellectuals to express persuasive form and force to their ideological position that it is justifiable to see their literature, especially when viewed through its themes and its attitudes (both explicit and implicit), as very largely a component to their ideological writings. (1981:146)

One of the ideological movements that offers a better picture of Francophone literary topography is the Negritude Movement. Negritude has been a part of these writers' reasoning from the primordial stage of their literary development. What may explain, for instance, why most Francophone novelists are bound together by the spirit of Negritude is the fact that René Maran, the West Indian who set the ball of the Francophone narrative in motion with the publication of *Batouala* in 1921, was particularly identified, according to Irele, as "an important forerunner of Negritude" (1981:146). Negritude is of course the ideological movement championed by Sartre and Senghor. As Irele explains it, Negritude

can be taken here to describe the writing of the French-speaking black intellectuals in their affirmation of a black personality, and to designate the complex ideas associated with their effort to define a new set of references for the collective experience and awareness of black people. (1981:68)

Apart from *Batoulala*, narratives like Bakary Diallo's *Force bouté*, Ousmane socé Diop's *Karim* (1935), Birago Diop's *Les Contes d'Amodou Koumba* (1942), Bernard Dadie's *Legendes africaines* (1950), Djibril Tamir Niame's *Soundiata* (1960), Nazi Boni's *Crepuscule des Temps anciens* (1902), Abdoulaye Sadjji's *Nini*

(1954), Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir* (1953), Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961) et cetera, are included in the corpus of Francophone narratives. One important thing about all these narratives is that they have traits of history in them. Among these authors, Camara Laye, Hamidou Kane Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti and Ousmane Sembene, are the most influential. These novelists have authored narratives that promote African integrity, which is all what Negritude is all about. Later, female writers like the Senegalese Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Ba, as well as radical writers like Alioum Fautoure, joined the brigade of the Francophone nationalist writers. In any brief mention of the classics of the Francophone novels one must also mention Kane's *L'Aventure Ambiguë*, translated into English by Katherine Woods as *Ambiguous Adventure*.

Ambiguous Adventure is according to Irele, "palpably an allegory derived from a meditation upon the contemplative function of imaginative fiction" (1981:167). As Irele further informs us, Kane himself accepts that his story is nothing but "a narrative that is barely removed from a direct reporting from fact" (1981:167). According to M'Baye, *Ambiguous Adventure* is

a historical and autobiographical novel written by a Senegalese author who lived on different side of the Atlantic ocean and who examined the change and dilemma that the contact between France and Africa brought into the cultures of Africans home and abroad. The book is an essential work of African history. (2006:194).

The ambiguity in *Ambiguous Adventure* begins to register when the most Royal Lady conveys a town's forum where she states "I come here to say to you: I the Most Royal Lady do not like the foreign school. I detest it. My opinion nevertheless is that we should send our children there" (45). As the Most Royal Lady delivers her speech we are made to understand the imminence of the psycho-philosophical complication of Samba Diallo, Kane's protagonist.

The school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them. When they return from the school, there may be those who will not recognize us. What I am proposing is that we should agree to die in our children's hearts and that the foreigners who have

defeated us should fill the place, wholly, which we shall have left free (46).

The historical outlook of *Ambiguous Adventure* is further captured by Irele in one of his latest books - *African Imagination* (2001) in which he points out that the novel looks

back to the early years of French occupations in Sahelian West Africa to the period of transaction between the dissolution of the precolonial Islamic States in the region and the full establishment of the French colonial administration as the point of departure of the narrative (2001:87).

M'Baye also tells us that Kane's novel is historical as the author captures the transformations, anxieties and ambivalences that colonization created in the lives of modern African people as they attempted to define their identities and understand the nature of their relationship to the west (2006). Hence, drawing from the socio-political and cultural contexts of the time of his upbringing and development in Senegal; as well as from the period of his experience as an expatriate in France, Kane "fictionalized the consequence that geographical displacement and fragmentation of Black identity created in the lives of modern African (M'Baye, 2006:194).

Kane is, as such, not alien to the kind of disintegration of black identity that Samba experiences and which consequently decimate his psycho-philosophical status. This is because, like Samba, Kane was sent to a French school when he was about ten years old. He also studied philosophy at a university in Paris only to return home in disillusionment that emanated from colonization. Therefore, through Samba we are acquainted with the mind of the educated African whose culture and tradition the westerners have adjudged inferior. Kane himself admitted the historicity, or historicalness, of his novel when he agreed:

I was pushed by the desire to say that our societies had in themselves a profound reality. That any desire to assimilate them was an error since they have their own basic civilization [and it] was to justify colonization that the Europeans pretended that we were not human beings. (cited in Irele 2001:04)

It was, most likely, in his attempt to explain African history that Kane inverts a plausible character and gives him the name "Samba", which, we are told, is actually Kane's house-name. Kane sets Samba to France where the latter discovers that he cannot identify with western values because of his Afrikoranic background. In France, "Samba also realizes that he cannot easily return to the stable [of] African Islamic and cultural traditions that had produced him" and his case becomes quite tragic (M'Baye, 2006:195). When Samba returns to his Diallobe environment, the devastating complexity that the ambiguity of his "self" has created finally results in his death. He returns to the country of the Diallobé after Thieno, his former Koranic teacher, dies. As M'Baye observes

[s]ummoned by his father, Samba arrives the country of the Diallobe late and, on account of being acculturated and lost in philosophical meditation, refuses to kneel and pray in front of this teacher's grave. It is at the unexpected moment that the character of Le Fou [the Fool], who had been Thieno's assistant during Samba's absence stabs Samba to death (195).

The drama that results in Samba's death is best presented through a long quote from the text:

Samba Diallo felt that someone was shaking him. He raised his head.

"The shadows are falling. See, it is sunlight. Let us pray" said the fool, gravely.

Samba Diallo made no response.

"Let us pray, oh, let us pray," the fool implored. If we do not pray immediately, the hour will pass, and neither of the two will be content"

"Who?"

"The teacher and his friend. Let us pray, oh, let us pray!"

He had seized Samba Diallo at the neck of his boubon, and was shaking him.

"Let us pray, speak, let us pray."... Samba Diallo pushed him from himself and got up to go away.

"You cannot go away like that, without praying!" the fool cried. Stop, oh stop! You cannot!"...

"You cannot go away. Stop, oh stop! Master -" ... As he spoke, the fool had begun to walk along behind Samba Diallo, burrowing feverishly into the depths of his frock-coat.

"Thou wouldst not know how to forget me like that. I will not agree, alone for us too, to suffer from thy withdrawal. I will not agree. No..."

The fool was in front of him.

"Promise me that you will pray tomorrow"

"No. I do not agree..."

Without noticing, he had spoken these words aloud.

It was then that the fool drew his weapon, and suddenly everything went black around Samba Diallo.
(173 - 174)

Readers feel a great deal of pathos at the death of the protagonist. A myriad of philosophical questions could, therefore, be raised around the death of Samba Diallo. However, Samba's antecedents suggests the hard task of knowing how to find a balance between African and western values. This reminds one of Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness" with which he explains the attempt to work out the line between African and western culture for the average modern African. In Du Bois's words the situation is

... a peculiar sensation, the double consciousness, the size of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled things: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1965:2)

The thesis of this paper aligns with that of Du Bois's since the motivation here lies in the attempt at fathoming a solution to the problem of the absence of a real African Identity. Before his final assassination by the fool, Samba has been culturally assassinated because he has been recreated culturally to look through the European's eyes. Bisi Ogunsina, a professor of Linguistics and Yoruba studies, discerns the Eurocentric sentiment that Kane and his contemporaries repudiate in their works when he asserts,

Fun òpòlopò odún seyìn ni awon oyinbo amúnisìn ti gba pe awon ni akódá, adédàá ati awise lori ìmò-ìjìnlè-èrò (philosophy) ati orisiirisii imo-eko. Ninu ironu tiwon, eniyan dudu ko ni imo-itan, litireso, imo-ede, sayensi, imo-ero, imo-ijinle ero abbl. L'aju tiwon oyinbo nikan ni orisun imo. Won si ri i gege bi ojuse won lati maa fi imo won ko iran eniyan dudu. Iru ero yii lo mu ki Rev. Leo Taylor so ninu idanilekoo kan ni Eko ni odun 1942 pe: "since you have no literature of your own, you must study the English literature". Iru ironu yii lo mu ko je pe fun odun gbooro, litireso ile Geesi lo gbile gboko, jakejado ile eniyan dudu (105).

(For many years past, the colonial masters have always seen themselves as the superior in all forms of knowledge – philosophy and all forms of education. Simply because of this mindset, it is assumed that the blacks do not have their own history, literature, linguistic, science, technology, engineering et cetera. In fact to the colonialists, the whites are the only origin of knowledge. As such, they saw it as incumbent on them to impose their own type of knowledge on generations of black Africans. Because of such prejudice Rev. Leo Taylor could once say in a lecture delivered in Lagos in 1924 "since you have no literature of your own, you must study the English literature". This kind of mindset is responsible for why the English literature was popular within the African setting for a very long time (my translation.)

This quote gives the contextual background upon which the interactions between the black man and his white master is premised. In fact, for the Francophone African the case is even more pathetic.

Conclusion

For the historical critic to ask what a piece of work means is to ask what the author meant when he created it. Historical critics are more often concerned with the causal links which indicate that the text is the product of the author's milieu, which is in turn the product of his own age. As *The Golden Papers of Criticism 2 (2010)* tells us, "the poem's real meaning is always in the past, even if sometimes in the very near past, and the search for that meaning is the search for the author's original intention" (2). From the analysis of Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, it becomes obvious that the author and his age coalesce into meaning and as argued in the body of the paper, there is very little a critic can do in the analysis of the text if he fails to place its content upon the pedestal of what the author and his environment experienced.

In *Ambiguous Adventure*, Kane evinces the impact of colonisation and with the eventual death of his protagonist he seems to advocate the need for decolonization of Africa from the grip of newer forms of slavery. The history that supplied inspiration for Kane and his contemporaries both in the Francophone and the Anglophone literary enterprises is still evergreen. As M'Baye notes.

From the 1880's to the 1960's France, Britain, and Portugal took the land of African and forced the people to work for the posterity of their social lives as Europeans took their freedom and compelled them to work for the benefit of a foreign hegemonic power that had no other goal but to exploit African labour and raw material. (196)

While Francophone writers such as Mariama Ba and Sow Fall, perhaps because of their gender, were motivated to re-present the post-independence political/Feminist struggle of the African women, Kane was more pre-occupied with reflection of the flagrant bastardization of the African selfhood. Certainly in *Ambiguous Adventure*, we have the subtle presentation of this bastardization. This presentation characterizes most Francophone novelists leading Palmer to conclude that such is the "reaction to the consequence of western infiltration of traditional African society" (124).

Kane thus set out on an agenda to represent the history of his people. This statement may, however, not go down well with the New Critic who queries the significance of the critic's knowledge of the author's intention. To such a person, a critic has committed a crime that he tags as *intentional fallacy* if he attempts to

retrieve a text's meaning from anywhere else except from the text itself. The New Critic advises that a critic must react to a piece of literature by staying within the intrinsic attributes of the text. One then wonders how apt it would be to adhere to this advice in the evaluation of Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* which the author himself confirms is composed with materials that are drawn from historical material of Francophone Africa.

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