

CONTEMPORARY CONVERSATIONS: CULTURAL THEORY AND DIALOGUE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Abstract: Art functions intricately within cultural systems, shaping and being shaped by societal evolution and artistic expressions. In the context of globalization's pervasive influence, particularly in Africa, this paper critically examines the trajectory of cultural theory, focusing on its implications for the literary criticism of African texts. Amidst challenges posed by what is termed 'nationality's malady', there is a growing discourse advocating for cultural dialogue rather than the erasure of non-dominant cultures. This study calls for a robust reevaluation of cultural theory to navigate the complexities of current overarching narratives while fostering inclusive dialogues.

Keywords: Cultural theory, Globalization, African literature, Literary criticism, Cultural dialogue

THE REALM OF CULTURE AND LITERATURE

This paper has its prodding from the issues raised in Alexel Zverev's seminar paper "Cultural Dialogue in the 20th Century" published over a decade ago, and it quickly agrees with Zverev that culture has become an enigma, in the same manner that a lethal war has been waged against traditional approaches to literary history and consequently declared effete. This is not surprising with the spate of postmodernist thinking which offers ambivalent answers to the problems that literature and culture had hitherto attended to.

However, Zverev is right when he says that the more, the resigned literature becomes the dictatorship of influential critical doctrines, the more problematic is its own existence and its very notion becomes conditional (Zverev, 1996: 95-96). This, to him, is the fallout of the fear expressed by famous American scholar, Ihab Hassan, that literature has become redundant as a raw material for constructing new theories and systems of interpretation. Consequently, there seems to be no longer any need in literature. The study will however like to differ from Zverev and Hassan in this thinking, in that its belief is reached from the privileged Euro-American position where the artist has been rendered more or less a sense tickler with no responsibility and the audience fed with less history.

Whatever fate culture suffers in any age usually leaves some stain on the literature of that period. This is not to say that the realm of culture is an already forgotten hemisphere, but one agrees with the fact that culture is always taken for granted as a live experience of any people. Again, this is why the study always spares itself of the

discomfort of going into defining what culture is as ontology; however, it aligns with epistemological dimension which proffers what we can know about it. Therefore, the study will strive to be distant from going into the domain of definitions. Also, it would not take for granted, the discussion of culture theory, while it discusses culture and theory (with apology to David Kaplan and Robert Manners, 1972). The paper is not about culture theory, but cultural theory and the need for cultural interactions in our century.

It is interesting to note that in an age of multiculturalism, intercultural communication is unavoidable. As a moving target, multiculturalism is an ongoing cultural flux and institutional arrangement (Pieterse, 2000: 393), thereby giving room for flexibility. This makes sense if one considers the fate of ‘culture’ in the hands of Clifford Geertz (and beyond), who sees not only art, but also ideology and religion as cultural systems. It gives more credence to his reading:

“Culture must be seen as the ‘webs of meaning’ within which people live and meaning are encoded in symbolic forms (language, artefacts, etiquette, rituals, calendars, and so on) that must be understood through acts of interpretation, analogous to the work of literary critics” (Ortner, 1999: 3).

We must then look beyond just definition of culture as a live experience of any people to now involve ‘the process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development’, as Raymond Williams would wish to stretch it. Culture in this sense will spread to the development of literacy, which inexorably brings in the intellectual and artistic productions. Geertz’s webs of meaning become more meaningful here to encompass culture as live experience as well as ‘signifying practices’ which John Storey (1993: 2) refers to as cultural ‘texts’. The realm of culture is, thus, understandably, the realm of literary practices.

CULTURAL THEORY: SEEKING SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

In his inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1992, Terry Eagleton, one of the most important figures in cultural theory held that cultural theory represents a fundamental challenge to our current division of academic labour, which is not the least of the reasons why the ‘establishment’ finds it such a nuisance (Eagleton 1994: 17). About a decade after, Eagleton handed down an admonition:

“As the grand narrative of capitalist globalization, and the destructive reaction which it brings in its wake, cultural theory must start thinking ambitiously once again – not so that it can hand the West its legitimation, but so that it can seek to make sense of the grand narratives in which it is now embroiled” (Eagleton, 2004: 72-73).

In this call for a rethink, Eagleton still maintains that we cannot have any reflective human activity without theory, in whatever ‘new’ form it assumes, and thus, we can never be ‘after theory’ per se. Cultural theory is consequently confronted with the fresh challenge of breaking out of the stifling orthodoxy of the narratives in order to engage in exploring new topics of a more ambitious global history. The autocracy of Western cultural theory has always been interrogated; and yet it continues to maintain this Archimedean position. Its one-directional approach, to the centre, will always give room for not only use, but also abuse which is also deep-rooted in “its political orientation and it continually arises as a result of its inability to overcome the chaos of its own existence” (Akoh, 2007: 3). This has also made Western cultural theory the Faust of all times.

DIALOGUE, NOT GLOBALISATION

Scholars have not ceased to question the importance of globalization since inception to date. The insistence of leftist intellectuals has been on the fact that it is an ideological discourse only meant for the legitimation of the strategies of imperialist capital (Chilcote, 2002: 81). Globalisation is not conceived with the hope of initiating a dialogue outside of the triad (USA, Europe and Japan) that champions it. It is obvious that globalisation is part of the last stage of deepening Euro-American capitalism, but which must be made to appear in this age in the mildest,

albeit most fiendish form. Its founding fathers continue to contradict themselves, offering uniform parameters by which the world must be 'globalised by' the year 2015. Nothing can be more deceptive than the 'hope' Africa is presently made to abide with as provided in the millennium development goals (MDGs). The parameters for achieving these goals were already conceived at the centre of power before they were read to a consumer (Africa). However, globalisation is necessarily postmodern. It appears much to the study that we (critics) all made this error in our passionate embrace of postmodernism as an aesthetic construct rather than a literary trend; and the reason is obvious: we thought that it would offer some relief from the tendentious position of modernism in offering holistic solution to man's problems. If it was taken first as a literary trend, its usability would have been interrogated early enough before its blossoming in every cultural milieu, although this may not always work out so. In postmodernism therefore, it appears that we are placing cultural values in a situation of 'gross overabundance and acute shortage of everything, in that one is, amazingly, aware of emptiness' (Zverev, 1996: 96). If culture suffers this fate, then it is not surprising especially in an age of universal simulacra and the end of humanism when the human self has disappeared into thin air. However, the study wants to return to the issue that was previously raised (globalisation). Globalisation is an offshoot of the postmodernist enlightenment and like its roots, the project is characterised by the culture of ambivalence. Postmodern globalisation has thus placed us in contradictory positions where we both homogenize (in that we are all said to look similar) and hegemonise (in this wedlock, one, definitely white, must be the boss) (Akoh, 2008). This is the position we must transcend in this age! Contrary to the fear in dictatorships, literature offers dialogue and this is what sustains its integrity as a special phenomenon as well as what legitimizes its existence. In his 'critical essays', Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) maintains a pluralist stance about culture in which he does not mince words in his understanding of dialogue as regulating the whole world of culture and literary practice. This, he maintains by his constant emphasis that what makes one relevant in history is that fact that one ceases to be oneself by way of dialoguing with others. One cannot agree less with Bakhtin in this regard. Bakhtin's position negates the autocracy of Western cultural theories which appear only to legislate rather than 'dialogue'. Nevertheless, there cannot be the universal thought of literature as macrosystem as thought out by Rene Wellek (1959), if there is no comparative cultural interactions. Zverev agrees with Bakhtin's position that dialogue is first and foremost a philosophical problem as well as a category embracing the entire complexity of culture. Dialogue is a journey of the imagination in Bakhtinian lexicon that translates to concrete matter in material and nonmaterial forms. Dialogue then finds a convenient place within the generous space which it provides with 'borders'. This is critical because "these borders are also open in the sense that when artistic events of world importance are transported into a different culture they acquire additional meanings" (emphasis added, Zverev, 1996: 102). Zverev insists further that this cultural transportation is a recurrent phenomenon and this further explains the fact that 'each generation has a hamlet of its own'.

In this instance, we, again, return to the Geertzian webs of meaning in culture. Within these borders of freedom, we cannot therefore continue to pretend to be in dialogue even when postcolonialism, a theory that is believed by its professors to cater for the varied provenance of colonised and subordinated peoples of the world, has long been hijacked by critics that are only resident in the metropolitan centres of Europe and America. Make a hue outside of this centre of power and you are silenced in words or signs. The study has therefore continued to interrogate this pretended position of those who claim to know and feel the pains more than the patient himself. Bakhtin is then right in our taste that authentic relationships in contemporary literature are provided within the open borders of dialogue. This is not peculiar and congenial to 20th century literature alone. It continues also to bear same in the 21st century literature, even much more than the lip service it paid to the subject in the 20th

century cultural theory. The assumption of a world literature (Goethe's idea of 'weltiliteratur') may continue at the level of discussion for a long time. If Europe under Matthew Arnold assumed a cultural, albeit utopian unity, then the dialogue should continue with African cultures. African cultures may even risk being chauvinistic without interactions, but also runs the risk of being drowned by Euro-American concerns. William Sewell's (1999: 35 – 55) idea is apt to the point of looking beyond Geertz in cultural theory in the journey from synchrony to transformation. This, to Sewell, includes supplements from 'foreign grafts'. In this case, we should tread a cautious path so that we do not hold this dialogue still within the maximum prison walls of Euro-American concerns in language and cultural acquisitions. Culture must not only be seen in its role for social progress, but rather be explored as a living organism with which new approaches and frameworks must be sought in studying its relationship with history and literature. There is no gainsaying the obvious fact that culture is the "most important factor in making socialism look more humane, in reinstating the lost ethical ideals and spiritual values" (Chelyshev, 1991: 119). As such, this receives meaning in literary terms. Even within the political sphere on the positions of culture or the relativity of it, Euro- American cultures present contradictory positions of rejection. Richard Shweder's relativist approach to the study of culture as a solution involves selections and rejections, but Shweder seems not to be clear as to the particular methodology to reject in the face of multiples. Let the study draw from his propositions:

- (1) We, the members of our ethnic group, are rationally justified in our conception of things. For example, that when you are dead, you are dead; that virtuous people can die young, that souls do not transmigrate and that authors have a natural inalienable right to publish works critical of revealed truth.
- (2) They, the members of some other ethnic group, have a different conception of things. For example, that the spirits of your dead ancestors can enter your body and wreak havoc on your life, that widows are unlucky and should be shunned, that a neighbor's envy can make you sick, that souls transmigrate, that nature is a scene of retributive causation and you get the death you deserve, that a parody of scriptural revelation is blasphemous and blasphemers should be punished.
- (3) They, the members of that other ethnic group, are rationally justified in their conception of things.
- (4) If others are rationally justified in their conception of things and that conception is different from ours, then we cannot be rationally justified in our conception of things. Conversely, if we are rationally justified in our conception of things and that conception is different from theirs, then they cannot be rationally justified in their conception of things (Shweder, 1991).

The quandary in which culture finds itself in a globalising world is clearly expressed in these propositions. Even in the US, the question really has not been answered as to whose culture is being fore-grounded as the dominant one among the different elements that make up the US cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the US as collation centre is not guiltless as influencing or encouraging a monoculture within a yet culturally heterogeneous world.

AFRICAN LITERATURE AND THE TYRANNY OF MONOCULTURALISM

It is reasoned that the debate on what is African literature in this paper should not be rejuvenated. Although, it would not be an overinvestment to remark that as of today, there are still some African critics who will not boldly pronounce the word 'African' literature in the same manner that they would not be associated with the subject of ideology in literature; however, the study shall make a bold step to pontificate on the nomenclature. As it is now, the world seems to be operating a monocultural system. All civilizations are dead, thanks to American military and economic powers that conveniently wrested these weapons from European imperial powers. Consequently

today, the world culture producers must need the promoters of American economic and political interests. America's monolithic cultural policy has attained a level that even Britain now occupies a middle position among the G7 (USA, Germany, Japan, Britain, France, Canada and Italy in that order of economic muscle). Interestingly, as the study was being put together, a national daily in Nigeria reported the Archbishop of Canterbury as saying that America is a worse colonial master than Britain. This needs no further emphasis. Needless to say that the criticism of African literature has suffered from the forceful application of universal critical criteria! One naturally would not begrudge a universality that is attained by consensus rather than by helpless surrender. With new criticism, America finally wrested the rest of what she needed to assume the ultimate position of world police. Thus, Africa is not alone in the cold among the victims of American monocultural tyranny. Development and perpetuation or preservation of American interests is not only in the area of economy, but also in the realm of culture in a new awareness of capitalist globalisation. In two separate forums (Akoh, 2007, 2008), the study has painstakingly espoused on this gnawing issue as apologetics for African literature in an age that globality is vigorously being sought, even in its contradictory positions.

CONCLUSION

It is unequivocal that the world today is shaped by a capitalism that influences, if not controls, all of us and perpetuates disparity, inequality and frustration (Chilcote, 2002: 83). From television and analogue telephone to the internet, the world is acquiring and moving not only towards a global economy, but also towards global culture with the growing power of the internet and satellite television. However, this 'progress' should not be concentrated within the Euro-American and Asian centres of the global community. Cultural theory in this century cannot afford to continue to be the usual monumental western monologue. The return to the pre-Babel global history (which as the study expressed elsewhere, seems to be the goal of globalisation) can be attained only with the composite fellowship of all cultural experiences including that of Africa. Cultural dialogue will heal the nationality's malady which is raging even within the small but complex nation states of Africa. However, dialogue will also encourage intra-global communication where literature and cultural theory, as Eagleton has expressed, will no longer be looked at with suspicion by the establishment.

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