HOW PHILOSOPHY MATTERS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE?

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ABSTRACT

Social, cultural, political, and many other faculties of humanities have certain ideologies and these ideologies are in the heart of all literary works. These ideologies are reflective factors in all kinds of art. African people have ancient and tribal cultures which reflect different ideologies. These ideologies are basic substances of African philosophy and African literature. The present paper shows the very truth how philosophy matters in African literature.

KEYWORDS: Ideologies, Philosophy, Literature, Pedagogy, Correlation, Metaphilosophy, Pragmatic, Ethnophilosophy, Hermeneutical, Imperialism, Negritude, Africanity, Trickster, Liberation, Alienation, Disillusionment

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy and literature both have correlation. Philosophers have universal views to share with us. Litterateurs have personal and universal views to share with readers. Philosophers may adopt literature to convey their ideas. Litterateurs may innovate and develop philosophical themes. Plato wrote dialogues in which fictional or fictionalized characters discuss philosophical subjects. A number of philosophers are still read for the literary merits of their works apart from their philosophical content. Jorge Luis Borges introduces many philosophical themes, and a number of fictional philosophers, in his short stories. A number of poets have written poems on philosophical themes, and some important philosophers have expressed their philosophy in verse. W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Rabindranath Tagore, and many other poets have philosophical themes in their poems. G. B. Shaw’s plays like Man and Superman, Pygmalion, and others are important for philosophical themes like life force, pedagogy, etc. In African philosophy and literature, Paulin J. Hountoundji, Henry Odera Oruka, Kwasi Wiredu, Nadine Gordimer, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka, Nuruddin Farah, Frantz Fanon and many others are popular names. Many of them are philosophers as well as litterateurs/literary writers.

PHILOSOPHY

Nadine Gordimer writes, defining the term 'African writing', “African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. One must look at the world from Africa, to be an African writer, not look upon Africa from the world.”¹ This view is Africa-centred consciousness. One can be black or brown or white, anybody belonging to any colour or any politics, can write with this Africa-centred consciousness and can stand as African writer, like liberals (male) and male-feminists who write on women’s rights.

For the purpose of the paper, correlating philosophy with literature, we need to inquire first “What is philosophy?” in general, and then ‘What is African philosophy?’ in specific sense of African philosophy and African literature. Zeverin Emagalit quotes a modern contemporary African philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan teaching African philosophy at Hampshire College. Serequeberhan remarked that, when he told students and the faculty there that he was teaching African
philosophy, they were shocked and raised eyebrows by asking if such a thing like "African philosophy" ever existed at all?

Philosophy is mostly connected to Roman, Egyptian, Indian and English philosophy. Western philosophy is supposed to be dominating in every field of human civilization. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and many other philosophers are often quoted in philosophical discussions. Chanakya, Sukracharya, Shankaracharya, and others are frequently quoted philosophers from Indian philosophy. Until half of the 19th century, names of African philosophers have been hardly heard in education and philosophical discussions. Surprise from the students at Hampshire College is reasonable and that can be justified.

In spite of ancient tribal cultures in Africa, African philosophy is a new and strange thought among us. A legacy of intellectual denigration portrays Africans as incapable of abstract thought. This legacy assumes that philosophy requires a tradition of written communication. Africans lacked both of these and naturally the question regarding the African philosophy is often raised.

Great thinkers are philosophers. Those who express great opinions are first-grade thinkers. Philosophers are in quest of truth. One truth is challenged by another truth, and thus one philosopher gives birth to another philosopher. Ever searching the truth or running after the quest of truth is the real job of the philosophers.

Before getting to the relation between philosophy (African philosophy) and literature, I would like to go through some important terms like 'philosophy of literature', 'philosophy of language', 'literature of philosophy' and 'philosophy of philosophy (metaphilosophy).

'Philosophy and literature' is the literary treatment of philosophers and philosophical themes, and the philosophical treatment of issues raised by literature. Philosophy of literature is a branch of aesthetics, which is the branch of philosophy that deals with the question, 'What is art?'

Philosophy of language is concerned with four central problems: the nature of meaning, language use, language cognition, and the relationship between language and reality. For continental philosophers, however, the philosophy of language tends to be dealt with, not as a separate topic, but as a part of logic. Major topics of concern in the philosophy of language are the nature of meaning, the relations between words and objects, different theories of language learning, and the distinction between the literal and figurative employment of language. These issues evidently have a role to play in shaping the theoretical frameworks of linguistic study.

Literary works (literature in general) born with philosophical themes refer to the literature of philosophy. A number of poets have written poems on philosophical themes, and some important philosophers have expressed their philosophy in verse.

Metaphilosophy, or philosophy of philosophy, is the study of nature, aims, and methods of philosophy. Metaphilosophy relies on the idea that it might be productive to distinguish some general pronouncements about philosophy from philosophy itself.

IDEOLOGY

All kinds of philosophy have relationship with ideology. Ideology is a set of ideas that constitute one's goals, expectations, and actions. An ideology can be thought of as a comprehensive vision, as a way of looking at things, as in several philosophical tendencies, or a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of a society to all members of this society. The main purpose behind an ideology is to offer either change in society, or adherence to a set of ideals where
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conformity already exists, through a normative thought process. Ideologies are systems of abstract thought applied to public matters and thus make this concept central to politics. The love of wisdom (philosophy) can take the form of being a seeker after knowledge. It can also take the form of being a proponent of ideas. So ideology presenters take their place among philosophers.

Not all questions have to be open-ended at all times for everybody. If they were, there would be no 'wisdom' for anybody to love. Ideologies are sometimes good and helpful to mankind and sometimes bad and harmful. To turn away from all ideas - from all ideologies - is to become closed to knowledge. To accept all ideas is to become undiscerning and lacking in judgment. So an ideal human is open to ideas (and ideologies) - accepts some of them, rejects some of them, by using critical thinking skills.

Philosophy refers to a pragmatic approach of looking and analyzing life. Ideology refers to a set of beliefs and rules belonging to a particular group or set of people. Philosophy aims to understand the world as it exists whereas ideology is born out of a vision for the future and aims at changing the current state to that particular vision. Philosophy is objective whereas ideology is dogmatic. Literature is philosophical as well as ideological.

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Samuel Imbo describes three senses of African philosophy: ethnological, universalist, and hermeneutical. As a form of ethnology or ethnophilosophy, African philosophy can be seen as a set of values, categories and assumptions that is implicit in the language, rituals, and beliefs of African cultures. Leopold Senghor argues that Africans have a distinctive approach to reality that is based on emotion rather than logic, an approach that encourages participation rather than analysis.

In opinion of Paulin Hountoundji, philosophy is a process of critical reflection on texts that requires a tradition of literacy. African philosophy is a critical literature produced by Africans for Africans. For Wiredu and Hountoundji, literacy is essential for the practice of African philosophy. Odera Oruka gives emphasis on active participation in critical reflection on the assumptions of one's culture for the practice of philosophy. Such people are equal to Socrates in the sense of reflecting upon their culture.

In the hermeneutical approach, philosophy takes lived experiences as its starting point, and the lived experience of most Africans revolves around a struggle to cope with the omnipresent effects of the cultural and economic imperialism of Europe. Imbo argues that African philosophy should be concerned with articulating those factors that make African people unique and different. There are several debatable issues dealing with the medium of expression for African philosophy - whether that should be in African languages or in European languages.

Zeverin Emagalit finds four trends in the present African philosophy. First is Ethnophilosophy, that is a folk philosophy, presenting collective philosophies of life of African peoples. Second is the philosophic sagacity, which is a reflective system of thought, based on the wisdom and the traditions of people, and the person reflecting is acknowledged both as a sage and a thinker. The third trend is the Nationalist-Ideological philosophy, which aims at seeking a true and a meaningful freedom for African people that can be attained by mental liberation and a return to genuine traditional African humanism. The last trend is the professional philosophy that deals with analysis and interpretation of reality in general.

Cultural and political nationalisms are asserted in the anti-colonial struggles of the colonized, and these assertions can be observed in two movements. First is the Negritude movement, which sets an African world union based on shared racial, cultural and spiritual essences, and this movement evolved from the cultural evolution, cultural nationalism and
authentic identity movement. Another is the 'African personality' movement, which is a psycho-ethnological concept resembling Negritude, but Negritude is a world-wide concept whereas African personality applies to the African continent alone. Kwame Nkrumah's philosophy of 'the African Personality' characterizes 'the African race' with the phrases such as 'deep-rooted wisdom and dignity', 'innate respect', and 'intense humanity.'  

**AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND AFRICAN LITERATURE**

Increased rate of literacy is the main inspiration behind the progress in the African philosophy and literature. African writers communicate to the readers with ancestral spirits and rhythms of traditional music. In the paper presented by Ali A. Mazrui and et al., seven conflicts are mentioned as literary themes in the African literature: clash between past and present, between tradition and modernity, between indigenous and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance, and between Africanity and humanity.  

Chinua Achebe says that the African writers should deal with the here-and-now rather than the past. African writers are not mindless; they do have a philosophy of great depth and value; they have poetry; they have dignity. They know that they have lost their dignity and self-respect. They can explore in depth the human condition. They write complex and traumatic experiences of the years of the denigration and self-abasement. African literature reflects spirituals, emotions and images of African folks.  

"Trickster" tales characterize precolonial African literature. Colonial literature tends to deal with slavery and themes of independence. Postcolonial works often deal with conflicts between the past and the future and also deals with the difficulty of maintaining an African identity in the face of globalization. In the colonial and post colonial periods, most African writers wrote their works with themes of liberation, independence, and negritude.  

Soyinka and Ngugi argue that, if the African writer takes recourse to the past, it should be in terms meaningful and relevant to the present. "The sensibility" of the author (Soyinka) and "the ideological persuasion" (Ngugi) are the same, which is responsible for how meaningful a role the writers can play in the historical processes of which they are a part. By a social conscience or by a socialist manner they can play important roles to solve social, political and economic problems in Africa.

Language use also became a major issue of conflict, and many African writers proclaimed in their works an emphatic belief in the value of the Native languages - with the sense of unity or solidarity in African cultures and nations. Many writers opposed the colonial languages saying that literature written in colonial languages is not African literature since it involves a dissociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment though Ngugi considered the colonial language as a carrier of culture.  

African prose writers like Charles Mangua and David Maillu explore the themes like alienation of the educated elite, their growing disillusionment, the generation gap between parents and children, etc. Earlier African dramas had the biblical themes but later playwrights like Duro Ladipo, Soyinka and others used the local issues as themes like clash of cultures, corruption, superstition, backwardness, social and political ills etc.

**CONCLUSIONS**

African writers are still engaged with social, cultural and political concerns in spite of challenges, troubles, persecution, etc. They illustrate conjunction between literature and society which in turn have philosophical relations. Philosophical ideas and social, cultural and political ideologies have connections and these connections are better illustrated in the African literature. African philosophy really matters much in African literature.
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