

African Fiction: A Counter-discourse to Re-assert Indigenous Experiences

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Abstract: *The paper attempts to explore the nature of African fiction that emerged in the post-colonial era. The perennial rule of imperial power was being constantly challenged through the fictional writings asserting the uniqueness of the native culture which had long been ignored or subjected to erasure under the vicious imperial rule.*

Fiction is a powerful tool in manifesting ideologies and presenting reality to the mass. Hence, the imperial powers that colonized the African territory established its superiority through a sequential portrayal of the native culture and ways as inferior and uncivilized in the fictional texts published during the colonial period. The colonizers gained mastery in colonizing a nation by the most powerful means of colonizing the mind through pieces of texts that claimed to impart education. The education was a propaganda of the colonizers to retain their superiority in the world by enslaving the colonized through education.

Yet, it is undeniable a fact that education was a double-edged weapon and hence the educated colonized were enlightened on the biased portrayal of them in the narratives. They employed the education to re-iterate those indigenous practices and experiences which had long been suppressed by the imperial powers to create a history which undermined the natives and upheld the imperial powers.

*An in-depth reading of Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* and *July's People* upholds the richness of African sensibility which has been outrageously dismissed in the colonial writings through the violent portrayal of barbaric Africans in the civilized world of Europeans. The paper attempts to present the ways in which the above mentioned works challenge the masked civility of the Europeans by reflecting the higher morals and values of African communities.*

Key words: *Counter discourse, indigenous experience, binarism, narratives.*

Introduction

Colonisation process is a crucial and pivotal process in the shaping of World history. It left no domain untouched and hence provided universality to the factors to substantiate its position. Colonisation is forming of settlement or colony by a group of people who move to new territories or countries in the name of discovery, trade and commerce. The countries across the world were colonised for decades by the European powers. African continent was no exception.

The colonisers colonised the minds of colonized nations to an extent wherein the colonized started readily accepting the superiority of the West and its autocratic rule without questioning. Literary texts supplied by the West to educate the colonised played a very important role in manifesting the ideologies of the West as universal truths and hence to be followed. The literary texts represented the colonised themselves as inherently inferior beings. Language, place, cartography, history, education etc. served to establish a binary relation in the colonial world and thus according legitimate superior status to the European imperial powers. The term "binarism" brought into currency by structural linguist Ferdinand De Saussure to describe the relationship of signs and language has been adapted by imperial powers to establish a relation of dominance over the colonised nations.

The colonised were educated by the colonisers to create a comprador class who would assist them in continuing their colonial legacy even in their absence in distant future. This idea is quite clear in Macaulay's words who insisted on English as a medium of education in colonial India "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."(1) The colonialist education was imparted with due apprehension about their long stay in the colonised land.

But, the colonialist education system was a "double-edged sword" (2) in itself. The educated minds of the colonised nations sensed the biased narratives produced by the West to validate the superiority and autonomy of power enjoyed by them. Hence, the writers of the post-colonial land appropriated the language of the coloniser to re-assert the uniqueness of their indigenous experience by producing the narratives in the coloniser's language to break the binary relationship established by the imperial powers. The post colonial writers disrupted the structural relations of the binary system in their works. While few post-colonial writers advocated use of native language in writings over writings in English, few others appropriated the universal foreign language to suit their purpose and reflect their values and culture as equally superior or more superior to the European ones.

African Fiction

Africa as a nation has been described as a "Dark Continent" – a land which did not have a history of its own and consequently the occupants of the place described as brute uncivilized savages by European powers which claim to have discovered this unknown land. History of Africa has been narrated since the advent of European power as Africa's tradition was recorded in oral literature unlike the colonialist tradition recorded in writings. Africa had to restore its identity lost in the colonial writings.

"Therefore an African writer, who bears the scar of his race, takes to writing through a new modality of expression, to re-create an identity for himself and his race. As the western assumptions and constructions that negate the identity of an African are questioned there is also an effort to reconstruct the identity of an African and to restore the sense of solidarity with his community. It is a scramble for the erasure of the images created by the west as well as offering alternative frames of reference for the ameliorative purpose of the black consciousness."

African literature is the counter discourse to the painful experience of colonisation and an attempt to celebrate the indigenous experience asserting the superiority of values and tradition rooted in African culture that has been outrageously discarded in colonial works. The African ways and rituals had been portrayed as monstrous, barbaric and horrifying. Hence, the African post-colonial writer perceived

the urgent need of negating the identity established by the imperial powers. The post-colonial writing valorized the indigenous culture which has been dismissed in colonial writings through denigrating discourses. It was a significant step in affirming and celebrating the indigenous culture. The native life and culture were given fullest expression in the post-colonial writings that emerged in Africa.

“Counter discourse”, a term coined by Richard Terdiman to characterize the theory and practice of symbolic resistance has been used to describe the ways to challenge a dominant discourse in post-colonial studies. (3)

[D]iscourses . . . may be strategically employed to mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order and to win the consent of those over whom power is exercised, thereby obviating the need for the direct coercive use of force. . . (4)

The post-colonial writers in Africa attempt to challenge the discourse established by Europe to legitimize their power through the counter-narratives. Cultural Imperialism has been described as the “mother to the slavery of the mind and the body” (5). Hence, the post-colonial writers created counter narratives to challenge cultural imperialism and “to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (6). Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Frantz Fanon, Nadine Gordimer etc. are the notable post colonial writers who provided a counter discourse through the narratives celebrating the richness of African culture and heritage. The narratives reversed the binarism and satirized the materialistic foundation of the Coloniser’s society. The narratives place the African ritual over Christianity which has been dismissed by colonial discourse as pagan practice and acts of savagery.

The present paper demonstrates the assertion of Africanness in positive terms through an analysis of the works of Nadine Gordimer. The counter-discourse to refute the theories and ideologies established by colonial discourse is best illustrated in the works of **Nadine Gordimer**. Novelist, playwright, short-story writer, polemicist and activist, Nadine Gordimer (1929), received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991. She has been a champion of anti-apartheid movement. The *Conservationist* and *July’s People* by Nadine Gordimer are taken for study to exemplify the ways of asserting native experience as civilized and humane in comparison to materialism.

July’s People and *The Conservationist*

July’s People is a 1981 novel set during a fictional war in which black South Africans have violently overturned the system of apartheid. The story follows the Smales, a liberal White South African family who were forced to flee Johannesburg to the native village of their black servant, July. The novel opens the morning after an exhausting three-day trip through bush country to reach the village. July brings tea for Maureen and Bamford Smale and breakfast for their children, Victor, Gina, and Royce. After experiencing disorientation from the trip, Maureen asks her husband about their vehicle, a small truck called a bakkie. He tells her that July has hidden it.

The Smales find themselves dependent on July, and July's family questions their presence in the village. Maureen and Bamford Smale, in the beginning of the novel, appear to be contemptuous about the practice of apartheid but are bewildered at the thought of their man servant being the master of the household. Gordimer in the novel, places human values inherent in the African citizens over the materialistic mind set of European inhabitants in Africa. While July displays his loyalty and humanistic attitude to the master’s family by helping them flee to a safe place, Maureen and Bam are found to be disturbed by the role-switching or role reversal. July is far more rational and expresses civility in rendering timely help to Smales family unlike Maureen and Bam who are outraged by July’s taking car keys without their consent.

Throughout the novel, Maureen deals with July in a capitalist and racist mentality. Gordimer has given Maureen much more space, time and role but she looks “tired” and “overburdened” due to her racist ideologies which she absorbs by virtue of her “whiteness”. It is worth to examine a number of the reasons that made her fail the present and her the past, alike. She tries, yet in vain, to idealize her racist way in dealing with July by deliberately acting out several liberal ideas, “her [Maureen’s] little triumph in getting him [July] to come turned over inside her with a throb and showed the meanness within her...” (*July’s People* 68).

Blacks including July display adaptive nature and mould themselves to fit in the adverse situations which Whites lack as demonstrated by Maureen and Bam. Maureen looks defeated and less enabled than she was in the beginning of the novel.

Unlike their parents, the Smales children socialize with the blacks; they learn their language, [h]ere was something for which Victor, Gina and Royce knew in the village people’s language but not their own, and sing their songs to the extent that “the children couldn’t believe [*the gumba-gumba*] was something unknown to them (*July’s People*140). Maureen never shared any black companion but for Lydia who is more a servant than an intimate friend.

“Why had Lydia carried her case? Did the photographer know what he saw, when they crossed the road like that together? Did the book, placing the pair in its context, give the reason her and Lydia, in their affection and ignorance, didn’t know?” (33). Although, Maureen does not seem to have answers to these fundamental questions, she at least “discovers the mutability and ethnocentricity of interpretations she had thought firmly fixed” (7).

Unlike Maureen, her daughter Gina befriends Africans and masters the language of Africa to socialize with them. Maureen appears irrational and uncivilized as opposed to the binary definition popularized by imperial powers about colonizers as rational, civilized and modern. Maureen and Bam do not express the rational nature flaunted by July, the African servant. The fleeing of Smales’ family is symbolic of non-belongingness in the colonized land in the post-apartheid Africa. Maureen and Bam fail to take lead role in the new South Africa unlike her children. The children adapted and accepted the African ideologies, traditions, values and language. They succeeded in integrating into the African black society as they moulded themselves into an identity that values sharing and redistributing wealth, skills, and emotions. Africanness is celebrated for its humane nature in comparison to the materialist or capitalist nature of colonial West.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon defines the colonial situation as a "Manichaean world", here the colonial situation is represented in terms of a Manichaean division along the binary axes of colonizer/colonized, good/evil, white/black, civil/savage etc. (8)

July's People shows the disintegration of white egos and consciousness when their former roles are reversed. The Manichaean duality of white - black, master - servant, urban - rural, sophisticated - primitive gets blurred.

Nadine Gordimer's another novel **The Conservationist** also demonstrates the futility of materialistic possession by the Whites. Mehring is rich, divorced and somewhat frustrated and, though he has a lot of highly-placed friends, he feels alienated. He also deals in pig-iron, so he doesn't classify himself as part of the oppressors regarding the use of cheap black labour in the mines. But Mehring has a farm as most rich South Africans do. In the context and setting of the story, rich is synonymous to white. Though Mehring has a farm, he does not run it for profit. He sees the farm as a place to escape to from the city and he knows nothing about farming so that blacks like Jacobus and Solomon and others are the ones who run the farm and these individuals were living on the land before it was purchased from the previous owner.

One day, the body of a black man was found on the farm. Mehring was called and he in turn called the police but because it was a black man, no investigations were conducted and the body was buried on location without any fuss. But when farm got flooded after a heavy downpour, the body was uncovered and the locals on Mehring's farm offered him a befitting burial using material they could gather or borrow. It is the appearance of the dead black man on his farm that got Mehring thinking of his own death and succession.

The ending of the novel becomes a symbolic, cathartic purging of secrets of the land, as a black man is reinterred by the black community. In the final sentence of the novel Gordimer writes that the dead man 'took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them.' (TC p11) This sentence hinges around the word 'theirs', which seems to refer both to the land – that is, that the land belongs to the community, and to the black man himself – that he too belongs to them. This contrasts strongly with Mehring's perception of ownership throughout the novel. (9)

The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. (10)

But, the novel *The Conservationist* portrays the white coloniser as insensible to ethics and devoid of values. Mehring pays no respect to the dead black man by denying the death rites. He cares the least about the identity of the dead man. The reappearance of the buried corpse after the flood is symbolic of nature's own way of refuting the white man's ways and asserting the black man as rightful inheritor of the land. The colour as a signifier of humanity is discarded through such a portrayal.

Mehring is also found to be distanced from his close ones. His son distances himself from the materialistic father. Mehring is unsuccessful in enjoying a blissful marital life, neither is he capable to establish a relationship with his mistress. Mehring finds himself alone despite rich in material possessions. On the contrary, the dead black man receives a decent burial by his poor fellow mates with the materials they collected or borrowed. The sense of togetherness and belongingness is shared by the dead black man and fellow mates even in the hardships unlike Mehring's sense of alienation and solitude despite materially rich and hence powerful.

Frantz Fanon says that in black/white relationship colour is a cultural marker, a key signifier. Just as the whiteness of the European signifies power, money, superiority, and civility, the blackness of the Negro signifies the opposites. (11)

Black male became a synonym for sexual aggression of white female. So the concern of the white male was to protect his immaculate white female from the aggressive black male. At the same time the white female had a fascination for the black male who was a stereotype of excessive sex potential. (12). Maureen is found increasingly drawn or dependent on July, the black man servant. White Bam is caught up in the lost prestige or status due to the loss of material possession while July emerges a hero expounding human values for being in necessity by the side of the losers. The white male in the novels of Gordimer loses the respect of the white female for lack of rational behavior as he is, often, unable to ensure the protection of white woman in adversity.

Mehring's thoughts at the beginning of the section as he lays in the veld thinking about a business trip to Japan in which he had discussed the farm with his colleagues: 'his presence on the grass becomes momentarily a demonstration, as if those people on the other side of the world were smilingly seeing it for themselves: I have my bit of veld and my cows.' (TC p39-40) The notions of possession and the glories of ownership are repeated in the Callaway quotation and in Mehring's thoughts, and through the reminder of the earlier African ownership of the land and its culture, Mehring's reflections become ironic. There is an assumed security in his possession of the farm here, emphasised by the repetition of the possessive 'my' in the first sentence but following immediately after his reflections on his seemingly unassailable possession of the land, this dramatises the question of its rightful owners. As Mehring lies on the ground 'breathing intimately into the ground' (TC p39) a parallel with the dead man is established. It is this motif which appears again at the end of the novel, as the dead man takes possession of the land.

Gordimer in *The Conservationist* includes brief excerpts of stories drawn from Zulu mythology to create a "sub-text" in the novel. The deliberate use of black mythology is to provide the reader with the alternative historical and social perspective of the native which the narratives of colonial discourse have concealed.

The novels **The Conservationist** and **July's People** by Nadine Gordimer try to reverse the binary notions popularized by the literary texts produced in the West and supplied across the world. They assert the indigenous experiences as superior, civilized, rational and humane contradictory to the binarism propagated by the Europeans.

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