



CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN NOVEL

T.M. Aluko • Cyprian Ekwensi
Wole Soyinka • Chinua Achebe

G. GULAM TARIO

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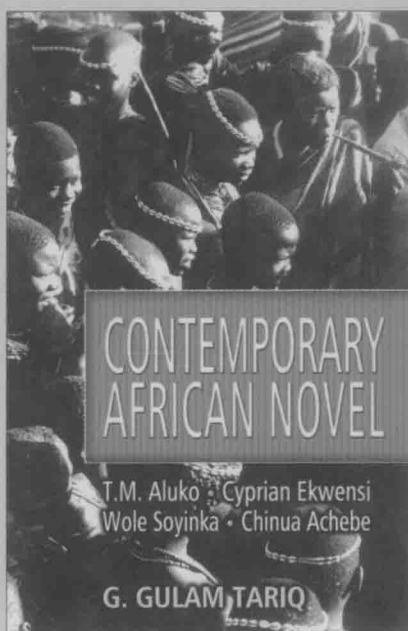
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DEDICATED TO
MY REVERED PARENTS

Preface

African Literature as a major segment of Commonwealth writing in English, with its phenomenal growth, has attracted the English-speaking world outside Africa. Modern African literature in English is a new voice of Africa countering the western thesis of cultural denigration. It aims at providing a living account of human condition and human values in Africa. It is more purposeful and more functional than several other literatures and endeavours to highlight the 'unique' potentialities of self, the man of Africa.

Major African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, T.M. Aluko, Gabriel Okara, James Ngugi, Flora Nwapa and others are deeply concerned with the task of restoring character and cultural identity to African society through the re-discovery of the past. Depicting the plight of modern Africans at the crossroads, utterly confused and unable to decide their future, they have endeavoured to reform the society by exposing the social evils, political injustices, economic imbalances and the rampant corruption—monetary and moral—in the contemporary African society in general and Nigerian society in particular. The traditional society was exposed to the onslaughts of the west during the colonial period.

The present book, a revised version of my Ph.D. thesis on T.M. Aluko and Cyprian Ekwensi's novels, is an attempt to study the change in the society as a result of colonialism. It also aims at evaluating these novelists as potential African writers, genuinely concerned about African society. Trapped between tradition and modernity, their protagonists undergo great mental trauma in their quest for identity before they affirm themselves. The focus is on the human condition, human predicament and the clash of cultures, tradition versus modernity, social status of

woman in traditional and modern society presented in fictional terms in the given Nigerian setting.

I cannot close this prefatory note without expressing my gratitude to my colleagues and friends who helped me in the completion of this book. I duly acknowledge the views and opinions of critics and scholars of African literature, which I have incorporated in the book. I am deeply beholden to Dr. S.A. Khayyoom, former Professor of English, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapur, and my research supervisor who has always been a source of inspiration to me in all my academic pursuits.

I am greatly indebted to my late parents for motivating me time and again and encouraging me to undertake a work of this nature. I am extremely thankful to my Vice-Chancellor Prof. A. Ramachandra Reddy and Principal Prof. L. Krishna Reddy for their help and support.

My grateful thanks are due to the management of Osmania College, Kurnool and particularly to Mrs. Azra Javed, secretary and correspondent and Mr. M. Azmathullah Khan, Administrative Officer and Executive Council member, Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Anantapur, for their inspiration and co-operation in completing this task.

Finally I thank Professor R.K. Dhawan, University of Delhi, without whose help the book would not have seen the light of the day. I am grateful to Prestige Books, New Delhi, who have brought out the book most elegantly and expeditiously.

G. GULAM TARIQ

Introduction: Contemporary African Novel

Commonwealth Literature as a new discipline has provided an excellent opportunity to break new ground and achieve greater relevance in academic pursuits. It has emerged as a veritable storehouse of different cultures and perspectives. It is a politically defined cultural activity. The patriotic notion of it as the literature of British Commonwealth is now outdated though it reflects the growth of British literary traditions overseas. As a multi-linguistic, multi-literary heritage, and as a living and growing literature, highly contemporaneous and mostly relevant to the times, it has established itself as an expanding circle of English studies today. It offers to our view larger perspectives of human nature, culture and sensibility. Commonwealth fiction as a literary form following western literary conventions has emerged as a new genre of writing, a cross-cultural phenomenon resulting from cultural interaction. It embodies, adapting itself to the new milieu, a change in its dichotomy of form and content. A colonial situation leading to cultural conflict, and a conflict between the savage and the so-called civilized by cultural superiority, find expression in Commonwealth Literature. It reflects the problems and responses in a unity appropriate to the ethos and aesthetics of a nation developed in colonial and postcolonial situations. As R.K. Dhawan observes: "The logic of cultural transition compelling new ways of self-differentiation, and new forgings of identity, continuity and affiliation are the central premise of these literatures."¹

African literature fascinated the European and Western mind with its novel and unexplored territories and African folklore and mythology. Africa, a hitherto gloomy phenomenon, is no longer a Conradian 'heart of darkness' full of cannibals and wild life. Its rich cultural heritage and fertile oral literature and a search for

African roots for establishing African cultural identity have made African writing creative. As Eustace Palmer observes:

Africa is no longer a fantasy world as portrayed by the Western motion pictures. Contemporary African Literature endeavours to highlight the 'unique and novel' potentialities of African and the richness of Africa as recorded by Olaudah Equiano in his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), the first literary work published by an Igbo in English and possibly in any language.

Africa until the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a coherent, organic and homogeneous society. And subsequently Africa was exposed to many onslaughts of the West. Alien culture, new faith and new education imposed during the colonial period, greatly affected the African tradition and life. Hence the primary task of African writer has been to restore African character to its society through the rediscovery of the past. The Western concept of 'White' for good and 'black' for evil is vehemently contested by the modern African writer. To him, dark stands for vitality and goodness and white for lifelessness and evil. Achebe has contrasted in his novels African culture with the alien culture.

Nigeria, one of the vast and most populous countries in West Africa, stretches from the forests and swamps of the coast in the South to the edge of the Sahara in the North and borders with Benin on the West and Cameroon on the East. It has been by tradition the 'Whitman's Grave' because of health hazards. It is a twentieth century creation, arbitrarily created by bringing together different ethnic groups by the British colonial administration. In the seventeenth century, the British who succeeded the Dutch and Portuguese as slave trade masters had prohibited the trade and decided to establish their rule in West Africa. The colony of Lagos emerged in 1861 when it was conceded to the Queen of England by the King of Lagos. By 1893 a Protectorate of Great Britain was formed with the territories of Eastern Nigeria. Ilorin was occupied by the Royal Niger Company in 1897 which together with certain parts of the Western Region formed the Southern Nigerian Protectorate in 1900. Also the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria came into existence in the same year. The

amalgamation of the colony and the two protectorates formed the Protectorate of Nigeria on 1 January 1914. The people became politically conscious, learnt new education, protested against economic exploitation and tyranny and demanded direct participation in the colonial administration. Three national parties emerged in Nigeria on regional lines between 1949 and 1960. Under the leadership of Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, the Igbos formed the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). The Northern People's Party of Hausa-Fulani was formed under the leadership of Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, while the Yorubas formed the Action Group led by Obafemi Awolowo.

The name 'Nigeria' was coined by Lady Lugard, the wife of Sir Frederick Lugard who effected the amalgamation. Nigeria achieved political freedom in 1960, became a republic and joined the Commonwealth in 1961, and later a federal republic in 1963. After Independence Nigeria witnessed successive military regimes leading to political instability. Between 1967 and 1970, civil wars broke out in Nigeria threatening the integrity of the country with the declaration of Biafra as a sovereign state in the eastern region. The changed political scenario finds expression in fictional terms in some novels and short stories of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Wole Soyinka.

Nigeria, the giant of black West Africa, vast and populous, has three major ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani dominating in the North, the Yoruba in the South-West and the Igbo in the South-East.

T.M. Aluko is a Yoruba, the largest ethnic group south of the Sahara made up of Isha, Idasha, Shabe, Ketu and other sub-groups. The legend holds that they were all united under the leadership of the King of Oyo. Yorubas with a high level of cultural achievement for a long time formed the dominant group of Nigeria's educated elite and were politically active before Nnamdi Azikwe. Yorubas have about seventeen hundred divinities, the largest number for any tribe in Nigeria. Olodumare is their supreme God, whom they worship devoutly and offer sacrifices. Ogun is one of the chief deities worshipped by hunters, blacksmiths, woodcarvers and locomotive automobile drivers. It

is believed that orishas or demi-gods are in close contact with its inhabitants. Eshu is the trickster god of market place but without a house of worship. As is Ani for Igbos, Yorubas worship Onile, the Goddess of Earth who maintains social morality.

Religious belief is an integral part of the life of Africans. There are four religious cults in the Yoruba tribe: Ogboni for judicial functions, Egungun who worship Amaiyegu to escape death, Gelede who is propitiated to save people from other witches and Epa, worshipped by the Yorubas in the north. All the deities are worshipped for fertility, good health, long life and prosperity. Religious festivals provide great opportunities for singing, dancing and masquerades. Their main occupations are animal husbandry and trade. They have sentimental attachment with the land which they believe links them to their departed and any severance of ties with the land would bring disaster. Yorubas are highly religious. "The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and all-governing principle of life for them," says Bolaji Idowu. Ja-haheinz Jahn observes: "God might be banished from Greek without any harm being done to the logical architecture of it, but this cannot be done in the case of Yoruba."

Susanne Wenger describes the Yoruba as "born masters and metaphysical manipulation." Gert Chesi observes: "The Yoruba do not merely practise their religion, they live in it. It is their involvement in universal happenings, their participation in nature's own spirituality which allows them to "tap the forces" of the gods. It is a true mutuality, a creative tug-of-war between gods and humans in commemoration of their joy of fertility which unites the human and divine collective interest in securing an enlarged field for life.

Cyprian Ekwensi is an Igbo. His novels, like Achebe's novels, speak of Igbo life, culture and history. Though Igbos earlier did not have well established and centralised institutions and powerful chiefs to constitute a large Igbo 'tribe,' they have later developed a rich cultural heritage and a well-defined tribal consciousness. The Igbos do not have rigid hierarchy of power but have a pluralistic system of administration where power is vested

in small groups—priests, diviners and medicine men representing religious power and men of title, elders and lords of the village constituting the temporal authority.

In the Igbo traditional society the social equilibrium is maintained by an intricate system of checks and balances. People assemble at the market place to take important decisions on significant matters like war with neighbouring clans, negotiations for peace, personal disputes etc.

The traditional society is primarily societal. Though the Igbo do not have strong rulers to enforce social morality, there are rules to regulate the social order. But the rules, as they are not codified and rigid, are subjected to debate and change. In the traditional society, an individual is but a corporate being, a part of the social pattern and he contributes to the communal good. The society in turn takes care of the individual when he becomes economically crippled. The Igbo society does not concede an individual too much freedom for individual expression and personal gratification. The non-authoritarian social system concedes considerable freedom of action only to deserving individuals with dynamism and ambition. In the flexible system the corporate being becomes more individualistic and susceptible to external influences, new ideas and change, but not at the expense of communal harmony and welfare.

The Igbo society is primarily rural, egalitarian and achievement-oriented. In the title society, titles are conferred on the individuals based on their prowess and virility demonstrated at war and the number of barns of yam produced. Title-societies play a dominant role in the community and set rules of conduct for its members. Igbo exogamy has strengthened the position of the individual and his society and has promoted affinity with the neighbouring clans. Religion plays a significant role in the life of Africans. Igbo religion is not a redemptive one like Christianity and Islam, nor is it utilitarian. Igbo are only ritually religious. Every activity in the life of an individual and season is devoutly punctuated by some religious ritual or magico-religious rites. Igbo observe a 'peace week' before planting of yam seed and celebrate Pumpkin Leaves Festival, a ceremony of purification.

Igbo life follows a culturally rhythmical order from birth to death—the naming ceremony, initiation ceremony, title-taking ceremony like ‘Ozo’ in Udi and ‘Ndichie’ in Onitsha, and the second burial ritual three days after the death of individual. Igbo religion is an ‘agrarian cult.’ Igbos have rites of propitiation of the Sun, the Rain and the Earth Mother. Igbos believe in the worship of public deities like Ulu, Idemili, Eru etc. and personal gods like Ikenga, ‘Chi’ etc. And their ancestors are represented by the masked Egwugwu. For Igbos, Chukwu is the supreme God, the Creator and Sustainer. Among lesser deities, the goddess of Earth—Ala, Ani (for Igbo) is considered the most powerful. She is the Queen of the underworld and ‘owner’ of men both dead and alive. The Goddess of Earth is responsible for Igbo morality. Her priest or priestess works for social integration by promulgating her laws and by punishing offenders. The ancestors represented on earth as masked men act as her agents in controlling social morality. Egwugwu is the Jury in *Things Fall Apart* that settles disputes—personal, and those with the neighbouring villages. Igbos believe in the constant interaction between the dead and alive, the visible and invisible, the material and the spiritual. The departed as the living-dead, become part of the Igbo social world and continue the lineage system in the spirit world. Every individual is granted by Chukwu ‘Chi’ ‘a soul or spiritual double’ to which his or her fortunes and abilities are ascribed.

The Igbo Novel

Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Flora Nwapa have made rich contribution to the West African fiction in English and popularized Igbo literature outside Nigeria. The Igbo literary revolution, a transition from fiction writing in Igbo to English took place in Nigeria after the Second World War. The colonial writers made use of this art form to record their excruciating experiences during the imperial rule. The early missionaries of the Church Missionary Society settled in Onitsha in 1857 were until the middle of the twentieth century engaged in the tasks of Christianization, New Education and Westernization of the Ig-