

The Use of Language and Thematic Concerns: A case of Five Selected African Poems

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Abstract: This study is a critical analysis of the language and themes used by the under listed five African poets: The Cathedral by Kofi Awoonor, Troubadour by Dennis Brutus, Telephone Conversation by Wole Soyinka, I Will Pronounce Your Name by Leopard Seder Senghor, and If You Should Know Me by Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali. Its main thrust is, therefore, the isolation and discussion of the elements of language and the themes that make up the artistic framework upon which their individual poems are based. The writers employ Critical Race Theory as the framework for this work. It looks at how individually and collectively they tackle the theme of racism as well as their choices of language in expressing their contempt to this social canker. The study narrows down to a discussion of the artistic positions of the authors within these two basic narrative variables. An examination of the various artistic strategies employed to create a multi-plexity of poetic fronts and their attendant scenes as well as backgrounds are what these divisions of the study target. It is this primacy of the artistic theme that this study dwells upon. The study intends to condemn this social injustice that brings separation rather than cohesion to human race. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service should organise essay competition on these African Poets' books to bring social cohesion among students in Ghana and Africa as a whole.

Keywords: Africinity, Racism, Critical Race Theory, Supremacy, Caucasian, Negritude

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1. Introduction

Every work of art, be it prose, drama or poetry, is hinged and shaped by the artistes' social considerations as well as what they see around them. Themes of African poets are affected by issues on western education, culture, identity and many more. African literature mainly concentrates on seven thematic areas: "the clash between Africa's past and present, between tradition and modern, between indigenous and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance and between Africinity and humanity" [1]. It is from these several considerations that four main types of themes in a work of arts namely the theme of moral lessons, theme of criticism, theme of observation and theme of statement are derived from. These writers see calculated pursuance of morality, of social justice and equality through constant criticism and protest against racism and prejudice as the overall observation made from these distinguished poets in tackling this political and social canker in our continent [1]. This, they pursue with carefully chosen language to drive home the message. This paper discusses the thematic concerns and the use of language in five distinguished poems of international repute with Critical Race Theory as the lens or the theoretical framework on which the paper is premised. The paper ends with the conclusion that

though these are individual literary artistes, they present a common front against continental hatred and racism. Although the poems are written in different decades, they have many other similarities in the theme and message.

2. Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

According to Gelgado and Jean Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that uses critical theory to examine society and cultures as they relate to categorizations of race, law, and power [2]. In other words, it is a collection of critical stances against any existing legal order from a race-based point of view. It focuses on the various ways in which the received tradition in law adversely affects people of colour not only as individuals but as a group. Thus, CRT attempts to analyze law and legal traditions through the history, contemporary experiences, and racial sensibilities of racial minorities in a country. CRT recognizes that racism has eaten into the fabric and institutional systems of the society, especially those assumed to be known as superpowers. This is the analytical lens that CRT uses in examining existing power structures. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which encourages the marginalization of people of colour [2].

2.1. The Main Arguments

- Critical Race Theory draws on the priorities and perspectives of both legal rights and conventional civil rights of all law-abiding citizens. It thus, rejects the incidence of white supremacy.
- It deals with sharing a commitment to a vision of liberation from racism through right reason with the civil rights tradition.
- It deconstructs some premises and arguments of legal theory and again holds that legally constructed rights are very important.
- CRT calls for more aggressive approach to social transformation, a race-conscious approach to transformation, and endorses an approach that relies more on political organizing, in contrast to liberalism's reliance on rights-based remedies.

The CRT can help combat institutionalized racism since its structures, policies, practices, and norms frowns on its existence and describes it as inhuman. Institutionalized racism is considered normative, sometimes legalized and often manifests as inherited disadvantage. It is structural, having been absorbed into our institutions of custom, practice and law, so there need not be an identifiable offender. Institutionalized racism manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power. With regard to material conditions, examples include differential access to quality education, sound housing, gainful employment, appropriate medical facilities and a clean environment [2].

2.2. Application of CRT to the Analysis of the Poems

Here, the focus of this work is on the issues of hate, crime and hate speech that emanate from the society, especially those considered supreme over the minority. The poem "Telephone Conversation" by Wole Soyinka has racial discrimination between the Caucasian and African as its major theme which casts a harsh light on the racism and prejudice which grip society. In the poem, the poet wanted to rent a house from a landlady, a simple everyday societal concern that does not call for hatred. The poet is only looking for a priority in life – accommodation. However, the issue of racial consideration comes in after he stated that he was African. The conversation turned to discuss the poet's skin colour swiftly and it lasted till the end of the conversation. This is what CRT seriously condemns and sets the pace by providing legal framework to combat the system and, in its stead, providing co-existence.

Repetition was used to emphasize the issue of racial discrimination. "Dark" was repeated to show how much the landlady cares about the persona's color, because "dark"

usually connects with the dark skin colour of Africans. The landlady was obviously discriminating against other races. It could also be shown from the question she kept asking, "...are you light or very dark?" After the persona told the landlady that he was African, the landlady's tone changed at once.

Soyinka might be speaking through personal experience, judging by the raw emotions that this poem subtly conveys: those of anger, rage, shame, humility and an acute sense of disgust at the apathy and inhumanity of humans who will not judge a book by its cover but would turn down a man for the colour of his skin. Though racism might be a dying phenomenon in certain institutions, individuals may still want to perpetuate it for their personal interest. Again, it does not mean that discrimination against other minorities has been completely eradicated. Soyinka, in this poem, critically condemns the social and political ills that have befallen and bedeviled Africanity and humanity for that matter. His concerns for the ill-treatment of society due to racism are well depicted in this poem. Having heard the tenant's origin, the lady on the other side is silent for some time.

The tenant thinks that it is a sign of good-breeding. In fact, he uses the expression "*Silence transmission of Pressurized breeding*", a sarcasm employed by the author to sense her feelings. The silence displays her doubt and unwillingness to give out the accommodation to a black. And suddenly, the poet's imagination of the landlady seems to be revised when he uses the words "*Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled cigarette holder pipped*" conveying the idea that the social status of the landlady is good enough, a contradiction from the earlier thought. The objects are but symbols that contribute in the making of a typical English woman, in other words, a well to do English woman. The landlady questions further, asking the tenant "ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?" This idea of using bold words by Wole Soyinka clearly depicts the repetitive and blatant manifestation of colour discrimination.

Button B. Button A. Stench

Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.

Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered

Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed

By ill-mannered silence, surrender

Pushed dumb-founded to beg simplification.

Considerate she was, varying the emphasis-

"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" Revelation came.

"You mean-like plain or milk chocolate?" Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light Impersonality.

This surprises the tenant and clearly presents racism before his very eyes, but his anguish is not overtly expressed. The mentioning of the articles here by the poet may seem irrelevant; it shows the poet's hatred for racial discrimination and prejudice. That same piece is also an invitation to the readers to understand the inner conflict that goes on within him.

As part of language, Soyinka uses sarcasm with the words "*Shamed By ill-mannered silence*"; here, it is the landlady who is to be shameful about the question she asked and not the tenant. She emphasizes further by asking "ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?" It is very amusing for the reader when the tenant seeks clarification by trying to bring out

the woman's actual intention comparing his colour to plain or milk chocolate. Her deep rooted racist feeling she shares with the English society is quiet obvious as she expects a simple answer BLACK or WHITE from the tenant. The author's usage of the words "*Her assent was clinical*" explains that the lady is unemotional, detached and very precise in her expression. She represents the English society, while the tenant, a highly empathetic person, represents the black community [3].

The tenant reveals that he is 'West African', an authenticated identity that he carries also in his passport. This reveals the potency and the readiness to fight such inequality embedded in some minds within our society. The lady listens to him, tries to know more about his colour and probes further. Highly annoyed by the questions that the landlady showers on the tenant, he goes on to describe the colours of some parts of his body. He says facially he is brunette, the palm of his hands and the soles of his feet are peroxide blond, and his bottom has turned raven black because of friction. When he goes on to say more, he hears the thunderclap of the receiver. The thunderclap indicates that the landlady is highly infuriated with the black man's intelligent confrontation and cuts the conversation while hanging up the phone. It can be seen that the tenant is a highly witty and cultured person, obvious from the usage of his language and not a savage the landlady imagines him to be. She might have had a misconception that the prospective tenant would not react or would endure her denial; in fact, his witty retaliation puts her off.

With such language as alliteration '*clinical, crushing*' was used to emphasize the coldness in the landlady's tone when she knew the man was African. Metaphor like '*spectroscopic*' was used to compare the landlady's mind with equipment which was used to judge a color. Based on this, Soyinka asserts that the significance of using this metaphor was to show the eagerness of the landlady to find out the colour of the poet [3]. Throughout the whole poem, the poet used different techniques and language to show how the imperialists discriminated against the dark-skinned people. The poet criticized it was not appropriate to judge a person with his skin colour.

One noticeable thing these so-called perpetrators of racism do is that they hide behind governments, institutions and systems to operate their shameful attitudes. In this instance, the landlady, a symbol of racism and prejudice, hides behind a telephone. Had the person been speaking face to face with the her, this whole conversation would never have taken place because she could have met the wrath of this man. She would have either refused outright, or would have found a subtler way of doing so. Thus, the telephone is used to make the issue of racism clear and prove how bad it really is.

There is silence at the other end, silence which the black man thinks is the reluctant result of an inbred sense of politeness. However, he is wrong because when she speaks again, she disregards all formalities and asks him to explain how dark he is. The man first thinks he has misheard but then realizes that that is not true as she repeats her question with a varying emphasis. Feeling as if he has just been reduced to the status of a machine, similar to the telephone in front of him, and asked to choose which button he is, the man is so disgusted that he can literally smell the stench coming from her deceptive words and sees red everywhere around him. Ironically, he is the one who is ashamed by the tense and awkward silence which follows, and asks for clarification thinking sarcastically that the lady was really helpful by giving him options to choose from. He suddenly understands what she is trying to ask, and repeats her question to her stating if she would like him to compare himself with chocolate, dark or light? She dispassionately answers and his thoughts change as he describes himself as a West African. The lady remains quite for a while, not wanting to admit to her ignorance, but then she gives in to curiosity and asks what that is. He replies that it is similar to brunette and she immediately clarifies that that's dark.

Now the man has had enough of her insensitiveness. He disregards all constraints of formality and mocks her outright, saying that he isn't all black, the soles of his feet and

the palms of his hands are completely white, but he is foolish enough to sit on his bottom so it has been rubbed black due to friction. But as he senses that she is about to slam the receiver on him, he struggles one last time to make her reconsider, pleading her to at least see for herself; only to have the phone slammed on him.

Written in an independent style and delivered in a passively sarcastic tone, this poem is a potent comment on society. Today, racism might be a dying concern, but that does not mean that discrimination against other minorities has been completely eradicated. Despite the progressing times, people continue to harbour prejudices and illogical suspicions about things they do not understand be it religions, traditions and customs. Thus, this poem remains a universal message for all of us, as Soyinka manages to convey just how absurd all prejudices are by highlighting the woman's rejection of the man just because he does not share the same skin colour with her.

In the case of Awoonor, he is obviously unimpressed by the literal uprooting of that tree that represented the life and breath of the local traditional existence to plant new religion, establish new order and insist that all traditional people should stop worshipping their God and follow them. To him, this is heinous crime against humanity and so his compact rejection of the act. He mourns the removal of the religious methods that existed before 'they' came. Whoever 'they' were who sent these surveyors and builders, Awoonor does not mention but he rants on that these artisans planted in the place of his tree "A huge senseless cathedral of doom".

Awoonor protests against cultural and religious prejudices and calls the place where the cathedral is standing, "a dirty patch". Perhaps "dirty" because what belongs to the black man is not good and should be uprooted to be replaced by a new religion as though it was another tree. This is what makes the poet to be highly annoyed. How could anyone remove the ancient symbiosis of life and spirit that existed under that tree, from which the whole tribe drew its existence? It is only fair that the cathedral, a symbol of imperialist and colonial oppression, is called "senseless". This is what CRT refers to as white supremacy and dominance. It can be realised again that Awoonor respects the rules of first line capitalization in keeping with the first sentence of the poem but breaks this rule in the last line when he announces the senselessness of the cathedral that is planted on his holy ground. He makes the reader know that no wisdom will justify the imposition of a new religion in the place where an old one freely grew [2, 4]. In the larger sphere, the cathedral symbolises not only the change in religious and spiritual experience but also the purity of local fellowship and freedom which was stolen by the imposition of a colonial government [4]. The *Cathedral* symbolises disapproval and hate for the utter disregard and destruction of communal property, traditional religion, or black life that God has given to humanity in a compact as well as highly persuasive manner [4].

What rather baffles many critiques of the genre is the utter description of the land of our birth as "dirty patch". Some critics can pardon the poet as a result of what they see as Awoonor's total disregard for foreign domination as well as foreign religious practices as a traditionalist. He cannot understand why the surveyors and builders should pull down the mighty tree to give way to the building of a foreign dominant religion. This is what brings about his blatant protest and disapproval. He recounts the racists' destruction of a formidable settlement that flourished the lives of many people. Perhaps, again, we can understand Awoonor and his utter disregard for the eviction of his perhaps tribal owners of the land. However, words such as "dirty" and "senseless" to describe a place of worship is too sharp to cut. Again, one can understand his dismay about the imposition of the foreign religion symbolized by the "Cathedral" [4].

This same racism perpetrated against blacks is what Dennis Brutus rises up and fights against as a "troubadour", as a medieval European poet-knight whose duty was to ride alongside and defend a mistress. Until the troubadour retires from service, his duty is to die defending her. Until Brutus dies, he would not stop fighting against this inhuman social canker that reduces man to a mere object. Brutus is a troubadour for his homeland,

South Africa, as a mistress for whom he must live and die for. Brutus travels length and breadth to defend his object of love, his homeland South Africa and to a larger extent, his continent Africa. Brutus talks about his romantic traverse across the land, exploring its wide-flung, spread-out or exposed parts in a movement that is sweeter than any other that he knows. He does so with zeal and with his “*amorous hand*”. And in this ecstasy, he has laughed at all those who have sought to stop or question him even though he knew that a crusade in the name of love for South Africa under apartheid meant that he will die protecting her or be doomed to Saracen arrest [5]. His activism against racism and apartheid likens him to a crusader for his country. A knight on duty for a mistress; and this has so often appeared in his poetry. He loved South Africa deeply and did everything to win its freedom from the imperialists [6].

The poem, *If you should know me* by Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, is a protest against racial considerations in South Africa, the poet vociferously speaks against the emotions of fear, suspicion and prejudice which stand in the way of meaningful human relations. In South Africa, racism has become a barrier to fundamental relationships. Whites cannot appreciate the Blacks so do the Blacks. There is mistreatment against innocence. Racism creates adversaries and does not allow people to appreciate other people for what they are. The persona’s reaction to these acts of denigration is an undiluted lamentation of this cynical and sarcastic attitude that according to the persona, is a destruction of virtues. The persona feels condemned by such a practice and so invites these perpetrators of this crime to conduct a search through him to find out [7]. He says:

o! come search

my soul for non- existent virtues

outnumbered by vices

Though the persona is clean and innocent, he foresees conflict, should the situation persist. He says in stanza two;

I bare my heart

To see the flint

To be ignited

Into a flame

Mtshali feels all human beings should see themselves as one; as sinners because we all come from Adam who allowed his “*temptress*” to deceive him into eating the apple.

The persona uses figurative languages such as metaphor (the use of the flint), biblical allusions (“*devil, serpent, apple of sin, and the three tongues which symbolizes the fire on the Pentecostal day*”), simile (“*flame shaped like three tongues*”) and Greenflies to subtly drive home his message of disgust towards the racism and prejudice which stand in the way of open and meaningful human relationships. His language is suspicious. He, therefore, uses the poem to show his protest to the treatment meted out to them. The title alone is enough to inform the Whites of his hate to their system of ruling them [7].

Finally, Leopold Sedar Senghor very much likes and cherishes his indigenous African background. Africa’s tropical settings, the beauty and structural configurations of its land and people greatly fascinated his mental and physical well-being and soul. In “*I Will Pronounce Your Name*” Senghor in the spirit of negritude, creates a female character by name Naett and expresses his profound admiration for her. Throughout the poem, he expresses his affection for Naett through the few lines that make-up the poem. He makes reference to Naett’s beauty, and ironically calls “*beautiful*”, attributes which are

commonly regarded unattractive outside the African continent. Again, what the racists abhors is what Senghor admires so much. The poet makes reference to such aspects as "*Shinning coal*" and "*You my Night sun*" [8].

Throughout the poem, Senghor communicates his celebration of the top beauty and wealth of the African culture. In the writing of the poem, the persona translates the ideas and concerns of the Negritude movement and its relationship with the African continent. He makes symbolic reference to the African continent in different lines of the poem, which cannot be mistaken for any other entity. In line four (4) of the poem, the poet makes reference to the "*Savannah*" and "*midday sun*" which are symbols closely associated with the African continent. In consistence with the themes of the Negritude movement, the poem celebrates the beauty of the African continent. The celebration of such aspects is achieved in mentioning the natural features associated with Africa. We can conveniently say that the character of Naett represents the African continent that Senghor wants to immortalize. Hence, the persona exhibits his love and admiration for the African continent through the few lines that make-up the poem. The Negritude movement mainly encouraged the 'glorification' of the African continent, which was contrary to the views and opinions of the French colonialists in West Africa. Leopold Sedar Senghor likens Africa's beauty to that of the lady he calls Naett. According to the poet, the world's perspective of Africa and its beauty does not demean the underlying beauty of the continent in any way. Here again, we see protest in the eyes of people like Senghor who would not allow the racists, on the altar of colonialism to demean and condemn his homeland Africa. He would also not wait for their set time which he knows, by virtue of their mindset, would never come for the 'glorification' of his African continent. In "*I Will Pronounce Your Name*," Senghor discusses womanhood from several interesting perspectives: from the power-love-wisdom syndrome; from the physical attractiveness of womanhood; and from the point of view of womanhood as a natural phenomenon which affects our human sensibilities.

With power-love-wisdom symbolism, Naet's beauty is so compelling that the persona must celebrates her "*blossoms forth under the masculine ardour of the midday sun*". Secondly, Naet's love is so overpowering that the persona must submit to it - "*I am your hero, and now I have become your sorcerer in order to pronounce your name*". Finally, the reversal of roles here suggests the appropriateness in loving Naet since she seems to possess both primordial love and beauty.

The physical attractiveness embodied in Naet, and by implication, all womanhood, is suggested by the powerful and colorful images which the poet employs to address her. They include: "*my night, my sun*," "*coin of gold, shining coal*." That Naet possesses celestial beauty is therefore not in doubt [8]. The name, Naet, is mentioned six times in the poem: this suggests not only the persona's familiarity with the name of his beloved, but also the degree and extent to which he cherishes or values that name. Moreover, that she appeals to all of our five senses suggests the fact that her virtuous attributes are complete and impeccable [8].

For example: the expression, "*the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees*," appeals both to our sense of taste as well as of sight. The image, "*the masculine ardour of the midday sun*," appeals to our sense of smell. And the image, "*the dry tornado, the hard clasp of lightning*," appeals to our sense of hearing and that of touch.

The woman Naet has several names: for instance, apart from being everything to the persona (*my night, my sun*), she is also the "*Princess of Elissa, banished from Futa on the fateful day*." All of the above epithets and qualifiers certainly add grace and glamour to her beauty. Leopold Sedar Senghor very much likes and cherishes his indigenous African background. Africa's tropical settings, the beauty and structural configurations of its land and people greatly fascinated his mental and physical well-being and soul.

Senghor also explores here, for poetic purposes, simplicity of language and subject matter, whereby "*incidents and situations from common life*" are examined or

highlighted, whereby “the peasant is more poetical than the aristocrat/...because he sees in him a sort of emanation from the landscape.” In this poem the beauty or charm or mystique of the African continent is brought vividly before our eyes. Although Senghor is in exile physically in New York city, psychologically however, the paternal bond between him and his idyllic African birthplace is profound and inseparable [8].

3. Conclusions

The study revealed that Kofi Awoonor, Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, Oswald Mtshali and Leopold Sedar Senghor, all had the same thematic observation of hatred for the institution of racism and that showed their contentment and disapproval individually but more importantly, through the lens of protest and criticism. The study also indicated that the poets intend to condemn this social injustice that brings separation rather than cohesion to human race.

4. Recommendations.

It is recommended that universities, colleges and schools should approve these books to be used by all students to understand how African poets wrote their books to whip against racism in our continent. It is also recommended that the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service should organise essay competition on these African Poets' books to bring social cohesion among students in Ghana and Africa as a whole. IF SD and JAS

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