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Critical Issues in African Fictions and Islam: An Ideological Survey

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Abstract

By employing New Historicism as a theoretical premise, this paper takes an inventory of the various ideological convergences that shaped modern African fictions. The main objective is to produce a critical picture of how Islam has substantially featured in the historical configuration of the sub Saharan African novels. By examining the dynamics between Islam and literature, the author exposes the historical formations that had shaped modern African fiction and demonstrates how African writers have precipitated a vibrant corpus of modern fictions from the multiplicity of ideological perspectives and social experiences. Thus, the essay brings into fore the social and psychological ruptures that colonialism inflicted on the landscape of African societies and shows how different writers have reacted to the phenomenon vis-à-vis the background of their religious convictions.

Keywords: Historicism, ideological, African fiction, sub-Saharan, vibrant

Introduction

Not until the publication of *Faces of Islam in African Literature* edited by Harrow Kenneth as recently as 1991, the universal image conveyed about the emergence of African fiction is one of an exclusive synthesis of western literary mode and African oral folk tradition. This perspective of literary history has largely precluded the study of the impact that Islam has had in enriching the corpus of African fictions and criticism. Shehu (2014, p. 107) argues that

with the rare exception of Kenneth Harrow's seminal text, *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (1991) and his other contributions, critical discourse on the impact of Islam on what is written in West Africa, why it is written, and how it is produced has been slow and muted. The reasons for this can be traced to a number of factors which include the nature of Islamic literacy in West Africa and the characteristics of the religion as they affect modern literature.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Islam has undoubtedly expanded the range of literature available for critical study. Many writers have created a vibrant corpus of literary works from the multiplicity of perspectives to represent divergent ideologies and experiences. The creative artists from different communities in Africa have equally utilised the various dimensions of Islamic history and sociological peculiarities to reflect different world views. In spite of the enormity of these literary productions, scholars and critics appeared to have neglected this

section of West African writings. It is in view of this gap that Kenneth (1991, p.xi) notes rightly thus

despite a vast body of literature in Africa that is of Islamic inspiration or that deals in a substantial way with Islamic beliefs, cultural practices, or social patterns, amazingly enough, there is no serious study available to the scholar dealing with this topic.

Yet, for literary critics and students of African literature to appreciate the multiplicity of factors that mould African literature, it is important to fill this gap by critically appropriating the numerous works that have Islamic sub-text. The major thrust of this paper, therefore, is to take an inventory of how Islam has contributed significantly in shaping the world-view and social experience of some African writers. It also studies the plethora of themes ranging from Islamic history, culture, identity and politics. The study aspires to explicate how some literary artists write within the conventional discourses of Islam with a view to providing a broad understanding of modern African fiction. The main objective is to expand the corpus of available critical essays by re-visiting some salient critical issues such as the effects of colonialism on religion, culture, identity and ideology in African literature. It also seeks to increase awareness of the divergent traditions in African fiction and stimulate interest on salient critical issues in the debate about the place of Islam in sub Saharan African societies of the pre colonial era. The paper adopts New Historicism as a theoretical model, which is an extrinsically motivated theory that seeks to examine a work of art from the perspective of history, social, political and aesthetic concerns.

New Historicism

New Historicism, literarily refers to as Cultural Materialism in Britain, emerges in the 1980s from the Marxist ideological perspective of literature and society. According to Knowles (1996, p.586) New Historicism marks a return to history along with a determination to understand texts in their “culture, and to use texts to explore how cultures represent and reproduce themselves”. The argument is extended further by Benneth and Royles (2016, p. 139) that “

understanding the historical context of a literary work- the circumstances surrounding its production- can and should guide us in reading it: but while the text is produced within a specific historical context, as a literary artefact, it is separate from that context: for the New Historicist’s knowledge of a literary text’s historical circumstance can and should form the basis of its understanding.

New Historicism can best be understood as a reaction to the formalists’ conception of literature as an art wholly insulated from historical experiences. The theory can as well be seen as recognition of the extent to which history is contextualised and as a rejection of the autonomy of a text as a self-entity. New Historicism is an attempt to displace objectivity of interpretation in general. Sabharwal (2013, p.209) defines New Historicism as a form of criticism that emphasises the relationship between the historical context of a work and a reader’s understanding and interpreting of it. The theory seeks to describe the culture of a period by reading different kinds of texts and paying close attention to different dimensions of a culture, including political, economic, social and aesthetic concerns. The New Historicists regard the text

not simply as a reflection of the culture that produces it but also as productive of that culture, playing an active role in the social and political conflicts of an age. The theorists acknowledge and then explore various versions of history by sensitising the readers to the fact that the history on which a writer chooses to focus is coloured by reconstruction from certain circumstance. This theory is appropriate to the study because African fiction emerged as a response to the historical circumstances of foreign invasions through Muslim Arab trade and Western imperialism. Akporobaro (2012,p 33)), for instance, posits that

the African novel has evolved along a functionalist rather than a purely aesthetic line of development in which a wide range of uses, social in nature, have been displayed by writers inspired by different motives and personal and societal psychological history. In their divergent amphiboly of temperaments, many different forms have been created to serve different needs, different-cultural and epistemological outlooks. One of the new and remarkable strident uses to which African novel has been put is its social, political engagement, its link with issues of politics, human development and moralisation.

New Historicism is adopted for the study so as to demonstrate how colonial history is connected with the domination, the imagination and the interpretation of African fiction. The study reads more sensitively and imaginatively at representation of Africa, of race and nation in twentieth century post colonial African literature.

Ideological Issues in African Literature and Islam

In the history of sub-Saharan African literature, the creative consciousness of writers has been influenced greatly by the existence of Islam. The advent of Islam in Africa as early as the eleventh century predominantly contributed to the growth of Arabic literacy. The development of religious education which arose among the indigenous elites who were knowledgeable in the teaching of the Koran and Arabic language played a significant role in the evolution of modern African literature. Efforts were made to proselytize the Islamic faith and promote literacy through the establishment of various independent centres of learning. From the products of these institutions arose the touch bearers and pioneers of creative writing both in Arabic and *al-Ajami*. In an account rendered by Gerald (2007), the first black community to have been Islamised in sub Saharan Africa was the kingdom of Tekkor in the Funta Toro near the mouth of Senegal River. This development was followed by the islamisation of the greater part of black West Africa. Two important factors were identified in the historical evolution of West African literature. The first fundamental step was the emergence of Timbuktu in Mali as a renowned centre of learning in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries respectively. The other factor was related to the composition of a large number of manuscripts dealing with the various aspects of Islamic theology, logic, grammar, history, astronomy, ethics and several other fields of learning. The manuscripts were produced by a multiplicity of authors. Some of the writers were from Egypt and Morocco. Others were said to have come from the West African empires of Mali, Songhai, Borno and Kanem. These writers were responsible for the growth of Arabic literature as well as the popularity of Timbuktu as a formidable intellectual centre. Gerald, thus, asserts that the introduction of writing skills to Africa was not as a result of Western colonisation. Quite a large number of historians and linguists such as Ibn Batuta, Ibn Al Magili and poets like Usman Dan Fodio, Sultan Mohammed Bello, Asmau bint Fodio, Abdullahi ibn Fodio and host of others

had produced substantial corpus of poetry in the Islamised areas of black Africa using Arabic script and language. Irele (2009, p.2) buttresses this assertion when he posits that:

The Arab presence in North Africa led to the early introduction of Islam to populations in Africa South of the Sahara and has ensured sustained interactions between the two areas for a good part of the past millennium. The Koran has thus served for a much longer period than the Bible as a reference text for the protocol of writing and the reformation of literary sensibility in Africa.

Many scholars were motivated to write for the purpose of Islamic propagation in the Sudan along the Caravan Route of the Sahara. Within the given period, writers began to compose Arabic literary expressions in form of books, pamphlets, letters, poems and many manuscripts. This development led to the proliferation of indigenous Islamic literature in classical Arabic traditions. For example, in Northern Nigeria of Hausa/Fulani kingdoms of the old Western Sudan, literature took a dramatic turn with the penetration of Islam as far back as the fourteenth century. Hisket (1975, p.16) asserts that the migration of Muslim scholars from North Africa, particularly Muhammed B. al-Karim al-Maghili (d. 1564) who taught in Kano and Katsina, marked the entrenchment of Arabic literacy in the North. The Muslim scholars were content to engage themselves in scholarly pursuit, which their Arabic literacy made possible. With the evolution of Arabic literature, the local culture began to be transformed, though the movement did not produce mass conversion to Islam or displace the indigenous folk-literature Hisket (1975, p.16). At the end of the eighteenth century, a radical group of Islamic reformers led by Usman Dan Fodio emerged. The group mounted aggressive revolution that later reformed the moral, social, cultural and political life of the Hausa/Fulanis. This group of Jihadist radically precipitated a novel form of civilisation and cultural oriental achievements in the realm of literary arts. They promoted the propagation of Islam through aggressive literary expressions in poetry. Obafemi (2006, p.13) buttresses this historical landmark when he argues that:

The Sokoto Jihad compelled the interplay of socio-cultural and socio-economic factors to produce a vibrant culture in Northern Nigeria. The Ulama produced enormous volumes of literature in Arabic—Arabic poetry and prose in the early periods of the nineteenth century. Uthman Dan Fodio and his son Mohammed Bello, who ruled between (1817-1837) were said to be outstanding scholars who inspired and encouraged the flourish of literary productivity. (2006, p.13)

The literature of Islam in sub Saharan Africa was dominated by an oriental approach in which theological training constituted the major motivating factor. Muslim writers produced a large corpus of texts in Arabic poetry, letters and hagiography to facilitate the understanding of Islam and its doctrinal history and once this was achieved, their interest diminished. This is one of the reasons why the history of Islamic literature remained undeveloped in colonial Africa. Another factor relates to how the writers strengthen the orientalist bias by limiting themselves to Arabic literature and tradition. Muslim scholars confined themselves to writings that were essential for the propagation of Islam and Islamic orthodoxy. The example of this, according to Robinson (1991), can be found in the primary documentation created by the founders of the Sokoto caliphate of the Northern Nigeria.

No society is static in the course of its historical and socio-cultural evolution. Ideologies and literary traditions largely depend on the social dimension of history. Thus, literature constitutes an essential component of any social organization that reflects realities. The transformation of Islam in sub Saharan African societies has been influenced by western-oriented civilization, modern information media and the changing cultural habits and attitudes. This process of change confronts several African writers with the problem of adjustment. In modern African fiction, writers like Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Aminata Sow Fall, Camara Laye, Sembene Ousmane, Mariama Ba, Nawal El-Sadaawi, Tewfik Al-Hakim, Naigub Mafhouz, Zaynab Alkali, Ibrahim Tahir among numerous others have perennially grappled with the challenges of conflicting religious expectations and demands. African writers have appropriated a large number of issues concerning the problems of a new society in which the introduction of new cultural elements has dramatically stimulated new desires, attitudes and values. The predisposition of different writers in their portrayal of Islam in African fiction largely depends on their circumstance of birth and upbringing in different communities of sub-Saharan Africa. The attitude of a set of writers who were born and bred in a society where Islam has fundamentally become inherent part of social practice; (a community where Islam has been firmly integrated into the rhythm of the forge, farming and other practices) is bound to be different from the attitude of others brought up in colonial African urban societies.

Against the background of this divergence, two major ideologically irreconcilable predispositions become visible in the configuration of modern African fiction and Islam. The first set, known as referent group, is made of writers whose ideological world view was shaped by their strong advocacy of Islam as the best form of social practice. Islam, to this set of writers, remains the only legitimate means of integrating the individual and society. The various literary works of this group represent a celebration of an enduring heritage of Islamic culture by which the African communities of Muslims have endeavour to define their place in the world. Hence, Islamic experience is presented as a distinctive characteristic of a modern awareness and sensibility, and Islamic religion and tradition remain essential components of a universal humanism (Makward, I. (1991). This perspective forms the thematic focus of Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984) and Zaynab Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* (1986) which are novels from the heartland of Islamic communities in Northern Nigeria.

According to Cham (1991) the influence of Islam among the products of African, Arab-Islamic and Euro-Christian education became prominent in the 1960s. Among the modern promoters of African fiction and Islam are Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Aminata Sow Fall, Camara Laye, Abdoulaye Sadi among numerous others. In Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), the thematic preoccupation is not so much about the penetration of external forces, both Arab-Islamic and Euro-Christian into Africa, the theme rather focuses on the disintegration of the already established Islamic African society. The novel's historical account of culture and conflict started at the time of Western invasion into Africa. Kane seeks to establish an idea of African difference. The West is projected to be radically encroaching on Africa in such a way that disallow the simplicity of choice, the clarity of confrontation and any tangible connection to origin. The novel discusses the French Policy of Assimilation and Islam as a fatal clash of distinct value and cultural systems. Hence, the novelist seems not to be bothered about how the sub-Saharan societies came to acquire Islamic identity in the first place. As far as Kane is concerned, there is no distinction between his society and Islam. The novel thus portrays the Euro-Christian and its materialist, as well as individual attitude, as diametrically opposed to his society's spiritualism and communal identity. This dialectical account forms the philosophical

intensity of Kane's novel, which many literary historians and critics such as Cham (1991) and Makward (1991) consider the most outstanding African fiction that defends Islam. Among modern African writers, Kane stands out as the most strong advocate and promoter of Islamic value and ideal. His glorified account of the mystic purity and commitment to the principle and process of Islamic-Koranic education is unique among other novels of Islam and modern literature. Kane does not allow even the slightest touch of disrespect towards Islam.

Apparently, Islam and Western colonialism among other conflicting social factors play a significant role in determining the thematic preoccupation of Kane's novel. His efforts at resolving the social contradictions result in his wholesale embrace of the African and Islam, integrated into one indivisible whole. Kane totally rejects the Euro-Christian tradition which his novel depicts as a powerful intruder, the harbinger of destabilization of the African Islamic community set up. The staunch belief in Islam and its Africaness are well associated with Kane than several other Muslim writers of literature.

Aminata Sow Fall has equally been mentioned by Makward (1991) as one of the female writers of African fiction who locates an enviable position for Islam and its influence in sub Saharan African society. The novels of Kane and Aminata embrace Islam with almost the same degree of affection. Both reflect Islamic teachings as the most effective panacea to the Western-Christian colonial culture. This view is apparently projected by Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, a novel which reveals the superiority of Islam over all other forms of civilisation. Islamic mysticism is constructed and brought in conflict with Western materialist and individualistic attitude; this is played out in the life of the novel's protagonist. In the same vein, Aminata's *The Beggar's Strike*, has been conceived as a text written in defence of Islam. Despite its lack of a philosophical and mystical depth found in Kane's novel and in spite of its more pronounced secular orientation, *The Beggar's Strike* constitutes a significant part of African fiction that defends certain aspect of the Islamic principles. While *Ambiguous Adventure's* angle of operation is wide and also epic in scope, *The Beggar's Strike* limits its tentacle to a fictional veneration of one of the most important teachings of Islamic faith, which is alms giving. The novel shows that any disrespect for the cherished value of Islam is capable of spelling a doom. The writer appears to have used the text to underscore the importance of respect for the true ideal of alms giving if the individual and society are to attain fulfillment in Africa. The fiction is a story of a protagonist, Mour Ndiaye, Director of Public Hygiene, whose efficient but inhuman removal of beggars from the city with a view to promoting tourism negatively affected his hope of being appointed into the newly created position of vice president of the country. The novel, thus, depicts the tragedy of individual like Ndiaye who disrespects the principle of alm giving in his selfish interest to achieve fame.

The second group comprises of writers who depict Islam as a product of colonial history. Most of the writers in this camp divorce Islam from African socio-cultural milieu. They rather portray Islam as a part of colonial heritage spread to Africa through sword and violence. The so-called irreverent writers are different from Kane and Aminata who present Islam and religious figures with an aura of deep respect. Writers like Ayi Kwei Armah, Yambo Ouologuem, Mariama Ba, Sembene Ousmane and host of others depict Islam as an alien institution and instrument used to justify some unwholesome practices. These writers' attitude to Islam and literature appear to have been conditioned by a Marxist ideology and artistic creed which have shown that Islam is an impediment to secular individual and social fulfillment. In Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, Islam is depicted as an appendage to the state and the instrument that helps to justify slave raiding, harems and the court's exploitation of the

commoners. Likewise, Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, according to Ikiddeh (1981) represents a serious indictment of

Muslim overlords who distinguished themselves by their obscene sensuality and unparalleled carnal corruption; the Arab slave traders, missionaries and later colonialists who combined to destroy life in all its worth with a ruthless inhumanity history had ever known; and African rulers who, following the example of the Arab, made themselves kings and imposed kingship on a people who had known no kings (p.37)

Armah's novel locates the present socio-political and economic woes of the contemporary African societies in the colonial incident of the past when an entirely homogeneous African communities were first invaded by the Arab predators who, at first, arrived like beggars and mendicants but subsequently through cunning and sometime brute force, imposed themselves and their religion on their unsuspecting hospitable local inhabitants. With use of 'askaris' and 'zombies', the Arab enslavers eventually usurped nearly every parts of sub Saharan African communities and established a powerful religious hegemony on their hosts. Following the forceful occupation of local communities, a majority succumbed to the pressure of the Arab predators, while a significant minority left their home land in search of a new environment that could eventually lead them back to the original form. According to Ashaolu, (1986, p.133)

But after an epic-like journey lasting several seasons, they arrived at what at first appeared to them as the promise land. The oppression of the Arab predators which at that time existed only in remembrance was replaced by the monstrosity of the white destroyers from the sea. Working in collusion with the kings and chiefs, and bribing them with presents like alcohol and worthless glittering trinkets, the 'white maggots' succeeded in enslaving the Blacks with more devastating death from their bullets than the Africans ever had to face from the Arabs in moments of attack.

Armah does not spare the Arabs in his sting indictment of colonial over lords. Similarly, in most of Sembene Ousmane's novels and short stories, Islam is portrayed as an avenue whereby priests exploit the natives, children and their parents in the contemporary Muslim societies of Africa. The works also depict how the evolution of Islam destroyed the legitimacy of the pre-colonial kingdoms. It is therefore, common to read in Sembene's fictions the mockery of Islamic holy men. Most of his criticism is targeted at some of the teachings of Islam as well as religious charlatans and distorters of Islam and its institutions. For instance, Sembene employs *White Genesis*, *The Money Order* and similar works of literature to launch a severe attack on the Islamic clerics who are the prime custodian of Islamic doctrines and teachings. His fictions take a radical step to project and reject Islam as the ultimate means of integrating the individual and society in various communities of Africa. His rejection of Islam is firmly rooted in his Materialist interpretation of the impact of religion on the world-view of the postcolonial African society and its approach to the real problem of the modern society. Religion is shown to be powerless in the face of practical problems of hunger, poverty and the law of the state which appear to be on the side of well meaning educated elite. The conflict between religion and the practical reality of life becomes the motif that Sembene explores widely

in most of his fictions. His works undermines the sanctity of Islam, which he links to the secular means of exploitation.

Sembene's characters rise against some of the well known social practices sanctioned by Islam. There is a severe attack on polygamous family set up with the portrayal of it as a retrogressive social practice. Most of the female characters boldly challenge some of the known Islamic family laws as provided for in the holy book right in the presence of religious clerics. Yacine in *Biblical Fourth Wife* demands the return of her virginity when her husband wants a return of dowry in the event of divorce. This obscene language and uncultured demand obviously throw the Islamic jurists into unprecedented confusions. When the jury asks her to refund the dowry paid to her as required by the Islamic law, she says, "very well, you think that is fair. But I will agree on condition that my husband gives me back my virginity". Sembene also appears to have interrogated the maxim that women must be fully devoted and totally submit their souls and bodies to their husbands. The religious teaching that the men will intercede for their wives to secure a place in paradise comes under devastating attack. Spurred by his ardent desire to free women from age-long tradition of passive docility and blind submission to the divine teachings, Sembene creates revolutionary female characters who audaciously challenge their husbands. He presents women characters that stand shoulder to shoulder with men and even lead strike actions as seen in *God's Bit of Wood*. Most of his novels and short stories present women that abandon veil and openly plait their hair in a bouffant style with rings dangling from their ears as well as bell-shaped skirts half knee-length. In this way, Sembene depicts the outlook of Muslim women in a way that totally contradicts what the religion preaches. By presenting such revolutionary female characters in the same society where the likes of Kane uphold the sanctity of Islamic teaching signifies an attempt to build a community of Muslims that is socially different from what Islam envisioned. The implication of this is that colonialism and imperial culture re-configured African Islamic societies in way that distort their distinct social identity.

Conclusion

The essential point that this essay has articulated so far is the disposition of African writers to Islam in the formation of modern African fictions. Apart from being a valuable addition to the growing database of African Islamic literature, the study is also a testimony to the enormity of literary outputs that have remarkably informed the process of islamisation of African literature. The special value which some writers attach to Islam is illustrated with Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and Aminata's *The Beggars' Strike*. The veneration of Islamic mysticism and practices are contrasted with the secular ideologies of selected African writers who reject Islam as the most superior form of civilisation in Africa. These divergent perspectives and ideologies are the social issues that have enriched the art and development of novel in contemporary Africa. The minds and thoughts of the divergent and mutually irreconcilable set of writers as far the place of Islam is concerned in African communities are laid bare. Therefore, the essay revealed the complexities and complicated hybridities that shape contemporary African novels.

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