

Individualism in the African Novel: A Heuristic Paradigm.

Anyadike, Chima

Ph.D. Literature-in-English

Department of English

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria

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Abstract:

In this study, patterns formed by highly individualistic characters in the African novel are investigated. It is hoped that firstly, this will throw some light on the problem of how the same societies that need strong individualistic characters for change and development, at the same time need to place certain limits on individualism if they are to muster adequate collective response to problems like colonialism, racism and corruption which cannot be eliminated by lone acts of courage. Secondly, the study also suggests an important dimension in the criteria for the criticism and evaluation of character in the African novel. Lucien Goldmann's formulation regarding the relationship between the themes and forms of literary texts and the moments of social and historical consciousness provide in part the methodological basis of analysis; however, Fanon's analyses of the moments of the colonized consciousness are also significantly relied upon.

The idea of conflict and its resolution is central to the line of investigation. In the first part, novels like Mofolo's, *Chaka*. Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart* and Abraham's A. *wreath for Udomo*, in which highly individualistic protagonists locate the source of the conflicts not in themselves but the society are studied. The consequence of these characters adopting more or less messianic roles which more often than not, lend them to tragic ends are clearly delineated. In the second section, attention is devoted to novels like Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and Malick Fall's *The wound* in which protagonists, more or less aware that they have internalised the contradictions of their societies in themselves, recognise that they are part of the problem. Because of their limited perceptions of the nature and scope of these contradictions, their individualism becomes perverted in ways that lead to inauthentic irrelevant lives. In the final section, attention is paid to protagonists in novels like Beti's *Remember Reuben*, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of wood* whose actions, in the face of these contradictions, are not like those of the great lonely heroes seeking to lead their people to salvation; rather they are actions arising from the collective struggle to freedom.

These lead to the conclusion that although there is a diversity and distinctiveness of individual expression among Africa novelists, they operate from the same mental structure that result from similar historical, socioeconomic conditionings. Consequently, they either deliberately or subliminally, subordinate narrative and aesthetic strategies which writers use to highlight individualism in other traditions of novel writing, to the exploration of group or collective experience in Africa.

Keywords: Individualism/ racism/ colonialism/ corruption/ conflict/ heuristic paradigm

Supervisor: Biodun Jeyifo

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