

// CULTURAL CONFLICT

IN

EAST AFRICAN LITERATURE //

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"A thesis submitted in fulfilment
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the University of Nairobi".

1980

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This is a study of East African literature in which we analyse the nature and consequences of European colonialism on African institutions and personality. Operating from the general title of 'Cultural Conflict', we identify the crucial institutions that were employed by the colonizer in his concerted effort to subordinate and exploit the African. It is inevitable that anyone treating the subject of cultural conflict should consider colonialism as the essential, unique phenomenon in the creation of this conflict. No other factor has had such a fundamental and prolonged impact on the life of the people over the last century.

In our exploration of the crucial factors of disruption emanating from colonialism, it becomes increasingly clear that the basic cause of conflict was not merely the fact of two cultures coming into contact. More specifically, it was the forceful imposition of the one over the other, its presumed superiority and hence the self-imposed mission of the colonizing power 'to civilize' and convert the colonized indigenous people, thereby transforming them to a desired image.

The Kenyan situation, like that of Central and Southern Africa is made unique by the factor of white settlement and the accompanying destruction of the economic base of the African. It is inevitable, therefore, that the two leading East African writers - Okot p'Bitek and Ngugi wa Thiong'o should vary in their handling of the theme of Cultural Conflict. In Ngugi's writing, the conflict goes beyond the inferiorization of the African educated, as he highlights more the economic exploitation that results from land alienation for white settlement. Both the writers are, however, in agreement as to the way in which cultural influence was seen and used by the colonial power as the most effective way to safeguard their long term economic and political interests. When one looks closely at the colonial impact, it becomes clear that the surest, least costly and most subtle way for the colonial power to maintain control was through influencing the mind and the sense of values. The values of the colonial power were, therefore, depicted as the ultimate in human achievement. The colonized people were expected and encouraged, to aspire to acquire all the attributes of the coloniser and at the same time to consider themselves fortunate that they were associated with the particular colonial power. Followed to its logical conclusion, this line of influence leads to the state of mind where the colonized people are happy and indeed proud to 'belong' to

the sphere of influence of their particular colonial power. At this point, the ultimate objective of the colonizer is achieved.

The African people, are, however, not empty receptacles only too willing to swallow wholesale submission to the will of the white man, abandoning their own 'primitive' self. Indeed the bulk of modern African writing on cultural conflict is dominated by the negative portrayal, using satire and other techniques, of the African character who so wholly accepts the white man's value system and rejects his traditional way of life.

The primary search of my thesis is, therefore, concerned with the varied response of the East African writer to the theme of cultural conflict. One view is that the cultural alienation of the African was so thorough and so complete, it requires similar aggression from the African to dismantle the colonial socio-economic and cultural structure if the African is to liberate himself from the colonial yoke. In this process, the past of African societies needs to be recreated, to reassure the African that his base was not all darkness, it had dignity and it was meaningful. The massive task required for the decolonization of the African in body, mind and soul is borne out by the fact that long after political

independence has been achieved, African leaders and intellectuals continue to operate from the same colonial bases and structures. The western educated elite, alienated from the masses by their missionary upbringing and orientation, continue to depend heavily on their European advisers - 'experts', and technical aid loaded with strings. In their relationship with the ordinary people, the educated, who now hold the reins of power are seen as behaving just like the European colonizer.

The selected East African writer has responded to the situation with both sensitivity and originality. He is at the one extreme, Okot p'Bitek, lamenting the African loss in terms of everyday, common human values and relationships, calling for outright rejection of European values that have no meaning to the African situation. And as if to demonstrate the superiority of African thought, art and style, Okot exploits the traditional form of song in his satirization of the European way of life, its unsuitability and meaninglessness for the African experience. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, leading East African novelist, traces the cultural struggle right from the first Euro-African contact, through the colonial period, right through to the post independence scene. Always optimistic that the oppressed man is capable of redeeming himself, Ngugi engages in a painful, arduous search for an ideology that will rescue the masses of African people from colonialist and neo-colonialist exploitation and domination. The extreme of these two views is that taken by the 'liberated', prolific East African poet and

critic, Taban lo Liyong who, to use his own words, refuses to 'cry over spilt milk' and boldly attempts to chart out a master plan for the restoration of the African character in history, using the white man's own tools. In Taban's view, the African past has no relevance, nothing to offer to the modern world of machine-gun technology. Taban advocates the ruthless adaptation and application of modern technology if Africa is to ever take her place among the nations of the world. Unlike Ngugi and Okot who take great pains in the recreation of the past in their attempt to restore the African character's dignity and self-respect, Taban lacks sympathy for a glorious past that could so easily bend to the wishes of 'wicked' colonialism. Taban, however, does discover traditional African literary techniques that are superior to any the west has to offer which he advocates with great enthusiasm.

It is the conclusion of this thesis that just as the natural evolution of the indigenous African culture was interrupted by the conscious and deliberate action of colonialism; the renaissance of a truly African culture, following the passage of colonialism, can only come through a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of the African. In order to develop this consciousness, it is essential for the African not only to understand but 'to feel' the method of operation and the effect of colonialism on his total life.

In bringing about this consciousness; this awareness; the first generation of African writers; Okot, Ngugi, Taban and others have a key role to play. It will be clear, however, that although all these writers have a common message to convey; that although they are all issuing the same basic call that: the dead, the living, and the unborn will unite to rebuild the destroyed shrines, each one has his own different approach and a different emphasis.