Review

Ambanasom’s *Son of the Native Soil* and the Western Concept of a Tragic Hero

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The essay, “Ambanasom’s *Son of the Native Soil* and the Western Concept of a Tragic Hero” discusses the view that although African and Western Literatures are fundamentally different as they exhibit or represent radically distinct cultural values, they nevertheless share some common notions. The concept of a tragic hero is one of those convergent spots where the two literatures meet. With this in mind, the essay examines in detail, Aristotle’s and Shakespeare’s concepts of a tragic hero and demonstrates how the ideas, which are exploited in *Macbeth* are similarly used in Ambanasom’s *Son of the Native Soil*, against the backdrop of rich African culture and colours.

Key word. Son of the Native Soil, Western Concept of a Tragic Hero.

INTRODUCTION

Although African written literature is generally considered as an offshoot of its orature, with unique values which sharply contrast those of Western literature, some features of the latter are traceable in traditional African literary texts. There has been the tendency to view African literature as “an instrument of protest against colonial exploitation and cultural domination” (Nkengasong, 2004) in Samuel and Wole (2006) “and the Theatre of Desolate Reality” argues that there has been the tendency to view African literature as “an instrument of protest against colonial exploitation and cultural domination” However, modern African literature has evolved beyond protest. Even if African authors from time to time take divergent views on some internal issues, which Breitinger describes as “the never-ending debate on the language issue in African literature” (2003), modern African literature had long crossed the borders of nationalist struggles and is now moving onto new heights while exhibiting the rich cultural values that the colonial presence had deigned to eclipse. In its postcoloniality and postmodernity, modern African literature seeks to grapple with the exploration of perspectives on black identities within the continent and beyond. It is not only expected to rise in value to the level of other world literatures, it should be viewed as serving the same humanity purposes like Western literature and others. It therefore, has to transport African social, political, economic and religious heritage beyond borders onto the ends of the earth. On these grounds, this essay examines the notion of a tragic hero from Western and African perspectives, in a bit to illustrate how both literatures interestingly share some common values.

African writers have realised that Western literary influences could never after all replace African values, or that ‘colonial exploitation and cultural domination’ from the West died with the decline of imperialism. With this in mind, African authors think African literature must come to maturity or enter a ‘golden age’ when writers have to desist from leaking past colonial sores and take responsibility to advance their civilization. M’Baye in “Colonisation and African Modernity in Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure*” argues that African modernity should not be narrowed down to Paul Gilroy’s opinion that “Black culture is being antithetical to modernity” (2006). M’Baye contends that “Gilroy’s definition of Black modernity as simply a Western phenomenon, as if Africans and other Blacks from the non-western hemisphere had not produced valuable cultures and identity formations that fit popular notions of the...
modern” does not give a true or honest picture of the African situation. In his opinion, “Gilroy’s exclusion of the role that African intellectuals played in the international forms of nationalism and resistance movements that Gilroy found to be central in the history of Black Atlantic and Black modernity” may be myopic. This argument is in consonant with Fanon’s argument that “the claims of the native intellectual are no luxury but a necessity in any coherent programme” (2004). The misleading notions of the West about Black people and their culture is regrettable because colonialist created the impression that “colonialism was to drive into the natives’ heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality” (Fanon, 2004). Wa Thiong’o had seen this danger which he calls “Cultural imperialism” and gives out the following warning to the whole African society, “Cultural imperialism in the era of neo-colonialism can be a more dangerous cancer because it can take new subtle forms” (1989). Perhaps that is why one of the monuments of African literature, Achebe observes that “the time has come when we must assume responsibility for our problems and our situation in the world and resist the temptation to blame other people” (2004). He goes further in his argument and adds, “whatever colonialism may have done in the past, the very fact of a commonwealth conference today is sufficient repudiation of it, is indeed a symbol of a new relationship of equality between peoples who were once masters and servants”. This thinking that African culture from which African literature sprang would still have stood its ground and survived Western imperialism, in keeping with the natural phenomenon of the rise and fall of empires and nations, is equally plausible. African Americans would not have existed if it were just so easy to completely cut off a people from their roots, for history can only be distorted and not extinct. Above all, moving African literature positively forward is paramount for new generation of writers. This modern writers who think African literary heritage must cross national and continental borders are those Chin refers to as a few who “have preferred that we chart an alternate, clearer vision for African writing - with the impetus of its historical cultural specifics – which requires that one must needs recover some flickering remnants of arcane light (ancestral wisdom) for a further enlightened posterity” (2008).

Chin argues, “if our writing so continues to incline in the direction of frenzied taxonomies, it will be forcing itself into an ever blurring compartment that always has Europe’s and America’s closed guess-works as exemplars of literary, cultural or philosophical directions”. However, he seems to console his spirit in the thought that “we should be glad that some writers of the eighties are not quite like the fifties and sixties generation. African writing has changed as can be observed in post-apartheid South Africa portrayed by Kani’s Nothing but the Truth. Kani (2002) embarks on new themes as he describes and exposes the short-comings of reconciliation. Many people, especially political leaders, fail to understand that there is need for reconciliation between Blacks and Blacks. Selfish desires and corruption are recurrent in African leaders and keep them separated from the masses, making it difficult for true love and reconciliation among them. For instance, in Nothing But the Truth, Sipho sees Themba’s political activities as fake because he knows what his brother is out for. “He was in the struggle, but on his terms. He got what he wanted from the struggle – money, fame and women”.

Similarly, Nkengasong (2004) in Across the Mongolo shifts from colonial and neo-colonial song to embrace new challenges of the conflict between Black leadership and the masses. For example, Ngwe the protagonist in the novel strives to fulfil his academic and social aspirations against the backdrop of repressive and corrupt government policy of the Republic of Kamangola, designed particular to crush Anglophones. Nkengasong in his novel is concerned with the way Anglophones in leadership positions treat their fellow kinsmen or brothers. Ngwe the ambitious university student is brutalised by the English speaking police, who ought to protect Anglophone students’ interest. He abuses Ngwe and his mates just because they are identified as Anglophones, “Anglofou, esclave, idiot, salaud, Angol!”. Also, the repression and enslavement policy inflicted on the Anglophones is evident by the statement, “All those who had PhD were asked by ministerial order to study and defend the Doctorat d’Etat before they would be recognised and given main courses”.

Most Anglophone writers are inspired by this nationalist consciousness and a sense of liberation of the Anglophone masses. Awasom (2004) in his review of Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon, states that “the book is a critical analysis of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon and is constructed against a background of political liberation in Cameroon since 1990”. In the same vein, United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services Cameroon, reveal that, Over the last decades feelings of political marginalisation and discrimination have grown stronger in the English speaking provinces, leading to the foundation of the various political movements including the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC) and the affiliated Southern Cameroon Youth League (SCYL) in the early 1990s.

Eko (2003) shares the same view in his effort to trace the role of the Cameroonian English-language press in creating awareness of the “Anglophone problem”. These citations evidently point to the fact that African writers are moving away from the old habits of crying for spill milk, to new perspectives where, they have begun to embrace innovations in themes and style.
The Common notion of a tragic hero in Western and African Literature

New perspectives in African literature which have brought “equality between peoples who were once masters and servants” might extend to Western and African ‘texts’ which comparatively share similar artistic and philosophical concepts. Worth examining is the prolific Anglophone Cameroon writer Shadrack Ambanasom, who, in Son of the Native Soil projects Achamba’s tragedy against a traditional African background. Set in the North West Region of Cameroon, the pathetic tragic scene and the fate of the protagonist are artistically woven to reflect Aristotle’s concept of tragedy and the tragic hero. Ambanson’s refined craftsmanship is evident in the way he endows his tragic hero with qualities that propel him higher than any other in the community of Dudum. Here Ambanson treads upon the farthest bounds of nature and passion. He imbibes in Achamba an outstanding personality, accompanied by the enabling tragic atmosphere that leads the protagonist to his treacherous murder at the height of his fame. The author or the society catapults Achamba onto the height of his glory, only to “betray him in deeper consequence” (Colin, 2009). There are strong similarities of the tragic vents that surround the tragic heroes in Ambanson’s Son of the Native Soil and Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Regarding Macbeth, Alexandre-Marie Colin Observes that,

Macbeth is from a tragic standpoint the most sublime and the most impressive as an acting play. Nothing so terrible has been written since the Eumenides of Aeschylus, and nothing in dramatic literature - not even the slaying of Agamemnon - is depicted with such awesome intensity as the murder of Duncan.

Reading Shakespeare’s Macbeth side by side Ambanasom’s Son of the Native Soil might seem like examining monuments of two great cultures together. Hazlitt’s (2005), comment about Macbeth is typical and relevant to Son of the Native Soil where he posits that Macbeth has “the force of things upon the mind. What he represents is brought home to the bosom as a part of our experience, implanted in the memory as if we had known the places, persons, and things of which he treats”. In the same manner, an African reader would identify with the cultural colourings in Son of the Native Soil, be it the squirrel hunt episode, long standing land disputes and local political tussles or the typical setting of Akaya’s homestead:

Patches of light filtered through cracks in the wall and little opening on the door and windows…A pig was grunting in its sty, while in their pen, goats bleated. Cocks crowed repeatedly; dogs barked, and birds warbled in joy. In the midst of this animal chorus could be heard voices of early risers, especially raffia-wine tapers.

Ambanasom’s typical African background exemplified by the setting of Akaya’s compound is closely related in colour and taste, to Oputa’s compound in Chin Ce’s Children of Koloko:

Walking through the open yard from the uncemented corridors to the rooms, you took in the mess of children left to lie by the door mouth of that querulous mother of Tukur. The flies droned noisily over the droppings of chicks and dirt from washed dishes left to scatter about in the pattering rain. Then somewhere beside the gutter, filled and darkened to the brim, was Nunu’s year old half-sister doing her toilet in the wet ground.

The squirrel hunt in Son of the Native Soil ties closely with Yoyo’s adventure with ants in Children of Koloko. These sceneries play the same role in both novels; that of projecting African cultural values.

It will be necessary to consider, briefly, some of the principles of a tragic hero as outlined by Aristotle and exemplified in Shakespeare’s tragedies. It has been argued that Shakespeare’s notion of the tragic hero strays slightly from Aristotle’s. Some scholars even hold the view that there is absolutely no connection between Shakespeare’s and Aristotle’s concepts of the tragic flaw. As Hammersmith (2009) argues, “One of the more perplexing puzzles in teaching Shakespeare is that students still bring with them the conviction that Shakespearean tragic character is grounded firmly and eternally in the pseudo-Aristotelian concept of the ‘tragic flaw.’ This is such an odd mistake, and such a pervasive one”. Hammersmith further argues that “Aristotle’s Poetics affected Elizabethan and Jacobean England scarcely at all”. However, the relationship between Aristotle’s Poetics and Shakespeare’s idea of the tragic hero cannot be completely discarded as there exists some traces of such a connection. Other critics think that “Shakespeare probably did not know Greek tragedy directly, he would have been familiar with the Latin adaptations of Greek drama by the Roman …playwright Seneca…Both Senecan and Renaissance tragedy was influenced by the theory of tragedy found in Aristotle’s Poetics” (Schwartz, 2005).

The difference, nevertheless, between Aristotle’s and Shakespeare’s ideas lies in the fact that Aristotle holds that a tragic hero must be consistently ‘good’ without any trace of villainy in his character, while Shakespeare does not see in those lines. Aristotle, for example, would not consider Macbeth a tragic hero because he is inherently evil, and so deserves his punishment or tragic fall. In other words, his fall cannot genuinely attract sympathy from the audience because of his wicket act of killing Duncan. This, not withstanding, renaissance principles of tragedy remain fundamentally the same as stated in Poetics. Aristotle explains that a tragic hero must be a character of great and noble status, “not like us”. The hero must occupy a ‘high’ position in the society, coupled with nobility and virtue as part of his innate character. He holds that the tragic hero, although great, is far from...
Achamba is said to have "chocolate coloured young man of about thirty", "tall", "slender", and "handsome," Achamba’s ‘maker’ wrought in him admirable and outstanding traits that erased the stigma of his humble background. Described in delicate expressions as ‘a dashing gentleman with a certain romantic air around him...always smartly dressed’. Achamba is one of the patrons of the Dudum Parents'/Teachers’ Association. He would appear during important events in stylish dark suit, a sky blue shirt and a black tie. He has a wardrobe that contains ‘well-tailored suits for special occasions.’ Achamba’s elegant appearance and eloquent speech at the Parents/Teachers Movement attract ceaseless applause from the expectant population, and raise him literary above ordinary human. His degree from the University of Yaounde does not only place him on the highest rung of academic ladder, but fetches him the job of a secondary school teacher, a prestigious position which gives him an imposing and conspicuous social status in the whole of Dudum. He is a man of the people naturally fit to occupy any post that demands popularity. One of his kinsmen suggests, “let us make Achamba not only President of this meeting but also President of the New Dudum Cultural and Development Association, which henceforth will embrace all of us here today, all Dudum people wherever they may be in Cameroon”. Achamba wins the confidence of his people and becomes the President of the Dudum Cultural and Development Association by Acclamation.

There was none to rival him in Dudum, for he had scored a series of firsts: he was the first President of the DCDA, first potential sub-section elections candidate from the new Dudum constituency, first university graduate from Dudum, and the lucky husband of the first Dudum girl to have graduated from college. Achamba’s fame thus soared.

By every consideration, Achamba meets the high social status requirements of a tragic hero. He is conscious of his fame and is self confident like Yoyo in Children of Koloko, who tells himself: “After all my CV was quite impressive. I had finished college, done a stint of press work, joined the national defence academy...”

Aristotle holds that a tragic hero must be ‘good.’ What qualifies a character as good would require putting together, a number of character traits that describe him as such. Achamba’s goodness is qualified with expressions such as peaceful, honest, and kind. As a peace maker, he puts in the last iota of his energy to bring together all progressive Dudum people for the sake of peace and development. This effort only adds to his most remarkable achievement of reconciling the Chiefs of Akan and Anjong whose relationship had deteriorated beyond mending limits. Even the chieftaincy crisis, which had become an incurable sore in Dudum, could be resolved, thanks to Achamba’s research efforts on the issue, in the National Archives in Yaounde. His reconciliation initiatives also bring on board the main opposing political figures from the two villages. He takes advantage of the visit of the D.O. to assemble both parties at Anjong School to draft a welcome address. Achamba’s desire to achieve peace in Dudum seems to transcend personal interests and emotions. For instance, he is ready to sacrifice his marriage for the Akan/Anjong peace process when he remarks to his fiancé, “I’m conscious of the fact that our two villages are larger units than two simple families; otherwise don’t you see the beauty of our marrying to heal the wounds of the quarrelling villages?” Achamba’s goodness is explained in terms of his kindness to his people. He helps his kinsmen materially; participates in the construction of roads; advises people and the Chiefs on issues of development; educates the youths on issues relating to obedience and hard work; pays regular visits and gives money to fellow villagers in detention at Mbambe, a gesture no other person initiates.

Since honesty is a rare commodity among political figures, especially to those who understand that politics is a game of interest, Achamba’s blond honesty in handling the Akan/Anjong conflict, particularly on the question of which village should be chosen as the capital of Dudum, inscribes him in bold letters as a benevolent character. He disagrees with Abago on the subject because he “would not selfishly advocate Akan as the headquarters of Dudum”. The disagreement further deepens because Achamba would not go in for anything that stands “in complete defiance of the facts of nature and history”. His search for facts in the National Archives is, firstly, an inept proof of honesty, and secondly, a means of
obtaining lasting peace. It takes more than ordinary honesty to resist the convincing tongue and threats of a political fox like Abaago, let alone, to pass verdict against one’s village of origin. Achamba’s immeasurable degree of honesty is his ‘harmatia’ because his murderers get offened by this uprightness and plan to eliminate him in the cruelest manner.

Regarding tragic flaw, Hammersmith asserts that “Macbeth’s tragic flaw is his ambition ... Othello’s is his credulity (or his jealousy), ... Hamlet’s is his inclination to think too much ... Lear’s is his pride”. For Achamba, it is his extreme honesty. He blindly depends on his conscience and this leads him to the fatal error of misjudgement. He does not only fail to realise that his enemies cannot read the content of his mind on his face, but fails to understand that his enemies unlike him, have no conscience at all. Achamba does not die of carelessness as his father had feared. He sufficiently keeps away from his enemies, especially, Abaago, thereby avoiding any possibility of poisoning. That is why his assassins could only succeed to kill him in his own house. Achamba’s death could only be avoided if he heeded his wife’s advice not to visit Akan, or remain in Mbambe on the advice of his father, Embuta. Achamba’s lack of judgment of what his enemies are capable of is very severe that even his level of education and experience could not help him make a leap over this tragic weakness. He falls prey to the ‘semi-educated’ treacherous character Abaago, whose name and character are similar to Shakespeare’s Iago. Abaago’s intrigues and political manoeuvres are similar to those of Fathead in *Children of Koloko*. Like Abaago, Fathead makes villagers believe him even when he does everything to serve his own interest. These two local politicians in their different contexts represent the modern African politicians. Abaago’s praise singers adore him like African politicians. Abaago’s trial before the village council instigated by Abaago is just the beginning of the serious plot against his life. Abaago tells the village council that “Achamba, like the ungrateful child in the fable, has bitten the finger that fed him and also stabbed in the back the foster mother to whom he owes his very existence”. Achamba’s death could only be avoided if he heeded his wife’s advice not to visit Akan, or remain in Mbambe on the advice of his father, Embuta. Achamba’s lack of judgment of what his enemies are capable of is very severe that even his level of education and experience could not help him make a leap over this tragic weakness. He falls prey to the ‘semi-educated’ treacherous character Abaago, whose name and character are similar to Shakespeare’s Iago. Abaago’s trial before the village council instigated by Abaago is just the beginning of the serious plot against his life. Abaago tells the village council that “Achamba, like the ungrateful child in the fable, has bitten the finger that fed him and also stabbed in the back the foster mother to whom he owes his very existence”. Achamba’s death could only be avoided if he heeded his wife’s advice not to visit Akan, or remain in Mbambe on the advice of his father, Embuta. Achamba’s lack of judgment of what his enemies are capable of is very severe that even his level of education and experience could not help him make a leap over this tragic weakness. He falls prey to the ‘semi-educated’ treacherous character Abaago, whose name and character are similar to Shakespeare’s Iago.

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The disorders in the natural realm experienced in the night preceding Achamba’s murder are similar to those in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The night before Achamba’s assassination is memorable as the most destructive night in history, a villager observes:

*It was as if the den of the wild and undomesticated elements had been thrown open and the chained forces let loose. The furious rain, the violent storm, the angry thunder, and the intermittent lightning — all of these joined in their elemental rage to make of that night one of the most terrifying in the history of the clan.*

The supernatural events are symbolic in the two texts in the way they uniquely announce or foretell the disappearance of great personalities from the scene. The supernatural amplifies the theme of death. A Dudum man remarks, “Remember, we are told, a similar catastrophe occurred prior to the death of the greatest Chief Dudum has ever had, Ambikoh, the great grandson of Ngiekum”. This happened so many years ago and nobody in the present generation witnessed the event. The Old Man’s memories go back seventy years, but nothing he can remember compares what has happened during this nigh. It imitates the old man in *Macbeth* who recounts his experience of the night of Duncan’s death, “I have seen/ Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night/ Hath trifled former knowings".
The incident that precedes Achamba’s death can only be associated with the departure of great figures in the likes of Ambikoh. He equates Achamba with Ambikoh, the greatest Chief Dudum has ever had. It is interesting to note that similar visions and hallucinations are seen in the nights that precede the tragedy in both texts. Visions and hallucinations are recurrent in Macbeth and serve as reminders of Macbeth’s and Lady Macbeth’s joint culpability for the growing body count. When he is about to kill Duncan, Macbeth sees a dagger floating in the air, covered with blood and pointed toward the king’s chamber. “Is this a Dagger, which I see before me, / The Handle toward my Hand? Come, let me clutch thee.” The dagger represents the bloody course on which Macbeth is about to embark. Later, he sees Banquo’s ghost sitting in a chair at a feast, pricking his conscience by mutely reminding him that he murdered his former friend.

In like manner, two days before Achamba’s murder, Embuta has a dream which foretells the calamity that is going to befall his son, though unknown to him, keeps Embuta worried. “Two days ago I had a very disturbing dream, a dream in which I wept...That dream is portentous. ...my father was killed on a battle field at Edom”. The dream evidently ties with Achamba’s death, because the dreamer is worried the more, when he sees Achamba. “It is ominous. That is why I was worried when I saw you”. Achamba himself experiences a scenario of his own eventual death, which he is unable to explain, evocative of the hallucinations in Macbeth.

As he lay shivering under the blanket he was convinced he heard, in the midst of the savage sounds outside, people crying or dancing; he thought he heard people screaming for help; he thought he heard women and children wailing; he thought he heard the notes of the ndek beating a mournful funeral message; he thought he heard Echunjei, heavy with pregnancy and drenched to the bones, beating frantically at his door for him to open and let her in ...This was unbearable.

Achamba’s vision in this passage is a premonition of his own murder and funeral ceremony to occur shortly after this experience. The passage reminds one of the phantom voices Macbeth hears after murdering Duncan. He thought he heard a voice say “Sleep no more! / ‘Macbeth does murder sleep,’ the innocent sleep...”, “Glamis hath murder’d sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more!” The difference is that this voice is heard after the execution of Duncan, while Achamba hears voices before he is assassinated. The unnatural in Son of the Native Soil is evident in the sacred tree around Dudum’s falls, which lies buried in a landslide. “It was supernatural; it was the work of the gods or the ancestors...This portends something terrible for Dudum”. Indeed it is a bad omen. Also, the inexplicable feelings that Echunjei has about Achamba’s homecoming visit ties with the ‘bad predictions’ suggested by traditional casting of the kola by Achamba and friends in the market. The kola predicts some kind of evil that looms in the air but no one knows exactly what it is or what the future holds. This brings to memory Banquo’s experience before Macbeth murders Duncan where he remarks to his son, “A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose! Just like Achamba’s friends in the market, or Echunjei who feels disturbed about the unknown that hangs in the air, Banquo does not say just what thoughts are disturbing his sleep. Finally, the bloody scene where Achamba is seen lying in the pool of his blood in his house is reminiscent of Duncan’s bloody murder in his castle. The tragedy in both cases takes place in the night and only discovered the following morning.

Conclusion

African literature is developing in themes and style to match the growing needs of African civilisation and culture. African literature, in this regard would continue to exhibit shared values with other literatures, especially, Western literature. In this advancement, African literature nevertheless remains unique in its idiosyncrasies. However closely related, the circumstances surrounding Ambanasom’s and Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, Achamba as a character is fundamentally different from Duncan or Macbeth. Duncan, a graceful king commanding a kingdom is surrounded by an atmosphere different from Achamba’s. Duncan’s gorgeous castle, horses and guards create solemnity that is different from Embuta’s humble hut. Besides, “a monstrous crime is committed; Duncan, a venerable old man, and the best of kings, is, in defenceless sleep, under the hospital’s roof, murdered by his subject, whom he has loaded with honours and rewards” (Colin, 2000). Furthermore, Macbeth’s military prowess, courage and bravery, tested and proven in the current battle constitute significant distinctions between him and Achamba. Their disparity in terms of ‘harmatia’ or tragic flaw is worth mentioning. It is vaulting ambition that lurks in Macbeth and pushes him to a series of murders and consequently to his tragic end. Meanwhile, it is Achamba’s blind honesty that exposes him to charges of treason before the village council. Perhaps, Achamba’s fate is in keeping with the traditional African adage that ‘no one wrestles with the gods and goes away without a broken arm.’

REFERENCE


