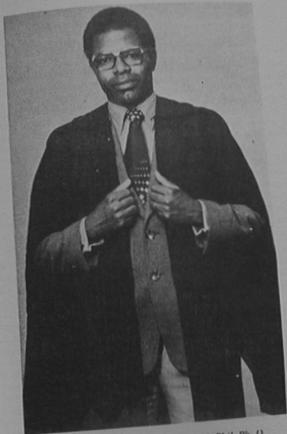


YAOUNDE UNIVERSITY AWARDS THE FIRST EVER PH.D. SUPERVISED  
BY  
Dr. Bernard Fonlon, Professor of Literature\*

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*Dr. Tala Kashim Ibrahim, M.A ; M. Phil, Ph. D.*

\* Curiously Dr. Fonlon was the first Cameroonian to receive the Ph.D. back in 1960 from the National University of Ireland.

## ABSTRACT

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STRONG INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY IN SELECTED ANGLOPHONE NOVELS.

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In the history of the evolution of society there exists the phenomenon where the individual dissociates himself from the masses and assumes the role of the keen social observer and critic. His importance grows with the development of society. But, instead of acknowledging his value and encouraging him to carry out his self-imposed task of social reconstruction society fears and distrusts him. In fact it is sometimes so anxious to rid itself of him that it is even prepared to murder him. Yet it is clear that, without him, society will lose its sense of direction and degenerate into chaos.

The Anglophone countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, like other Third World countries have, since their initial exposure to the west, been undergoing rapid social and cultural change. There are three main stages in this change: the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. Each of these stages in the social and cultural change has produced its own kind of strong individual who, more often than not, has been put aside or frustrated by the society for fear that he would disrupt the established order.

This study sets out to examine the fate of the strong individual of vision in a changing society as portrayed in selected novels from Anglophone countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. It also attempts to demonstrate that the content of the novels from these countries is largely determined by ecological factors.

Chapter One, «Theoretical Considerations», defines the sociological terms used and shows how they are applied to literature. It examines the similarities and dissimilarities between fiction from Anglophone countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean and, by so doing, establishes a basis for comparison. It describes the different stages in the evolution of the society of these novels and shows how each stage in the development of the society helps to alienate the strong individual further from the group. It also demonstrates how the post-colonial society has become materialistic, corrupt, and morally insensitive, and how these in turn, force the strong individual to take one of three stands: to join the socially and morally corrupt, to seek refuge in withdrawal and passivity, to commit himself to moral agitation. Finally, it demonstrates that the strong individual is usually caught up in a «sequence of temporary acceptance, growing opposition, rejection, suffering, dereliction, vindication».

Chapter Two treats *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *The Only Son*, and *Danda*, novels which are concerned with the first stage in the change, that is, with the initial exposure of the Third world to the West. At this stage in the social and cultural change, the individual identity is just beginning to show signs of breaking away from the group. As a result, the protagonists, Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Chuiaku, and Danda subscribe, for the most part, to the norms and values of the society which they criticize. They do not dissociate themselves from their society even though they manifest disconcerting tendencies towards non-conformity. They are therefore precursors of the strong individual.

*Kanthapuro*, *In the Castle of my Skin*, *Scorpion Orchid*, and *A Walk in the Night* considered in Chapter Three deal with the second stage in the social and cultural change. The break between the individual identity and the group which was foreshadowed in Chapter Two has now become a reality and the strong individual no longer forms part of the establishment he criticizes. Whereas his goal in the novels discussed in Chapter Two is mainly cultural that of rescuing the heroic values of his society — his goal in the novels discussed in this chapter is mainly political; that is, he sets out to put an end to years of mental, physical and economic subjugation of one race by another. Thus, the colonial administration receives the brunt of his attacks in his fight for the total emancipation of the colonized. Since such an individual can disrupt the society, he is feared and distrusted by the establishment.

Chapter Four focuses on *Season of Anomy*, *The Mimic Men*, *Fragments*, and *Petals of Blood* set in the post-colonial era which is the third stage in the change. With the common enemy, colonialism, now removed, or at least distanced, the role of the strong individual ceases to be political and becomes moral. The corrupt establishment being attacked is no longer white but black or brown as the case may be. Thus, the post-colonial society needs the strong individual much more than colonial and pre-colonial societies. Yet it is the post-colonial society which has developed the most subtle means of getting rid of the strong individual.

The strong individual in the Afro-Asian fiction considered is presented both as a scapegoat and a saviour, and his fate is similar to the fate of the other messiahs before him. What finally vindicates him and justifies his individuality is the extent to which he resists the seduction to conformism.

It is important to note the similarities which exist between the Afro-Asian writers considered and the strong individuals who are the products of their imagination. Both have their dreams and ideals. They have developed a keen sense of values, and are acquainted with the whole range of possibilities of human life. They are therefore able to look upon the complexities of life with much greater understanding, insight, and sympathy. They both care where others are content to let things slide. Finally, they are dedicated to the service of their community. Unfortunately, they are scarce in society, and where they happen to exist, they find it extremely difficult to operate.

The conclusion drawn at the end of this study is that by concerning themselves with the problems of social and cultural change in their society and by preoccupying themselves with the plight of the strong individual, the Afro-Asian writers considered have demonstrated that the future course of society will be determined in part, by the ideals of the strong individual which they, as writers, share.

*Late last month, a four-man international jury convened at the Yaounde University amphitheatre to bear an alumnus defend his thesis; a doctoral thesis—the first ever to be awarded by this 17-year-old academic institution.*

*The president of the jury was the renowned writer and critic of African literary works, Professor Gerald Holyoake Moore currently professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.*

We met Prof. Moore at his hotel suite shortly after the thesis defence for an exclusive interview. Excerpts:

*Cameroon Tribune* : Professor Moore, you were president of the four-man jury that awarded a doctorate degree to Mr. Tala Kashim Ibrahim, a lecturer at the Yaounde University. Why had Yaounde University to wait this long, nearly 20 years, to award its first doctorate?

*Professor Moore* : All the necessary structures were not yet in place. Time has now come to award the doctorate, at least as far as the Department of African Literature is concerned. There are now enough professors to supervise various fields of research.

*C.T.* : But the library conditions, I hear, are still restricted.

*Prof. Moore* : Library conditions may be restricted as you say but Mr. Tala, for all I know, travelled a lot. He came to Nigeria and also went to Europe to assemble the necessary documentation. In any case, he is not a new-comer to the field of academics and research. He already had the M.A. and the M. Phil. We would certainly not have awarded the Ph. D. if we had any doubts concerning the quality of the work and the maturity of the candidate.

*C.T.* : In your citation you said that the thesis "has made an important contribution to the knowledge and understanding of African fiction." How original was this contribution?

*Prof. Moore* : Originality in the arts is not as obvious as say in the physical sciences. In literature for instance, originality is likely to lie in the questions you ask than in the work itself. It is different from Mathematics, physics or chemistry. The only way in which you could make originality in literature comparable with mathematics is in the questions asked and the answers found.

*C.T.* : After Dr. Tala, who else? Do you anticipate another long period of hibernation or has Dr. Tala opened the flood-gates, in other words, is there going to be a rush or not?

*Prof. Moore* : There seem to be a number of promising candidates working for the Masters and the Ph.D. Tala's performance, surely an encouragement to many more to come, but I do not foresee a swamp; not immediately.

*C.T.* : One has the impression that the new generation of African writers, including many of the old-school activists are tending to be more conformist than before the pre-independence years. What do you say?

*Prof. Moore* : It is the opposite. African writers are becoming more radical instead. Truly, there was a short lull during the years immediately following independence, but they have since become more radical and critical of things around them. Take Wole Soyinka, James Ngugi or even the young South African writer Alex La Guma

*C.T.* : But Chinua Achebe was all silent during a critical period in his nation's history — 1 mean during the 13 years the army was in power in Nigeria including the time of the civil war.

*Prof. Moore* : Well, Achebe is a different type of writer. He is a novelist. There is no way writers could be conformist per se. Conform to what?

There is not just one truth or reality but many, not just one philosophical option but many. So, what do you want the writer to conform to? He is free to sing the praise of this or that system if he is convinced it is good or to criticize it, if he thinks it needs to be improved or changed. After all I don't see why the writer should be expected to be completely aloof from the emotions and expectations of others. He is part and parcel of the social structure. At times, you could best crystallize in writing only that which you have experienced personally. Many writers have sacrificed their lives for causes they believe in. Socrates, for instance, died on the battle field.

*C.T.* : It is said that Ngugi is an imitation of Achebe — a sort of firebrand Achebe.

*Prof. Moore* : Ngugi is a very different kind of writer from Achebe. He is interested in social change. He wants more of it, not less. He may borrow some positive things from tradition, but he does not think that tradition is necessarily right.

Achebe is an ironist. He ironizes works ; for instance in "Arrow of God". Of course, the 'River Between' is Ngugi's first book, written while he was still an undergraduate. His full potential and personality blossom only in his latter works.

*C.T.* : There is said to be a literary lag in anglophone Cameroon as compared to Cameroon east of the Mungo. Have you any idea why this is so ; that is if you agree with the observation ?

*Prof. Moore* : Well, I don't know exactly. I have also remarked that most of the Cameroonian writers I know are from francophone Cameroon. But if the harshness and bitterness that underlie most of their works — Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Guillaume Oyono Mbia, Francis Bebey etc. — is anything to go by, I could say that they have had more to write about than their anglophone counterparts.

*C.T.* : Could it also be that the British colonial system of education, given its utilitarian nature was a handicap ?

*Prof. Moore* : No, I don't think so. What of Nigeria ?

*C.T.* : Are there that many writers in Nigeria ? Outside the old-guard there are not that many, are they ? I mean, in terms of proportion ; given its huge population it could be deceptive, you know.

*Prof. Moore* : Oh ! yes, there are so many young writers coming up. You may not know them being here in Cameroon, but if you come to Nigeria you will be overwhelmed by their number.

*C.T.* : Who are your favorite African writers?

*Prof. Moore* : In terms of established writers : Ngugi, Sembene Ousmane and Mongo Beti. Among the young generation, I think of Alex La Guma of South Africa.

Interviewed by Richard NYAMBOLI

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