

Ain Shams University

Faculty of Women for Arts, Sciences and Education

Department of English Language and Literature



**Decolonization in West African Poetry:
A Comparative Study of Selected Works by Kofi
Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo**

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By

Ghada Hussein Sayed Ali

Under the Supervision of

Dr. Gehan Shafea Al-Margoushy

Associate Professor of English Literature

Faculty of Women

Ain Shams University

Dr. Abdulgawad Ali El-Nady

Associate Professor of English Literature

Faculty of Arts

Tanta University

Dr. Shahira Fikry Kelesh

Assistant Professor of English Literature

Faculty of Women, Ain Shams University

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Preface

Preface

The present study traces the process of decolonization in the poetry of the West African poets Kofi Awoonor (1935-2013) and Christopher Okigbo (1932-1967) representing Ghana and Nigeria as two African countries exposed to the encroachment of European colonization. These countries became the leading nations in the struggle for independence. Independence has characterized an era of euphoria in which many dreams would be fulfilled and realized. The political independence of many African countries in the wake of the 1950s has led to a fortuitous tendency towards cultural autonomy.

By the mid- 1950s many African countries were struggling to assert their independence from European colonial powers. This struggle was not only set against political and economic authority, but it involved a struggle against Western cultural hegemony as well. This came true in 1957 when Ghana attained its political independence, paving the way for other African countries to follow its path. Nigeria was the next West African country that gained its independence in 1960. Writers of these countries share similar colonial and post- independence concerns. While their early writings were influenced by European and

American literary forms as they were detached from their traditional cultures, their later works do contain historical realities that are culturally independent from the European world view. Seeking to make a new evaluation of their own experiences, African writers in general and West African poets in particular, move away from a colonial imitative literature and mould a new kind of literature that reflects the African spirit.

African literature of the 1950s and 1960s was remarkable with the appearance of many writers like Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), Christopher Okigbo, Kofi Awoonor and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-) who set the basis for a culmination of a continuous and cherished tradition. They handled similar themes and issues embraced by most writers of post-independence. Their writings have reflected and transmitted the practices of traditional oral literature. They have a burning desire to transform the false colonialist viewpoint of African societies and their past. As a result these writers' task was to celebrate and recover the African past from an African perspective. As Gareth Griffiths states, "they approached this task with the new, enthusiastic spirit created by political independence"(Griffiths, 113).

Kofi Awoonor was born on March 13, 1935 in the small village of Wheta in the Volta region of Ghana. He attended the primary school of the Catholic Mission at Dzodze from 1939 to 1943 and then Bremen School at Keta. This early education at missionary schools reflects Awoonor's constant struggle to free himself from all the values and ethics acquired during the colonialist education which was eventually incarnated in his refutation of Christianity imposed upon him at the mission schools and embracing his indigenous Ewe religion (Parekh, 52). He worked as a university professor at the University of Ghana at Legon where he participated in the International Socialist Solidarity of Kwame Nkrumah.

Furthermore, he was a Ghanaian ambassador of many countries like Russia, China and Cuba. He also served as director of Ghana Film Institute and he was a member of the literary magazine *Okyeame* which published his poetry and the works of his compatriots such as Efua Sutherland (1924- 1996), Kwei Armah (1967-) and Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-) (Parekh, 52-53). Awoonor left Ghana in 1968 and spent eight years in exile. When he returned to Ghana in 1975, he was arrested and accused of collusion to subvert the Acheampong regime. He spent one year in the prison

of Ussher Fort which resulted in a collection of poetry entitled *The House by the Sea*(1978) (Parekh, 53).

During the 1980s, Awoonor was serving as an ambassador to Brazil and then as a representative of Ghana to the United Nations until 1994 when he finally returned to Ghana. Most of the themes and subjects of his work are inspired by his experiences of migration, exile and return but in his earlier works, Awoonor stresses the rediscovery of cultural identity, speaking specifically of the recovery of spiritual traditions, reviving Ewe African myths and the abandonment of Christianity. He encourages instead the return to the energy and the power of the ancestral gods which are predominant themes even in other works that are related to his belief in the social role of the writer in his society.

Christopher Okigbo was born in Ojoto on 16 August, 1932, Nigeria. His early education was received at Umulobia Catholic School. He graduated from the University of Ibadan and worked as a teacher and librarian before beginning a literary career. His interest in social and political change in Nigeria is derived from his belief that it is impossible for the artist to examine his or her identity in isolation. In Ibadan, Okigbo became a central figure of the

Mbari Club. He published his first poems in the student literary journal, *Horn*, which was edited by J. p. Clark. Then in 1962, his works appeared in the literary magazine *Black Orpheus*. Okigbo's early poems reflected the divided cultural heritage of his country showing a great influence of Virgil, Eliot and Pound but *Heavensgate* marked his return to the African heritage and self- renewal through the goddess of the earth.

The 1960s was a period of great political upheavals in Nigeria. Okigbo's volume *Path of Thunder* showed a new direction in its direct attack on revolutionary politicians and neocolonial exploitation. In 1966, Okigbo won the poetry prize at the Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal but he refused to receive it because he did not believe that art should be judged on racial bases. At the outbreak of the civil war, Okigbo joined the Biafran army in 1967. He was killed in action near Nsukka in August. In one of his poems from *Path of Thunder*, Okigbo predicted his death:

O mother mother Earth, unbind me; let this be
my last testament; let this be

The ram's hidden wish to the sword the sword's
secret prayer to the scabbard- (*Labyrinths*, 71).

Thus, writers such as Awoonor and Okigbo set out to focus mostly on the dignified cultural heritage of their countries especially in their later works. They recognized the importance of being fully aware of the literary aesthetics of their oral literature, incorporating many of these devices in their works. Moreover they directly began to address their people dealing with many social and political issues crucial to their nations. This, in turn, helps to consolidate their position and value in their own countries. Okigbo's earlier poetry, for instance, was greatly influenced by Euro-modernist tendencies, drawing on sources as diverse as the classics, modern English poets as Hopkins, Pound and Eliot and the symbolists as predominant syllabus taught in their universities. However in these early attempts Okigbo blended these eclectic influences with images validating his African heritage and with his last collection *Path of Thunder*, he became a committed writer depicting the socio-political realities of his time.

The Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor also adhered to the emerging movement of taking poetry back to its indigenous roots by imbuing it with its local flavor in the early 1960s.

He never fails to present images of the past and the celebration of its dignity, making it smooth for later poets such as Kofi Anyidoho (1947-) to go deep into this culture and find out its treasures. Moreover, he presents this past in relation to the contemporary realities of his African life. Gareth Griffiths points out Awoonor's endorsement of traditional Ewe culture from the earliest times. He says "Awoonor has a claim to being the most consistently successful poet to employ the traditional forms in an appropriated way in English verse" (Griffiths, 155).

This study includes three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one handles decolonization as a process that prevailed after the Second World War and gives a survey of many critical views concerning it. Frantz Fanon (192-1961) and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo's views are handled largely. They stress the urgent need of Africans to restore their identity through coming in contact with their history, indigenous languages and traditions. Hence, Fanon and Ngũgĩ's critical views center on decolonization through resistance and nationalism. This implies rejecting the stereotypical images of Africans imposed by the colonialists and reconstructing true and authentic ones.

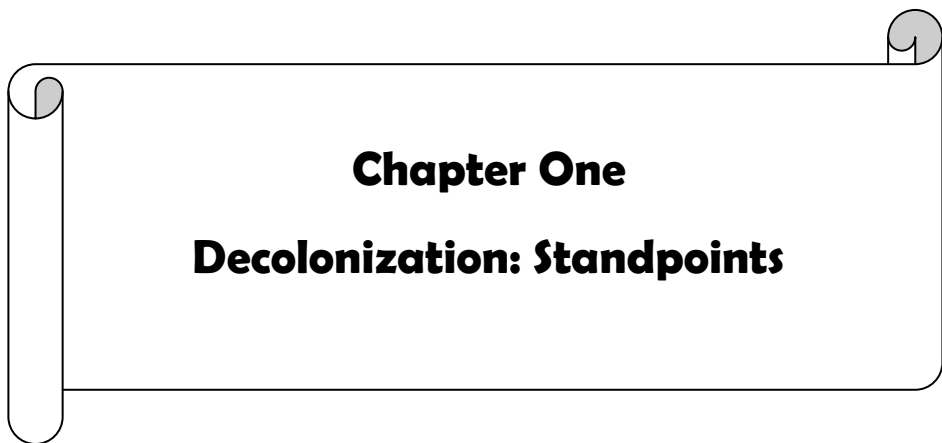
Chapter two analyses the poetry of Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo as real attempts towards achieving literary and cultural decolonization. Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo are often handled as members of second generation of West African writers. Their poetic work came as an expression of complete freedom to infuse some of the African oral traditions as a way of cultural self-discovery they strive to assert. Their poetry shows a great interest in the oral African traditions of their ancestors in an attempt to revive their true African identity.

Chapter three is divided into two parts. The first part highlights how the two poets were influenced by modern English and American poets such as Ezra Pound (1885-1972), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844- 1889) and W. B. Yeats (1865- 1939) at the very beginning of their career. T. S. Eliot (1888- 1965) is an example of this influence. This influence has been examined in the light of Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence.

The second part stresses their rejection of European influence especially in the later works of Kofi Awoonor and Christopher Okigbo. This rejection is epitomized in their insistence on the use of poetic diction and rhythm of their oral literature. Moreover, they draw on the original

myths of their African culture. It also demonstrates how the two poets excel in connecting the past myths of their society with the present realities of their countries.

The conclusion sums up the final findings of the research.



Chapter One

Decolonization: Standpoints

This chapter focuses on decolonization as a process that prevailed after the Second World War and gives a survey of many critical views concerning it. Frantz Fanon and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's views are handled extensively. Both writers stress the urgent need of Africans to restore their identity through coming in contact with their history, indigenous languages and traditions. Fanon and Ngugi are two voices expressing the African continent and they are aware of the suffering of its peoples. Hence, Fanon and Ngugi's critical views center on decolonization through resistance and nationalism. This implies rejecting the stereotypical images of Africans imposed by the colonialists and reconstructing true and authentic ones. Fulfillment of this task comes through stressing indigenous traditions and relating them to the present.

Fanon and Ngugi's ideas present clear steps towards achieving decolonization on the political and literary levels. They pave the way for African writers to employ their work until their people attain their cultural freedom. Their views are set as an example followed by Kofi Awoonor and