

Themes and Style of Bate Besong's Works

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Themes

In most of his works Bate Besong criticises the roof by attacking the foundation... Bate Besong always comes back to where the rain began to beat us, not with the naivety of somebody who does not know what happened in the past but with the clairvoyance of somebody who knows what should happen in the future. ... But rather than resort to a trip of witch-hunting he is in search of a Promethean ideal; he is in search of change, for change is the only permanent rhythm in life. His poems conjure the bitter themes of Power Abuse like in the *The Kaiser Lied*,

**You fed Kangaroo gonads
to the world press corps
to camouflage the soporific bankruptcy
of a traumatized brotherhood-in-sophistry,
already, shrouded in the obituarist lagoon
of wrong Deal! (p. 8)**

They also tell the story of our country's fractured genesis like in *Letter to Mongo Beti* or the horrors of our concentration camps like in *Prison Blues*. Even when the subtitles of his poems throw invectives or eulogies at personalities, the contents dissect the anatomy of our moribund body politic and quite often end up with a frightening note of capital punishment and retribution.

**Yet doomsday must freshen
the early morning dew
A cockerel woke me from the window
of our quiet Monrovia**

**there was the mummery of vultures gathered
like hyenas around
the decomposing carcass of
another civilian Doe**

Letter to Mongo Beti (p.9)

While most of his themes in poetry revolve around the Age of Disillusionment that characterised the post-independent Euphoria - a period, when instead of granting genuine independence, the European Capitalist powers had merely handed power over to a class of Africans who would ensure their continued economic hegemony and political control - his plays deal with the present neocolonial era when our African Rulers toy with democracy and replace the culture of Political nationalism with the spirit of bourgeois capitalism, thereby leaving our masses helpless, homeless and hopeless.

His plays deal with leadership crisis with emphasis laid on the Anglophone problem in Cameroon. While he blames the French and Francophones for using their imperialistic weapon and numerical majority syndrome to retard the growth of the Anglophone culture, his satire is on the Anglophones who have allowed themselves to become doormats and docile servitors all in a bid to secure an anonymous and ceremonial government appointment. That is why he believes the French language in the Republic of Cameroon has become synonymous with superior intelligence and black recolonisation. It is this intellectual radical stand that has branded Bate Besong as a separationist or secessionist. Yet it is this intellectual radicalism that has provided the masses a moral force and a political voice...

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Like *Cameroon Tribune* once wrote of Bate Besong "He is Anglophone Cameroon's most versatile and charismatic playwright ... and poet ... in his exalting task of awakening consciences". In fact sometimes I think that if God had not created Bate Besong, the Anglophones would have invented him.

Style

Can we therefore take Bate Besong's writing seriously? Maybe not? Because his language has become very controversial. Mejame Njikang would testify. Bate Besong's vehicle of communication has been regarded as sheer obscurantism. He has been accused of writing for the intelligentsia and not for the common man that he professes to defend. One can arguably put Bate Besong among the class of Euromodernist like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Hopkins. Euro modernists were prone to difficult language because they were interested in proving to the European audience that they (African writers) were not inferior in literary capabilities. This style. of writing was prevalent in the University of Ibadan (Bate Besong's Alma Mater).

According to Chinweizu, a controversial Nigerian critic, these Euromodernists had been contaminated by "the Hopkins disease" which was a style of writing involving a combination of atrocious punctuations, syntactic: jugglery, blurred images and structural inconsistencies. At the end, the local audience did not understand the message of the authors. This is seen in Christopher Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*, Wole Soyinka's *Idanre* and Bate Besong's *Obasinjom Warrior*, otherwise what sense can one make from Bate Besong's poem *After Mandela's Earth*,

**year after harlequin year
and the circus also came
to circus town - quislings
of a francophonie
cretin; they devise the decor:
opaque columns of dung, rise
and rise
above this doomed
empire which takes counseling blunders
from the cadaverous
old crocodile whose monumental basilica
folly - in the Bokassa Zombie**

Archipelago - cardinal devil of Yamoussoukro (p. 27)

At first reading the lines make no sense because the conflict is enacted through language itself and through those symbols which are the very embodiment of the drama of external conflict now internalised and transfigured into a private vision. In consequence, the language becomes recondite and difficult to decode. The ebb and flow of his poems arise when one reads the lines loudly, more than once to oneself in a quiet corner. You do not only enjoy the robust rhythm but you get a grasp of his use of private symbolic meaning to his images. His poems are best understood when you read the lines in segments instead of a whole for his flow of ideas seems to be more in episodes than in a continuum. Although his use of digressions do not provide coherence in ideas, they provide unity in purpose. In the lines above, you must know "the Francophonie cretin", "the doomed empire", "the basilica folly", "the, devil Yamoussoukro" etc.

You must be current with historical events, and abreast of socio-political trends. His symbols are deeply rooted in Social changes. His clustered images range from distant civilisation like when he accuses our leadership of possessing a "Kanyon Doe-like deafness" in *After Mandela's Earth*, through local metaphors like, when he says "a litre of petrol costs more than a litre of my Anglophone Blood (cf) to sexual overtones like when he says "secretions tread easter pods to lave white havens, sweet - shawled in loin chambers" in *Cristina* and to traditional myth like when he says "a pale colour myth resembling emanya-Nkpe stones of a catacomb sheen" (cf)

His background is typically African. By setting his writing against a local colour and addressing his message to a local audience Bate Besong would be regarded more as an Afrmodernist than a Euromodernist.

His plays depict moral decay and his tone like that of Ayi Kwei Armah is bitter and hard as the unfathomable depth of moral decay we have been enveloped in. In other words he faces his antagonists with the same emotional vigour and the same dictatorial weapon they use against the masses. He is allergic to treachery and betrayal and spares no effort

to lambaste in bitter tones leaders who betray their people. The harder they rule, the harder he writes...

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