CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE AND RESISTANCE

Placed at a relatively critical juncture when radical changes have swept across the world along with rapid strides made in the field of technological advancement, especially in global communications and modes of sharing information and knowledge, the world is still struggling for an egalitarian, conflict-free and democratic world order. A deep sense of crisis pervades in the collective psyche of humanity as age-old barriers and prejudices persist. Assumptions and opinions about the legitimacy of colonial dominance have radically changed but we are yet to witness a world without the shadows of imperialism, racism, casteism, class dominance and hegemony. Modes and categories that operated in the past continue to hold a pernicious grip inspite of continuing efforts to erase them. It is not unknown to people across the world that realities are immensely different today. However, the nature of the construction inherent in it makes it immensely problematic in terms of evolving a value-free analysis. Reality, like other things in society, is also a construct and the construction is always value-based. It implies certain codes working exclusively in the interest of the dominant ideology and prevailing power structures. The elite in society aims at asserting dominance through the constructed realities. There has been a constant struggle in society among different groups to construct and consume reality from their own respective positions.

Culture is a social reality constructed through various codes related to the dominant ideology. As a concept or category, it is problematic and inconclusive. Attempts to provide a broad and conclusive understanding of culture is still beset with problems of various sorts. A dubious distinction between two conceptions of culture has been operating in the academic discourse for some time (Entwistle 1977:109). In the academic domain, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, psychologists, literary theorists and critics seek to describe it as a total way of life. However, traditional European mindset conceived culture in terms of cultural artefacts like arts, philosophy, religion and sciences. In their narrow and limited view, the
non-European world was devoid of these cultural artefacts (Clifford and Marcus 1986), (Geertz 1973).

There has been a pervasive attitude among the ‘civilizing’ European colonial powers to invalidate other ways of life alien to them. This practice has always been a marked political and ideological requirement for the perpetration of colonialism. The widely circulated Eurocentric conceptualization of culture tends to locate it exclusively within their civilizational domain. A conspicuous privileging of European aesthetic, intellectual, moral standards and values insidiously impose a division between colonial Europe and the colonised regions of the world. European philology, philosophy, history, biology, political and economic theory, anthropology and above all literature have worked in so many ways to generate pejorative images of the non-European world. It ultimately helped the rapid movement towards colonization. The practice of projecting non-Europeans, non-whites as primitives, savages, heathens and barbarians ensured the denial of literature, arts and religion to other civilizations located outside Europe. Outside Europe lay a world inhabited by strange, exotic, savage primitives upon whom civilization had yet to dawn. To the colonial masters of Europe, they constituted the ‘Other’ who were meant to be ruled and subjugated. Claiming that it was a mission ordained by God, the myth of ‘the White man’s burden’ perpetrated the idea of Europeans exporting culture, civilization, religion and progress to the non-European world.

European relegation and denunciation of the colonised worked effectively through strategies and devices other than the military, political and economic. The philosophical doctrines of Hegel, Locke and Hume are filled with racist ideas, justifying slavery and colonialism. Nineteenth century European liberal lexicon is filled with names whose views on race, imperialism and colonialism have been explicitly Eurocentric and blatantly biased. J.S. Mill, Carlyle, Newman, Ruskin, Macaulay, Dickens and Arnold have made significant impact on the European mind on questions pertaining to race and empire (Said 1978, 1993). It was none other than the celebrated defender of liberty, John Stuart Mill, who declared that the views expounded in his book *On Liberty and Representative Government* cannot be applied in the case of India on the grounds that Indians are civilizational, if not racially, inferior. It needs to be reminded that his celebrated views on liberty were specifically addressed to and meant for Europeans. For Hegel, Africa was the classic case of a society without history and spirit, existing in an undeveloped, wild and untamed state. The
famous European thinker David Hume remarked in 1735:

The Negro is naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers among them, no arts, no science (quoted in Ngugi 1981b:14).

Lord Macaulay's infamous "Minutes on Education" (1835), the savage and inhuman suppression of a revolt in Jamaica (1864) by Governor Eyre and the ironical defence against his indictment by the Eyre Defence Committee, a body comprising great 'liberal' personalities like Dickens, Carlyle, Ruskin, Trollope, Tennyson and Charles Kingsley, Ruskin's declaration to Oxford students in 1870 that the British are still a pure race are all glaring examples of racism.

The classic case of Mathew Arnold's definition of culture as the best of what has been thought and said, effectively reinforced imperialist strategies in denigrating the colonised. Arnold's quasi-religious project to reinforce social divisions by striking a dubious distinction between culture and anarchy in an attempt to quash the movement for extension of political rights to certain sections of the society in metropolitan England — he dubbed the protesting masses culture and its enemies (Williams 1980:5) — was dexterously used to advance inflections in matters of race and empire so as to induce an endemic invalidation of other cultures and societies. Articulated at the height of colonial expansion and imperialist exploitation, this quasi-religious view consolidated the colonial perception and identification of the colonised and their ways of life as base and anarchic. Arnold fails to take into account the contradictions of history and collapses them into a quasi-moral imperative. Whatever pertained to culture and refinement was rooted in European tradition and history. The great European tradition implied universality; inclusion and exclusion in this framework of the universal remained their prerogative. Understanding of the world was confined to European outlook and experience. Massacres, wars, battles and foreages against non-Europeans were conducted in the name of progress, development and civilization. The crucial question is — whose progress, development and civilization? Whether it was the indigenous populace of America, the wretched slaves forcefully brought from Africa or the indentured labour from the Indian subcontinent, the idea of these peoples as human beings fully capable of
living a rational life like a European remained distant. From the voyages of discovery, trade and finally colonial conquest, every act was justified and legitimised in the name of civilizational and racial superiority. Rather than articulating a polysemous conception of culture as practised by different societies based on different understandings and consciousness drawn from their respective experiences, a monolithic/insular articulation worked towards the imposition of European cultural codes as universal and humane.

II

The role of literature in strengthening, reinforcing and disseminating colonialist stereotypes and images was in no sense more marginal than the part played by the other discourses. Unlike the other discourses, literature works on the imaginative aspect of the human mind. Colonial literature sought to dehumanize the colonised by producing powerful and haunting images that worked in so many fissiparous ways. To the general European mindset, it presented an inscrutable picture of a life utterly opposed to European values, refinement, Christian humility and forgiveness. Simultaneously it seeks to impose or inscribe a politico-cultural influence by masking the brutal character of colonialism. Lenin’s thesis of containing the revolutionary tendency of the proletariat in the colonial metropolises through the exploitation of the colonies can be seen in the light of the above analysis. The containment of revolutionary tendencies in the metropolitan centres could be largely achieved through the masking of colonial exploitation. On the other hand, it works toward the destruction of the sensibility of the colonised by conditioning their mentality and taking away their confidence, belief and faith in themselves. It creates an unnerving wave of images making the colonised feel revulsive towards his own culture, society, tradition and history. In both the colonial writer and the reader, it works toward the strengthening of the myths and stereotypes in their imagination while destroying the self-confidence of the colonised.

Concentrating on English literature, which incidentally happens to be the most influential and dominating specimen of European literature in the colonial context in comparison with relatively weaker counterparts like French or Portuguese literatures, a cursory glance will reveal the disturbing images of the colonised produced vociferously. The overarching figures of English literature, including celebrated names like Shakespeare, Blake, Dickens, Austen,
Kipling, Arnold, Conrad, Forster, Joyce Cary who were hailed as immortal signposts of literary creativity and imaginative expression, have all dabbled at one point of time or the other with issues of race and empire with disastrous implications for the colonised. Radical rereading of their texts foregrounds the crucial reality that literature cannot be dissociated from politics and history; their works cannot be perceived outside discussions of colonialist discourse.

Another area of concern is the role of English literary criticism which seeks to isolate literary texts from the historical conditions of production. This mode of criticism made the literary texts override history. Literary texts transcended the vicissitudes of history becoming timeless literary classics revered and worshipped for all sorts of reasons. They apparently stood outside the framework of history. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has been seen through the ages as a play depicting the conflict between Art and Nature. Traditional criticism discussed the play in terms of a banal opposition where Prospero, the enlightened, sophisticated, cultured European, tries to civilize the savage Caliban. Caliban, in Frank Kermode's analysis, becomes the 'savage and deformed slave', 'the dark void' against which Prospero's art and civilizational values are illuminated by contrast (Kermode 1954: XXV).

A radical contextualised reading will inform the reader of the ways in which the play reflects the European imperialist desire symptomatic of Sixteenth Century Europe with its voyages, adventures and quest for unknown lands. The quest that ultimately led to conquest remained at the heart of Sixteenth Century European desire for new discoveries. Prospero, the refugee becomes the master of Caliban's island. The play can be read in terms of a colonizer's fantasy. Noted anti-colonial writer Aime Cesaire's retroactive reading brings out the dehumanizing politics implicit in Shakespeare and traditional criticism:

Prospero is the man of cold reason, the man of methodical conquest — in other words, a portrait of the 'enlightened' European... Caliban is the man still close to his beginnings, whose links with the natural world has not yet been broken. Caliban can still participate in a world of created marvels, where as his master can merely 'create' them through his acquired knowledge. At the same time, Caliban is also a rebel — the positive hero, in a Hegelian sense. The slave is always more important than his master — for it is the slave who creates history. (Quoted in Wilson 1995: 11).

Again, one can easily discern the overtly racist tone in what may be passed off as a liberal and humane conception of universal fraternity and love in one of William Blake's celebrated poem 'The Little Black Boy'. Rereading the poem in this race-sensitized era can provoke disturbing thoughts:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O, my soul is white
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black as if bereaved of light.⁴

The ‘little black boy’ takes birth in the wilderness, away from the comforts of the civilized European home and he is made to lament the fate of his pigmentation. Blake deliberately makes the black boy acutely conscious of his skin colour. The play of ‘black’ and ‘white’ divorces the black boy from his identity and plunges him into the disturbing Christian category of ‘soul’ and whiteness. He is ‘bereaved of light’ and in contrast stands the Christian English boy who is apparently white as an angel. Such a dubious use of religion and colour to advance a pernicious racist idea is not unconnected with imperialism. The poem can never be read outside the colonialist discourse. Blake’s little black boy dreams of the day when he will meet his creator, the Christian God who will ultimately receive him with open arms and let him lean on His knee alongwith the white boy. Ironically, it suggests a death-wish in the black boy as only death can free him from the burden of his skin colour. Such a blatantly racist poem continued to be celebrated and read for its liberal and humane note:

And then I’ll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me.⁵

The black boy has to put efforts to earn the love of the white boy. It should not be forgotten that Blake wrote during the era of colonial expansion and imperialist exploitation.

Rudyard Kipling’s works are tinged with overt colonial tones. The Mowgli stories, and novels like Kim emphasized the brutal use of force in order to protect imperial rule in India. The logic of imperialism is inherent in his infamous phrase ‘White man’s burden’. It was an inevitable responsibility set by the colour of their skin to bring civilization to the coloured races. Colonialism and imperialist exploitation were justified in the name of progress and civilization. The entire non-European world was waiting for the ontologically superior whites to tread on:

Now, this is the road that the White Man tread
when they go to clean a land —
Iron underfoot and the vine overhead
And the deep on either hand.
We have trod that road — and a wet and windy road —
our chosen star for guide.
Oh, well for the world when the White Man tread
Their highway side by side.  

This was an exhortation to fellow companions — other colonial European nations — about the dangers of their rivalry. Haunted by memories of the 1857 mutiny in India, Kipling’s White man needed to emphasise the use of force, the coloniser’s inevitable weapon in the face of opposition.  

Joseph Conrad is another writer whose works are deeply enmeshed in the issues of race and empire. His novel *Heart of Darkness* celebrated and canonised as a masterpiece of modernism institutionalises certain images of Africa as a land of primitive savagery. The colonialist agenda is reinforced in the novel when Marlow’s aunt thinks of her nephew as an emissary of light or a sort of apostle weaning ignorant millions from horrid ways. Conrad makes Africa utterly incomprehensible and inscrutable. The land and its people hangs on a precarious balance between insanity and incomprehensibility: 

There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over-shadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on the river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once — somewhere — far away — in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one’s past came back to me, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence (Quoted in Carroll 1980: 3). 

Africa is depicted as a dark world standing in contrast with enlightened Europe. We can see Conrad’s deeply ingrained sense of imperialism in his exploitation of the highly biased stereotype of Africa. By making the African landscape barren of real and comprehensible figures, he attempts to portray an Africa filled with creatures conceived by his own prejudiced imagination. It was left barren for any European reader to fit whatever creatures his imagination could afford. Another novelist, Joyce Cary, more or less follows the same line. His novel *Mister Johnson* narrates the story of an African who longs to be shot dead by an Englishman who supposedly loves him. Euthanasia or mercy killing of the African character is celebrated here. The idea of a faithful African character whose redemption lies in the bullet of his English
master is portrayed with virtuosity in the book. The great modernist poet, T.S. Eliot, considered England as the true mediator between European nations on the basis that it possessed a genuine empire.

Parallel to the uncanny representation of Africa in colonial writings, we have a corpus of racist literature that swelled the tide of imperialism and inhuman misery upon the colonized African peoples. In all these works the European appears in all his glory, ready to dole justice and truth to the natives. The most unashamed display of racism can be discerned in these highly charged imperialist literature. Important examples are Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Robert Ruark's *Something of value* and *Uhuru*, C.T. Stoneham's *Kenya Mystery*, M. Herding's *Nest of Friendship*, Espleth Huxley's, *A New Earth, A Thing to Love, Forks and Hope, Red strangers* and *White Man's Country*, Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Tribe that Lost its Head*, M.M. Kaye's *Later than you think*, G.R. Fazakerley's *Kongoni*, V. S. Reid's *The Leopard*, Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* and Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. These are some of the works out of a much larger corpus of imaginative literature by the colonial masters about the colonised land and people of Africa. A close scrutiny of these fictions exhibit a classification of colonized African in two categories: the sinister Negro who is consumed by an insane contempt of his white benefactor without any rational basis except for sheer envy and the good Negro who is always obedient, ready to devote his life in the service of his master. At times a certain variation in this categorization can be seen in some of the writers like Espleth Huxley whose evil African characters are those educated on Western lines demanding political rights and exhorting others to rebellion and violence instead of obeying the White man's rule. In all these writers the imposing figure of the benevolent white colonial ruler endeavouring to bring civilization and progress remains a hallmark. To snub the Africans and their ways was something quite natural:

Kamante could have no idea as to how a dish of ours ought to taste, and he was, inspite of his conversion, and his connection with civilization, at heart an arrant kikuyu, rooted in the traditions of his tribe and his faith in them, as in the only way of living worthy of a human being. He did at times taste the food that he cooked, but then with a distrustful face, like a witch who takes a sip out of her cauldron. He stuck to the maizecobs of his fathers. Here even his intelligence sometimes failed him, and he came and offered me a Kikuyu delicacy, a roasted sweet potato or a lump of sheep's fat — as even a civilized dog, that has lived for a long time with people, will place a bone on the floor before you, as a present. 8
The Empire successfully disseminated the idea of its necessary presence through such rarefied and laboured stereotypes. Such literary cultural practices provided impetus to colonial manipulation and deprivation of the colonised. It served to disconnect the colonised from history and context. With the consolidation of colonialism in the nineteenth century, the role of English Literature in disseminating racist ideology became all the more important. The rise of English Literature in the academic curriculum of the metropolitan centres of learning underscores a crucial relationship between literature and the colonial enterprise.

III

For many scholars and critics, the question of African literature still remains dubiously entangled in prejudiced configurations. The simple fact that oral literatures (or oratures according to Ngugi) in the form of folk tales, myths and legends constitute an important feature of the African literary landscape is derided and denunciated by a majority of western critics and scholars who continue to perceive African literature as a product of colonialism. They vociferously preach the idea that it is a post-Second World War phenomenon assuming literature as an expression of colonized Africans in the naturalised languages of European colonizers — English, French, Portuguese, Dutch etc. Historical and archaeological evidences have exploded the myth of Europeans as the people who introduced scripts for the first time in Africa. It was the Arabs who introduced scripts for the first time in Africa through repeated invasion from the regions north of the African mainland. For instance, Hausa, a language spoken by people inhabiting the northern parts of Nigeria acquired the Arabic script and till today the Arabic script remains a common mode of written expression in the language. Other examples include Swahili — a trade language used in the coastal areas from Mombasa to Zanzibar — written in the Arabic script. Any belief that there was no literary activity in this region and other non-European languages can safely be abandoned not only because literature is not a stable, easily definable and objective category but also in keeping with the understanding that traditional European notions of literature are not the only ones in the World. It would be dogmatic not to entertain such ideas. The terms that embody the literary values are transitive, time specific, bound by certain conditions, situations and contexts. What is valued as literature by a certain group of people might simply appear disparately distant, alien and irrelevant to others.
It is crucial to note that there are several prominent writers writing in African languages till today even after the brutal experience of colonial onslaught. Gakaara Wa Wanja was imprisoned by the British during 1952 and 1962 for his powerful writings in Gikuyu. Shabaan Robert wrote and published poetry and prose in kiswahili. He has a substantial number of publications in his name. Nigerian writer Chief Fagunwa has published extensively in Yoruba. Literatures in African languages like Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and others are still an important feature of the African literary landscape. The existence and popularity of African writing in European languages in no way diminishes the importance of the literatures written in indigenous languages. In a multilingual, multicultural landscape with a colonial heritage where the intrusion of colonial cultures — including language and literature — has been fatal, literature in the indigenous languages plays a vital role in the creative imagination of the teeming millions for whom the colonial languages are still alien.

Coming to our main area of study, African literatures in English is inevitably a product of colonialism and a post-War phenomenon. Its genesis is intertwined with the spread of English education in colonized Africa. Even though African writing in English can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century, it emerged as a force to reckon with in the nineteen fifties. Published in 1911, E. Caseley Hayford’s *Ethiopia unbound* was perhaps the first long narrative in prose by an African. The book provides a broad outline of contemporary issues like education, religion and colonialism. Caseley- Hayford attempts to sketch a comparative view of modern Europe with pre-colonial African social structure. The book delves into the nuances of Fanti religion, customs and tradition providing a rather different picture of the African socio-cultural set up different from the cliched images constructed by the European imagination. Its critical engagement with the politics of colonialism have provoked certain western critics to argue vociferously about its literary merit and status. Another early effort came from R. E. Obeng whose *Eighteen Pence* published in 1943, is a novel in the allegorical mode dealing with a Christianised African society. Christian influences play a dominant role in this book where virtue and rebellion are made to confront each other. It is pertinent to note that inspite of a conspicuous absence of comparable development in the case of Anglophone writing, it received a lot of impetus from Francophone writing done by the anticolonial writers of the early negritude period — Fanon, Senghor, Cesaire, Diop and others. In conjunction with the efforts of these anti-colonial writers, literary efforts witnessed
the publication of journals like Presence Africaine by emigrant Africans in Sorbonne, Paris, under the editorship of Alioune Diop. It was followed by another journal, Black Orpheus.

With the understanding that the African World is in transition, they aimed to recover Africa from centuries old European prejudice, greed, avarice, slavery, domination and colonial exploitation. Solidarity was forged with writers from underdeveloped countries, particularly of Asia. The tide of decolonization in the post-War period forged a common bond in all the colonies. A body of Afro-Asian writers emerged with the agenda of literary efforts for cultural reawakening. Meetings were held in New Delhi in 1956, Tashkent in 1958 and Cairo in 1962. Literary-cultural efforts were not without the political agenda of liberation aimed at subverting the crippling effects of colonialism. A meeting organised by African emigrants in Paris in 1956 foregrounded the need and relevance of resistance in the context of colonised Africa. The resolution called for the political liberation of Africa vis-a-vis the understanding that no cultural liberation was possible without it. Another meeting in Rome in 1959 reiterated the importance of political independence and registered the need for economic freedom also. Resistance as an inevitable reality conditioned the socio-cultural, material space in which the African writers have to produce literature. The aims and motives were inextricably intertwined with the ensuing struggle for decolonisation. A conspicuous feature of African writing is the fact that those who led the struggle for decolonisation were also the leading writers — Sedor Senghor, Mamadu Diu, Tafa wa Balawa, Augustino Nino, Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta.

African literature in English emerged in a big way in the fifties. The period witnessed the flowering of powerful literary talents whose works subsequently generated some of the most rigorous debates in the field of literary-cultural studies. Powerful critical currents crucial to debates on colonial discourse analysis were shaped during this period. Nigerian Amos Tutuola’s literary efforts witnessed the publication of his first novel The Palm Wine Drinkard in 1952. The book generated a series of arguments with wide ranging implications about language and culture in the colonial context. Tutuola’s narrative was largely based on Yoruba folk structure and material which were woven with perspicacity into the fabric of a different language. His imaginative variation of the language structure became the site of a fierce debate. The irregular and unidiomatic use of English was simultaneously praised and condemned by different critics for different reasons. However, the appropriation of the coloniser’s language
and violation of its vaunted codes to suit his purpose of rendering the Yoruba linguistic and folk structure indicates an implicit attempt at subverting dominant colonial culture. It exhibits a tendency to debunk the grand meta-narrative of the English language which inevitably belonged to the coloniser. Praised and condemned for different reasons, Tutuola went on repeating his practice to produce some of the most powerful fiction in the history of African literature — *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle*, *The Brave African Huntress*, *Feather Woman of the Jungle* etc. Precisely six years after the publication of Tutuola’s first novel, the world witnessed the emergence of an African literary figure whose claim to fame was instantaneous. Hailed as a modern classic, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) undoubtedly remains the most widely read book in African literature in English. It has been translated into a number of languages throughout the world. Creating ripples in the literary world with the book, Achebe hasn’t looked back and continues to write with immense vigour and virtuosity. T.M Aluko, another fellow Nigerian, has steadily climbed the ladder of fame with the publication of his first fiction *One Man, One Wife* in 1959. He deflates both the coloniser and the crooked among the colonised. From his early novels depicting the clash of cultural values between the coloniser and the colonised, he goes on to attack the corruption-ridden social institutions in post-independence Africa. His novels — *One Man One Matchet* (1964), *Kinsman and Foreman* (1966) — have lucidly captured African society in transition.

Along with the rapid movement towards decolonisation, African writing in English became more widespread. We see a rapidly expanding body of writers using different forms and modes of expression. A talented dramatist who simultaneously developed new skills in the manipulation of English verse forms, J.P Clark draws vigorously on the tradition of Ekirin drama. Coming from the Ijaw region of Niger delta, his publications include *Song of a Goat* (1961), *The Masquerade* (1963), *America*, *Their America* (1964), *The Raft* (1965), a volume of verse called *Reed in the Tide* and others. Gabriel Okara who prefers writing poems in his mother tongue, Ijaw, before translating them into English is another important writer in the African literary scene. The attempt to render a vivid description of the vibrancy intrinsic to traditional African life offers a powerful challenge to dominant Eurocentric representation of Africa. Subversion of the stereotypes produced by the colonial culture remains a dominant theme in his poetry. Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian who has earned respect and regard across the world. His plays and critical theories have not only brought international
acclaim in the form of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968 but have also generated rigorous debates in the field of post-colonial literary criticism. The 'syncretic' mode of critique adopted by him offers a complex range of ideas and insight in the analysis of marginalised cultures and societies vis-a-vis dominance and hegemony. \(^{11}\) A Dance of The Forest (1964), The Lion and The Jewel(1964), The Road (1965) along with his novel The Interpreters provide a profound analysis of crucial issues pertaining to the practice of colonialism and neocolonialism. Cyprian Ekwensi who began his career as a pamphleteer in the market town of Onitsha in eastern Nigeria has carved a niche for himself as a master story-teller. From his early novels Burning Grass (1962), Jagua Nana (1961) he has grown in strength and status with his novels and short stories.

With the harsh reality of a bitter and violent struggle for freedom, East African writing was shaped by this different consciousness. Unlike West Africa where there was more or less a peaceful transition to political independence, East Africa was the site of violent and bloody conflicts between the coloniser and the colonised. \(^{12}\) It was marked by acts of brutal repressions seldom witnessed in human history. This reality became an important feature in East African writing, both in English and the vernaculars. Johnathan Kariaga, Rebecca Njau, Grace Ogot, Okot P’Bitek and Ngugi Wa-Thiong ‘o’ are major names whose engagement with the violent reality assume critical proportions. Ngugi, in both his creative and critical writings, offers a rigorous critique of colonial and neo-colonial politics. Right from The River Between to Matigari, Ngugi has dealt with the political, economic and cultural impact of colonialism. Other Kenyan writers like Meja Mwangi and Godwin Wachira have provided haunting images of the violent anti-colonial struggles in Kenya. Mwangi’s Carcass for Hounds (1974), Taste of Death (1975) and Wachira’s Ordeal in The Forest attempt to subvert colonial representation of the Kenyan liberation struggle as a saga of mindless violence and terrorism.

South Africa’s beleaguered history reveals a woeful tale of human injustice. Colonial experience became accentuated with a system where racist prejudices were given sanctity by a minority White regime. The official policy of apartheid pursued for decades divided the society on the basis of race and colour, and dissent was ruthlessly suppressed through the enforcement of draconian laws. This deeply entrenched practice remained in the consciousness of both the coloured and non-coloured writers. Peter
Abraham’s *Mine Boy* (1946), *Tell Freedom* (1954) and Alex La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and *And a Threefold Card* (1964) are examples of coloured writings where the pains of inhuman discrimination are strongly underlined with an unmistakable note of subversion. Nadine Gordimer, who belongs to the white settler community, laments the fate of a compartmentalized and fractured society in her works.

Even after the formal process of decolonization — political independence — of African countries, the stark contradictions and cleavages in society persisted. The polemics of decolonization make it imperative to ascertain the reality signified by a formal transfer of political power to an indigenous elite. When power was negotiated and transferred it excluded the oppressed masses. However, it is pertinent to note how African literature still continues to engage with this neo-colonial reality. Unlike the muted or rather curious silence on the issue of neo-colonialism in other ex-colonies of Asia and Latin America, African writers grapple with it in a rigorous manner. The literary engagement with this disturbing reality has become more profound and insightful with the emergence of a member of women writers who are in fact doubly marginalised in such societies. Grace Ogot, Buchi Emechta, Flora Nwapa, Rebecca Njau, Bessie Head, Farida Karodia, Mariama Ba and other women writers deal with the impact of neo-colonialism in different ways. Their literary engagements assume vital importance in the generation of a radical consciousness in the minds of the people. It remains an active means through which cultural imperialism and hegemony can be effectively opposed/resisted so as to help the people recover their lost cultural attributes. A truly decolonised sensibility can emerge only when the creative imagination is liberated from the crippling effects of colonialism. This understanding remains crucial in African writing. It is not unknown to the world that repeated attempts to curb the writer from engaging with neo-colonialism make it all the more relevant to assess the inevitability of struggle against oppression and exploitation.
Notes

1. The emergence of Foucault, Derrida and the French post structuralists in epistemological debates have dislodged the concept of reality as a sacrosanct entity. Rejecting reality as an *a priori* concept, they have argued that it is a construct made up by dominant ideologies and power structures. It necessarily includes and excludes, suppresses and stresses notions depending on the prejudices, predilection and prescriptions of the dominant ideology. An outline of these debates can be seen in:


5. Ibid. 58.


