International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 07 Issue 08 August 2024

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i08-102, Impact factor- 7.876

Page No: 6670-6673

Spatial Dynamics in African Literature: Analyzing Rural and Urban Representations in Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts

Dr. Ilham EL MAJDOUBI,

Literary and Cultural Studies Hassan II University (UH2C), Faculty of Arts and Humanities (FLSHM), Morocco

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the interplay between colonial and postcolonial spatial dynamics in African literature, focusing on both urban and rural landscapes. It investigates how Anglophone and Francophone African writers portray the intersection of historical and fictional settings, highlighting the influence of colonialism on African topography. By analyzing literary depictions of traditional versus dominant cultures, the study assesses the enduring colonial impact on African landscapes and its reflection in modern and contemporary sub-Saharan fiction.

KEYWORDS: Anglophone and Francophone African Writers, Colonial and Postcolonial Spaces, Urban and Rural Landscapes

The oral tradition of African literature has its roots in the continent's history, with a thousand-year-old history of storytelling. These oral traditions, which encompass a multitude of forms, including myths, legends, epics, folktales, and other narrative genres, have constituted an integral aspect of African culture. The advent of colonialism in the early twentieth century gave rise to a new era of African literature, which saw the emergence of classic works reflecting the experiences and perspectives of African writers in the context of colonialism. In the 1970s, writers in sub-Saharan Africa expressed the disillusionment of the post-independence era with equal intensity.

The genesis of African literature can be traced back to a culturalist concern: the transmission of the "civilizing values of the black world,"[1] as articulated by the Senegalese writer Léopold Senghor in his concept of Negritude. In the context of Martinican poet and intellectual Aimé Césaire, this concept can be understood as a mode of engaging with historical experience. It entails "a way of living history within history,"[2] as Césaire himself put it.

This paper juxtaposes the colonial and postcolonial urban and rural spaces embodied in African literature. We will examine the relationship between factual and fictional settings in the writings of Anglophone and Francophone Africans. Through the literary representation of traditional cultures in relation to dominant cultures, we will measure the colonial imprint on African topography and the impact of this spatial configuration on the novelistic canvas of modern and contemporary sub-Saharan fiction.

The European presence in Black Africa, as in the Maghreb, introduced a different concept of habitat. Europeans developed port cities. Since the mid-19th century, they have settled in the former commercial and military trading posts that have become modern cities. This fact does not deny the existence of great pre-colonial cities, since Africa has known very ancient civilizations, as evidenced by its glorious history.

The colonial influence is visible in the architecture of the city. Since colonization, the topography of African countries has had a dual structure: the city versus the village. These social and spatial mutations in the urban environment are inherent to modernity, which has significantly polarized the African space. European modernization has imposed a new urban rhythm on local populations, thus disrupting traditional ways of life and generating a new way of thinking and inhabiting the world.

Cameroonian sociologist Jean-Marc Ela observes: "The urban phenomenon is not accepted as a dimension of existence. In this sense, we are strangers in our cities."[3] Aesthetically, the city occupies a key place in African fiction, so much so that many novels feature the city as a central theme or character. Beyond its spatial and temporal connotations, the urban space becomes a metaphor for radical, even cruel otherness—"the most delicious of monsters," as Balzac put it.

[1] Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté III : Négritude et civilisation de l'universel*, Paris, Seuil, 1974, p. 90. My translation.
[2] Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* [suivi de] *Discours sur la négritude*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 2004 [rééd.], p. 82. My translation.
[3] Jean-Marc Ela, *La ville en Afrique noire*, Paris, Karthala, 1983, p. 70. My translation.

The Senegalese writer Ousmane Socé Diop was one of the first to introduce the African city into sub-Saharan literature. His first novel, Karim: Roman sénégalais, was written in 1935. From Saint-Louis to Dakar, the melodrama of the characters is a recurring leitmotif of the city. The imposing architecture of the colonial city is an extension of the metropolis, and the "victor's style" imitates the bourgeois republican ideology. In a consensual spirit, Socé sought to reconcile Western and African cultures.

Ousmane Socé's second novel, Mirages de Paris (1937), continues the journey from Saint-Louis—the cradle of tradition––to Dakar and finally to Paris. It touches on the same themes as the previous novel: the gap between the imperatives of modern life and those of tribal mentalities. The dual articulation of local and imperial societies and cultures in the African space intensifies the conflict between the two opposing worlds and thus becomes an essential aesthetic paradigm of sub-Saharan writing.

The awareness of a black singularity in the interwar period contributed to the elaboration of a vision of African literature different from the colonial novel and the travel narratives that paved the way for it. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe depicts the urban space as a place of chaos.

In "Marriage is a Private Affair," a short story published in 1952, eight years before the British left, the colonial city of Lagos stages the light and shadows of Africa. It is the theater where African and European styles mix and clash, the point of convergence and divergence between two incongruous realities in the same space.

When Achebe writes about his Igbo ethnicity, he gives the British colonizer an African perspective. He replaces the exotic romanticism of colonialist novels with a more authentic realism in a unique style that is neither documentary nor moralistic. He tells his story to an African and Western audience.

"As long as the lions have no historians, the history of the hunt will continue to glorify the hunter," is Achebe's legendary quote. In 1983, he published a pamphlet, The Trouble with Nigeria, to denounce the corruption that plagued his country. Achebe scrutinizes the African elite and criticizes the colonial administration and the local political classes responsible for the disorder.

In 1953, the Senegalese writer Abdoulaye Sadji published his novel Maïmouna. Since the village is a space without prospects, the heroine leaves her comfortable nest and falls into the urban trap. The temptation is so irresistible that the warnings of the marabou are not enough to dissuade the young farmer. Dakar offers her a promise of gratification, but compromises her hopes. Maïmouna becomes pregnant outside the traditional marriage bond. This tragic event triggers her fateful return to Louga. Sadji emphasizes the authenticity of the provinces, the danger of the metropolis, and the defenselessness of the characters trapped in the city.

Maïmouna is reminiscent of another heroine in the novel Buur Tilleen: Roi de la Médina, published in 1972 by Senegalese writer Cheik Aliou N'dao. The story revolves around an educated girl, Raki, who becomes pregnant out of wedlock. Expelled from the family by her father, Gorgui M'Bodj, she lives under the protective wing of her aunt, Astou. After enduring humiliation, the young mother-to-be dies in the hospital.

The Cameroonian writer Eza Boto or Mongo Beti, whose real name was Alexandre Biyidi Awala, also described the new African landscape in his novel: Ville cruelle, published in 1954. He paints an imaginary colonial city divided into two suburbs: Tanga North, the indigenous city, and Tanga South, the European city. His formula—"Two Tangas...two worlds...two destinies"—sums up the idea that the African city has become a mirror of colonial domination and a reflection of European ideology:

Le Tanga commercial se terminait au sommet de la colline par un pâté de bâtiments administratifs, trop blancs, trop indiscrets. Leur vue laissait, on ne sait pourquoi, un irréductible sentiment de désolation. L'autre Tanga, le Tanga sans spécialité, le Tanga auquel les bâtiments administratifs tournaient le dos—par une erreur d'appréciation probablement—le Tanga indigène, le Tanga des cases, occupait le versant nord peu incliné, étendu en éventail. Ce Tanga se subdivisait en innombrables petits quartiers qui, tous, portaient un nom évocateur. Une série de bas-fonds, en réalité ! … Deux Tanga…deux mondes…deux destins.[4]

The Eurocentric vision of the city is at the heart of the literary and artistic expressions of modernity. In Western paradigms, urbanity and civility are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as identifying markers of civilization. Rural and wild spaces, including the village and the bush, are rich in African symbols. They carry knowledge, representations, and discourses of ancestral cultures. Diminished by older travel narratives, they have regained their dignity through contemporary sub-Saharan writers.

In African wisdom, the referents of modernity differ from the layered categories of civilization versus primitivism. Traditional life and its cultural roots are valued. The village is not a place of lesser culture, but belongs to Mother Earth, cosmogony, and cosmic laws. In modern African literature, the urban landscape is part and parcel of the absorbing colonial experience with its attendant traumas. The city has the narrative function of revealing the question of existential and social alienation, but not only!

[4] Eza Boto, *Ville cruelle*, Paris : Editions africaines, 1954, p. 19.

If the city represents modernity, the village points to a rich heritage that promotes a lifestyle in perfect osmosis with nature. The narrative structure of the African works is based on the village/city dyad. The protagonists are displaced heroes struggling to survive in an urban environment that de-structures both the imaginary and the tribal reality.

The urban fabric of modern African literature is heterogeneous. After a structured village childhood, the hero discovers a fragmented city. This new social reality is a turning point in his life. In many African novels, as we shall see, the rite of passage consists of three main stages: separation, suffering, and the return of the lost child. The reintegration of the lost and then found member into the community is never without tension.

L'Aventure ambiguë, the 1961 novel by Senegalese writer Cheick Hamidou Kane, evokes the last thirty years of colonization. The narrator-protagonist, Samba Diallo, is torn between his traditional upbringing and the Western culture. After living in France, he returns to his village only to discover that his roots lie elsewhere. Samba idealistically believed that he could be both a Muslim and a free thinker. The mentally deranged man who stabbed him because he refused to pray foreshadows the religious extremism that afflicts Africa today. In an interview, the author laments this frightening reality.[5]

The city also appears as a symbol of damnation in Afrika Ba'a, a novel published in 1969 by the French-speaking Cameroonian writer Rémy Gilbert Médou Mvomo. The narrator describes the decay of the protagonist's native village. This young man, christened Kambara, has no choice but to pay the dowry demanded by his in-laws. So, he travels to a city called Necroville: the city of the dead.

Afrika Ba'a has the narrative pattern of the African Buildungsroman. After his travels, Kambara returns home to convince his people that success requires hard work. The novel establishes the village as a field space that becomes the site of another lyricism. Written in the context of independence, it shows an Africa torn between the city and the village. African literature's reaction to the colonial presence echoes its postcolonial critique of the local leaders responsible for the anarchy.

Le Pleurer-Rire, a novel by Congolese writer Henri Lopes published in 1982, is part of a liberation movement in search of a counter-hegemonic voice. The hero rules over a territory that has an identity and a set of values. This space acquires a greater meaning through its historical and political anchoring. Since these places are also imbued with sexism, as architect Rodrigo Vidal-Rojas explains, the territory embodies the phallic symbol, as opposed to the city, which epitomizes the feminine element:

Le symbole phallique, premier élément de structuration spatiale du territoire (menhir) traduit la domination de l'homme sur la femme et sur la mère-terre ; c'est le phallocentrisme ou la primauté du mâle.[6]

The characters in Le Pleurer-Rire move between two places and two stories. This double anchorage gives them a complexity that is real and fictional, historical and geographical. Catherine Mazauric rightly expresses this idea when she says:

Un ou des personnages se réinventent ailleurs qu'en leur lieu de vie initial. Plus tard, d'autres se lancent sur leurs traces pour tenter de reconstituer à travers leur itinéraire, un portrait disloqué. Ainsi s'affirme la dissémination de l'Afrique en elle-même comme en toute part du monde.[7]

In her novel La grève des Bàttu published in 1979, the Senegalese writer Aminata Sow Fall shows how the urban space fractures the narrative. The coexistence of beggars and politicians in the city generates deep conflicts. The novel expresses Africa's current grievances inherited from colonization. The depiction of African cities in sub-Saharan fiction evokes the aesthetics of misery at the thematic level and the aesthetics of discontinuity at the structural level.

Similarly, in L'Enfer au paradis, a 1988 novel by the Burkinabe writer Ansomwin Ignace Hien, urban migration abolishes tribal ties. Tanga, the protagonist, leaves his village for the capital, Ouagadougou. The westernized lifestyle leads the young student to prison and death. The city thus appears as the cursed land of all evils.

Cultural displacement and aesthetic disarticulation go hand in hand in African colonial literature. The city is seen as an expansionist phenomenon. In sub-Saharan novels, it appears as a gallery of social mirrors, each reflecting the other ad infinitum. It is a metonym for colonial power and local resistance. Depicted as a mortifying place, it carries a morally and politically threatening modernity for traditional cultures.

About thirty years separate Achebe's short story "Marriage is a Private Affair" (1952) from Henri Lopes' novel Le Pleurer-Rire (1982). By spacing the literary works, we have tried to vary the light on the issues to be analyzed. This approach has allowed us to gain a polyfocal insight into reality and to discern the African evolution of things.

The aesthetics of tragedy used in African literature from the colonial era to independence testifies to the social and spatial mutations of sub-Saharan cultures towards more modern conceptions and forms of life. This new epistemological orientation,

[5] Interview with Nicholas Michel, published in *Jeune Afrique* under the title: « Cheikh Hamidou Kane : 'Je suis plus un témoin qu'un écrivain' ». URL: https://www.jeuneafrique.com/183145/politique/cheikh-hamidou-kane-je-suis-plus-un-t-moin-qu-un-crivain/

[6] Rodrigo Vidal-Rojas, « La ville au féminin et au masculin », *Femmes, villes et environnement*, texts collected by Yvonne Preiswerk and Isabelle Milbert, Genève: IUED/DDC/Unesco, 1995, p. 62.

[7] Catherine Mazauric, « Mobilités de l'œuvre : exils, errances, retours », *Études littéraires africaines*, n° 45, 2018, p. 32.

initiated by the spatial turn, must be intrinsic to African history and its endogenous values in order to be adopted by Africans. There are two types of modernity: colonial modernity and national modernity. Post-independence movements naturally reject modernity unless it comes from the womb of the state. In short, modernity should be a nation in motion.

It follows from this survey of African literature that the village is a space charged with social, moral, and psychological implications. The city, on the other hand, seems more like a place of tension, where opulence rubs shoulders with scarcity. The promise of the city quickly disillusions the newcomers. African writers seize the opportunity to denounce the rural exodus and the inadequacy of education. The spatial and social dichotomy that pervades sub-Saharan novels generates another form of violence, namely textual violence.

The dislocation that informs the aesthetic integrity of literary texts leads us to a nuanced vision of things. By deconstructing the antagonisms of spaces and characters, contemporary African society seeks to reconcile complementary opposites. In Sortir de la grande nuit (2010), an insightful essay on decolonized Africa, the Cameroonian writer Achille Mbembe notes the emergence of a new Africa that achieves its synthesis. In the same vein, the Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou, in his essay Le sanglot de l'homme noir (2012), invites us to go beyond. He does not deny the African tragedy, but refuses to define himself cynically.

In short, the factual cities and their fictional representation in sub-Saharan literary creations revolve around two poles: Africa and Europe. The two cultures coexist, not without clashes, in the space of African fiction. The mise en abyme structure is omnipresent in modern African works, where the cultural war also rages within the characters. Contemporary writers, however, are moving away from the binary vision to a more nuanced approach to the black question.

A mutation is taking place in African literature. In its search for identity, Africa reveals itself artistically in its relationship to the world. The dialectic of the self and the other reveals another conflict between generations. Fathers and sons no longer share the same ideals, as shown in Achebe's short story under study and in the novel by the Senegalese Mariama Bâ, Une si longue lettre (1979), where love marriages defy parental guidance and tribal intrusion. Both writers depict a fierce struggle between modernity and tradition, the individual and the community. By redrawing its borders, Africa sets its social and cultural markers as a wise way to embrace otherness without losing its soul.

The African works examined here converge on a conception of literature that rejects hierarchies and determinisms. What is clear from all these readings is that the urban colonial project is incompatible with tribal identities. Once protesters against colonization, African writers are now leading a revolt against neo-colonialism. The oppressor who undermines African dignity, whether black or white, is seen as a threat.

Finally, the poetics of post-independence novels is based more on the harmonious coexistence of village and city, identity and otherness, tradition and modernity. The omniscient narrative gradually disappears in favor of a non-linear polyphonic voice that allows the expression of different points of view and offers a chromatic vision of the African continent with its human genius and paradoxes.

REFERENCES

1) BOTO, Eza. Ville cruelle, Paris, Editions africaines, 1954.
2) CESAIRE, Aimé. Discours sur le colonialisme [suivi de] Discours sur la négritude [1955], Paris, Présence Africaine, 2004.
3) ELA, Jean-Marc. La ville en Afrique noire, Paris, Karthala, 1983.
4) MAZAURIC, Catherine. « Mobilités de l'œuvre : exils, errances, retours », Études littéraires africaines, n° 45, 2018.
5) MILBERT Isabelle & PREISWERK Yvonne (eds.). Femmes, villes et environnement, Genève : IUED/DDC/Unesco, 1995.
6) SENGHOR, Léopold Sédar. Liberté III : Négritude et civilisation de l'universel, Paris, Seuil, 1974.