HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL

EXAMINATION OF MASSA MAKAN DIABATE’S THE KOUTA

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Abstract

Hermeneutics has its background from the interpretation of logos of the scripture in line with context and the culture of a particular people. Its presence in Literature is not equally far fetch from the interpretation of meaning. This owes to the veracity that the meaning of a word in a text is equally bound to be interpreted using the circumstances and situation that surround it. This is important as words work not in isolation even as the actions intended are bound to be expressed in word. In an attempt to examine the subconscious of a character besides what he does and says, his actions not spoken or acted become vital in judging him. This work applies a psychoanalytic theory in examining the hermeneutics of suspicion, hence words are self-referring.

Introduction

The departure of a text to its final point of conclusion is said to be a creative work of an author. The writer is said to have accounted for his personal experiences or frontier a deep profound point of fictive creativity. In writing, “…the author is also historic…(for) when he writes his text, he does not go outside his historic situation; he writes and anchors it in his time, in his environment and in his history” (Rallo 84). But how true will this be if it is equally arguable that a piece of work may never be often seen in the light of the author’s direction? Does the author in his creative writing provide all the meaning that a critique is bound to bring to fore through approaches and techniques? Certainly, the answer may not be affirmative hence “the aim of literary theory is essentially, to provide a modelled interpretative frame or master code – a balanced and sufficient controlling critical practice – so to speak – that would, in one breathe, hold or provide the ground for or organise a process of and/or the procedure for meaning-making” (Aule 757). According to Aule, meaning making in a piece of literature is not dependant on what the author would have written but upon what tools has the critique relied up in drawing out meaning from the well abundance of meanings. This is why Barthes opines concerning a text that “...a work is a finished object, sometimes computable, which can occupy a physical space (take its place, for example, on the shelves of a library)” (39). For Barthes, a work may be completed but a text is equally bound to emanate from a work hence “the text can be felt only in a work, a production” (Barthes 40). This therefore lights the facts that a text is not just the creativity of the author but equally could be drawn from the inspirational reader of a work as meanings are interpreted from the ‘work’ of an author seen as not only “a mere message or “...finished product” (Barthes 42) but also “perpetual productions, enunciations, through which the subject continues to struggle; this subject is no doubt that of the author, but also that of the reader” (Barthes 42). This implies that a reader is bound to be an author from merely reading a text and drawing meanings from the text. This is why Bello-Kano opines that

the Author and the Reader are only distinct subjectivities, the realm of intentional activities of human beings; Context, like history, is, in another sense, a structure, a set of determinations which supposedly acts as casual influence or reference within interpretation; and Text, which stands for all semantic productions, the symbolic, the cultural realm, the spaces of representation where, in the words of Frank Farrel, human meaning-making is ‘repeated and interpreted and shaped’ (12).

For Bello-Kano, the author and the reader are unique subjectivities, being that both see the ‘con-text’ from different light and meaning is bound to be read from different angles. The writer and the author writing to mean one thing and the reader, through a theory depicts meaning from a different angel hence “words are self-referring”. It is in line with this that this work seeks to examine the variety of meanings resulting from the reader’s objective understanding.

Bio-Sketch

Born in 1938 in Kita his village which is forty kilometers away from Bamako, Massa MakanDiabaté began his traditional oral education by learning from his father and his uncle Kele Monson. He had most of educational pursuits in Conakry before going to France, precisely Paris to specialize in human sciences. While in Paris, he studied Sociology and History. He later returned and held some administrative offices in his country among which include the Director General of Information and was also the Minister of Cultural Education. Massa MakanDiabaté, before his death in January 27, 1988 in Bamako won several literary awards for his works. He was a poet, storyteller, musician, playwright, novelist and singer.

Resume of the Corpus

The Kouta Lieutenant (Le Lieutenant de Kouta) originally written in French narrates how Lieutenant Siriman Keita returns from a colonial wars with the reputation of a hero and resides in Kouta village though from Kouroula , a village located one kilometer away from Kouta. Keita was Siriman violent protests against whites. As time unfolds, his personality is reduced due to his philosophies and abnormal decisions. Lieutenant adopts FamakanBerete, a fatherless child shortly after the impact. Imam advises him to marry.

Lieutenant Siriman Keita eventually marries Awa, a civil ceremonial way to the dismay of the imam, all that pleases captain Bertin. Later, a plot by the Bertin commander lands the lieutenant in prison. He is humiliated. In his absence his beautiful wife organizes festive evenings with Zazous. Kouta returns from prison and becomes Ex-Lieutenant. He finds his beautiful pregnant. Siriman Keita converts to Muslim in a big ceremony and he becomes a very quiet man. He always at the mosque to the dismay of the colonial administration. The colonial authorities offered him the title of Knight of the Legion, with an apology for the humiliation and slander brought to him. Former Lieutenant died of a stray dog bite. He was buried in the courtyard of the mosque as a saint.

Theoretical Framework

Sigmund Freud, considered the author of the structural (de)construct of personality, elaborated upon by Jacques Lacan suggests that “each person’s personality is formed of three parts: the Ego, the Superego and the Id” (Ewen 901). These three concepts, “according to Freud, exist in the ‘mind’ (as)…they control and determine human behavoir” (James 64). This psychoanalysis is deemed a process of using what we know about these three parts of someone’s personality to examine analytically the ways that a person is tantamount to behave. The critical exploration of the ego, superego, and id of characters in a work unveils characters’ un/conscious that influences his attitudes and characters though these personality traits are bound to be inconsistent. This process is called psychoanalytic criticism. What is therefore the ‘id’, ‘superego’ and ‘ego’?

The id “…houses the libido, the source of all psychosexual desires and all our psychic enery” (Blressler 124). It is the part of the personality that contains our primitive impulses-such as thirst, anger, hunger-and the desire for instant gratification or release. According to Freud, we are born with our id. The id is an important part of our personality because as newborns, it allows us to get our basic needs met. Freud believed that the id is based on our pleasure principle. The id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the other circumstances of the situation. This is the part of the personality that represents the conscience, the moral part of us. The superego considered “…a psychological reservoir of instincts and our libido” (Tyson 27), develops due to the moral and ethical restraints placed on us by our caregivers. It dictates our belief of right and wrong.

The ego is the part of the personality that maintains a balance between our impulses (id) and our conscience (superego). The ego is based on the reality principle. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the end. It is the ego’s job to meet the needs of the id, while taking into consideration the reality of the situation. The ego works, in other words, to balance the id and superego.

Hermeneutic of Suspicion

‘Hermeneutics’ is considered a Christian term which is “the finding and interpretation of the spiritual truth in the Bible” (Cuddon 376). However, in a more general term and of recent, “hermeneutics has been concerned with the interpretation and understanding of human action (this includes what people do, say and create) and, particularly, with human action… (Cuddon 376). This therefore implies that hermeneutics is concerned with the actions and inactions of human beings. What is therefore ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’?

Hermeneutic of suspicion is “the act of probing into the ‘unconscious’ of a text in order to reveal the processes and the ‘dream-work’ by which it was produced” (Cuddon 376). This occurs in psychoanalytical criticism which gives the reader accesses to the actions and inactions of the character hence his/her personality is revealed. This work examines the variety of meaning through the use of proverbs, symbolism, words not said and ambivalence.

Proverb

This is “a short pithy saying which embodies a general truth. It is related in form and content to the maxim and the aphorism” (Cuddon 706). As a way of conveying special meaning in a unique way, proverbs are used in the text for special semantic features.

1. “Well, not until some earth is put into my ears, the jealous and the envious will be seeing me here in Kouta” (1).

The meaning of this is that until he is dead, people who are jealous and envious will keep seeing him in Kouta. This implies that some people would not have wanted his stay in Kouta. As a retired lieutenant, his presence, action and inaction have become a threat to a lot of people. His decision to state his stand for not leaving Kouta is reassurance that he would not leave Kouta until his death.

1. “He who steals an egg will steal an ox” (3).

This proverb is made by the lieutenant at the instance when Famakan is caught by the lieutenant stealing an egg. An egg considered to be something small, is a way of learning to steal something bigger. In other words, for Famakan to have stolen an egg is evident that one day he will steal something bigger if not tamed. This shows that when an evil act is not consciously handled, it will become a detriment to the society.

1. “A retired soldier awaits only his death” (5).

Soldiers are warriors and need not fear war. Therefore, after retirement, all what a retired soldier awaits is just his death for he would have seen it all and equally given his very best.

1. “All that is in the market is for sale. But one never buys a hat without first of all trying it out” (35)

The market is considered a place where commercial activities take place. This is place where everything displayed is considered for sale. But how would one just buy something for instance, a pair of shoes without trying it on? How can one buy a face-cup, eye glasses without trying to see if it is of his or her size? This is quite important in determining the reality and the compatibility of what is being bought. In the context of the above reference, Awa, a very pretty woman with every necessary attracting physique, even from behind is considered to be a product in the market where the man would have to tread upon her beauty (may be sexually) before thinking of making her a wife. This image created by the Diabete gives a general picture of woman being liken to a market product. This is quite demining and dehumanizing. The place of a woman in this light is subjugated and relegated to the level lesser than the man. The meaning conveyed by the expression is quite clear as today, men believe that a woman’s sexual, domestic and kitchen prowess should be tested before the marital contract is taken into consideration. It is in line with this that the author adds that:

1. “A well-seasoned dish is like a beautiful woman; it gives satisfaction to the whole body” (37)

This is also in the same way bringing the place and relevance of a woman to merely satisfying the erotic desire of the man. In comparing this, the author gives a picture of a “well-seasoned fish”, which is palatable, delicious and nutritious to the emotional, sexual and psychological satisfaction of a man. The man is bound to derive a satisfying relationship with a woman. The place and status of the woman here is just to satisfy the man. But, the woman is not considered if satisfied or not.

1. “As a blind man, I know of neither fear nor shame” (38)

One of the problems leading to hypocrisy and sycophancy has remained shame and fear to openly criticise societal ills and speak the truth. The eyes serve as a way of reframing one from telling the reality of a situation (sometimes). This is never the case with the blind; for their world of sight, shame and fear is cut off. Seeing no one is good enough to speak the truth about the person. This is why often the truth is often told at one’s absence. Therefore, to the blind, everyone is absent and the truth could be told at any time hence shame and fear are cut off.

1. “He is conducting every business, one hand up one hand down”

In the light of the above expression, business could be seen as the day to day affairs of the human life, the general human relationship and interactions. How can one conduct his daily activities with “…one hand up, one hand down”(38)? Precautionary measures are very important in taking every decision. For instance, what are the negative and positive effect of your daily decisions and choices? Do we put in mind the effects of our decisions? Of course, consciously or unconsciously, we tread the path of life to maximise profit. This is what Massa Makan is putting into consciousness. “…the hand up…” here refers to the investment, decision and choices that we make in life. Also, “…one hand down” here refers to the conscious steps taken in case of any eventuality. We will have to bounce back on sometime as our second option in case the first option does not go through. Therefore, having an alternative in every decision we take becomes paramount.

Symbolism

Symbolism “is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands for’ something else” (Cuddon 885). This unique feature used in literature empowers the writer to mean much more than what may appear. This is owing to the fact that symbol in literature, as Cuddon opines “combines an image with a concept” (885) to relate or interrogate a phenomenon. In this wise, concrete images are used as symbols to express an emotion or an abstract idea or what Eliot calls: ‘objective correlatives which, according to him, is finding ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion (Cuddon 886). The understanding of a text, using this parameter, is only possible when these sets of objects are first of all isolated and then juxtaposed with socio-political or historical moments in order to draw out the link between them. By doing so, these objects, linked with situations that gave birth to them, become correlates as they can be seen as having mutual or complementary properties through which meaning can be deduced.

Kouta: Koutais considered the town in which colonial activities take place. This is where the Commandant and his soldiers are housed as they are answerable to the Governor. Kouta is quite a pretty small town from all description. This is where the lieutenant has decided to settle after retirement, a town not too far away from his own village. Kouta has a history of trilogy. It is considered one of the colonial centres. Koutarepresents the centre of unity. In Kouta, white, the villagers and strangers are found living in peace. Their market day is often considered a day of commerce as they buy and sell their products. Kouta, through colonisation, has witnessed an evolvement as there are prisoners as a result of colonialist. Yet, the town stands for peace and unity.

The lieutenant: The lieutenant is considered a classified hybrid. He is typical symbol of war and peace. As a symbol of war, he led his people against the advocate of independence and as a peace maker; he was honoured to have accepted to stay with Awa after discovering that she was not pregnant for him as he notes: My wife is expecting a baby that couldn’t have come from me…I have the intention of recognizing this child” (108). This is an act of peace. This is equally attested by the Imam that “We have seen you feed and love an orphan as if you had given birth to him” (108). It is this symbol of peace represented by the lieutenant that made the Imam to first all appoint him as the new muezzin as thus: “the lieutenant who is on retirement and has no material worries would be a good muezzin” (114). He was a new convert to the Muslim community but his passion for service and worship knew no bounce. The Imam attests thus “And I attest in the name of God that nobody here present would have been capable of your gesture…Not even your imam…”(114). This is why he as buried in the mosque by the Imam thus: “I have decided that Siriman Keita (the lieutenant) be buried in our mosque” (126). This singular act made him a saint before the Muslim community.

He also symbolises the refined African-French man who is mentally colonised. He lives a life of the colonial master in the village and wants to be respected as the colonial masters. He represents the early African leaders who see their fellow black as nothing to be taken serious having dined with the white. He is a man of ego and does not see anyone matching up to his personality in the village. He is never an advocate of independence hence a pensioner and does not want anything that would stop his pension.

The horses: The horse is an animal considered to be ridden by the nobles in the African traditional setting. Even today, the horse is considered an animal found among the nobles as its treatment is special. A wounded horse is sent to the lieutenant after his wedding with Awa from a unanimous. The wounded horse is considered the fall of the lieutenant. The tragedy that befalls the horse is seen in the lieutenant.

Words not said

Words not said here are seen as intended actions, reflections and thoughts, nonverbal expressions, and gestures.

1. “Women had their hands over their ears”

This action is considered to be nonverbal form of expressing their bewilderment. Closing one’s ear is a typical sign of not willing to hear something. This is when one is not interested in a particular discourse or as a result of shame does not want to be part of a discussion. This feature expressed here shows that the women are not willing to hear what the lieutenant is saying concerning Famakan, a young lad who is caught stealing eggs by the lieutenant.

1. Awa appeared, wrapped up in a white sheet. As the lieutenant greeted her hurriedly, she responded by bowing her head. From her face, Siriman Keita read a fright she could not control. His gesture was sudden as his voice trembled:

-you are expecting a baby? (106).

This is another reason that nonverbal expression has given a lot of meaning. Ordinarily, one would expect reactions and counter reaction but the meaning conveyed by the unspoken words are profound. One occasion considered to be at the climax of the text is the discovery of the lieutenant after six month detention that his wife Awa is pregnant for another man.

The bowing of head by Awa could signify a lot of meanings. This could be out of shame for the fact that she was carrying another man’s baby in her husband’s house and the discovery of the husband would have been disgraceful. This is a typical African way of non-verbal expression for shame. When one’s head is not high, it is considered one has done something wrong. In another instance, the bowing of head by Awa could mean a sign of respect for her husband. The African culture holds the man and husband in high esteem. It does not give the woman room to look right into the eyes of her husband. Culturally, Awa’s action could be read in two lights. However, in the light of context used, one will deduce that it was more of shame than respect for her husband. This is why her face had a fright that cannot be controlled.

One would also wonder why the lieutenant is surprise and speaks in a trembling voice. The question asked by the lieutenant was not necessary as her physique shows that she is pregnant. Why then would he ask her the question? It was simple an expression of defeat. Having failed to make her pregnant, he is cut between a loss of his pride and the anger that would have rained in his reality as a man capable of meeting up with his marital sexual responsibility.

We are told that Awa does not answer this question with words but with a cry “ shestaarted crying, hitting her breasts hard” (107). This has a volume of information to pass across. We see from the forgoing that her response is equally non-verbal. She cries as a way of regret and rumour for what she has done. She shows from her actions that she deserves to be beaten; she should have been beaten by her husband than presenting her with just a simple question of her pregnancy.

c). He (the lieutenant) inspected the troops, introducing along the rows recently retired old soldiers, who put on airs in their uniform and proudly showed off their brand new decorations. In the face of this heterogeneous assemblage of men and accoutrement, the Commandant forced an amusing smile,shook all the hands that were stretched towards him…(24)

The kouta Lieutenant is classified a colonial text. One of the elements of such a text is the dehumanising relationship suffered by the Africans in the hands of the Europeans. This text is not out of this context. One of the major characters, the lieutenant, is one of those who fought guerrilla wars for France. Several Africans fought these wars for the Europeans and many paying the ultimate prize while others became physically disabled. Despite this reality, these native would come to celebrate “July 14”. It is one of these celebrations that we are told the Commandant who is a white will come out and congratulate the retired soldiers who stood in defence for France. However, our concern here is to probe the profound action of the Commandant in the light of this reality. Of course, he is obliged to perform this as a duty but not from the sincerity of his heart. This is seen from the forced prostrating smile of the Commandant. This smile is deduced to be a form of mockery to those retirees whose dilapidating physique is as a result of European selfishness. This smile is deemed to be the highest form of mockery and a well calculated attempt by the Commandant to show his level of psychological savagery rationalisation towards these Africans who fought for France. Of course, what would have amused the Commandant on a parade ground? Would he exhibit such scally-wag behaviour in the mist of ‘his fellow compatriots’? Or is it simply because he has found himself on a pedestal he would have never attained in his life if lift in Europe? These and numerous meanings are bound to be interpreted from the Commandant attitudes.

Ambivalences

This is showing mixed feeling towards something or someone. This is seen precisely in the personality of the lieutenant. In the first place, his decision to reside in Kouta after retirement is welcomed with mixed feelings. The lieutenant, not being a member of this community is considered to be a threat to the villagers. The community sees the lieutenant as a threat to their community. This is obvious as the Commandant gives the lieutenant a special place at his arrival as he (the Commandant) galvanises the whole community for a grand festive arrival of the lieutenant to the community.

He had built this square house before he was sent on retirement. A lot had been said in Kouta, when masons, assisted by all the prisoners, were building the house., without offering any explanation. They had been given a place and precise instructions from the District Commandant.

-the house must be square, with a double door portal and without any other exit (7-8).

The building of this house in Koutais welcomed with a mixed reaction. The community sees the presence of this house as another threat to their peace as to whether “…could it be that the lieutenant is building a new prison in view of impending arrests?” (8). This gives us a signal of fear within the community. The coming of the lieutenant to Kouta is really not without psychological effect. This coming is announced and celebrated thus:

On the eve of his arrival, Commandant Dotori had asked the town-crier to inform the people that a worthy son of the soil, a successful servant of France would be arriving by ten o’clock train and that it would be appropriate to welcome him in a musical combination of balafons, tom-toms and tambouries (8)

One tends to wonder of what importance is his special welcome party to the Commandant and the entire community? He was a soldier but not for his people. His contributions had no relevance to his people but France. So, why celebrate the lieutenant? It is simply the glaring veracity that the Commandant knows he would benefit from the military training of the lieutenant and equally, it is a way of wining the lieutenant on his side.

Conclusion

The reading and interpretation of meaning from a work of literature is dependent upon the tools used by the critique. This is why several meanings and interpretations could be read from a piece of work using a variety of theory. This work examines several underlying meanings from Massa MakanDiabate’sThe Kouta Lieutenant using the hermeneutic of suspicion: a tool which allows meanings to be read through the theory of psychoanalysis. This work draws meaning from a variety of actions, spoken and unspoken words. These range from proverbs, to symbolism, to words not said and ambivalence. This work observes and concludes that every step, action, word, thought, reflection, nonverbal expression etc. by a character is purposeful and has a semantic implication; and meaning could be interpreted using a variety of stand point like culture, context and situation.

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