

2FACE IDIBIA’S *AFRICAN QUEEN*: AN EXCURSION INTO THE PHILOSOPHY OF NEGRITUDE IN AFRICAN MUSIC

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Abstract

With all intents and purposes, the song under study *African Queen* by 2face Idibia is an intellectual artistic exercise executed with formidable precision. Precisely, the study sees this song as a re-enactment of negritude’s philosophy in the African arts form. The researcher adopts a critical analytical approach through the theoretical lens of cultural poetics having in mind the integration of the different arts forms such as music, dance, poetry and painting. The researcher first of all listens to the song, transcribes it from the text of oral to its written form for analysis. This analysis of the song using literary techniques helps in decoding and encoding the metaphorical deposits in it in order to bring out its deeper meaning. To achieve this, a simplification approach is adopted where the symbolizes and the symbolized as well as the signifiers and the signified are identified and placed side by side for easy understanding.

Keywords: African Queen, Philosophy of Negritude, African Music

Introduction

2face idibia, a Nigerian sensational artiste re-ignited the philosophy of negritude in African music when he took to stage his hit-making song *African Queen* in 2004. Like the revolutionary poets of the negritude movement, 2face idibia, a Nigerian musician, proclaimed from roof-top the beauty of the African woman, the black world and the black aesthetics. He has shown that he adored and praised the African woman, her charming beauty.

This sentiment was already exemplified and existed for a very long time in the creative works of negritude poets like Leopold Senghor in his classic poem, *Femme noire*, where he addresses African womanhood:

... *Dark woman, symbol of life and maturity, whose colour symbolises life itself, and whose form is nothing but beauty as jewels sparkle like stars on the darkness of her skin (qtd in Mezu, 102).*

For a long time afterwards this image of the black woman became an idol worthy of veneration by the African poets which has today been brought to a foe through the music of 2face idibia. His accent on the African woman has raised a serious black consciousness in other artistes like flavour who without sentiment toed the same line in his recent song, *Black is Beautiful*, sound sultan who no doubt has been a loyal ally of 2face in his song *King of my Country* and others. So today, since the release of *African Queen* artistes have beginning to use their songs to search for a true African folk roots. This attempt which in people like 2face Idibia is lyrical and a cult of beauty, black and African, no doubt takes more poignant dimensions in the song under study.

The Concepts of Negritude

Negritude is a literary and ideological philosophy, developed by francophone African intellectuals, writers, and politicians in France in the 1930s. The founders were Martinican poet Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor (ex-Senegalese president), Leon Damas of French Guiana. Senghor defines it as a philosophy of African art. It later developed into a cultural and artistic movement that challenged the theory of race hierarchy and black inferiority developed by philosophers such as Friedrich Hegel and Joseph de Gobineau.

He believes that every African shares certain distinctive and innate characteristics, values and aesthetics. In the poem *New York*, he informs us that the black community of Harlem should ‘listen to the far beating of your nocturnal heart, rhythm and blood of the drum and yet the black blood flow into your blood.’ Senghor is asserting here that one’s African heritage (one’s Blackness) is both inescapable and natural (like night-time).

So Negritude is the active rooting of a Black identity in this inescapable and natural African essence. The major premise of Negritude is therefore that one’s biological make-up (race) defines one’s outer (skin colour) as well as inner (spirit/essence) traits. Negritude is a concept which holds that there is a ‘shared culture and subjectivity and spiritual essence’ among members of the same racial group. Negritude rejects the assumption that the African is inherently inferior to the “white man.”

Critique of the Song

2face in the song started by declaring that the woman character in the song is his African queen followed by the imaginative description of who she is to him using such romantic imageries as “The Sun”, “Light of the Earth” “The Light of my Life” in the first verse.

Yea! Yea!!
You are my African queen
O Lord! O Lord!!
Just like the sun
Light up the earth
You light up my life
The only one I see
That smile so bright

The exclamation in the first line performs a very important function in an attempt to understand the depth of love the singer has for his lover which he could not keep to himself but wants the whole world to know by announcing to the woman in the second line that you are my *African Queen*. Off course literarily we know the importance of exclamation which is basically to heighten feelings and attention. In line three (3) the singer looks up to the sky and exclaims again, “O lord! O lord!” and continues in the following lines when he employs the power of simile and metaphor by liking his African queen to the ‘Sun’ and the ‘light’.

Even as a modern musician, 2face has worked hard never to forget the importance of the use of figures of speech. These figures of speech according to the French stylistician pierre Guiraud are “changes in sense”, and among which metaphors are the most widely known and the most widely used by 2face to evoke the true feeling of love and beauty. He strives hard to elevate both the outer and inner beauty of his African queen, even beyond immediate

comprehension. By so doing, 2face has effectively employed a symbolic transposition of real and live, the qualities of African woman.

Metaphorically he continues:

Just yesterday you came into my life
You came around my way
You change my whole story
with your tarnishing beauty
Oh!
You could make a brother sin
Not ordinary thing
A supernatural being
You are brighter than the moon
Brighter than the star.
I love you just the way you are.

Like the negritude poets, 2face has made his adoration of the African woman a celebration as he revels in the exoticism of her extra-ordinary beauty which has turned her into “a supernatural being”. The metaphors in the song run all through with its intensity met when he describes her as “brighter than the moon”, “brighter than the star”. Hyperbolic expressions also run through the song basically to show the extent of love the singer has for the African woman.

One may begin to wonder while listening to *African Queen* the poetic qualities of the song. I don't know about you this is the way I feel each time I listen to 2face songs. Though, I am not too surprised when I remember Mezu's assertion that “one of the most interesting aspects of traditional African civilization is the unity of the art forms” (93). In *African Queen* 2face has explored Charles Baudelaire's proposition that:

... The unity and association of music, poetry, dance and painting in the process of which the sounds of music, the rhythms, phrases and syllables, the allegories and analogies of poetry, the steps, movements, jumps and signals of dance and finally the columns of painting are unified in a symbolic world where religion provides a solid and firm structure (quoted in Mezu, 93).

So *African Queen* can best be described, like I told my wife while listening to the song, as “from poetry to music”. Side by side with this unity of the art forms is the element of repetition in the line, “you are my *African Queen*”. This element is usually found in black-American music especially in jazz and blues, where slight and endlessly variable permutations and combinations lend novelty and continuity to the trumpets of Louis Armstrong or where the languorous, melancholic and the voice of Ray Charles holds the listener spell-bound as he found in cha-cha, the samba, the pachanga, rumba, maringa and the popular West African high-life, even in the music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Oliver Dicoque, Osadebey and Bongos Ikwue.

In most African art forms, this approach is employed to describe the attributes of the object of praise in an unfathomable way likened to the European surrealistic conception of poetry and art. In traditional African society even, very little distinction is made between songs and poetry. In the chorus 2face informs us that his *African Queen* is the ‘girl of his dream’ and

that she takes him to where he has never been. After all the praises and exaltations, the singer concludes in that verse that, “and that is the African beauty ee”. What this suggests is that the beauty he adores is not for a particular woman but that of the entire African womanhood and her continent.

It is in this light that we stand bold to say that 2face has become a new voice that has re-ignited that spirit of negritude, the spirit of African-ness in the music. From whatever way we look at him, 2face has contributed in enduring way, to the African aesthetic in the arts. I found his contribution to the arts, the music in his exaltation of the black woman which goes a long way to stress the innate dignity of the African personality. He sparks-up an inspiration in the art and in African folk culture which has become a reservoir of the rhythm and lyricism of his music. What 2face represents for his generation of African arts and music in particular is akin to what Nnolim says of Negritude movement thus:

In its insistence on the “felt” quality of the poetry of all African peoples; in its demonstration of the life-force that governs the art of all African peoples; and most importantly, in its encouragement of the study and appreciation of our African heritage. (122-3).

What this means is that, 2face defines for his generation what pop music is in Africa. It is in light of the above that critics conclude that 2face Innocent Ujah Idibia is an African export to the world.

2face continues in the following verse:

Out of the million
You stand as one
When I look into your eyes
What I see is paradise
You have in-fated my soul
Every day I want you more!!!
I cannot deny
This feeling inside
No one can take your place
Take your place
You are the one that makes me smile
Makes me flow like bottom of the Nile.

At this point the singer is making a vow to his lover to remain committed, never to disappoint her. This can be found in line 9 and 10 of this verse. The message in line 4 is quite significant. The singer here is giving his lover hope that in her what he is seeing is nothing but an affection that could last till eternity. He ends the verse with a wonderful submission to his affirmation in the last two lines that ‘she is the one that makes me happy’. He employs simile by the use of ‘like’ in the last line where he sharply compares the joy of being in love with the woman with the ‘bottom of the Nile’.

2face has achieved for his generation and the one yet unborn what Nnolim describes as “the anlage of the African creative process” (122). In *African queen*, the singer intelligently employs a basic creative principle with emphasis on the vibrations of the word than the word itself. This could be what obinaju had in mind when he says that ‘words go beyond their

lexical significance most of the time' (116). The singer's insistence on rhythm as a basic creative principle in the song is quite commendable.

In one of his live performances I attended in Owerri, 2face performed the song under study. Immediately he was called to the stage thousands of spectators who gathered to watch him could not help but stood up from their seats including the Governor, Rochas Okorocha and his guests to join 2face on stage with others fainting and crying. After the event, I heard some people asking one another, 'are you sure this Benue boy is not using juju on people?' Others reacted differently, but within me I know that the singer is simply exploiting a genuine power of creativity and intelligent imagination. It is capable of moving you without knowing. This is what Janheinz Jahn identifies as:

Nommo or the creative power of the word by which the Black artist weaves a spell by the magic omnipotence of the word or the incantatory magic factor in the poetry of all black peoples which transmutes the poem into something imbued with magic (122).

What we are saying in effect is that the rhythm, the lyricism, the gaiety that characterizes the music of 2face Idibia reveal a richer, more relaxed and more natural approach to life. This approach is the magic-wand with which 2face uses to hold his viewers spell-bond each time he climbs the stage. It is available for use by any artiste who like 2face, understands the moving power of creative imagination and aesthetics in the arts. We watched a similar thing whenever Michael Jackson, Lucky Dube and Bob Marley performed.

Listening to the song further reveals the artiste's use of descriptive imagination and aesthetic metaphor:

I know that this love is sent from above
You are the only one I think of
I will give you my heart, my love, my
body and bodee
Every other thing you think of
I do not think I can find anything better
than you
I do not think I can ever hurt you Sacrifice
is all I will give to you.

In fact what appears obvious in this verse and the ones above is that 2face is intentionally exploiting the process of "Symbolization" than that of direct "meaning". In this verse for instance, we find the expression in line one, "I know that this love is sent from above" as a signifier and the signified as "something beyond human imagination". In this song we equally find the same example in the last line, "sacrifice is all I will give you". Here *sacrifice* is the 'symbolizer' while *true love* is the symbolized. So the artiste is trying to prove to his adored lover the extent of love he has for her and the commitment attached to it. So it becomes clear that 2face in his love songs prefers to use metaphors in expressing himself believing that 'condensed comparisons' are the best symbolizers and help very much in bringing out the true meaning of the topic in question.

Conclusion.

Innocent Ujah Idibia whose stage name is 2face Idibia has won several awards in music and entertainment. He is known for singing highly rated romantic songs yet *African Queen* is the best of them all. The song melted the heart of many women across the world-even those who are just Africans at heart. This and many more reasons justify my description of the song as a re-enactment of the philosophy of negritude in African music. This is because the expression of love and a display of an innate appreciation for the beauty of an African woman transcend that of womanhood to that of the entire Africa and her continent.

2face is one of the few African musicians who work across a variety of genres with incredible ease. This is evidenced in the tact and great artistry he shows in the composition of *African Queen*. A careful study of the song reveals that *African Queen* is a fusion of poetry and music. It perfectly represents the unity of the art forms; a quality that yielded the song to the application of literary techniques in its study and analysis through the theoretical lens of cultural poetics.

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