IMAGINING BLACKNESS: A REVIEW OF FEMI ABODUNRIN’S
BLACKNESS: CULTURE, IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE


The study of black or Africana writing has not been a particularly easy endeavour because of its scope. It is so vast that it links up various continents and exists in various languages. It consequently situates the literary practices of peoples of Africa and African descent within a common tradition. It should be no surprise that theorists and critics construct the tradition in a variety of ways. Works and writers that constitute the tradition naturally operate within other traditions that coincide with national, linguistic or continental formations. However, the fact that black writing validates itself based on the global geography of black presence means that every way of defining it is at best tentative. The global nature of the black presence suggests that every mapping of the tradition is also an effort at projecting a vision of the black world. It will then be logical to assume that the literary cultures of some segments of the black world will remain excluded from the canon of black writing until their canonical texts are available and accessible in the major world languages. Critical works constantly betray visions of critics about the black world and how much of its literature has shaped their outlook because they always have to delimit the spheres of their engagement. At the end of the day, every critic of black writing may as well double as its theorist.

Femi Abodunrin’s Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse offers an articulate apprehension of literary expressions of the black identity. A reading of the book will therefore usher one into not only the world of contemporary black literature but also the world of issues and ideas that inform the way it is produced and received. The work originally grew out of a doctoral dissertation that explores connections between the literatures of Africa and its Diaspora. The new edition revises and enlarges the first edition, Blackness: Culture, ideology and Discourse—A Comparative Study which appeared in 1996. The second edition differs significantly from the first in the sense that it is a reworked and enlarged version. The author acknowledges that it as well accommodates “re-written, edited or enlarged” versions of essays and contributions made to some journals and books. The work shares a common methodological premise with Tejumola Olaniyan’s Scars of Conquest / Mask of Resistance: The Invention of
Cultural Identities in African, African-American and Caribbean Drama. It however differs from it in the sense that while the latter concentrates on black drama, it explores both fictional and dramatic texts. To the extent that Blackness brings the work of the author with a common focus and reading strategy together, it is safe to see it as a product of a perspective on black writing that has evolved and has been refined over time.

In reviewing the second edition of a book, it is natural to emphasise how different it is from the book that it seeks to update. Abodunrin’s passionate engagement with the cultural, the discursive and the ideological in black writing would account for the attempt at refining, extending and updating his argument in the new work. If the earlier effort is essentially driven by theory, the latter is no less so. The difference between the two editions of the book in quantitative terms is that, while the first is just a slim volume of two hundred and fifty-nine pages, the second runs into four hundred and fifty-two pages. In addition to any revisions in the existing chapters, the second includes new chapters on such writers as Akachi Ezeigbo, Chinua Achebe and Ken Saro-Wiwa. As with all efforts at clarifying black cultural production, the first issue that it engages borders on how to theorise the literary articulation of the black experience. It becomes necessary to make a choice in this case between an essentially introspective strategy, involving theorising the culture on its own terms, and drawing on ideas nurtured outside the black experience in explaining it. While the first will almost be labelled nativist, the second may as well be dismissed as irrelevant as it will amount to implying that there is nothing within the black experience with which to apprehend it. Abodunrin’s study navigates this rather problematic terrain by reconciling a sense of cultural awareness with textual grounding. His reading harmonises a strategy rooted in a black vernacular theory with “positive contribution from other traditions” (414).

The twelve chapters of the book are grouped into three sections. The first (“Introduction”) made up of an extensive introductory chapter, creates a basis for linking “Africans in the Diaspora and in the Homeland.” The second section has two chapters that provide the broad theoretical basis for the study. The second chapter clarifies the conceptual value of the Eshu-Elegbara myth, which it draws from the Yoruba cultural environment, in reading black texts. This obviously owes much to the insight of Louis Gates, whose The Signifying Monkey first demonstrated this possibility. The third closely engages patterns of figuration in black texts by drawing particular
attention to “the context of their social history.” The third section (“Rhetorical Strategies and the Texts of Blackness”) constitutes the longest part of the study, being the section that applies the assumptions that the first two provide to selected literary texts. Its two sub-sections, Part 1 and Part 2, engage texts drawn from continental Africa and the African Diaspora respectively. Chapters Four, Five and Six read Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo’s *House of Symbols* and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *A Month and a Day* in that order. What all the texts share, apart from being narrative works, is a common Nigerian origin. Chapters Seven to Twelve engage a variety of works drawn from the genres of drama and narrative fiction from the African, Caribbean, African American and Latin American sub-traditions. The works studied include Armah’s novels, Ijimere’s *The Imprisonment of Obatala*, Jorge Amado’s *Tent of Miracles*, Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*.

The texts that feature in *Blackness: Culture, ideology and Discourse* do not make any pretence to constituting the canon of black writing. They at best serve the purpose of the critic in projecting a coherent vision of the textual rendering of the black experience, implying that some other texts can easily take their place. It is also significant that the African axis of the black world enjoys considerable prominence in the overall design of the study. This may not invalidate its propositions but perhaps reveals a reality that recurs in most efforts at theorising the production of culture in the black world—the fact that every critic and theorist in this context inevitably appraises the tradition from a particular cultural location, a location that inevitably becomes privileged. This is the way to explain the dominance of not only African but also Nigerian literary texts in particular, in Abodunrin’s reading. The strength of the book resides in the animated way in which it engages the shared values in the black literary imagination and the fact that it locates its textual engagements within relevant debates and conceptual frames. It thus demonstrates the possibility of theoretically invigorating the reading of black writing.

While the book is a significant intervention in the study of black writing in Africa, it does not transcend the limitation that plagues many contemporary studies of black writing: it excludes black poetry, a major component of the black creative imagination, from its data. This reflects the dominance of fictional and dramatic genres in
constituting black literature. The fact that the book is a revised and enlarged version of an earlier effort recommends it as an improvement on the first. What it shares with the edition that it seeks to update is an elevated theoretical orientation, which will make it very challenging for anyone who is not acquainted with the many debates and arguments it alludes to in the course of contextualising its readings. In all, *Blackness* presents Abodunrin as a major voice in theorising the literary culture of global Africa. This new edition of the book is consequently a significant addition to the growing theoretical engagement with the production of black culture.

Works Cited


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