

An Afrocentric reading of *My Son* by Albert Nyathi and Ignatius Mabasa

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Abstract

This article attempts an Afrocentric reading of *My Son* by two renowned Zimbabwean poets, Albert Nyathi and Ignatius Mabasa. The book is targeted at the young and impressionable African minds during the era of globalisation which threatens to sweep the culturally unstable and feeble off their feet. The work of art is a bold step towards asserting the utilitarian and enduring African cultural resources in spite of the spirited centuries-old onslaught on the African psyche. Thus the book provides a fulcrum upon which to culturally anchor the young African. It is a book that celebrates African-centredness leading to cultural 'locatedness', polemics best exposed by an Afrocentric reading employed in this analysis.

Keywords: afrocentricism, *my son*, albert nyathi, ignatius mabasa

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that for centuries Africa was at the receiving end of slavery and for generations was in colonial bondage. History and art are replete with these. Both experiences reduced everything African to second fiddle. The systems set up by the coloniser/slave driver were meant to covertly and overtly promote the powerful culture and norms and values at the expense of the subordinated groups. In fact through a carefully orchestrated carrot and stick mechanism by rewarding those who were prepared to sell their souls for a living and punishing the 'cheeky' natives who chose to spurn the 'civilising hand' extended to them to remain in the heart of the darkness of the Platonic cave. Reality was consciously or unconsciously packaged and consumed in a monovisionary and exclusionary fashion with the school and books at the epicentre of this onslaught. Those who chose to question the arrangement were deemed to be on the wrong side of civilisation. Various socialisation agents, particularly the school, were employed in full force to rechannel the perceived heathenic energies towards embracing the recently delivered imported light. The onslaught and assault on the African psyche over centuries of slavery and colonisation resulted in many physically and psychologically conquered assuming and preferring the conqueror's ways: being human meant drifting as far as possible from the African centre and being lost in unfamiliar exotic terrain. The need for relocation of the dislocated and mislocated advocated by Afrocentrism is the anchor in the critiquing of the book, *My Son* by Albert Nyathi and Ignatius Mabasa selected for this analysis. The book, targeted at the young and impressionable African minds, is a bold step towards asserting the utilitarian and enduring cultural resources in spite of the spirited centuries-old onslaught of the African.

A brief background to Afrocentrism

Broadly speaking Afrocentrism is simply an attempt to place Africa, instead of Europe, at the centre of scholarly analysis of

peoples of African descent's experiences. Asante (1987:6) defines Afrocentricity as "the placing of African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior". Afrocentrism is a conceptual tool for seeing the history of Africans whether geographical or diasporic, through their own lens, and not through the lens of Europe or the West (Asante, 1987; 1990; 2007).

The famous German philosopher, F. Hegel, wrote of Africa thus:

This is the land where men are children, a land lying beyond the daylight of self-conscious history and enveloped in the black colour of night. At this point let us forget Africa not to mention it again. Africa is no historical part of the world...

Burton gives similar views on African life and art thus:

'The savage custom of going naked', we are told, 'has denuded the mind, and destroyed all decorum in the language. Poetry there is none . . . There is no metre, no rhyme, nothing that interests or soothes the feelings, or arrests the passions . . . (Burton cited in Finnegan, 2012:29)

This perception of Africa is what Afrocentrism want to deconstruct. It is a perception which sought to do more than decentering of Africa-to obliterate Africa from the face of the earth. Afrocentrism seeks to visibilize the subnegated African. Hoskins asserts that "most of history books in the last five hundred years have been written to glorify Europeans at the expense of other people" (Hoskins, 1992:248). Works of art have not shied away from the band wagon to denigrate the African. Such kind of literature tends to *other* other people and some of the othered tend to ape their oppressor's ways and in the case of Africa, the Eurocentric one. Eurocentrism is a set of beliefs which places Europe at the centre and

relegating all other ways of thinking to the periphery by setting standards in which reality can be tested (Shohat and Stam, 1994). Since Afrocentrism is largely driven by the quest to 're-member' the erstwhile 'dismembered' and dismembered African from the world's high-table, Africa and Africans have always been taken as the afterthought other. This process involves dispossession materially and culturally with literature and the school system playing an important role in the onslaught.

The term Afrocentricity is used to denote a worldview that encompasses and focuses on the history and culture of Africa as the focal point of consciousness of self and reality. Asante views it as an "intellectual perspective deriving its name from the centrality of African people and phenomena in the interpretation of data" (cited in Hudson-Weems, 2007:29). Grant and Ladsen-Billings (1997:11) posit that Afrocentricity "addresses the interpretation or reinterpretation of reality from perspectives that maintain and perpetuate African life and culture." This is in line with Asante's assertion that Afrocentricity is "the placing of African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour" (1987:6). *My Son* is a work of art by two Zimbabwean artists, Albert Nyathi and Ignatius Mabasa and is addressed at a Zimbabwean child. Hence it is a good candidate for an Afrocentric reading. Furthermore the writer of this article being Zimbabwean and African's analysis is obviously coloured similarly.

Afrocentricity is the relocation, the repositioning of the African in a place of agency where instead of being spectator to others African voices are heard in the full meaning of history (Asante, 1999: ix). In the poem, *My Son*, focus is on African values imparted on an African child expected to help the child survive with head held high on a variegated global cultural terrain. Thus the two Afrocentric writers' principal motive "...seems to have been the use of [African] knowledge for the cultural, social, political and economic liberation of African people..." (Asante, 1999: 2).

Thus the two artists seem to subscribe to Okot p'Bitek (1976:5)'s view that Africa needs to:

Re-examine herself critically. She must discover her true self, and rid herself of all "apemanship". For only then can she begin to develop a culture of her own. Africa must define all cultural terms according to her own interests.

The re-examination pointed above includes a relook at and an embracing of the values that have stubbornly sustained the humanity of the African in the face of onslaught and assault and that are expected to propel him or her into the future as an equal to all citizens of the global village. This ridding of 'apemanship' is quite loud in the chosen text where the son is equipped with the cultural software to propel him on the harsh global village terrain. As postulated by Asante (1988:39) an Afrocentric methodology involves the placement of African way of life as the central axis that "reorganizes our frame of reference so that we become the center of analysis and synthesis" thus prioritising African people's customs, beliefs, motifs, norms, mores, values, and world outlook. According to Modupe (2003: 58-59), "Afrocentricity is the collective quest by both the continental and diasporic African to cultural and

psychic emancipation liberation with the ultimate aim being Africana existence on African terms". Asante (2007) identifies five basic characteristics of an Afrocentric project namely: establishment of an interest in psychological location; a commitment to finding the African subject place; a defense of African cultural elements; a commitment to lexical refinement and a commitment to a new Africana narrative.

This paper will particularly be informed by Abiola Irele's recommendation that critics informed by an Afrocentric philosophy need to:

...approach African literature with an insight into, and a feeling for, those aspects of African life which stand beyond the work itself, its extension into the African experience, and its foundation into the very substance of African existence.... This approach, in its fullest and widest meaning, implies that our criticism should take into account everything that has gone into the work, and specifically for our literature; everything within our society which has informed the work... (Abiola Irele cited in Olusola, 2010: 87)

Analysis of *My Son*

The book is basically a piece of advice from the experienced father to the young and inexperienced son, Shakespeare. The son is as fit as a fiddle, clad in 'warrior' regalia and is armed with a spear. The name 'Shakespeare', which is made up of 'shaking' and 'spear', alludes to the 'warrior path' the young man is on. The name also suggests that the young man may be too eager to use his spear hence the father's anxiety to advise or warn him before he uses it or attempts to use it on the wrong target with disastrous consequences. The opening lines of the poem substantiate the claims:

My son Shakespeare
Do not just shake your spear everywhere (p3)

This suggests that the boy has come of age. He might have graduated at an initiation ceremony or rite of passage where he was pronounced a man hence the emphasis on 'today':

Today you have become
a warrior
A warrior eager to explore and tame the jungle (p5)

Under normal Zimbabwean cultural circumstances, the father does not advise his biological son. Such a duty is assigned to the father's young brothers or the son's maternal relatives. The father in this case might be doing it because of a desperate situation resulting from a changing cultural terrain. This situation also obtains in Albert Nyathi's *My Daughter* where the father throws away all cultural protocol to the wind and advises his daughter, a taboo in Zimbabwean culture but a must in a fast changing and dangerous environment.

In typical African oral tradition animals have characters and are personified depending on their natural inclinations. The buffalo, for instance, is notorious for its temperament. The boy is warned that this particular one is "wounded from previous encounters with hunters" (p3) which makes it worse than the ordinary buffalo. Shakespeare is entering the jungle

not as the only hunter but one of many before him some of whom have hurt some animals before so he is entering an environment which is full of tension and therefore potentially explosive hence the need to be forewarned and therefore forearmed by the more experienced hunter, his father.

The father always addresses Shakespeare as “my son” to show that he is fond and proud of him but also to remind him of his DNA roots that he should not betray. As his son and a true chip from the block, there is a behaviour pattern he should exhibit. The father has lived the life the son is so eager to live and explore:

Today you have become a warrior,
A warrior eager to explore and tame the jungle (p5)

In a way the father is pre-empting what the son is so eager to explore by telling him that what he is so eager to ‘discover’ is not new. What might be new is him and the new animals. A deeper look shows that even the boy and the new animal characters he will encounter are not new: the boy is son to the advisor and is expected to act as his ‘fathers’ did-to get into the jungle prepared and act responsibly. The animals in the jungle on the other hand exhibit the same old traits their ancestors displayed: the temperamental buffalo, the cautious tortoise, the slimy and treacherous snake, the mesmerizingly deceptive python, the slow and calculating chameleon, the pretentious crocodile and the pushy and ‘dictatorial’ elephant. The script seems to be the same, only cosmetically altered through a recycled cast of animal and human characters.

The young hunter is advised against stabbing baby animals. Through this piece of advice the son is taught early to think, in typical African fashion, about generations to come. Therefore hunting needs to be sustainable for posterity. As pointed out by Sifuna and Otiende (1994:135-6) traditional African education

had strong elements of perennialism in that it focused mainly on the transmission of a heritage from one generation to another. It aimed at assuring a continuity and being the instrument by which civilisations perpetuated themselves. Through education, members of the society made sure that behaviours necessary for the survival of the cultural heritage were learnt. It was a collective means through which society initiated its young generation into the values and techniques which characterized life...

The phrase ‘baby animals’ may also refer to underage girls the boy may come across in his life’s journey-children who would not be mature enough for him to marry. He is told:

Never stab baby animals
That is no manhood
Remember, it is only the snake which
Bites what it does not eat! (p19)

Indirectly the boy is told that if he hunts baby animals he would be no different from the callous snake that bites and kills just for ‘fun’ to water its insatiable conquest ego. The fact that one has a sharp spear and that an animal is available does not justify its killing:

Be kind to the old and slow tortoise,
let her go
she will bring you blessing and favour
for letting her be (p18)

At that tender age the boy is taught responsibility and empathy. He is taught that humanity is not only reflected in one’s treatment of vulnerable and powerless creatures. At another level –the courtship level, the boy is advised against having relationships for the sake of them in the process hurting the feelings of those ‘animals’ involved. He is advised not to emulate the scorpion which

...stings and kills and goes away,
Probably laughing,
Feeling it has conquered, when it really leaves with
nothing, and
leaves only poison.
Hunt only what you need to eat (p20)

The metaphor of a stabbing spear (p19) is further recast and illuminated through the vivid use of animal imagery in the child’s familiar African environment. The callous stab/sting alludes to the deflowering of young girls by young men such as Shakespeare.

Shakespeare is similarly advised to run away from ‘limping’ animals who “look easy game” (p21). Limping animals are no threat to an agile, alert and armed hunter. In fact such animals are easy prey to predators and hunters alike but the father advises him to run away from those seemingly easy prey. In the expression “look easy game” (p21) there is a pun on the word ‘game’ which may refer to the meat from the wild animals or a non-committal promiscuous relationship suggested in hunting what one does not eat. The African hunting style is contrasted with such Western practices as trophy hunting where a whole animal is slaughtered for its horns, for instance.

The young hunter is advised to be focused-shaking his spear everywhere will not get him anywhere. The advice is akin to that contained in the Shona proverb ‘Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi’ which literally means ‘Carpenter bee, stick to one flower, flowers will always be there’:

...do not just shake your spear
Everywhere my son
Everywhere is nowhere,
Everybody is nobody (p23)

Shaking the spear everywhere exposes the hunter to attack since more and more enemies are created in the process of showing off one’s supposed hunting acumen. In addition the spear is also susceptible to damage-it wasn’t made to be used on any animal it comes across. The spear can refer to the male organ and its indiscriminate use can be said to be referring to promiscuity which leads to social and physical harm and death. The inability to grow old may be said to be alluding to the HIV and AIDS pandemic which hit hard mainly the young and sexually active in Sub-Saharan Africa and whose transmission in this part of the world has been mainly through heterosexual encounters. He is advised against seeking advice

from young hunters who are likely to give him wrong advice warning him thus:

Only few live their own advice
Test their own advice
Till they wise and old like me (p23)

The young hunters lack experience/life's lessons hence their inability to advise. In Africa one ideally seeks advice from those born earlier –those that would have seen the sun earlier hence the Ndebele adage “Inyathi ibuzwa kwabapambili” which essentially means ‘seek counsel of those who have gone ahead of you’ in the journey of life:

Son,
If you do not ask from
The grey bearded
Which forest wild lion reside,
You will be hunting blindly
And without foresight,
What use is a spear
If your eyes are shut (p29)

What is important is not the possession of a spear but the wisdom to use it. The young hunter can only ignore advice from the wise old men at his own demise. The possession of the spear is indicative of the potential might he might have but this has to be accompanied with a functional brain. Hence the mood of the father shifts towards the end of the book when he angrily states:

Nxa uyisqholo, isiqoqodo, isangondo
Iqhalaqhala, iqil' elizikhoth' emhlane,
Uzakufa uzihudela mfana wami.
Ungabi liqaqa elingazizwa ukunuka kwalo
Mfana wami (p30)

Loosely translated it means if you are hotheaded, stubborn, dumb, a shrewd schemer and crook you will perish, drowning in your very own diarrhoea. Don't be like a civet cat that cannot smell its own stench (p30). The young and inexperienced hunter can only ignore the tried and tested advice at his own peril. The father seems to be suggesting that if he ignores the advice he is likely to perish from self-inflicted wounds. The diarrhoea he is referring to may be said to be HIV related after misusing his spear. There is a relationship between the hot-headedness and the eventual drowning in one's diarrhoea. The frightened and angry father is afraid that his son will act irresponsibly with his spear leading to his illness hence the strong language used in an effort to dissuade him from risky behavior. Human excrement is unpleasant to be in its oculistic or proxemic proximity. It is disgusting to imagine swimming in such a pool let alone drowning in it. The grotesque picturesque image of free flowing noisily discharged watery stool succinctly captured by the original Ndebele stanza quoted above in general and the word ‘uzihudela’ in particular, is meant to shock the young hunter into changing his ways to avoid an undignified exit to terrestrial life.

The young hunter is further warned that the ‘kiss’ of a cobra

paralysed many eager hunters. This means that the eager hunters had gone too close to the cobra to enable it to do that. They put their trust into the wrong hands. He is also warned against the many traps that litter the many modern jungles the young traverse:

The urban jungles, the bars, the clubs and roaming vines
The telephone and electronic jungles (p31)

The urban areas with their clubs and bars are seen as jungles, that thick forests where danger lurks. The jungle also includes “roaming vines” which may be referring to the dangerous roads where many lives are lost. The word ‘roaming’ suggests a troubled restless ‘mind’ craving to inflict pain. Hence the carnage we find in the ‘haunted’ and therefore ‘roaming’ vines. The young hunter is advised to desist from hunting on Facebook or Twitter and never to trust WhatsApp or Instagram as animals on all applications are not real “have no home, smell or spoor” (p6). The modern child may think that he/she is free from marauding wild animals but the father advises that they are still there though in different forms. It is difficult to hunt or deal with a spoorless and scentless animal. It is easy for such animals to inflict damage and disappear into thin air untraced. In a way such a mutation of animals may be said to be more dangerous than the erstwhile physically manifested ones. Many a young person has fallen prey to confidence tricksters associated with the cyber space. ‘Animals’ using the social media and Internet may falsify their true social and physical identity leading to the hunter being misled and falling into a snare.

The poem makes use of proverbs taken from various African languages spoken in Zimbabwe to drive home the key messages. Proverbs are part of the rich African heritage originating from a distillation of experiences tested over time and encapsulated into crystalized wisdom. Finnegan (2012:380) has this to say about this artistic form: “Proverbs are a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw”. What Nketia so elaborately puts across on Ghana also applies to the rest of Africa:

The value of the proverb to us in modern Ghana does not lie only in what it reveals of the thoughts of the past. For the poet today or indeed for the speaker who is some sort of an artist in the use of words, the proverb is a model of compressed or forceful language. In addition to drawing on it for its words of wisdom, therefore, he takes interest in its verbal techniques—its selection of words, its use of comparison as a method of statement, and so on. Familiarity with its techniques enables him to create, as it were, his own proverbs. This enables him to avoid hackneyed expressions and give a certain amount of freshness to his speech. This . . . approach to proverbs which is evident in the speech of people who are regarded as accomplished speakers or poets of a sort makes the proverbs not only a body of short statements built up over the years and which reflect the thought and insight of Ghanaians into problems of life, but also a technique of verbal expression, which is greatly appreciated by the Ghanaian. It is no wonder therefore that the use of proverbs has continued to be a living tradition in Ghana

(Nketia 1958 cited in Finnegan, 2012:380).

In *Things Fall Apart*, arguably the most celebrated African work written in English, Chinua Achebe succinctly describes African sentiments, though case studying the Ibo, when he states that “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. (Achebe, 1994:11)

The piece of advice proffered in the form of the poem is largely in English though Africanised to capture the sensibilities of the African experience. However at the end of the book there is a heavier dosage of adages from African languages. After saying so much the father wants to leave the son with the most critical and memorable message. Fortunately he finds the oral tradition facility to succinctly do the job. The young hunter is advised that he needs to co-operate with the others for better results. Even in his hunting expedition he would need to fall back on colleagues to extricate him from danger or to effect a more effective and efficient hunting expedition. At another level of hunting, he may need to enlist the services of the many ‘hunters’ around him to enable him to get the life partner he needs.

He is also advised to seek counsel of those who have gone before him: experience is the best teacher as such he will benefit vicariously from that of others. The Shona proverb ‘Kumanya hakusi kusvika’ whose meaning goes hand in glove with the English one ‘More haste less speed’ advises the young man not to be rush as this may expose him to fatal errors. The Shona proverb is similar in meaning to the Ndebele one given on the same page in the same breadth: “Ubude kabuphangwa” which literally means ‘Don’t hunger/crave to get tall’. This implies that Shakespeare is at the moment ‘short’ in terms of experience and even physically and needs to patiently wait for the seemingly slow natural development that will make him tall. During his process of growing he needs assistance from other people. This is encapsulated in the Ndebele proverb: “Abadala bathi akuqili elazikhotha umhlana” (No trickster can lick his back) (p33). The imagery is that of an animal such as an ox/cow that has to be licked by others because it cannot reach all parts of its body with its tongue. Thus this early in his life the boy is taught the importance of co-operation or a gregarious living. The Venda proverb “Was a lipfa u vhudzwani u dho lipfa vhluloni” (p33) is also enlisted to give counsel to the young and impressionable hunter. The expression paradoxically states that if the young hunter does not listen to the advice he is offered now, he will listen to it from the grave. What is clear is that it is the young hunter who for lack of listening will go to the grave (early) very likely and ‘unnaturally’ leaving the father behind. The grave is a quiet place and a person who is listening does not make noise hence the young man who would be quiet (dead) would ironically be similar to one listening but this will be too late to assist him. He is further advised that:

...isala kutshelwa sibona ngomopho (he who refuses advice is recognizable with gushing wounds)

Tjilambo layiwa tjozwi bonegwa (he who refuses advice will soon meet his match) (p33).

The two proverbs, though given in one breadth and similar in meaning, are from two different languages, Ndebele and

Kalanga, respectively. The poets might have done this in order to spread the advice to as many ‘sons’ as possible. The code switching is a feature of a multilingual speech community like the Zimbabwean one whose constitution recognizes sixteen languages (The Zimbabwe Constitutional Amendment No. 20 of 2013).

Shakespeare is advised to rise each time he falters. He is reassured that it is normal to lose one’s step but after that he should pick himself up and resume the journey.

Conclusion

The article attempted an Afrocentric reading of the book, *My Son*. The book is targeted at the son growing up in a dangerous sociocultural environment hence the need to forearm him with invaluable age-old wisdom handed down from generation to generation in a form unique to the African literary cuisine. Equipping the son with such knowledge would enable him to traverse the global village cultural terrain ‘located’ and therefore anchored and steadfast with a functional cultural campus. An Afrocentricity reading was deemed to be the best approach to unpack the literary artistry of a work of art by two African artists, targeted primarily at a young African readership and critiqued by an African. It can be argued that the work analysed sheds some “... insight into, and a feeling for, those aspects of African life which stand beyond the work itself, its extension into the African experience, and its foundation into the very substance of African existence.... (Abiola Irele cited in Olusola, 2010: 87). As similarly argued by Asante (2013:98) “Afrocentricity seeks to obliterate the mental, physical, cultural and economic dislocation of African people by thrusting Africans as centred, healthy human beings in the context of African thought...” In this endeavor education, which includes the lessons imparted through the arts, plays an important role in the realization of a ‘located’ African.

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