

Scripting Shame in African Literature.

Stephen L. Bishop.

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Stephen L. Bishop is an associate professor of French and the director of the International Studies Institute at the University of New Mexico. In this book he focuses on the diverse expressions of shame in African liter-

ature and on the representation of the different roles shame plays in the relationship that exists between the individual and his community. Bishop, like other scholars in the field, debunks the Western “shame-society” versus “guilt-society” dichotomy and posits that both ‘emotions’ are present in all societies. He establishes a link between shame and Africa in a way that shows how shame is pliable and requisite to understanding the changing narratives about Africa and its literature. Bishop’s work further examines the play of factors in the lack of research on shame and its functions in sub-Saharan African literature. He tries to define shame by divorcing it from its other attributes (which include humiliation and embarrassment). In his bid to do this, he uses over twenty texts (mostly French and English) as data to study the portrayal of shame in African Literature. He excellently analyses multiple relevant theories, concepts and texts by African writers and scholars.

The book consists of two parts and ten chapters. There is also a prologue and an epilogue—the monograph is structured similarly to a traditional novel. In the first part, titled “The Many Faces of Shame”, the author traces the varied definitions and concepts of the phenomenon across Africa and the world. In this section, he also looks at the relationships between shame, humiliation, contempt and disgust. It is in this section which comprises forty percent of the work, that Bishop carves out a definition of shame by recognising it as poly-thematic and dependent on dynamic social contexts. He builds on popular psychology and personality studies like the psychoanalytic theorisation of shame by Freud, the Durkheimian sociological theory of Scheff and others to explain the ‘emotion’ of shame and its nuances. The plethora of studies he draws on and his in-depth analyses makes his work rich and comprehensive.

Succeeding his definitions of shame and its attributes, Bishop expands on the perspectives of shame in African societies. He uses Gyekye’s work in *African Philosophical Thought* (1987), which is a study of Akan conceptions of shame and guilt, together with other scholarly works on African social structures from different parts of the continent such as the Congo, South Africa, Senegal, to study the diverse manifestations of shame. With reference to other scholars and their definitions and classification of the different forms of shame in African literature, Bishop identifies three predominant appearances of shame. The shame of weakness, the shame of juxtaposing the colonised’s existence with that of the coloniser, and the colonially invented states of shame in contrast with actual ‘indigenous’

shame. These manifestations of shame are summarised in Diabate’s quote which affirms that the predominant theme in African Literature is “Colonisation as a source of shame for the colonized” (26–30). Bishop’s use of studies on multiple African communities exhibits his dedication and the thoroughness of his research on the subject.

In the second part of his book, titled “Penned in: Shame in the African Novel”, he discusses colonial and postcolonial expressions of shame as represented in the African novel. This part is made up of six chapters, the first three of which examine the concept of shame in terms of three thematic areas—the struggle against colonial expression, postcolonial disillusion, and the emergence of women’s rights—through an array of literary texts that outline the socio-evolutionary nature of shame in African literature. The rest of the chapters look at more recent examples that serve as variations on those themes while also raising new, more unsettling social questions and concerns. The selection of texts ranges from Sembene’s *God’s Bits of Wood* (1976), Bâ’s *So long a Letter* (1980), Kourama’s *The Suns of Independence* (1981) and *Allah is not obliged* (2006) and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007). Bishop contends that some of these texts shame the continent by incorporating stereotyped Western narratives about violence, child soldiers and corruption. In my opinion, this proposition by Bishop is valid because some images of terror and inequality on the continent promote racial abuse and discrimination.

Bishop concludes his discussion on the representation of shame by drawing attention to the misrepresentation of queerness as a Western import. He posits that this is a result of misplaced anticolonial ideologies and of religious notions of morality. According to Bishop, the ability to change this erroneous narrative is solely in the hands of African writers. This assertion by Bishop is valid because subjects like women’s sexuality and pleasure were mystified until contemporary writers like Sadaawi began to write about them openly. Bishop tries to dichotomise ‘shame’ and ‘excessive shame’ by establishing that the society’s intended effect for shame could become reversed when done in excess. Even though he elaborates on the manifestations of shamelessness, he does not substantiate excessive shame as relative. In other words, there is no answer to the question “how much shame is too much shame?” I posit that a more intentional attempt is required in discussing the spectrum of shame.

Considering the fact that the subject of shame in African literature has been categorically ignored in favour of other ‘more important’ subjects, Bishop does

an excellent work by bringing this subject to light. His book is unquestionably significant and timely.

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