


Issues in African Literature

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Dedication

To my Children:

Emeka
Mrs. Chinyere Babajide
Amaeze
Mrs. Azuka Gratias

who, while complaining about how long Daddy stayed in his study
became adults, and began, like Daddy, to face the serious side of life.
You are all, in true Nigerian parlance, “the sugar in my tea.”

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Dedication

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Introduction

Contemporary African literature disparaged by colonial criticism, polarized by a multiplicity of critical approaches, divided on the problem of its language of expression, sundered by ideological camps, and driven by a divided audience is a boiling cauldron of unresolved issues. These issues are multifarious and keep rearing up their heads in conferences, symposia, and seminars on African literature. The first issue centres around the definition of African literature. What is African literature? Shall we accept without debate the definition proffered by the maverick troika:

Works done for African audiences, by Africans, and in African languages, whether these works are oral or written, constitute the historically indisputable core of African literature.¹

Or shall we rather have it clarified and ventilated by Achebe's dictum that we "cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition" because African literature is not one unit but "a group of associated units—in fact the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa."² The above might have settled the issue with a qualifier by Ernest Emenyonu that the literature of a people must be "an imaginative recreation of a people's account of their social, cultural, political and economic perspectives at a given time and place,"³ had the "language-of-expression" issue not come to befuzz the finer edges of the debate.

In what language should the African writer express himself in his creative works? What is the status of that debate now?

¹ Chinweizu, *et al. Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), pp.11-12.

² Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.56.

³ Ernest Emenyonu, "African Literature and the Ethnic Imperative," *Afa: Journal of Creative Writing* (1982), p.22.

Between Obi Wali's "to be truly African, African literature must be written in African languages" supported by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's: "a foreign language cannot correctly reflect the historical consciousness of a people,"⁴ and Achebe's "there is certainly a great advantage to writing in a world language,"⁵ the audience of African literature steers a harassed course, as Senghor's dictum seems to confirm Achebe's position:

French has enabled us to send to the world, to our brother men, the wonder message that we alone could send them. It has enabled us to contribute to this universal civilization something without which it would not have been universal, without which it would have lacked that inner warmth that is man's true hallmark.⁶

If it is true, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that literature written in European languages cannot be African literature since it "reflects the historical consciousness of foreigners", where does African literature written in one of the tribal tongues leave us? Is it better to receive it through a third-hand translator, or are we nearer what the author is saying by reading him first hand in English which he has in any case, "bent" himself? What, for example, would *Things Fall Apart* have read like, had Achebe first published it in Igbo and we received it through a translator's endeavours? The debate on language use in African literature is still a heated one and no attempt is made to resolve it or any other issue in this volume.

The multitudinous nature of African literature has always been an issue but really not a problem, although its oral base has been used by expatriate critics to accuse African literature of thin plots, superficial characterization, and thin narrative structures. African literature also, it is observed, is a mixed grill: it is oral; it is written in vernacular or tribal tongues; written in foreign tongues—English, French, Portuguese—and within the foreign language in which it is written, pidgin and Creole further bend the already bent language, giving African literature a further taint of linguistic impurity.

African literature further suffers from the nature of its "newness" and this creates problems for the critic. Because it is new, and because its critics are in simultaneous existence with its writers, we

⁴ Quoted by Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1985), p.40.

⁵ Achebe, p. 59.

⁶ Quoted by Phanuel Egejuru in *Towards African Literary Independence* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1980), p.14.

confront the problem of “instant analysis” which provides expatriate, critics with the divine afflatus to impose their supercilious and, some say, arrogant critical standards on the criticism of African literature; which further denies the advantage of hindsight to our criticism; which fails to distance sentiment and subjectivity from objective analysis. And sentimental attachment to a living author often leads to vague hymn singing due to friendships or, on the other hand to vitriol owing to clash of personalities or ideas.

Around these issues also accrete the idea of who should be the rightful or acceptable critic of African literature. Must he be an African,⁷ as Ernest Emenyonu tried once to urge us, because African literature must be evaluated on criteria based on values imbibed by an African critic who must perhaps think black, write black and possibly wear black? Or must African literature bare its bosom to the expatriate critic who fails to understand the culture, the traditions, the national ethos and even the intention of the writer and is thus likely to misapply the tools of his art as a critic? In the above is the great divide—the Afrocentric critic urging the uniqueness of African literature, away from which the expatriate critic must turn, versus the Eurocentric, expatriate universalist critic who argues that African literature is part of world literature and that there should be no special *ichor* in its veins that distinguishes its vital juices from the literature of Europe.⁸ Hanging on our lips is an answer to the question: “what is the best approach to the criticism of African literature?”

II

In the light of the above, this volume continues the debate and tries to clarify contemporary burning issues in African literature, by focusing on particular areas where the debate has been most concentrated or around which it has hovered and been persistent. Most of the essays published here had appeared in far-flung journals which may not be available to the average student or scholar. One

⁷ Ernest Emenyonu, “African Literature: What Does it Take to Be its Critic?” *African Literature Today*, No.5 (1971), pp.1-11.

⁸ Donatus Nwoga, “Plagiarism and Authentic Creativity in West Africa”, in *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1976), p.159, ff.

issue around which the debate has hovered is that of source and influence in African literature. The first act of apostasy started with a debate between Professor Sellin and Paul Flamand around the idea that Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence* was plagiarized from another work *Le Dernier des Justes* and from Graham Greene's *It's a Battlefield*. Before we could catch our breath, Donatus Nwoga came out to openly charge Christopher Okigbo of plagiarism in the "Four Canzones" by copying from Miguel Hernandez's "El amor Ascendia entre Nostros", plus other poems Okigbo plagiarized from Yoruba salutation poems.⁹

The issue of source and influence is continued in this volume in the essay "A Source for Arrow of God" with an updated information since its publication in *Research in African Literature*.¹⁰ Another study, "The Sons of Achebe: The example of John Munonye" extends the debate on the issue of source and influence. Raging still at almost all international conferences on African literature is the perennial topic of the African aesthetic in literature. The essay entitled: "Prolegomena to a Definition of the African Aesthetic in Literature" fully addresses this issue. Of equal currency in African literary circles is the issue of feminism which is addressed in the essay "A House Divided: Feminism in African Literature" and its implications further explored in two other essays. The rest of the essays speak for themselves: the place of mythology in our literatures, the "tradition" of the Nigerian novel; the challenges of criticism for the African critic, plus trends in that criticism; the issue of politics in the West African novel; the place of utopia in the African literary imagination, and the African concept of tragedy in the African novel as reflected in "Achebe's Tragic Heroes"

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⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Letters to the Editor, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol.15, No.1 (Spring, 1984), pp.148-150).

A source for *Arrow of God**

With the exception of occasional remarks on oral or folkloric sources, scholars have said little about the literary materials upon which African authors have based their writings. My own research has not led me to any detective criticism reconstructing written sources for any long fictional prose works from Africa. What one is likely to find are vague conjectures and suspect theorizing of diffuse sources for, say, Okigbo's poetry. Many a critic, without painstaking efforts at proof, has made weak-kneed suggestions that Achebe's novels owe a lot of Joseph Conrad. One possible reason for the vacuum existing in source study of African literature is, of course, complacency: we all assume that our writers, especially novelists, do not research their stories, that their material comes naturally to them like leaves to a tree and that all they did was merely to reconstruct their stories from the common petty-cash drawer of their culture. And a great writer like Achebe has consistently given the impression that all he did in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* was merely to reconstruct Igbo culture from his own personal knowledge (which is irrefutable) and from stories told him by his father and grandfather (which must be taken with a grain of salt: either his grandfather told him more than ours told us or he began keeping a diary from the age of seven).

A few words about the normal problems of source-study art in order here. The aim of source-study, we are all aware, is to establish the nature of the ingredients that coalesced into a finished literary

* First published in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1977), pp. 1-26.