AFRICAN WRITERS AT RISK

By
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Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted risks faced by African writers, including political persecution, censorship, exile, and economic barriers to readership. Through case studies of figures like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Yvonne Vera, it highlights how authoritarian regimes and systemic poverty suppress literary expression. The decline in local readership due to high book costs further threatens the survival of African literature. Proposed solutions include affordable newspaper-format publications and cultural recognition through initiatives like commemorative postage stamps.

Keywords

Censorship, post-colonial literature, Literary activism, Publishing economics, African diaspora writers

These are disturbing stories:

November 10, 1995—almost ten years ago—Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed, rapidly, after a military tribunal declared him guilty, before the rest of the world had fathomed what had happened, not that the West would have done that much anyway. His crime? Trumped-up charges of murdering four pro-government Ogoni leaders, while Saro-Wiwa himself was in prison. His real crime? Of thinking of Ogoni secession, so that the oil fields on Ogoni land would no longer be controlled by Nigerian thugs, namely General Sani Abacha, the country's ruthless military dictator who died a few years later from an overdose of Viagra.

Before his murder, Ken Saro-Wiwa's popularity on the streets had equaled that of any other Nigerian literary figure, not because of his imaginative fiction, but because of the sit-com *Basik & Co.*, which ran on Nigerian TV from 1985 to 1990 for 150 episodes. Saro-Wiwa was a prolific writer and journalist, as well as a publisher, but then he dared to veer off into dangerous territory—political commentary—once he saw what was happening to his Ogoni people, to the country's environment, to the billions of dollars misappropriated from the oil industry. He must have cried his heart out, because in one of his celebrated short stories, "Africa Kills Her Sun" (1989), Bana, the narrator, declared that in a state as corrupt as Nigeria, he'd prefer to die rather than be "condemned, like most others, to live."

These were chilling statements that a dictator even as ruthless as Abacha must have understood, not that he would have read Saro-Wiwa's short story. But Abacha must have been aware of the implications of the title of one of the last of Saro-Wiwa's books, when he had moved from creative work to political commentary: *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992). Saro-Wiwa was

executed in such a despicable fashion that even the method became a warning. The man charged with the duty had to hang Saro-Wiwa five times before the job was done.

Three years later, December 13, 1998, Norbert Zongo, the Burkina Faso novelist and journalist, mysteriously died along with three others, including his younger brother, his driver, and a co-worker. Three of the bodies, including Zongo's, were discovered "badly burned inside the cabin of their four-wheel-drive vehicle," according to a report from Reporters without Borders. There was no evidence that the vehicle had struck any obstacle, no skid marks on the road to indicate a sudden stop, but there were bullet holes in the vehicle. Zongo was the managing publisher of *L'Indépendant*. The weekly newspaper had undertaken a detailed investigation of the murder of David Ouedraogo, the driver for François Compaoré, the president's brother.

Reporters without Borders stated that late the previous year Ouedraogo was believed to have been tortured to death, though his body was never discovered. The president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, was about to be sworn in for a second term. The state-sponsored investigation into Zongo's death was delayed for days after the discovery of his body, by which time much of the evidence had been compromised. François Compaoré, the president's brother, had managed to evade a court summons concerning the investigation of the death of his driver." This led others to conclude that Zongo was murdered because of his newspaper's investigation.

In the late summer of last year, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—Kenya's most important writer—returned home after twenty-two years of exile. Beginning in 1977, Ngũgĩ ran into trouble with Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, because of his plays and his novels—especially *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1982), both highly critical of post-independent Kenyan leadership and Western capitalism. Ngũgĩ was incarcerated by Kenyatta for a year, with no charges ever made against him. After his release, he was denied his earlier position of Chair of the Department of English at the University of Nairobi. Fearing additional imprisonment, he fled the country, living and teaching most of the subsequent years in the United States. Ngũgĩ vowed never to return to Kenya while Moi was still president (Moi left office in December of 2002).

Days after his return to Kenya in August, 2004, Ngũgĩ and his wife were robbed and brutalized in a hotel in Nairobi. Ngũgĩ's face was repeatedly burned with a cigarette; his wife, Njeeri, was gang-raped. The attackers, it was first speculated, were operating under the instructions of people who had harassed and incarcerated Ngũgĩ more than two decades earlier but were subsequently identified as the promoters of his return to Kenya, calculating robbers. Besides the violence of the incident, the chilling message of the attackers was quite clear: in Africa, success often comes at a terrible price.

On April 7th of 2005, the beloved Zimbabwean novelist, Yvonne Vera—author of five novels and a collection of short stories—succumbed to AIDS, dying in Toronto after a lengthy illness. She was 41 years old. Sadly, she had waited too long before returning to Canada, where she had been a graduate student and where she could receive medical treatment unavailable in Zimbabwe. By the time she reached Canada, the disease was too advanced for her to benefit from such treatment.

Vera—hailed as the most promising female novelist from black Africa—had won numerous international literary awards and was identified by the Swedish Academy as someone they considered Nobel Prize material.

Yvonne Vera's death from AIDS has sent a chill through the continent's literary establishment. The violence inflicted on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and his wife represents another kind of warning. The murders of Ken Saro-Wiwa and Norbert Zongo are a third context—the most visible examples of extreme punishment meted out by African states and African individuals against their most prized possessions: their writers. I make that statement ironically, because if African writers were valued by their countries, these disturbing stories would not be there for the telling. Writers would not be snuffed out, they would not be incarcerated, they would not be forced into exile, and their works would not be censored; all depressingly frequent situations involving writers in post-colonial Africa. One might go so far as to say that this is the defining context of post-colonial writing in Africa. Writers are censored, suffocated, and silenced. They exist, when they exist at all, in a context in no way equal to that of their compatriots in the West, who have little awareness of what their peers on the continent endure.

Under apartheid in South Africa, writers suffered grievously—virtually all of the indignities mentioned above. If they were the least bit critical of the political system, their works were routinely banned for readership within the country. Thousands of books—simply those by black writers—were banned in South Africa. Writers fled into exile—the list is too long to delineate here—and too many were imprisoned. But apartheid finally ended, and South African writing by black writers may finally be on the cusp of a genuine renaissance.

The rest of black Africa, freed of colonial shackles for forty-plus years in most cases, has not done so well. Too many of the continent's major writers have suffered the same humiliations as those inflicted on the writers cited above. Wole Soyinka, the continent's first Nobel Prize Winner, was incarcerated for two years by government authorities during the Nigerian Civil War. His writing has gradually shifted from the celebrated plays and poems that won him the Nobel Prize to social and political commentary, the most widely read being the obviously titled *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1997), an attack on African leaders, most notably Sani Abacha. But Soyinka has also been at odds most recently with Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria's democratically-elected President. Chinua Achebe has been equally critical of President Obasanjo, as well as of the military dictators who ruled the country before him. Like Soyinka's, Achebe's creativity took a turn to politics with the publication of *The Trouble with Nigeria*, in 1983.

Camara Laye, Bessie Head, Es'kia Mphahlele, Ama Ata Aidoo, Yvonne Vera, Syl Cheney-Coker, Dennis Brutus, Jack Mapanje, Emmanuel Dongala, Nuruddin Farah—some of the most famous writers from the continent—have spent time in exile or are in exile today. The list of incarcerated writers (including some of the above) is equally long. And too many writers have seen their works banned by the post-colonial governments of Africa. Some countries have witnessed a virtual exodus of all of their major writers (South Africa in the past, Zimbabwe today). Still another group

(Ben Okri and Sindiwe Magona, most recently) have simply assumed that the continent is inhospitable for the creative artist and have sought work elsewhere, namely in Europe and the United States. A few have stayed on the continent only to watch their readership in their own countries dwindle and almost disappear.

The major problem that has put African writers at risk today, however, is not the threat of physical violence, imprisonment, censorship, or exile—as awful as these may be—but the lack of significant readers across the continent to sustain an ongoing literary tradition. This is what has changed so drastically during the last twenty years. Although literacy is higher in most African countries than it has ever been, too many Africans exist on a dollar or so a day, and books, therefore, have become luxury items, out of the reach of the vast majority of African readers.

There was never much of a book-reading tradition among educated Africans even in the early days after independence, when most nations increased the educational opportunities for their people. The newly literate read newspapers and self-help books of any kind that could help them improve their employment opportunities, but most Africans didn't read literature, except for the occasional best-selling Western writer and, possibly, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. School students read textbooks; language classes (mostly in English and French) have incorporated African literary works, at least for a couple of decades after independence, following the same carry-over traditions from the colonial educational systems (such as the School Certificate Exams from the British system). Then the requirements became difficult to implement because of the cost of books. Even university students in English literature courses often could not afford to buy books, so their professors began Xeroxing parts of books for their students to read.

The major problem is price. Imported books cost as much in Africa as they cost in the United States, which means that most Africans cannot afford them. Locally produced books are also expensive because almost everything necessary for their production has to be imported; printing presses and paper, for example. What this means in actuality is that a celebrated Nigerian writer such as Ben Okri, whose novel, *The Famished Road*, won the Booker Award in 1991, has had few readers for that book on the African continent. An authorized edition of *The Famished Road* sells for 1500 Naira (about $12) in Nigeria, and pirated editions sell for less, yet I doubt that more than a few thousand Nigerians have read the novel, in spite of a population of 130 million people. "Verb has the ability to constitute a substantial portion of an utterance" (Okon & John, 2024, p. 30). Nor have the writer's subsequent works appeared in Nigerian editions. The country's publishers have clearly determined that sales do not justify the investment. So Nigerians have limited access to one of their country's great writers. Okri's novel is even less well known in other African countries. Books don't get printed because they cost too much to produce, and the readers simply aren't out there to purchase them if they are published. The bottom line is that books in Africa need to sell for 50 cents or less for readers to be able to afford them and for a growing reading audience to be established and take root.

It is possible to be a world-class writer, celebrated with major Western literary awards, and be unknown at home. This situation may even be happening to the continent's most famous writer: Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart* (1958). For years, after independence, Achebe's masterpiece sold tens of thousands of copies each year in Nigeria alone and sold equally well in the Anglophone areas across the continent. The novel was translated into French and thus became available for readers in the Francophone areas of the continent. The American publisher of Achebe's novel has verified that the book is currently selling 100,000 copies a year. But when I last checked with Heinemann, Achebe's publisher in Nigeria, I learned that the yearly sales figures for the novel had dwindled to a few hundred copies. This in a country with 65 million potential readers. Is it possible, then, that in another decade or so, even *Things Fall Apart* will be largely unknown among African readers, especially the continent's younger readers?

If something is not done quickly, yes, African writers will be read almost exclusively in the West (as was the case from the 1930's through the 1950's when many of the continent's writers were first beginning to publish their works). It is not, then, simply ruthless dictators, or even benevolent politicians, who pose the greatest threat to the extinction of the African writer, although bad government has clearly resulted in poor economies, declining standards of living, and millions of people living at the poverty level. In Africa, the writer has little chance to be published outside of the continent, as the few African writers (apart from the well-established names) demonstrate each year. The exception is the occasional writer who happens to have been schooled in the West and who probably still lives away from the continent, such as Chimamanda Adichie, whose *Purple Hibiscus* was published in 2003 by Algonquin. Some of the Caine Prize winners have also been successful with Western publishers and subsequently have seen their works reprinted in African editions.

I believe that writers, no matter from which soil they are nourished, want to be read by their own people. American writers want to be read by American readers; Russian writers want to be read by Russian readers; African writers want to be read by African readers. More specifically, I believe that Nigerian writers write for their own people first; for other Africans, second, and finally for readers around the world. I do not believe that the issue is as much a matter of time as of culture. All great literature is firmly rooted in the cultural foundations of the writer. What makes the great American novel American is not the desire by a writer to become rich and famous but to connect to his or her country's roots and, therefore, to his or her countrymen. Furthermore, it seems to me that the novels that Western readers and critics revere are inevitably linked to cultural, ethnic, and historical contexts. Is there any better explanation for the brilliance of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*? Igbo readers can read it on one level; Nigerians of other ethnic origins on another; Africans across the continent on still another; and finally, readers outside of Africa on another, for multiple reasons and contexts. And no matter how we all look at *Things Fall Apart*, we all categorize the novel as a great work, a great African novel.

What I am arguing is quite simple. I am certain that Ben Okri, who lives in London, would like to be more widely read in Nigeria than he is. Chinua Achebe, I am equally certain, has to be disturbed

by his declining reading audience in Nigeria. Nuruddin Farah must long to have readers in Somalia, where I doubt that more than a few copies of each of his recent books exist. Ditto every other contemporary African writer. Imagine what it must be like to publish a novel (or a play or a collection of poems) and pretty much determine that the volume will be unknown by one's own people.

Are there any solutions to these problems? Are there things that can be done to help African writers increase their readership in their own countries as well as across the continent? For years, international donors have attempted to supply Africans with reading materials, mostly overstocked books, dumped by publishers in Africa—donated books, almost all of them unsuitable for African readers, donated to human libraries. I recall visiting a public library in Munali, Zimbabwe, several years ago and seeing shelf after shelf of copies of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, all of them collecting dust and looking as if they had never been checked out by local readers. These kinds of attempts to increase African readership have utterly failed. Africans need to read books by African writers; Malawians need works by Malawian writers, and so on. Thus, we return to the question of book production in Africa, which has also mostly failed, that is, has failed to sustain and increase the African reading audience. Cost, copyright control, piracy, foreign exchange, distribution—all of these problems are largely the results of compromised economies. I repeat: books need to sell for fifty cents (or less) to develop an African reading audience.

The time has arrived for a more radical approach, or soon the African writer will become extinct.

Africans read newspapers. Particularly in the cities and, of course, in the countries that still have a modicum of free speech, an open press. Newspaper hawkers are on every corner; one observes Africans everywhere reading newspapers. Even in the rural areas, out-of-date newspapers are frequently passed from reader to reader until they are read to shreds. Why not print the works of African writers (particularly the writers of fiction) in newspaper format—either in serialization or in tabloid form? Serialize African novels, chapter by chapter, in African newspapers or print an entire novel as a tabloid? Both methods would reduce the price to the range that many Africans could afford.

If Chimamanda Adichie wants to be widely read in Nigeria, then she should authorize that *Purple Hibiscus* be printed in a tabloid edition, on newsprint, and sold for no more than the cost of a newspaper. What does she have to lose? Certainly not significant royalties, because in a Nigerian edition of the novel selling for 1500 Naira, she will never be read by the masses within Nigeria. If Chinua Achebe wants to regain his readers in Nigeria, let him authorize a tabloid edition of the novel he is now completing. Better yet, the next time African writers' works are routinely published in the West, these writers should place a clause in their contracts with Western publishers, authorizing serialization or tabloid editions of their works within their own countries, with no royalties reverting back to the Western publisher.

This is what it is going to take: a willingness on the part of African writers and their Western publishers to forgo any royalties for newsprint editions of their books to be published in the writer's

own country—or even better, in any country on the African continent. In the age of computers and the Internet, entire texts of books can be sent electronically around the world, from a publisher in one country to a publisher in another. Thus, the costs of newspaper editions of African literary works can be kept to a bare minimum—no more than the costs of newspaper production. The same procedure could be used for the exchange of titles from publisher to publisher, from country to country, within the continent. Once readership is piqued, once readers of tabloid novels are hooked on reading, there may even come a time when reading in Africa can once again evolve into the production of books that attract significant numbers of readers. One can only hope.

And for the icing on the cake—to increase awareness of African writers and African artists in general? What about postage stamps? African authors have postal services that issue stamps so often with Western images such as Elvis Presley, in order to sell these stamps to philatelists in the West. Since they need these stamps for their own postal services, what is to stop an enlightened African government—Nigeria? Ghana? South Africa? Botswana?—from honoring African artists, beginning with African writers? Hasn't the time arrived for Léopold Sédar Senghor (one of the fathers of negritude) to be honored as part of an African Postal Series celebrating African writers? Shouldn't Chief D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Christopher Okigbo be printed on Nigerian postage stamps? And Bessie Head to be honored in Botswana?

What better way to heal the wounds of the past? And, no doubt, it's past time to instigate a little pride in what is, after all, the continent's most prized possession: its writers.

Conclusion

The survival of African literature hinges on addressing both political repression and economic exclusion. While dictatorships silence dissent, poverty silences readership. Innovative approaches—like tabloid-format novels and cultural honors—could democratize access to literature and reignite pride in African storytelling. Without urgent action, the continent risks losing not only its writers but also the audiences who sustain their voices. The call to protect and celebrate African literature is not just about books; it is about safeguarding the right to imagine, critique, and redefine the future.

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