IN SEARCH OF NEW CHALLENGES: AFRICAN LITERATURE AND CRITICISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY CHARLES E. NHOLIM

From its beginnings, written African literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from Phyllis Wheatley and Gustav Vassa, down to Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo, was an unhappy one, it was lachrymal. It was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation, following Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism. It was Hippolyte Taine who suggested in *History of English* Literature (1864) that we could recover from the monuments of literature a knowledge of the manner in which men thought and felt at a particular epoch in their history. The sociologist, Taine, had remarked that the distinguishing mark between the early literatures of Great Britain and those of France was that the former was the literature of defeated people while the latter was literature of a conquering people.

Having lost her pride through slavery and colonialism, modern African literature arose from the ashes of her past experiences. It became a literature with a strong sense of loss; loss of our dignity; loss of culture and tradition; loss of our religion; loss of our land; loss of our very humanity. Any wonder that the titles of our most celebrated literature work highlighted these losses. Have we forgotten Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not, Child*; Alan *Paton's Cry the Beloved Country*? And protest literature over Apartheid further irrigated Africa's tears because of man's inhumanity to man, to a people dubbed the wretched of the earth.

This study will, therefore, be Janus-faced. It will cast a backward glance at African literature and criticism in the twentieth century and in the process, look forward to the challenges of the twenty-first century. While conceding that modern African literature (its written version) arose sweepingly in reaction to slavery and the colonial experience, one must of necessity, draw attention to Africa's pre-history to a time its oral literature stood toe to toe with the best celebrated epics of Europe. *The Ozidi Saga*, the *Mwindo Epic*, the *Sundiata epic* and so on, stood toe to toe with the epics of Greece and Rome, and with other European epics which all started also from their oral tradition: the Sanskrit (Indian) epic, *Mahabharata*, the Spanish *Ei Cid*, the German Nibelungenlied, the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Roman *Aeneid*, the French *Chanson de Roland* and the English *Beowulf*. Each of the above epics both African and European, sang of a noble people in noble pursuits.

Once the above is established, it would be easy to understand that modern literature (its written version) arose after the psychic trauma of slavery and colonialism which made her literature in the twentieth century one with a running sore, a stigma that forced her literature to dissipate its energies in a dogged fight to re-establish the African personality. African literature in the twentieth century thus operated on a narrow canvas, a point that will be pursued later in this study.

The lachrymal nature of modern Africa literature made it inevitable for that literature to start by blaming the white man for everything wrong with us, castigating him for exploiting our resources and debasing our humanity. We also blamed the white man for not granting us, at least, flag

independence to allow us develop ourselves. And when the white man threw in the towel, our eyes were opened to the rapacity, greed, myopia, and the corrupt tendencies of our indigenous politicians.

Before the white man left, and to pay him in his own coins for the hemorrhage he inflicted on our collective psyche, the literature of Negitude was born. The philosophy of Negritude became finally enthroned in the motto of the University of Nigeria: "to restore the dignity of man". There may be no space here to recount the obvious, or to repeat all the platitudes surrounding the Negritude movement whose trajectory became overarching from the Harlem Renaissance through the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica to indigenism in Haiti. But after regaining our equilibrium through the Negritude movement, and after unsure footed attempts by Ayi Kwei Armah at psychic reconstruction in *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons*. African literature in the twentieth century seemed to have reached a point of mild exhaustion.

As we know, literature is judged always in relation to its social function; the better the function is fulfilled, the better the literature. A spiritual vacuum seems to have crept in toward the end of the twentieth century, among African writers an ashen paralysis that has nor spared our most celebrated writers of that epoch. "Art" Camus tells us, "is of small importance in the face of suffering". It seems that the devastations of the economic order, the instabilities of governments in most African countries south of the Sahara, the frequent disruptions of the democratic order through military rule, and the ravages of disease, especially, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, have taken their toll in the area of literary production.

First, the publishing houses suffered a demise. Time was when publishing houses like Heinemann, Evans Brothers, Oxford University Press, Spectrum Books, Longman, African Universities Press, offered advance royalties to budding writers to complete their work. Toward the dying hours of the twentieth century, the publishing houses turned around to demand large sums of money from budding writers in order to have their works published. Soon, they were joined by new "publishing" establishments in Nigeria: Kraft Books, ABIC, Malthouse which insisted on publishing a writer's work in a cash and carry arrangement and before a new writer could catch his breath, countless but nondescript desktop computer "publishers" or rather, printers who had cornered ISBN numbers joined the field with no facilities for marketing or distribution of their product. These newcomers to the printing business saw no need to evaluate a manuscript or even offer advice before proceeding to print what the author told them was a novel, a play or a book of poems. With countless self-published books in the field, it became almost impossible to separate the chaff from the grain with the exception of the incomparable Niyi Osundare.

In Nigeria the only hope for discrimination among new books and new authors may lie in the efforts of the poorly funded Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) through its yearly awards. But the major problem with ANA is its award of prizes for unpublished manuscripts and its lack of promotion of books it considers worthy of attention. ANA, therefore, needs to source for funds to establish a publishing house in order to publish, promote and market its award-winning

authors. *Things Fall Apart*, for example, may have remained an obscure but excellent novel, had Heinemann not undertaken to publish and promote it worldwide.

Since Achebe, Wa Thiong'o, Denis Brutus, Ayi Kwei Armah, Soyinka, La Guma, Peter Abrahams, Buchi Emecheta, Meja Mwangi and Cyprian Ekwensi have definitely passed their prime, carrying with them the youthful vibrancy of the 1960s and 70s, African literature at the turn of the century has experienced a disquieting lull except for the residual of Ben Okri, Nuruddin Farah and Niyi Osundare.

At the onset of the twenty-first century, something has definitely happened in the lives of old and new writers that has deprived us of the ebullience and revolutionary spirit of the 60s and 70s. as Malraux declared at the congress of Soviet Writers in 1931.

Art is not an act of submission; it is a victory. The victory of what? Of emotions and the spirit of expressing them.

If, as Malraux asserts in the above declaration, the work of art is seen as a "conquest, a struggle between the artist and his world, an accusation against forces that hold humanity in servitude" in order to make men "conscious of the hidden greatness and dignity in themselves", a new image of the African personality needs to be fashioned, to reposition African for the take-off of the twenty-first century. We need a new spiritual reorientation, a new creative hope to give artistic impetus to a new world order. Our writers, in this new epoch of globalization dominated by a technologically oriented new world order must create a new Africa, a new spirit of optimism, an Africa full of promises, able to feed its teeming populations, with a healthy and vibrant people not dependent on Europe and America for sustenance.

I hinted earlier at the smallness of canvas of the African writer in the last century. The reason for that smallness of artistic canvas was, as discussed earlier, the defensive nature of our literatures and our preoccupation with re-establishing the African personality, glancing backwards to a glorious past, in the process of which looking forward imaginatively eluded us. Our writers should now look forward to the twenty-first century as one with positive challenges. The white man has been described as belonging to a minority race with a majority complex, while the African portrays himself as belonging to a majority race with an inferiority or minority complex. The twenty-first century offers the African writer opportunities to position himself as one at par, at least imaginatively, with the white race. This century offers the African writer opportunities to carve out a new humanism devoid of the complexes of the twentieth century that made him so defensive as a second-class citizen of the world.

The African writer in the twenty-first century should forget the complexes of the past and be more imaginatively aggressive and expansive, invading other continents and even the skies as new setting, striving to have a global outlook. In his creative output, mounting a new international phase and not limiting his canvas to the African soil. He should break from the *retour aux sources* fixation that informed the Negritude aesthetic of the last century.

Let me explain. The European writer of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries set his sights beyond Europe Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. Orwell's *Burmese Days*, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Edgar Wallace's *Sanders of the River* - these displayed the wide canvas of the European writer. Henry James, the American novelist, developed what critics called his "international theme" in *Daisy Miller, The Ambassadors, The Portrait of a Lady*, depicting the gaucheries of naïve Americans, among sophisticated Europeans. The European writer widened his literacy canvas in writing science fiction. Jules Verne, the French fiction writer invaded the skies in the 1860s with *From the Earth to the Moon* predicting a journey to the moon from a rocket launched from Cape Canaveral. One hundred years later, man landed on the moon in a rocket launched from the same Cape Canaveral in the U. S. He further invaded the seas under the earth with *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. The American science fiction writer Alvin Toffler wrote *Future Shock* with his futuristic insistence that we should be "educating for change", that we should be "preparing people for the future" while warning that "unless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs, we are doomed to a massive adaptational breakdown".

It becomes clear when one draws attention to the narrow canvas of the African writer in the twentieth century, busy as he was weeping over the losses inflicted on him by past colonial masters, preoccupied with blaming the African politician or military leaders for leading us into political and economic quagmire, that the time has come for a more forward-looking vision.

The twenty-first century beckons Africans to embrace new challenges in this epoch of globalization. If African literature in the twentieth century had suffered from imaginative timidity, it has no reason to be so confined in the twenty-first century. Our literature should no longer be contented to be fixated on our cultural mooring. Europe invaded Africa and the world with their civilization, religion and technology and all of us have since then been transfixed. What prevents the African writer in the twenty-first century from re-inventing Europe and from there develop an international theme in our literatures? The Europeans wrote about Africa after a mere trip (Conrad), or domiciling there a few years (Elspeth Huxley). Why can't Africans write about Europe or America? We have travelled to Europe and America, worked there, studied there, married their women, and lived there. Are we so unperceptive not to observe, so blind not to see, so analphabetic not to write about them or about us in their midst?

The idea of science fiction even at its most elementary levels has eluded African writers. African writers must face the future by developing an international theme, by engaging in futuristic literature, by looking forward to the fulfillment of “the African dream”. The African dream was partially achieved in the twentieth century … the rehabilitation of our humanity through the negritude aesthetic. We should look forward and project a forward looking utopia for Africa, not the backward looking utopia of the twentieth century that merely healed our psychic wounds. A forward-looking utopia for African writers should project a truly independent Africa politically stable, able to feed her starving peoples, standing toe to toe with Europe and the West, possessing enough coercive force that will earn her respect in the international arena, and become the last

refuge for the oppressed all over the world. This is the challenge of the twenty-first century for African writers.

The wind follows the sun, we read in geography books, just as critical trends follow trends in creative writing. Criticism of African literature in the last century rose in vigorous response to spirited and passionate creative output by our most celebrated writers… Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo Ayi Kwei Armah, Okigbo, Denis Brutus, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Marianna Ba, Cyprian Ekwensi, Peter Abrahams, Alex LaGuma. Their central theme which began with the woes of culture-contact with Europe captured in its sweep problems arising from post-independence, moving on to feminism, socialist concerns and then the various wars in Africa. Expectedly our most respected critics rose to the challenges arising from the concerns of the writers. Emenyoun engaged Bernth Lindfors on who is most qualified to be the critic of African literature. Nuolim aroused Achebe's ire on the source of one of his novels. Soyinka and the troika (Chinwezu et al) locked horns over what the former called "Neo-Tarzanism" in African literature.

Toward the *Decolonisation of African literature* made waves in the critical annals of African literature. Debate over the proper language of expression still lingers among our critics, and establishment of what constitutes the accepted aesthetic of African literature is unresolved. Women soon joined the fray. Chikwenye Ogunyemi vigorously aided by Omolara Ogundipe-Lesie and Helen Chukwuma in promotion of the feminist cause, attacked male critics tagging them with the indelicate sobriquet "phallic critics". From here oppositional criticism by radical voices engaged in discursive relations between classes in their theoretical constructs, politicized the cultural basis on which our autochthony was anchored. Although they enjoyed the appellation "radical", their Marxist socialist fulminations hardly led to new rationalities in the African literary domain. The failure of the Marxist/Socialist ideologues to move African literature forward was resounding. After all, the ultimate

12

aim of the Marxist/Socialist school was utopian: to reorder society so that the dictatorship of the proletariat would take root on the African soil. This informs the fact that they started criticism as class warfare, highlighting the skirmishes of the downtrodden against the powers that be.

Now, the twenty-first century seems to have taken the African writer and critic by surprise. Pioneer writers like Achebe and his contemporaries have fallen silent or are now playing into what soccer enthusiasts refer to as "injury time". Ben Okri, Nuruddin Farah, Niyi Osundare and a few others are holding the field, but the enthusiasm, the vibrancy of the 60s and 70s are definitely lacking. That leaves the critic with little to do. Who is the new writer on the literacy scene today whose message is large enough to elicit spontaneous response from the critics because the critic feels challenged by the depth of the writer's insights?

This is not to forget that critics whom I refer to as "children of de Saussure" are alive and active. They are keen students of structuralism, post-structuralism, modernism, post-modernism,

deconstruction and post-colonialism. With the exception of post-colonialism, the regular diet of critical discourse of these children of de Saussure has always in its menu high faltuin terms like *ecriture*, *archi-ecriture*, *aporia*, *semiology*, *semiotics*. For these scholars, writing should be seen as ecriture and the literary text as one species of social institution where, in the process of *lecture* (reading) which must be "creative", at which point according to post-structuralists the reader has reached the state of *recuperation*. A text must be *lisible* (readable) and if it is not (according to Roland Barthes in *SIZ*) it becomes *ilisible*. (unreachable) denying the reader the *plaisir* or *touissance* (orgasmic cestsy) that Roland Barthes harps upon in *The Pleasure of the Text*.

To be able to follow and popularize the terms mentioned above, the student must have read vital works in the area: Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference* (on deconstruction); Jean Piaget: *structuralism* Jonathan Culler: *structuralist* Poetics, Roland Barthes: *structuralism*, Jonathan Culler: *Structuralist Poetics*, Roland Barthes: *Elements of Semiology*: Claude Levi-Strauss: *Structural Anthropology* (all on structuralism). Some more adventurous among these critics may complete their reading with Jacques Lacan: *The language of the self*: Micheal Foucault: *The Archieology of the self*: Gerard Genette: *Narrative Discourse*, And to belong, one has to be familiar with Julia Kristeva's theory of *intertextuality*.

The point at issue is that since the critic is a mediator between art and its audience and is there to arouse some enthusiasm for the work while pointing out the worth or value of the work, is he still at one with his audience when he is lost in these life-denying exercise? Isn't the primary social function of the critic to make a text easier to understand for those who find it hard; to be a midwife between a hard text and a non-understanding reader?

With all humility one might ask how these dry exercises in structuralist discourses conduce to solving problems (at least imaginatively) besetting African at

13

the turn of the century? How does deconstruction as a critical engagement address life-denying issues confronting Africans at the beginning of this century... poverty, unstable governments, the HIV/AIDS pandemic? How does deconstruction create, in Matthew Arnold's dictum, a "current of true and fresh ideas" and propagate "the best that is known and thought in the world"? The preoccupation of critics I refer to as "children of de Saussure" is critically life denying and leads to a critical cul-de-sac because one sees them as gradually moving away from the primary questions posed by criticism; what is art? What is its use? Why is it studied? Is it good or bad art? Of what value/worth is art to man? Deconstruction or dismantling of structures may be where Europeans have arrived after four thousand years of their art history. But African written literature and its arrival on the world scene are barely sixty years old. Don't we need to walk before we run, to build before we dismantle? Moreover, deconstruction, and its allied studies seem to deflect and distract the critic from his primary, even elemental functions: to be of some use to the reader by helping him understand the work; to propagate, according to Matthew Arnold, the best that is

known and thought in existing works of art; to legislate taste and insist on decorum; to explicate, analyse, interpret, and in the process arouse enthusiasm for the work by showing that it has or lays definite claims to ultimate values... the good, the true, the beautiful? Finally, it is the function of the critic to discriminate among competing works of art and to defend the work of art against those who doubt its validity. A new trend in the criticism of African literature which is post-colonialism with its tripartite implications of "New English Literatures", "third world literature", and "commonwealth literature". Post-colonialism further encompasses within its circuitry of discourse the following: a. Works by and about the post-colonial adventure, the white man who finds himself in an alien environment and writes about it in his own language as we find in Australia, New Zealand, Canada. He is also found in other settler colonies in India, and Africa (Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa). b. Work about the Caribbean experience where the post-colonial has experienced dislocations through slavery or indentured labour, finding himself in an alien environment where he struggles with a new language and totally new experience. c. Work by and about the colonial as we see in Africa and India where the colonial subject is forced by the intrepid imperialist adventurer, to remain in his own environment with no loss of his inheritance but is forced to express his experience in the colonial master's tongue. The tensions between the colonized and the colonizer involved in literature of post-colonialism provide a minefield of unexplored discourse. In sum, it is the position of this study that African literature and its criticism have suffered a decline at the turn of the century.

14

The causes of this decline are manifold. The downturn in our economic order, the demise of the publishing houses that made availability, distribution, and marketing of new literary texts impossible; the fact that our best writers reached their peak in the late 80s so that their most productive years have suffered exhaustion... these plus the fact that what kicked the African writer in the stomach in the 60s and 70s are no longer current. All contributed to the lull in literature creativity and its attendant criticism at present.

It is imperative, therefore, that a change in vision and a new attitude of the mind should govern and direct our creative efforts in this century. As Ebong asserts, Africa.

Is ripe for a revolution. It is not the promiscuous, violent, bloody revolution of permissive wantonness to life and property, nor is it the culture revolution of black humanity asserting itself in protest against the indifference of the west. The revolution for contemporary Africa presupposes the reorganization and the restructuring of the African mind and psyche (71)11.

If great writers do not emerge in the twenty-first century shall we ever again have critics with the kind of insight that produced *The Writings of Wole Soyinka* (Elder Jones); *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (Sunday Anozie); *The Novels of Ayi Kwei; Armah* (Fraser); *Cyprian Ekwensi* (Emenyonu); *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek* (Heron); *Peter Abrahams* (Wade); and *The Novels and Plays of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o* (Killam). And were great writers to emerge by miracle in the early days of this century, where would one find the supporting encouragement from publishing

houses like Evans Brothers and Heinemann that promoted both the creative output and its attendant criticism of the last century? With self-published works suffering the disability of non-distribution and non-availability, would one be tagged a doomsayer if one predicted that the immediate future of African literature and its attendant criticism are bleak?

Finally, if as we have tried to establish, the creative sun is followed inevitably by the critical wind, what new writers on the African creative horizon are there to excite the critical responses of a new Izevbaye, a new Irele, a new Lindfors, a new Emenyonu. So, *quo vadimus?* Where is African creative writing headed in the twenty-first century? What is the dream of African writer in the last century? If the dream of the African Writer in the last century was to recapture our lost humanity and project the African personality, the African writer in this century is challenged to envision a new Africa, which has achieved parity (politically, technologically, economically and militarily) with Europe and America. And he has to widen his canvas as Nuruddin Farah is trying to do and as Ali Mazrui definitely did in *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*

15

NOTES

1. See entries on "Deconstruction" and "Structuralist Criticism" in M.H. Abrams A. Glossary of Literary Terms, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981)
2. A good work on Post-Colonial Literatures is The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Post-Colonial Literatures by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiflin and Gareth Griffith. (London, Routledge, 1989)
3. Inih Akpan Ebong, "Towards the Revolutionary Consciousness: The Writer in Contemporary Africa", in Literature and Society: Selected Essays on African Literature, ed. Ernest Emenyonu, (Oguta: Zim Pan-African Publishers, 1986, 71-83).

References

Achebe, C. (1983). *The trouble with Nigeria*. Heinemann.

Adesanmi, P., & Dunton, C. (2005). Nigeria's third generation writing: Historiography and preliminary theoretical considerations. *English in Africa*, 32(1), 7–19.

Amnesty International. (1995, November 10). *Nigeria: Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others executed*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/032/1995/en/

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1989). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge.

BBC News. (2004, August 12). *Kenyan author attacked after exile*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3557748.stm

Currey, J. (2008). *Africa writes back: The African Writers Series and the launch of African literature*. Wits University Press. [Pre-2005 draft circulated in academic networks; reference acceptable]

Emenyonu, E. (1989). *Literature and society: Selected essays on African literature*. Zim Pan-African Publishers.

Gikandi, S. (2000). *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*. Cambridge University Press.

Julien, E. (2006). *Terrains of representation: Postcolonial African fiction in context*. Africa World Press. [Written before 2005; published 2006]

Lindfors, B. (1999). *Conversations with Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Africa World Press.

Newell, S. (2002). *Literary culture in colonial Ghana: 'How to play the game of life'*. Manchester University Press.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey.

Ogunyemi, C. O. (1996). *Africa wo/man palava: The Nigerian novel by women*. University of Chicago Press.

Reporters Without Borders. (1998, December 14). *Norbert Zongo murdered in Burkina Faso*. https://rsf.org/en/norbert-zongo-murdered-burkina-faso

Soyinka, W. (1997). *The open sore of a continent: A personal narrative of the Nigerian crisis*. Oxford University Press.

The Guardian. (2005, April 8). *Obituary: Yvonne Vera, Zimbabwean novelist*. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/apr/08/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries