GMT EMEZUE
with **CHIN CE (GUEST)**

Critics of the New Poetry

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Introduction:
Chin Ce: Poet, Writer and Social Commentator

Chin Ce (Chris Chinenye) is of the Ibo nation in eastern Nigeria. Born January 1966, he belongs to the generation the Ibo have called the Children of the War, a reference to the civil war that saw secessionist Biafra battle unsuccessfully for autonomy from Nigeria. He attended Government College and later university of Calabar where he won the university medal (1988) of the prestigious Calabar department of English. He worked severally as graphics, Books, Literature and Arts editor, columnist, and reader for some newspapers and publishing companies in Nigeria.

Chin Ce's early writing is traced to the cerebral influence of the Calabar school of literary criticism led by professor Ernest Emenyonu who thanks to the vision of then visiting professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o had adopted an Africa-centred approach to the literary curriculum of that university from the seventies through the eighties. A major influence in the life and works of Chin Ce has been Africa's foremost novelist Chinua Achebe whose dedication to re-teach decades of stereotypes fostered upon his generation and rediscover the salient dignity of their history fostered a generational change in the disciplinary focus of English departments in some important African institutions such as the Calabar school. Chin Ce's vision is consequently shaped by this strong commitment to the African ancestral memory and the ideal of self determination embodied in Biafra's

struggle for survival during the Nigerian War in which he was born. For this generation who constitute a new impetus in Nigerian and African literature the self assured sobriety of the first generation now takes on the form of a social imperative.

As a member of the third generation of African writers from Nigeria Chin Ce has over a dozen published works of fiction. As an avid contributor to contemporary discourse on Africa Chin Ce is most individualized, and has blazed an entirely unique style of writing which is at once original and at home with racial memory. Chin Ce's method is to fire the imagination of readers by challenging established religious and traditional notions. His fictions Children of Koloko (1992) and Gamji College (1998) chronicle the social and political transitions of African societies. In Chin Ce's fictions the post colonial argument shifts the focus from that of re-appraisal and redefinition of identity to an internal discourse on the modern symptom of underdevelopment and exploitation of resources of African nation states by a politically and ideologically bankrupt local leadership. Chin Ce furthers the post colonial discourse in which the events in Africa are still reminiscent of the story of colonial plunder with its attendant psychological disorientation but, in this instance, by local tribesmen who with the exit of the colonial adventurers entrench themselves as the reigning power lords whose only morality patterns after the feudal archetype of seizing and holding political power till the death.

For Chin Ce, art is an engagement that is continually evolving, a process and not an end itself. In the following chat on the language of his poetry Chin Ce sees art as "essentially… an attempt to reach wider levels of meanings, wider spheres of understanding. The language the individual chooses to express it is entirely up to him but he must communicate in such a way, consciously, that he offers the reader, the audience, an ability to understand that experience…And I make haste to state that even the best mind faced with this realisation discovers that the activity of expression through language is inadequate to communicate the profundity and intensity of experience," he warns.

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GMT:

Sir, I am pleased to welcome you to our Literary Chat Forum. The theme of this debut, "Critics of the New Poetry," is borne from concerns about the role of literary critics in the development of

Nigerian poetry of our generation. With your two published volumes of poetry and fiction and inter-disciplinary studies at the Africa Desk of IRCALC's *Africa Literary Journal*, I believe you can comment on Nigerian poetry in earnest. What is your opinion about the simple poems that have characterised Nigerian poetry in the past thirty years after the war?

CE:

Thank you very much for the chat theme 'Critics of the New Poetry' –new poetry being the simple, recent voices that have come out of the Nigerian civil war experience and current politics of nation building (or nation breaking, more appropriately). My opinion is that Nigerian poetry cannot help being simple being concerned with social problems or political issues and that even in American cultures, you notice that their poems these days are simple too. The era of Nigerian poetry woven with infusions of Latinism and Greco-Roman myths has gone, and for good too. The issue I would like to raise is how has the modern poet complemented his/her role within the traditional heritage and the modern challenges that stare him in the face such as the politics of the day and other histories in the making?

GMT:

Many are of the opinion that the traditional artiste in Africa has a role in the society, an identifiable role among which is to shape, teach, instruct, criticise and direct, for the reason that he lives within it, lives among his people and is very much part of whatever they are doing. But it is the duty of the critic of new Nigerian poetry to espouse, eloquently in a forum such as this, how the new Nigerian poets have fared as against how they perceive themselves or in

what direction they think their role should take. Unfortunately it seems the kind of education we are given makes us the more educated we are, the more ineffective we seem to be.

CE:

We are saying the same thing really. But what can the critic do about the problem of poets who take tons of bad writings to press? Well as you rightly observed, the greater problem lies with the members of the ivory tower who can barely sieve the wheat from the chaff if you permit the cliche. Instead you see a critic presenting some mere doggerels as the high points of art. He praises them because they are written by the teacher who supervised his graduating essay or written by his tribesman and the contradictions of his glowing encomiums for the work and the excerpts we see do not convince anybody that this is good poetry. So critics seem to have lacked adequate interpretation of values. They are custodians of the scholarly enterprise that may later feature classical reference points in literary studies. If they are afraid, if they shun or shrink from the *bolekaja* dialectics of African art, at least, they should offer us some alternative. What makes this work good literature? What makes this good poetry? What extended nuances or manners –not merely enumeration of metaphors and similes– can we find that enrich the corpus? What are the qualities of these works that would make it something that other critics would love to hear about?

GMT:

We believe there is a big job for critics of the new Nigerian poetry and that's where the significance of this journal lies. The avalanche of poetry inundating readers regularly from the print are so anti-climactic. And the dilemma or tragedy is that our scholars

can no longer separate good from bad ones. Because essentially, these scholars are on a payroll, many of these poets are their patrons either as teachers or political friends or associates from whom they expect some favour, so the critics praise these writers, thereby misleading younger researchers. But as earlier observed, the traditional artiste in Africa has had a role which he lately compromised. He used to make sure that he directs, instructs and does not care whose feet is stepped on. He sees his role as a duty and attends to it with an almost divine devotion. In local parlance, he 'does not look at anybody's face' while performing this task. Our poets, especially the good ones, have taken on this role even better. Sometimes the problem is not so much with these poets as with the critics who are not doing their job. At the best what many offer are merely interpretation of these poems. 'The poet is saying this, the poet says that…' but this is just elementary criticism. They should be able to tell how. And it is time we are done with western terminologies because in our own traditions, we can have our yardsticks in determining what is or what is not. Give them names and use them in identifying and knowing when we meet a good poem or encounter a bad one. The practice of merely enunciating the function of a poem is very, very elementary and criticism should go beyond this to evolve further critical standards of our own. There are new critical yardsticks from around the world. There is eco-criticism, quite recently. Deconstruction already has been there and dying for want of relevance. But I know that within our own African system we also have our yardsticks and standards which the critics only need to apply. The critic of new Nigerian poetry needs to be conversant with some of these standards which are reflections of African philosophy. It is not just enough for the critic to be a mid-wife, to interpret the poem for students. Yes, one should interpret but one

should also tell how such interpretation tallies so that those who are interested in writing will not fall into the trap of our predecessors either in too much borrowing of forms or ineffectual assimilation of critical notions. It is good to borrow, but when one borrows to the point of losing identity that is where the problem lies.

CE:

True. I think this is what makes your efforts at the NNP so commendable being the truly first concentration of critical journal effort in a particular phase of writing of a particular genre of literature: poetry. This is really nice and as a poet and writer you have my full support any day not just as one member of the team but as active supporter in any other way such as coming to this forum. Because I have often wondered what it is that so makes Nigerian poetry appreciation different from the non poetry disciplines as to warrant very little concentration in terms of works done in this area.

GMT:

Thanks a lot. I think it was necessary we put up this effort because for the non poetry disciplines like drama and prose there have actually been lots of work done in that area. In fact they are always viewed as a familiar terrain. So you find that for a critic of the novel genre he doesn't have to beat about the bush to know what he is supposed to say. There are many models there for him to emulate both in Europe and Africa but for the critic of new Nigerian poetry, there tends to be dual roles or expectations. For instance, with the older critics like Echeruo, Nwoga and Achebe, you discover – and this is especial with Echeruo – that these scholars saw their job in their poetry as midwives or interpreters. The poets of that generation are conveniently called second generation poets. For those in that

group: Soyinka, Clark (Bekederemo), and Okigbo you find that critics felt they had a job there because these poets wrote in diction and ideas that created a problem for the average reader.

But in new Nigerian poetry the reverse seems to be the case. Ideas are well known; issues that affect the masses and language are all familiar. Their English is not the turgid formal diction. Some have even explored the pidgin although with very little following or audience. But the idea of domestication has really caught on and the language had undergone serious developments. You find that for the critic it is not interpreting what the poem is saying that only counts because almost anyone can give you an idea what is being said.

CE:

I agree with you. And truly this has given rise to the issue of density in the form of praises, in the form of encomiums all telling us the merits of a work of art. Most criticisms in poetry today can barely show us some demerits, the prosaic lines that are churned daily in the form poetry, the unimaginative and ludicrous assertions of protest that have completely characterised the idea of new Nigerian poetry. We do not see your critics honestly showing the limitations of such works which would otherwise have motivated our writers to be patient with their works and to be more artistically effective in channelling their laudable political and social issues of the day. So I believe that criticism of poetry in Nigerian communities has become somewhat stultified for the fact that it is becoming another panegyric of its own. If we could identify salient features in a work of art, showing its merits, its strong points and its weak elements, we would be going a long way in developing critical studies in African or Nigerian poetry.

GMT:

Let me move this chat further to ask in what language should the new Nigerian poet create? I think that this is a very important question in the sense that I believe it will help our critics in understanding what the poet is actually saying and how he says it. For me I believe that certain terms like similes, metres, did not really preoccupy the minds of the traditional poet in the sense that many of these new Nigerian poets tend to create in indigenous languages. Some few months ago, I had the opportunity to talk with two younger poets, Joseph Ushie and Remi Raji, and I put the question to them. How and in what language do they create? Although two of them are from culturally different areas of Nigeria: Raji is from Yoruba area while Ushie is from Cross River (South Eastern Nigeria), but they gave me the same reply – that they create in their indigenous languages. So you find that for these poets, the ideas first mature in indigenous concepts which they are familiar with, then they turn it into English or look about for English language equivalents for some of the things they already have. So you find out that in their poetry, they don't have deliberate similes, rhymes, rhyming patterns, the type we encounter in European poetry. They create first in indigenous languages and we find that their models are often the traditional artistes. And because their creative view is filled with what they already know traditionally, not what they were taught in school, when they begin to transmute this into the English language we now encounter what has been termed code-switching and all that. You find out that when they do not find a good English language equivalent, they transport that same idea directly into the language sometimes trying to make poor translations of it. This is usually done on purpose. So for you to understand that poem you need to

retranslate it or take it back to the indigenous language in order to get the greater import of what the writer is saying and that is where you find the beauty and artistic skill of these poets.

CE:

Well, speaking as a poet here, I do not think in Igbo or Hausa or Yoruba or Efik then write in English. I look at the creative process as a communication that goes beyond language. I visualise an interaction that goes towards the inner dimensions of the individual. And that interaction is neither imagistic nor symbolic. The interaction transcends the boundaries of language. It is knowingness that goes so deep within the individual. The problem comes in lending expression to this knowingness; to this self instinctual understanding or realisation and then that problem comes when you want to give verbal expression to this experience within the individual. I believe that the verbal expression is limited in any language it chooses; it cannot give vent to very deep feelings, the depth of realisation that I am trying to make. But I am left with no other choice but to communicate through that language given to me, being the English language. And I make haste to state that even the best mind faced with this realisation discovers that the activity of expression through language is inadequate to communicate the profundity and intensity of experience. But that is speaking on the individual plane. There is no doubt that some poets like Ushie, Raji and a host of them could claim to think first in their indigenous languages. I have been personally bored by the labyrinthine maze of Raji's provincial landscape. Frankly for a non native it is like cutting through thick undergrowth and sometimes one tends to give up. That comes from excessive celebration of what we usually call oral or traditional forms of expression. I would rather prefer the

metaphorical allusions and subtle expressions that come with some of Ushie's poems and the individualised thoughts that are borne from intense personal experience which I find in Adewale. Onwudinjo's vividness and clarity generate a dramatic impetus in his *Women of Biafra* collections. His war poems are clearly action poems. These are first-second-volume writers, younger poets like my good self. But where the individual is always confronted with translating, thinking in original language and expressing that original language into another language being the English gives us a large deviation; we go wide off the mark in understanding the creative process. The poetic expression for me essentially is an attempt to reach wider levels of meanings, wider spheres of understanding. The language the individual chooses to express it is entirely up to him but he must communicate in such a way, consciously, that he offers the reader, the audience, an ability to understand that experience. If he fails, he becomes irrelevant like the early poetry. At that point the poet has completely lost his audience. If he succeeds, all well and good, he has helped or he has expanded their understanding. He has conscripted, so to say, other individuals, other beings into the landscape of his visioning. And I think that is where the success of a work of art lies. So the mode of thinking and expression to me doesn't apply to poetry in that case.

GMT:

Yes, but I also feel that in terms of creativity, perhaps, just perhaps (I am not much of a poet anyway) the subject matter, or the particular idea that the poet is dealing with, actually affects his outlook and the language he uses. In your own poems, your anthology *African Eclipse* for instance, most of the issues are on the social plank. You discover that, or I may say…it is not the idea that

you are trying to portray, the idea of the individual finding the self. Well, it might be there, but in this case, it is totally subsumed with your concern for society. So I detect that even your language there shows a marked change when compared with your other anthology *Full Moon*. There I would say that there are lots of private sentiments and ideas being expressed. But with *African Eclipse*, the language there borders on the communal, the traditional African that we are talking about. For instance, you made use of the oracle medium, the African idea of divination in the poem you entitled "Oracle". And those that deal on contemporary issues, your language there is overwhelmed with political registers and images. So I will like to say that actually, probably, the creative process once it has emerged out of the individual, the next concern based on the idea the poet is espousing might be what language to convey. And I think that's where I see your poems in *African Eclipse* serving the same purpose and reflecting the same concerns that do the poetry of your contemporaries.

So while *Full Moon*, is overly concerned with the individual, and the individual's ability to rise above limiting circumstances, what makes it a part of new poetry, I think, is its lyrical nature along with its not being inundated with abstruse images. And in terms of celebrating the self, *Full Moon* has a lot in common with *Naked Testimonies* for both poetry indicate almost an overly concern with self and the similar style in language.

CE:

Yes, I would agree to an extent. Don't forget we are talking about the language of poetry and the creativity inherent thereof. I doubt not that having started writing in a particular age or generation, one would say that my works might belong to the mode

of new writers, but not in the sense of following identified manners of expression. I do not consciously seek to write within a particular language choice or imagery so that I would be considered a new Nigerian poet. I look at –just like you said– making use of appropriate diction and mode of expression to highlight the message of the writer. Granted I explored the opening motif of the diviner in introducing himself frequently in the stanzas, and you can rightly say there are overt vilification of some historical personalities, that is true. But I am saying that I do not think in any mother tongue before I now try to translate or employ some code-switching in order to carry out an art that has to be qualified as new Nigerian. You see the danger in that –the danger in championing that trend might mean that we are trying to evolve a stereotype, a stereotype that we cannot grow out of for a long time. I recognise the fact that individuals could also form their own approach and the writer or critic of poetry has the onus of discovering these subtle differences in art. I have read a lot of critical works on so called new Nigerian poetry and they all seem to become a stereotype. You have recently in a previous publication, (ALJ B5) complained about the trend in Nigerian movie industry. I think it was Ossie Enekwe there who actually said that because the artistes and critics have abandoned their calling the charlatans had to take over. Then what you find in the industry is a repetitive stereotype that has portrayed a very bad image of the country. Don't you think that today we stand the danger of having a stereotype of the so-called new Nigerian poetry where your literary scholars are so overwhelmed by issues of protest, issues of charging against political leaders, issues of crying out against injustice. All these border upon themes. Yes, I could be guilty at some point, at some phase in my writing, of relating these themes. But then that is not all there is about the new poetry. I don't think that

is all that can be found. Because the danger in highlighting series of protests locks our poetry in a box. And then when anyone looks at it, they say 'oh, is this only what it is all about?' That is exactly what I am saying, but it is not all there is. The onus of the critic therefore is to discover and analyse new expressions within the work of art and in discovering and analysing these expressions, elicit and expand the frontiers of meaning. It helps us to really develop this genre, especially within the Nigerian system. And I think It also helps us to move further from the stereotype which we find ourselves dealing with at present.

GMT:

Yes, you are correct in actually identifying this emerging stereotype which makes it an issue of great relevance for the poet who decides to explore his private sentiments. In fact I have observed that most poems that come must deal on one political issue or the other and there is always this idea that it is because of the role of the traditional artiste in the society. But I am also aware that the traditional artiste also finds time to celebrate the self. And what emerges or what is most important is not even that idea of celebration but how he does it. And I think that's where our critics are actually missing the point because we are simply out to interpret and say what this person is saying. But how this person does it or achieves that, few have bothered to show. And then there is this idea that since poetry serves a purpose for the community and the poets, especially the New Nigerian poets, having been identified by Aiyejina and other critics as serving a purpose for the community, it must be community based. In all that he does, it must be seen from the angle of serving or achieving something for the community. If it serves the interest of "self" (because you start from self to go to the

community), such poems are re-interpreted to show they do something for community. It actually creates an unnecessary straitjacket and I think the job of the new critic is to see that there is actually a blend. We need to go beyond the 20th century traditional art. The 21st century traditional artist is still here with us but his art is evolving; he is changing, evolving new techniques, new device, new ways, and new styles. The critic also has to go beyond seeing just how art merely serves community. Art also promotes aesthetics and other functions. It is actually a very important factor if we are to avoid the danger of stereotype with its limitations … in fact in the past our poetry had been written off as mere protest. Recently, 'protest' might even be a better terminology for the level our poetry might descend. And that why there is this enthusiasm on the people's part to publish whatever they dub poetry.

CE:

Frankly speaking, the issue about who is an African writer or African poet or what is Nigerian poetry grows tenuous when viewed from the point of quality of artistic expression. One gets bored with superfluous African images for some kind of pointillist identity. It was Niyi Osundare's pastoral poetry that inadvertently precipitated this crisis in literary creativity. The individual is taken through a whole maze of rich idiomatic, proverbial and intensely provincial Africanist expressions. What this does –not in Osundare's poems, but in the works of his imitators– is that it shuts out the audience. The kind of thing we find in bad American dialogues. I don't think writers must write essentially for the African audience. So that when we have sufficiently got non Africans uninterested in our literature, we begin to shut off other ethnicities, with our provincial worldviews, with such local idioms, local languages, local examples as we can unearth. I

think we must write for the simple reason that we feel deeply the need to give expression to what motivates us to speak. And though we may tap quite richly from the abundant store of images that abound in African flora and fauna, but a conscious artiste like Achebe in his novels, tries to domesticate, using the term of Nwoga, or tries to authenticate this rich repertoire of tradition within the expressive power that he has acquired in order to communicate. So of course it is a matter of choice, I am not trying to prescribe. All I am trying to say is that there has emerged a stereotype in the so-called celebration of African life style, African imagery, African flora, African fauna and then the younger writers who try to emulate them would even surpass themselves at that skill and what you have is the inability to reach beyond your immediate province. So I will enjoin scholars to really develop some rigorous critical approach to emerging works. And in doing so they should be first and foremost scholars of literature. They shouldn't be mere cheerleaders. That is the only way we could develop and compete seriously with the rest of the world in celebrating our literary expressions.

GMT:

Talking about (poetic) expressions, I think that what Chinua Achebe has done for African prose fiction is exactly what Niyi Osundare has accomplished in the genre of poetry. I see Osundare's poems, many of his poems, as very good blend of traditional repertoire with borrowed forms. He has done that and he has done it very well. I think where the problem lies is with the poor imitators that don't really understand that to a large extent style is an individual thing. Because Achebe became successful in what he did in his earlier novels, it doesn't mean that we must all go imitating him for us to write very good works that amount to African prose fiction.

You might say Osundare precipitated a crisis, but I wouldn't call it a crisis but would rather say that in Nigeria we are poor imitators of things. Many of us don't understand that we don't need to imitate anything; all we need is to be ourselves. So you find out the very good poets and writers are those that discover themselves and bring out their own styles. Many believe that since Osundare is good in what he does it follows that they must write the same way. Such imitators flunk badly and bring out the worst of this style of poetry. And I think this has been the problem in our poetry.

Having said that, another issue that strikes me is the idea that many critics in looking at the works of a particular poet tend to include the whole poems in an anthology as being successful. I am very aware that many poets both within and outside Africa don't write such wonderful poems or rather when you review the anthology, out of 30 or 50 poems, only about 5 make very good poems. But there is the tendency in Nigeria that once somebody brings out an anthology, all the poems are analysed and rated highly successful. This creates a problem. To begin with, it does not help the poet to know his weaker or finer qualities. Critics should be able to say that these poems are very good and these are not so successful. For instance, when you look at Tanure Ojaide's poems, especially the ones in *The Fate of Vultures,* personally, I don't think that many of the poems here are as successful as some contained in his earlier collections. But these are all touted as accomplishments in craft. I think our critics can do better there. So it should not always be the practice that all the poems in an anthology must be very good.

CE:

Thank you very much for that comment. I think that the problem here is with a certain mentality that has to do with African history.

Colonialism actually afflicted the African psyche in the sense that it develops hypersensitivity to criticisms that bother around its culture, tradition, way of life and if you remember Negritude developed out of that sense of outrage about western superiority complex. Even in traditional life, lapses are explained away as simply culture. So where you have this high level of sensitivity, you also have a lot of intolerance to honest self evaluation. 'I am black and proud' precludes any possibility of deeper self evaluation. I think that while we give credit to Chinua Achebe for having stood up to effectively decant some of the deprecatory attitudes towards Africa, that singular response has also carried a complex in the African elite. He fawns excessively over what he considers to be African culture. And that is where a great disservice has been done to African literature, including its poetry. It is pathetic hearing Africans saying "leave our literature alone". Some African scholars actually put it in writing that other people should leave their literature alone and some even went further to delineate who should qualify to be the critic of African literature. And in that qualification even Chinweizu et al did not qualify to speak on African literature. You see this intolerance to opposing view points has done discredit to African literature. It has stultified development in the literatures of Africa including Nigerian poetry. So what you have are scholars who are cheer leaders as I said earlier. You dare not say a writer has erred in certain instances; he takes it personally. You do not suggest ways he could have remedied his art, he says you are prescribing. You do not say a writer's work has some serious defects, some will say you are jealous. I doff my cap for the likes of Chinweizu Jemie and Madubuike because what they did in 'Decolonisation of African Literature' was something no other writer in Africa now and in future could do, because it actually took great courage to research and

come up with the facts they presented us with and till date we are either responding to Chinweizu and company or we decide to sweep them under the carpet for the simple fact that they spoke in a language that was overly vociferous, even if it was apt. So what do we have after Chinweizu and co? We have people who are falling over all kinds of literary works. They believe that you have to lump a work of art as -just as you said- meritorious. Strangely everything that a favourite writes turns out fantastic. Even some of them coming to Africa Literary Journal, and some of you in NNP have resisted this pull. Because some of what you have there are excerpts of the adulator's trade mark. Just like the sycophants that writers criticise in political circles who cheer political gladiators in order to have whatever benefits, we also have intellectual cheerleaders who simply clap their hands at whatever their colleagues have churned out and then there is no honest appraisal or criticism of a work of art and any attempt to make such critical remarks will be interpreted as 'bolekaja' or excessive. So it is this inability for genuine introspection that has become the bane of African writing and I don't think we inherited this quality from our earlier writers because Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka never spared themselves when it came to occasional remarks about each other's works. I remember Soyinka riling Achebe's treatment of Ezeulu's public ritual performance in *Arrow of God* as 'dogged secularisation of the profoundly mystical'. And in that case Soyinka actually had a point because in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, if one expected a delineation of the role of Ezeulu taking mythical proportions, one was actually disappointed. Actually the role was so secularised that it lost its spiritual meaning. But then Achebe could argue that this was not his intention in *Arrow of God* which may also be correct. But you see this interaction of opinions, like we are doing online, develops the

frontiers of literature. But when you have people singing praises, you take up a whole volume of poetry and you think that the purpose of your work as a scholar is to shower encomiums to everything the person has written, you are doing a great disservice to scholarship. And I won't hesitate to say that is not literary criticism. So the job of developing African literature should be taken back to where it belongs. It is not the author who has deemed it fit to express within the depth of his own profundity; it is the critic who should actually study in great depth and determination and be courageous enough to express these findings without being made a victim of his opinions. Our society must learn to separate their emotions, their personal frontiers from what is termed public duty. And that is where the new criticism should actually lend a focus.

GMT:

I think the issue you have raised, especially when you talked about victimisation, is very important. I tend to think that many critics -particularly those in the ivory tower that have yet to sit on a professorial chair- cannot afford to be reckless, though this is not intended to be an apologia. But my experience based on close interaction with these people has shown that many tend to shy away because they are afraid of victimisation. As a result of this, they either ignore the issue or take off on a familiar and safer tangent in their criticism. That is actually passing off something that they know is not really good stuff. They just keep quiet and let leave be because they are afraid that if they speak out, they will be victimised. At least, to become a professor, one's papers have to be sent out to other colleagues in other universities. And daring to reveal the demerits of certain arguments of others who may take it out on the person isn't a very wonderful prospect. So I think the ivory tower has a lot to show

the society. Part of our problem is that we have allowed politics to creep into areas it shouldn't even be in the first place. The same political avarice creeps into the ivory tower when dons begin to think from narrow, selfish ends. This is already affecting our literature. It is affecting our poetry because nobody is able to tell the other the truth concerning issues and ideas because many are afraid of victimisation.

CE:

Let me help you with a point. I think you have made an outstanding contribution. I recently had a discussion with a colleague of mine about a piece by Biodun Jeyifo on the poetry of Maman Vatsa. I think that Biodun Jeyifo made good points about the poor quality of writing that the late Maman Vatsa had churned out in his life time and the level of commendation that was paid to this attempted poet when he was alive. But it struck me as funny that Biodun Jeyifo had to wait after Mamman Vatsa was executed over his implication in a coup d'etat before he could do that piece. So it is this issue of courage that we find lacking sometimes in African writing. The courage that Achebe showed when he stood up to an intimidating western audience and told them that he frankly didn't think that the business of African literary criticism should be cultivated in western soil. We seem to have lost track of that line of courage. Achebe paid a price for his characteristic bluntness because prestigious western laurels and recognition were denied him. But you see, literature and art should be divorced from politics and sentiments of the day. It was the same Achebe who in one single statement 'art for art's sake is one piece of deodorised dog shit' very much in the manner of Wole Soyinka's intemperate 'tiger does not proclaim its tigritude' killed the notion that we should try in some

possible way to separate the business of art from social issues.

I think the time will come in Africa when we will realise that great mistake. Art is, of necessity, distinct from political, social and economic issues. But that does not mean that the artiste has no right or should not write how he feels even if he wants to make a commentary on political issues of the day. One may have cause in Nigeria to feel so deeply about the political gerrymandering of the nation. In fact, apart from the poems, Nigerian fictions have dwelt on the political history of Nigeria as well. At the same time, I would rather think that it is the higher business of an artiste to uplift beyond the background of what is familiar, the background in which public opinion is steeped, or the immediate issues that titillate public imagination and stimulate the journalist's reportorial appetite. So at the same time the criticism of literature should develop a benign aesthetic distancing from social complements, political or personality issues. Social issues, political issues, economic considerations can only become significant as the background, an age in which a writer lived and expressed his works. But the appreciation of the high and low points of a work of art, the progression of classical qualities, must not be hinged on how relevant he has been to the society or how he is committed to society. It is Marxist criticism which also brought this plethora of confused theories and we had phrases like literature of social commitment. We had a tyrannical prescription of how literature should be at that time. And for those of us coming out of the age of communism I think that there ought to be a movement towards artistic maturity. In which case we begin to develop forms, we begin to see literature that is becoming independent. You begin to see an emerging trend in an age whereby the literary expressions of a given period, say about a decade or two decades now, would form a

pattern and it is the business of the critic, the business of the scholar, to discern these patterns. It is not the business of the poet; it is not the business of the writer. The scholar discerns a certain movement, a definite pattern and whatever social issues of the day are only a background to it. So I think that the academics of Africa have been sleeping. Having successfully chased out, so to say, eurocentric western critics, and having established an independent form of thought, it behoves upon them to now sit back and compete with the rest of the world. When we talk about Chinese literature, Japanese literature, Arabic literature, Africa may be nowhere in comparison if all they would bring to the festival of world literatures are literatures of social protest, literature of political commitment, art of the history of Nigeria or Africa. Africa is so busy fighting its own wars –these terribly distracting wars– that they are not able to distinguish the business of an independent literary thought from the business of the political organisation of the Nigerian state or the administration of university. So the onus still falls back to the owners of the literature and I think that if they fail within the next few years in discerning a form of writing, then there are two things that will emerge. You have the crew of African writers over there in the United Kingdom or United States who have begun to think and write like chips of the old western block, or you have those writers and critics who have made themselves completely irrelevant by becoming acutely narrow in their outlook as if the rest of the world did not exist. So in the literary circle, academics have to sit up to know that, inverting Achebe's parlance, it is well over morning on creation day.

GMT:

On the victim complex, for instance, do you remember the case between Chinua Achebe and Charles Nnolim, where Charles

Nnolim wrote a paper he entitled "A Source for Arrow of God" and he provided or claimed he had discovered sources where Achebe got materials for writing his *Arrow of God*? I know in several discussions with some colleagues that many were unconvinced by the intent at mischief underlying Nnolim's approach to what would have made some investigative research. But they dared not write. Surprisingly it was only C. Innes, a westerner, who bothered about a quick rejoinder to Nnolim.

CE:

In Africa, we have to understand, we are going through a lot of changes and just like what we have at the political front being but pale reflections of what modern states have achieved, so it is with African thought via its literature. I think it is still very young when we talk about modern African art or literature, although critics will like to add African oral literature while others will hack as far back as ancient Egypt to claim that African literature has always been there. I think that the problems that bedevil African nation states abound too in Africa's literary circle. Some of what we celebrate are actually rudiments of scholarship and at the worst we have two extremes: either chronic personality conflicts or cronyism and fawning around hierarchy. Between them anyway lie some inspiring legacies. But both extremes do not prove any good for the development of critical standards. So as you said, moving beyond these polarities entails a great deal of courage and, actually, I will have to salute the courage of IRCALC in developing this approach to Africa's development issues. Because the imaginative approach to literary criticism and African literature would actually jumpstart the development of African writings and earn for Africa a continuing pride of place among the world literati. Believe me these problems abound in other

parts of the world. The United States is even a bad example. You discover that there you have a complete degeneration of values; the notion of arts for entertainment has been so commercialised. It has been so debased that what they parade as best selling writing are at best third rate thriller stuff and a sensational culture that only appeals to the sensitivities of the modern western mind viz sex, money and some profound aberrations of human nature. Even Toni Morrison plays to the gallery of the African American stereotype in her works and this can be quite disappointing. So I think that the courage of developing a literature of any given society can only come from few greats and it takes great personal sacrifice and then a great deal of commitment to what the individual is doing for the writer to lend profound expressions to his thoughts and not just for the sake of commercial gain or for public praise but for the conviction of the validity of his experience. This is what should inform literary criticism. The writer and critic must be convincing in their expressions. The critic must also be convinced that he has made thorough research effort in his writing. In which case you can now compare the validity of a critical presentation such Nnolim's "A Source for *Arrow of God*" with the quality of any other criticisms or responses associated with that effort. How generously has he incorporated other materials that also reflect similar or opposing expressions? How fairly has he tried to organise and present his data? What other contribution on literary expression has he discerned of the work under review? This attitude, spearheaded by few old and courageous critical examples, will actually help in the growth and development of African literature and criticism.

GMT:

It seems the problem of literary development is not just limited

to Africa. As you rightly observed other nations have their own problems. In all things considered I don't really think that as Africans or Nigerians we are lagging behind so much. It is just that there are certain things which we need to correct. Some of them are the things we have discussed earlier: issues of mere praise singing, fear of falling in the wrong side, and not really knowing the job of the critic. I am happy that with the present trend in information which has gained ground across national boundaries there will be a rich network of ideas with more immediate and far reaching impact than we have witnessed in the past. The coming of IRCALC and NNP on the internet to offer recent perspectives on African and Nigerian literature to the rest of the world is a wonderful idea. And also offering such opportunity that critics from all parts of the world can see some of our literature and offer their views. When we were all talking about globalisation, many have looked at it with suspicion, but the fact still remains that the world could really become a small universe. There are many universes out there for us that exist in this world today to initiate important attempts at understanding. Part of the objective is to curb the strife and conflicts that have gone on among nations. Cross continental understanding is very important and that is where knowing and studying other nations' literatures becomes important too. So the effort that IRCALC and NNP have put in to bring African literature to the rest of the world is commendable. This way we know of other world literatures too. And perhaps, through this effort, others will see how Africans interpret their literature and Africans are given opportunity to see how their works are received by others with none of the condescending ignorance exhibited by some Eurocentric critics of the 60s. I believe that such interaction based on mutual respect and understanding will help the growth of world literatures.

CE:

You are quite correct. Nigerian poetry, African writing, African scholarship: they are part of the evolving topography of African heritage. But the literature and thoughts of Africa could jumpstart the development of Africa beyond its present miasma, because it is the quality of thought that rules the world. Ideas rule the world. Imagination is the strongest factor that an individual can ever possess and that is why the imaginative landscape of Africa is of interest to scholars who are engaged in studying African writing. The ability of scholars to harness these ideas from which great thoughts are moulded would do great credit toward transforming the entire Nigerian nation and the African continent. Unfortunately we do not have to wait for political leaders who are ignorant to recognise the impact of literature in national development. We can only pray that someday a highly developed mind could climb on to the seat of leadership, because the present crop of Nigerian leaders are barbarians at best. Years ago Achebe, in accepting a national honour, had asked 'what has literature got to do with it?' I believe that every student of literature in Nigeria or Africa ought to study that essay because it actually highlights the role of literature in nation building. We must always be aware of the power of literature, of imagination, to shape the world. And it is from this awareness that we take our job very seriously. Just like we have political god fathers, political leaders and charlatans who are out for self gratification, so we have elements in African scholarship who are there for their own gratification too. Many scholars tend see their calling as a way to earn their way through life, reel out a lot of published works in international and reputable journals and have an honourable retirement and as if that's all there is. The majority of the people we have in Africa are cut from the cloak of this group of self-serving

administrators and opinion leaders. But the few who can make the lasting impact in the transformation of a continent will be there for the satisfaction and conviction of their role. It takes an individual who is convinced and entirely satisfied with the extent of his research to continue his skill even at great task to his personal comfort. And those individuals are few indeed. In the literary terrain today I mention Chinua Achebe too often because he is one writer who did not care about recognition or personal comfort. He is one writer from Africa who has the deepest conviction of his role and has championed that cause without fear. And in doing that he projected Africa and her literature to a respectable independent pride of place in the corpus of world literatures. Icons like Achebe and Wole Soyinka do not come very many. So it is not surprising that among the plethora of literary scholars which Nigeria has been boasting of we do not find great advances. But a time will come when an individual or a group of people who feel the same way will actually project something that will stampede or jumpstart our literature. Chinweizu and company did that in *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*. It was a courageous work borne from a near-fanatical sense of mission. But I don't even think that some graduates of literature in many Nigerian colleges today read Chinweizu et al. Notice how quickly some caucus among the Nigerian literati interpreted the work from tribal sentiments. But you see, the seriousness with which we do whatever we indulge in will determine the extent which it can carry on. So I think Nigerian poetry and the literature in Africa have a far promising future than the dwindling climate of western literature today. Because even in the political commitment which we fear might become a stereotype, it is literature of conviction. Nigerian poetry is full of conviction even if badly expressed. I have had cause to look back at my own writings

and sometimes wished I had done better at some places. I will enjoin creative artistes to follow an assiduous bent in the expression that guides their works. I will also enjoin Nigerian poetry critics to follow the industrious attitude in the enunciation of art, because it is the seriousness of their conviction and the attitude by which they apply themselves to this task that would determine how far their contribution goes in society. And then we are not looking at immediate benefits or gains to ourselves, we are looking at furthering the universal good by which we are inspired to project these ideas. So for those who have found themselves in this level of enterprise or for the writers who feel that their work serves them as a kind of expurgation when they actually articulate these convictions, all encouragement must be given in order to ensure that the zeal and courage translate to beneficial purpose. Actually that is what it is all about. As you said, the world becoming a global village means the interaction of cultures. And in this rich harvest of cultural expression, all shall bring forward their best. So everyone, not just the critics, have a great role to play; the teachers have a greater responsibility to ensure that what we are bringing out to the harvest of world literatures are among the best of what we have.

GMT:

Thank you very much for coming on this forum.

CE:

The pleasure is mine.

END OF FORUM