

Mutant Traditions

Welcoming IRCALC

LITERARY critics in Africa and the black world have had varied disagreements on African literature and its commitment to social criticism. Of late there have arisen many theoretical positions regarding literature in African societies. The social critic, Jean Paul Sartre, once noted that, like morality, literature needs to be universal and the writer must put himself on the side of the majority in all his conflict resolutions. This was in line with some writers' positions that the artiste needs to march in front of the struggle for human liberty and overall well-being of society.

Achebe's early notes on the critical direction of African literature published in his collected essays *Morning Yet on Creation Day* might still ring with clarity and relevance. It was perhaps necessary that early in the nineteen seventies, he was to approach the critical direction of African writing with the aggression of a mother hen who must protect the

youngling from the visit of alien hawks. Today the same might not be stated for the present majority of literary practitioners at ANA, the authors' association he had founded in his home country, which sadly remains unable to impact positively upon the quality and originality of thought and aesthetics currently cluttering Nigerian writing. If it did, the litter emanating from peer authors should clearly have witnessed otherwise.

As usual with any failure of direction the losers become the upcoming generation for the reason that present actions impact upon or shape future realities. It was not long ago when we tended to celebrate poets who abandoned their literary and occupational enterprise to turn to soldiering and fighting for a cause they had to die straight out. We have had the usual strains of influences from our colonial history, cultural contacts and, more importantly, from our resolve or the seeming lack of inner resolve toward originality of thought.

In Nigeria the most telling impact of generational actions (or inactions) upon subsequent ones was the intellectual collusion in the destruction of its early nationhood. While many sections of the ethnic zones turned on others in bestial riots and massacres other intellectuals and opinion leaders from unaffected sectors turned their backs to the suffering claiming it to be an ethnic struggle for domination. The continuing corruption, ethnic mediocrity and inequity in Nigerian statecraft have entrenched a vicious circle of exploitation against which many are now only screaming like tired widowers. But we have argued before that any

screaming strategy for our collective aspiration in the predatory individualism of over a century of Western domination will come to naught. This is because there are few energies and very little altruistic centring to the resolution of affairs for the greater good or for the benefit of posterity, or even for that sanctity of the hallowed earth that holds our bodies and the bones of our departed ancestors. In short there is a deep poverty within, a bankruptcy and stagnation that will never be filled by the dogmatism of traditional sciences and religions which drive our vicious separate schemes for advantage and exploitation of the environment.

Much too has been written about the literary critical history of modern African literature and the attempt made by neo-colonial critics of African literature to adopt it as a part of the Great Western Tradition. Their dismissal by the host of African scholars had scored the singular place of African literature in the index of world writing. No doubt Achebe's vanguard in this direction had come with a price tag to his creative laurels although his critical standards endure more. Remnants of Western prejudice may still have it as minority literature in their university curricular but African literature and its criticism have come of age after the works of Achebe and Soyinka.

There are, however, strange hiccups at the local scene that prompt the current opinion that the damage no longer lies with a close-minded foreign visitor but the atrophy of local adherents: the hollow men. In the early years of twentieth century criticism of African literature a handful of first class graduates in Shakespeare and Milton who nearly desecrated

their greater purpose tangled with Lindfors and company to leave us with an aftertaste of British-American criticism and its paternalistic treatment of African writing. At best Lindfors had known a little about African idioms and had itemised Achebe's proverbs and few biographical slights on Soyinka and Armah in their early years of literary activity. On Ekwensi he laid waste his humour, pummelling the stylistic defects of that dogged chronicler of modern Nigerian life on every side to the delight of many local opiners. And having done with Ekwensi, Lindfors had turned the cudgel even less magnanimously on Africa's first female novelist, Flora Nwapa, rated by his kinsman, Palmer, as an inferior novelist in a 1968 edition of *African Literature Today*. But this was more than Nwapa's fellow national in the person of Emenyonu could bear.

The literary swordsmanship -as they rather loved it- that ensued on the pages of journals showed the scholarly egotism of modern-day knights claiming to objectivity. And there was too much egotism among the bunch that flocked around the literary scene then. Before Soyinka got tired of writing a magnum opus in *Idanre*, including few other experiments in the novel that never quite succeeded, and his wise settling down to his greater dramatic power in support of the downtrodden elements of society, more wars were fought, paper and pen, for compelling critical rating.

The great Nnolim and company easily belonged to these high-driven groups of scholars always seeking to beat the haughty Euro-American tradition at their own game. As a complement to his insinuation that his kinsman was a

plagiarist in that notorious essay, 'A Source for Arrow of God' the scholarship of his group consisted in pointing out the deficiencies of other arguments on African literature and mockery of other peer movements which neither falter nor acknowledge any other cardinal pre-eminence in the local school of literary criticism. This tendency has had its pool of admirers and followers in the younger critics who are co-opted either from tutelage and association with their masters or in admiration of the notorious power that this tendency appeared to confer on its practitioners.

If it was a power conflict of literary sorts it was to exhibit more battles with the boisterous school of Marxist scholarship which had transcribed literary criticism under the 'progressive' versus 'bourgeois-reactionary' equation. But with the nineteen nineties' collapse of Communist revolutions and the embrace of Western capitalist market, even by China the growling of a school that used to house the largest repertoire of committed or progressive scholars of Africa's intellectual establishment has been kept well at bay. Now writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and other champions of popular rebellion have tended, of recent, to attenuate their vision of proletarian revolution with the proposition of a quasi-mystical and feminist-subversionist alternative against Africa's growing pseudo democratic tyrannies. At least this is what *Wizard of the Crow* might have proposed in a one-sentence sum.

In Nigeria the hawkish schools did have their tangles with the Calabar tradition that our own Emenyonu tried to cultivate as an enduring legacy. This pragmatic critic and

scholar had fostered our critical attendance to less known writers such as Nwapa, Aluko and Ekwensi. It may be recalled that Ekwensi, Munonye, and Amadi were contemporaries relatively unsung during the critical promotion of Achebe. However Emenyonu's conflict with his colleagues, the Nnolims, often dwelt on tenuous divides between style and vision or clumsy typographic oversights in published works or, sometimes, whether the small novel should be called novella or novelette. This was the favourite pastime for those that delighted in hunting for blind spots in many a literary showmanship of their fellows. Other times this bunch of critics debated very hotly issues of language of African literature, which work qualified for African literature and which did not. This was ever since the gadfly of modern literature, Wali, provoked criticisms of Africans writing in English or foreign languages. At some point the Calabar critic also had to tackle, even to dimensions of ridicule and caricature, Maduka's and Ugoenyi's positions that language determined ownership of literature.

Calabar's endowment to literary criticism proceeded to be the most enduring of its peers by positioning African literature in the authentic interpretation of communal experience and history from the truest possible fictional imagining. It proved an important drive to the original quest for the preservation of heritage particularly in African interactions and relationships with other cultures of the world. While Nnolim and like scholars in their Port Harcourt and Lagos enclaves tended to carve for themselves a formidable stronghold in critical brinkmanship, making out

as pundits of formalism and what other theoretical schools that held the loudest voicing the Calabar school, with its steady delineation of values of African literary perception, doggedly for a time elucidated the works of authors popular and less known and from fairly indigenous theoretical perspectives.

Now with the arrival of international organisations with an independent African outlook the coast has widened considerably to embrace insightful scholars from all over the world. Their enthusiastic response to old and new African writing is a refreshing difference from the understandable groping, argumentation and exhibitionism of our aged critics. And contrary to early warning lights about the sterility of writing in the colonial language the explosion of themes has enhanced the critical debate in ways that illuminate the qualities of both indigenous and other writings of the African Diaspora.

Ironically in spite of the theories, reviews and acclaims, and the unshakeable position of Achebe more than thirty years ago regarding the uniqueness of African literary and cultural expressions an old malaise still remains and afflicts the works of new writers.

The abject lack of vision in contemporary writing might be traced to the collapse of the economies of African nation states and the exile of hordes of her intelligentsia to European nations in search of livelihood. America's hosting of the greater proportion of African Diaspora writers has, so far, triumphed in the co-optation of the African writer within American tastes for the seamy and sickly -a reflection of

Western society and its moral decay. Ojaide had hinted at this development in his recent attempt in *The Activist* (2006) although he adds a new dimension to Nigerian writing with copious essays and arguments on the Niger Delta conflict to weave a masterful novel as far as the blurb goes.

Of course the line has since been blurred a little between the genres before now especially when our writers in Diaspora must treat their hi-stories from that psychotic derangement that is the cutting edge of American social life. It is part of the trendy thriller championed by Nwosu, Attah, Adichie and, recently, Habila. But this is rather removed from the conscious, enlightened, traditions of Okri and Bandele-Thomas. For the former group, the new African novel -or just the novel probably- might be the narrative of sentiments of average social or religious intelligence replete with epic sequences and native words interpreted for the American reader. All these regularly intersperse with past political events in Nigeria and Africa to make for the new realism. Nnolim has tagged them 'fleshly' boys and girls of Nigerian (and no doubt African) writing but this is no more an indulgent school than a short-distance thrill in artistic discrimination.

In the meantime serious literary criticism and reception in Africa engages the new millennium in a dimension that jostles for theoretical bearing from the West. It commends little for Africa that her younger scholarly extractions are the carriers of this trend goaded on by a presumptuous Western information production and promotion machinery. Unfortunately too, few of the local intelligentsia have seemed

to mitigate this misdirection with qualitative home-rooted scholarship that understands its own indigenous base from which to interact with the world. It means that either way the hollow men and women who continue to write or critique their cultures in Western precepts may fare Africa no better. For in their pandering to foreign tastes as the guarantee for some artistic or financial respite they only threaten to bring a whole circle of African writing to its cul-de-sac in alien or poorer mutant traditions.

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