

African Literature and the Interpretive Enterprise: Between Orthodoxy and Sub-Versions

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Abstract: This paper, in a two-pronged interrogation first contends that the interpretive enterprise has, overtime, drawn, and still draws from disparate insights by seminal thinkers, from Aristotle through Matthew Arnold to the emergence of the ‘subversive’ Modern Literary and Critical theories, which are paradoxically ‘sub-versions’ of those coalescence of in sights from those of the classical seminal thinkers to the present. Predicating its second contention on the first above, this paper argues that the process of accessing meanings in a literary text presupposes the resolution of a number of issues, issues that border on Attridge’s (1988) ‘shifting web of socially produced relations, judgments, and distinctions which eventually opens it to change and cultural variation’, as well as those issues that transcend the literary to the political, the economic, the psychological, the social, and the philosophical. Consequently, the paper concludes that the interpretation of African literary text may be open to all nature of critics and critical paradigms, but what remains indubitable is the fact that no single critical standard can sufficiently engage the nuances of an African literary text as to present to the readers all its possible vistas, more so, given the composite construct or elements of an African literary text, and the fact that most of those theories were not particularly cognizant of the peculiarities of Africa’s pre-colonial history, and literary heritage. Further, this paper suggests the employment of diverse critical parameters from across the disparate critical standards in any reading of an African text.

Keywords: African Literature, Interpretation, criticism, literary text, textual meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Interpretation, as a conceptual term, gestures in a multiplicity of directions. In its primary search for meaning(s), it seeks to establish a ‘domain’ for Literature, “to allow for the possibility of metadiscourse to talk about ‘the literary’ as a specific category of the generic ‘writing’” [1]; it further recognizes Literature as a cultural product which exists within and is determined by “a shifting web of socially produced relations, judgements, and distinctions which eventually opens it to change and cultural variation” [2].

This paper, therefore, in a two-pronged interrogation first contends that the interpretive enterprise (Note, this is at once similar even if slightly different from Immanuel Kant’s the ‘Interpretive Turn’, which posits that our experience, as reality, is formed and concretized by what he views as our stable and transcendent mental categories, a position that is controverted by Nietzsche’s theory which upholds that ‘there are no grounding truths, that history and experience are fragmented and happenstance, driven by the will to power...’ [3]. In other words, our experience, and reality are changeable, and driven by

historical forces) has, overtime, drawn, and still draws from disparate insights by seminal thinkers, from Aristotle through Matthew Arnold to the emergence of the ‘subversive’ Modern Literary and Critical theories, which are paradoxically ‘sub-versions’ of those coalescence of insights from those of the classical seminal thinkers to the present.

Predicating its second contention on the first above, this paper argues that the process of accessing meanings in a literary text presupposes the resolution of a number of issues, issues that border on Attridge’s [2] ‘shifting web of socially produced relations, judgements, and distinctions which eventually opens it to change and cultural variation’, as well as those issues that transcend the literary to the political, the economic, the psychological, the social, and the philosophical. More so, as pivotal to interpretation are diverse ideas drawn from cognate fields such as Communications Theory [4] Communication Model), which raise some fundamental questions about:

- The nature of representation.
- The processes of history [5].

- The reader as an inevitable participant in the textual discourse.
- The place of context in the construction of textual meaning (s).
- All cultures as networks of signifying practices.
- Identity and subjectivity

Consequently, the paper concludes that the interpretation of African literary text may be open to all nature of critics and critical paradigms, but what remains indubitable is the fact that no single critical standard can sufficiently engage the nuances of an African literary text as to present to the readers all its possible vistas, more so, given the composite construct or elements of an African literary text, and the fact that most of those theories were not particularly cognizant of the peculiarities of Africa's pre-colonial history, and literary heritage.

Further, following Griffith [6] which recognizes the spaces of meaning as located in the author-text-reader dynamics, this paper suggests the employment of diverse critical parameters from across the disparate critical standards in any reading of an African text, so long as they provide possibilities of answers to those fundamental question we have earlier identified.

Literary Criticism as an Interpretive Tool

Literary Criticism is, simply put, a judgmental enterprise that seeks to analyze, interpret, explicate, and evaluate any piece of literary work.

The possibility of an interpretative, evaluative and judgmental discourse in literature and about literature presumes the presence of a pre-existing literary standard or values by which the interpretative or critical undertaking is predicated. In other words, Criticism is secondary to the subject of its studies, and as Irving Howe [7] notes that 'Criticism offers seemingly endless possibilities for the discrimination of values, the sharing of insights, the defence of living culture.'

The intricate and often time problematic relation between what constitute the literary standard or values, the subject or space of literary discourse and literary criticism itself has preoccupied literary scholarship since Plato.

As a field of scholarly discourse, Literary Criticism is evident in the 4th Century work of the classical Greek thinker, Plato, *The Republic*: a work in which he excommunicates the poet from his ideal Republic. Plato assumes that the poet's peculiar use of language appeals to irrational emotions instead of reason, and this is detrimental to the development of a rational man, and to the well being of the society. Beside, the poet's deployment of language to evoke reality in an ethereal light severally removes man from

the reality. The representational nature of literature certainly provokes the antagonism of Plato. He assumes physical objects as approximate of true reality, that they are a step or a remove from the reality of their forms - that pictures and artistic or literary representations of these physical objects (in the form of metaphor, symbolism and imagery) take man a further remove from reality. This consequently estranges the poets as well as consumers of their product from knowledge. Plato's resentment of the role of the poet in the society is a tacit acknowledgement of the influential role literature plays in the formation of both the human personality and the human society. Thus, Literary Criticism has traditionally remained concerned with:

1. The question of the role of literature in society;
2. The study and analysis of the major features of the different genres of literature;
3. The question of the impact of literature on the reader;
4. An in-depth study of individual works; and
5. The nature of composition – this methodology to literary criticism is prescriptive, even pontifical at times, on the creative process.

The relevance of literary criticism to the explication of the complexities organic to Literature is made more urgent by its very nature, which embodies layers of meaning, and access to those layers of meaning requires an in-depth and systematic analysis of the literary text, an interpretation that unlocks the deeper meaning of the text.

However, the demand for a systematic interpretation of texts is not peculiar to literature. Interpretation, according to Klarer [8], is of primary importance to the excavation of meaning in the realm of magic, religion, and legal discourse, since oracles, dreams, religious and juridical texts embody encoded information, which can only be decoded or accessed through an intelligible process of interpretation. It is instructive to note that interpretation of dreams, oracles, and religion and legal texts are all conducted by persons grounded both in the methodologies associated with those approaches of interpretation, and the field or object of interpretation itself. This harmonizes with the assertion of Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) that critics of poetry should be persons who are themselves versed in poetry composition:

*Let such teach others who themselves excel, and
censure freely, who have written well (L.15-16)*

The field of literary criticism, in both its theoretical and practical forms, has thus remained an integral part of literary studies. Commenting on the source of one of the key elements of literary criticism, and its relevance to literary studies, Mario Klarer [8] notes that:

Literary criticism derived its central term 'interpretation' from these two areas of textual study (the exegesis of the Bible and the interpretation of legal texts). The exegesis of religious and legal texts was based on the assumption that the meaning of a text could only be retrieved through the act of interpretation. Biblical scholarship coined the term "hermeneutics" for the procedure, and it has been integrated into literary interpretation over the past several centuries.

Literary criticism however presently encompasses a variety of contradictory and sometimes overlapping opinions or approaches to textual analysis and interpretation. These disparate approaches are, as academic disciplines, rooted in some ideological, institutional, cultural and historical backgrounds.

A cognate discipline or academic discourse to literary criticism is literary theory, a field defined by Jeremy Hawthorn [9] as "a general study of the nature of literature based upon abstraction from actual literary-practice; (which studies) the nature of composition, investigating such matters as influence, inspiration, and the writers' sense of an audience." Literary theory thus examines the philosophical and methodological foundations of literary criticism.

As we have noted earlier, literary criticism is characterized by divergent approaches that are at once both contradictory and overlapping in their methodologies and concerns with literary texts. However, a basic classification of these various approaches can be attained through a careful delineation of the main concerns and methodological pre-occupation of those approaches. Consequently, approaches to literary studies can be distinguished into any of these four broad categories: Text-; Author-; Reader-; and Context-oriented approaches [8].

The Text-Based Theories

The Text-based approach has under it such diverse theoretical schools as Philology, Rhetoric, Formalism, Structuralism, New Criticism, Semiotics, and Deconstruction. This approach primarily examines the structural and formal features of a text; the nature or materiality of language and the literariness of the text. It ignores what it considers extrinsic materials to the text, which are matters that are outside the text qua text, and are, therefore immaterial to the understanding of the meaning of the text. One approach under this classification, Formalism, has through one of its proponents, Roman Jakobson [4] generated one of the enduring flashpoints of literary discourse when he asserts that "the subject of literary scholarship is not literature in its totality, but literariness, i.e., that which makes of a given work a work of literature." This assertion has, since it was made, engaged discourses by literary critics across the spectrum of the different approaches to literary criticism.

The Author-based Theories

The Author-based approach, on the other hand, comprise such theories as Biographical Criticism, Psychoanalytical Criticism, and Phenomenology. Biographical Criticism was the dominant movement in the nineteenth century before the pre-eminence of the Formalist-Structuralist theories in the twentieth century. This movement, by its concern, seeks to identify the authors in their work. Equally, it examines materials in the text, which it considers as having entered the text "on a subconscious or involuntary level." To exemplify this theory's conflation of the plot of the text with the personal experiences of the author, Mario Klarer [8] cites the experience of Mary Shelley [10].

The fact that Mary Shelley [10] had a miscarriage during the period in which she wrote her novel Frankenstein (1818) can be related directly to the plot...The creation of an artificial human being can be traced back to Mary Shelley's intense psychological occupation with her issue of birth at the time.

This statement explains the incursion of Psychology, through Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis, into literary criticism and literature generally. Hence, the question of writers writing themselves or an aspect of themselves became a key issue taken up by literary critics while examining any literary artefact.

An approach allied to the Psychoanalytical theory, and under the same Author-oriented approaches is Phenomenology. This theory seeks to identify the presence of mythologized canonical authors in their respective texts but in encoded form. Therefore, an intensive reading of their complete works is required to revive their spirits.

The Reader- Based Theories

The Reader-oriented approaches, on the other hand, comprise the following theories: Reception theory, Reception History, and Reader-Response Criticism. The Reader-based approaches to literary criticism developed in the 1960s as a reaction against the dominance of the text-based theories.

The aesthetics of the Reception theory places primacy on the reader's point of view over a text. It also assumes that an individual reader constitutes a "community of readers" in itself. This is so as the reader acquires a new set of meaning at every reading of the same text. It thus questions New Criticism's concept of "Affective Fallacy", which rejects the subjective contributions of the reader in the interpretation of a text. It thus shifts attention from the text to the interaction between the text and the reader.

Reception theory and History of Reception, approaches that dwell on the synchronic and/or diachronic analysis of the reception of the text by a particular readership, were pushed from their position

of eminence in the 1970s to near obscurity in the 1980s by context-based theories, such as Deconstruction and others.

Context-based theories

The context-based theories are a collection of disparate approaches that views the interpretation of a literary text as largely influenced by the context of its production. It includes theories such as Literary History, Marxist Literary theory, Feminist Literary Criticism, New Historicism, and Cultural Studies.

One of the most influential of these approaches is Literary History, which periodizes literary phenomena; examines the relationship between texts of different as well as similar periods; and interprets a text in the context of its historical background.

Another influential theory in this group is the Marxist Literary theory. Evolving from the postulations of Karl Marx [11] and his friend, Friedrich Engel [12] on society and the arts; and from the works of subsequent Marxist literary scholars like Althusser, Leon Trotsky, Lukacs, Gramsci, and a host of others. Marxist Literary theory subjects literary texts to a systematic analysis that considers the socio-political and economic conditions of its producer; nature of production, consumption and distribution in the interpretation of the text.

The 1980s witnessed the development of New Historicism as a new theory in the field of contextual approaches to literary criticism. It draws from Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, with their emphasis on text and discourse, which it conflates with its own perspectives on history in the analysis of literary texts or discourse.

One of the significant characteristics of this theory is its collapse of the boundary between the literary text and history. In its analysis of a literary text, it does not regard history as merely providing a historical background to a text. Instead, it views history itself as a textual phenomenon.

Feminist literary theory, on the other hand, is interestingly a conflation of elements from different critical approaches. It is though essentially a gender-focused theory. However, it inclines towards Reader-based approach when it sought “the identification of the woman reader with fictional female characters in literary texts” [8]. It also draws on Author-centred approaches when, in the mid-‘70s, it called for the revision of traditional literary canon which had neglected female writers, through the re-writing of literary history. Then in the 1980s, through the influences of French Feminists Helene Cixious and Julia Kristeva, it entered the realm of Text-centred approaches when the question of gender difference as a determinant of the act of writing became prevalent

within the Feminist domain. The assumption that the female physiognomy has a direct bearing on how women write led to the emergence of the French concept of *écriture féminine* “female writing.”

The disparate approaches employed by Feminist Literary Criticism are instructive to the approach adopted in this thesis. The eclectic nature of its approaches provides it with the possibilities of examining a text from different angles depending on the nature of the approach (es) the text(s) naturally lends itself to. It is still an open question if a text, or every text can be analysed through any analytical approach without sounding academically mechanical and trite.

African Literature and Literary Criticism

Discourse on the relationship between African Literature and Literary Criticism is often approached through the contextualization of the major elements in the textual discourse.

Literature is traditionally the space of literary criticism. However, Literature is not a given, as its boundaries have, overtime, acquired an indeterminate fluidity that have rendered it unsustainable within the spaces offered by numerous, even if sometimes disparate definitions. The difficulty in defining it becomes even more problematic with its qualification with the epithet ‘African’. This is so as the attribution ‘African’ is itself not without controversy. A controversy acquired as a result of Africa’s colonial experiences. Does the term ‘African’ refer to all persons, indigenous to Africa anywhere in the world? If so, can we then refer to the writings by people of African descent in the Americas and the Caribbean Islands, as well as those in continental Europe and the British Isles as ‘African Literature’?, bearing in mind the fact that those Africans in the diasporas have now acquired another epithet designating different nationalities: African-American, Black-Britons, Afro-Caribbeans, and others worldwide.

The most vexing question that haunts a more definite definition of African Literature is the question of writing in foreign languages. Can a literature written in a language other than an African indigenous language belong to the community of the writer? Nevertheless, a counterpoise to this is the question: How can African literature written in its numerous indigenous languages reach other Africans, and even the outside world?

Another yet profound intellectual poser to the term ‘African’ is the Western World’s historical proclivity to continually construct textually the person of the African, and the African continent. This imaginary construction of the African runs through the gamut of Western fiction written about Africa, from George Alfred Henty’s *The March to Commassie* [13] through Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* [14] to

Cutcliffe Hyne's *Further Adventures of Captain Kettle* [15]. It cuts an obnoxious picture of the African and Africa. The negative fictionalization of Africa's reality is what irked G.D.Killam [16] to exasperatedly comment thus:

The most striking aspect of the fiction...is the consistency of the image of Africa it presents and the variance of this image from African reality as we now understand it. Writers taking over an established range of responses and attitudes to Africa left the image virtually intact. Literary Africa as apprehended through this body of fiction bears little resemblance to real African (emphasis added).

What constitute African Literature is conflated with what its aesthetics are. This position is similarly expressed in O.A.Ladimeji's assertion [17] that "the standards by which African Literatures are to be understood issue from that Literature itself." Opinions about African Literature therefore, its Aesthetics, and its Critics and Writers are as variegated as the African continent itself. The various shades of opinion that attempt to define African Literature and its aesthetics are reflections of the writer's cultural, institutional or ideological inclinations. Thus, this work views those shades of opinion about African Literature; its critical standards, and its writers and critics through a three-phased categorization of those opinions

The Colonialist/Euro-Modernist Perspective on African Literature and its Aesthetics

Scholars, writers and intellectuals who view African Literature as an appendage of European Literature choose to impose on it a transposed Western Literary standard. This view denies individuality to African Literature as it snubs at the idea of an indigenous aesthetics drawn from Africa's traditional oral heritage. Writers of this bent argued that Anglophone Literature, on the ground of its language of composition, is inseparable from English Literature, Edgar Wright [18] said as much when he locates African Literature "within the broad field of literature in English", therefore it should be open to analysis, interpretation and evaluation by any critic, even critics alien to Africa's peculiarities, insofar as they have mastered the Western tools of Literary Criticism. In the same vein, T.O.McLaughlin [19] wondered why African Literature should have a set of critical standard different from those of the West: "The argument for critical separatism strikes one as unsound", he concluded.

Defenders of the unity of African and European Literatures do not easily appreciate the main thrust of the argument of those who call for such 'separatism.' The indubitable fact remains that African Literature cannot and should not, simply on the grounds of language, be subsumed among European Literatures or even be viewed as its appendage. Of course,

literature as a dimension of a people's culture is as dynamic as the society from whence it emanated. And societies the world over are in a continuous state of flux resulting from their innate dynamics, as well as those forces that are the products of contact among diverse people, especially between people of unequal access to the facilities of physical and mental development. Our argument herein is, in sum, simply that language is not enough legal ground to effect a change of ownership.

Another contentious position of the Colonialist/Euro-Modernist Critics is the seemingly innocuous practice of affiliating individual African writers to a European foster-parent. Albeit Palmer (ALT 7) has argued that it was primarily done for comparative purposes aimed at justifying the progress and achievements of African Literature and its writers within its short span of existence. Even this assumption is itself tinged with a patronizing aura of the superiority of European Literature and its writers over African Literature and its writers. Thus, such Criticism draws for the African writer literary models from among Western writers and literary traditions, for example, even though Gerald Moore [20] rightly observed that Amos Tutuola did not acknowledge any European, or even local master, yet he went ahead to link him with Bunyan and Dante. Moore seems to suggest a closer affinity between Tutuola, Dante and Bunyan, than between Tutuola and the traditional Yoruba folktales that produced him. Ekwensi too is removed from his natural Onitsha literary milieu, and linked with urban America in a tenuous, pale and imposed literary affinity. It is this patronizing attitude by the Europeans that Achebe decries when he observes that:

I am going to use the word "colonialist" to describe a form of pseudo-literary criticism which is still very much alive today in African Literature and which derives from the same basic attitude and assumption as colonialism itself. The attitude and assumption was crystallized in Albert Schweitzer's immortal dictum: the African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother. The colonialist critic promoted by similar reasoning believes that the African writer is somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European, but meanwhile must be humble, must learn all he can and give due credit to his teachers in the form of either direct praise or even better, such praise can become tricky and embarrassing self-contempt.

Reacting to one of such criticism by Charles Larson, Ayi Kwei Armah counters that critics of African Literature, particularly Western critics, 'operate within the framework of the prejudices of their leaders...a received framework of western values and prejudices,' therefore, "Western scholars, critics of African Literature included, are nothing but Westerners working in the interest of the West." [21].The underlying intention, as Achebe further observes, is

simply to “set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest”(Quoted in Booker, 13).

At the moment of denying individuality to African Literature, the Colonialist/Euro-Modernist or Universalist critic is at the same time divesting African literature of its artistic dimension. This must have informed their attitude of viewing African texts from largely anthropological perspective. As a result, African texts were frequently cited in Western institutions as “evidence of African ‘anthropology’; of traditional and modern African customs and beliefs” [17].

The failure to appreciate that the production of literature cannot be independent of its historical context, and the belief that one’s experiences approximate those of others are typically evident in the colonialist critics’ effort at imposing Western aesthetic criteria in the valuation of African Literature, an attitude which, in turn, is reflective of the dominant vision of the Literature of the West, a vision encapsulated in the Formalist slogan of “art for art’s sake.”

Naturally, African writers and scholars reacted and struggled to decolonize their art from another form of Africa’s subjugation. The preoccupation of African Literature with social and political issues has been one of the nubs of Western discourse on African Literature. This, in turn, has made some African writers and critics to be hesitant in engaging such experiences in their discourse on African literature. But the imposed “anthropological and Universalist readings of African Literature” by Western Critics refused to take cognizance of the defining role and aesthetic dimension of the dominance of social and political matters in African Literature. Abiola Irele [22] says as much when he notes that social and political matters as well as the expectations of their immediate readership are central to the role of the African literary artists:

The manifest concern of the writers is to speak to the immediate issues of social life, to narrate the tensions that traverse their worlds, to relate their imaginative expression to their particular universe of experience in all its existential concreteness- this seems to me to leave the African critic with hardly any choice but to give precedence to the powerful referential thrust of our Literature.

It is such vehement reactions against colonialist conception of African Literature that culminated in the emergence of what this thesis identifies as the Traditionalist Aesthetics of African Literature.

The Traditionalist Aesthetics of African Literature

The search or call for an African Literary Aesthetics resonated across the continent and among

scholars of African Literature in the diasporas in the face of the sustained attack on the very identity of African Literature by some Western and pro-Western Critics. One of the most significant works in this direction is the work of the Nigerian troika critics: Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* [23]. This work at once deconstructs the underlying racist and patronizing assumptions, and literary practices of some Western and pro-Western critics and writers alike in relation to Africa: its people and its literary arts, as it sets out parameters for what may eventuate into an African Literary Aesthetics rooted in traditional African oral traditions.

Locating Literature within the greater struggle for Africa’s total liberation from “all foreign domination... (and) encrustations of colonial and slave mentality,” the trio first establishes its conception of Literature as including “all the genres of publicly communicated written matter of society...in addition to prose fiction, poetry, and drama...essays, biographies, addresses and orations” are also considered as vital parts of literature, and they also recognize and accord same emphasis to the two modes: the oral and the written in which Literature exist.

Predicating their argument on the autonomy or individuality of African Literature, Chinweizu et al posit that African Literature has its own traditions, models, and norms:

Its constituency is separate and radically different from that of the European or other literatures. And its historical and cultural imperatives impose upon it concerns and constraints quite different, sometimes altogether antithetical to the European. These facts hold true even for those portions of African literature which continue to be written in European languages (p.4).

They then wonder why African Literature should be charged for lacking qualities that are largely alien and insignificant to its very identity. The European and Euro-centric critics’ charges against African literature, especially the novel, for its perceived ‘technical, thematic and ideological inadequacies’ can only be legitimated if African literatures were “intended to be replicas or approximations of European ones, employing the same techniques and in approximately the same ways, treating the same themes with approximately the same emphases, and urging the same values” (p3).

Given the distinctiveness of African literature from European literature, even though they recognize and are reconciled to the irreversibility of Africa’s colonial experience, the residue of which is evident in the prevalence of the language(s) of the colonizers in the spheres of literature, scholarship and officialese of

African countries, they remain insistent that African literature should draw its aesthetics from its oral traditions, for it is “the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, esthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination outside the plastic arts.” (p2)

One fundamental contribution of this approach to African literature is that it not only checkmates and exposes the racist subterfuge of universalism in the valuation of African literature, it has as well, by its insistence on an African poetics rooted in the time-tested oral traditions of Africa; reclaimed for Africa its sense of history, which is necessary for the regeneration of a people, especially those who have suffered years of denigration and dehumanization that culminated in what Memmi [24] describes as “the most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history.” Africans, like other peoples of the world need to ‘recover a past that can support viable cultural identities in the present... (and) upon which we can build a viable future’ (Booker, 25).

Chinweizu *et al*'s positing for an African literary aesthetics that is drawn from Africa's traditional and cultural milieu however raises some fundamental questions. One of such questions is on the actual shape and nature of what constitutes African traditional oral aesthetics given the variegated forms of African oral traditions. Though probing this question may seem to be, it still does not deny originality and the possibility of a “poetic paradigm” evolving from Africa's disparate oral traditions. Sallah's [25] interrogation of Chinweizu's position that sought to know “if it does not mean a return to traditional African literatures rendered in African languages... (and) that African poetics has to shed all foreign influences...” seem to have missed the main thrust of Chinweizu's argument, especially as his conclusion that Chinweizu *et al*'s amount to a call for the isolation of the African poets from other ‘cultural universes,’ betrays his inclination towards the vilified Euro-Modernist tendency in African Literature.

The troika's obloquy of African writers that are Euro-centric or slavishly imitative of Western writers is responded to by a leading figure in this class of writers, Wole Soyinka. In his characteristic standoffish manner, Soyinka justifies their imitation of Western writers thus:

The excesses committed in a small part of the poetic output achieve an importance only for those who fail to see the poet's preoccupation as springing from the same source of creativity which activates the major technological developments; town planning, sewage disposal, hydroelectric power. None of these including the making of war...has taken place... without the awareness of foreign thought and culture patterns, and their exploitation. To recommend on the one hand, that the embattled general or the liberation fighter seek the

most sophisticated weaponry from Europe, America or China while on the other that the poet totally expunge from his consciousness all knowledge of a foreign tradition in his own craft, is an absurdity.

Soyinka's as well as Sallah's refutations of the troika's position and argument is simply patronizing of Western sensibilities. Beside, Soyinka's seems to scorn Africa's traditional source of creativity as arid and impoverished of the powers of inspiration contra the West's, which had activated “the major technological developments.” ‘Absurdity’ of course describes his analogy of the poet's craft and the ‘embattled general or the liberation fighter (s)’ need for ammunitions. Soyinka's particularly seeks to nurture a culture of dependency on the outside world for all of Africa's needs- even in the very ways and forms of expressing a profound cultural element as literature.

Moreover, the troika has not, in any way, called for the total severance of ties between the art of the African poet and those sensibilities occasioned by Africa's contact with the West. The troika's argument is simply that slavish imitation, no matter the intention, is detrimental to the very identity of Africa, its art and its artists. When a poet chooses to model the poetic expressions of his cultural experiences on foreign forms replete with alien imagery:

It may be asked: what is wrong with cursing the way Englishmen of the 16th or 19th century (supposedly) cursed? The answer is simple: (1) it is a voluntary cultural servitude- and worse...it is a denial of the validity of our own culture. The poet is saying in effect that our cultural style is not good enough to curse in.(2) it blocks the channel of cultural transmission...we have nothing against foreign imagery...as such...when the context and setting is African and tropical, it is asinine to drag in spring, snow and other arctic paraphernalia (pp171-172).

Such a poet paradoxically denies himself an authentic poetic tradition rooted in his “cultural universe,” and confirms the West's rejection of the existence of any African pre-colonial poetic paradigm or its semblance, since most, if not all of Black Africa is assumed to be of primary oral culture, that is, it lacks any history of writing indigenous to its culture [32].

The Contemporary and Post-colonial Critics of African Literature

The third phase of African Literary criticism involves what this thesis chooses to call contemporary and post-colonial critics of African Literature. The contemporary and the post-colonial may at one level be separate, and at another level conflate. This is because the post-colonial critic is at once a contemporary critic, though the contemporary may not necessarily be a post-colonial critic.

This group comprises a number of critics with disparate approaches to the criticism of African Literature. It includes an emergent class of foreign critics who are reconciled to the distinctiveness of African Literature; African critics who sought for the fusion of aesthetic values from both the oral and written traditions-of African orature/literature to eventuate into a distinctive African Literary Aesthetics; Critics (both Africans and non-Africans) who have chosen to analyse African Literature from a particularly chosen critical paradigm that may be either 'secular' or ideologically biased, for example the Formalist approach of Emmanuel Ngara; Sunday Anozie's Structuralism; and the Marxist approach of Chidi Amuta.

The post-colonial critics, on the other hand, are African and non-African critics that have either generated themselves, or use the critical tools generated by scholars of disadvantaged and colonized nations to engage, in a ceaseless battle, those forces of neo-colonialism and globalization as the aftermath of the intercourse between the Centre and the Periphery. In their interrogation of the "master-narratives" of the Metropolises however, the post-colonial critics may employ any critical tools they found potent to their critical undertaking.

Thus some deploy Marxist, Feminist, New Historicist, Deconstructionist, or Psycho-analytic critical paradigms in their critical discourse on African literature, though such tools are always made to suit the immediate demands of textual representations.

An emergent crop of non-African critics of African literature chooses to view African literature from a perspective that is dispassionately scholarly, and considerate of those peculiarities of African Literature. They have discarded, or never held, the racist attitude hitherto employed by most European critics of African literature. One of such critics is Keith Booker, whose approach to the criticism of African literature (in his case, the novel) recognizes the essentializing roles of indigenous cultural practices and oral traditions in the construction of African literature. More so, he appreciates the hybrid characteristics of African societies and cultures- thus re-echoing Ali Mazrui's seminal work on the composite nature of African cultures: an amalgam of Islam, Christianity, and tradition, in the comprehension of the complexities and peculiarities of African literature. Consequently, in his study of the African novel, *The African Novel in English: An Introduction* [26], he employs both the contextual as well as the author-based approaches that explore elements of the historical (colonial, independence, and post-independence periods), and cultural backgrounds in the analysis of African literature:

To keep students in the discussions in context, each of the discussions of specific novel is followed by a survey

of texts' historical background, as well as a survey of the author's life and career. (p.vii)

Noting the destructive and prejudiced reading of African Literature by early European critics: Charles Larson [27], Eustace Palmer [28, 29], and Adrian Roscoe [30], readings which view African Literature as an extension of European Literature and should therefore be subjected to European critical standards, Keith Booker suggests a number of issues which a would-be reader/critic of African Literature(especially the European reader/critic) should consider in any critical enterprise involving African Literature. In other words, any fruitful engagement with African Literature by a non-African reader/critic presupposes a careful consideration of those issues he has identified, viz issues of (i) Relevance; (ii) Cultural differences; (iii) Background; and (iv) Language. We shall, herein dwell on the question of language only, because of its immediate relevance to the description and delineation of African Literature.

The Question of Languages: Words and Worlds

The choice (or is it imposition?) of the language of literary composition by (or on) African writers has remained a controversial issue in the discourse on African Literature. The paradox of talking back to the Centre, (to borrow Gareth Griffins et al's description of one of the bases of Postcolonial Literature) in the language(s) of the colonizers, a Caliban -Prospero syndrome of a sort, is not lost on scholars of African literature. Abdul Jan Mohamed for example, notes "the African writer's very decision to use English as his medium is engulfed by ironies, paradoxes and contradictions." [31].Jan Mohamed' opinion resonates in equal fervour in Booker's comments that" African writers who continue to work in the languages of their former colonial rulers risk the perpetuation of colonialist ideas especially ideas involving the cultural and linguistic superiority of Europe."

Despite all this, Keith Booker however argues that the material realities of the publishing industry coupled with the low level of literacy in Western education amongst most Africans, and the fact that the Western readership is the single largest patronizers of African literary texts, made it imperative for African writers to use English and other European languages in their writings. The greater irony lies in the fact that there are more Africans literate in European languages than African s literate in indigenous African languages.

Following Walter J. Ong's [32] work on oral culture, Jan Mohamed contends that oral and written cultures conceptualize the world in remarkably different ways. Thus, the African writer is confronted with the problem of reconciling the divergence between oral and written cultures. This they achieve by drawing their material from African oral culture and incorporating it

into their written texts. This Obiechina [33] notes in the writings of Tutuola, which manifest an “ability to assimilate elements peculiar to the oral tradition with elements peculiar to the literary tradition: in other words, to impose a literary organization upon essentially oral narrative material.” In the same vein, Jan Mohamed [34] also observes that Achebe has achieved a “syncretic” conflation of the written and oral cultural energies in his novels: *Things Fall Apart*, and *Arrow of God*. These are important conditions that a reader/critic of African Literature must take into consideration prior to venturing into any critical engagement with it.

Further, Oladele Taiwo [35] adding his voice to the discourse on African literary criticism, identifies what he calls ‘vital issues in the criticism of African literature’:

These issues include the problems of communication in African Literature, the varieties of English in particular works, the intimate connection between language and meaning, the link between tradition and contemporary experience, the relevance of sociological material and the issue of the universality of a work of art.

Taiwo’s first ground-clearing statement was directed at the ‘ultra-nationalists’ racist definition of the Critic of African Literature. He argues that since the currents of African literature run into the main stream of world literature, it inevitably ceases to be the sole concern of Africans only. Hence both African and non-African critics can engage it in a fruitful and dispassionate critical discourse. However, such a critical venture should be undertaken by only persons grounded in the socio-cultural milieu of the authors. “For criticism to give a true reflection of the work of art...” according to Taiwo (p.2) ‘the critic must understand thoroughly not only the language of the author but also the socio-cultural circumstances surrounding the work.’

In essence, the critical enterprise should be a cross between elements of both Text, and Author-oriented approaches. Taiwo is evidently refuting the alleged invasive presence of anthropological material in African literature, which according to some Eurocentric critics renders it unfit for any formal artistic consideration or criticism. Moreover, Taiwo views with commensurate pre-eminence the knowledge of an author’s socio-cultural background for a deeper and more beneficial comprehension of Africa’s literary works, as it places the critic in a vantage position to answer questions pertinent to the analysis of African literary texts:

What are the particular values the writer is upholding or opposing? And what is his attitude to them? What particular emotional or intellectual effect does he hope to achieve? And does he succeed? If he does, by what

method of communication? If he fails, from what problems of communication has failure resulted? And what effect does this have on the reader? (p.2)

Some of these pertinent questions again resonate with the inevitable dominance of oral tradition in most African literary texts. The possibility of communication between the text and the critic is largely “advanced by a coincidence of feeling and experience between the writer and his critic.” The fact remains that the influence of the writers’ first language is evidently conspicuous in their texts in the forms of vernacular words; ‘formality of address; and the repetition of certain conventional statements and answers,’ the significance of which is largely ignored by non-African critics.

Taking on the question of universality of African Literature, Taiwo contends that African literature should not be under any urgent obligation to prove its ‘universality,’ more so as the concept has inadvertently acquired or assumed literary values that are peculiarly European. “Universality,” he argues, “is best judged by the extent to which a work of art extends our knowledge of the condition of man in society...what is important is that the writer, starting from the local and particular, should reach the universal.”(p.6)

Universality does not therefore operate outside the text, as Eldred Jones’ (in Taiwo, opcit 7) further shows that “a work, which succeeds in realizing its environment to the full, often achieves this universality. The happy paradox is that, to be truly universal one must be truly local.” Consequently, critics who seek for the universal in an African text engage in a futile search, especially where their view of the universal is implicated in the Western literary and philosophical prejudices.

The issue of ‘aesthetic distance’ is somewhat tied to the issue of sociological materials in African literary texts. Africa’s peculiar experiences: traditional and colonial, make the predominance of sociological material in African literary texts an inescapable reality. Therefore, such material should not be treated independent of the living situation of the text. This the writers achieve through an artistic integration of the sociological material into the world of the text. The writers’ relationship with the world of their text should, in turn, be one of dispassionate and clinical detachment. Following this, Arthur Gakwandi [36] warns that:

When an African writer attempts to depict the crises of his contemporary world, he has to struggle to free himself from the anxieties, the fears and the hysterias of his time. If he does not free himself... he may find himself part of the mass hysteria...When this happens the reader is left no wiser than he was, apart from learning that there is an artist who has gone neurotic.

Africa's literary texts are mostly composed in European languages, which in itself present a number of challenges to the reader, writer, and critic of African literature. For example, African writers writing in English are faced with one fundamental challenge: using the colonialist language(s) to convey a peculiarly African experience, a responsibility the language (s) is/are not clearly cut out for. Beside, the English language for example does not present a monolithic linguistic medium, thus across the spectrum of African literature, we find a wide range of English usages – from the bare illiterate English of Amos Tutuola, through the experimental English of Gabriel Okara, and the unorthodox and faulty pidgin English of Adaora Ulasi, down to the domesticated English of Chinua Achebe, and Niyi Osundare, as well as the subversive pidgin English of Ezenwa Ohaeto and Mamman Vatsa, all of which manifest the respective authors' artistic purposes.

The critics therefore should not assume the writer's use of English or any other European language as a given. This attitude will blind them to the artistic value of a particular specialized or deviant use of the English language.

Criticism should, in essence, like the chameleon, reflect its immediate environment, that is, it should take the hue of what it is engaged with. So, the criticism of African literature should reflect those African characteristics and qualities inherent in its subject. Unless criticism engages a work's specific cultural dimension, it would remain of little significance to the promotion of the understanding of the art by the readership.

CONCLUSION

In sum, critic of an African text, according to Taiwo (ibid, 14) requires "an incisive knowledge of the customs, lore and way of life of the people he is writing about... (and) also the changes which have been brought upon their environment and circumstances of life by science and technology" in order to effectively perform the critical enterprise. Thus plurality or multiplicity of approaches may be of the essence in any reading of an African text.

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