

Celebrating the Diversity of African Literature

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Abstract

Diversity within the context of African literature is identified in this paper as one of the reasons for the world-wide appeal and acceptance of the literature beyond the shores of the continent. This is explored, especially as it relates to written African literature which evolved as a consequence of the introduction of western education which came on the heels of the African experience of colonialism. Varied as the themes handled by African writers are in their works across the periods dating from the colonial epoch to the postcolonial period, because the literature has largely been anti-establishment, pitted as it has been against reactionary forces, whether white or African, protest, pessimism and resistance are the predominant markers shored up by the literature. This invariably makes social criticism the epicenter or major area of attention of majority of African writings since the beginning of written African literature, thus emphasizing its claustrophobic character. However, there is great diversity in the critical responses to African literature, the different styles showcased by the writers and in the many national literatures that have evolved in Africa. These are indices of great developments worth celebrating.

Keywords: Diversity, African literature, Celebration.

Introduction

This discussion affords us the opportunity to assess the trajectory that written African literature has followed and to also celebrate its diversity, for it is true to admit that the strong appeal of this literature to readers, literary critics and intellectuals all over the world essentially derives from the variegations in the genres of the literature, themes and styles of the writers and in the different approaches that have been shored up by literary critics in studying the literature as well as the different temperaments and vibrancy of the national literatures that have evolved from it. Just so that one is properly guided in my navigation through this discussion, I provide below a working definition of the term 'diversity,' which as a noun means "noticeable heterogeneity; diverseness; multifariousness and variety or the condition or result of being

changeable....." I shall, therefore, hedge this discussion around some of these points as the paper unfolds.

African oral literature has been in existence since the dawn of humanity and it is made up of the folktales, songs, proverbs, anecdotes, dramatic performances and parables that predominate in traditional societies, mainly enacted orally for both entertainment and ritualistic purposes. Although by the fact of generic differentiation and the varied contexts for performance of these oral literary types it is possible to talk about diversity in African oral literature, our main concern in this essay is with written African literature, which is by and large, a concomitance of the colonial subjugation of the African people by European imperial powers who brought literacy and western type formal education to Africa. As the examples of Chinua Achebe and other first generation African writers show, they started their writing careers after their acquisition of western education and their main prompting was to counter the deplorable image of Africa in the literary works of European writers such as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson* and many other careless utterances of western adventurers in the colonial service; all providing justification for the supposed superiority of the white civilization and the colonial enterprise in Africa. In fact, many white writers who wrote on Africa and the black man before and after Charles Darwin published his work on human evolution, *The Origins of Species*, reflected negative opinions about the continent and its peoples¹. As Achebe explains:

In our own time a preoccupation with Europe has seemed almost equally inevitable despite the passage of nearly two hundred years. In the colonial period and its aftermath, our preoccupation with Europe took the form of protest. (3)

So, from the 1940s to the 50s when written African literature evolved, it necessarily had to be subversive in countering the damaging distortions proselytized by white writers about Africa and its peoples as well as give vent to the despoliations of African cultures occasioned by colonialism. Writers across the continent and across the genres of African literature such as Eskia Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, Denis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali, Lewis Nkosi; all from South Africa², Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, pioneer poets such as Azikiwe, Gabriel Okara, J.P. Clark, Casely Hayford, R. E. Obeng, Camara Laye, Ousmane Sembene, Kofi Awoonor, Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti and others from West Africa; Naguib Mahfouz and other Maghrebians writers of the period from North Africa and Ngugi wa Thiong'O

and other early writers from East Africa; all explored the clash of cultures theme which was emblematic of cultural nationalism. Even the writings of the 60s across the genres of African literature, which anticipated the granting of political independence and the aftermath of colonialism, appropriately dubbed 'anti-colonialist literatures' did not significantly depart from the creative works of the earlier phase by their combative stance and protest strain.

Whereas, for examples, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, two of his novels dealing with the pre-colonial and colonial periods of the African experience, protest against the relegation of the African cultures and the indignities accorded Africans by colonialism, his novels *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, two novels set in post-colonial Africa, still continue with this culture of protest, although now against African politicians and other members of the elite class to whom devolved the mantle of leadership in post-colonial Africa, the intervention of the military in political leadership and the consecration of corruption as the overriding ethos in the governance of most of the African countries which had attained political independence. This pattern of response by African writers of these periods defined by their frustration with the issue of political leadership, whether by the European colonialists or the African neo-colonialists is also clearly evident in the writings of Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Kofi Awoonor, J.P. Clark, Mongo Beti etc, although it is reversed in the novels of the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah.³

The emergent theme of post-independence disillusionment embodied by the literatures of the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s was essentially fuelled by experiences such as the draconian nature of military dictatorship, since African nations grappled with military coups and counter coups during this period, the experience of the civil war in Nigeria, for example, and the continuing frustrations of the expectations and aspirations of the African masses who had thought that their sufferings in the hands of the colonial masters would cease after the attainment of independence. It was therefore to be expected that this overriding culture of protest defined by the anti-establishment temperaments of African writings of these periods will show limitations that emphasize the claustrophobic character of the literature, seeing that it was centred and continues to be centred on the same margins of thematic explorations since it began. I believe I am not the only scholar who shares this view. Bothered by the monolithic pattern of the thematic development of African literature, especially the near consecration of protest into some kind of mantra, Charles Nnolim has dubbed the literature "lachrymal or weeping literature". As he avers: "From its beginnings written African literature in the 19th and 20th centuries ... was an unhappy one. It was lachrymal. It was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation,

following Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism" (1). Femi Osofisan, another writer and critic of African literature, has expressed grave concerns about the near consecration of pessimism as the dominant mode of depicting reality in modern Nigerian fiction. As he says:

But my opinion is that the works which are being produced at the moment in Lagos... are too negative, too filled with pain and bitterness and savagery: and hence enervating and destructive in their vision. As brilliant and captivating as it all is, in terms of style and the manipulation of words, this new literature falls short ... of the humanistic ethos that our culture has always upheld, and been justly celebrated for. It is a literature of alienation... rather than as a road to catharsis. (78)

Again, in the context of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, seen by Chinyere Nwahunanya as the 'albatross of Nigeria' and a "symbol of the ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multinational economic interests teaming up with the local comprador bourgeois class" (xiii), writers within the region, acting as the unacknowledged voices of their peoples, have mainly churned out and continue to churn out protest literature. In tracing the trajectory of the near tragic and monstrous experiences of the impoverished Niger Deltans, Nwahunanya points to the unfolding manifestation of a subversive literary culture that essentially owes fidelity to its social environment. Starting from the quietist works of the early Okara, Clark and Amadi lamenting the despoliations of the Niger Delta environment, contemporary literary engagements from the region have largely become confrontational, "exhibiting a combative spirit associated with the literature of protest" (xix). The writings of Tanure Ojaide, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey, Kaine Agary, Ogaga Ifowodo, G. G. Darah and other Niger Deltans exemplify this trend.

Thus, thematically African literature has come to deify social criticism as its dominant mode of depicting reality. However diversified the contentual matters handled by the writers in the different genres of the literature, the defining character of pessimism or protest always triumphs whether or not the writers are critical realists or revolutionary writers. This is obviously why the art for art's sake or essentially formalist conception of literature continues to be relegated to the background by the writers. A literary work in Africa is expected to serve a social as well as a utilitarian purpose; it must mirror social problems and other reprehensible traits in the corridors of power or in the larger society and show the way forward towards the redemption of the society.

However, a new conception of the role of the writer as patriot has started to evolve in African literature. Our writers should now use their creative writings to support the cultivation of democratic ideals, maintain a regenerative attitude towards depicting the image of Africa and generally reinvent Africa along the lines of positive developments in their works. They should now begin to infuse their writings with hope and support the political leaders, not always criticizing and pointing out social problems in the society. The earlier lachrymal culture identified by Nnolim should give way to a more progressive view of developments in Africa. In fact, as he says again while pointing to a new direction for African writers in the 21st century:

... a new image of the African personality needs to be fashioned to reposition Africa for the take-off of the 21st century. We need a new spiritual reorientation, a new creative hope to give artistic impetus to a new world order. Our writers, in this new epoch of globalism dominated by a technologically oriented new order must create a new Africa, a new spirit of optimism, an Africa full of promises, able to feed its teeming populations, with a healthy and vibrant people, not dependent on Europe and America for sustenance. (3)

For Femi Osofisan, in the afore cited article, "There is a need to counter this new literature of incurable angst with another that offers a more positive perspective of life, a literature that will encourage us to struggle and not be beaten down by despair" (79). I have in several contexts drawn attention to the novels of Joseph Edoki of Nigeria as some of the finest examples of this new direction of writings in African literature⁴. Vincent Egbuson's novel titled *Womandela* and Abubakar Gimba's *Letters to the Unborn Child* are other examples.

One important corollary to this stock taking that also reflects some kind of diversity is the use that African literature has been put by literary critics who are best suited for sustaining interest and appeals for the literature through their critical explications of African literary works. Without a thriving culture of literary criticism, literature will not endure, especially over a long period of time. That Shakespeare's plays and other English writers of his time and age are still being studied in the 21st century is because of the vibrancy of the English and American critical schools which have continued to subject such works to newer interpretations using different literary methodologies to sustain the interest of the reading public.

It thus appears that we have far more diversity in the critical responses to African literary works than in the range of the contents or materials covered by the writings in the different genres. African literary critics of different critical persuasions or schools⁵ have evolved over time to put the literature they explicate and interpret on the world map. Literary associations such as the Literary Society of

Nigeria, the African Literature Association in America and a host of others as well as notable peer review journals such as African Literature Today, Researches in African Literature, Matatu etc. continue to provide opportunities to literary critics to showcase or publish their critical studies of African literature, thereby making it to become as entrenched as other world literatures.

Today, African literature is not only studied in African schools and universities, but all over the world with as much interest in European and American institutions. This world wide appeal derives essentially from the range of the diversities in the critical enterprise that the literature has given rise to and which has continued to make it fresh, evergreen and popular by sustaining interest in the creative works through critical interpretations that provide insights on the works. It may not be too far from the truth to say that names of literary critics such as Dan Izevbaye, Abiola Irele, Charles Nnolim, Romanus Egudu, Biodun Jeyifo, Eldred Durosimi Jones, Eustace Palmer, Ernest Emenyonu, Bernth Lindfors, Solomon Iyasere Ogbeide and many others within and outside Africa who have made their marks as literary critics are as popular as the best of the African creative writers themselves, even though criticism is a secondary exercise that only takes place after a creative text has been published and usually does not enjoy the flamboyance associated with the creative writer and his or her works.

That the African continent till date has produced five Nobel laureates is as much a credit to the recipients, the literature and the very healthy critical receptions that popularized the works and continue to provide fresh insights to attract wider reading audiences for the writers so honoured⁶. Other acclaimed literary awards such as the Booker Prize, Caine, Man Booker, Pulitzer prizes etc. have been won by African writers over the years⁷. This underscores the fact that African literature in its many parts has become mature and has come of age; it has taken its rightful position among the literatures of the world.

Another important development worth celebrating is the emergence of national literatures in Africa which can on their own subsume the present momentum of literary developments in the different countries. The term 'African literature' is really a contraption or 'hold all' term referring to the writings by African writers from all over the continent. At its beginning and due to the uneven level of development in African countries at the time, it was necessary to conflate the few available literary works from the countries and regions together under the label 'African literature', even though North Africa as represented by Egypt, for instance, already had a thriving literary culture in Arabic and South Africa, also due to the presence of white people in the country, already had published writers both in English and in the

vernacular languages before European colonialism, properly speaking, commenced in the other regions and countries of Africa. It is now more expedient to talk about national literatures with defined literary and critical canons that can encourage the growth and development of the literary cultures of African countries. This is important because literary prizes and awards are given and won on the basis of national literatures: the five Nobel laureates in Africa are from Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa. We, therefore, need more diversity in the spread of works to cover all the genres of literature, themes handled by the writers and in the critical responses to the works produced in the different national literatures that have evolved in African countries. This kind of diversity will ensure that the literary culture evolved by a national literature is not lop-sided or skewed towards a particular genre, or certain canonized works or certain favoured writers from a segment of the country.

Conclusion

It is therefore clear from the foregoing that the term 'diversity' as it applies to African literature is worth celebrating, not only because it draws attention to the heterogeneity of the literature by characterizing the directions of its development, not only generically, thematically or stylistically, but also from the standpoint of the evolution of strong critical traditions that have developed to make the literature endure through time and continue to provide newer insights and interpretations to African works, thereby expanding the appeal of the literature to a world-wide readership. It is only a literature that contextualizes and conceptualizes diversity in this manner that can harness the gains of universal acceptability. Therefore, it may not be too far from the truth to opine that the strong appreciation of African literature all over the world today draws strength from its diversity, which we celebrate at this conference, which draws attention to the variedness of the literature.

Notes

1. Steve E. Ogude has provided some illuminations on this subject in some of his very well received essays. One of these can be consulted for more clarification of this point: *English Literature, Race and Africa: The Myth of the Global Village. Inaugural Lecture Series 57, University of Benin, Nigeria, 2000.*

2. The bulk of the writings on Apartheid South Africa as one can glimpse from the literature about the period protested against the indignities of apartheid suffered by the coloureds and mostly African populations. The African resistance to apartheid also related to a spirited attempt to preserve the culture of the people from the

onslaught of apartheid much in the same way that writers such as Achebe in the other regions of Africa defended the culture of Africans against colonialism, Mphahlele's vituperations on Negritude, notwithstanding.

3. This is because, unlike most other early writers in Africa, Armah started his writing career by protesting against the corruption of the African ruling elite in the post-independence period by exemplifying with Nkrumah's consecration of corruption as the embodying principle of government in post-independence Ghana. His protest in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, or even his ironic treatment of the same theme in *Why Are We So Blest?* all relate to the writer's frustration with the issue of African leadership in postcolonial Africa. His later novels return to the African past showcasing the way the African contact with the Europeans and the Arabs derailed and blighted them from their original culture and way of life which essentially abhors corruption.

4. See my other essays on Joseph Edoki for clarification:

"In Praise of Imagination: A Thematic Study of Joseph Edoki's *The African Dream*". *The Ker Review: A Journal of Nigerian Literature*. Vol. 2, No. 1&2. 2006, 27-43; "The African Novel and the Task of Reinventing Africa in the 21st Century: The Example of Joseph Edoki". *IRORO: Journal of Arts*. Vol. 16, No. I, 2015, 1-15.

5. African literary texts have been studied and continue to be studied from the standpoints of all the known literary methodologies available, ranging from Formalism, Structuralism, Sociological Criticism and its variant form, Marxist Criticism, Psychoanalytical Criticism, Archetypal Criticism, Deconstructionist Criticism, Ecocritical methodology to Feminism and other types and many of the big names mentioned in the main body of this essay typify many of these critical schools by their practice.

6. As at the time of writing this essay in 2020, Africa has produced five winners of the Nobel prize for literature: one from Nigeria, one from Egypt and three from South Africa. Although the South African laureates are whites who live and pursue their writing careers in South Africa, their works bear the imprints of the country and so South Africa can rightly claim the glory. The African Nobel prize winners for literature include: Wole Soyinka (1986), Naguib Mahfouz (1988), Nadine Gordimer (1991), J.M. Coetzee (2003) and Doris Lessing (2007).

7. African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Ben Okri, Niyi Osundare, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mariama Ba and a host of others have won many other coveted world and continental literary prizes at different times.

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