

CRITICISM IN AFRICA: THE HOSTILITY AND CONTRADICTIONS CONTINUE.

Solomon Ogbede Iyasere, in an article written in 1977, chided some contemporary critics of African literature for what he called "misplaced hostility." He elaborates:

Yet judging from the increasing criticism of African literature by Africans, we Africans ourselves--with all our so-called "inside knowledge" of the social realities behind the novels at our disposal--have not provided significantly more insightful criticism. In most cases ... responses are too often apologetic defences of mediocre works with a vehement display of misplaced hostility towards anyone ... who dares see faults in the contemporary novelists.¹

Fifteen years later, it is tempting to suggest that the criticism of African literature in English has come of age; that the bickering has ceased; that indigenous criteria of judgement has replaced the obsolescent Eurocentric principles that had governed it for so long. Such a declaration would be most inaccurate, however. Although African writers and commentators have made some significant, even brilliant contributions to the world of letters over the years, the "clear sense of struggle, of confrontation and ideological divergence"² which Chidi Amuta identifies among African critics have not led to the establishment of several healthy traditions of literary criticism. Instead of promoting literature and its criticism in the continent, critics in Africa employ their skills to undermine the positions taken by their peers. A comment by Adebayo Williams, which refers specifically to the animosity with which critics regard the creative writers, could easily be applied to their attitude towards each other:

Under the guise of turning its harsh floodlight on art, this criticism is, in fact, passing up its frustrations, failures, and inadequacies on the authors.³

This paper identifies some of the major tendencies among critics of African literature, and focusses on the divisions and the parochial attitudes that have debilitated

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- ¹. Solomon Ogbede Iyasere, "African Critics and African Literature: A Study in Misplaced Hostility." *African Literature Today* vol. 7 (1975) p. 21.
 - ². Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism*. London Zed (1989) p. 28.
 - ³. Adebayo Williams, "The Crisis of Confidence in the Criticism of African Literature." *Presence Africaine* vol. 123.3 (1982) p. 89.

their criticism. If the duty of the literary critic is to ensure that creative writers maintain high standards, these commentators for the most part have neglected their calling. The paper argues, finally, that if criticism is to make any contribution at all, its exponents should become less intransigent in their critical postures, and present a stronger front to the Eurocentric criticism which still threatens to impose its standards on the African literary scene.

Ironically, a perusal of some of the major statements by African critics demonstrates that they share the same goals. They recognize, for instance, that criticism in Africa must necessarily be utilitarian. Given the social, historical, and cultural concerns that are peculiar to the continent, art can never become an end itself; on the contrary, African literary critics of most academic and ideological persuasions realise that art should be employed for political purposes. They agree, in effect, that the artist must always function as a teacher or as a pathfinder. Achebe, in an oft-quoted extract from "The Novelist as Teacher," declares that "the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front."⁴ Ngugi, the Kenyan novelist and critic asserts:

For the Kenya artist the most minimal step towards his own freedom is a total immersion in the struggles of Kenyan workers and peasants for the liberation of the products of their labor for the benefit of Kenyans.... It is for the writers themselves to choose whether they will use their art in the service of exploiting oppressing classes and nations articulating their world view or in the service of the masses engaged in a fierce struggle against human degradation and oppression.⁵

Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubike (popularly known as "the troika"), created a sensation when, in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, they breezily dismissed the literary establishment in Africa, and valorized the oral tradition. They set forth their objectives in the following manner:

The cultural task in hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality, to clear the bushes and stake out new frontiers for a

⁴. Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher." *Hope and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann (1988) p. 30.

⁵. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature*. London: Lawrence Hill (1973) p. 68-69.

liberated African modernity.⁶

Chidi Amuta is one of the more recent critics to participate in the search for fresh approaches to African literary criticism, and in his ambitiously titled book, *The Theory of African Literary Criticism*, he defines his position thus:

African literature and its criticism testify to the historical contradictions that define the African situation. In order to resolve these contradictions in the direction of progressive change, literary criticism must be predicated on a theoretical outlook that couples cultural theory back to social practice. In this respect, literary theory and practice must form part of the anti-imperialist struggle, thus demystifying literary criticism and reintegrating it into the social experience and practice of which literature itself is very much part.⁷

This study makes no claims to completeness, its objectives, as stated above, are limited; consequently, it makes no attempt to deal with the so-called Larsonist critics who appraise African literature with Western eyes; Henry Louis Gates and other Deconstructionists based in the United States; and feminist critics like Kavesta Adagala. Instead, the study focusses on the hostility, the contradictions, and the points of convergence and divergence in the criticism of the troika, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

In 1986, Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel prize for literature. To most observers this was an honour that was long overdue. Not only did the gesture prove that Soyinka was a great writer, but it constituted a victory for all artists in the Third World. The authors of *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* would have seen it differently, however. The troika always regarded Soyinka as the "pointman and demolition expert" for the British who took it upon themselves "to slow down and guide astray any active nationalist consciousness in the literature of their African colonies and neo-colonies;"⁸ they would argue, consequently, that this award was nothing more than a reward for Soyinka's services to the West. For the greater part of the 1970s, the African world of letters was taken up with what came to be known as the *Transition* debates in which the Soyinka group on the one hand and the troika on the other battled to become the voice of what was truly African. Gugelberger insists that "This crossing of swords of two opposing views of tradition versus commitment, modernism versus

⁶. Chinweizu, Jemie Onwchekwa, and Ihechukwu Madubike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Washington DC: Howard University Press (1973) p. 1.

⁷. Amuta, *op.cit.* p. 7.

⁸. Chinweizu *op.cit.* p. 207-208.

populism...opened the doors to a more fruitful debate which is still going on."⁹ The debate continues but so far has not proved "fruitful," and perhaps will never be resolved. The two sides are more polarized than before, and the "debate" has degenerated into a vendetta.

The troika is convinced that, despite Soyinka's claims, he is not a traditionalist but a stooge of the West. His creative and critical work, they argue, are cerebral, elitist, and based on European modernism. The following comments are not levelled directly at Soyinka, but they capture in essence the troika's charges against the writers and intellectuals who approach art the way that he does:

It won't do for him [the artist] to claim that a writer has no mandate from any one to write, therefore no one should advise him what to write about or how to write.... If he insists on the prerogative claimed by some decadent and alienated bourgeois artists of the West, he should move to the West, where he can join them in indulging in the social irrelevance of art for art's sake. If he chooses to remain in Africa, he should keep his scribbles to himself. For the function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assume a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings, and not preoccupy himself with his puny ego. Because in Africa we recognize that art is in the public domain, a sense of social commitment is mandatory upon the artist. That commitment demands that the writer pay attention to his craft and that he not burden his public with unfinished or indecipherable works. It also demands that his theme be germane to the concerns of the community.¹⁰

The troika's statements are exaggerated; in fact, when applied to Soyinka, these indictments are untrue. Although not enunciated in the manner of a Ngugi, Soyinka's "sense of social commitment" has always been a *donee*. This commitment is apparent in plays as diverse as *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *A Play of Giants*,¹¹ What is more important to note in the troika's statement, however, is the insistence on the African tradition, an insistence which foregrounds one of the many contradictions in their criticism. In the introductory chapter, the troika concedes that

⁹. Georg M. Gugelberger, "Marxist Literary Debates and Their Continuity in African Literary Criticism." *Marxism and African Literature*. Ed. Georg M. Gugelberger. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press (1985) p. 13.

¹⁰. Chinweizu, *op.cit.* p. 252.

¹¹. *A Play of Giants*, for instance, is a savage attack on Idi Amin and on other African dictators.

contemporary African literature is based on both the indigenous and Western traditions; yet the rest of the book is a celebration of the African oral tradition. The presence of the other is either ignored or regarded as an aberration. Given the troika's aim, which is to "decolonize" African literature, such a valorization is understandable, but to be successful it has to be kept within bounds. To demand that all novels should include a "narrator, a master story-teller, a spell-binding raconteur whose delivery will conform to the styles of traditional story telling, utilizing its familiar techniques and rhetorical devices, with the audience chiming in with questions, comments and laughter interrupting the narrative from time to time"¹² will decidedly restrict a writer's options, especially if the experience he chooses to portray is an urban one. Any theory which makes the myopic prescription that aesthetic standards should be derived exclusively from received traditions will effectively stifle a literature and deprive it of any dynamism. African literature is no exception. Certainly, African critics and artists should, in their search for standards and ideas, tap the vast resources in the indigenous literary tradition, but not at the total expense of other influences.

Because of the series of *non sequiturs* in their argument and their unbalanced and hysterical rejection of the Establishment, Soyinka easily dismissed the troika's claims. One could ask, however, whether Soyinka has done any better in his criticism; whether the cynicism with which he berates the troika in "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," is any different from the affected irreverence displayed by his rivals. If the troika accused Soyinka of placing too great an emphasis on the artist as an individual and of being beholden to Eurocentric values, Soyinka responds by trivialising their arguments, and by doubting their credentials as critics. He says that they are "unsure critics and superficial traditionalists," who use criticism "with a destructive opportunism rather than with an intelligent concern for poetry."¹³ Ironically, even a glance at his major critical work, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* shows that his notion of traditionalism differs only in detail. Like the troika, Soyinka rejects those Eurocentric critics who have denied African Literature an identity of its own:

This volume...is engaged in what should be the simultaneous act of eliciting from history, mythology and literature, for the benefit of both genuine aliens and alienated Africans, a continuing process of self-apprehension whose temporary dislocation appears to have persuaded many of its non-existence or its irrelevance...in contemporary world

¹² *Ibid.* p. 260-61.

¹³ Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Ibadan: New Horn Press (1988) p. 316.

reality.¹⁴

If the troika valorizes the oral tradition, Soyinka uses as his yardstick certain Yoruban myths which he then applies to the whole continent. By so doing, he attempts to present a uniquely African mode of perceiving reality. A crucial statement of his thesis reads thus:

The serious divergences between a traditional African and the European ... will be found more accurately in what is a recognisable Western cast of mind, a compartmentalising habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or "truths) sustained by a proliferating super-structure of presentation, idioms, analogies and analytical modes.¹⁵

The traditionalists and the Eurocentric critics indeed have different approaches to "Myth, Literature and the African World." but Soyinka suggests in this piece (unintentionally, no doubt) that Africans are incapable of logical thought—a canard which was employed by many European administrators to justify their colonial project. In Ngugi's, *A Grain of Wheat*, for instance, Thompson, a District Officer, is convinced that "the irrationality, inconsistency, and superstition so characteristic of the African and Oriental races" should be "replaced by the three principles basic to the Western mind: i.e. the principle of Reason, of Order and of Measure."¹⁶ Such a venture, he believes, would "lead to the creation of one British nation, embracing all colours and creeds..."¹⁷ In his anxiety to present an alternative to Eurocentric criticism, Soyinka comes perilously close to reinforcing the well documented attitudes of imperialists like Albert Schweitzer and Cecil Rhodes who were, after all, Thompson's antecedents.

This perusal of the critical strategies employed by Soyinka and the troika demonstrates that it is no longer possible for one to long for "the lost ideals of racial infancy; the nostalgic groping for the nipples of the pristine African maternal breast; the

¹⁴. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1976) p. xi.

¹⁵. *Ibid.* p. 37.

¹⁶. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, (1983) p. 47.

¹⁷. *Ibid.* p. 48.

selective resuscitation of ancestral myths, values and institutions."¹⁸ It is equally wrong to declare, however, that traditionalist aesthetics cannot be applied to evaluate modern African literature. The search for a sensible African aesthetic, which does not preclude borrowings from other traditions *in toto*, is a necessary exercise, and if conducted properly, could be used as one standard or as a point of departure for analysing African literature. Ideally, such a frame of reference could be formulated by combining the more positive contributions of Soyinka and the troika--despite their faults they are the best exponents of traditionalist aesthetics in Africa. Yet even if this ideal is never realized, there is no reason why the two forms of traditionalism cannot co-exist. Some of their claims have been realized in practical terms. Achebe shows in *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah* that the oral tradition can be employed fruitfully for certain kinds of novels, and Soyinka himself has made complex use of Yoruban myth in *The Interpreters*. Unfortunately, as this study shows, much of the energy which could have been directed towards the formulation of a sophisticated traditionalist aesthetics has thus far been dissipated in bitter exchanges; as a consequence, criticism has remained stagnant.

Next to the traditionalists, the African critics who have been ever-present in recent years are the Marxists. The battle between these two schools of criticism has been as acrimonious as that between Soyinka and the "neo-Tarzanists," witness Soyinka's diatribe against a Marxist opponent in his essay, "The Autistic Hunt; Or How to Maximise Mediocrity":

It is regrettable that a mere dismissal as an inept Marxist will not suffice for the case of Mr. Hunt. It will not explain why the pages of his paper are drenched in so much bile, why such virulence dominates even his few instances of arguable criticism, why smear and sneer are substituted for clarity or precision of attack.¹⁹

Enough of Wole Soyinka, however. This paper will now concentrate on the Marxist author and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Ngugi's critical theories have changed dramatically over the years; in fact, David Maughan Brown suggests for one that Ngugi, initially, shared all the complacencies of the liberal humanist critics.²⁰ The following extract from Ngugi's *Homecoming* seems to support Maughan-Brown's contention:

¹⁸. Amuta, *op.cit.* p. 34.

¹⁹. Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Ibadan: New Horn Press (1988) p. 311-312.

²⁰. David Maughan-Brown, *Land Freedom and Fiction: Literature and Ideology in Kenya*. London: Zed Press (1985) p. 253.

In a novel the writer is totally immersed in a world of the imagination which is other than his conscious self. At his most intense and creative the writer is transfigured, he is possessed, he becomes a medium.²¹

Even during this "liberal humanist" stage, however, Ngugi was aware that on occasion the "conscious self" should be at the forefront when setting down works of art. Consider the following statements in which he chides Chinua Achebe for his lack of commitment in novels like *A Man of the People*:

Achebe-cum-teacher has left too many questions unanswered. Or maybe he has levelled his accusation, has raised questions, and left it to the pupils to find answers....The novel seems to suggest the possibility of individual honesty, integrity and maybe greater efficiency in building the extension. However, a given organization of material interests dictates its own morality. Which do you change first in a society--its politico-economic base...or the morality of individual men and women.

The pupils, and the teachers as well, must define their attitude--and find solutions to these questions.... The teacher no longer stands apart to contemplate. He has moved with a whip among the pupils, flagellating himself as well as them. He is now the true man of the people.²²

Ngugi's Marxist, and at the same time, anti-Western stance becomes even more pronounced in his subsequent critical works, *Writers in Politics*, *A Barrel of a Pen*, and *Decolonizing The Mind*. In 1977, after he published *Petals of Blood*, he decided to stop writing in English. With the publication of *Decolonizing the Mind*, he bade "farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings."²³ Literature and literary criticism written in English, he contends, cannot be called African but Euro-African; consequently, this literature will hamper rather than help the masses from achieving their aim, which is freedom from colonial and neo-colonial oppression. He states his position thus:

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-

²¹. Ngugi wa Thiong'o *op.cit.* p. 15.

²². *Ibid.* p. 53-54.

²³. Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey (1986) p. xiv.

America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?²⁴

Ngugi's conclusions are persuasive, but if acted upon could prove counter-productive. Indeed, if more artists in Africa were to follow his dictates, individuals who are not literate in a specific African language will never be able to read, appreciate, and learn from these gifted writers. Furthermore, such a move will prevent writers like Achebe from continuing to demonstrate to those misguided individuals in the west that pre-colonial Africa was not "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered us."²⁵ What is even more disturbing, however, is that this cellular consciousness which Ngugi advocates will most certainly break the solidarity that Ngugi had sought from Marxist writers throughout the world in *Writers in Politics*:

What the African writer is called upon to do is not easy: it demands of him that he recognize the global character or dimension of the forces struggling against it to build a new world. He must reject, repudiate, and negate his roots in the native bourgeoisie and its spokesmen, and find his true creative links with the pan-African masses over the earth in alliance with all the socialistic forces of the world.... He must write with the vibrations and tremors of the struggles of all the working people in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe behind him.²⁶

Surely, the only way in which any kind of trans-continental contact could be maintained is by writing in languages common to all. Rather than regarding the use of English or French as a subtle way of perpetuating colonialism, it would be more expeditious, and indeed more satisfying, to appropriate the language of the oppressor to defeat the oppressor. Ngugi's stance, finally, will prevent artists in Africa from utilizing intertextual relationships for aesthetic purposes. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi's characters, Thompson and Mugo, are set up in such a way that they bear comparison with the Conradian figures, Kurtz and Rasumov. This juxtaposition is carried out with deliberate artistic intent because Ngugi here, *a la* Roland Barthes, challenges the reader to give a "writerly" or a more plural reading of the text. If Ngugi's strictures are taken

²⁴. *Ibid.* p. 26.

²⁵. Achebe, *op. cit.* p. 30.

²⁶. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics: Essays*. London: Heinemann (1981) p. 79-80.

too seriously, writers will be forced to abandon such techniques, a move which will certainly not benefit the reader, writer, or critic.

The conclusions that one could draw even after a cursory examination of the critical postures adopted by Ngugi, Soyinka, and the troika is that confusion, contradictions, and animosity will continue in literary criticism in Africa, if the various schools insist that there can be only one way of approaching literature and criticism. In the Western world, the same attitudes have polarized the liberal humanists, the deconstructionists, and the Feminists. The African continent cannot afford such divisions. Since all critics agree on the basic premise that literature in Africa is utilitarian, and that it should be used to combat excesses by Governments and other social and political institutions, it should be possible for these critics to retain their differences and still muster some degree of solidarity. Certainly there is no place for the kind of arrogance displayed here by Amuta:

The danger posed by this type of critic arises from the fact that *owing to a certain lack of proper political education and commitment*, they may in fact be unaware of whose values they are promoting or espousing. Often disoriented by Euro-American higher education, mystified by the captivating myths of Greco-Roman civilization and drunk with the canons of biblical morality, bourgeois critics end up seeing themselves as humanists in the universal idealist sense.²⁷ (emphasis added)

The concept is not new. Jean Paul Sartre made the same point more cogently in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. What is objectionable in Amuta's statement is the now familiar implication that only some individuals (in his case the Marxists) have the "proper political education" to be critics. Literary critics in Africa, or anywhere for that matter, will achieve little if they persist in adopting what really amounts to an elitist outlook. Criticism will flourish only when its practitioners become more humble, tolerant, and less egocentric; or else, the student of African literature in Africa and around the globe, bewildered by the accusations and counter-accusations levelled at each other by the leading African critics of the age, and bemused by the contradictory stances adopted by individuals and by the various schools of criticism, will be forced to look towards Eurocentric critics for guidance.

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²⁷. Amuta, *op. cit.* p. 17.