

## *African Literature and its Western Critics*

*African literary criticism suffers from the problem that no one is, nor ever has been, quite sure what standards to apply. If there is uncertainty among Western literary critics about the standards to use in evaluating African literature, the same confusion exists among the growing number of African writers and critics.*

*For those who have been following the developing interest in this field, it is obvious that one period of literary criticism has come to an end and that the entire Western treatment of African literature must be reevaluated. . .*

*Because of language difficulties, traditional oral African literature was largely ignored by the West and considered of interest only to anthropologists. Those few dull, dry, literal translations which revealed nothing of the original complexity and life of oral literature did little but confirm the Westerner's view that this was not truly literature.*

*However, the advent of modern African literature in English and French triggered a barrage of European and American criticism, for this was something Western readers could understand and relate to. Indeed it was the Western critic who initially dominated the literary scene in publications and has only lately begun to relinquish his position to more qualified African critics. All too often this criticism was characterized by lack of knowledge of African cultural traditions and realities, coupled with ignorance of African oral literature. To qualify for reviewing an African author's work, one needed only to have a slight literary background or to have set foot on African soil.*

*In light of this, it seems appropriate to examine the varied approaches which for two decades have passed for critical standards. This article is in no way a definitive study but rather a comprehensive one, seeking to outline major trends in literary criticism in English language publications, with mention of negritude and its critics, and to indicate problems and conflicts involved in determining critical standards for African literature. By reviewing past treatment of African literature and discussing problems of critical standards we can better ascertain how to proceed in the future.*

Publication of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1952 aroused a flurry of criticism delighted with this quaint and exotic work which was entirely the sort of naive writing one might expect of an African. (Author's italics). The New Yorker reviewer who wrote: « One catches a glimpse of the very beginning of literature », little realized that Tutuola was drawing from an ancient background of Yoruba folk-tales not only rich in oral tradition but with written works such as those of Chief Fagunwa which were known to Tutuola. The man's talent as a storyteller rooted in Yoruba literary tradition was completely overlooked because many critics were ignorant of the importance of traditional literature in modern writing. Instead, they concerned themselves mainly with those aspects of language or description which coincided with their own romantic concepts of the dark continent. Nor did this emphasis on the exotic die out with criticism of Tutuola, for years later, paragraphs such as this could be found in serious critical articles:

What has made African literature so profoundly a part of world literature today is its unique adaptability of English to convey the sense of the brooding rhythms of a supple people shaping their human clay out of swampland, forests and cities bursting with an overwhelming energy<sup>1</sup>.

The author's lyricism speaks for itself, indicating his romantic attitude towards African writing and his failure in imposing that attitude upon the writing. If we overlook the fact that this critic so typically writes of African literature as only that small fraction of it in English, we are still left wondering what is unique about adapting English to one's own country. So common was this sort of conscious or unconscious romantic, exotic approach by critics that this paragraph might have been drawn from any one of many similar articles.

With the appearance of West African novels such as Ekwensi's *People of the City* in 1954 or Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, the exotic theme combined with a certain paternalistic attitude. Suddenly the noble savage could write intelligently in English. This was definitely to be encouraged and gave rise to almost insultingly lavish praise. While the worst of this attitude was soon exhausted, traces of it lingered on so that even when Wole Soyinka's plays came to the attention of reviewers, critics expressed their amazement at his talent in terms like:

That he has accomplished so many things in so many fields in so short a time is in itself symptomatic of his great talent, but what is more amazing is that the quality of his work, his plays, is comparable to the best work of contemporary British and American playwrights<sup>2</sup>.

What is really amazing here is that it never occurred to the critic that there might be higher praise than comparing a man's work to what many people feel is a dead or dying theatre. Nonetheless, this ethnocentrism seemed to be the rule among Western critics.

A third approach was to view poetry and novels of West and South Africa as a means of gaining insight into the « real » African way of life. Words like « genuine » or « authentic » crept into the reviewer's vocabulary, and with this socio-anthropological approach, criteria for good writing became « How much description of African life is there? » or « How much can we learn about African culture from this book? »

The theme of culture conflict was readily welcomed by critics as a means of learning about Africa in relation to the critics' own culture. Thus after much study, one critic was able to conclude: « For the African, change to the white man's way is wrong even if necessary, but return to the African way is right<sup>3</sup> ». Certainly culture conflict was a major theme in early modern African writing, but this superficial treatment of it by Western critics was of little value to anyone except perhaps a Western reader utterly ignorant of Africa.

Whereas shallow comment might conceivably be overlooked in the case of a reviewer for a popular non-African magazine, it is entirely unjustifiable coming from a professor of literature. However, it is typical of the criticism of many Western scholars. Without taking the trouble to read thoroughly in fields related to African writing, they theorized on its most superficial aspects, setting themselves up as experts to interpret this strange culture to the West. Perhaps Americans were most at fault, for in African literature they saw a lucrative field ripe for promotion and easy fame.

Uncertain of standards for evaluating African writing, and unsure of who was reading it, many critics ignored crucial issues and dealt only with specific aspects of an author's work, delivering a synopsis of the plot with a few generalizations about African culture. In addition, there was the self-conscious need to relate everything back to the Western reader and the inevitable harkening to Homer. An advanced level of this sort of criticism was an attempt to arbitrarily group African authors by theme, such as autobiography, culture conflict, or village versus city life, or for the really advanced to compare authors' treatments of these themes.

(Those familiar with the work of Judith Gleason or more recently Wilfred Cartey, will have a precise idea of this type of criticism).

While stressing the negative aspects of Western criticism of African literature, it must not be thought that there were none of value. For

example, two critics most directly responsible for introduction of modern African literature in English and French to the world were Europeans. Ulli Beier, a lecturer in Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, was responsible for the founding in 1957 of the Nigerian literary magazine *Black Orpheus* and subsequently for the creation in 1961 of Mbari club and publications. Gerald Moore, Director of Extra-Mural Studies at Makerere in Uganda was instrumental in organizing the first Conference of African Writers of English Expression which was held in Kampala in 1962. Rather than being solely critics, both men aided African writers in becoming acquainted with each other and each other's works, providing a medium for public exposure of their writings in *Black Orpheus* and books.

What distinguishes these two men from many critics preceding or succeeding them is their appreciation of African cultures and a sense of their own critical limitations. Hence in selecting works in European languages for their anthology, they made it clear that they were not ignorant of the existence of traditional African literatures, but felt unqualified to pass judgment on them:

*There is poetry awaiting collection in hundreds of African vernaculars. But how is one to make a critical selection without being fully familiar with all the vernaculars involved?*

In addition, never did they attempt to tell an African what he must write about as did so many Europeans, particularly those associated with negritude. In the introduction to their anthology, they took to task Jahneiz Jahn for attempting to dictate what was authentically African. However, their attitude towards African literature was exceptional among Western critics.

Turning to French language critics, one finds they were not guilty of such shoddy treatment of African writing as most English-speaking critics, in part because of the intense literary and critical tradition in French-speaking countries and, in part, because of emphasis on academic scholarship. The French language critic tended to more serious treatment. In addition, he benefited from longer contact with modern African writing through the negritude movement. Because negritude followed in the same philosophic and literary tradition as many similar European movements such as *Dadaism* or *Surrealism*, the French could more easily understand it historically. And, in some measure, it cannot be denied that negritude was actually directed towards the European.

As a result of French assimilation policy, modern African literature in French was largely thought of as part of French literary tradition

and treated as seriously as any French work, using the same critical standards. Just as the African was considered basically French, so, too, did the process work in reverse. Some French critics were familiar with negritude to the extent that they identified solely with that movement and considered it as the only means of authentic African expression in modern literature. Though in many respects French language critics were better than their English-speaking counterparts, they felt capable of dictating standards to African writers and fell into a paternalistic pose never equalled by more ignorant but self-conscious English critics.

While Mme. Lilyan L'agneau-Kesteloot is one of the most learned and farsighted Western critics, she has unfortunately become so identified with the negritude philosophy that she sees herself as one of its mentors. In cases where the writer does not follow negritude philosophy in his writing, she views the critic's role as that of teacher, and paternalistically casts the African writer in the role of a student to be guided. Thus she has written:

*It is therefore necessary for the literary critic, first of all, to help the Africans to break the chains which stifle the authentic Negro inspiration<sup>5</sup>...*

*I am thinking of works in which style is good, but in which African problems are dealt with from the white man's point of view... Once a critic has noticed this inconsistency he should try to get in touch with the writer concerned, either directly or by inducing him to tell the truth as he sees it (even at the risk of giving European readers a shock) and to describe the problems that disturb him in their full complexity. For instance, one can urge a writer to attack abuses of the dowry system or of polygamy, not the institutions themselves, which have sound roots in African civilization. One must never, of course, try to influence the actual ideas of a writer, only to make him feel that he is entitled to put down everything he has in his mind. And his mind is never completely turned against his traditional culture!*

*In such cases the critic acts as a sort of cultural psycho-analyst. His task is to restore confidence to the victim of the cultural anxiety<sup>6</sup>.*

No matter how well-intentioned, the European attempting to be Frantz Fanon smacks too much of paternalism. Only by completely forgetting the existence of such Western critics will the African writer ever be free. And he is fortunately aware of this as can be seen in Ezekiel Mphahlele's calm but urgent repudiation of Madame L'agneau's insistence

on African subjects and an African style as the appropriate area for African writing<sup>7</sup>.

No matter how intelligent or sensitive a European may be, it is not his place to tell an African what is African and what is not. That, the writer must find through his own evolution. It was the African writer himself who had finally to deal with Western critics. If no one else was aware of the follies being committed in the name of criticism, at least strong protest was registered in one quarter, that of the West African writers whose works were being so blithely abused.

In the early sixties, one of the most interesting debates in modern African writing raged through the pages of Nigeria Magazine. I. P. Clark opened the foray with a controversial article citing specific errors in Western critical approaches<sup>8</sup>. He attacked the romantic, exotic school of critics who had dealt with Tuniola and those Western critics who placed a superficial emphasis on African content while neglecting to examine the form of a work.

Shortly after, in an article wryly entitled « Where Angels Fear to Tread », Chinua Achebe continued the criticism.

Most Nigerian writers have at one time or other complained about European (and American) critics... We are not opposed to criticism but we are getting weary of all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited<sup>9</sup>.

As Achebe's novels are especially revealing of traditional African life, he more than anyone else, has undergone scrutiny by the pseudo-sociological type critic, so they have become his particular target of scorn. He cites an example of this type saying :

But the critic went further to make pronouncements which she was not qualified to make. She said of Burning Grass, « This is truly Nigeria and these are real Nigerian people ». She did not say what her test was for sorting out real Nigerians from unreal ones<sup>10</sup>.

After criticism of this sort, it is little wonder that Achebe concludes :

No man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and language here does not mean simply words but a man's entire world-view). How many Europeans (and Americans) have our language? I do not know of any, certainly not among our writers and critics<sup>11</sup>.

However, not all African writers were prepared to condemn Western critics quite so severely. Pointing a finger at the absence of African critics and a receptive audience within Africa, Cyprian Ekwensi stated :

Since so fleeting an interest is taken of Nigerian Writing within the country's borders, much of the criticism of African Writing comes from abroad.

Foreign critics have been accused of applying false standards by imposing criteria of their own... This protest I regard as completely hypocritical. Surely literature is universal... Human nature, subject to environmental and other factors is basically the same the world over. There is therefore no reason why a critic reading about human nature in Nigeria should not be free to express his own views provided he does not exceed the bounds of his own knowledge. By this I mean he must apply universal principles of criticism. It is when he begins to dabble outside of this orbit that he creates a resentment<sup>12</sup>.

Fine and good, but it was precisely because many Western critics did exceed the bounds of their own knowledge that they came under fire. And when Mr. Ekwensi calls for « universal principles of criticism » just what does he mean ? Many people who feel there should be universal standards in the arts are at a loss to state what they are. Anyone who has seen a Japanese No play knows that the criteria for its criticism is utterly different from that used to criticize a Broadway play. Are those « universal principles of criticism » referred to by Ekwensi not really universally accepted principles of Western criticism ?

Many critics avoided the problem by simply not defining their standards, leaving the reader to wonder if they had any. Those few who did attempt a definition ended up in fruitless suggestions such as :

Perhaps some rough criterion as 'worthy of serious consideration' will be the measure for evaluating one's selection among this new literature. Indeed one could insist on no higher standard for the literature that makes up the body of an academic course at any university<sup>13</sup>.

Here then is the definitive high standard an American professor uses when treating modern African literature — that it be "worthy of serious consideration". But worthy on what grounds ? The question of critical standards still remains untouched.

Basically this confusion about critical standards arises from the lingering question : "What is African literature ;" It was the African writers

themselves who tackled the problem and came to no conclusive answer after years of debate. Opinions vary radically, with nearly as many views as there are writers.

On one extreme is the now famous statement issued at a conference on "African literature and the University curriculum" at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone which defined African literature as: "Creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral". It was specifically noted that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* qualified as African literature while Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter* failed because it could have been set anywhere outside Africa. Clearly this definition of African literature was influenced by the Western obsession with "authenticity" and "African life". Conrad's culture was European and his language English. Because he looked at Africa from a European cultural viewpoint, seems obvious that no matter what the setting, the literature remains part of the literary tradition of the author's culture and language. Today few people, if any, would accept the above definition of African literature.

Another view holds simply that "African literature is the entire body of literary works written by Africans"<sup>4</sup>. This appears basically valid, but it must be noted that some of the early African writers in English or French were so strongly influenced by English or French literary traditions and conventions of theme and form that there is little intrinsically African left in their work. Thus the writing of someone like Jean J. Rabearivelo is considered African because of the author's nationality, but the profoundly French nature of his work is apparent. However, since the problem of the African's cultural alienation reflects an historical actuality, even this writing has a place in the evolution of modern African writing.

On the other extreme is Obi Wali's contention: "African literature simply means, any imaginative work of art written in an indigenous African language"<sup>5</sup>. As for those works in European languages:

We must have to face the truth that our writers like Camara Laye, Chinua Achebe, Leopold Senghor and others, are plainly writers of English and French, just as native French and English writers are!<sup>6</sup>

What therefore is now described as African literature in English and French, is a clear contradiction, and a false proposition, just as 'Italian literature in Hausa' would be!<sup>7</sup>

Needless to say, those authors writing in English or French take violent exception to this attitude. Chinua Achebe took it upon himself to reply directly to Obi Wali's position point by point, concluding:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings... What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language!<sup>8</sup>

At the root of the problem of critical standards and of African literature itself lies this question of language. Critical standards are basically culture bound, and language is the unifying expression of a culture. Thus one cannot accept Obi Wali's definition of modern African writing in English or French as automatically part of these literary traditions, because African writers are not of these cultures, nor are they expressing European cultural views. Even the language is being gradually altered as Achebe points out, so that it is no longer strictly a European language.

It would be short-sighted not to realize that what is being currently written in English or French, though still close to the European literary traditions in language and form, may well evolve into a much more distinctly African tradition. The urbanization and accompanying loss of ethnic cultural identity which has already occurred to some extent in the larger cities of South Africa may well occur to a lesser extent in West Africa also, leaving English or French as the only valid means of expression for this small segment of modern African culture which is itself in a stage of evolution.

While one might be tempted to apply Western critical standards to modern African literature because of its use of Western language and form, these standards may not apply in the future as the language and form are altered. At this point, just as modern African literature is caught between Western literary traditions and African traditional literature, so too, are the critical standards to be used in judging it. Only with a further evolution of the literature will one be able to state clearly what critical standards apply. At best, the only alternative a critic is currently left with is to indicate clearly what criteria he is personally using in his evaluation. Though a temporary measure, this would be an improvement over the vague and baseless approaches of the past.

Regarding literature in indigenous African languages, if we accept Obi Wali's view, the problem of literary standards is straightforward. Literature must be examined in the language in which it is spoken or written, and the critic must know precisely why a work is highly regarded within that culture. Just as languages vary, so do cultures, which presupposes that a critic must be thoroughly versed in both language and cultural standards of a people before he can hope to understand their

own critical attitudes towards their literature. For the Western critic this presents problems. First it would mean intensive linguistic work and years of study in a language, and second, an actual living experience within the culture. The outsider would constantly have to guard against asserting his own cultural standards, even unconsciously. It would be an exceptional Western critic who could speak with genuine authority in either traditional or modern literature in an indigenous African language. Obviously a native speaker raised within a culture would have a better chance of understanding and evaluating his people's literature than would someone of any other cultural identity.

Nonetheless, because a detached perspective may still reveal things missed by someone inside a system, the Western critic has a place in analyzing African literature. Let him, however, approach with a humble attitude, having first made a thorough study of it, acknowledging that it is in no way a mere extension of Western literature. Recognizing the limitations of his own knowledge and stating clearly his critical standards, his analysis may be better evaluated in relation to what African critics themselves contribute.

This trend of looking towards the African for guidance is possible now with a growing core of African critics like Obi Wali, Lewis Nkosi, Taban Lo Liyong, Eldred Jones or A. Irele, among others. Certainly their approaches and opinions vary with different training and background, but the one thing they share in common, unlike Western critics, is a full awareness of the importance of traditional African literature and its influence even in modern African writing.

After the period when traditional oral literature was ignored by Western critics, Africans are rediscovering and reasserting its importance. Perhaps this new awareness is best reflected in something Oket p'Blitek wrote:

*In the evening we have sat on our big sofa and put our legs on the tea table, and said, 'there is very little vernacular literature' and have pulled out a volume of Achebe or Wole Soyinka or Transition. Meanwhile all over the countryside, the outdoor fires have been lit and the folk tales are being performed<sup>19</sup>.*

In a very real sense, the period of dominance by Western critics is over and with it comes a realization by Africans that they must return to the roots of their literatures in order to become really valid critics. In this respect Dr. E. Makward has pointed out:

*Literary criticism as a separate and autonomous speciality or genre had no place in pre-colonial Africa, where the best qualified and reliable critics were indeed the public itself<sup>20</sup>.*

*It would seem that after two decades of confusion this premise is still true. What is needed now is a knowledge of the critical standards used by the African public itself. Without doubt, these critical standards by the African critics drawn from this public. Once could best be expressed by African critics established, critics and readers of all this central core of knowledge is established, critics and readers of all nationalities will have a better understanding of African literature, or indeed, of the many literatures of Africa.*

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