

EMERGING ISSUES IN THE DEFINITION AND EVALUATION OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

As simplistic as the term sounds, arriving at a consensus definition of African literature, or, defining African literature in a holistic and encompassing manner has always been problematic. Equally controversial is the issue of the proper yardsticks for the evaluation of African literature. Different scholars and critics of the literature have come up with one definition or the other of the term. Curiously, rather than provide a clear direction as to the resolution of the questions, these efforts have thrown up many more questions and vexed issues. This paper discusses the major issues involved in the questions and attempts a possible way forward. Its methodology is to first undertake a detailed literature review, particularly sampling opinions of individual scholars on the subject. It then examines these views in a bid to determine the merits or otherwise in the views. The study relies on such critical materials as journal articles, reviews, interviews and critiques published on the subject. This is towards having a balanced and comprehensive perspective on the subject. In the end, it is found that the major emerging issues in the definition of African literature are those of medium and language, even with regard to works published on the internet. With respect to evaluation, it is our finding that the major debate has centred on the question as to whether African or Eurocentric standards should be employed in the criticism of African literature, especially given the fact that much of modern African literature is written in English. The study then concludes that African, rather than Eurocentric standards should be applied in the evaluation of African literature; a method which recognizes the unique and 'hybrid' nature of African literature and that the task of

formulating this African aesthetic rests on the shoulders of African scholars.

Key Words: definition, evaluation, African, literature, internet, Eurocentric, medium, language

Introduction

The issue of the definition and evaluation of African literature has become an over-flogged one. Since the historic conference at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda in 1961, where writers and scholars across the continent gathered to discuss the state of African literature, this issue has continued to dominate discussions in literary and critical circles. The major questions have been: what is African literature? Who should write it? What should the literature depict and how should it be communicated? Put another way, must one be an African to write about Africa? If the answer is yes, who is an African? Does it mean somebody who is a native of the African continent? Would it include the North Africans who are of Arab descent? What of blacks in the Diaspora, such as the South Americas?

In recent times, it has also been wondered whether African literature, and indeed literary materials 'published' on the internet, as opposed to the 'traditional' publishing companies can be considered as African literature, that is, whether those poems, novels, short stories, plays, etc., put on the internet without passing them through the traditional publishing houses and bringing them out in the usual print format qualify to be called African literature.

With respect to evaluation, the issues have been: what should be the appropriate criteria for the evaluation of African literature? Should Eurocentric criteria, or African standards be applied in the evaluation of African literature, especially given the fact that modern written African literatures were born in the educational

systems imposed by colonialism with models drawn from Europe rather than from existing African traditions, plus the fact that much of it is written in English? And if the yardsticks are to be African, who should the task of formulating the African aesthetic be assigned to? These have been the major questions involved in the definition and evaluation of African literature. Central to them all are the issues of medium and language. These are discussed in this paper.

African Literature: The Issue of Medium

In the essay, 'The African Writer and the English Language', Achebe, in trying to define the term, African literature, opines that African literature is 'creative writing' in which African experiences originating in Africa are integral. Similarly, Obi Wali in 'The Dead End of African Literature' argues that African literature must be 'written' in African languages or lose its artistic autonomy as African literature.

The issue raised above is the question of medium in African literature. It presupposes that for anything to be literature, it has to be written. This issue of 'writteness' is also the reason why Adrian Roscoe would not consider as novels certain oral narratives that existed in precolonial Africa. In Roscoe's words:

the novel, as it is known in the West precisely because it is a written form has no history whatever in Africa.. It is a literary import... from Europe.... It is not in its nature, an African form.... It is not a fact of the African past (1971, 75).

With respect to the above, it is worth pointing out that African literature is both oral and written and that African literature existed in the oral form before written literature. Also referred to as orature, oral literature which comprises folktales, proverbs, myths, legends, songs, incantations, moonlight dances, etc. provides the springboard for written African literature. The two – oral literature

and written literature – play complementary roles and neither is inferior to the other. Chinweizu *et al* perhaps capture it succinctly when they say that African literature are works ‘done’ for the African audience by Africans and in African languages, whether those works are oral or written (1980, 11- 12).

African Writers and the Internet

As already observed, in recent times, it has been wondered whether literature, including African literature ‘published’ on the internet qualify to be called literature. This question is prompted by the fact that in the modern era, there has been a revolution in science, especially in Information Communication Technology (ICT) which has given rise not only to faster and higher speeds of dissemination and accessing of information such that we now talk of the world being a global village, but has also caused a proliferation of information communication tools and devices, one of which is the internet. The result is that many people now transact their businesses on the internet such that we now hear of e-commerce, e-library, e-learning, e-banking, e-dating, etc. Writers are not left out in the use of this facility. Creative writers, including African writers now use the internet to ‘publish’ their works, giving rise to what is termed ‘e-literature’. And so, it has been asked whether those works on the internet by African writers which are not in the ‘normal’ print or hard format can be considered as African literature.

Again, the issue raised here is that of medium. Before written literature was oral literature and now e-literature. As already observed, first and foremost, medium is not the defining factor as to whether or not a piece of work is literary. What determines the literariness of a work is the ability of the work to imaginatively capture reality. Of paramount importance also is the fact that the work meets the formal requirements in terms of length and

structural and textual complexity. The technical aspects such as plot, point of view, setting, style, etc, are not left out. Literature mirrors life and so, thematically, the work must also imaginatively capture reality. If all these happen, then the work qualifies to be called literature, the medium notwithstanding. Thus, if a poem, short story or novel 'published' on the internet by African writers meets the above requirements, then there will be no justification for denying that work of the status of African literature.

African Literature: The Issue of Language

It has been argued that there is no need to define any literature because a literature is defined by the language in which it is written. For instance, Adrian Roscoe in *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature*, asserts that 'If an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole (1971: x). Similarly, John Povey argues:

When one can so readily make cross-comparisons with the work of Achebe and say, Thomas Hardy or Joseph Conrad, one has the satisfying sense that the African writer can be conveniently set within the context of the much wider field of English language writing (1972: 97).

The issue raised above is the thorny question of language in African literature. Implicit in the assertions is the argument that whatever is not written in an African language is not African literature or that whatever is written in a European language is an 'appendage' (to borrow Chinweizu's term) to European literature.

However, the above arguments are fallacious because they blur the distinction between European national literatures and non-European literatures written in European languages; between English as a language used in literature by many outside the British nation and English letters as a body of works of the British nation. As Tolu Ogunlesi observes, language is both an end in itself (a

signifier/characteristic of culture, identity, tribal or national pride) and a means to an end (a means of communication) (2008: 101). It must be remembered that the English language as a means of communication in Africa is a product of British colonization and their writers simply by-products of the same processes that have made the new nation states of Africa. So the fact that African writers use English in their creative writings does not make their works English literature.

Chinweizu *et al*, Ngugi wa thiong'o and Obi Wali argue that African literature must be written in African languages or lose their artistic validity and autonomy. They maintain that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable media for educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In Wali's words:

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end which can only lead to sterility uncreativity and frustration (1963: 20)

Wole Soyinka on the other hand, calls for a continental language; a pan-African language to be chosen from one of the African indigenous languages and spoken across the continent. However, commendable as Soyinka's position is for its pro-African stance, the suggestion remains unfeasible because the English language as a means of communication in some parts of Africa was learnt by force. But now we have independent African states with different language policies. Also the task of evolving a common language that everybody from the Arab world to the Zulu can identify with remains a daunting one. In Nigeria, for instance, there have been

attempts to create an indigenous national language ('Wazobia') but this has not yielded any positive results and this is in addition to the fact that Soyinka's suggestion, if implemented, will hinder the growth of individual community literatures.

Ngugi on the other hand maintains that it is contradictory to talk of African literature in European languages. As far as Ngugi is concerned, African literature must be done in African indigenous languages. Thereafter, if foreigners want the literature, it can be translated for them. To Ngugi, abandoning the English language is a process of decolonizing the mind, as whoever controls one's mind, controls the person's existence. Ngugi argues that as long as Africans continue to use the English language, colonization is still at work as language is a philosophy, history and ideology. It remains a wonder to him how one could think in one's mother tongue and then render it in a foreign language. For him, African writers who feel committed to the African cause must be so from the perspective of language: communicate in the language of the masses. Megan Behrent confirms this observation when he notes that:

The Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa thiong'o argues that to rid African literature of the legacy of colonialism, African writers must begin writing in their native languages and that literature written by Africans in a colonial language is not African literature, but 'Afro-European literature'. He argues that using European languages inherently makes African literature the literature of an elite class of Africans ('Right from its conception, it was a literature of the petty-bourgeoisie born of the colonial schools and universities. It could not be otherwise, given the linguistic medium of its message') which cannot relate to the majority of African peoples who do not necessarily speak or read European languages, but rather speak a variety of indigenous African languages (2008: 101).

Therefore, to Ngugi, as long as Africans continue to use the English language, imperialism continues to 'pressgang the African hand to plough to turn the soil over, ...putting blinkers on him to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with a bible and sword' (1985: 1). The implication here is that the ceaseless struggles of African peoples to liberate their economy, politics and culture from the stranglehold Euro-America and usher in a new era of truly communal self-regulation and determination remain futile as long as Africans continue to employ foreign languages in their transactions since language and the use to which it is put are central to a people's definition of itself in relation to its natural and social environment, and indeed to the entire universe.

However, although Ngugi's pro-African stance is again, highly admirable, the suggestion seems impracticable, first, because, his *Devil on the Cross* (1980), *I will Marry When I Want* (1982) and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) which were first written in Gikuyu before being translated into English took a long time before being so realized, in addition to the issue of how many of our kinsmen can actually be communicated with through such writings given the fact that over 50% of Africa's population is illiterate and hence cannot access written literatures, whether in indigenous or foreign languages.

Chinua Achebe probably answers the question – to write or not to write in English – best:

'It doesn't matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good. Language is a weapon, and we use it.... There's no point in fighting a language' (1975: 54). He, however, makes a distinction between national and ethnic literatures as two separate but equally important aspects of African literature. National literature, he explains is written in the national language and can be understood throughout its territory while ethnic literature is

only available to one specific group within the nation. Although Achebe himself does not number among those writers who write in their indigenous or ethnic languages, he expresses the hope that 'there will always be men ... who will choose to write in their native tongue and insure that our ethnic literature will flourish side-by-side with the national one' (83).

Achebe therefore, does not dismiss African languages as inferior means of story-telling but resigns himself to the fact that the English language is 'the world language which history has shoved down our throats' so that, for him, 'there is no choice' in the matter, but 'the reality of present-day Africa' (79). However, he maintains that the fact that some African nations created by the British continue to hold English as a national language does not mean that these peoples were 'invented by the British' but that many African writers are 're-inventing the language of their oppressors to tell their own stories and retell their collective histories' (77).

Achebe also admits to the benefits of writing in English, one of which is the increased audience African writers can reach by employing this language. 'Let us give the devil his due', Achebe continues, 'there are areas of Africa where colonialism divided (groups).... But on the whole, it did bring together many peoples.... And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another.... The only reason why we can even talk about African writing is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in' (77).

However, although Achebe acknowledges the fact that the benefits of writing in English outweigh the negative consequences, he also notes the difficulty of writing in a second language and the tedium of having to translate the ideas and phrasing from the native tongue to a more accessible national language. But he warns that African writers must not try to use English like the native speakers, saying it is 'neither necessary nor desirable' but that they should

aim to use the language in a way that brings out their message best, without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international communication will be lost. This, according to him should be done by 'expanding' the frontiers of the language to convey their sensibilities as Africans. And so, on the question as to whether an African can ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing, Achebe answers in the affirmative. But as to whether the African writer can ever learn to use English like a native speaker, Achebe says:

I should hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of uses.
(54)

So the ultimate aim of the African writer in Achebe's view should be to fashion out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. This, Achebe demonstrates by making his characters deeply ingrained within the novel's narration, and injecting the language with a style particular to his Nigerian roots. As evident, from his earlier works (*Things Fall Apart* in 1958, *Arrow of God* in 1964) to his more recent *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), Achebe uses proverbs, brilliant imagery and other elements of style to his advantage. He captures Igbo speech patterns and flavour in these works, even though they are written in English.

On the whole, it can be said that Achebe's position seems to be the most realistic because, first, and foremost, it is a known fact that there are not many countries in Africa today where the English language could be abolished and the facility for mutual communication would still be maintained. Therefore, as Ernest Emenyonu points out, those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic 'smart alecs' with an eye on the main chance – outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same processes that have made the new nation

states of Africa; a fact which accounts for why today in many countries across Africa, English remains the language of instruction in the schools, the language of the law, business, government, satellite television and the internet, in addition to assuming the status of an indigenous language of communication in some homes.

However, with regard to the foregoing arguments, it is clear that none of the European languages can be said to carry with it fully the reality of the African experience as it exists, nor can it be said that Africans can ever feel they are in full possession of their literature as long as the literature is elaborated in a language that does not belong to them in an immediate and original way. Equally true is the fact that the writing of African literatures in languages other than African indigenous languages inhibits the healthy development of African literatures in indigenous languages. But these facts do not detract from the value of African literature as an art conceived in the African mind according to the African world-view and values. As Emenyonu reiterates, African cultures must be preserved and this is best done in African languages, but this does not mean that anything or everything said and written in Africa by an African which seeks to portray African life must be in African indigenous languages or lose its validity. Thus, ideally, African literature, like any other literature, should express its 'Africanness' in African tongues. But since this seems a far-away dream since the English language has for long established its presence in Africa, African writers may continue to use the language but 'domesticate' it in a way that best conveys their sensibilities as Africans; the ultimate goal being to project African literature in African indigenous languages someday.

African Literature: Issues of Evaluation

It has also been asked what the proper yardsticks for the evaluation of African literature should be; that is, whether Western or African

criteria should be used in the evaluation of African literature, especially given the fact that much of modern African literature is written in European languages. For instance, Adrian Roscoe avers, if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English literature as a whole and must be judged by the same critical standards as any other work written in English (1971: X).

The above blurs the distinction between European national literatures and non-European literatures written in European languages; between English as a language used in literature by many outside the British nation and English letters as a body of works of the British nation.

As already observed, literature is the expression of a people's culture and values. It conveys the imaginative experience of a people and so does not exist in isolation from the reality that encompasses it. African literature has its roots in Africa and therefore has elements of the oral tradition and modern mass culture, existing side-by-side. This means that the cultural environment in Africa has greatly influenced the representation of life and experience in African literature and given it a distinctive local colour and texture so that while in broad outline, African narrative literature remains faithful to the formal requirements of the novel, in the matter of time, space and language use, it has necessarily had to represent traditional, as well as modern beliefs in a way that defines the African concept of realities.

Thus in both content and style, African literature in English has roots and contexts that lie outside the traditional, cultural and linguistic soil that nourished the literature of the West. And so Western critical standards cannot be used for the evaluation of African works. The literature of an era evolves its own critical yardsticks and the Western critical standards were developed in the Western tradition to be applied by Western critics to Western

literature, and to Western audiences. As such, the application of Western critical standards (without modification) to African literature might stultify African literature. The critical standards for the evaluation of African literature must be one that recognizes the background to African literature and is indeed nourished by African culture, while conforming to universal yardsticks. It must recognize the background, spirit, and influences – indigenous as well as foreign – that have gone into the making of modern African literature. For instance, as George Joseph observes, whereas European views of literature often stress a separation of art and content, the African awareness is inclusive, and whereas literature can also imply an artistic use of words for the sake of art alone, traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. Thus, rather than write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society so that an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build. This then means that the formulation of African aesthetics for the evaluation of African literature implies a sociological imagination that understands the mental landscape of the African which is being articulated. It must be done against the background of the African culture; an approach that recognizes both its oral and written traditions.

The need for an approach that conforms with universal yardsticks is informed by the fact that much of modern African literature is written in English. This makes it a universal/world literature. As Achebe points out, since Nigerians have borrowed a world language to write in, have sought publication in Europe and America, they cannot expect the world not to say something about their by-products. But ‘universal,’ according to him does not mean ‘Western’. ‘Universal’, to Achebe is a product of both the local and the global, as a Western critical approach cannot work when

applied to cultures that are distinct in origin from the one that supplied the source material for the theory, notwithstanding the fact that modern African literature is written in English. According to him, a distinction must be made between European national literatures and non-European national literatures written in European languages. As put by Chinweizu *et al*, African literature is a 'hybrid', born out of the African oral tradition and the imported literary forms of Europe so that it is precisely this 'hybrid' nature which needs most to be considered when determining the proper yardsticks for its evaluation. Thus, since the colonial situation according to them imposes a different set of concerns and constraints upon African literature, its primary constituency is different from that of European or other regional bodies. Therefore, it would be foolhardy to try to impose critical standards developed in other traditions on it.

The next question is: if African literature is a unique and autonomous entity deriving its nature from both the African oral tradition and European literary models which must be evaluated not by the principles of Eurocentric Western criticism but by African standards, who should this task of spelling out the African criteria be assigned to? Should they be Africans, or Westerners?

It has to be stated that the responsibility of establishing African criteria for the evaluation of African arts falls squarely on the shoulders of African critics and scholars. Criticism is reasoned judgement on a work of art done within cultural settings and shared values. It is separating the grain from the chaff; the good from the bad and African scholars are in a better position to do that. This is so because Western critics are not familiar with the African oral heritage and do not understand African languages. As Ngugi consistently points out, language does not simply mean words. Language connotes a people's entire world-view and here, one notices that what many Western critics issue on African literature

reflects a lack of deep knowledge of the African culture and even of the existence, nature and depth of the oral tradition. Thus, the European critic can only see the African culture from the outside unless he has undergone a severe discipline of dissociating himself from his own cultural pre-suppositions. He lacks a thorough understanding of the African way of life and mind and as such, cannot experience the world of the African. Therefore, African critics and scholars, not Westerners have the responsibility of establishing African aesthetics for the evaluation of African arts.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it becomes evident that the questions of medium and language have been the major issues surrounding the definition and evaluation of African literature. While some scholars, especially Eurocentric critics aver that a text must be in a written form to be considered as literature, thus, neglecting the oral forms, African scholars insist that African literature is both oral and written and that the oral form existed before the written text and exerted, and continues to exert influence on the written text.

With regard to literary materials 'published' on the internet, it is our observation as in the case of oral literature that medium is not the defining factor as to whether or not a work is literary, but that the ability of a work to authentically capture reality, in addition to meeting the formal, technical and structural requirements earlier highlighted are what make a work literary so that any literary 'publications' by Africans on the internet that meet these requirements qualify to be called African literature, irrespective of the fact that the works is not in the 'usual' print format.

On the issue of language, it has been the argument of both African and Western scholars alike that whatever is not written in an African language is not African literature or that whatever is written in a European language is an 'appendage' to European

literature. Ngugi, Wali, Chiweizu *et al* in particular, maintain that as long as Africans continue to write in English; a language which does not belong to them in an immediate and original way, they can never feel that they are in full possession of their literature as language is not only a means of communication but also an ideology and vehicle of culture. Here Achebe agrees with Ngugi, Wali and Chiweizu *et al*, but resigns himself to 'the reality of present-day Africa' where there is no part of the continent where the English language could be abolished and the facility for mutual communication would still be maintained.

With respect to evaluation, it is our view that the position, especially of Western scholars that if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to the whole 'Great Tradition' and as such must be judged by the same critical standards as any other works of that Tradition. This position blurs the distinction between European national literature and non-European national literatures written in European languages. It fails to recognize African literature as an autonomous and unique entity; a 'hybrid', deriving its nature from both the African oral tradition and Western models which must therefore be evaluated not by the principles of Eurocentric Western criticism but by a critical method which recognizes both its oral and written foundations.

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