

## THE DYNAMICS OF AFRICAN LITERATURE AND ITS CRITICISM: PERSPECTIVES FROM ZIMBABWE

By

Wiseman Magwa<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*This paper argues that Africans should view their literature as an autonomous entity separate from all other literatures of the world. The author argues for a perspective of literature and its criticism that is African in nature. The article discusses how African literature both oral and written has over the years received negative criticism from Euro-centric literary critics. Western critics, it is further argued, habitually view African literary works using European eyes to the extent that some even consider African literature as an overseas department of European literature (Palmer, 1979; Povey, 1972, 1971). Charges against African literature range from technical and thematic inadequacies as if African literary works have been written to be consumed by natives of Europe. Regrettably, some Africans, have unwittingly accepted these criticisms and adopted the use of foreign theoretical tools to understand and analyse literature found on the African continent. The paper concludes by discouraging African scholars from gazing westwards for signals of approval that their statements and views about literature conform to the canons of European literature. Africans should establish their own tools of analysing literature that are relevant and appropriate to needs and interests of the African people.*

### Introduction

Literature is not only a question of the primary texts of study, specific novels, poems, dramas and essays but it is also the criticism that goes with it. Criticism of literature has existed almost as long as the word literature itself, but despite this seemingly long historical background, critics fail to reach a consensus on what is good literature and the proper procedures of analysing it (Dutton, 1984). This is because any attempt to analyse and criticise a piece of literary art carries with it value judgements. The whole body of critical appreciation, interpretations, theories, and commentaries often carries within itself “an entire set of ideological assumptions about society and relations between human beings (Ngugi, 1997:23)”

The varied values, range from those of Africans, Europeans, Indians, Asians, and many other races of the world. Theories of literature and criticism are therefore not neutral entities, because literature is about the effect of wealth, power and values on the quality of human lives and relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Wiseman Magwa is an Associate Professor in the Department of African Languages Literature and Culture at Midlands State University

At present, there are many theories of analysing literature that have been brought to us by scholars from all over the world. These are among others; Formalism, Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Marxism and modernism just to mention a few. However, it is sad to note that of all these theories of understanding and analysing literature, none is African. As a result, most of these theories end up being irrelevant to the needs of the African literary critic, because the founding critics had a worldview that had Europe at the centre.

### **The Euro-centric Literary Base**

Systematic studies of literature in Europe began with the writings of Plato (427 - 348 BC), Aristotle (394 -322 BC) and Horace (65 - 8 BC). These are the founders of classical literary criticism in Europe. According to Plato, the great philosopher, everything that existed on this planet was an imperfect copy of the ideal object. Literature was therefore, a third hand of distortions of truth and valueless was indeed potentially misleading. As a philosopher, Plato was mainly interested in the content of literature and its effects on the audience. His approach to literature was strictly authoritarian, thus any forms of literature that undermined the state were not accepted. Emphasis was on the content of literature without regard to its form and technical qualities (Dorsh, 1965). Aristotle wrote the most influential book on literary criticism, called *Poetics*, and his literary approach was rather different from that of Plato in that he put emphasis on form as opposed to content. He argued that literature should be considered in terms of the form in which it is embodied. Dutton (1984), asserts that the Italian poet, Horace (65-8 BC), like Aristotle also valued form at the expense of content. Horace outlined elements that constitute the form of literature as plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. Of these, plot was singled out as the most important.

Analysis of literature in Europe continued to be carried out by people like Philip Sidney (1554 - 1586), John Dryden (1631 - 1700), Alexander Pope (1688 - 1744), Joseph Addison (1672 - 1719), Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 - 1834), Mathew Arnold (1822 - 1888), and T. S. Eliot (1888 - 1965). However, towards the twentieth century, it became rather difficult to write a historical outline of literary criticism as an account of individual contributions. It became almost unacceptable to single out individuals as representative of particular approaches in analysing literature (Dutton, 1984). The adoption of literary criticism as a university subject in Europe led to an increase in critical activity and marked diversity of approaches in the field of literature. Modern criticism of literature had theories that represented schools of thought such as formalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis and Marxism just to mention a few.

### **The denigration of African literature by Euro-centric literary critics**

Because of the above-mentioned historic tradition of literary criticism, European scholars and some of their African disciples continued to view African literature using European viewpoints. Euro-centric literary critics always view African literature as an appendage of European literature ( Amuta, 1989 ) The African novel for example, is said to be thin in its plot, poor in characterisation, poor in the handling of time and unrealistic in dialogue. There are many other unfounded allegations against works of art written by Africans. Novels and plays by

African writers, for example, are often being faulted for being too short and being too didactic as if African literature is intended to be a replica of European literature ( Ngugi, 1997 ).

Colonialist criticism of literature was always based on the colonial ideology, which was characterised by supremacist arrogance predicated on racial prejudice (Amuta, 1989). The African who wrote in English was seen as a European brother but indeed a “junior brother” (Achebe, 1975: 3). Whatever the African wrote was considered to be a result of the influence they got from their European masters of the likes of Shakespeare. European critics of African literature conceive African cultures as static aspects of a society’s material and spiritual achievement and characteristics at a particular stage in the process of social development. Thus conceived, the physical symbols of culture are seen exclusively in terms of museum pieces, archival remains and survivals of animistic social existence to be recovered in long abandoned caves and the ruins of great walls.

Euro-centric critics do not concede the autonomy of African literature. They do not grant it the elementary right to have its own rules and standards but insist rather on viewing it as an overseas department of European literature. Roscoe (1971) bluntly comments on African literature saying that if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English literature as a whole and can be scrutinised accordingly. Such type of criticism refuses to draw a distinction between European literature and non – European literature in order to justify the application of European literary standards on African works written in the English language.

Some African literary critics, such as Eustace Palmer, due to lack of a theory of their own have blindly grabbed European tools of analysis and started using them on African literary works. These tools of analysing literature have in most cases been applied indiscriminately to works of literature written by African authors. This led Africans themselves to denigrate works by fellow Africans on the grounds that those works failed to fit nicely into European literary sign-posts. African literature as a result continues to receive a negative image from both European and African literary critics and this will continue for a very long period of time. Amuta (1989) says some critics got so obsessed with colonial education and ended up believing that, “the African novel grew out of the Western novel and writers like Achebe, Laye and Ekwensi were much more influenced by Conrad, Hardy, Dickens, Kafka and George Elliot than by the African oral tale” (Palmer, 1979:5) It becomes very clear that no objective evaluation of African writers and their works is to be arrived at by critics whose cultural biases and aesthetic values are motivated from outside. Eurocentric critics usually seek for ancestry, equivalents and precedents of stylistic trends in African literature in the Euro–American literary tradition, thus it becomes easy to see African works as deriving from British and American literature.

### **Towards a theory of African aesthetics**

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Africans, for a very long time have been using European literary tools to analyse their literature. However, it is sad to note that most of these tools of analysis seem to be irrelevant and inappropriate to African literature. Freud’s theory for instance says literature should put emphasis on sex to reveal the Oedipus and the Electra complexes (i.e. the desire by men to have sex with their daughters and the desire by women

to have sex with their sons respectively). One wonders whether this is the general feeling among Africans. The question is: Is it true that African men are obsessed with this desire to have sex with their mothers or daughters? If the answer is no, then one wonders how this theory could be an appropriate tool to analyse and understand African literature. It follows therefore that European tools of literary criticism cannot adequately explain African literature hence, there is need for Africans to have their own ways of interpreting their world.

African literary critics should stop looking for foreign literary patterns in works of literature written by African authors. Critics from the continent should investigate and formulate critical canons and procedures that are adequate for analysing African experiences. The literary culture of African people must be decolonised and liberated. Liberation in this sense means ending all foreign domination and a total rejection of foreign literary tools on native literature.

The approach being advocated for is Afrocentrism that is simply defined as an effort by African people to be re-located historically, economically, socially, politically and philosophically. This approach was popularised by Molefi Kete Asante (1991) who argues that Afro-centrism seeks to re-locate the African person as an agent in human history in an effort to eliminate the illusion of the fringes. The approach intends to destroy the notion that Africans are objects in the 'western project of domination'. The central concern is to advance the position of African people in the world by affirming their identity and contributions and by unmasking the biases and limitations of Western culture. The goal is not to replace white history with black history or white mathematics with black mathematics, but rather to promote a more plausible view of the arts, humanities, social sciences and physical sciences. These should be seen not as products of white culture only but of human culture in plural form.

An Afro-centric approach calls for a much more inclusive valuation of human diversity, rejecting the exclusive, imperialistic and dehumanising aspects of Euro-centric claims to universalism in cultural and intellectual life. Africans in this approach would want to re-establish Africa and its descendants as centres of value, without in any way demeaning other people and their historic contribution to world civilisation. Placing Africa at the centre of a people's worldview does not mean isolation since "culture contact is the oxygen of any civilisation"(Ngugi, 1997:23). Civilisations that withdraw into themselves end up being suffocated in their self-enclosure. The literature of other peoples is therefore important in helping Africans to understand other peoples and their cultures and also in understanding themselves.

Chinweizu et al (1980) assert that African literature must be viewed as an autonomous entity, separate from all other literatures. The constituency of African literature is very different from that of the Europeans and people should stop judging African literature using European standards. If Africans use European standards to analyse their literature, then they are indeed accepting the fallacy that African literature is an appendage of European literature and that African culture is the same as that of Europeans. Genuine African literature should be defined as literature written for an African audience, by an African preferably using an African language. Zimbabwean literature for example would be that literature produced mostly in the indigenous languages of all the ethnic groups that make up Zimbabwe. These works

can either be oral or written. For a literary work to qualify as African literature, the following considerations should be made:

- The primary audience for whom the work is done should be African
- The cultural and national consciousness expressed in the work should be African
- The language used should be African (Chinweizu et al, 1980)

However, even if the language used in a literary work is not African, the most important thing to consider is the audience for whom the work is done. The cultural and national consciousness expressed in the work in question should always be African. What this simply means is that if Africans like Chenjerai Hove, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Shimmer Chinodya and many others write using English, it does not follow that their works belong to English literature and can be analysed using European tools. The fact that they are writing in English does not make them Europeans nor does that make their works belong to English literature. Likewise, British writers, I am persuaded to believe will always write for a British audience even if the setting is Africa. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, is set in Africa but still remains a British novel because of the author's nationality (British by naturalisation).

African literature should always fight against foreign domination in economics, politics and culture. Literature therefore cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Thus there is always a relationship between writing and politics. Every writer is a politician and the only difference is the direction of politics. What the writer can only choose is the side to be in the battlefield, the side of the people or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Therefore every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what politics and whose politics? (Ngugi, 1997).

Literature should be used as a tool to reject the culture of the colonizer, his religious and education systems. African people should create their own songs, dances, poems and narratives. Criticism of literature must stress the primacy of society as the basis of human existence. Literature should help Africans to fight the economic and value systems that promote neo-colonialism in the continent. There is therefore need to shake off the yoke of Euro-centricity which history has pressed upon the shoulders of Africa. Africans need a dialectical theory of literature that should pay attention to the complex relationship between literature and society. It is, according to Amuta (1989), only from a dialectical position that one can comprehend the objective world and the universal laws for development.

A dialectical theory of literature primarily underlines the inescapable relationship between history and works of art. Agriculture, politics, education, commerce and industry will determine what the African writer is going to write because the values, criteria and standards by which literature is measured are in themselves matrixes in the system of values of a given society.

The ideology of a new and more functionally relevant approach to African literature should be relevant to the socio-economic, cultural, political and ideological contradictions which define the life and historical experiences of the African people (Amuta, 1989). The new theory or approach

to African literature and its criticism is expected to be dialectical in nature. A dialectical theory of literature pays attention to the complex relationship between literature and society. It is only from a dialectical position that one can comprehend the objective world and the universal laws for its development. This then makes Afro-centrism to be the relevant ideology for a new perspective of African literature, because it offers a scientific theory of society that rejects exploitation and inequality. Pan-Africanism or Negritude can be used as natural anchors for all theories of African literature that have a desire for freedom. These two ideologies can be used as theoretical launch pads in the struggle to fight for a total understanding of African literature.

Motivation and inspiration of African literary critics should emanate from the ideas of historic African figures such as Leopold Senghor, W. E. B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Edward Blyden, Kwame Nkurumah and Julius Nyerere. Criticism of African literature should not be based entirely on the European ideas of people like Plato, Aristotle, Richards, and other capitalist literary conduits. These European literary critics are the ones who portrayed a false conception of the African society. They always viewed Africa as a static and undialectical society, with undifferentiated socio-cultural continuum, which has remained oblivious to the passage of time. Such a naïve understanding of African literature is what contemporary African scholars, who are conscious of their identity, refer to as museum concept of literature and culture (ibid).

It is therefore advisable for literary critics in Africa to engage in a dialectical literary criticism in order for them to shake off the yoke of Eurocentricity which history has placed upon the shoulders of Africa. Genuine decolonisation of African literature does not simply mean symbolic use of African languages in literature. Mere exclusive use of African languages as the medium of communication in literature does not constitute mental decolonisation. The process of liberating African literature and its criticism is in itself a struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism. Literature by sons and daughters of Africa is expected to help Africans to fight the economic and political systems that promote neo-colonialism on the African continent, and elsewhere. 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 a part (ibid).

### **Conclusion**

A Zimbabwean perspective of African literature should revolve around the social, political and economic experiences that constitute African history and tradition. It is this combination of history and culture that becomes the primary condition for the existence and understanding of contemporary African literature. The primary responsibility of literary art is to fight against oppression and struggle for freedom because genuine literature can only survive in a free state.

The approach should place emphasis on content, context and form. The context of a literary work involves the totality of a people's history with its main thrust on the economic and cultural independence not in terms of erection of flags and singing of national anthems, but in terms of the total transfer of the means of production and distribution of resources into the hands of the masses of Africa (Amuta, 1989; Ngugi 1987). Scholars in Africa and even those in the diaspora should be encouraged by all means possible to use literature to re-establish an authentic



history of the African people. A truly anti-imperialist theory of African literature can only be derived from a radical society whose members do not have perennial feelings of nostalgia about Europe and its wealth.

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