

AFRICAN LITERATURE CRITICISM AND THE ISSUE OF LANGUAGE

El Hacen Ould Ahmed
Département d'Anglais
Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines
Université de Nouakchott

African critics are yet to settle down the question of an African literature criticism accepted by all. This is partly because of their different backgrounds, partly because of complexity of the different sources of African literature but mainly because of the absence of clear cut standards and features according to which people can evaluate the quality of an African Artistic work. True, it may sound very relative and depending on who is evaluating and the material being evaluated; however the fact that criticism of any literature be it African, Chinese, American or Arabic, shall always remain relative. It depends on the perspective from which the critic is investigating the work. Meanwhile this cannot mean in any case the absence of logic in what is being done.

Chinweizu et al summed up their argument about the African literary criticism in these energetic words:

If African literature is not to become a transplanted fossil of European literature, it needs to burst out of the strait-jacket of anglomodernist poetry and of the 'well-made novel', and it needs to find more ways of incorporating forms, treatments and devices taken from the African oral tradition. Chinweizu. (1980, p. 97)

I. R. Richards supports this view and gives more freedom to the critic concerning the evaluation of any literary work. The aim of the critic must always be to assess and valorise literature regardless of origins and backgrounds of its writer. In the following passage I. R. Richards, puts very clearly his view about the prerequisite for being a critic when he says,

Criticism, as I understand it, is the endeavour to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them. We cannot do this without some understanding of the nature of experience, or without theories of valuation and communication. pp. I-II

To evoke the subject of literary criticism in general and the African one in particular is a demanding, polemical and controversial matter; not only

between African writers and critics on the one hand and Western writers and critics on the other hand, but also among the Africans themselves. The so-called universal body of thoughts applied to the understanding of the human mind and experience proved its lack of objectivity and neutrality. Simply because such set of thought and ideology represents the universe from the angle of European civilization. So far as a particular civilization is in play, it is necessary, if not urgent, to bear in mind the socio-cultural load of that civilization. Subsequently, it will be a big mistake to tend to over-generalize the principles of European literary criticism. The culture they want to export to the outside world.

Undoubtedly, the role of literary criticism is essential to the development and nurturing of an authentic literary tradition. It helps to separate the chaff from the grains. However, the uncertainty of literary judgements and criterion of evaluation summons the attentions of the scholars to a deep and delicate problem of the universality of literary values. To put it in another way, certain Western scholars used to advocate the primacy of the autonomy of the literary text. Any literary work is considered as a coherent chain of signs which needs no reference to factors outside its entity, for its explanation and apprehension. Such underscoring of textuality is not without risks of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Literature is here to speak to the public about human experience and imagination, and also to voice the social situation because art is the 'function of society'. Thus, the socio-historical factors cannot in any way set aside, during the process of decoding the text. The orthodoxy of textuality "...has led to what is visibly an extreme position in which the relation of literary expression to a lived world of human values and consciousness is being eroded." p. XIII. It is discernible that Westerners are tempted to subsume the African literature under the umbrella of theirs. But they neglect one determinant factor which is the modernity of African written literature and the different historical experience of the African world. African literature is still fledging and its criticism is in parallel development with it. The objective of this criticism is to furnish the necessary understanding of the function of literature of the African continent; and to reveal the social discourse it encompasses. Criticism "is the vision of vision" according to the French critic Roman Fernandez, a true reflection of the work not to a distortion of it. This is the pragmatic usefulness of criticism.

Once we agree upon the rudimental point that criticism must sustain literature by exhibiting its social, political, cultural and artistic properties, one can agree that African literature requires a critique of its own. The

idea of African critique is supported by Richards in the following Statement:

I assume that, we as black social theorists; have no use for the myth of objectivity- a myth which has served the interest of Western European political objectives. Contrary to the propaganda of academia, white social theory does not represent a universally valid and 'Objective' body of thought, nor a neutral tool to be used for the purpose of understanding human experience. I would argue, instead, that it represents a particular view of the world as seen from the perspectives of supposed Western-European superiority, inherent in the terms definition and theoretical models on which white social theory is based. p. 3, 1973

To receive one's education in a foreign language is not a flaw; conversely it may stand for a great advantage, if the student makes a good use of it.

The importance is not that colonialism has endowed various African writers with a world language: the important thing is that how the writer uses the language (how the writer succeeds to turn out of the language a sheer tool that can serve him adequately). Killam p. 6, 1983

So, the African writers have the advantageous position to master one or two foreign languages, though, this may imply an inherited influence of the second language on the output of the Africans. The influence of the European culture on language cannot be, in any case, analogous with the rewriting of Western ideology and tradition by Africans; as some radicals 'excuse me for the term' African theorists advocate in the example of Obi Wali. Wali tries to explain the ambiguity of direct dependency of the African literature on European one, by the medium of language, by qualifying the African literature of being a mere by-product of the colonial experience. The same view is shared to some extent by Irele who argues that,

"We cannot feel that we are in full passion of this literature (African literature) so long as it is elaborated in a language that does not belong to us in an immediate and original way. p. 45, 1990"

The writings of Africans must be representative of the African reality to justify their reason of being. The peculiarity of the African society's culture, history of ideology shapes the individuality and personality of Africans in a different way than that of the Western; and that is where the hub of the matter lies. The hypothesized superiority of Westerns and the Western culture "the origin of light" and the denigration of

Africa "darkness" led the European theorists to mould what is, for them, unshakeable universal body of thoughts to which Africa- as well as continents such as Asia, Australia and in previous times the US- has to submit to. Instead of availing themselves of the commonalities between the various facets of the two literatures, some Westerns literary hegemony which stems from imperialism has the propensity language factors as a way in to assess African literature. Therefore, it will be very obscure and absurd to neglect that Africa has a culture and civilization; to adopt Achebe's terms "the past of Africa was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them". It has a well organized social system usually displayed in the hierarchy of the family, the tribe and the structure of the former African kingdom. The truth is that Africa did not receive its first lesson of civilization from Westerns. Adversely, Africa is the cradle of human civilization.

... as far as I am concerned the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme- put quite simply- is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. (Achebe, p. 158, 1975)

The fact that the issue of language and criticism are inextricably linked leads to an overlapped treatment of the subject. Meanwhile two questions are in play: How can the writer use the language adequately in the African context? What kind of criticism such use of language will trigger? A part of the crude mission of language which is natural communication, language is used in a subtler way to weave up fantasy, imagination, reality and experience to give out what is qualified as ART. An essential factor of artistic work is its originality and objectivity. In this perspective the African writer is expected to condition the Western language to suit his raw material and the reality he is dealing with. He must make the language speak an African voice, wear an African veil; and not only the other way about. If the African writers attain this goal, it will be logical to aspire to an objective and constructive African critique.

Recently, many voices are springing up here and there calling for what could be considered African criticism. Some of those voices advocate a complete rupture with the use of Western language; much space must be allotted to this suggestion later, whereas others do not bother much about the issue of language. This latter group, to whom I add my voice, is for a criticism which assumes the responsibility of showing the literary work as a significant social statement in a direct relevance to the African experience. What is important is to avoid the mistake of trying to transpose Western criticism on the African literature:

It evolves a process whereby the very differentiation that marks the two frames of reference of this literature imposes up the critical function important adjustments of those principles worked out in the Western tradition, to the peculiar modes of sensibility which feature in African works, and which derive from the African background, of which the uses of language, both conditioned by and conditioning the traditional modes of feeling and apprehension, constitute a distinct social reality.

p. 38 Irele

Any attempt to evaluate African literature outside these parameters is bound, in advance, to fail, because the two realities, preoccupation and priorities are different from each other. Subsequently, the two criticisms are expected to be as different as the two literatures and their histories.

Another facet of this complex subject is the involvement of the imperial factoring the attitude of Westerns toward the African literature. The former colonizer and actual dominator, politically and economically obsessed by what he calls a mission for "civilizing and educating Africa", is struggling to perpetuate his status of master. Europeans spare no time to remain the owners, if not the exclusive, and source of "belles-lettres". Therefore, it is very common to find many European voices endeavouring to relegate the African literature to the margin, or in the best cases to a second or third grade behind theirs.

At the other extremity of the rope stay the newly emerging African modern writers who are engaged in strenuous tug-of-war with Western critics and theorists. Under these circumstances, African writers are required more than ever to prove their capacities, faculties and creative intelligence. They are bound to tear the veils behind which Westerns, for a long span-time, has hidden their real intentions. "A man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body." Achebe, 1975, p.

158 the Ibo saying recapitulates the idea of the urgent necessity to diagnose the sickness and dig out its causes and origins, in order to come up with an efficient solution. The post-independence African writings were devoted to the political chaos and social plight of the population. Writers like Achebe, Soyinke, Ngugi, Armah...etc had done great works denouncing, deploring and highlighting the malfeasance of the greedy new regimes who are brilliantly depicted by Achebe in his satiric novel *A Man of the People* as follows: "tell them that this man has used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you –as my father did- if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth." 1966, p. 2

As far as African criticism is concerned, one has to bear in mind that, criticism comes later after literature to buttress it up and reveal its strong and weak points. Richards argues that, "for the experiences with which criticism is concerned are exceptionally accessible, we have only to open the book, stand before the picture, have the music played, spread out the rug, pour out the wine, and the material upon which the critic works is presently before us" p1

It is also worthwhile to mention that the African writers are summoned to break down the traditional structure of the Western language, if necessary, to fit the African thought, to bring a fresh original contribution to the world of art. At the meantime, Africans do not need to chew the cud. They are in a good position to create their literature out of a pure African inspiration.

As a result, it is necessary either to take into consideration the differences of the socio-historical context of the two literatures, or to establish an Afro-centric criticism. The latter option is preferable since a good judgement of a work depends heavily on the degree of familiarity of the critic with work in question.

I don't think one can assess a writer's motives without knowing something of his early development. His subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in ...before even he begins to write he will never completely escape.
p. 25 Orwell

Thus, African and Asian writers like Achebe and Raja Rao were compelled to work out some criticism on their original books and essays. In his answer to a question asked by Jussawalla, Achebe argues that, "if you do it (criticism) better than I do, I will stop it. ...the thing to bear in mind is the historical sequence. Criticism does not exist before what is criticized", argues Achebe, p.77. In other words, critics are just waiting for the writers

to initiate and create a raw material, before they start training themselves on that work. Therefore critical conclusions are relative and prone to miss the point. However, the dependency of criticism on literature cannot be considered negative, on the contrary, it is very positive as long as the duty of criticism is to discriminate aesthetic from sham literature.

Another controversial issue is the label of African literature which deserves a whole study, yet it may be noteworthy to evoke it here, to build up a brainstorm in the reader's mind about it. Due to the nature of theme, one can get easily lost behind the ramifications which are highly interwoven. On what basis one can decide upon what is African literature? Are there any special well determined characteristics of African literature?

In bookstores, it is a commonplace to fall on books entitled African French literature, African English Literature, African Portuguese literature; furthermore, titles are sometimes more specific as Nigerian, Ghanaian, Kenyan Literature. The use of such identifying adjectives casts a shadow of ambiguity as it is the case of the issue of identity and nationality of literature. To start from the very beginning, can we talk about national literature where there is no one national language? Any way, it is a habit now to talk about national literature, while we are fully conscious that in every single African nation coexist many languages whose speakers are ready to take arms at any moment, if it ever happens to their government to declare one of the neighbouring languages the official national language.

More complex and delicate situation of national languages is the fact that many local languages are usually spoken over a whole region covering different sovereign countries. For example, Pulaar, Soninke, and wolof in west Africa. In Senegal, Mauritania, the Gambia and Guinea at least one of these languages is recognized officially one of the national languages. So, if a literature is written in Pulaar i.e. by a Senegalese citizen would it be different from the one living in Guinea or Mauritania? It seems very important to establish one national language before proceeding to enlarge the scope of one unique African language. In both cases, it will not be an easy task, if not bordering utopia.

Once again the distinction between what is known as African literature and African English literature is inexact. In most of times the two literatures deal with the very socio-political and economic issues. In the African twentieth century novel i.e. regardless of its language, themes like neo-colonialism, independences, corruption and the misuse of power machine are omnipresent and widely shared by the African post-colonial authors. Consequently, throughout the two literatures any African can identify himself with the society being depicted by the author. Africa has

one soul and one culture, though there are some minor nuances. Therefore, the western languages are simply vehicles of communication and expression of ideas and thoughts. And this is may be the only positive legacy of colonialism, to provide to the numerous African ethnic groups one common language that is able to serve as a lingua franca. Achebe argues that, "if it failed to give them a song, gave them a tongue for singing" p. 75. One can conclude that African literature is: the ensemble of African concepts, culture, tradition and pattern of thought wrapped in a Western language. That is, African literature has a Western shell but an African essence. This should not mean in any case that the African oral literature and literature written in African Languages are disregarded. These literatures are part and parcel of the whole tradition and should be taken into consideration, even though the most visibly overwhelming body of African literature is written in Western Languages.

It can be felt easily that our discussion is a roundabout way of approaching the subject, due to the delicacy of the subject and its elasticity. Africans have had an oral tradition, before the arrival of the Westerners. The orality constituted for centuries a cement to maintain the cultural linkage between generations. It ensured the pass-over of the African culture from one generation to another. A juxtaposition of the African era of orality and the actual revolution of writing literature in abundance, raised the sense of uneasiness about the prevailing use of Western languages among many African writers.

The Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o proposes the writing of African literature in African native languages. He advocates a fresh reflection over the matter, in order to single out what language fits most the African audience. Ngugi's new language philosophy led him to break away from the main stream. This cleavage brought to the surface a host of questions: is it negative to write in a foreign language? What is the adequate African language for the African writing? Is there a sufficient number of African readerships in one native language? As one of the fervent supporters of the idea "African literature in African languages", Ngugi ended by stopping to write in English in 1977, and later on he took one more step forward, when he decided to put an end to his translations of his works from Kikuyu to English.

"I have lost interest in the use of the English language", declared Ngugi. Henceforth, the intellectual milieu gets agitated about the impact of the new decision of Ngugi, which he highlighted enough in his book "Decolonizing the mind". He claims that, "ninety percent of the population in Africa today speak only African languages and we need to reach that

ninety percent" p. 27. Writers like the West-Indian, Roy Heath, say that the work of Ngugi is a real reference to him, in choosing to produce in Creole or in any other nation language in the West Indian situation. While Ngugi sees in the use of English a form of dependency, Achebe looks at the matter from a different corner, the latter considers the English language as an artistic medium that is not simply used for communication, between the hands of the creative writers. Thus, it is up to the writers to make out of the language at their disposal a good convenient use according to the public they are targeting. The argument of Ngugi about the importance of the percentage of the Africans who can speak only African languages is questionable. For Ngugi when Africans write in these languages (English, French and Portuguese), they are basically addressing themselves to that very tiny minority. p.26

It appears that the author neglects two major factors. Firstly, there is only a very small minority of Africans who are able to read literature in local languages, whereas there is no guarantee yet about the attitude of the overwhelming majority toward literature in their native languages. Secondly, the majority of African illiterates can neither read nor write its native languages. In fact the decision of Ngugi to write exclusively in Kikuyu will be of little effect on the process of raising African consciousness, since his ideas and thoughts are henceforth confined in a language whose speakers are drastically smaller in number than those of English Speakers. One may advance translating works into English but translation is never complete.

In case of having every single African writer writing in his community tongue, Africa will be confronted with a problem of an enormous multiplicity of literatures, which will impose a laborious task of translation (unrealistic task to be fulfilled). A situation which is likely to engender the enlargement of the gap between the author and his African audience on a large scale; and the outcome of such situation is likely to be a multi-ethnic literature.

The implication of historical factors in shaping the actual African modern literature is extremely important. Meanwhile it is still possible to improve the status of African languages to satisfy the African people. To attain this aim African intellectuals are invited, it seems, to work out a political decision to adopt and imply a new coherent African language policy. The promotion and development must precede writing literature in these languages, if such literature is to survive and succeed among Africans

first; because, Africans need to be taught their languages more than having literature written in these languages.

Still the African writer is confronted with a grave problem which resides in the divorce between his artistic medium and the cultural burden he is committed to communicate to his readers. Due to the fact that language is shaped and adjusted to fit the set of mind, the culture, and ideology of its people and their universe; it is the first responsible for the understanding or not of any given culture. Therefore, the differences and nuances between Western and African cultures may cause cultural hiatus that can manifest in lack of Western accurate expression for certain African notions. In answer to the importance of an African language for African literature, Achebe argues that, it will be mere waste of time and misunderstanding of history, if the Africans were tempted to establish an African literature written in a common African language in comparison to literatures in Russian, Japanese and French...etc. According to him; "History has not treated the whole world the same way, and we would be foolish not to realise how we are in peculiar situation as Africans. Our history has not been the history of England." p. 76

Among many proposition about the adoption of one African language one can also cite the proposition of Wole Soyinka. This proposition consists in the adoption of Swahili for the Sub-Saharan Africa and that all the future coming literature should be written in it. But in the present confusing context of Africa, this approach is rather a utopia. It harbours lethal germs inside it. First a compromising political consensus is indispensable. Secondly, the willingness of the population to assimilate to the fore-mentioned language, and turn down the diversity of languages they speak. If we suppose that a magical and extraordinary change of the context occurs and the above mentioned two factors are satisfied, what will be the fate of literary life? Is the literary production going to live a period of recession all along the duration of the acquisition of the new language? None of the situations is likely to happen, furthermore, lack of time and devotion among Africans to undertake such hard tedious work complicates the issue further.

Whatever, discords the critics and the artists may outline about the subject of the relationship between art and criticism on the one hand and art and language on the other hand, there will always be the distinction between "popular art and art for the connoisseur" to borrow the words of Philipson. Even though, the standards of criticism are there to help the critic to guide every reader singles out his own diet according to his personal taste. Barzun advances in his essay: *Human Freedom* that the standards and criterion of

literary criticism can never be absolute, eternal or universal. A claim buttressed up by Keneth Quinn 1992 in his book *How literature Works*, when he argued that "any writer who chooses can stand the traditional rules on their head and perhaps get away with it" p. 22. Because, of absence of rigid delineated laws such as the ones applied to describe the physical universe.

The African modern literature encounters enormous problem of language issue, and so far, a fresh approach which can offer an outlet from the actual situation is unpredictable. The Pan-Africanist feeling and orientation displayed by many African authors lead only to leave them on the horns of dilemma of language choice. Unfortunately, the prevailing atmosphere actually in Africa is far from being conducive to the establishment of one African language for all; moreover, it is very conspicuous that the proponents of the promotion of an African unique literary language took the subject for granted. Instead, they should have had a deep reflection and analysis of the African sociological context to realise the thorniness of the matter.

In what concerns the foundation of an African criticism one can confirm, without being mistaken, that it is at the reach of African writers. Owing to the fact that Africans are the best to know the core of their works, since they are the architects who endeavour not to neglect any detail of the social and historical phenomena they are tackling. But this does not mean in any sense that African criticism must be exclusively African field. Any other critic who is ready to abide with the specificity of the African literature; which stems from a mixture of sociology, history and original preoccupation of the society, is likely to come up with a more pertinent conclusions. In other words, generalities are not applicable to criticism. What is true about Western literature is not necessarily true about African literature.

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