

African Literature: Regional, National and Ethnic Imperatives

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THE NEEDS OF SCHOLARSHIP and research make it necessary for scholars to occasionally re-examine some of the concepts and conventionally accepted notions that are very germane to the scholars' disciplines. The gusto — and occasional emotional outbursts — which accompanied the assertion and definition of an "African Literature"¹ has largely spent itself, and in its place we now often find dispassionate restatements that are only necessary for purposes of thesis formulations. We may now safely say that the need to accord "African Literature" a status independent of the colonial antecedents of such literature is hardly questioned by well-meaning scholars of the literary discipline in Africa and some parts of the Western world and America. This view is given credence by the fact that a good number of scholars of African literature these days obtain their masters' and doctorate degrees in British and American universities that had hitherto attracted to themselves a long tradition of conservatism towards African studies. And the dissertations for which these awards are made overtly or covertly hold brief for an African literature.

But having acknowledged the existence of an African literature, one should be bold enough to grapple with the implications of such an admission. Does the admission of the existence of an African literature imply that such a term as "continental literature" should now be allowed to assert its own slot within the fold of "national," "regional" and "ethnic" literatures so fairly well recognized in comparative literary scholarship?

There is now a long-standing tradition in literary history to examine a literature from the perspective of the nation from where that literature is produced. As Albert Gérard puts it,

“literary history began as a science in Western Europe at a time when the acknowledged units of European history were the nation-states. Accordingly, it developed along national lines, each literature being examined independently of the other.”² At that early stage in the evolution of literary history, the nation tended to be culturally and linguistically homogenous, so that when one talked of the literature of a people, one always implied a literature written in the people’s language. It is in this regard that Willa Muir could argue that German literature was the product of a language, German, that “conditions . . . the kind of thought it expresses, and so . . . must have organic relationship to the aspirations and imaginative constructions of those who use it.”³

But as world history advanced, the concept of a nation as a culturally and linguistically homogenous entity had to be re-examined in the light of new cultural nationalisms within and across nation-states. The nation became as complex as Disraeli’s definition of it as an entity

gradually created by a variety of influences — the influence of original organization, of climate, of soil, laws, customs, manners, extraordinary accidents and incidents in their history, and the individual character of her illustrious citizens.⁴

National literature, in the circumstances, could not afford to ignore these factors that have helped in the evolution of the new kind of nation. It began to breathe the national spirit; it reflected the national culture of the people and derived its unique inspiration from the history, environment and institutions of such people.

The American nation, in spite of its conglomeration of peoples, became identified with an American national literature, possessing a peculiar style and temperament. It is a style and temperament in which writers like Whitman and Mark Twain, and others who came after them, laid a tradition with their “freedom of line; their vernacular style, their lack of interest in social themes and their preference for naked unsocial man, and with their large sense of responsibility for the quality of American society and the nature of the American man.”⁵ Similarly, the Canadian nation, its mutually antagonistic bilingualism notwithstanding, has been identified by Miriam Waddington as possess-

ing a national literary tradition with themes that include "a zeal for landscape, a self-conscious, anti-colonial nationalism, and the pioneer pattern of family life which requires the moral virtues of courage, loyalty and resourcefulness."⁸ And the Indian nation, with its multiplicity of cultures and languages, possesses a literature whose novel, according to William Walsh, is based on "the Indian scene, the agricultural tradition, the vast distance, the terrible poverty, the profoundly significant religion."⁷

What has been true of the literatures of the "new" nations of Europe, America and Asia, applies, to a large extent, to the African continent, though here one must acknowledge some outstanding, if not peculiar, issues. In Africa, the long presence of Portugal in Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique, has left its mark on the literatures of these nations, even if only for the reason that Portuguese remains the national language of these nations. French literary influence remains such a strong influence in Africa that it has contributed in creating the vital difference between the literatures of English-speaking Africa and those of French-speaking Africa. Hence, whereas the literature of French-speaking Africa, especially under colonial rule, was centred around the concept of *négritude*, English-speaking African literature was more dynamic in its confrontation with colonialism, and thus more concerned with contemporary issues. Indeed, it can be argued that the concept of *négritude* itself as an essentially psychological reaction is no different from what is known of the French literary tradition: its concern with the abstract and the psychic. "The philosophy of *négritude*," Clive Wake argues rightly,

which is most strongly associated with French-speaking Africa, is as much a product of French culture, with its love for literary schools and literary manifestoes, as it is a reaction against it. French Africans of Senghor's generation were obsessed with the primacy of culture as the French themselves, with their mission *civilisatrice*. This French influence has tended to impose certain uniformity on the creative writing of French-speaking Africa.⁸

Imperial influence has thus left its mark on Africa, compounding the analysis of her literatures, even after the colonial masters have left the political scene, and many African countries have

become independent. The often undeclared reasons for classifying African literature under one entity to which specific characteristics are given are that, firstly, Africa belongs to one continent whose peoples share similarity of cultures and, secondly, that the African peoples have undergone similar historical experiences emanating from the incidence of colonialism.

Whereas many literary critics of African literature may, like Albert Gérard, define modern African literature as "creative writing by black Africans,"⁹ others may seek to be more explicit, first, by recognizing that particular sections of the African continent are inhabited and controlled by Arabs, whites of European origin, and blacks; and, second, by seeking to distinguish between the literatures written in these areas whose yardstick for categorization is racial. Janheinz Jahn has, on the basis of this race-oriented identification, isolated what amounts to three "national" literatures in the African continent — the "Afro-Arab" written in the areas where the Islamic-Arabic culture dominates; the "Neo-African" which is heir to traditional African literature and Western literature; and the Western which "reveals no African stylistic features or patterns of expression . . . even if written by an African."¹⁰

Considerable debate has been precipitated by Janheinz Jahn; the term "African literature" has been a much battered subject, and many literary critics of *that* literature are fairly agreed that, no matter what one's definition of African literature might be, it needs a different set of critical criteria from that which the world has been using for centuries in relation to the criticism of European and "Euro-derived" literatures. There is a lot to be said in favour of this call for "a system of isolating and evaluating the literary works of African peoples; a system that reflects the special characteristics and dynamic imperatives of the African experience as reflected in literature."¹¹ Whether, however, the recognition of some peculiar cultural and historical circumstances that have informed the evolution of African literature would mean the establishment of a different set of critical criteria for African literature is another matter. The question might in fact be asked as to whether there is ever a literature that is appraised and assessed in a vacuum; a literary critical analysis

that fails to put into consideration "the special characteristics and dynamic imperatives" of the experiences of the people who own that literature.

When Omolara Leslie argues, in relation to African literature, that it is doubtful "whether one can handle the area of affect in aesthetics without seeing or feeling the world from the perspective of the work's culture; without understanding or sympathizing with the cultural values which suffuse the art of a different people,"¹² she holds a view that is as much applicable to any other literature as it is to African literature. Implied in the above is a recognition that every writer of note writes within the context of a literary tradition, and that his creative work can only best be assessed in the context of that tradition within which the writer operates. One is reminded of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which has the European literary tradition as its contextual reference.

We must indeed be prepared to acknowledge the paradoxes inherent in this argument that those who are involved in the criticism of African literature use as their yardsticks of assessment a new set of critical criteria. On the one hand is the suggestion that African literature, however defined, be given the status of a "national literature." Since African cultures share an impressive degree of similarity, the argument seems to indicate, and since most of the African peoples have been victims of the colonial experience, then all must be seen as being bound by a common African destiny. African literature must be seen as one literature; a literature shaped by similar historical and cultural circumstances, and characterized by similar traits. On the other hand, however, there is the implied admission in the above argument that the African continent is made up of a conglomeration of national cultures. If those who talk of Africa as if it is a homogenous entity have not gone out of their way to admit that there exists an appreciable degree of diversity of cultures even in black Africa alone, it is because such an admission would undermine their call for one set of critical criteria for African literature.

In addition to this implicit admission of the existence of so many cultural groups in Africa, a good number of critics of African literature have had to discuss such literature in relation

to the new nations to which the writers of this literature belong. The initial impression seems to be that since these independent nations exist anyway, even if only as geographical entities, then it is important to take note of what country an African writer has come from. But a recognition of the geographical homelands of African literature soon led to a recognition that certain literary characteristics tended to differentiate writers from certain regions of Africa from others from other regions. Thus it became fashionable to hear critics of African literature talk of things like "West African literature," "East African literature," "South African literature," and "North African literature." And such demarcations have not been mere mechanical divisions necessary to isolate specific areas for critical study. It soon became apparent that such demarcations had been necessitated by the critics' conviction that such regional approaches to the study of African literature were essential, because there were indeed certain literary, cultural and historical evidences to justify this "regionalization" of African literature.

A study of such books as Emmanuel Obiechina's *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*,¹³ Kolawole Ogungbesan's *New West African Literature*,¹⁴ D. I. Nwoga's *Literature and Modern West African Culture*,¹⁵ Romanus Egudu's *Four Modern West African Poets*,¹⁶ Adrian Roscoe's *Uhuru's Fire: Literature East to South*,¹⁷ and Heywood's *Aspects of South African Literature*,¹⁸ would bear out the above contention. Ogungbesan, for example, writes in his introduction to *New West African Literature* that "one dominant theme in all the essays [in the book] is the writer's search for an appropriate response to the political moment of his society."¹⁹ And in one of the chapters of his book, *African Literature in the Twentieth Century*, titled "East, Central and South African Novelists in English," O. R. Dathorne emphasizes that the writers he treats are bound by a common approach to theme and style quite distinguishable from what one finds in West African literature.²⁰

From the "regionalization" of African literature, some critics have now moved on to talk of the "national" characteristics of literatures that come from particular African nations. Such books as Bernth Lindfors' *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*,²¹

Ekwensi's edited anthology titled *Festac Anthology of Nigerian New Writing*,²² and Bruce King's *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* are only, one suspects, indications of a likely future trend in the study of African literature; a trend that would encourage the examination of African literature from the perspective of the relevance of certain writings to the history, mood, cultural nationalism and aspirations of the nation to which the writers belong. Bruce King articulates this kind of vision when he argues that

it may be possible to begin talking about a Nigerian literature and to see something like the emergence of a distinctive type with an aura of its own. Already the general reader is becoming aware of certain typically Nigerian features, mainly a kind of vitality and ebullience which is very Nigerian and which one senses in the people themselves on arriving in Lagos from Dakar or Accra. . . .²³

Contemporary Nigerian poetry, continues Bruce King, combines "a sense of the concrete, of form and poetic insight which gives [such poetry] its vital quality."²⁴ We are inclined to agree with him, and we would go further to suggest that the national characteristics that are beginning to emerge in Nigerian literature in English reflect the current pulse of the Nigerian nation: its aggressive and dehumanizing capitalism, the restless vitality of its urban dwellings, the peculiar vigorous humour of its citizens even in the midst of an economically debilitating existence, and the increasing awareness of the economically underprivileged Nigerians and of the class differences often generated by the kind of acute capitalism which the Nigerian nation embodies.

But the emergence of national characteristics in the literatures of modern African nations does not in any way undermine the existence of what might be described as "ethnic literatures" in each of these nations. Chinua Achebe, in one of his numerous comments on African literature, asserts that "you cannot cram African literature into a small, neat, definition. I do not see African literature as one unit, but as a group of associated units — in fact the sum total of all *national* and *ethnic* literatures in Africa."²⁵ In the context in which Achebe makes this comment,

the word "ethnic" can be taken to mean no more than what a sociologist has defined, in relation to Nigeria, as

consisting of interacting members, who define themselves as belonging to a named or labelled social group with whose interest they identify and which manifest certain aspects of a unique culture, while constituting part of a wider society. . . .²⁶

Thus we find that ethnicism implies a language indigenous to the ethnic group. Ethnic literature would therefore mean the literature of a cultural group which is identified with, among other things, one language.

Such literatures abound in world literary history. Spanish-American literature, Scandinavian-American literature and German-American literature are all ethnic literatures in the United States of America. They arose out of differing circumstances, but the factor most common to them was the desire to use the medium of language to ensure a continuity between these American groups and their ancestors in Europe.²⁷ In the U.S.S.R., the tendency in modern times has been to promote the literatures of the various peoples that make up the Soviet Republic, provided such literatures help to uphold the Marxist-Leninist ideology of socialist realism in literature. To the extent that these literatures are written in the languages of these constituents of the Russian nation, they are ethnic literatures. Similarly, Yugoslavia has four separate literatures featuring four languages, "each of them flourishing at least in part because of the peculiarly benevolent attitudes with which official Marxist-Leninist doctrine has always regarded the preservation and fostering of national cultural differences."²⁸

If ethnic literatures still flourish in nations with long traditions of national literary characteristics, we are in a better position to appreciate why the African continent, whose nations are relatively young, is remarkable for featuring many literatures written in the languages of the various African ethnic groups. This is in addition to the fact that oral literature, performed in these indigenous African languages, still assumes a pervasive dimension. Albert Gérard's study of four African literatures in his book, *Four African Literatures*, reveals that the difference between these literatures — in Amharic, Zulu, Xhosa and Southern Sotho

— and African literature in English lies not so much in content as in the language medium of these literatures. In other words, it is the language of these literatures that first and foremost makes them ethnic. In Nigeria today, written literature, in Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo have assumed such extensive and complex dimensions that they are all studied at post-graduate level in some Nigerian universities. Any analysis of literature in Nigeria that fails to take into cognizance the existence of these literatures would certainly fall short of adequacy.

Would it mean, then, that an ethnic literature qualifies to be called that name simply because it is written in a language indigenous to an ethnic group? We believe that though the language factor could be used as the criterion for determining an ethnic literature, it would be more profitable if such ethnicity takes into cognizance a number of other factors that are not entirely linguistic. R. P. Armstrong has argued that “any work executed by an individual informed by the unique values, perceptions, esthetics and the whole system of social, political and economic structures of an ethnic group — black or white, Moslem or Christian, educated or nearly illiterate — contributes to and defines the literature of that group.”²⁹ We note that Armstrong has not insisted that an ethnic literature be written in the indigenous language of the ethnic group, and we agree with him. A literary work written in a language other than that belonging to an ethnic group could in fact reveal “the unique values, perceptions, esthetics and whole system of social, political and economic structures of [that] ethnic group.” It is on the basis of this conviction that we have argued elsewhere³⁰ that many of the novels written in English by the Igbo of Nigeria reveal a great deal about the Igbo world of the past and present — a world of people and values — and that, stylistically, these writers have drawn a lot from the character and syntax of the Igbo language even while they write in English. It is this stylistic peculiarity of their English, derived from the Igbo language, that has made Bernth Lindfors argue that these writers use an “Iboized English” characterized by “a quiet prose style” which is “calm, graceful, proverb-studded idiom which resembles natural expression in their native tongue.”³¹

The process of "Igbonization"³² of English seems to be a conscious attempt by certain writers of "the Achebe School"³³ to stretch the resources of the English language so as to accommodate Igbo thought patterns. Achebe himself throws some light on this conscious manipulation of the English language to suit his artistic purposes. He quotes an excerpt from his *Arrow of God*, and we think it necessary to reproduce the passage here:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had I known* tomorrow.³⁴

Then Achebe proceeds to re-write the excerpt in a version of English which he considers more "standard," but less artistic:

I am sending you as my representative among these people—just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight.³⁵

If we examine the two passages by the same author, we shall find that the passage in *Arrow of God* is characterized by two remarkable features. The first is a transliterative quality which gives an impression of the structure of some other language hiding under a veil of the outer structures of the English language—"saying *had I known*," for example, is the usual Igbo way of expressing "regret." The second feature is the author's Igbo, proverb-drawn, metaphor of adaptability; a popular proverb which insists that "he who watches the dancing mask does not stay on one spot" (*a naghi ano otu ebe ele mmuo*). One might want to compare Achebe's passage in *Arrow of God* with a short one from Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda* where the picaresque hero says:

I give to each man his own. Goodness to all. If there is any man to whom what is good is not good let him put his head into the fire and see how he like it.³⁶

The passage is very transliterative. All the speaker does here is

wish everybody well, insisting that the world is sufficiently a nice place for one to feel contented in. But the author presents the speech as if he is "writing Igbo in the English language." Like Achebe, he makes a triumph of the exercise because he has not undermined the credibility of the English language as a medium of communication. The vocabulary is English; the surface syntax is not unEnglish. But underneath all these is an Igbo rhythm, the total morphology of a people's language, asserting its aesthetic presence. Perhaps it is only a feeling, but a powerful feeling of the speech nuances of a language other than English.

Bernth Lindfors, in a chapter already cited, which he calls "Characteristics of Yoruba and Ibo Prose Styles in English," argues that Nigerian Yoruba writers in English use a prose style that derives its quality from the Yoruba language; a prose style which he describes as a "rococo literary style,"³⁷ and which reveals a "verbal ebullience and a zany sense of humour" reminding one readily of "Faustian rhetoric."³⁸ Lindfors says, in effect, that, like their Igbo counterparts who write in English, Yoruba writers in English reveal a great deal of the ethnic sensibility that has informed their art. Such a conclusion, even if only tentative, indicates a new area of fruitful research; an area that would bring to greater light the wider dimensions that are implicit in the definition of an ethnic literature.

The term "African Literature," then, needs to be viewed from all possible perspectives. It can be approached from the point of view of literature from Africa written in colonial languages; and one can go further to examine such literature from the perspective of regional characteristics. African literature can also be approached from the perspective of the new nations to which the writers of these literary works belong. This "national" approach could attempt to identify the national characteristics of this literature written either in a colonial language or other indigenous languages of the peoples that make up the nation. Finally, African literature ought to include within the compass of its definition the ethnic literatures of Africa. In determining what constitutes ethnicity in literature, the language criterion should not be taken as being a sole yardstick, though it is inevitable in studying both the oral forms of such literatures and works

written in the languages of African ethnic groups. The fact that a whole world — of people, or values and of linguistic traits — of an ethnic group could be revealed in literature, using a language not indigenous to that group, should be acknowledged.

NOTES

- ¹ D. S. Izevbaye's article, "African Literature Defined: The Record of a Controversy" (*Ibadan Studies in English*, 1:1, May-June 1969, 55-69) contains a long list of references which may well serve as a select bibliography of the definition of African literature up till the time the article was written.
- ² *Four African Literatures* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), p. 12. Wellek and Warren make a similar observation in *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 51.
- ³ *On Translation*, ed. R. H. Brower (New York: Galaxy Edition, 1960), p. 69.
- ⁴ Quoted in Shaffer Boyd, *Nationalism, Myth and Reality* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1955), p. 9.
- ⁵ *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Modern World Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (London: Hutchinson, 1963), p. 3.
- ⁶ "Canadian Tradition and Canadian Literature," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 8 (December 1969), p. 130.
- ⁷ "Nataraja and the Packet of Saffron: the Indian Novel in English," *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*, ed. William Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 57.
- ⁸ "Nigeria and the Caribbean: A Bird's Eye View," *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (London: Evans Bros., 1971), p. 194.
- ⁹ Gérard, pp. 4-5.
- ¹⁰ *A History of Neo-African Literature* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 22.
- ¹¹ Charles Nnolim, "An African Literary Aesthetic: A Prolegomena," *Ba Shiru*, 7:2 (1976), 56-57. Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie have gone further to itemize such literary criteria for assessing African literature in a number of articles whose core arguments have been incorporated in their recently published book, *Toward the De-colonization of African Literature* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Books, 1980).
- ¹² "Criticism and The Emergence of African Fiction," *Ba Shiru*, 5:1 (1973), p. 73.
- ¹³ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- ¹⁴ London: Heinemann, 1979.
- ¹⁵ Benin: Ethiope Publishing Co., 1978.
- ¹⁶ Lagos: Nok Publishers, 1977.
- ¹⁷ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

- 18 London: Heinemann, 1976.
- 19 Ogungbesan, p. vii.
- 20 London: Heinemann, 1976, pp. 121-50.
- 21 London: Heinemann, 1979.
- 22 Lagos: Ministry of Information, 1977.
- 23 King, p. 194.
- 24 King, p. 198.
- 25 "The African Writer and the English Language," *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 56.
- 26 O. A. Sanda, "Ethnic Relations in Sociological Theory," *Ethnic Relations in Nigeria*, ed. Sanda (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1976), p. 38.
- 27 See Spiller, Thorp, Johnson and Canby, *Literary History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 678-88.
- 28 Thomas Butler, "Yugoslavia's Slavic Languages: A Brief Historical Perspective," *Review of National Literatures (The Multi-National Literature of Yugoslavia)*, 5:1 (Spring 1974), 19.
- 29 "The Characteristics and Comprehension of a National Literature—Nigeria," *Proceedings of a Conference on African Languages and Literature*, ed. Jack Berry (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 120.
- 30 A. N. Ebeogu, "The Igbo Tradition in Nigerian Literature of English Expression," Diss. University of Ibadan, 1980.
- 31 *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1973), p. 167.
- 32 Most present-day scholars of Igbo origin insist that "Igbo," referring to the people as well as their language, has always been the right word, before it got anglicized to "Ibo." "Igbonization" is preferred to Lindfors' "Iboization" not only because of this need to use the authentic word, but also because the addition of "n" seems more in consonance with the rules of verbal derivations from English nominals, where a consonant usually precedes the "-ize" morpheme.
- 33 Lindfors uses this expression to refer to this group of Igbo writers in English who draw a lot of their thematic and stylistic materials from the Igbo culture (see *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*, p. 47). Ernest Emenyonu, in his *The Rise of the Igbo Novel* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. xxi) uses a similar expression, "a school of Achebe," to refer to this same group.
- 34 London: Heinemann, 1964, p. 55. Quoted in "The African Writer and the English Language," *Morning Yet on Creation Day (Essays)* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 61.
- 35 "The African Writer and the English Language," p. 62.
- 36 London: Fontana Books, 1972, p. 6.
- 37 *Folklore in Nigerian Literature*, p. 165.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 164.