

Editorial Article

African Literature Comes of Age

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African Literature has indeed ‘come of age’ since the publication, in the English language, of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in the middle of the 20th century. Prior to 1958, there were remarkable novels by Africans written and read inside and outside the African continent. They include Peter Abrahams’ *Mine Boy* (1946), *The Path of Thunder* (1948), *Tell Freedom* (1954), *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956); Ferdinand Oyono’s *Houseboy* (1956); Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952); Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954); Nadine Gordimer’s *Lying Days* (1953); Camara Laye’s *The African Child* (1956), *The Radiance of the King* (1954); and others. One would have thought that a collective name for this body of writing should have been ‘African Literature/African Writing’ in the context of world literatures, but it was not. Moreover, before these African writings were published in European languages, there existed creative works by Africans written in indigenous African languages, some of which were published, notably by British publishers in the United Kingdom. Three distinct examples are Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1931), Pita Nwana’s *Omenuko* (1933), and D.O. Fagunwa’s *Ògbójú Ọ̀dẹ̀ nínú Ìgbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ (The Forest of a Thousand Daemons)* (1938).

One can point out that before these writings in African languages, a most popular form of imaginative creativity, ‘storytelling’, had existed in all African societies from time immemorial. It was a verbal performance. It consisted of oral narratives expressively performed in the process of narration. It was a very popular form of entertainment. It served raconteurs in telling folktales, seers and diviners in their invocations and incantations (forensic and otherwise), and griots in telling or updating the history, heritage, lineage, and exploits of ruling monarchs in ancient African empires and kingdoms. It served warriors, hunters, wrestlers, carvers, farmers, and other professionals relaying accounts of their expeditions, adventures, heroic experiences, victories

or otherwise, to family or community members. Mothers found it effective in inculcating cherished community and societal values in the formative years of their children. The forms of communication were relative to times and circumstances.

The 'song' was a universal medium. There were solo performances featuring minstrels and group performances consisting of vocalist/s accompanied by drummers and dancers acting as chorus. Essentially, embedded in these African oral performances, were customs and traditions transmitted by word of mouth from generation to generation. Again, in essence, these performances could have been identified in literary circles as 'African Oral Performances' and designated (because of the vast literary contents and artistic techniques embedded in them) as 'Oral Literature', and given due recognition and credit as such, but they were not. This was in pre-colonial and colonial eras, and because Africa was colonized or occupied by Europe, the European *literati* applied to Africa the 'famous' (notorious?) intellectual theory of their time that proclaimed: '*If it is not written, it is not Literature!*'

African Oral Performances, collectively known as Oral Literature, are verbal, not written. However, their cultural contents and techniques of presentation make them literature. They constitute the sources of raw African values. Contemporary African prose fiction, poetry, and drama draw from them in function, narrative techniques, and purpose. Contemporary African writers have used or applied them to embellish their narrative techniques as well as to reinforce their themes of social relevance. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe became the first African writer who consciously reached into the past to draw themes and narrative techniques from the African art of storytelling. His uniqueness as a modern African storyteller lay in his innovative approach in establishing the art of the African novel, namely, the articulation of the traditional and the modern in storytelling. His characters had names (Nwoye, Obierika, Ikemefuna, Ezinma, Nneka etc.) with meanings that reflected their cultural history and the circumstances of their birth. He brought into the novel realities of African and Igbo environments, human conditions, and sensibilities in ramifications never before thought possible in a novel. They included such realities as African cosmologies, religious and philosophical beliefs in the supernatural, the concept of death as a point of transition, not a finality; reincarnation, sacrifice, ancestors – and yes, 'there was coming and going between the living and the dead'. He boldly asserted that 'there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather – that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry.' (Killam 1973, 3). Perhaps, one can see how these ideas could seem audacious and

inflammatory in the face of European popular ideas about literature, its scope and function, and E.M. Forster's definition of the novel documented in his celebrated book, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). Achebe made no apologies. He purposefully brought into his novel *Things Fall Apart* more 'aspects' than Forster did, some inconceivable in European minds. 'Fantasy, prophecy, human nature' articulated by Forster were incompatible with Achebe's relative depictions in *Things Fall Apart*. These include ancestors from the spirit world changing into physical humans to attend social events in the world of the living, the existential roles of diviners, and the institution of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Additionally included is the half-human/half-spiritual identity of priestess Chielo shopping with fellow women in the open market in the day and communing with supernatural agencies at night. Instead of ideologies known in European literatures, Achebe called on African writers to tell the African story, the African way. He declared, 'I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.' (Killam 1973, 4). Furthermore, he maintained:

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 had 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 dignity they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who cannot tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. (Killam 1973, 8)

In *Things Fall Apart*, without mincing words, Achebe told African readers where the rain began to beat them. Close to the end of the novel, after European colonizers stripped Africans of their dignity, humanity, cultural pride and identity, choice of language of communication, and self-esteem, Achebe then stated his purpose in the novel:

'Does the white man understand our custom about land?'
'How can he when he does not speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion

also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act as one. *He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.*' (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 160, my emphasis)

A number of British publishers rejected the manuscript of *Things Fall Apart* before Heinemann publishers, London (after considerable intervention and persuasion) agreed to publish it. Obviously, they did not see any lucrative profit coming from the risky venture, so they printed only 2,000 copies in hardback for libraries. Who else would want or care to buy or read a so-called novel written by an African? In England at the time, not many thought Achebe's novel had even a fighting chance. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Chinua Achebe died on 21 March 2013, but he was alive to see his debut novel read in all corners of the globe with millions of copies in sales, and translations into over sixty (and counting) world languages. In response to someone who was said to have so bitterly resented *Things Fall Apart* that he ridiculed and mocked it, 'that'd be the day when Achebe would be read along with Chaucer on a classic literary canon', Achebe quipped, 'and when that day comes, they would be reading more Achebe than Chaucer!' Achebe had his unique sense of humour. He recognized that *Things Fall Apart* would grow to influence not only African Literature in particular, but also change the course of world literature in general. Literary critics who attributed 'the invention of African Literature' to Chinua Achebe seemed to have had just cause! African Literature has indeed 'come of age' in the 21st century when it has been called by its rightful name. There might be places in the world today with notions of African Literature as 'one of the new world literatures in English or French'. Such nomenclatures betray ignorance or wilful misinformation that only facts and re-education can correct. In the 21st century, that re-education is being done by African and non-African scholars in classrooms, lecture halls, and other forums and platforms all over the world. The demands for African writings grow by the day and African writers, male and female, are responding with amazing innovative creativities.

This volume of *African Literature Today* is not only an affirmation but also a celebration of African Literature coming of age in all its ramifications. The Articles as well as the Literary Supplement reflect its maturity, diversity, scope, spread, and above all, relevance. The articles deal with diverse subject matters, set in all geographic regions (urban

as well as rural environments) of the continent, and discuss works of authors from all parts of Africa: west, east, north, and south. The themes of the works have no boundaries and touch topics as far apart from each other as the approaches to them – from sickle cell disease to the animalization of humans. Feminism has a new twist that states that pioneer feminist writers were guilty of the stereotypes of womanhood that they criticized and lambasted in male chauvinistic writings. A discourse on black masculinity as epitome of racism goes a step further to redefine masculinity as having different shades far worse than they appear on the surface. Two articles (one by a woman, the other by a man), on religion as a weapon of dehumanization of womanhood and political exploitation in creative works set in different parts of Africa, come to the same conclusion after extensive analysis that religion was used by its propagators to exploit the populace, dehumanize women, and create class distinctions. A novel set in post-apartheid South Africa existentially portrays apartheid as far from over; dead but alive! Conventional literary genres are in one article said to manifest shortcomings in definitions and representations; that indeed, genres are either disappearing or crossing boundaries; that the theatre is regenerating new forms that in theory and practice change the known trajectories of dramatic theatre, and more. Some specifics will help to substantiate the increasing thematic depths and upsurges that have not only reinforced the autonomous status of African Literature, but also endowed its criticism with vibrant, formidable theoretical approaches. In general, these kinds of substance, freshness, and vitality characterize the articles in this volume of *African Literature Today*.

In the lead chapter, 'Of Literature & Medicine: Narrating Sickle Cell Disease in a Nigerian Novel', Kazeem Adebisi-Adelabu presents an engagement with the subject of illness in the Nigerian literary context. He argues that sickle cell disease (SCD) has become so rampant in Nigeria over the years that it deserves the type of wide attention given to HIV/AIDS in both the medical humanities and in African literary studies. He advocates among other things that, 'Medical personnel can draw illumination and pedagogic values from reading illness narratives (...) Perhaps the multiplicity of benefits or responses to a single narrative embedded with multiple meanings is what makes fictions of illness or pathography a thing of interest in both literary and non-literary landscapes in recent times.' This article will be of interest to literary scholars as well as the general reader.

Chikwurah Destiny Isiguzo, in his 'Post-humanism & Speciesism in African Literature: Animals & the Animalized in Zakes Mda's

The Heart of Redness’, brings a rare perspective in the analysis of the portrayal of animal characters in this novel. He interrogates Mda’s novel from a post-humanist theory focusing on human and animal species. Beginning with exploitation, Isiguzo ends with an analysis of the portrayal of horse intelligence and suffering: ‘Comparing human suffering to the suffering of nonhuman animals or other living things to some people is unthinkable (...). However, a critical examination of human exploitation reveals that it shares the same pattern as animal exploitation and degradation.’ There are personifications of animal behaviours and actions that remind one about George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* in an African setting and environment.

In ‘Manifestations of Masculinities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Novels: Initiating a Talk on Black Masculinity Studies’, Paramita Routh Roy uses two of Adichie’s novels to open an important discourse on black masculinity: ‘The whole notion of blackness has been constructed by the white people in their own interests. It is by creating the idea of “other” that the white colonizers tried to legitimize their superiority and their hegemony over the colonized. In this connection, “black male gender identities have been culturally constructed through complex dialectics of power” and thus unveiling this complex system can expose the hypocrisy of the white hegemonic structure (Pochmara, 12). Adichie initiates a conversation on “Black Masculinity” by investing her fictional narratives with characters that represent different shades of masculinity (...) It is clear that through her novels she emphasizes the transforming definitions of black masculinity.’ This is a new area of attention in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It makes an interesting read. Paramita Routh Roy persuasively argues the points she raises logically. Equally significant are her definitions of the terms, ‘black masculinity’ and ‘subordinate masculinities’.

Readers may find Nonye Chinyere Ahumibe’s chapter, ‘Transformative Female Narratives & New Visions in African Women’s Writing: A Re-reading of NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* & Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*’, engaging and rattling at the same time. She states that pioneer African feminist writers were as guilty of derogatory stereotypes of womanhood as the male chauvinistic writers they set out to criticize and lambast in their works. Included are Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Ifeoma Okoye, Amma Darko, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. She advocates alternative African women’s writing that purposefully recreates or re-imagines African womanhood. The two selected novels she studies in the chapter, demonstrate that Adichie and Bulawayo present in

them 'alternative stories' about African women which 'exhibit their complexity and multi-dimensionality (...) chang[e] society's poor perception of women, and enhance[e] women's sense of self and value (...) and ensur[e] that economic exploitation of female characters is non-existent'. This article is bound to compel a re-reading of a lot of current African women's writings and their criticism to date.

In 'Religion, Capitalism & Politics: The Revolutionary Imagination in the Plays of Nawal El-Saadawi', H. Oby Okolocha explores how Nawal El-Saadawi's plays represent her most irrepressible qualities of dissent and fearlessness. She argues that there is a close similarity between the operations of religion, capitalism, and politics and that Saadawi demonstrates in the plays how the three social institutions exploit the populace, discriminate against women, and create class distinctions. Okolocha concludes that events in the plays illustrate that the operations of religion are synonymous with the operations of power politics, and Saadawi's presentations suggest that religion is inherently an oppressive construct and shares similarities with capitalism.

Alexandra Negri, in 'Approaching Gang Violence on the Cape Flats in Rehana Rossouw's *What Will People Say?*', gives the reader peeps into post-apartheid mixed feelings of love and hate, dreams and realities symbolized by the Cape Flats, 'a suburb located between the Cape Peninsula and the mountains south-east of Cape Town in South Africa. (...) The crime-ridden townships of the Cape Flats are a blatant reminder of the spatial legacy of segregation as a feature of apartheid.' Negri analyses and interprets the novel as a kind of metaphor of 'hopes and impediments':

how to best cope with past and present sins committed by one's community while clinging, nonetheless, to the hope that, somehow, 'everything will come right' in the new South Africa – how to accept that South Africa *was*, as Mandela famously asserted as he took his presidential oath in 1994, 'the skunk of the world' and simultaneously embrace the hope that it *will* meet up to the promises of the so-called Rainbow Nation – and, maybe most importantly, how to grapple with being South African in the meantime.

Negri analyses and interprets the novel as a kind of metaphor of 'hopes and impediments'. The complexities of events and the human conditions in the novel truly fit the existential description of apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa as 'far from over; dead but alive!'

In 'The Denunciation of Religious Collusion with Colonization in *Devil on the Cross & Matigari*', Christophe Sékène Diouf, using

Marxist theory and postcolonial approaches, shows how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o draws upon full images excerpted from the Bible to depict the prevailing situations in Kenya during the colonial and postcolonial periods. 'Marxist literary theory,' Diouf suggests, 'is an essential guideline to examine Ngũgĩ's opposition to the different forces that hamper the liberation and prosperity of Kenyan people. It represents a central instrument of struggle in both novels.' His study 'demonstrates that Ngũgĩ's artistic genius enables him to mix Gikuyu and the Marxist philosophical doctrine with biblical elements to convey his messages.'

Benedicta Adeola Ehanire's 'The Weapons of Subjugation in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*' provides a unique analysis of 'a story spanning forty years of the subjugation of the people of Kosawa, a fictional African village created by Mbue to expose a global phenomenon of the brute force of the powerful over the weak. The powerful American oil company, Pexton, egged on by the federal government, engages with reckless abandon in the drilling of oil in the village. The operations lead to the despoliation and degradation of the land as well as the pollution of the waters.' Ehanire credits the author with painting 'a picture of the hopelessness of the people who are victims of the insensitivity of imperialists and their own (villagers') federal government.' The reader can hardly miss the satire of sadism and hypocrisy in contemporary African political leadership.

In 'Abrogating Aesthetic Boundaries in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: A Reading of Femi Abodunrin's Poetry as Drama', Sani Gambo essentially analyses Femi Abodunrin's poetry as drama. This is based on his observation that, 'In recent times, poetry has generally experienced a gradual and systematic shift in favour of a new performance paradigm which points to the fluid nature of the genre. (...) The implication of this is that the traditional notion of poetry and those of prose, drama, and even orature as distinct artistic categories have come under serious contemporary scrutiny.' With reference to Femi Abodunrin's poetry collection, *It Would Take Time: Conversation with Living Ancestors*, his study 'demonstrates the fluid nature of contemporary Nigerian literature accentuated by the coalescence of literary categories to the extent that the distinctions between genres are gradually disappearing'. The chapter is well written and there is interesting commentary on Abodunrin's work.

'The End of Robert Mugabe: On Knowledge Production & Political Power' by Tinashe Mushakavanhu is a powerfully written, intense story of a nation (Zimbabwe) under and after Robert Mugabe. It encompasses diverse perspectives from vast sources and multiple genres, well

researched and documented. The reader will find in this chapter more than reminiscences of achievements and lost opportunities.

The last chapter in the volume, 'The Text & Textual Fields of African Popular Literature: The Agency of Nigerian Stand-Up Comedy' by John Uwa, is best described as an exceptional work in a class of its own. Uwa examines 'selected live performances (...) remediated on DVD and social media, to articulate the changing trajectories of African literature in the wake of the postmodernist conception of "the literary".' He defines Nigerian stand-up comedy as 'a solo performance in which actors take turns with the microphone to entertain the audience with jokes and humour, punctuating their renditions with intermittent punchlines that should evoke laughter and applause.' He adds, however, that it is 'a non-elitist response to "literary theatre" that speaks of the determination of a subaltern group to be heard in the theory and practice of dramatic theatre in Nigeria.' This chapter is a must read and a rare treat for the reader. The author is clearly a brilliant critical thinker with a large amount of material to offer on Nigerian stand-up with a pool of critical positions to call on from Aristotle to postmodernism.

The authors of the chapters in this volume have shown, in theory and practice, manifestations that affirm and celebrate that African Literature, has indeed, come of age. The items in the Literary Supplement richly complement the articles. The memorial tributes recognize a legendary, ultra-feminist, versatile writer, Nawal El-Saadawi, and a multitalented, incomparable literary critic, Charles R. Larson.

Enjoy!

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
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