

of Zikora's mother. Adichie does ironically present in *Zikora* two conflicting scenarios, one where Zikora's mother is oppressed due to her inability to birth a male child, and the other of Zikora, who is abandoned by Kwame despite giving birth to a male child that the tradition values greatly. What does this say about Adichie's narrative project in this story? It may be a way of educating African people that each child despite its gender is vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the relationship of two adults that may fail, and that no matter the strain, or the encoded values that underscore these human relationships, the child must come first – be protected – as Zikora does with her son and Zikora's own abandoned mother does with her. Adichie is also most certainly celebrating the strength of women as the protectors of life, when all else fails. It is typical Adichie: multilayered and rendered in elegant, accessible language.

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Isidore Diala (ed). *Obumsele on African Literature:
 The Intellectual Muse.*

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That the late Professor Benedict Obumsele (1930–2017) bestrode the field of African literary criticism for well over four decades is beyond dispute. The editor, in his introduction to this book, believes that Obumsele's scholarly engagement in the field of African literary criticism embodies a comparative sweep that consolidates the interaction between culture, art, politics, diplomacy, and even entrepreneurship; a sweep that demands that a compendium of major Obumsele essays be made; a compendium of fifteen chapters, most of them already published in various other sources and written between 1966 and 2018.

The first chapter is titled 'The Background of Modern African Literature'. In this essay, Obumsele uses the word 'background' to

denote the imaginative ideas which an artist sifts from the culture that mainly informs his work of art and then remodulates for his audience. Obumselu insists that for modern African literature to qualify to be regarded as 'African literature', there must be a continuity between that literature and its vernacular form translated into European languages. In this regard the Amharic verse that has informed 'many contemporary African poets' must be acknowledge, as must the *Oriki* tradition which Okigbo borrowed from the Yoruba oral poetry, and the 'best example of Modern African Praise' which Senghor borrowed from the Senegalese oral tradition.

Chapter two is a 1970 essay titled 'African Eden: Cultural Nationalism in the African Novel', where Obumselu discusses ten African novels and two European novels on Africa, in relation to the perpetual conflict between intuition and reason, between feeling and the intellect, which any perceptive creative writer is often called upon to balance in the attempt to penetratingly delineate fictional character. Obumselu argues that African writings have reflected more of the intuitive than the intellectual. He distinguishes between character individuation in an intuitive, subjective role and the separation of characters one from another as social entities, arguing that Achebe, master though he is in the art of analytical prose, presents his character, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, as deficient in emotional stability, which 'impoverishment' assumes an ethnic defect of the Igbo man in the novel.

In chapter three, titled 'Marx, Politics and the African Novel', first published in 1973, Obumselu selects three African novels – Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born*, Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* – which he discusses, not necessarily because they satisfy the appellation of 'Marxist novels' but because they were written under the noticeable influence of Marxist literary predilections. He observes that whereas Marx, through the interpretations of him by Frantz Fanon in relation to the African situation, recommends that literature should present man realistically, so that we see all men as people like ourselves, the images of man offered to the reader in many literary representations by African writers fail to reflect the realities of the African socio-political environment. He then proceeds to discuss the three chosen African socialist-oriented novels in relation to this observation.

In chapter four, 'A Grain of Wheat: Ngũgĩ's Debt to Conrad' (1974), Obumselu critiques the novel, which he regards as 'a national epic', in relation to its sources of inspiration. He recognizes that the perspective of this African novel is firmly based on the recognition of human

weakness, which is a 20th century concern not peculiar to Africa, except that, in the African situation, that weakness is built around the corruption in African politics. The novel, however, relies eminently on other, rather European sources for its structure and character delineation. Obumselu argues that Ngũgĩ, however, has not quite internalized his borrowings from Conrad and other European sources and to that extent his rendering reveals gaps that could only have arisen when a writer who is in his early years as a novelist has relied heavily on his readings of some master draftsmen other than himself.

Chapter five is a 1976 essay titled 'Mofolo's *Chaka* and the Folk Tradition' and in the essay the author reminds us that even though Chaka was a true historical figure, Mofolo's intention in writing his story was not to relate, in its true legendary nuances, the legend of a Zulu king cut down by ethnic and colonialist forces. Mofolo, a Sotho writing about a Zulu, was instead more of a Christian writing about a pagan, and eager to please the Christian missionary spirit of his mentors.

In chapter six, 'Chinua Achebe's African Aesthetics: A Reconsideration of *A Man of the People*' (1977), Obumselu praises Achebe's ability as a novelist to create new resources, structures and images that bring new characters to life, adding that the novelist has left a mark, reminiscent of Fanon and Senghor, in shaping 'the landscape of contemporary sensibilities in Africa'. Unfortunately, his fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, does not aspire towards the complete autonomy of Achebe's other novels. What seemed the uppermost intention of Achebe was to give this novel a political relevance and in so doing he sacrificed some aesthetic demands that would have been more satisfying to a more sophisticated reader.

The seventh chapter is a 1980 essay titled 'The French and Moslem Backgrounds of *The Radiance of the King*', Camara Laye's novel which elsewhere, in chapter fourteen, Obumselu describes as 'the African novel par excellence' (284). Obumselu in this essay recognizes the impressive welcome which early reviewers of the novel accorded it, and joins them in praising Laye's fidelity to detail and the persistent accuracy with which he presents the novel's rural activities. Whereas there is indeed a kind of conflict between spirituality and sensuality in the novel, an attempt by any critic to focus on this conflict is likely to overshadow the basic myth on which the theme and events of the novel are structured: the myth of man's universal search for God. The real meaning of the novel, Obumselu suggests somewhat disapprovingly, does not, however, lie in the privileged racial perspective often adopted by Eurocentric critics of the novel, but is to be found in the 20th century intellectualism of France, a search for completeness which Sartre says 'haunts our consciousness' (123).

As to the Moslem background, pursues Obumsele, the fact that Clarence (the hero of the novel) is very much attached to the beggar from the beginning to the end is a reflection of that background; this attachment illustrates the hero's dependent status. For the beggar occupies a special place in the Moslem world and one notes the symbolic role of the mendicant in the novel as a reminder of man's spiritual poverty. The path of Clarence suggests the Sufi way in the hero's search for the extinction of individuality in the union with God.

Chapter eight, written in 2004, is on 'In the Oriki Tradition' in which Obumsele regards the Yoruba poetic *Oriki* 'as an African continental form' (137). The tradition, which is perhaps the highest developed praise tradition in Africa, is quintessentially rhythmic and has manifested itself in other parts of the continent in an expanded capacity, changing itself in time into 'heroic chants, dynastic histories, ceremonial odes and recreational tales' (152). Even modern poets like Oswald Mtshali and Mazisi Kunene of South Africa have borrowed from the tradition, as have Duro Ladipo, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and Camara Laye, with differing intensities.

Diala devotes chapters nine and ten to Christopher Okigbo. The ninth chapter written in 2006, is titled 'Christopher Okigbo: A Poet's Identity', and in it Obumsele examines some of Okigbo's earliest poems up to 1961. The main substance of the discussion is to show that Okigbo's poetry can best be appreciated as an artistic development closely linked with the events and experiences that took place in the life of the poet from 1958 to 1966. In all these, Okigbo was selecting from outside of himself materials that helped to define his own being, and we can see why Obumsele concludes that 'Okigbo's most enchanting and memorable poem is himself' (161).

The tenth chapter, 'Cambridge House Ibadan, 1962–66: Politics and Poetics in Okigbo's Last Year', was written in 2010. We are reminded early in this essay of Okigbo's continued 'boasting' to his interviewers that 'he did not ever set out to communicate meaning [in his poetry], but to make music' (182). This practice which he had learnt from the French Mallarmé dominates his poetic efforts from 1962 to his death in 1966, and the obvious pedagogical implication is that reading Okigbo amounts to immense intellectual effort; the poet's craft was thus a kind of devotion to making a poem difficult; thus, according to Obumsele, Okigbo's determination to be among the best made him end up writing only very few poems to completion.

From Okigbo's poetry the book shifts to another discourse of the novel genre, this time 'Ben Okri's *The Famished Road: A Reevaluation*',

written in 2011. Some of Obumselu's earlier observations, especially in relation to the status of folklore not only in African literary traditions but elsewhere, indicate that he [Obumselu] has a preference for the 'magical realism' which the novel genre can utilize for the inner delineation of character, theme, setting, plot, and style in African fiction. Okri's *The Famished Road* naturally attracts Obumselu's eye in this regard. He argues that this novel, whose theme is built on 'the mystery of the road of life', is heavily influenced by the novelist's obvious knowledge of Kafka's *The Castle*, but that the novelist also relies for his success on a capacity to hybridize and synthesize other literary traditions.

Chapter twelve is a previously unpublished essay with the title of 'Two Pioneer African Novelists': Tshetoshlo Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1917–1922) published in South Africa in 1930 and Mofolo's *Chaka* (1909) published in the Sotho language in 1925, the latter's 'folk tradition' being the subject of Obumselu's discourse in chapter five of this compendium. In this chapter, the scholar-critic examines these novels as pioneer, modern prose fiction in sub-Saharan Africa. He regards both novelists as practitioners of the African folk tradition of historical myth and as having made first-step attempts at writing African realistic prose fiction.

Chapter 13 is a 2018 essay, 'Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: The Literary Context', in which the critic insists that the novel demands a totally new reading which sees Yoruba creation stories fusing with the Joycean myth of Ulysses of the creative artist in quest of meaning. Here the Ogun legend that saturates Soyinka's creative consciousness functions best in the context of a modernist stream of consciousness in which a character, like Sekoni, is an image of 'the artist as a young man'.

The two concluding chapters of the book, 'An African Critic on African Literary Criticism: Interview with Ben Obumselu' (chapter 14) and 'We need an Element of Prophecy in New Nigerian Writing' (chapter 15), are respectively 1989 and 2012 interviews in which Obumselu expatiates on his beliefs, practices and expectations as an African literary scholar and critic. He categorizes three phases of criticism of African Literature as: 'the Golden School' phase, the 'Burning Spear' phase, and the 'Research School' phase. He argues further that much of what is called 'criticism' in Africa is 'journalistic appreciation', whereas meaningful criticism should be able to deal, not only with the text of a work of art, but also with the history / biography/autobiography surrounding the work of art, the cultural and political imperatives of the text, the writer's possible influences, the psychological underpinnings of the text, and even the biological/

racial notations and denotations of the writer and his/her text. Obumselu does not believe that the diasporic tendency among African critics amounts to a brain-drain, for African writers and intellectuals do need to spend some of their time abroad in order to nurture and add twilight to their activities as 'great thinkers', since, 'in literature and art, national boundaries have no significance', (295).

In the process, the literary scholar-critics finds it necessary to relate literary theory to its criticism. The two interviews referred to above articulate what might be regarded as the Obumselu literary quintessence, fully captured by the fifteen chapters of this compendium and constituted of the following:

- i an amazing knowledge of the literatures of other parts of the world as they relate to Africa;
- ii an in-depth appreciation of the inner mechanics of the expression 'poetry' as being more of a pattern of linguistic expressions that point to, but not necessarily implying, a message;
- iii a preference for reading literary texts in their original;
- iv a critical scholar's knowledge of other arts – music, painting, sculpture, fine art, photography/cinematography – all appreciated in their proper registers and collocations;
- v an inquisitive knowledge of the geography on which a literary material is based;
- vi an approval of the imaginative foray into the world of the fantastic in order to sift out symbolic/metaphoric materials for the exploration and re-interpretation of the realities of modern life;
- vii finally, a literary catholicity suggesting not only the interlinking of cultures but also the audacious allowance which the artist exercises in foraging into the cultural world of people, no matter how weird, earthly or complex, in search of materials for artistic portraiture.

The rigorous commitment which Professor Isidore Diala imposed on himself in order to present this Obumselu literary quintessence in a compendium has paid off, and serious scholars of African Literature can now heave a sigh of relief that the Obumselu imprint on African Literature has finally been domiciled.

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