

# Africa's Literature Beyond Politics

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The literature of contemporary Africa is more than a response to the politics of Africa. It is an aspect of the political debate, of course, but it is also an intrinsically important element in the total African renaissance of our times. True, the earliest beginnings of literature in contemporary Africa are rooted in politics and political protest. (I exclude the African writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the simple reason that most of them did not see fiction, poetry or drama as possible vehicles for their anti-colonial and anti-slavery protests.)

*Négritude*, the literary movement of the French African and Antillean *deraciné*, was created as a literary response to European cultural imperialism (defined by Gallicism). Its prophets, Césaire of Martinique, Damas of Guyana, and L. S. Senghor of Senegal, expressed the anguish of their delirious alienation, frustration, protest against European culture, and against that romantic glorification of Africa, the Sartrean imaginary continent. The prodigious idiocies of a mal-integrated culture were overthrown in proclamations of faith in things black and in ringing calls to the African bridge. Nostalgia and cultural atavism resulted in the first anthology of African and Madagascan poetry compiled and edited by Césaire and Senghor in 1939. Césaire's own collection, *Notebook on the Return to My Native Land*, also presented the argument against European civilization and proceeded to state the nature of the black man's estate.

But *négritude* was essentially the exiled African's *cri de coeur*, his protest as a colonial man and an *assimilé*. *Négritude* was a romantic recall of a continent he had never known, and in most cases did not wish

to know. It attempted, in the philosophical writings of Senghor, to create the black man's *Weltanschauung*, his metaphysical grasp of man and his destiny in the universe. It celebrated blackness, blood, rhythm, and sought to generate what Sartre called an "effective attitude toward the world." The ancestors and the dead, the external living supervisory forces of the black nirvana, are called upon to partake of the ultimate festival of life. The philosophical postulates of this black condition are designed to achieve the needful "disalienation," a reversal of the order created by white rationalist philosophy, in order to emphasize effectively the intuitive (emotive) dimensions of man. This insistence on sensuality had already fed the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties, and had recreated nineteenth-century European myths of Africa.

The tragedy of *négritude* is that in its journey back to Africa it dismally failed to come to grips with what is no longer an imaginary continent nurtured on the purgatorial boulevards of Paris. Senghor, *négritude's* silver-tongued prophet, is now President of Senegal. The socio-cultural protestations of *négritude* notwithstanding, the University of Dakar is a constituent college of the University of France, the Senegalese economy is an appendage of the French economy, and the Senegalese people exist almost entirely outside the flirtations between Senghor and France (where he has a villa). The contradictions of *négritude* extend into those incredibly noisy and rhetorical gatherings sponsored now and then by Senghor that go by the name of Negro Festivals of the Arts; lavish banquets in the midst of the chronic dispossession and poverty which is the ordinary Senegalese citizen's destiny.

The real political statements made through literature in Africa were made in the mid-fifties by the English-speaking writers, especially by Chinua Achebe, the Igbo writer from Nigeria. Romantic fantasies of the English writer Rider Haggard had

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fed into the whole colonial literature a series of unflattering preconceptions and downright slanders of Africa. Achebe's work is in obvious response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, the latter a work set in the Nigeria of the twenties. Conrad's Kurtz expressed that incipient darkness which was part of the African jungle, a preternatural malevolence that marks the beast-man, and which plays itself out with persistent agony in those dim, dense regions of Africa. Cary wrote unashamedly in the preface to his other African novel, *African Witch*:

The attraction of Africa is that it shows these wars of belief and the powerful often subconscious motives which underlie them in the greatest variety and also in very simple forms. Basic obsessions, which in Europe hide themselves under all sorts of decorous scientific or theological or political uniforms, are there seen naked and in bold action.

The African setting, said Cary, demanded "violence and coarseness of detail . . . a fabulous treatment." So he created the rebels who are atavistically drawn toward their primary nature, throwing off the veneer of acquired culture, undergoing a return journey to the raw and, to Cary, the basically infelicitous instincts of man, all to be played out on this fantastic landscape of Africa.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which was published in 1958, constitutes a basic socio-political rebuttal to this naive outrage. It creates an integrated world of the so-called tribal man, and does so without apology. No effort is made to explain any aspect of this life away. With unsurpassed artistic finesse, Achebe draws attention to endemic weaknesses which will make that integrated tribal world vulnerable to external pressures and to ultimate intervention. This tribal world insisted on a masculinity that played down and at times denied the gentler virtues. It created its own armies of outcasts, those who lived out their precarious existences by sufferance of its harsh rules. When the Christian church came, with its noisy religion and promises of salvation and eternal life, those whom this tribal world had rejected found a ready haven. But *Things Fall Apart* was written because the African's already bruised ego was offended by a novel such as Cary's *Mister Johnson*, a novel of infinite caricature that cast the African *evolué* in the role of a happy and at times rather inspired child. We encountered in *Mister Johnson* a certain outrageous smugness which we thought particularly English. It was offensive and amounted to almost a vulgar joke.

Achebe's work redeemed for the African a lost history and era, it reasserted the tribal world whose lineaments remain clearly, even if precariously, tangible. Its politics is not the *négritude* rejection of Europe accompanied by a copious overflow of tears

and lamentations. Its politics rests on positive statements of tribal integrity, honor and dignified death in the face of overwhelming odds. There is nothing elusive or apologetic here. The brutality of the confrontation between tribal Africa and a Europe eager to "civilize" is here revealed as the stupendous alibi which represented something very sick in the Victorian psyche.

Significantly, Achebe is the writer who set the tone for African writing in English for a decade. The theme of clashing cultures became popular and was exploited in French also, as in the novels of the Cameroonians, Oyono and Beti. These writers, especially Oyono, launched bitter, and at times relentlessly ironic, attacks on France as it was represented by the Roman Catholic Church and her political administration in Africa. Oyono's *Boy* captures the same tragic consequences of the African-European confrontation as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's *Arrow of God* carries into a balanced debate this same theme, allowing for an overplay of intra-group factors, and for fundamental probings of such greater questions as man and his relationship to God.

*No Longer at Ease*, Achebe's second book, which deals with the Nigeria immediately preceding its independence, still explores the clash of cultures, but it examines further the nature and impact of the new dispensation. Cynicism, corruption, graft are only hinted at. There is a vague possibility of redemption; the tribal world still beckons her children from the putrefaction of the city. Ekwensi, another Igbo, had already created those impossibly romantic idylls of the eastern greens, and had erected the nostalgia for the simple, beautiful ruritania into the principal motif of his *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana*. But it is Achebe who draws attention to the tragic change and possible decay that have already overtaken this rural greenery, this last haven of supposed pristine virtues. In that rural world too, he saw corruptibility, disease and bigotry. He felt the explosive snap of the center. The collapse, if not exactly instantaneous, is inexorable.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe celebrates the romance of independence, the raising of millennial hopes for a fantastically brave new world. Here we draw near to the era of African independence, a world in which our foes—the colonizer and his hated regimes—will be obliterated. We will then take our place in the bright sun, independent, proud and wonderful. The dreams nursed by the great agitators of Africa—Blyden, Casely Hayford, Azikiwe, Kenyatta, Nkrumah—are about to be fulfilled. There are suggestions of acts of corruption, but these are insignificant annoyances that will be swept away by the great floods of independence and self-determination. The impotence and insensitivity of our intellectuals (lackeys of imperialism and alien culture) will be replaced by the fervor, productiveness and insight of Africa's new man.

It is in *A Man of the People* that Achebe comes into his own as the political novelist *par excellence*. The debate has come full cycle. Independence is here. The brave new world is building in Africa. 1960 was Africa's Year of Destiny. Ghana's independence in 1957 struck the final nail in the coffins of the European colonial empires. Britain, in spite of herself, responded to the political realities of the post-war years. India, her most glittering jewel, had been snatched by the half-naked kafir with the spinning wheel. With the loss of India, the Asian empire crumbled. In Africa, the new breed of demagogues, trained in America and, alas, in Africa's own universities, were hammering at the gates. Nkrumah, the most charismatic of the lot, a product of post-Depression American liberal intellectualism, a keen student of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and also of Jefferson, Paine and Lincoln, was the most effective political agitator. He used tools from creeds as diverse as Marxism, Jeffersonian democracy and Gandhian non-violence to begin an incredible stripdown of Britain's African empire. De Gaulle and France, pounded into flight from Indochina, and caught in the horrendous war of attrition in Algeria, could only dismantle the republican empire with the 1958 dispensation that offered a *oui* or *non* alternative to the countries under the wings of the empire.

So, one by one, Africa hoisted her new flags and played unrecognizable tunes that went by the grand name of national anthems. Nigeria, the Giant of Africa, Britain's model democracy (Nkrumah had, alas, decidedly become a Communist), received a federal constitution which no one ever quite understood. As if to clinch the joke, she was also given a national anthem proclaiming unity, written by an English schoolmistress.

The federal experiment obviously could not work; alliances broke down as quickly as they were made; the regions clung to the autonomy they had and clamored for more; politicians regarded the national coffers as their private banks. When, in 1965, civil order broke down in the western region and private armies were let loose upon that area, it became clear that the federation dreamed up in Whitehall had become Nigeria's ugly nightmare.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe, untormented by any ideological vision of excellence, yet agonized by the tragic events that held his country in thrall, becomes almost a chronicler of lost dreams and shattered opportunities. So accurate is his analysis that the book appeared two weeks before the January, 1966, coup that was the prelude to the war with Biafra. Achebe writes in *A Man of the People*:

The trouble with our new nation is that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say, "to hell with it." We had all been in the rain together until yesterday, then a handful of us—the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best—had scrambled for

the one shelter our former rulers left and had taken it over and barricaded ourselves in. And from within, we sought to persuade the rest through numerous loud-speakers that the first phase of the struggle had been won, and that the next phase—the extension of our house—was even more important and called for new and original tactics. It required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house.

This is the story of decline and fall. There is no redeemer in sight except a naive intellectual who confuses his own self-interest with political idealism. The masses become cynical and contemptuous. Achebe, the novelist, is totally overwhelmed by the sheer burden of the tragedy. When, in the novel (as in real life), armies of thugs roam the land and hold it ransom, he invokes his *deus ex machina*, the regular army, which stages a bloody coup. But a coup, it was quite clear from the recent tragic history of that country, is not the answer. Grotesque and farcical, the novel redeems itself from being overly simplistic by its caustic and fetching humor. In a superb balance of humor and pain, Achebe seems to be saying: if you cannot cry, then you must laugh; there is nothing you can do about it.

This overwhelming sense of doom seems also to permeate the work of Ayi Swei Armah, the Ghanaian novelist, whose two books—*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*—have been published in this country. In the first novel, there is a touching sorrow that underlies the unmitigated anger and despair. Dark, sinister and relentless, the book (one suspects) expresses more Armah's own overextended ennui and political impotence than anything else. He strikes out at everyone who took part in what he saw as the tragedy of Ghana under Nkrumah, but it seems to me that he, having been away in Groton and Harvard, is denied an ultimate insight into the incredible drama of that era. Like the eternal expatriate, he saw no joy, no laughter, no humanity in the heady, inspired, often wrong-headed but yet exhilaratingly creative experiments of the Nkrumah era. Armah's view of man seems limited to the anal features of his non-characters; *The Beautiful Ones* is a work in which defecation and farts seem to triumph; he presents the affairs of men from the womb to the end. He sees only a world in which we enter trailing dung, and bow out through latrine trapdoors. Armah's poetry redeems both this book and *Fragments* and keeps them from being banal and intrinsically one-dimensional. (If I didn't know that Armah received a Fairfield Fellowship to study at Columbia, I would be more inclined to forgive him his sly and pretentious attacks on certain people whom he accuses of being lackeys of foreign bodies.) Armah's vision is a tormented one,

tormented almost beyond redemption. The agony of *Fragments* shifts from the political annoyances of post-independent Africa to more private and personal shores of alienation, and the dislocation of the personal psyche as it centers on the total and inexplicable rejection of the mother. Is it not true that we write what we are and dream?

Yambo Ouloguem, the Malian novelist, whose work, *Bound to Violence*, was released in America in March, 1971 (almost three years after the French version), expresses another dimension of the post-independence frustration of the African writer. The novel recreates the so-called great epical history of the African kingdoms of the Middle Ages, debauched and corrupt, slavery-ridden, harsh and cruel beyond telling. The book takes us through an indescribable orgy of violence, cannibalism, sexual orgies and uncontrollable barbarity. Apparently, Ouloguem's fictional aim is to debunk *négritude's* golden-age concept of Africa and to create for the African that necessity of violence which expresses his essential humanity. Its historicity is highly doubtful, since the author cites almost no records or accounts in support of his claims.

His aim, it seems, was to deflate those latter-day Africans who claim that Africa was the home of humanism and benevolence based on her age-old communalism. He argues, instead, that Africa was a barbarous land of raw instincts that precipitated her own decline and fall by proceeding gleefully and with filed teeth into the Arab and European era of her history. Ouloguem's philosophical viewpoint does not differ from the nineteenth-century Europeans', who fostered the popular image of Africa. It coincides with the darker aspects of the noble-savage idea, the raw instincts and dark atavistic reflexes which Cary, for example, thought demanded a fabulous treatment. At best it is naive and silly. Even if we grant the accuracy of Ouloguem's historical argument, we can ask if the evils of human societies are to be accounted for by a preternatural attachment to violence within the human psyche. Do we all end up as equals because we have inherited an exaggerated essence of violence which alone makes us human? Or is his work a well-disguised apologia for Francophilism, a polemic against French-speaking Africa, providing ready-made arguments for racist detractors of the African Continent? No race has a monopoly on evil. Ouloguem, by his insistence on the atavistic, negative and excruciatingly dull aspects of the African myth, seems to believe that the road to redemption is in proclaiming that we too love sex and violence and relish human flesh. The tale itself is overblown, over-told, sweeping in lunatic fashion across vast terrains of legend and history with its own built-in instruments of artistic distortion.

But there are other trails, trails that lead to self-criticism and inward examination. This is the artistic service rendered, for example, by the works of Wole Soyinka. In his novel, *The Interpreters*, Soyinka

grotes toward the artistic salvation nurtured through the unification of the divergent sensibilities of past and present. When the salvation becomes corporate, and no longer individual, it will be because man in Africa has achieved a symbolic unity which the gods themselves achieve on the great canvas of the universe.

The questions about Africa's political directions are not the only concern of the artist, however. Soyinka once wrote:

In any culture, the cycle of rediscovery—négritude renaissance, enlightenment or pre-Raphaelite—must, before the wonder palls, breed its own body of literature of self-worship.

In our times, the quick self-worship which becomes the intellectual's refuge also expresses a determination to stand up for self and individual. The writer can reserve the right to lead his people nowhere.

In the *New Yorker* (November 13, 1971), John Updike reviewed three novels by Africans, including my own *This Earth, My Brother*. Toward the end of a generally sympathetic consideration he wrote:

The Un-New World, however, is the dispirited air of these novels. The African bourgeoisie and the intellectual class within it seem to have been born discouraged. At the moment, the black African artist, from his niche in American colleges or Paris literary circles, seems a voice without an auditorium, a sensibility between worlds.

These words of veiled criticism carry a sadly proprietary tone which is, to say the least, offensive. Is the writer defined specifically by the historical and political conditions of the land of his birth, or by the articulate sense of awe and clarity which he brings to his vision of man? What about Mann's simple demand that the writer bring together his sense of truth and of suffering? Writers will continue to write in exile about the human condition as they know and perceive it in their native lands. Exile, in the Joycean sense, need not be to that typically tinted land of refuge where there are answers to every anguished inquiry. Visceral contact with a homeland may not be necessary to create some of the best works of our time. Perhaps Updike does not know that we are read also in Africa, even though we exist in what he calls the niche of American colleges and Parisian art circles. The writer who views his work as that of a political crusader will be writing a great deal of inspired nonsense. But when his talent is directed toward illuminating life for all people (including his countrymen if need be) he brings into sharper focus the deep agonies of our times. Whether he comes from fascist Greece, Communist Russia, capitalist America or from the psychically truncated continent of Africa, we cannot label him as a delineator of only his own "tribal" woes.

In Africa today, the crisis is more or less that of the so-called intellectual, that miseducated soul whom European universities and institutions have sickened on the African psyche. African governments today talk half-wittedly about democracy and the rule of law while they maintain anachronistic universities that are prototypes of Oxford, Cambridge and the Sorbonne. The African elitist academics, Sandhurst soldiers and Ruskin College trade unionists who run most of these countries represent only themselves and the financial interests they serve. The masses of people, long disillusioned, abused and deceived, continue to grope in the impenetrable darkness for early graves into which they are hastened by malnutrition and unmentionable diseases.

Some of the writers in Africa must do what they do not wish to do in order merely to survive beneath the shadows of cheap crooks and three-penny dictators. Others have taken up alternative tools of resistance and exposure. Osman Sembene, for instance, after a decade of fiction-writing, has decided to make films which will expose the contradictions of Senghor's po-

sition in Senegal. Wole Soyinka went to jail in Nigeria because he tried to stop the war he foresaw.

But when the role of writing is usurped for ideological and propagandistic purposes, it ceases to be an artistic response of one man to the agony or the joy of all. To expect African writers to take to the streets or to go and lead revolutions in their own countries because they complain about the death of vision, Philistinism and political despair in their own societies is to deny them an esthetic perception of the world.

Hemingway, Stein, Fitzgerald, Joyce and Wright did not leave their own countries because they had a burning desire to lap up the affluence and soothing calm of alien lands (as if these alien lands were immune to the malaise, despair and corruption that affects the human spirit), but because they were possessed by that singularly haunting ennui that drives all true artists to seek for finer, firmer and incorruptible truths. The strength of their work lies in their search for this, and never in their frustrated inability to find it. That search is not a niche.