



Issues in the Theory and Development of the Novel in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The African novel as it now, is not a mere literary import as many critics would conceive it. The novel has grown within a dual hybrid tradition; the Western tradition and the African Oral tradition. These two traditions make the novel what it is now. The novel as it is in the West has had a lot of influences such as the Romance. This may not be the same with the novel in Africa. According to Abrams' (1971), "the novel is an extended narrative" (110) this extended narrative must include characters who will act out the story. In another sense, he argues that:

The novel is characterized as a fictional attempt to give the effect of realism by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in social class, operate in a highly developed social structure, interact with many other characters and undergo plausible and everyday mode of experience (112).

Abrams' idea of the novel points to many issues that will make up the cannons within the framework of the Western novel. Such issues as: complex characters, mixed motives, social class structure etc. The hero in the African novel must not be a member of a superstructure, but is a member of a larger society in which he is a part and parcel and a partaker of the ideals that determine goals and achievement in that society.

According to Watt (1983), "the novel is the form of literature which must fully reflect individualistic innovative reorientation" (13). Watt's emphasis is on the individual character of the work. Watt's definition of the novel as a form, allow for two aspects of the novel, which include characterization and presentation of background. It is the individualization of the characters and the detail presentation of their environment that marks off the Western novel from previous forms. Though fictional, Watt argues that characters should be presented as if they are real. Watt attempts to present the characteristics of the novel are explicit, as he calls for plots that will distinguish the novel from previous forms like the epic and the romance.

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These plots placed emphasis on a sense of stream of consciousness and explicit sense can be made on what is going on in the characters mind. In addition to these elements, Watt calls for the "Linguistic ornateness" (31), for attention to be paid to the use of language as a criterion in the criticism of the novel. The previous stylistic tradition for fiction was not primarily concerned with the correspondence of words to things but rather with the extrinsic beauties which could be bestowed upon description and action ... an author's skill was shown, not in the closeness with which he made his words correspond to their objects, with when reflected the linguistic decorum appropriate to its subject.

The novel as seen by other critics differs from the discussions we have made on the novel. According to Goldman (1977) "the novel is a degraded story" (1) a narration about the degradation of the hero/heroine and he/her world. He then argues thus:

The novel has a dialectical nature in so far as it derives specifically, on the one hand, from the fundamental community of the hero and the world presupposed by all epic forms and, on the other hand, from their insurmountable rupture; the community of the hero and of the world resultant from the fact that they are both degraded (2).

The claim here is that the characters are authentic representatives of the crisis and values he/her world. The world which the novelist creates in the novel is different from the world of any other literary form. Goldman's idea of the novel raises many issues concerning its form. He sees the novel as a literary genre in which authentic values cannot be presented in the work in the form of conscious characters or concrete realities. What then is the novel since he believes that the values exist in the consciousness of the novelist and not the novel as a formal form. But he holds that:

basically the novel for the first part of its history, was a biography and a social chronicle and so it has always been possible to show that the social chronicle reflected to a greater or lesser degree the society of the period and one does not need to be a sociologist to see that (6).

Here, he holds that the history of the novel in West and any other nation is tied to the mind and modes of the society that produces it. The structure and the psychology of the novel reflects a social environment at a given a time. However, the canon for its evaluation must reflect the society's value. Fictional literature like the novel is an authentic form of cultural creation.

The African novel like most contemporary literary genres is as we have it now is a hybrid genre. It has its composite role and form. According to Chinweizu, oral tradition forms the base-rock of the novel in Africa. He questions Western claim that there was no novel in Africa prior to the coming of

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European colonizer and his colonialism

There are both oral and written antecedents to the African novel ... these narratives have made thematic, technical and formal contribution in the area of length, structural complexity and textual complexity ... the novelists have utilized material from tales, fables, epigrams ... the structural and textual of their narration have their counterpart in short as well as extended oral narrative (26-7). This position buttresses the claim that the African novel grew out of the oral tradition and that any criticism must as a matter of necessity and urgency take into consideration oral tradition as a theoretical foundation of the African novel:

... in the case of the African novel, it is important to realize that its indigenes antecedent should be sought in the continent's traditions of extended narrative (29).

Chinweizu's position is shared by the later views of Akwanya and Anohu (2001) Akwanya and Anohu trace the development of the novel in Nigeria dating fifty years back. They outlined the major influences of the novel in Nigeria which include the Onitsha market literature and the oral tradition. They hold that the major influence on the novel in Nigeria is the oral tradition Tracing the development of the novel in Nigeria they hold that:

The novel is probably the strongest of all the literary forms in Nigeria tradition, may have derived from its formative experiences, particularly the heroic form a dependent upon provocations which pertains the public sphere (7).

Taylor (1981) shares the same views that the novel grew out of the heroic form. According to him, the novel:

Is normally a prose work of quite some length and complexity which tries to reflect and express something of the quality and value of human experience of conduct. The novel originally developed towards the middle of eighteenth century as a realistic reflection of middle class life and experience (46).

He further says, "theme derived from epic" (46). One has to note here that these epics that influence the novel were orally recited at courts.

What we have done above is to look at the novel as a form and its origin and influence. Now we will examine some of the basic issues that are concerned with the criticism of the African novel. The language question has become a major subject of debate among critics of Africa literature. This debate on the English language in the African novel started with the early press reviewers. Such reviewers like Eric Larrabe, Dylan Thomas etc, prefer to call Tutuola's English quaint English. But the person who really raised the

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tenets of this language issue to a more controversial height is Adrian Roscoe. Roscoe (1971) argues that:

If an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to the English letters as a whole and can be scrutinized accordingly (x).

Roscoe's claims are anchored on his later view that the novel as a literary form has no history in Africa, but has been a literary import and a minor one too; a peripheral appendage to the mainstream of European literature (75). What Roscoe could not notice is that language alone is not enough to disclaim a work of art. According to Angmor (1987):

Therefore one would expect that the European language and the symbolic devices in African literary writing would reflect the cultural polarities of the modern African world, a world that is a mixture of native (African) and European cultural experiences ... so the use of an alien language by itself need not discredit a literary specimen. For what should be considered is how the writer's medium lends credibility to his world (182).

It is obvious from Angmor's position that the African novelist should blend the English Language with an African flavour and still maintain the language's international intelligibility. As stated earlier, Roscoe insists that language is the main criterion in the evaluation of African novel:

How can an African, writing in English convey his authentic voice and spirit? Will his immersion in the English language simply mean a further dose of the culture bleaching ... ? Will it result in species of schizoid, some kind of modern bastardy neither right African nor European, but mixing black and white to produce the dullest grey (9).

Roscoe's claim here is that the Africa novelist who writes in English lacks the controlling ability to command and manipulate adequately and effectively the linguistic resources of the English language. African critics have called for a language that accommodates the African experiences. This call comes as a result of the unique position in which the English language occupies in Africa, as Julius Ogu (1986) explains:

One glaring and profound result of colonialism and colonial education in Africa is the introduction and imposition of English or French language ... for administration and what is more of literary activity (80).

The result of this imposition is that an African novelist writing in a foreign language has some difficulties because of his first language interference. On the other hand Achebe (1975) holds that:

The African' writer should aim to use the language in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost (6)

The African novelist creates from his own world with a target audience which will allow him to manipulate the language to fit into the world he is creating. This world is in many ways different from the European world and as such cannot be judged by the same language criterion. Responding to Roscoe's use of the English language as a criterion in evaluating the African novel, Chinweizu argues thus "Roscoe's theory explains nothing because there is nothing to be explained, but it gives an insight into his prejudices" (93).

Roscoe did not take into consideration the fact that the novel has been domesticated in Africa and his opinions are now merely prescriptive rather than empirical. On the other hand, Young (1981) holds that it is the duty of the writer to choose the language that suits his creative ambitions (25). Landforms (1975) also sees language as a problem for the African novelists as he says, "The concern with identity is rooted in the African writers problem with language.

Lamenting this problem of language, Irele (1982) argues that:

The problems of the criticism of modern African literature arise out of the unusual situation of modern African Literature itself. We have a literature written by Africans who have a distinct background as far as their experience is concerned and who are writing, or at least striving to write, within a specific cultural, social and historical framework, but who are expressing themselves in a language they have not deliberately chosen, a language with its own structure and literary tradition in its nature far removed from their own frame of experience (10).

The implication of the problems outlined above is that the novelist finds it difficult mastering linguistic medium of the literary tradition he has chosen to express himself. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2000) analyzing the language problem in African literature, advocates a New English - the Achebe's type or a return to orality or the mother tongue. Though he acknowledges the problems of the mother tongue and orality, he fails to see the unique position of English language in African literature. Finally, he argues that "the language question has bugged African literature for a long time and will probably bug it for some time to come" (29).

The singling out of language as the only criterion for the evaluation of the African novel will not advance the criticism of the African novel. Though critics like Ngugi advocate a return to indigenous languages, the poor stage of orthography in most of these languages will limit the audience the African novel.

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According to Ngugi (1994):

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to people's definition of themselves in relation to their cultural and social environment, indeed in relation to their entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in Africa of the twentieth century (4).

Ngugi's position is that, writing in indigenous languages will re-connect the writer to his people. But he emphasizes that the use language alone will assist little in the development of the novel in Africa as Larson (1971) puts it:

Mannerism of language then constitutes one of the basic differences (and barriers) immediately recognizable in the African novel written in a European language But the Western critic has not been completely fair in his evaluation of African writing if he has been content to limit his approach to linguistics (12).

Some critics of the African novel have limited their criticism to language, neglecting other theoretical considerations. In reality this has not much helped in the effort to understand, clarify and advances the mission of the African novel and its study. Theoretically, the African novel has grown from stage to stage. From themes that celebrate the African past, contact with the European colonizer, the clamour for self-rule, post independence mal-administration and the corruption in the contemporary polity.

One cannot employ Western canons in the evaluation of the African novel. The experiences of the West differ from ones in Africa. Early novels like Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, Amadi's *The Concubine*, and Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* examine the eroding of the African cultural values as a result of her encounter with the West. Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, portrays, 'society devoid of modernism and creates a hero who stands out compared to heroes in Western novels. The society is well organized with festivals and traditional system of administration of justice. But this society was to fall apart because the white man put a knife and divided them.

Similarly Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, singles out colonialism and slavery as the major factors that have hindered development in the African continent. Amadi's *The Concubine* also presents the African society as unique. Amadi even attempts to create a utopia. With the attainment of self-rule the thematic preoccupation in the African novel shifted from the novels of cultural evaluation to novels that examine how meaningful the African has made use of his self-rule. The African novelists now perform the role of a chronicler of history. Among the novels of this era include Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* where he castigates the black man who has just stepped into the throne vacated by the whites, and does worse than the white man did. According to Nwankwo (1992), "Ngugi's endorsement of violence as the only productive

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way of including change is a unique change in the themes of the African novel" (128).

In Achebe's *A Man of the People*, the thematic preoccupation is the corruption that has bedeviled the post independent African States. Achebe uses Nigeria to mirror the entire African continent deep in corruption, social and political injustice, politics of materialism and betrayal, intimidation etc. as Roscoe (1971) puts it:

A Man of the People indeed marks a new departure. Achebe's former avowal of giving back to his people their self respect has been set aside for an angry statement of their sins (129).

As the novel in Africa grew, there was also development in the area of theme. Soyinka's *Interpreters* uses five major characters to question the moral values in Africa, just after the granting of self-rule. The novel's form and language has not received many critical accolades because of its obscure language and its near poetic form. Ogunbesan (1979) lament thus "how is one to explain the sudden decline of a book which was once proclaimed as the African of the future?" (7). This is one of the many laments of *The Interpreters*.

In Nigeria, the Nigerian civil war has remained one if not the major raw material for the African novel. This era marks the outpouring of such works as Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973), Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1980), Ike's *Sun-set At Dawn* (1976), Enekwe's *Come Thunder* (1984), Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Iroh's *Forty Eight Guns for the General* (1977), Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*(1986) among others. All these novels took their themes from the devastating effect of the civil war occasioned by mal-administration of the ruling class. New writers have also emerge with new themes that are in tandem with the current reality in Africa. Such themes include; HIV/AIDS, Ecology Globalization among others.

Another issue that will form part of the criterion in examining the African novel is the cultural influences. In the treatment of themes of the African novel, impetus should be drawn from the particular cultural setting and experiences which these novels represents . According to Taiwo (1976):

Frequent allusions are made to the people's customs, traditional ceremonies, community festivals, beliefs and rituals, mainly in order to demonstrate their importance to the community, but occasionally to show the effect of external influence on traditional culture (3).

We see notable examples of these cultural elements in Achebe's historical novels and other novels in Africa. Taiwo mentions a couple of examples in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* where there is a clash between the Western culture represented by Christianity and the African system of belief represented by Ulu.

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The cultural issue is central to the development of the African novel. As Ngwaba (1986) points out "The literary artist's approach to character very often reflects the view of man as held in his culture and age" (7). This position agrees with the earlier views of Okpewho (1970), who holds that "critical standards must derive from aesthetics, aesthetics are culture dependant. Therefore critical standards must be derived from culture" (4). Gakwandi (1980) also notes the centrality of cultural elements in the African novel, and that this inevitable as a result of two ways of life -Western and traditional (7). What is significant in this interpretation of history is that it highlights the part that the West did not simply have to rely on force to plant its values Africa. Western values were willingly embraced by many sections of African community because of the inherent weakness in traditional cultures (10).

Chukwuma (1991), is more positive about this culture as she says:

The idea of rehearsing the past is itself a cultural affirmation of a vibrant heritage and a further way of finding out using Achebe's term 'where the rain started beating us.' The essence of traditional culture was exposed, also its inner mechanism that bound it into a cohesive force and the people's total obedience to its norms, taboos and values (iv).

Other issues worth discussing when evaluating the African novel include the setting, plot and characterization. The setting of the African novel reflects African experiences custom and locations. The characters too must be those who embody African ideals and must be realistic too. Most often, when discussing these issues, the African critics fall into the snare of fallacies of errors. They spend most of the time refuting the allegation of Western critics than promoting the development of the African novel on its merit as an authentic African form. Larson (1971) raises so many issues concerning the African novel: the novels are situational novels, plotlessness etc. Larson also compares Western novels to African novels in the area of characterization and failed to note that character in the traditional oral art form are embodiments of the traditional values and ideals. Within the African tradition, these characters are individualized and they are portrayed realistically.

Larson's views were replied with much venom by Armah and Chinweizu, Armah creates a new theory of criticism called "Larsony" where he argues that the theory is the use of fiction as a criticism of fiction. The plot of the African novel reflects the African myth and how the myth is presented. The plot must not reflect the Western form and not all novels must bear the same length. Notable in the development of the African novel is the feminist theory that seeks to tell the story of the woman. Among them include Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*; Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* etc. All these

works argue for the female gender and they have contributed in shaping the African novel as a form.

CONCLUSION

The business of this paper has been to trace issues in the theory and development of the novel in Africa. Emphasis has been on theoretical issues rather than the periodic growth of the novel. Most of these issues are language, culture, theme, style, among others. Submitting to the position of the use of European language in African literature, Emenyonu (1991) argues that "it will be fruitless exercise justifying or condemning an author's reason for writing in a particular language of his choice" (2).

Emenyonu's position comes at the heels of the call to abandon the European language and use the indigenous language. Obi Wali and Chinweizu championed this call. Language alone cannot be used as a criterion in the evaluation of the African novel. Because African criticism according to Moore (1980) "has its own formalists, its own structuralists and its own Marxists all equally convinced of the validity of their chosen methods" (11). Moore's claim is to buttress the claim that in the criticism of the African novel, the problem is not with standards but methodology (11).

Whatever methods an author or critic adopts, according to Izevbaye (1982) is not limited to the effect on the author's reason. Izevbaye believes that the criticism of the African novel has not been based on interest and even now "the general attitude seemed to be that literary quality could wait..." (27). Tiffin (1975) challenges what has been termed literary universality. According to her:

Models which stress shared language and shared circumstance of colonialism (recognizing vast differences in the expression of British imperialism from place to place) allow for counter-discursive strategies, but unless their stress is on counter-discursive fields of activity such models run the risk of becoming colonizer in their own turn. African critics and writers have repeated these models for their apparently neo-assimilative bases, and opted instead for the natural or the pan African. But if the impulse behind much post colonial literature is seen to be broadly counter-discursive, and it is recognized that the resulting strategies may take many forms in different cultures (96).

In criticism which is counter-discursive, the form and methods differs from culture to culture. Thematically, the African novel has moved from themes of cultural narcissism to contemporary issues as Oladitan (1979) puts it:

Literary imagination is not bound by factual 'accuracy'; it may deliberately confuse, distort, invent and falsify. African writers

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particularly the novelists, have consistently exercised these poetic liberties over the collective experience of their society in a rich and skillful and purposeful manner (10).

Oladitan's position is as a result of the problem of the Nigerian novelist in handling the theme that emanate from the crisis in Nigeria. As Lindfors (1995) puts it, "literary criticism is a fickle tale and uncertain art in which no-one has a final word" (54). In criticism it is like settling disputes and disputes of criticism are not usually resolved at a round table. Also Wellek (1982) says that criticism is:

Where disputes are frequent because a work of literature is not only an aesthetic object but an assembly of often heterogeneous values. It can be valued for different reason by different people because it is not something of neutral out there but is charged with values (42).

These values may not be the same as the values of other cultures. The African novel should be 'valuated within the context of African culture, the texts alone may not suffice, but when related to the culture they make much meaning, cultural relativism is expedient in the criticism of the African novel. This paper does not share wholly with Izevbaye (1975) that "if a literary culture has not a critical traditional in which its critics can be trained, the critic must receive training in an existing tradition elsewhere" (3). This position if accepted, will mean African critics trained in Western tradition will apply it in the criticism of African novel. This will mean African novel will be seen as an appendage to the Western novel. The African novel must not in the words of Chiweizu "meet standards based on European well made or novel" The issues examined if taken into consideration will no doubt help or contribute to the existing scholarship in the criticism of the African novel.

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