

**Rethinking Literature: My Personal Essays on a Troubled Discipline.**

Henry Indangasi.

Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2018. 89 pp.

ISBN 9789966653123.

Henry Indangasi's *Rethinking Literature: My Personal Essays on a Troubled Discipline* (2018) underscores his penchant for intellectual controversies, marking him as a resolute gadfly in East Africa's literary scholarship. Domiciled in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi from the 1970s, a department renowned for postcolonial activism, Indangasi's stance against postcolonial thought is troubling. The 1970s decolonial luminaries at the department, Henry Owuor Anyumba, Taban lo Liyong and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o championed for the delinking of the study of literature from the nationalist history of England, as was the case in the largely white professoriate department in 1968. By advocating for the centring of African letters and thought in the curricular, the troika was charting a different way of visualising the world—from the perspectives of the minoritised people. This was a departure from the dominant perspective entrenched through literary and cultural productions of the Global North. But in *Rethinking Literature*, Indangasi provocatively challenges his readers to think beyond the postcolonial box that has gained traction among African literary scholars.

Unlike Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and other scholars who revise their lectures before publishing them as books, Indangasi did not incorporate the conversations his essays stimulated when they first appeared in Kenyan dailies, an exercise that would have exploited hindsight and further enriched the essays. The essay that stood out for me in the book is "Fifty Years of Reading Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*" (16–26). In this essay, Indangasi narrates his experiences in Kenya in relation to the ideas germane to *Weep Not, Child*. He argues that creation myths "are not innocent, harmless compositions. They sanctify the mistaken view that we are exceptional; they buttress our ethnic jingoism" (26). Readings of Ngũgĩ usually take for granted the use of Gikũyũ myths of creation and Mau Mau oaths in his works. Yet, there are Kenyans who have witnessed deadly consequences of the myths: "people were made to actualize a fabricated

creation myth to the detriment of their fellow human beings" (24) in 1969 when Mau Mau War methods were employed to ensure political power is restricted to the 'chosen' community, the Gikũyũ. It is on this account that Indangasi's contention against nationalist literatures is unleashed: "And yet I believe, and I will go to my grave believing, that as an institution literature affirms our humane values; literature speaks to our common humanity" (26).

There is no doubt that Indangasi's *Rethinking Literature* carves, with regards to the idea of writing differently, an alternative way of writing where scholars humanise research by producing knowledge imaginatively, inspirationally, and emotionally. This style, which resonates through the sharing of everyday experiences, shatters the normalised domains of objective, restrictive, impersonal academic writing. Here, Indangasi explores the self; immerses himself in memories as he uniquely makes research personal. He refers to his approach as public writing. He is present on the pages—the same unpretentious, controversial Indangasi. Instead of heavily relying on what other scholars have written on Achebe, for instance, to augment his writing, he centralises his personal experiences with Achebe. Even when it comes to his idol William Shakespeare, Indangasi treats readers to his journey to Shakespeare's hometown, Shakespeare's wife's cottage, Shakespeare's grave—what most postcolonial enthusiasts can interpret as the nostalgic hallmarks of colonial tutelage.

Indeed, *Rethinking Literature* underscores Indangasi's reverence for William Shakespeare who, it appears, epitomises the profundity of thought as well as the aesthetics of literature. For instance, in his polemical essay ("Saturday Nation on 2 Dec 2017"), Indangasi asserts that to postmodernists and postcolonialists, "Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be bracketed together with some cheap script at the Kenya National Drama Festival" (n. p.). Also, in reflections on his schooling at Friends School Kamusinga in the mid-1960s, Indangasi remarks that Shakespeare was taught by Quakers missionaries in "more or less the same way they talked about Jesus—that he had come to save us all" (57–8); that he was a "writer who belonged to all humanity" (57). This would appear a critique of colonial knowledge impartation to the African child, except that In-

dangasi affirms similar problematic ideas as the book progresses. He endorses Stephen Marche's argument that Shakespeare's larger-than-life Black hero Othello significantly contributed to Barrack Obama's rise to the presidency of the United States of America. Yet Othello ends calamitously, albeit by the evil machinations of Iago, a white villain. Othello appears the embodiment of the exoticisation of Black men who strongly appeal to vulnerable white women such as Desdemona but end tragically due to Black men's presumed lack of insight. It is also notable that, a century later, slavery and the slave trade flourished among those readers of Shakespeare. Further, it is completely lost on Indangasi that readers of Shakespeare unleashed colonial horrors on minoritised people in Africa, India, and Australia. The point here is that Shakespeare offered no salvation to the subaltern—the subaltern had to strike the freedom blow themselves!

Above all, a Marxist reading of Shakespeare reveals his unreserved complicity to and advocacy for monarchical rule. In *King Lear*, for instance, Edmund is depicted as an imposter to nobility and is eventually supplanted by 'true nobles'. Indangasi recalls that when postcolonial literary gurus had expelled Shakespeare from Kenyan schools, the British Foreign Minister urged President Daniel Moi (Kenya's president from 1978 to 2002) to recall Shakespeare: "Moi talks about it publicly and decrees that the British playwright be brought back into our curriculum" (61). Indangasi doesn't question why neo-colonial forces are bent on having Shakespeare in the curriculum, rather, he rejoices at the prospects of the celebrated playwright's return. Why are dictators safe with ideas that impostors to power, fake nobilities, will always fail? Notably, African writers who were condemning neocolonialism in East Africa and West Africa and imperial oppression in Southern Africa were being incarcerated. Thus, Britain's insistence that Shakespeare occupies the central place in the education of the African child raises fundamental issues that writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have highlighted in *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, lucidly demonstrating the postcolonial state's anxieties against the decolonial and subversive nature of the arts produced by/for the oppressed. Thus, Shakespeare's artistic prowess would not be entertained at the expense of ideologies that cement complicity to oppressive powers of the world.

The Queen's language also played a significant role in colonialism. In a tribute to dramatist Waigwa Wachira, Indangasi courts trouble as he unnecessarily glorifies English: "Waigwa Wachira spoke idiomatic English, fluently and effortlessly. In a country where

bad pronunciations have proliferated, our late friend and colleague was in a class of his own" (64). In an essay on Chinua Achebe, Indangasi expresses similar views when he recalls Achebe reading from *Anthills of the Savannah* at University of Nairobi's Taifa Hall in 1988: "With a somewhat noticeable Nigerian accent, he wasn't a particularly good reader" (4). Indangasi's views here lack depth as they are enslaved to mimicry. Postcolonial thought contests colonial powers' hierarchisation and control over language, which is part of the endeavour to monopolise 'truth', 'order' and 'reality'. Indangasi must be familiar with Achebe's politics on the English language; assertions that an African writer who uses English should use it in a way that carries "his peculiar experience" ("English and the African Writer" 29). Achebe contends: A lesser writer is "like a man offering a small, nondescript routine sacrifice for which a chick or less will do. A serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering" (29).

The literati were marking the first anniversary since Achebe's death when Indangasi (8) made the claim: "Achebe wasn't great, but he was the finest writer in Anglophone Africa". Structurally, Indangasi's claim resonates with Bernth Lindfors's (65): Soyinka "may be Africa's greatest playwright but one suspects he could be even greater if he were more nakedly African." It is very tempting to see Lindfors as an exemplar of what Wole Soyinka (27) calls the "neo-Tarzanist" critics hunting for exotic Africa. Yet, while Lindfors provides detailed readings of Soyinka's oeuvre to the point that he almost convinces readers that Soyinka's drama is unnecessarily complex and un-African, Indangasi judges Achebe's 'greatness' in terms of minor encounters, including Achebe's disgruntlement about Soyinka being awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature. After all, the desire to outdo peers is human. Also, Indangasi's claim that Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* is a "poorly written book" engaging with a "historically tired theme of Biafran secessionism" (7–8) is lamely pegged on Indangasi's wish that Achebe should have written on disability following the writer's car accident in 1989. But Achebe (*Hopes and Impediments* 42) was no stranger to such criticism, he reveals he usually made vague noises "whenever a wise critic comes along to tell me I should have written a different book to the one I wrote". While the 'Great Tradition' is Indangasi's yardstick for measuring postcolonial literatures, seeing his insinuations that Achebe can match neither Leo Tolstoy's nor Joseph Conrad's literary prowess, Simon Gikandi (6) writes that Achebe "invented African

literature as an institutional practice” through the monumentality of his works—the publication of *Things Fall Apart* represents “the inaugural moment of African literary history.”

Through *Rethinking Literature*, Indangasi (60) aspires to salvage literature from what he refers to as ‘literary nationalists’ who have, over time, reduced texts into mere political missiles. The literary nationalists are no different to the ones Soyinka (28) flags: “And the issue is that something is being promoted for which literature, like any other available commodity, provides mere fodder.” While this is a problem that plagues African literary scholarship, literary works speak to myriads of human situations. It is my contestation that Indangasi’s book reveals his refusal to see the power of postcolonial thought and the promiscuous nature of literature as a discipline that is impossible to restrict to disciplinary closets where form reigns supreme. The current generation of literary scholars are stretching the boundaries of literature to speak to emergent global issues. Therefore, Indangasi’s lamentations that the institution of literature in East Africa is troubled largely reveal his discomfort with (Marxist) postcolonialism.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. “English and the African Writer.” *Transition* vol. 18, 1965, pp. 27–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2934835>.
- _____. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. Anchor, 1990.
- Gikandi, Simon. “Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture.” *Research in African Literatures* vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, pp. 3–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/ral.2001.32.3.3>.

Wafula Yenjela

dwafular16@gmail.com

South Eastern Kenya University

Kitui, Kenya

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8586-9212>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v.58i1.9531>