

Examining Canonisation in Modern African Literature¹

Tanure Ojaide²
University of North Carolina-Charlotte, USA

Abstract

This essay examines the idea of an African literary canon through the creative works of African writers, their criticism by African literary scholars, and the validation of African aesthetic values. Based on the premise that literature is a cultural production, modern African literature expresses the socio-cultural, historical, and other experiences as well as the sensibility of its people. Literary works that focus on certain criteria of cultural acceptability, African-ness, or Africanity constitute modern African literature and its canon. Since modern African literature is still relatively young compared to Western literatures, there have been debates and controversies over what is truly African literature. It is in the context of the people's overall experience and the aesthetic considerations involved that canonisation will be discussed. Among these issues are the language of modern African literature and the current debate as to whether African writers in the West (North America and Europe) writing and publishing there are still African writers. Cultural identity and what constitutes what Abiola Irele describes as "the African imagination" will thus be the touchstones of any African literary canon. As a result of the postcolonial experience shared by many African and Asian societies, many of the issues relating to African literature and its canon will likely have parallel responses in modern Asian literary discourse.

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² Born in the oil-rich Niger Delta area of Nigeria, Tanure Ojaide was raised by his grandmother in a riverine rural environment. He attended a Catholic Grammar School and Federal Government College, Warri. Ojaide was later educated at the University of Ibadan, where he received a bachelor's degree in English, and Syracuse University, where he received both the MA in Creative Writing and PhD in English. A Fellow in Writing of the University of Iowa, his poetry awards include the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region (1987), the All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry (1988, 1997), the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award (1988), and the Association of Nigerian Authors Poetry Award (1988, 1994, and 2003). Ojaide taught for many years at The University of Maiduguri (Nigeria), and is currently the Frank Porter Graham Professor of Africana Studies at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he teaches African/Pan-African literature and art. He received a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship for 1999/2000 academic year to collect and study the "Udje Dance Songs of Nigeria's Urhobo People." He has also received the Fulbright Research/Teaching Fellowship (2002/2003). He has published fifteen collections of poetry, a memoir, a short story collection, two novels, and five books of literary criticism. He has read from his poetry in Britain, Canada, France, Ghana, Israel, Mexico, Malaysia, Nigeria, The Netherlands, Spain, the United States, and South Africa. His poetry has been translated into Chinese, Dutch, French, and Spanish.

Keywords

Aesthetics, canon, folklore, hybridity, orality, postcolonial

With four literary Nobel laureates in the past two decades or so (Nigeria's Wole Soyinka, Egypt's Idris Mahfouz, and South Africa's Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee), modern African literature has reached such a world standard of respectability that deserves internal re-examination. Once a writer wins the Nobel Prize, his/her literature and culture assume a significance that would normally not be accorded it. For this reason, it is pertinent to re-examine the modern tradition of African literature.

This essay examines the idea of an African literary canon through the creative talents of African writers and their critics. The term "canon" will be used here in its simple meaning of being "privileged," or given special status, by a culture (Murfin and Ray 38). Broadly speaking, works that attain the status of classics and are repeatedly discussed, anthologised, or reprinted are usually said to have entered the canon. Of course, different schools of critics, especially Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, cultural, and minority ones argue that many artistic works may not enter the canon if they do not conform to the mainstream ideology. The discussion of the African literary canon will have more to do with what makes African literature generally than isolating specific texts into a superior class of its own. This essay will thus discuss the criteria for inclusion and what constitutes cultural acceptability in African literary works. Once there is a canon, it follows that there will be works outside its domain or what could be described as non-canonical works.

By inference, if literature is a cultural production, as there is a Western literary canon, so also will there be an African literary canon. Inevitably, since writers of Europe, North America (Canada and the United States), and European world peoples in Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere have their literary canon as defined by critics such as Harold Bloom and others, one needs to define what is the African literary canon. The African literary canon is based on the African-ness or Africanity and what it constitutes in literary terms.

Africa is a geographical, political, and socio-cultural entity. For this reason the African in this essay is not limited to the racial but also covers the totality of a diverse continent. African writers are those writers that express the African sensibility in their works. This is significant as critics have been shy to address the position in African literature of non-black writers of South Africa and also of Arab writers in North Africa. If Nadine Gordimer has been a life-long member of the ANC and expresses the concerns of Africans, she is an African writer. There is also no doubt of the Africanity of Dennis Brutus, Breyten Breytenbach, and Athol Fugard. Brutus is popular in African literary circles, especially the African Literature Association, and for his anti-apartheid struggle. Breytenbach has also suffered incarceration for his anti-apartheid views. Some dispute may arise on the African-ness of J.M. Coetzee, but he is a South African even though he currently lives in Australia. Similarly, being Africans politically and geographically, North African writers are African despite their Arab or

Muslim affiliations. Simply put, any writer who is a citizen of any African country is an African writer. It is another matter to question whether any specific African writer who projects an African sensibility is to be admitted into the canon.

Every literary canon exists in the context of the people's overall experience and aesthetic values. Thus, the African literary canon is related to the African experience, which has strong cultural and historical underpinnings. The idea of an African literary canon is one that has often been raised in controversies but not addressed head-on in its totality. Chinweizu's "debate" with Wole Soyinka in the 1980s, the issue of the language of African literature from Benedict Vilakazi through Obi Wali in "The Dead End of African Literature" in 1963 and Ngugi wa Thiongo's cultural crusade since the early 1980s to now, and the ongoing debate as to whether contemporary African writers, especially those living in North America and Europe, are writing more to please their Western audiences and publishers rather than their own African people they write about, are examples of discussions that touch the issue of canonisation in modern African literature.

In addition, what constitutes the African experience forms a significant part of the canonical definition. Issues of ontology, epistemology, hermeneutics, and tradition are also involved in the people's experience and what constitutes the highest standards of a literary achievement. Furthermore, the cultural identity of the people with any uniqueness in their artistic production is also involved in this exploration. All such controversial debates contest what should be or not be part of the African literary canon, or what Abiola Irele describes as "the African imagination."

To Chinweizu, Madubuike, and Jemie, modern African literature has to be "decolonised" to be taken seriously and seen as authentically African. Many critics would quarrel with that position as essentialist, but others still wonder why modern African literature should be written mainly in the foreign languages of former European colonisers of the continent and also exhibit core features of European modernist writing. To Soyinka, the reality of Africans has to be acknowledged and the modernist impulse of Europe has to be part of the historical experience of colonisation, which, for better or worse, has given rise to modern African states. The traditional mode of Africa before colonisation can no longer stand in isolation in the face of modernity and globalisation. The world is more inter-connected now than ever before because of new means of communication, rapid movements of people, new technologies, and other "scapes" that Arjun Appadurai ascribes to globalisation, that make the entire world a "global village."

Benedict W. Vilakazi, as far back as 1939, lamented the fact that South African writers were writing in English and not in African indigenous languages. Very much in the manner of Chinweizu, some five decades earlier, he saw African literature as literary works in African languages. He wrote:

By Bantu drama, I mean a drama written by a Bantu, for the Bantu, in a Bantu language. I do not class English or Afrikaans dramas on Bantu themes, whether these are written by Black people, I do not call them contributions to Bantu Literature. It is the same with poetry.... I have an unshaken belief in the possibilities of Bantu languages and their literature, provided the Bantu writers

themselves can learn to love their languages and use them as vehicles for thought, feeling and will. After all, the belief, resulting in literature, is a demonstration of a people's "self" where they cry: "*Ego sum quod sum*" [I am what I am]. That is our pride in being black, and we cannot change creation. (qtd. in Masilela 76)

Vilakazi also sees Bantu sensibility as different from what he describes as the Romantic sensibility of South Africans of European stock (qtd. in Masilela 75). This same idea of an African language defining African literature is to be pursued by Chinweizu et alia and Ngugi wa Thiongo later on.

Doubtless, literary works by Africans in indigenous African languages such as Ewe, Sotho, Yoruba, and Zulu are African works that have a place in the canon. So also are works of Afro-Arab literature in Ki-Swahili and Hausa. However, a people's experience is so diverse that it is not limited to "authentic" or pristine features. The African reality is diverse and ever-changing and it is expansive enough to accommodate what Africans do in their own different ways. Hybridisation inevitably occurs in the course of a people's history, as that of Africans, and that is an integral aspect of the people's experience. The African identity, therefore, is an ongoing process, like the African culture, and is not fixed on marble but is dynamic – it absorbs new features, even as it discards some of its own old ways. Thus, literary works in non-African languages by Africans that express the African experience and sensibility belong to the multifarious tradition of African literature(s).

Much as literatures in pre-colonial times were defined by the languages they were expressed or written in, European colonial adventures across the globe have made that definition of a people's literature limited and outmoded in a postcolonial context. Chinua Achebe accepts the use of English, but attempts to indigenise it to suit the society he writes about. In fact, in his particular case, as in *Things Fall Apart*, the language of the coloniser becomes a potent medium of the colonised to interrogate the colonial enterprise in its political, moral, and ethical dimensions. Abiola Irele defends African writers' use of English, which he describes as an "extra-territorial" language, since there are now many Englishes worldwide. On the other hand, the language debate, as to whether a work in English, French, or Portuguese can be "African," appears to be playing itself out in recommendations for the translation of works done by Africans in foreign languages into indigenous African languages. Furthermore, by using indigenous oral techniques to write, African writers are practicing what Abiola Irele describes as "written oral literature."

Literature in Africa has traditionally played a transformative role in society. Satiric or abuse songs, such as the udje of Nigeria's Urhobo people and the halo of the Ewe of Ghana and Togo, are composed to check the excesses of individuals in a communal society through insults of those violating the accepted communal virtues and ethos. One can say that the Yoruba ijala and the Zulu and Tswana izibongo, by praising individuals in society with the virtues of courage, generosity, and others, also stir people to strive for such virtues. Oral narratives, especially epics, such as of Sundiata, Ozidi, and Mwindo, engage in stirring up a sense of heroism in individuals among their peoples. In simple folktales, the small animals outwit the big, with the

animals behaving as humans in order to proffer lessons for humans in society. The mould that communality is supposed to ensure is often broken by the tricksters – tortoise, spider, hare, and hyena – that get away with unacceptable behaviour in society. Thus, while there is a sense of community, there is room for the individual to be unique as long as that does not infringe negatively on others or communal harmony.

Modern African literature has imbibed many qualities of the oral tradition. Much of the writing is functional in the sense that the literary creations – poetry, fiction, and drama – aim at transforming society into a more humane one. It is for this reason of having an impact on society that the renowned South African writer, Mazisi Kunene, finds African literature “heavy,” compared to European literature. He told Dike Okoro in an interview in Durban, 2003, the following: “When an African writer tries to change, they’re trying to adapt to the idiom that is non-African. That is why the literature is light. They write about flowers. Beautiful flowers. Who cares? (Laughs). Who cares about beautiful flowers?”

In fact, it is those works that aim at changing the world as it is (often imperfect) and installing new values that will advance the betterment of society and individuals that can be said to be natural inheritors of the oral tradition. In the oral tradition, as in *udje* and *halo*, literature matters as individuals pay attention to the way they live and so follow cherished values so as not to be laughed at in songs. Literary works that have this attribute should contend for inclusion in the African literary canon.

Many African literary works deal with subjects that in the Western canon will be described as “extra-literary,” suggesting that they should not be legitimate concerns of writers. However, what is “extra-literary” to the Western critic is intrinsic to the African writer, who, because of the historical predicament and tradition, draws materials from the socio-political happenings around him or her. It appears, the Western definition of what makes literature is far narrower than the African concept of literature, which is inclusive of politics, philosophy, divination, mysticism, and so on. For this reason, many literary works in all the genres criticise political corruption, tyranny of leaders, excessive materialism of the elite, and others meant to ridicule and, by so doing, eliminate the negative habits of society, are also natural heirs of the African oral traditions of literature.

Many African literary works fall into the satiric corpus of laughing at follies and foibles of individuals and society to change them for the better. Examples are plentiful, but it suffices to mention a few. Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, for instance, attacks the vulgar materialism of Nigerian politicians of that time, as does Achebe’s *Man of the People*. Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* ridicules Africans who were copying Western lifestyles without discrimination as shown in the lampooning of both Ocol and his girlfriend Clementina, while portraying the culturally nationalistic Lawino in a positive manner. Much of modern African poetry is critical of political corruption as in Niyi Osundare’s *Songs of the Marketplace* and Tanure Ojaide’s *The Fate of Vultures*.

African writers condemn the exploitation of the common people (as in Syl Cheney-Coker’s “Peasants”) and other negative practices. There is the effort on the

parts of writers to promote humanity and sensitivity to others. Works that condemn apartheid in South Africa in the form of poetry such as Dennis Brutus's *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots*, fiction such as Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* and Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, memoir such as Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, and drama as Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* are functional works meant to eliminate the inhuman socio-political system of apartheid. It is thus very understandable that there is a lot of protest in modern African literature – against colonialism, racism, apartheid, political corruption, class distinction, and injustice, among others. Modern African literature is a literature that responds to the people's plight, feelings, and aspirations.

The cultural identity of modern African literature is a major consideration in establishing a canon for its texts. Culture involves a shared experience of belief systems, worldview, traditions, and aesthetic standards. One can observe certain aspects of cultural identity in modern African literature, especially the novel, even though written in English, French, or Portuguese foreign languages. As expressed in *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa*, these cultural qualities include the utilitarian function of the literature, social cohesion, the ethical/moral nature of African civilisation, defence of African culture, African mystical life, ideas of law and order, peculiar attitude to time and space, and special use of folklore and language, especially of proverbs. Let me highlight some aspects of the cultural identity exhibited in modern African literature.

African literary works tend to be functional and not just art for art's sake. A few examples will illustrate the didactic tendency of African creative works. The "adequate revolution" that Chinua Achebe espouses is "to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* 44). And he teaches fellow Africans "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" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* 45). To Mariama Ba, her mission as a female writer is to attack "the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage" (i). Ngugi and Ken Saro-Wiwa are also clearly didactic in both *Devil on the Cross* and *Lemona's Tale* respectively. In Ngugi's novel, the Gicaandi Player tells Waringa's story so that other young women will learn from her story and avoid her mistakes. Saro-Wiwa's *Lemona's Tale* is meant for young beautiful but uneducated women to learn from her plight. While many literary works are openly didactic, others are more subtle in their methods.

The sense of community holds strongly in the African society. A cardinal point in understanding the African view of humankind is the belief that "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 108-09). Mazisi Kunene is of the view that "the earliest act of civilization was... the establishment of a cooperative, interactive, human community." He adds:

The idea of integrating the artist's vision within a broad social experience becomes a normal and natural process that does not require rules of application.

Both the philosophic and artistic worlds fuse to produce a discipline that aims at affirming the social purpose of all expressions of human life. In short, the ideal of social solidarity is projected. (xvi)

Modern African literature, while dealing with individuals as characters, tends to focus on the entire society. In many works, the hero or protagonist is diffused in many characters. Examples of such works include Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* with five major characters, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* with three major characters, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* with multiple major characters, and Tsitsi Dangerembga's *Nervous Conditions* with two major adolescent female characters. Often, there are many characters of equal force and the focus appears to be more on society rather than on a single protagonist, a characteristic that reinforces the communal nature of traditional African societies. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo though a major character is not the hero of the narrative but rather the entire Umuofia community whose balanced values he fails to embody.

John Mbiti also says that "the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in... mystical power" (197). This continues today through the embrace of traditional religion and practices and Pentecostal Christianity, which emphasises defeating demons and principalities than preparing to go to heaven as the regular Western Christianity does. The belief in gods and mystical phenomena is strong in African literature. There are gods invoked in many African literary works. Also there is a sense of mystery expressed as in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* and in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* in which a beautiful lady is dedicated to the gods and woe betide the man who marries her. Many African writers portray characters and actions that defy scientific reality and operate in extraterrestrial planes. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *StarBook* derive from this tradition. Of course, the much touted magical realism of Latin America most likely originated in Africa, brought there by African slave traditions, with actions that defy physical observable reality.

The African idea of law and order can best be seen at play in a literary work like Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, where Elesin has to will himself to die before the burial of the dead Oba so that he will not have to interfere with the rule of succession. On the African concept of land, it is sacred and dedicated to the ancestors. In Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*, "Any man who had land was considered rich," and is poor if he has no land but has cars and jet planes (22). African literary works that express these mainstream beliefs can be considered as belonging to the literary canon.

Modern African literature is highly infused with folklore. The oral traditions of Africa originated from the earliest history of the people and have continued to evolve according to the conditions of the times. The myths and legends developed over thousands of years and have been influenced by mass migrations. Thus, as people settled in new places, new stories were created to explain the origins of their ruling class and the society's structure. Many African writers incorporate folktales into their works, whether it is in poetry as in Jack Mapanje, in fiction as in Chinua Achebe and Ngugi, and drama as in Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan. The folktale, as of the

tortoise in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, becomes symbolic of the story's protagonist, Okonkwo, who achieves greatness by initially borrowing yams to plant and later not waiting for a communal decision on what to do as a clan. Of course, like the tortoise, Okonkwo can be said to be self-centred rather than deferring to the communal interests of Umuofia.

The use of language in African literature appears unique because of the peculiar circumstances of African history and the nature of its indigenous languages. That Africans write in English, French, and Portuguese does not make their language European. Most African writers, especially of the first, second, and third generations, spoke their own mother tongues before learning the European official languages at school. In fact, there are many Africans who spoke two or more languages before acquiring any of the European languages of their countries. Once African writers begin to use the adopted language, they tend to inform it with their native tongues. For instance, the writings of Wole Soyinka are informed by Yoruba, while those of Chinua Achebe are informed by Igbo, Kofi Awoonor's by Ewe, and Ngugi wa Thiongo's by Gikuyu. These tonal African languages have their own syntax and folklore, which become subtexts in, for instance, the English that the writers use. A reading of *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Things Fall Apart*, "Song of Sorrow," and *Petals of Blood*, without taking into consideration the African language settings of the respective texts, would lead to missing much of the meaning of the works. As Abiola Irele puts it in *The African Imagination*, "The effort to achieve a formal correspondence between the writer's African references and the European language he or she employs has, as one of its objectives, the achievement of a distinctiveness of idiom within the borrowed tongue by an infusion of the European language with the tonality of African speech patterns" (57). Irele sees "orality as a matrix of the African imagination," incorporated into modern African literature through "transliteration, transfer, reinterpretation, and transposition" (*The African Imagination* 58). Language, after all, carries the thought and experience of a people.

It is significant that many modern African writers, especially the poets, are highly learned in the folklores of their peoples. Kofi Anyidoho studied his Ghanaian Ewe folklore, as Tanure Ojaide has researched on Nigeria's Urhobo udje songs, and Jack Mapanje in Malawi's Chewa folktales. The Ethiopian Nega Mezlekia, author of *The God Who Begat a Jackal*, has full grasp of his people's folklore. Similarly, South African Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* is replete with Xhosa folklore. Other writers such as the young Yoruba-speaking Akeem Lasisi and Remi-Raji Oyewole have full grasp of their indigenous folklore.

Many African writers have gone to the extent of writing poetry, plays, and stories by anglicising their local languages or indigenising English. Kofi Anyidoho's "Tsitsa" does this in Ewe-ising "teacher," "college," "trousers," and "English," among so many words of the poem. Kojo Laing has also tried to use Akan words as if English. Gabriel Okara's novel, *The Voice*, is written in a language which is a transliteration of Izon (also spelt Ijo) into English.

The frequent use of proverbs by African writers, especially in fiction and drama, gives a unique flavour to African literature. The proverb, a traditional speech trope,

validates what the writer aims at conveying. Chinua Achebe seems to have used proverbs the most of modern African writers. These proverbs give a distinctive cultural identity to modern African literature.

Though it could be seen as a postcolonial phenomenon, the use of Pidgin English has become an African language experience that some of the writers employ in their works. It started from coastal areas of Africa as a means of communication between the foreign sailors and the multiethnic local communities as in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and Sapele, Nigeria. Pidgin English, like French patois in Francophone areas, grew over decades of urbanisation in the twentieth century to become the major means of communication, in fact, the *lingua franca*, of common people.

Pidgin English has been used to write fiction as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soja Boy*, which is described as "rotten English." Many pidgin poems have been written in Nigeria, as by Aig Imoukuede and Ezenwa Ohaeto. In "I Wan Bi President," Ohaeto expresses the plight of the underclass that the President is spared from:

I wan bi President
if food no dey market I no worry
if dem say price don rise I no go worry
if salary no come on time I no go worry
if petrol dey cost too much I no go worry
if sanitation exercise dey I no go worry
if na religion trouble dey I no go worry.

(Ojaide and Sallah, *The New African Poetry* 183).

Pidgin English, for the most cases, serves as a comic medium to undermine and ridicule accepted but unethical values of the society.

The use of Pidgin and patois and the indigenisation of European language words are forms of linguistic experimentation in the creative process of the postcolonial societies of Africa. Works done through these media are attempts to arrive at what language best suits the writer's mission and can best articulate artistically the message desired. The works in Pidgin English also express the African reality.

At the crux of traditional African literature is its orality. Abiola Irele observes in *The African Imagination*, "a conscious reference to a matrix of expression whose ultimate foundation is the oral mode" (21). Africans, in their writings, have to switch from the traditional mode of the spoken word to the modern one of writing. It is interesting that there is a good amount of written works in some African languages, especially in Yoruba, Hausa, Ki-Swahili, and Somali. However, in terms of historical time, African languages have only recently started to be written, a postcolonial experience. The point is that while written, African literature still carries much of its traditional orality in many forms such as the use of repetition, songs, narrative modes, and chant-like rhythms, among other features. Often there is tension between the oral (often popular culture) and the modern written (often elitist) resulting in the synthesis of the two into a unique artistic mode. One can observe that modern African poetry tends to be more performative in mode than reflective, a distinction that comes out when one listens to an African poet and a Western (American or British) poet read at

the same forum. This mediation of writing by orality has become a significant mark of modern African literature. No good African literature, therefore, can afford to ignore the reality of the known tradition of orality employed in a creative manner in writing. This has led Abiola Irele to assert that “the problem of the African writer employing a European language is how to write an oral culture” (*The African Imagination* 16). He adds that, “what gives interest to the literary situation today in Africa is the way our written literature, in both the indigenous languages and the European languages, enacts a dialectic between orality and literacy” (*The African Imagination* 38).

Since literature is a cultural production, it only follows that a people’s narratives, poetry, and drama should be an expression of their culture’s artistic disposition at its highest level. Failing to reflect this cultural identity will fall short of the aesthetic, which is culturally conditioned. In fact, the canon of a people’s literature grows from its cultural ideals. It is not surprising therefore that Obotunde Ijemere, a British, writes with that penname to be seen as a Nigerian Yoruba in order to validate his cultural immersion in the African people’s artistic production. The notion of a literary canon admits of some essentialism, since working out of a different, albeit foreign, cultural background will not fit into some specific cultural view of the literature. John Haynes, also a British writer in Nigeria, had to take a Hausa name while in Zaria to pass for a Nigerian in his poetic writing in his quest for African acceptance.

The African environment provides the setting, source of images, and symbolism for the African experience expressed in the literary works. The evocation of the landscape provides the literary work a concrete setting that defines it as African. African rivers, forests, and mountains, among others, appear in literary works. The river, for instance, is the home of Mami Wata, the water-maid or Olokun by a Yoruba name that pervades the poetry of many African writers such as J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, and Onookome Okome, among many poets. The weather is also evoked as in David Rubadiri’s “An African Thunderstorm,” featured in *A Selection of African Poetry* edited by Kojo Senanu and Theo Vincent.

The fauna and flora of the continent become embodiments of the thoughts of the characters expressed in literature. Wole Soyinka’s *Brother Jero* plays are based on the motif of the trickster tortoise, the Yoruba *ajakpa*. Kofi Awoonor uses the weaverbird to represent the coming of colonialists to Africa in a very symbolic manner. The vulture has featured in Niger Delta literature, as well as the iroko in rainforest settings of African writers. The aim of such symbolism is to use known images of the environment to communicate to the African reader familiar with the reference.

Following the shared experience of culture and environment is the historical experience of the people, especially of the people’s contact with Europeans and the consequence of that encounter. First, there was slave trade in which the coastal and interior parts of the continent were ravaged by despoliation and the youths captured and shipped away. Then there was colonisation in which Europe, through military might, shared Africa for economic and political exploitation. With Europe “under-developing” Africa, the continent’s people suffered and still suffer from the consequences of foreign domination and tutelage. One of the premises of colonialism was that Africans had no culture and history and so Europe had to bring it civilisation.

The Europeans, thus, held themselves as superior to Africans whose culture they considered inferior, uncivilised, and savage. The European notion of Africa as a *tabula rasa* informed the policy of assimilation pursued by France and Portugal in Africa. Colonialism and post-colonialism are inherent parts of the history of Western hegemony in empire-building and political and economic domination at the expense of other peoples as in Africa. African literature aims at countering the Western image of Africa in cultural and socio-political perspectives.

The Negritude writers countered the European notion of Africans as inferior by extolling pride in blackness. Works of Leopold Sedar Senghor, Birago Diop, David Diop, and others praise African values and humanity, what later generations will call *ubuntu*. Senghor does not only exhibit the state of innocence of pre-colonial Africa as in “Night of Sine” and “I Will Pronounce Your Name,” but also expresses in both “New York” and “Prayer to Masks” how African humanism can complement European life. In the latter poem, he writes:

For who else would teach rhythm to the world that has died of machines and
cannons?
For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy, that arouses the dead and the wise
in a new dawn?
Say, who else could return the memory of life to men with a torn hope?
They call us cotton heads, and coffee men, and oily men,
They call us men of death.
But we are the men of the dance whose feet only gain power when they beat
the hard soil. (Moore and Beier 233)

Senghor is using this poem and similar ones to confront the challenges of colonial history, proffering to Europeans what they lack and Africans have in abundance. He thus uses his art not only to respond to the European colonisation of Africa but also to defend Africa against European racism and what that entails.

While there are several strands of Negritude, including Senghor’s romantic presentation of pre-colonial Africa as an idyllic place, there is agreement that the literary movement of the 1940s and 50s raised black consciousness in Africa and the African Diaspora, especially in the Caribbean, where Leon Damas and Aime Cesaire were also pioneer exponents of Negritude.

While Francophone African intellectuals and writers used Negritude to react to European denigration of African culture, the Anglophone African writers affirmed their Africanity in their own way by showing the African personality as a human who has strengths and weaknesses. With works of Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) and Joyce Cary (*Mister Johnson*) in particular portraying African characters in stereotypical ways, African writers felt it was their duty to correct the European distortion of the African.

Chinua Achebe’s literary objective in his early works, especially in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, was to fight back the negative ideas of Africa propagated by the European colonisers and those sharing a similar imperial ideology. To the renowned Nigerian writer, “African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time

from Europeans... their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty... they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity” (Achebe’s Interview with Serumaga; qtd. in Ojaide and Obi 37). One can see Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* in the context of showing African culture and life in relative terms to the European, indirectly saying that each culture has about the same things as others and differences are only relative. In that classic play, Soyinka looks at concepts of honour and sacrifice in particular in terms of cultural relativism. Thus, African writers see themselves as defending their race and culture in the face of European/Western marginalisation and denigration. In the African-European/Western dichotomy, many African writers, especially the pioneer ones such as Senghor, Achebe, and Soyinka extol the humanity of Africa as superior to Western exploitative nature and radical individualism. Mazisi Kunene talks of this when he differentiates between material development of the Europeans and the ethical development of Africans in *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*. African writers bring their race and humanity to the centre of discourse, unlike the margin Africa occupies in Western discourse.

Africa’s political history has a significant impact on the people’s experience and their literature. The experience of colonisation placed the European metropolitan countries at the centre and the African colonies at the periphery in a relationship that African writers fought against. In fact, Janheinz Jahn sees African literature as paralleling modern African history. The years of colonisation, nationalist struggle, independence, post-independence, and neo-colonialism have their imprint on modern African literature. The colonisation afforded African writers the opportunity to question European values in their exploitation of “others.” Thus, African literature is critical of the colonial enterprise of Europeans. After World War II, many Africans, including those who fought for the liberation and freedom of Europe, demanded freedom for themselves. Leopold Sedar Senghor, who fought for the French and was a prisoner of war, was one of the African nationalists. Nationalism extolled African values, and political independence came with euphoria all over the continent. Africa was at last free of foreign domination and Africans were then in charge of their own affairs. As will be discussed later, the euphoria did not last for long.

The nation became very important in identity formations of Africans. In place of traditional ethnic groups or kingdoms, new states arose, bringing together multiethnic groups that the European powers put together for their political and economic benefit. African peoples were divided into countries irrespective of ethnicities, and countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda became multiethnic nations. A new political topography came into place with every African belonging to a specific country. With this development, the writers have a new “community” to address in their writings – their “people.” For instance, Achebe was no longer just an Igbo but a Nigerian. Similarly, Soyinka was not just Yoruba but also Nigerian, as Kofi Awoonor was not Ewe but Ghanaian, Lenrie Peters not Aku but Gambian, and Ngugi wa Thiongo not Kikuyu but Kenyan. Belonging to an ethnic group and to a nation will lead to tension in individual writers which they have to address in times of conflicts

between the two “communities,” as Achebe and Ngugi had to do during the Nigerian Civil War and the Kenyan 2008 Presidential Election respectively.

In both Francophone and Anglophone Africa, writers attacked European exploitation of Africans. Works of Sembene Ousmane such as *Le Mandat (The Money Order)* and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* are illustrative of the calamities brought by the West to Africa. Neo-colonialism is perpetrated through contemporary Africa as in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Devil on the Cross*.

In addition to reacting to European exploitation, after independence, African writers started to react to their separate African rule. As will follow, the political corruption of the emergent states and the instability resulting in coups and civil wars gave the writers materials for their art. One can say that almost all over Africa, the writers interrogated their nations in what was a reactive stance of addressing the political ineptitude of the time. Works such as Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomie*, Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, and many other literary texts address the writer’s nation in its political direction. With many writers cynical about their country’s direction, the literary texts are not cheerful to read with the sombre visions.

Literary works immediately preceding and following political independence in Africa, between 1957 and 1968, exhibit the euphoria that would fritter away with political corruption of the leaders. Satiric writing was common in poetry and fiction by Lenrie Peters, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and others. Then from the late 60s through the 70s to the mid-80s came the decades of coups and counter-coups that brought military dictators to power. Writers ranged on the side of the people against military rule. Soyinka’s *The Man Died* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* are examples of texts that addressed issues of military dictatorship and tyranny.

This period coincided with the Cold War between the Eastern Bloc and the West. Most of the writers were left of centre. There was Marxism expressed in works, principal among them was Ngugi wa Thiongo in his *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and *Matigari*. The workers and proletariat came to the centre of fictional works. In poetry, many writers, including Jared Angira and Niyi Osundare, declared themselves Marxists. However, whether declared Marxists or not, the poets of the generation that include Syl Cheney-Coker, Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, and Femi Osofisan ranged on the side of the underprivileged and tended to concern themselves more with socio-economic issues rather than culture, which formed the major preoccupation of the earlier generation of Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Kofi Awoonor, and Lenrie Peters. These “new” poets also expressed more of class conflict as they relied more on African oral traditional techniques rather than the modernists in their expression of the current African reality. Thus, Africa’s history and politics are connected.

Involved in the historical experience of Africa and concomitant with colonialism was the introduction of Christianity to Africa. While Christianity might have been brought to parts of Egypt and Ethiopia very early on in the history of that religion, and Portugal had made missionary incursions centuries earlier into Benin and Kongo kingdoms, it was colonialism that became the vanguard of Christian expansion in

Africa. This new religion became one of the major faiths of Africans and brought with it new beliefs, icons, and socio-cultural ways, ranging from worship to marriage. Christianity, as pitched by the colonialists, was a more civilised religion than anything Africans had had, since theirs were denigrated as worshipping heathen gods in fetish practices. Christianity was an inescapable part of Westernisation, and African writers would react to it in diverse ways.

African writers, especially the poets, the Congolese Tchicaya U'Tamsi, the Nigerian Christopher Okigbo, and the Sierra Leonean Syl Cheney-Coker, copiously use Christian motifs of a suffering Christ and other rituals and symbolisms of Christianity, particularly of the Catholic Church. Christ becomes the sacrificial hero, who endures the “sins” of society and is immolated to give better life to his people. While Cheney-Coker may not be a church-going person, still he uses the image of Christ to express his Creole origin and his individual circumstances in his society in *Concerto for an Exile*. It is interesting to note that in Cheney-Coker’s poetry “his persona combines the contradictory attitude of condemning Christ and Christianity while at the same time seeing himself as Christ” (Ojaide and Obi 149). He feels betrayed, as Christ was, in love, his Creole ancestry, and the mistreatment of people in his country and throughout the world; hence he exhorts his betrayers:

Oh! Nail me to my cross, the two thieves also, I am they
my three deaths, one for myself, one for my people,
and one for Sierra Leone. (*Concerto for an Exile* 10)

In Cheney-Coker’s poetic work, “The mask of Christ is used by the poet for secular motives – to save the lives of his people as in Christopher Okigbo, not to save their souls” (Ojaide and Obi 150).

Thus, Christianity may be alien in origin, but it has become a religion embraced by millions of Africans who fashion their lifestyles on its tenets. Many African writers, especially the poets, tend to be critical of Christianity because of its association with slave trade and colonialism.

Integral to Africa’s historical experience is the absorption of some European intellectual trends of the time. This has to do with the arrival of modernism in African literature. With writing, as we know it today, coming with colonialism to Africa, the pathway to literary modernism was created for the African writer even before starting to write. Modernism, or, for that matter, modernity, in Africa is a borrowed, and some would say acquired, outfit through the happenstance of European colonisation and domination of Africa through politics, economic exploitation, socio-cultural assimilation, military might, and other hegemonic strategies for their benefit from the 19th century and is still ongoing in the 21st century in different guises. African modernity involves historical, political, and intellectual transformation, occasioned by the European encounter, from the traditional to “new” ways. As described by Octavio Paz, “The new is not exactly the modern, unless it carries a double explosive charge: the negation of the past and the affirmation of something different” (qtd. in Masilela

4). One can say that European modernity has, in many ways, fashioned African modernity.

Modernism (or modernity) goes with many assumptions – literacy, democracy, etc. that fit well with the state of the European world at the time of its origin between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that coincided with the onset of colonialism in Africa. On the literary level, the works of T.S. Elliot, Ezra Pounds, W.B. Yeats, and Gerald Manley Hopkins, among others, illustrate the modernist spirit that resulted in difficult, obscure, allusive, and fragmented ideas manifested in poetry. Modernism demands some intellectual basis for creativity, as seen from the literary works of Europe from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s. Its focus on form, difficulty, obscurity, and fragmentation (of the psyche) are alien to mainstream traditional African poetry. However, absorbed into poetic writing as done by Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka at the early points of their poetic careers, modernist techniques become tools used to express the multifarious modern African experience as lived or perceived by the writers. As a result of its very nature, modernism has given rise in African literature to a high-brow, elitist, ivory-tower orientation to creative works in, for Soyinka, *The Interpreters* and the *Idanre* poems. The bulk of Okigbo's early poetry, especially *Labyrinths*, belongs to the modernist impulse as borrowed by African writers. To deny that modernism is a European, albeit Western, concept is to miss the point of its source, inspiration, and intellectual basis.

Modernist poetry, which has influenced early modern African poetry, tends to overvalue poetic form at the expense of content. Karen Barber calls this a “box” that African literature may not fit into, since African definition of literature traditionally is much wider as it involves medicine, divination, philosophy, etc.

Contemporary trends are enlarging the African literary canon. African writers have been responding to the impact of migration and globalisation on their people and continent. Ecological and environmental matters, sometimes arising from the actions of multinational companies, are at the core of Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* on the ecology of the coastal part of South Africa and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* and *The Tale of the Harmattan* on the environmental degradation of the oil-rich Niger Delta area of Nigeria. A major conflict in Mda's *The Heart of Redness* is conserving nature and maintaining culture versus development in the forms of electricity, tourism, and casinos. The argument of the Believers appears stronger as they can maintain their culture and still have cultural tourism and also electricity through solar energy. In Mda's viewpoint, one can sensibly conserve nature and culture and still be progressive.

In recent times, there has been discussion about the direction of contemporary African literature, especially the direction the literature is taking in light of the fact that many of Africa's leading writers now live in the West and the problem arising from the foreign publishers bringing out texts that conform to their notion of “African” literature, which is usually a distorted Western view of Africa. The relevant question is: Is any writing with an African setting African literature? Are African writers living in North America and Western Europe writing about the continent different from

Joseph Conrad of *The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *Heart of Darkness*, Graham Greene of *The Heart of the Matter*, and Joyce Cary of *Mister Johnson*? If Conrad was in a ship that might have sailed by the African coast and Cary was a colonial officer in Northern Nigeria, are “Africans” who travel to Africa to gain experience to write books much different? Recent works such as Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beast of No Nation* come to mind. Abani’s language and perception of the Nigerian society have been criticised as not reflective of the reality of the society portrayed. Similarly, Iweala’s portrayal of the child-soldier, a Western obsession of the time, is seen as more to please a Western audience than to reflect Africa’s reality. The naïve language of the child-soldier, Agu, reflects neither his Igbo origin nor the general Nigerian identity.

Many African writers in North America and Europe appear to be less culturally inhibited and write about what writers in their new environments deal with. Calixthe Beyala, based in France, has addressed sex and sexuality in a very explicit manner in some of her writings. Many Nigerian writers based in the United States such as Tess Onwueme, Chris Abani, and Iweala have homosexual and lesbian characters in their works. In her recent novel set on the Nigerian Civil War, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has many episodes describing sex in that time of desperation and suffering. Nigerian writers based at home do not seem to be fascinated by sex and sexuality, which the foreign-based writers are not inhibited to write about because of the liberal environments in which they find themselves.

Writing specifically of South African literature, but reflective of this phenomenon in the continent’s literature, Gugu Hlongwane writes: “The point being advanced here is that the Western gaze influences not only how some South Africans write, but also who is elevated as the modern interpreter who will be palatable for Westerners” (5). Also many of the African writers getting published in North America and Europe are barely read in their home countries where these books are very expensive because of Africa’s current economic plight. The argument, whether African writers specially selected to be published in the West are African and represent African experience, since the content and style of their works are geared towards foreign markets and readers, is thus at the core of the ongoing contestation of the African literary canon. There is the implication that the unfettered works of African writers in the Continent published there without Western editorial selection or others living in the West but often bypassed and so published by small presses represent true African literature. With cosmopolitanism and globalisation, at a time when many people feel it no longer matters where you live, some may find the argument of an African literary canon as unnecessary or passé in the postmodern world in which we find ourselves. However, if literature remains a cultural production, one expects it to reflect the experience, values, and aesthetic considerations of the people who are supposed to own it.

The position of contemporary African writers living (and writing) in the continent in the literary canon debate has become less significant as the writers in the West tend to steal the spotlight with the advantage of big publishers, promotion in the media, and money involved. Most African writers winning international literary prizes

tend to be living in the West, and one can count so many of them – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Calixthe Beyala, Zakes Mda, Sefi Atta, Helen Oyeyemi, and others. These writers abroad have their works reviewed by the *New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and other prestigious papers, magazines, and journals in the West. At the same time, despite globalisation, the poor communication network within Africa does not allow the widespread flow of new books within the continent. Rather, each country has a sense of its writers, who are barely known outside that country even within Africa.

Those living and writing outside Africa seem therefore to be defining the canon rather than those writing in Africa with access to only the less financially viable homegrown publishers. In fact, many of the writers in the continent are helpless and desperate for good-quality publishers and often send their works outside to be considered for publication in the West. With the exception of South African publishing, which is far more advanced than in other African countries, the poor editorial staff, poor quality of books, and the weak distribution network of the African publishers keep many of the published works from circulating outside their regions of publication. When many of these books go abroad through the African Books Collective based in Oxford, UK, and distributed by Michigan State University Press in Detroit, USA, they circulate outside the mainstream's major bookstores. In the face of globalisation, the African literary canon is suffering the inability of the cultural home (Africa) to define itself and so surrenders its identity to others to define in the editorial rooms of Western publishers caring more for the capital to be gained by giving their own audience what they want to read about Africa.

The establishment of a tradition and the inter-textuality that goes with it are related to the establishment of a canon. While there is the inter-textuality of indigenous folklore and writing in the form of folktales used in poetry, drama, and fiction that easily conjure in one's mind certain modes of behaviour as of the tortoise, spider, and hyena, among others, it is the connectedness of the writing tradition that gives the readers/audience a sense of continuity. Younger writers seem to be referring to their elders' works to validate their own standing in their individual country's or continent's legacy.

Zakes Mda of South Africa in *The Heart of Redness* echoes Achebe of both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her *Purple Hibiscus* reminds readers of Achebe's constant reference to an Igbo proverb that where one thing stands, another can also stand in the characters of opposing types of Catholics, priests, and siblings. Of course, the folktale of the tortoise that Pa Nnukwu tells is a variant of Achebe's in *Things Fall Apart*. In drama, Femi Osofisan has consciously *rewritten* J.P. Clark's play, *The Raft*, in *Another Raft*. In poetry, Christopher Okigbo's influence runs in poets from his native Nigeria to Malawi and South Africa. In many countries, there appears to be heirs to older poets as Kofi Anyidoho to Kofi Awoonor in Ghana and Tijan M. Sallah to Lenrie Peters in The Gambia.

There appears an observable lack of connection between the older and younger writers in the case of South African literature. This is understandable in the sense that

the children of free South Africa are different from the two earlier generations of the H.I.E. Dhlomo-Benedict Vilakazi and the anti-apartheid generation of Dennis Brutus-Peter Abraham. With the burden of apartheid lifted, younger writers are thrust into a postmodern and global world in which all of a sudden race issues and being South African do not seem to matter a lot to young ones. In any case, on the whole there appears to be a tradition of African literature that is being nurtured by the creative spirit of older writers.

One cannot conclude the discussion of a literary or artistic canon without a thorough examination of the aesthetics involved. Traditional and modern Africans and their artists have their established concept of the purpose of literature. They also have their notions of beauty and artistic merit when judging a specific literary text. Whether among oral or written texts, Africans have standards and principles for judging cultural productions, what Emory Elliott describes as “the systems of values” (5). African literary aesthetic also has to do with critical evaluation and making “selections and judgments from among an abundant array of texts” (Emory Elliott 5). It is from the expectations of readers that a people’s literature can establish its canon. Audiences challenge the writers to certain standards. Works that advance their cherished values and are consonant with the highest aspirations of African peoples and done artistically are those that can enter the canon under discussion.

It goes without saying that since literature is a cultural production and is dynamic like the culture that carries it, the notion of an African literary canon is fluid and not cast in stone. The canon is not calcified, but evolving within the shared experiences of Africans, rooted in their known reality, and forever tapping into their changing consciousness. However, despite the diversity and the expanding content and style of modern African literature arising from the dynamic experience of the people and continent, African literature will remain that literature that responds to the concerns and expresses the sensibility and aspirations and ideals of African people in a form and manner that they see as part of their living reality.

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