The Criticism of African Fiction: Its Nature and Function

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The recent publication of a number of critical works on African Literature and the ensuing flurry of literary controversy suggest that the criteria for the evaluation of this new literature have not yet been finally settled, and that a reexamination of the whole purpose and nature of criticism, with particular reference to African fiction, is justified.

The need for criticism is now generally accepted, even though a minority still hold the view that hostile critics breathing down the necks of writers as they write, will stifle the creative impulse and sound the death knell of the new literature. Literature can only flourish in an atmosphere where writers are exposed to intelligent objective criticism of their work. With the proliferation of African fiction twenty-five years after the publication of the first novels worth the name, the need for the imposition of standards and the encouragement of discrimination in readers is as urgent as ever.

If there is some agreement about the need for criticism there is less about its nature and function. Given the peculiar circumstances of African literature, it should not be taken for granted that the role of criticism in Africa would be the same as it is in Europe. In a very important essay Abiola Irele has argued strongly in favor of creating a criticism adequate to modern African literature, one which will relate "the new literary expression in a clear and meaningful way to the African situation ans specifically to the African peoples themselves—to their total experience,"[1] Basing his case on Irving Howe's definition of criticism,[2] he discusses three important aspects of the critical function. He mentions the evaluative role of criticism which he sees as the act of making reasoned judgments upon literary works based upon clear and definite criteria. He suggests also that critical judgments are ultimately of a subjective character, since they are dependent on the subjective responses of the critic as a reader. Finally, he stresses that literature is written within a cultural setting and no meaningful criticism is possible without the existence of a community of values shared by the writer and the critic, which the latter can in turn make meaningful to the writer's larger audience. Irele's first two points are perfectly acceptable. The third, however, poses certain problems for the criticism of African fiction if accepted in its entirety. I shall have more to say about this later.

When the critical function is translated to the specific context of the African literary situation it is clear that certain adjustments have to be made to suit rather special circumstances. Again, Irele is lucid on this point. He suggests that criticism has to make allowance for the fact that the African writer is forced to write in a language not of his own choosing; this imposes an artistic burden on him, and our responses as readers and critics must be conditioned by our awareness of his linguistic problem. Secondly, African literature is a new development and still growing. Thirdly, African literature, which was originally directed at a largely foreign audience, must now be brought home to its own public, and the critic has a very vital role to play

in the process of making it accessible to an increasingly literate African audience.

The upshot of Irele's reasoning is to stress the two most important duties of the literary critic in the special African situation: he must evaluate the quality of the work in front of him and he must also act as mediator between the writer and his African audience, explaining the relevance of the situation depicted in the writer's work to the reader's own situation—cultural, political, religious, or otherwise. But this evaluation must take into account the African writer's rather special linguistic situation, and Irele stresses the need "to consider how far the reality of the literary situation in Africa permits a balanced criticism which makes due allowance for the restrictions imposed by the linguistic problem but which does not lose sight of the need to maintain a reasonable standard of evaluation."[3]

Irele honestly recognizes the need for critical alertness and the maintenance of the highest standards of evaluation. Yet his comments on the need for flexibility could be misinterpreted by lesser men as implying that no standards should be maintained and no criteria applied. For instance, he complains that the critical apparatus brought to bear on the works of African writers is sometimes too heavy, but he does not define the critical apparatus that ought to be used. He states, furthermore, that the use of an overly sophisticated critical approach and the application of rigorous standards of evaluation have resulted in works with a certain interest and a certain value in themselves being dismissed out of hand and treated without any sympathy. Surely, if the works have value in themselves (and I suppose he is referring to literary values), then even the most rigorous standards of evaluation ought to credit this. Irele would seem to be suggesting, perhaps unwittingly, that if a work is of sufficient sociological or historical interest, then we could dispense with literary criteria for evaluation.

I intend to investigate the implications of all these points for the criticism of the African novel. The most important view that has to be discussed here is not just that the rather special circumstances attending creative writing in Africa necessitate adjustments in the critical function, but that the African novel differs so widely from the European that it would be wrongheaded to apply Western critical standards to its evaluation. This seems to be the central thesis of Dr. Larson's recent book *The Emergence of African Fiction.*[4] If I devote some space to a discussion of Dr. Larson's views, it is not because I wish to point out any weaknesses in the book, but because I realize that it makes a very interesting contribution to the subject under review. Dr. Larson attributes the confusion surrounding the early criticism of African fiction to the fact that most Western critics were unprepared for its emergence and lacked an adequate critical apparatus to deal with it. Consequently, these critics tried to force African fiction into an unsuitable Western mold, and wrongly applied Western literary criteria to the evaluation of a fictional form which was often widely at variance with the Western form of the novel (see Larson, p. 9).

In order to substantiate his thesis Dr. Larson proceeds to indicate the differences between the African and Western novels. The most striking of these is the often limited importance of characterization in the African novel. But the examples Dr. Larson cites in support of his view are all taken from extremely slight novels, and it is obvious that he fails to discriminate between the sophisticated writer who consciously bends the novel form to accommodate

his insights and the novelist whose incompetence prevents him from achieving certain effects. What we would normally recognize as incompetence, Dr. Larson merely sees as a difference. The fact is that in the best African authors characterization is extremely important and is often very powerfully done. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God,* Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat* and *The River Between,* Amadi in *The Concubine,* Laye in *The Radiance of the King,* Oyono in *The Old Man and the Medal* and *Houseboy* and Sembene Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood* create extremely powerful, fully rounded characters by the normal methods of characterization such as introspection, dialogue, and action, all of which, Larson feels, are peculiarly absent from the African novel. And these characters are just as important as the situation.

In order to uphold his view of the limited importance of characterization in African fiction, Dr. Larson is led to some very strange conclusions. He describes Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* ("the African archetypal novel") as a novel of situation, not of character, and the hero of the novel is not Okonkwo, but the village Umofia, and this emphasis on the situation rather than on character is the major difference from the traditional Western genre, "which in the twentieth century at least has emphasized the psychological depiction of character" (Larson, p. 63). This will sound strange in the ears of readers who have been impressed by Achebe's keen psychological insight in plotting the development of Okonkwo's character, the portrayal of which is one of the novel's greatest claims to excellence. In the light of several African authors' expertise at the creation of character, we must, when we encounter weakness of characterization, ask ourselves whether the weakness is due to incompetence, rather than to a characteristic difference between the African and Western novels.

Dr. Larson's second major difference is the almost complete absence, from the African novel, of description as we tend to think of it in the Western novel. This is surely strange. The copious descriptions in Soyinka's *The Interpreters,* Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (sic), Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Laye's *The Radiance of the King* must surely disprove this. But Dr. Larson proceeds to make a distinction between Francophone and Anglophone writing and is forced also to change his stance and talk not just of description, but of pure description "of a natural setting" which he says is extremely difficult to find "anywhere in Anglophone writing of the first generation" (Larson, p. 44). Even if this were true, it would still not suggest a difference between the African and the Western novels; there is little landscape painting "in the eighteenth-century sense" in Defoe's *Moll Flanders,* Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,* or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.* In any case, does not the occurrence of such description in the work of what Dr. Larson calls "the second generation of African writers" (p. 279) invalidate the theory?

Description, one of the hallmarks of the Western novel, is replaced in the African novel by ethnographic material, according to Dr. Larson, and this provides the third difference between the two types. But ethnographic material is not a substitute for description in African novels. Certainly, a good many of the early African novels had a distinctly anthropological bias because their authors wished to teach their people as well as the outside world about their culture, but this ethnographical preoccupation was clearly temporary, and is now giving way to other concerns. Furthermore, the use of anthropology in the African novel is not distinctively African. There is a lot of anthropology in Hardy, and at least very exhaustive sociological presentation in George

Eliot. If Achebe uses anthropological details in his work, it is not just to give the novel a distinctively African stamp, but because it is essential for the presentation of the society.

Another difference that Dr. Larson observes is the African writer's frequent difficulties in writing convincing dialogue. In support of this he cites Gerald Moore's remarks about dialogue deficiency in the novels of Nzekwu and Ekwensi (p. 18). To cite another critic's comments on two of the weakest African novelists could hardly be said to prove Dr. Larson's point, especially in the light of the very convincing dialogue often found in novels like *A Grain of Wheat, Weep Not, Child, The Poor Christ of Bomba, The Interpreters,* and *God's Bits of Wood,* to name only a few. Dr. Larson goes further to say that plot, the conception of the well-made story in Western critical terms, takes on a "widely different importance in much contemporary African fiction" (p. 28). But this is also true of much contemporary Western fiction. In any case, the structural experiments of novelists like Soyinka in *The Interpreters,* Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat,* and Armah in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* are not by any means typical of the generality of African novelists who are, in fact, very "plot conscious," very anxious to write a well-made story in which everything is pulled together at the end.

Few African novels end on an overtly didactic note as Dr. Larson suggests. The intelligent, objective Achebe and Ngugi conspicuously refrain from stressing any moral lessons at the end. Whatever moral wisdom they wish to convey is rightly demonstrated in the body of the novels by the interrelationship between characters, scenes, and setting. And if moral wisdom is conveyed, this is not unique to the African novel, since it is the dominant streak in the English novel. Nor do African novelists have a different conception of time. The very "English" Sterne takes liberties with time. If Ouologuem starts his novel in 1202 and ends in 1947, it is because he is writing a historical novel and needs to fill in the historical background briefly before coming to the present. If Tutuola takes liberties with time, this is in line with his flare for fantasy, and his practice has certainly not been emulated by other African novelists, most of whom have a normal conception of time. Dr. Larson gives the impression in his book of forcing the African novel to fit his thesis, instead of deriving conclusions from an objective empirical survey. What he refers to as differences, are often really weaknesses in individual novels.

This is not to say that there are no differences between African novels and Western ones. The language problem which Irele discusses and Dr. Larson justifiably refers to is important. It is likely that African novelists will use English differently from English novelists, either because of inadequate mastery, or through the realization that the frontiers of the language have to be extended to accommodate their insights. An African novel is therefore unlikely to read like an English one. Yet one must try to discriminate between the attempts of novelists like Achebe, Ngugi, and Soyinka who have acquired mastery over the language and merely modify it consciously to achieve their purpose, and less skilled craftsmen like Tutuola and Ekwensi who write as they do out of an inadequate mastery. One cannot simply talk of difference. Tutuola would not have written as he did had his level of education been higher. In any case, when talking about "difference" one ought to realize that various English novelists use English differently, some of them, like Defoe, even incompetently. One must also bear in mind that various modern English novelists are also pushing back the frontiers of the language. Joyce is a good example of a writer whose practice with words demands

that the reader's mode of apprehension be adjusted. The language difference does not therefore suggest the application of different critical criteria.

It is also conceivable that the themes of African novels will be different from those of Western ones. The earliest African novels reflected the disastrous consequences of the impact of Western civilization on indigenous cultures. But difference of theme, like difference in the use of language, does not suggest the application of different critical criteria. After all, there are signs that new themes are now capturing the attention of African novelists, and in any case the Western novel itself manifests a wide variety of themes. We must also expect that, because of his different cultural and historical background, the African novelist's point of view will be different from that of his Western counterpart. But this would still not argue the use of different critical criteria. Defoe in *Moll Flanders* and Hardy in *Tess of The D'Urbevilles* give completely different treatments of the theme of a woman's struggle against a hostile environment.

In the light of the Western novel's capacity for change, it is precipitate to talk about differences between it and the African novel in these terms. Dr. Larson himself realizes that the Western novel is in a constant state of flux, and it really does matter whether one compares Achebe with Fielding or Virginia Woolf. There is probably a greater difference between the modern English novel and the classical English novel, than between the English novel and the African novel. The emergence in recent years of "a new generation" of African novelists whose work is hardly distinguishable from that of Western novelists, surely invalidates the thesis. It reinforces the view that Dr. Larson's differences were really weaknesses, and that after a period of infancy the African novel is settling down and the new practitioners are profiting from the mistakes of their elders. One of our problems is that we have begun to talk of our novelists as towering literary giants when another twenty years might reveal that their present works are only juvenilia.

The tenor of my arguments so far has been to the effect that the African novel is not widely different from the Western one and we therefore do not need very different criteria for evaluation. If it could be proved, however, that the African novel emerged from traditional African sources quite independent of Western influences, then there might be some justification for the use of purely African critical terms of reference in keeping with the sources and the indigenous development of African fiction.

Some critics hold the view that the African novel evolved, not from the Western novel, but from the well-established tradition of African prose writing and the even more ancient tradition of oral literature. This claim needs to be seriously considered. Of course, it is incontestable that African prose writing did not start with Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi. Lalage Bown in a very scholarly article has demonstrated the wealth and range of African prose writing from the eighteenth-century figures Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and Cuguano, through Africanus Horton, Samuel Crowther, and Edward Blyden to comparatively modern figures like Caseley-Hayford.[5] But while it is easy to demonstrate the way in which the English novel grew in the eighteenth century out of Bunyan's tract, the essays of Steele, the rogue biography and the travelogue, it is difficult to see any direct link between the prose works discussed by Lalage Bown and the African novel.

It will probably be more rewarding to try to trace the development of

the African novel from the African oral tradition. As Irele and other critics have continually reminded us, Africa has always been extremely rich in oral literature, and the tradition of storytelling is well established. Tutuola, who was the first significant writer of fiction, made elaborate use of traditional tales, and if his practice had been followed by later novelists, it could have been demonstrated conclusively that the African novel grew out of the folktale. But Tutuola has no followers. Ekwensi, who comes next to him in chronological importance, sets his scenes not in the rural world, or in the world of fantasy, but in the world of the city. *Burning Grass,* which is the only novel that seems to be based on a folktale, was his third, published in 1962.

The attempts by some critics to demonstrate that the African novel is a direct outgrowth of the African oral tradition borders at times on the ridiculous. Every minor feature with oral association, even if it only occurs in conversation, is pounced upon as evidence. Figures of speech such as similes, and the use of various rhetorical devices, are all adduced as examples of the influence of the oral tradition, as though similes and rhetorical devices only occur in oral literature and are confined to the African oral tradition. Of course such critics stress the importance of the proverb, especially in the case of Achebe, seeing it as the conclusive proof. But Achebe uses proverbs in order to give his conversations authenticity, not necessarily because he has been influenced by folktale or oral tradition.

The fact is, that although a number of African novelists incorporated elements of the oral tradition into their works, their novels were not outgrowths of the folktale. Much as we would like to think otherwise, for nationalistic and other reasons, the novel, unlike poetry and drama, is not an indigenous African genre; the African novel grew out of the Western novel, and writers like Achebe, Laye, and Ekwensi were influenced much more by Conrad, Hardy, Dickens, and Kafka than by the African oral tale. Many of the most redoubtable critics of the African novel have recognized this fact. J. P. Clark has stated that the novel is the one genre of art that Nigerians have really borrowed;[6] Povey mentions the orthodoxy of Achebe's handling of the novel genre, suggesting that his work can be conveniently set within the context of the much wider field of English language writing;[7] and Killam recognizes that the modern Nigerian novel follows the main historical development of the English novel, making additions of its own, the additions being largely in the way of themes.[8]

If, then, the African novel is derived from Western sources, and is not markedly different from the Western novel, what argument could there be against applying to its evaluation the literary criteria that have grown up alongside the Western novel? This brings me back to Irele. His point about the allowances to be made for the African writer's use of language is valid. But he goes on to stress that in order to fulfill the second function of criticism in the special African context—that of bringing African literature home to its African audience and pointing out its significance for them—the African references of the work must be elucidated. And this can be done "by approaching the work with an insight into, and a feeling for, those aspects of African life which stand beyond the work itself, its extensions into the African experience, and its foundation in the very substance of African existence" (Irele, p. 16). In spite of his awareness of the need for literary evaluation Irele is arguing for an essentially sociological criticism which he feels is the most apt to render a full account of African literature. No one will deny that a sociological approach is sometimes extremely useful; nor is it confined

to the criticism of African literature. But sociological criticism should reinforce, not replace evaluative criticism. The danger of the sociological approach is that a number of inexpert critics will feel that all that is required for evaluation is to point out the work's social references, thus demonstrating its relevance for the African people. But criticism will then degenerate into sterile sociological and historical commentaries, and there will be no essential difference between this and the debased anthropological criticism of the earliest critics. In this kind of situation works of dubious literary value will be treated with respect because of their sociological importance. Surely, in order to demonstrate the relevance of a novel for its African readers one need not point out "everything within the society which has informed the work" (Killam, pp. 79-80). If the writer is sufficiently skillful, the social situation ought to have been powerfully demonstrated in the work itself, and all the critic needs to do is to interpret this society as it is presented. The African critic has a responsibility not only to educate his people about social or historical reality (a task which the historian and sociologist can do so much better), but to help cultivate taste and judgment and discuss values and standards. There is a naive school of thought which seems to believe that the alternative to sociological criticism is "artistic" criticism, a concern with "art for art's sake." This is absurd. The alternative to sociological criticism is a criticism which both evaluates the literary quality of the work and discusses the novelist's concern with and treatment of real issues which are relevant to the lives of his people. The considerations influencing critical judgment should be human, literary, and social; there should be no opposition between them.

One of the dangers of the sociological approach is that in the hands of inexpert critics, it might even lead to an insistence on the dogma that the only African novels worth considering are those which deal with social or historical reality. Novels, therefore, which deal with questions like love, death, or relations between the sexes might tend to be devalued. It might lead, and has led, to the feeling that the African writer must be committed, and what is perhaps worse, that the African critic himself must also be committed. He must identify himself with the struggles of the African people, must realize that they are among the most oppressed and dehumanized in the world; he must look at the novel from a definite historical and social reality, and his criticism must be subjective. This is the enunciation of a dangerous critical doctrine which ought to be utterly rejected. Most African critics, like most African writers, are probably committed, but they should certainly not allow their commitment to influence their criticism. They should approach the work with an open mind, honestly prepared to evaluate, illuminate, and interpret what is there. Far from being subjective, they must aim at making their criticism as objective as possible. The dogma implies that the committed, subjective African critic will be immediately drawn in sympathy to works dealing with the oppression and dehumanization of the African peoples, even if these works are badly executed. On the contrary, the critic, while being prepared to discuss the writer's treatment of oppression and dehumanization, should leave himself free to deplore the writer's weaknesses in execution.

I am suggesting, then, that for effective criticism of the African novel we need not look for criteria other than those which have grown up alongside the Western literary tradition. In fact it is a distortion to call these criteria Western criteria. If they have grown up alongside the development of the Western novel it is most probably because the Western novel was the first to be seriously discussed. They are probably the considerations that readers of novels everywhere will discuss in order to account for the impact of

novels on their minds. And these criteria are so generalized that they allow for a tremendous amount of flexibility; they allow for innovations of themes, structure, and style, and they can be applied to writers as diverse as Fielding, Conrad, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Kafka. Nor do they imply any rigidity or prescriptiveness, or suggest that the criticism of fiction is a mechanical process. In fact, most readers read a novel responding to the novelist's signposts, and participating imaginatively themselves in the novelist's creation of his special world. They first feel the impact of the novel before they try to account for it. And the criteria normally listed are the result of the cumulative experience of readers over the centuries that the novels which have made the most forceful impact are those which are seen to possess such and such qualities.

We need, I think, to stress the novel's realism. A novel must deal with issues relevant to the lives of people through situations which are credible and convincing and characters who look like real people. The novel must give an acceptable picture of life as it is lived. We must also demand that the novelist demonstrates a feeling for the right style, making sure that his use of language, selection of images, and deployment of metaphors, are consistent with his subject matter and his treatment of it. Finally we must demand that the work manifests coherence of plot and structure. This does not suggest that every novel must follow a conventional linear pattern and time sequence; all we must ask is that whatever structure the novelist chooses, obeys laws of its own and has its own principles and logic of organization, which ensure its coherence.

We need a criticism, then, which not only analyzes a novel's treatment of political, social, and historical forces—pointing out their relevance to the people's lives—but one which also concerns itself with the book's literary excellence. We need a criticism, in short, which can say that although Tutuola is a brilliant teller of folktales he is not a novelist, since he operates within a world of fantasy and not within one of human reality, and, at the same time his world is one in which the psychological implausibilities, inconsistencies, and liberties which he takes with time and distance are not at one with a world of credible human beings and human situations. We need a criticism which, like Killam's, will suggest Ekwensi's importance in dealing with the growing urban menace in Nigeria, while deploring his stylistic weaknesses. We need a criticism which can give Soyinka high praise for his thoroughgoing exposure of modern Nigerian decadence and his superb realization of scenes, while holding a question mark over his novel's structural coherence. Above all we must avoid generating heat in the discussion of African literature and not allow ourselves to be swayed by personal or nationalistic feelings which might blur the issues and cloud critical judgment.

NOTES

[1]Abiola Irele, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," in *Perspectives of African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 9-24.

[2]Irving Howe, *Modern Literary Criticism* (New York: 1956).

[3]Irele, p. 13.

[4]Charles Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

[5]Lalage Brown, "The Development of African Prose Writing in English: A Perspective," in *Perspectives on African Literature*, op. cit., pp. 33-48.

[6]J. P. Clarke, "Our Literary Critics," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 74 (September 1962), p. 80.

[7]John Povey, "The Novels of Chinua Achebe," in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (Lagos: University of Lagos and Evans Brothers, 1971), p. 97.

[8]G. D. Killam, "Cyprian Ekwensi," in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, op. cit., p. 77.