

Chinweizu et al. and the Evaluation of African Literature

Eustace Palmer, University of Sierra Leone

The appropriate criteria for the evaluation of African Literature have constituted a controversial issue for critics. It has been generally assumed that Eurocentric standards and values which have so far been predominant in the evaluation of European and American Literature would not adequately serve the purpose of African Literature with its different background, spirit, and influences. The need has long been felt, therefore, for a work which would definitively spell out the specifically African criteria which could be used in the evaluation of African Literature in general and the African novel in particular. It was therefore with eager anticipation that one looked forward to Chinweizu's *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* (London: KPI, 1985). Unfortunately, this volume is not such a work.

A very careful reading of this book suggests that its real motivation is political and ideological rather than literary or cultural. It is designed to put in their places all those white, European "capitalist and racist" critics who, in the view of the authors, would like to transfer the West's political and economic domination of Africa on to the cultural sphere and who therefore dare to find faults in African works of literature. The authors proudly proclaim this in the very second paragraph of the introduction: "The cultural task in hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality." And this is the tone which dominates the work throughout. One must not therefore expect from this book a sober, academic examination of the influences, indigenous as well as foreign, which have gone into the making of modern African Literature, especially the novel, and of the criteria, therefore, which are to be used in its evaluation. The book, in fact, constitutes the most vicious form of literary blackmail. It says, in effect, to all Western or white critics, "If you dare find fault with any African novel or presume to praise an African poet whose work manifests Western nontraditional influences, you will be pilloried, insulted, and denounced as a racist imperialist, who is using underhand methods to defend and reinforce Western capitalism and imperialism." The book seems to be intended to frighten Western critics away from the discussion of African literature, since most responsible critics would like to have the freedom and integrity to point out both strengths and weaknesses.

Chinweizu's, Jemie's and Madubuike's thesis is that the African novel is an autonomous entity deriving from the African oral tradition and must therefore be evaluated, not by the principles of Eurocentric Western criticism, but by the indigenous African values of traditional African orature. This is a reasonable thesis which has already been propounded by a number of other critics, and in whose exploration numerous readers, African and non-African alike, would be interested. Proponents of such a thesis would be expected both to demonstrate clearly that the African novel *did* derive from the African oral tradition and to spell out the "African" criteria that are to be used in its evaluation; for even if it is conclusively demonstrated that the African novel derived solely from the African oral tradition, it must not be automatically assumed that it should be evaluated by the principles of African orature. The African novel, as we have it, is not an oral form and it is markedly different from the oral tale.

But this is not the methodology employed by the authors. The technique used instead is to falsely, and without real evidence, attribute the most preposterous critical positions and assertions to their adversaries and then proceed with an air of sweet reasonableness to refute them. For instance, the authors rail at those critics who, according to them, heap

obloquy on African orature or who have accused the oral tradition of contaminating the African novel with the deficiencies of the oral medium. The main target of attack here is Dan Izevbaye, the eminent Ibadan critic. Izevbaye in the article quoted by the authors was in fact commenting on Professor Abraham's view that the undeveloped characters of African fiction are attributable to the traditional conception of the individual and society. He was also quite justifiably warning against the dangers of applying to written forms like the novel concepts abstracted from the oral tradition. Properly read, Izevbaye's article is a warning against blaming the oral tradition for the shortcomings of the novel form. He goes on to talk of the virtues of the oral tale which he sees as a genre of great vitality and power. Both his other writings in general, and this article in particular, show that Izevbaye is uniquely responsive to the power artistry and value of the oral tale. Yet Chinweizu and his colleagues proceed to distort his views and accuse him of a Eurocentric denigration of the oral form. Of course, this accusation gives the authors the opportunity of writing a lengthy and quite unnecessary section defending the respectability of the oral tale; unnecessary, both because it does not really arise from the argument, and because it has been done before with much greater professionalism by specialists in the field.

As far as demonstrating the derivation of the African novel from the oral tradition is concerned, all that Chinweizu and others do is to resort to a curious twist of logic: the novel in other societies had oral antecedents; since antecedents to the African novel existed in African societies in the form of the oral tale, the African novel must have derived from the oral tale. This is a non sequitur which fails to take into account the cultural influence of colonialism, a dirty word to Chinweizu and a lot of Africans of course, but one whose influence the serious academic must reckon with. If there had been no colonialism, it is possible that the African novel might have derived in course of time and in a straight line of descent from the oral tradition. But colonialism intervened with a particular educational system which had all sorts of influences on the people who came to write novels in Africa. To deny the impact of foreign influences on the shaping of the African novel is to be intellectually dishonest. Indeed, Chinweizu and his colleagues fail to realize that they contradict themselves when they refer to the African novel in another section as a hybrid, which is really what it is. What one had expected from them was a detailed analysis of the forms and structures of both the oral tale and the African novel to see whether in fact the one could have derived directly from the other. Roscoe and Larson, for all the insult heaped on them by the authors, do much more than the latter to demonstrate the close similarity between the oral tradition and some early African novels. Chinweizu and colleagues are so blinkered by their racialist and ideological prejudices that they fail to realize that in a sense Larson and Roscoe are on their side.

In order to establish the continuity of the African novel with the African oral tradition it is essential to the authors' argument to assert that Tutuola's works are novels, since that author, to a greater extent than any other African writer, capitalizes on the oral tradition. The category into which we should place Tutuola's works has always been a thorny issue. It is a matter for legitimate literary debate, not for insult and abuse, and it is surely perverse to accuse all those who do not regard Tutuola's works as novels of wanting to preserve Western cultural hegemony. The very perceptive Nigerian critic, Emmanuel Obiechina, has demonstrated, as the result of very painstaking research, that Tutuola's works belong firmly to the world of the oral tale and that he must be regarded as a brilliant teller of folk tales. Must we assume that he too wishes to preserve Western cultural hegemony?

In discussing whether Tutuola's works are novels, the issue of realism is important, since realism has been held to be one of the novel's hallmarks. Chinweizu and his colleagues would have been on more solid ground had they claimed, as one might have expected, that the unique African novel they are talking about does not require realism as one of its components. But they apparently accept this "Western" criterion. They then go on to suggest that the African "bourgeoisie" for whom the African novel was presumably intended, have not, like the Western bourgeoisie, banished spirits, ghosts, and the supernatural from their concept of the real. Who are the African bourgeoisie anyway? Chinweizu and colleagues have quite slavishly accepted the "Western" notion that the novel

is a bourgeois form ministering to the literary needs of the bourgeoisie and expressing the values of the bourgeoisie. Who are the bourgeoisie whose values Achebe expresses in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*? And is it really true that the West has banished ghosts, spirits, and the supernatural in general from its concept of the real? The problem is not whether in African cosmology ghosts and spirits are allowed to mingle with human beings, but that there are outrageously fantastic things in Tutuola which would be considered fantasy even by those who accept ghosts and spirits, such as the "television handed ghostess" who has television sets in the palms of her hands.

The problem arises from the authors' insistence that Tutuola's works must be regarded as novels. But why must we regard them as novels which are, after all, originally a Western form? Do we necessarily degrade their importance if we say that they belong to another genre? Some very eminent critics have categorized them as epics and romances. Do they lose anything by being regarded as epics and romances which are, in fact, indigenous African forms? Chinweizu and his colleagues are honest enough to admit that Tutuola's works are continuations in English of the African genre of heroic epic; so why must they be regarded as novels? Of course, they preposterously go on to call the epic "a sub-genre of the novel," which suggests that they have forgotten about epic poetry and which flagrantly contradicts one of the critics they admire--Biebuyck, who, according to them, calls the epic a supergenre "which fuses together practically all genres known in a particular culture."

In their strident call for the use of African criteria, Chinweizu and others pretend to adopt an antiuniversalist stance, as if there is necessarily any dichotomy between being local and being universal. But they turn out in effect to be great universalists without realizing it; for they constantly invoke Western writers like Joyce, Proust, and Kafka to illustrate their points. If it is claimed that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is merely a collection of tales welded together, so too are *Don Quixote* and *Ulysses*; if African writers turn their attention to the short story, it is not because of the pull of their indigenous tradition, for so too do Joyce, Chekhov, and Faulkner; if Tutuola treats time in an unusual way, it is not because of any "Africanness" as one might have expected the authors to suggest, but because his treatment is no different from stories in nonrealistic modes in any society. This last reveals one of the contradictions and inconsistencies in this work. For Chinweizu and others who had strenuously defended the "realism" of Tutuola's works, now talk about his working within the nonrealistic mode.

After all the bluster, the abuse, and the demonstrations of ill-temper and bad manners, does *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* make any real contribution towards the development of an African aesthetic, particularly with regard to the criticism of the African novel? The answer must be a decided no. Any young student looking for specific African approaches to the evaluation of the African novel would be profoundly disappointed. For nowhere, not even in the section on African orature, do the authors specify those African criteria which are to be used in place of the Eurocentric ones; nowhere do they actually discuss an African novel using African criteria. Their few forays into the arena of actual appreciation amount to no more than the most pedestrian formalism. They posit nothing new to replace psychological depiction of character, unit, and coherence of plot and structure, realism and meaningful use of setting. On the one hand those critics who pronounce some African novels weak because they are deficient in these qualities are accused of looking at these works through Eurocentric eyes and of being racist, imperialist, and what have you. On the other hand, Chinweizu and his colleagues claim that the best African novels (and they are concerned, they say, with nothing but excellence) possess these qualities anyway. The excellence of these works therefore must have been pronounced at least partly as a result of the consideration of these supposedly Eurocentric criteria. But the authors do not see the contradiction.

The problem is that Chinweizu and his coauthors want a situation in which no Western critic will describe an "African" novel as being weak. This is to have no criteria at all; and in effect the authors do not seem to have any. Their message to Western critics is "hands off our literature; concern yourself with your own bad novels," which is a racist posture.