CRITICISM AND IDEOLOGY

Second African Writers' Conference
Stockholm 1986

Edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen
with an introductory essay by Per Wästberg

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The first Stockholm conference for African writers was held in 1967, at Hässelby Castle outside Stockholm, to discuss the role of the writer in modern African Society, especially the relationship of his or her individuality to a wider social commitment. It was arranged on the initiative of Per Wastberg, well-known for having introduced much of African literature to the Swedish public.

On Per Wastberg's initiative the Second Stockholm Conference for African Writers was arranged almost twenty years later. This time the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies was again privileged to arrange the conference in cooperation with the Swedish Institute.

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Anders Hjort af Ornas
Director
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Introduction

*Kirsten Holst Petersen*

The present volume consists of the papers and highlights of the discussions from the second Stockholm Conference for African Writers, held in 1986. The report from the first Stockholm conference *The Writer in Modern Africa* provided an important testimony to the mood and preoccupations of African writers in 1967. The mood was sombre on account of the recent outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, and the debate understandably concerned itself with the writer's role in oppressive or war-torn situations. In a passionate submission Soyinka denounced negritude, yet again, and asked the writer to be true to his heritage, which is to be not just 'the recorder of the mores and experience of his society,' but also 'the voice of vision in his own time'. 'Gun running and holding up radio stations' became the catchwords around which the writer debated their ideas of commitment. Ngugi and Alex la Guma were all for it, Lewis Nkosi was elegantly controversial, maintaining that writers 'were going to do no such thing' as provide a vision, and anyway, they tended to be 'congenial shirkers', and their commitment as writers was to literature, not society, and John Nagenda went all the way and declared that all he cared about was his 'individual capacity . . . to live my life in this world before I die'. Negritude received more and more detailed criticism from Mbelle Sonne Dipoko, who accused the African intellectuals of 'becoming ambassadors, taking news of Africa to the courts of Europe'. The language question was touched upon with less venom than on subsequent occasions. Eldred Jones held that the aim of the African writer should be 'to be faithful to his own imagination, whatever language and whatever medium he happens to be using', and that statement remained surprisingly unopposed.

What are the main areas of debate when African writers meet, nearly twenty years later? Negritude, the language debate and the question of commitment were still there, but added to them were new areas of interest, which centred around criticism and the critic, the state of South African literature and the new, or newly acknowledged voice of African women writers who provided the clearest example of change and renewal since the first conference, which was attended only by male writers.

In 'Ethics, Ideology and the Critic' Soyinka delivers a blast at critics of African literature who have obviously irritated him for some time. Despite
his stated intention to be 'as light-hearted as possible' Soyinka here becomes intensely polemic, in the same vein as the *Transition* debate, and his paper is peppered with expressions like 'goggle-eyed, loin-clothed jungleman aesthetics', 'more ethnic than thou sanctimonious shit', and 'our literary school of infantile regression'. He arranges the critics along a descending scale, starting with lovers of literature and ending with the chichidodo school. In between he puts ideologically committed critics, consisting of two groups, Marxist critics and the well known neo-Tarzanists. Ideologically, those two groups have very little in common. In fact they are at a certain point diametrically opposed. Soyinka, however, rages both against the neo-Tarzanists' elevation of aspects of traditional culture to aesthetic consciousness. He does, however, acknowledge the difference between the two groups, and he seems to have a higher regard for the Marxists, but ultimately, for him 'Ideology is ideology' and per se destructive of criticism. He is here reiterating his position in 'Ideology and the Social Vision: The Religious Factor' (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976, p 61) where he said 'yes' to a social vision, but no to a literary ideology. This levelling of ideology to an oppressive system, regardless of its content, is particularly galling from a Marxist point of view, and Soyinka has increasingly become the subject of committed and penetrating Marxist analyses from critics like Biodun Jeyifo and Femi Osofisan who are not easily dismissed.

Soyinka next focuses on expatriate critics, whom he puts into two categories, those who are simply too stupid to become anything else but critics of African literature, and the industrious ones who irritate him because they dig up juvenalia which he himself is not very proud of, and publish it. At the very bottom of the rung we find the chichidodo school, named after the mythical bird in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which hates excrement, but also feeds on it. Soyinka provides examples of these 'un-critical tendencies', and he widens the scope by including a comparison with critical treatments of black American writers. Through selective quoting he arrives at a critical contradiction. Claude McKay is a self-confessed 'whitey-pleaser' because of his simplistic poetry, written in a southern dialect form, and the little known poet M B Tolson is accused of being the same, because he is said to be 'intricate, erudite and

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obscure'. In other words, you can't win! Soyinka is understandably touchy about the 'whitey-pleaser' epithet, as his eclecticism and his international frame of reference is interpreted as just that by the Africanist school of critics (neo-Tarzanists), and he makes a rather desperate plea for more subtlety and a wider horizon on the part of the critics. He also argues against the prevailing tendency in African literary criticism to turn criticism into sociology and use it to debate or even prove political opinions.

A logical aspect of the controversy between an indigenous versus an international outlook is the language question. The scope of this debate is also widened by a comparison with American black southern dialect and its elevation into a literary language, and Soyinka's argument here is not surprisingly that this could be either good or bad, but the important thing is to not create an orthodoxy of it and become prescriptive. Transferred to the African scene this becomes a very direct attack on Ngugi's position 'Let us not have this exaggeration of coming-homeness, which exists about certain writers'. He is at pains to debunk the ideological seriousness of the indigenous language school; to his mind they are 'not doing anything original', and yet 'parading' their ideas. This seems to be a linguistic extension of the 'tigritude' remark, embodying the idea from 'The Future of African Writing' (1960) that 'the real mark of authenticity in African writing was indifferent self-acceptance rather than energetic racial self-assertion'.

The language debate, as it developed throughout the conference reflected very narrowly the political/geographical background of the writers, and Soyinka was no exception. He pointed out the serious consequences of a changed language policy for the stability of Nigeria. The two points made by Soyinka in the linguistic debate, namely the charge of pomposity and the political considerations were taken up and further developed by Kole Omotoso in his paper 'The Languages of our Dreams and the Dreams of our Languages.' He, like Soyinka, advocates the use of English on grounds of expediency, but at the same time they both support the furtherance of indigenous languages. Kole Omotoso warns against a kind of modern illiteracy, whereby the speakers master neither their own nor the imposed language, but have an incomplete knowledge of both.

Eldred Jones could only have been pleased to find that his sentiments about the language question nearly twenty years ago met with general agreement on the second occasion. We was, however, not so pleased with

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the general development in Africa during the same span of years, and in his paper he catalogued the sacrifices which writers have made and continue to make in Africa in order to remain true to their vision when faced with censorship and other forms of oppression. His paper echoes most clearly the debate at the first conference. Writers are not 'congenital shirkers', and civil action (the gun running etc) is needed as well as writing. If Soyinka's paper was a vitriolic attack on the critics, Eldred Jones's was an accolade to the courage and integrity of writers.

Chris Wanjala introduced a different, perhaps East African tenor into the discussion. His paper had two concerns: one was to trace the beginning of East African literature through its genres, the short story, the popular novel and the songs school, and the other concern was to outline an aesthetics for African writing. The main point of his argument was that African writers must 'begin with the return to the roots', and that they must 'commute between the world of oral traditions and the world of written traditions'. This, according to his conclusion, represents a 'new spirit of criticism in East Africa'. The many objections which followed his paper would seem to indicate that this is not the case in either Southern or West Africa, and it does seem ironic that his point should not only be made, but be made to appear as a 'new spirit' twenty years after Soyinka, at the previous Stockholm conference urged that, the African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past.

Another writer who most emphatically did not agree with Soyinka on that point was Taban Lo Liyong, who dedicated his whole paper to a defence of traditional religion by way of delivering an angry attack on John F Mbiti's book *African Religions and Philosophy* and ending with the rhetorical question 'is it not time we championed our traditional religions and advocate their case?' When Ngugi wa Thiong'o joined his two East African colleagues in agreement across a vast ideological gulf one was tempted to perceive an East-West African opposition, but on closer reflection this makes little sense. One has to remember that Soyinka's stance is in opposition to the traditionalist school led by Chinweizu and his colleagues at Nsukka. Neither does the declared ideological stand-point of the writers offer an adequate explanation. Soyinka and Taban Lo Liyong have a considerable amount of shared ideological luggage, whilst Chinweizu is very far from Ngugi's Marxism, and if one looks at the leading West African socialist writers one finds that Sembene Ousmane rejects his traditional Muslim society as oppressive, whilst A. K. Armah uses it creatively as the scene for allegories of ideal socialist and revolutionary behaviour in oppressed situations. The picture is even further complicated if one bears in mind that Soyinka makes extensive use of both traditional
Yoruba material and form, and Ngugi does the same with modern foreign Marxist ideology and form. One clue to this seeming confusion could be a realization that the discussion is not really about the desirability of using traditional material or form, but about the purpose of this exercise. Should the African past produce a literary aesthetics to oppose western ones, or should it, like Armah's, teach a lesson? The two are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but the variety of answers to the question shows that the past itself is not unambiguous, and that it is very much at the mercy of its interpreters. Each writer interprets and uses the past according to his or her ideology and perceived needs, and the literary discussion shows itself once more to be highly politicized. I see no cause for regret or apology in this; as Terry Eagleton has said 'there is no need to drag politics into literary theory: as with South African sport, it has been there from the beginning.'

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's paper 'Writing against Neo-colonialism' exemplifies this fusion of criticism and politics, which Soyinka deplored. He first outlines briefly the political development of the 50s, the 60s and the 70s, and against this background describes the intellectual and cultural answers to the historical situation. He sees the 50s as a decade of hope and the writing accordingly as assertive and optimistic, but due to a mixture of faulty analysis on the part of the African intellectuals (over-emphasizing race and ignoring class) and foreign destabilization efforts, disillusion set in, and due to inadequate ideological insight writers were reduced to appealing to the conscience of corrupt national leaders. The 70s saw a renewed struggle against imperialism, this time tied to a socialist ideology, and the writer found himself 'edging towards the people'. Discussing the 80s Ngugi introduces a sinister note, agreeing with Chris Wanjala that the choice of the Kenyan writer today is either self-censorship, becoming a state functionary (with reference to Grace Ogot) or risking jail or exile. The seriousness of the question of censorship was further emphasized by Jack Mapanje from Malawi, who in his paper traced the banning history of his collection of poetry Of Chameleons and Gods.

David Maillu's paper took the form of an allegory of the history of Africa since colonization. White European man Yuropa meets African maid Negrato and rapes her. Young Afrikanus objects and receives a vicious kick where it hurts, so he retreats to the jungle, whilst Yuropa builds himself a strong castle. Meanwhile Afrikana whose real name is Uhuru is born, and we have reached the Second World War. Yuropa goes

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back to Europe before the birth, because he is afraid of Afrikanus who has reappeared from the jungle to attack him. The childhood, adolescence and youth of Afrikanà correpond to the 50s, 60s and 70s. During the 50s Afrikanà goes through a confused childhood, during the 60s she becomes the object of sexual desire for black and whites alike, and for communists, capitalists and Christians of various denominations. In the 70s she chooses an African to be her lover, but 'she knew that the battle was far from being won. She kept her courage and hoped that one day, she would grow out of these precarious situations'. In the 80s she faces difficulties, and the writer has a staggering responsibility to help her resolve them. On the surface this seems a fair enough assessment of events, but the childhood metaphor, against which so many African writers have raged, conveys both a sense of African passivity and a (false) sense of optimism. The optimism is false because it is simply based on the progression of time, where teething problems eventually turn into maturity, regardless of the nature of the problems, which are conveniently ignored. Whereas one knows precisely what Ngugi means when he says that the African writer in the 80s must align himself with the people, it is difficult to imagine what kind of advice David Maillu will offer as a result of his analysis.

Not surprisingly, Emmanuel Ngara's paper was in agreement with Ngugi's, both in its analysis of the past and its view of the present. Emmanuel Ngara called the optimism of the 50s and early 60s cultural nationalism and saw the souring of this into the disillusionment of the late 60s as a result of emergent class interests and a subsequent rift between writers and politicians. In his concern with the present Emmanuel Ngara introduced a vital element into the discussion. The debate on censorship had until then been concerned with the situation of writers under oppressive regimes, but Emmanuel Ngara first described Zimbabwe's government as 'a people-orientated' government and then proceeded to discuss the possible reasons for the present day absence of literature concerned with 'constructive criticism' of Zimbabwean socialism, which Emmanuel Ngara sees as one of the functions of the writer in a socialist state. In his answer to the question he suggested that a certain fear of the consequences of criticism induces self-censorship in the writers. With regard to the orature and language debate Zimbabwe lies squarely within the South African constellation of the problem. Literature in African languages is for historical reasons not 'progressive' and English has been the medium through which both opposition to the white regime and new ideas have been articulated. Regardless of the views expressed, the language debate reflects a serious concern with the cultural direction of developing African countries. Terry Eagleton maintains that even in our society which gener-
ally has little time for culture 'there are times and places when it suddenly becomes newly relevant, charged with a significance beyond itself'. He sees four such major moments in the world today, and one is 'nations struggling for their independence from imperialism' who are fighting against 'the uprooting of languages and custom'. Another such 'moment' is the women's movement where 'cultural and political action have become closely united', and the double burden of imperialist and male oppression obviously necessitates a strongly committed and courageous literature, a challenge which was willingly taken up by the African women writers at the conference.

The connection between politics and literature is almost graphically reflected in Lauretta Ngcobo's paper 'African Motherhood—Myth and Reality.' The first half of the paper is given to a critical overview of the role of women in traditional society where the women are marginalized in their husband's homes, valued mainly as breeders and treated, legally and otherwise, as minors. The second half of the paper discusses the images of women in Southern African literature and finds that they are too negative and do not offer the role models which young girls so desperately need. 'Punitive literature perpetuates the oppression of women' she says. 'We are looking for a changed portrayal of women in our books'. In her conclusion Lauretta Ngcobo fuses the two aspects into a political purpose. In view of the magnitude of the African people's struggle against imperialism it is incomprehensible that the African men still oppress their women to such an extent, and for the external fight to be totally honest the internal oppression must stop.

Ama Ata Aidoo agrees with her that African men and women have suffered and still suffer equally from imperialism. Both writers express the opinion that the economic/racial oppression is of a more severe order than the sexual one. This is in tune with black feminism, as it is formulated in Africa and America. In the introduction to Ngambika, Studies of Women in African Literature (African World Press 1986) Carole Boyce Davies summarizes a 'genuine African feminism', and the first point is that 'it recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European American exploitation'. However, Ama Ata Aidoo has an addition to make to the plight of African women writers: they are denied serious critical attention. She catalogues a long list of well-known critical studies of African literature, which omit women writers, and she is wittily sarcastic about Olado Taiwo's book

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4 op. cit. p 215.
Female Novelists of Modern Africa in which she says, he praises the women writers 'as if they were a bunch of precocious six-year olds who had demonstrated some special abilities to the headteacher'. She demands a literary criticism which is based on the text and the writer's intention and not on speculations about her ability to be a good mother as well as a writer.

Buchi Emecheta in her paper 'Feminism with a small 'f'' adds another aspect to the definition of African feminism, which distances it from European and American feminism. She finds that Western women over-emphasize the role of sex. 'Sex is part of life. It is not THE life' she says. African women know this, and their 'African feminism is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic.' Buchi Emecheta is a firm believer in achievement through personal effort, and she asked for better educational facilities for girls. She is, however torn between admiration for successful women, like the ones who carried out the Aba riots in Western Nigeria in 1929 and a certain impatience with her sisters. 'We are on the lowest rung. Men did not put us there, my sisters, I think sometimes we put ourselves there.' Perhaps by her emphasis on women's self-help groups, a system of both economic and psychological support, which would gladden the heart of any feminist. Buchi Emecheta's world is centred on the everyday life of women, and not, according to herself, on ideological issues, but her strong advocacy of the advancement of women in public life belies the implied opposition between the two worlds.

Ideological issues were in the forefront almost to the exclusion of personal ones in the South African session. Both Sipho Sepamla, Wally Serote and Miriam Tlali discussed the problem of censorship, and although they agreed that censorship had recently become less harsh they also agreed that things in general had become worse. Sipho Sepamla added Bantu education, self-exile and the work of the security police to his list of grievances, and it is obvious that they are talking about a sinister scale of oppression. Protest and revolt were still the dominant tone, they asserted, and the writer today was more actively involved in the fight than before, mainly through public poetry readings and participation in demonstrations and burials of apartheid victims. Wally Serote who is the cultural representative for the ANC and therefore a politician as well as a writer, was the most prescriptive in his views of what South African literature should be about. If it did not inspire, give hope and optimism to the people in the fight it was 'irrelevant'. He shared with Njabulo Ndebele a writer's fascination with the phenomenon of 'wearing the necklace'. The burning to death of perceived traitors as a result of street justice contains all the most painful elements in the South African situation. Wally Serote wants to make politi-
cal sense of it, and Njabulo Ndebele wants to understand the psychology of both the informer and his killers. In this lies a difference between the two writers, not in terms of their aim (the aim for black writers in South Africa is always the same), but in terms of literary approach. Professor Ndebele argued convincingly in his paper that protest literature had run its course. He saw it as tied to a specific situation of near total helplessness, which existed in the 50s. The only option for writers in that situation was the articulation of grievances, and there was a belief in the inherent persuasiveness of the moral position (what Richard Rive in a recent interview has called 'Look here, white man stuff') which could lead to a reformist attitude rather than a desire for radical change. The situation in the 60s, 70s and 80s is radically different, the blacks are no longer powerless, and this new balance of power should be reflected in a change in the orientation of the literature, away from protest and the obsession with the whites and their power mechanisms and towards an affirmation of black culture and an exploration and discussion of the new structures of a future independent and black South Africa. He suggested that one way of carrying out this psychological liberation would be to write about hitherto unexplored areas in the lives of blacks such as the relationship between the oppressed and the tools of science, the psychology of stooges, the changing role of the family, the world of sport and fashion and rural life. He suggests that writers leave out any references to the white dominant culture and concentrate on an exploration of their own culture, a practice which he himself has followed in his award winning collection of short stories *Fools and other Stories* which celebrates aspects of township life. His paper constituted a major contribution to new thinking in the field of South African literature. What conclusions could one draw from comparing the discussion at this conference with that of the previous one nearly twenty years ago? What has happened in the established areas of debate and what new issues and ideas have occurred?

Negritude, which came in for severe criticism at the first conference, was hardly touched upon at the second one. This could be an indication that the concept has taken its place in history as the outcome of a certain set of conditions, which no longer obtains, and that it is therefore no longer valid or interesting in its original form as an ideological tool for shaping modern African consciousness.

The language debate, on the other hand, seems to rage with unabated

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strength, and the support for writing in indigenous languages has if, anything, become stronger. The closely related debate on orature and African aesthetics can perhaps be seen as a present day offshoot of the negritude debate, and the Marxist base of some of the ideas represent a rejection of African socialism as it appeared in the writing of Senghor, whilst at the same time remaining within a socialist world view.

The debate on censorship and the inclusion of the concept of 'self-censorship' was a somewhat sinister addition to the debate at the second conference, and one cannot escape the conclusion that the crisis has deepened in South Africa, but also that freedom of expression is endangered in certain black African countries as well, notably Kenya. The debate on critics and criticism of African literature testifies to the enormous output of critical material and raises the question as to whether African literature is receiving too much critical attention. It further touches upon the uneasy relationship between black and white critics, which does not seem to have eased up though the last twenty years have seen a vast improvement in the imbalance of European/American versus African critics, to the extent that the leading critics of African literature now come from Africa. In other words, the situation is much closer to a normal literary scene with an international interest.

With regard to literary aesthetics Njabulo Ndebele's paper represented a new direction, away from protest literature and towards a 'literature of affirmation' in South Africa, but the one single most important new development since the first conference was the contribution of the women writers. They also existed in 1967, albeit in smaller numbers, but in the intervening years they have moved from being individual scattered authors towards forming a movement which at this moment shares grievances and demands, but as yet no wider platform or ideology. There was the definite feeling of the beginning of something tremendously important, but the difficulties that lay ahead were also outlined. They included such large and vexed questions as the connection between feminism and Marxism, and the relationship with white feminism. An added difficulty is the attitude of African men to feminism or anything that remotely resembles it, and this was demonstrated very clearly at the conference. The women's courage in facing the hostility gave hope, and if I had the power to decide what would be the outstanding features at an African writers' conference in 20 years, I would want to see a strong, but not necessarily united feminist platform and a vigorous and affirmative literature coming out of a free South Africa.
What is the essence of African literature? Nobody quite knows. That is why there are so many conferences. I would suggest one feature in which African literature differs from European literature: it is contemporary. With some exceptions its authors are alive today. Most African works of fiction are written after the Second World War. They document a time of transition. They reflect what is still in the memory of the living.

When twenty years ago Eskia Mphahlele (who was refused a passport to come here) edited the anthology *African Writing Today*, most of its contributors were under forty-five years of age. Now they would be under sixty-five, still not quite retired.

That generation had no obvious models to follow. They wrote against the impact of travel and settler literature. They had to express their Africaness in a foreign tongue and at the same time educate African readers to perceive their own experience in a mirror unknown, in a medium alien to them. When Heinemann started its African Writers Series in 1962, its first title was a reprint of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Since then hundreds of titles have appeared.

Achebe, who could not come to Hasselby Castle in 1967 but arrived some time afterwards, sweeps away years of ‘denigration and self-abasement’ but cannot help his society regain belief in itself without pulling it apart and analysing what has gone wrong. It is the artist's responsibility to reshape a distorted history and portray a misjudged society honestly, without idealizing it. Thus Achebe is able to criticize Western economic oppression while facing the coups, the corruption, the inner imperialism of a new set of rulers. His themes remain, to an amazing degree, relevant: the traditionalism of the past, sometimes suffocating, against the individualism, sometimes greedy and self-centred, of the present. The pioneers of African literature are still the masters. It is not always easy to see what outstanding talents are emerging from their shadows.

When in 1961 I published my first anthology of African literature, a book of 500 pages, and when the following year I wrote a thesis on African prose 1945-60, I found one could survey and contemplate the entire African literary scene with some ease provided one could get hold of the necessary material. But since our meeting here in 1967, the picture has grown more complex.
Production has increased, though important manuscripts still remain unprinted—less so for authors writing in English than for those in Angola and Mozambique. Hundreds of names now circle in the air. Above all, experts on African literature abound, especially in the United States. Today more is written about African literature than literature itself. The works dealing with, for example, Wole Soyinka are many more than his own books. They could be seen as forming a wall to prevent the reader from gaining access to his work. Has then African literature been swamped by criticism and analysis? Has African literature suffered from the recent philosophical trend which has tended to elevate criticism above creative writing and turned works of art into mere illustrations of intellectual theories?

A purpose of this gathering is to let the writers speak. That was also the aim last time; it seems even more vital today. For most seminars on African literature are conducted by critics, or madmen and specialists as Soyinka would say. I find it essential that as practitioners of a difficult craft the writers themselves should voice their triumphs and grievances. One reason for the success of the seminar here in 1967 was that the writers were encouraged to talk of concrete experiences that had shaped them, from their childhood onwards. In our endeavours, I would like to see the thread of personal experience run through the talks so that they do not become too abstract. What made you start writing and what makes you persevere? What incidents and meetings formed you? Such matters are not easy to air, but I would be happy if we did not let the stuff of our dreams out of sight.

Perhaps one may regard the literature published up to our first meeting here as the first stage of a literary development in Africa, starting vaguely in the 30s, more seriously with Achebe in 1958. The next twenty years may, with a bold generalization, be considered as the second stage. For the pioneers of the first stage a principal aim was to show to the outside world an Africa that had remained hidden and unexpressed. They made visible what the colonialists and the foreign visitors had not been able to interpret.

During the second state, writers no longer demonstrate to outsiders how it felt to grow up in Africa or the intricacies of tribal life. They deal with social and emotional experiences that are becoming more and more complex and controversial, the further they are removed from the age of colonial dominance.

As Wole Soyinka said last time at Hässelby, the author must not content himself with chronicling the customs of society. He must play the part of bard and oracle, he must see more clearly and exactly than other people, he must be a visionary, a warning voice and a builder of the future.

Soyinka himself is outside categories, he is multidimensional and difficult to summarize. He has a vibrant imagination, he has also shown his
democratic spirit in many social and political campaigns. He has a vision of a dignified harmonious past—the traditional Yoruba village where people had a knowledge and understanding lost to the contemporary world—but he has also resisted the facile fascination of the past that may inhibit a writer rather than release his creativity. For a quarter of a century, Soyinka has denounced the corrupt post-independence establishment in Africa. He has satirized the hypocritical kleptomaniac rulers, politicians, religious persuaders. While he has learnt much from Western art, Yoruba culture and cosmology provide the African dimension to his universal dramas. He makes Ogun today's god of precision tools, oil rigs and space rockets. He refuses to free African from European goods and concepts entirely. Africa should use Western technology in order to control it and not be enslaved by it. In the same spirit he uses English, as long as it is the only possible language that does not carry the values of a particular ethnic group.

In the preface to this play *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), Soyinka argues that art should 'expose, reflect, indeed magnify the decadent, rotten underbelly of a society that has lost its directions, jettisoned all sense of values and is careering down a precipice as fast as the latest artificial boom can take it'. To those who require a more radical slant he replies that though his work has a firm social vision, he objects to the imposition of a literary ideology which 'curtails creative and critical options and tries to dodge labour which properly belongs to the socio-political analyst'.

For Soyinka's younger friend Kole Omotoso, the artist is also the oracle of the people, the self-ordained priest who helps to make society aware of itself in order to know where it is going. Omotoso scorns African writers in exile; you must live in your own society and stop explaining Africa to visitors. 'The new generation of writers are concerned with explaining ourselves to ourselves,' he writes.

My impression is that the generation divide means more in Africa than in Europe. Writers have now grown up in Nigeria or Kenya and hardly remember what went before independence. Their point of reference is Africa, not Europe. They know they have to chart the future without much outside help. They are not obsessed by colonialism, rather by corruption, greed, inefficiency and elitism. These writers are committed in the sense that they live in an atmosphere of urgency and frustration. They try not only to protect their freedom of action but seek a way of acting. They take the side of the powerless and important, they write of victims of the arbitrariness of others, they sing no songs in praise of the victor.

But at the same time, often enough, the writer is a connoisseur of power. In his very profession lies power to influence. It seems to me it is in this double role that the writer can be important: he knows the essence of
power through his own job as persuader just as the politician must know his. He knows the attraction of power but he also knows life in the shadow of big power. On his insight in these matters depends the weight of his words.

In Europe there is the notion that the artist lives on the edge of society which looks at him with suspicion and does not care about him. In Africa, for some time, the writer seemed part of the nation-building effort. He was a teacher with a very direct influence. He then suffered for what he taught. Now major writers live in exile: Ngugi, Nuruddin Farah, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo. We must also remember that the traditional role of the African poet is to teach and praise and not to subvert society. But what he celebrates is not the surface appearance of that society but a world in which the spiritual and the material being are one.

Having just mentioned Armah, I regret his absence here. He lives for the moment in Dakar and, like Achebe, declines to take part in African seminars outside Africa. He is a polyglot who has gone to live in different countries in Africa in order to find and recreate a synthesis of the continent's culture. He belongs to those who would like to solve the problems of Africa by direct action: 'Literature to me is a creation at a very low level of intensity. I think it is absurd never to have been in practical participation.' Armah reflects a frustration common enough among African writers: they should be in a position to influence and advise, yet they feel they are not listened to. They could not even make their living as writers. No book clubs, no book promotion, no proper bookshops exist in Africa, complains Armah. Thus writers become amateurs who go into diplomacy, banking, teaching and they die from lost creativity. Armah partly blames the publishers failing to establish the link between producers and consumers. The link is all too often 'some neo-colonial tentacle of the European or American publishing establishment . . . As long as major African writers are happy to depend on Western publishers or their local placemen, we shall remain blocked at pre-professional levels' (West Africa 86081).

It may well be that a continental co-operative of African authors, publishers and distributors may raise the standards of literature itself. My very personal feeling is that African literature is preparing for an outburst of original creativity around the turn of the millenium. That phenomenon has occurred in other literatures: first a few remarkable works of art, then a longer period of general productivity but on the whole without exceptional quality. During that period a sub-soil comes into being, nurturing the more significant efforts that will follow later on. That necessary undergrowth consists of entertainment, cheap literature, pseudo-docum- taries, everyday dramas, trivial steps on one's road through life. It is a literature that mirrors society in a more or less superficial manner and it will
be read as sociology in the future, not as works of art. With us in Sweden, the fifty or so years preceding August Strindberg was such a period—notwithstanding three or four authors of high quality. I would not be surprised if something similar is now taking place in Africa as was the case in Latin America before the outburst of the 'total novel' of Carpentier, Marquez, Llosa, Cortazar.

Looking back to our seminar in 1967, I see other differences. One is that some writers—Ngugi foremost among them—have begun writing in their own language and so have gained more influence locally. They no longer address foreign audiences as ambassadors of their culture but speak to their own people. Ngugi tells how he was approached by a village woman who said 'We hear you have a lot of education and that you write books. Why don't you and others of your kind give some of that education to the village? We don't want the whole amount; just a little of it, and a little of your time.' Ngugi yielded to that appeal by starting to write in Kikuyu and founding a village theatre, and as a consequence he spent a year in gaol and now lives in exile. Other writers were jailed for other reasons, but Ngugi was the first to be jailed for his use of an African language to produce a play that his African audience could understand.

Another difference compared to twenty years ago is that the path to fame no longer always goes via London, New York and Paris. There are publishing houses run by Africans in Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Zimbabwe as well as in South Africa. That is a good thing. But in spite of rising literacy, books sell less. The reasons are lack of currency, import restrictions between African nations, piracy. The flow of books is held up by customs regulations and slow shipping from the West coast to the East. To get a book from Lagos to Dar is more difficult than from London, in fact virtually impossible. There is so far no joint university press program even within the SADCC countries. Only Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines (based in Dakar with affiliations in Abidjan and Yaoundé) is a reasonably successful publishing house, mainly because of the franc-zone.

Writers are then forced to use other media than the printing press. They use the radio—with risk, since it is generally government controlled. They may go into filming—as Sembene Ousmane of Senegal has done with formidable success. Recently, bold experiments are taking place in drama: Yoruba plays for mass audiences in a Lagos stadium, Negative workshop in Harare, the birth of spontaneous theatre in Soweto, performed one night in a parish hall, then secretly transferred to an unused school to avoid police harassment.

Writing itself, as Emmanuel Ngara points out in his paper, has become so hazardous that some writers are now resorting to obscure imagery and symbolism making their works less accessible to the general reader than is
desirable. It seems to me that African literature— to a greater extent than European or Latin American literature— has tried to reflect the ills of society and suggest ways to bring about an improvement. But the message seldom gets across, at least not to the appropriate authorities, or the reaction is unfavourable enough to have the writer resort to allegory and fantasy.

While the creative imagination may suffer by steering too close to the actual reality, it suffers more by being stifled through censorship, lack of encouragement, the hostility or indifference of a government. To Sembene Ousmane, African countries lack cultural policies and so-called Ministries of Culture do little more than gather young, half-naked girls to dance once in a while to entertain visiting dignitaries. It is therefore the duty of the artist to resist the process that is turning Paris and London into cultural capitals for Africa.

Ousmane argues that he has been given the task by his people to say the things the politicians will not hear. The artist is not important simply because he creates objects of art but because he is the voice of the less-privileged. The emergence of censorship in so many African states proves that the vision of the statesman and the writer do not coincide. It is rarely combined in the same person as in Léopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal or in Luis Bernardo Honwana of Mozambique.

The situation of the black writers in South Africa is different simply because they live in the most oppressive racist regime the world has seen since Hitler. They are under police surveillance and find it next to impossible to sustain a creative output. They encounter all sorts of aesthetic dilemmas as well.

The critic and novelist Lewis Nkosi (who was with us here in 1967) recently wrote that a desire 'to share more intimately in a collective identity provided by political action against the apartheid regime . . . has created for these writers their present crisis'. He points out that what happens in the streets never actually happens in literature, but this fact is lost to many black authors who practice a naive documentary fiction.

Njabulo Ndebele who is here today seems to me one of the writers who has managed to avoid those pitfalls. He agrees that one effect of the desire to bridge the space between literature and the terrible reality of apartheid has been a tendency to 'produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can easily be characterized as one of either good or evil, or, more accurately, symbols of evils on the one hand and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand . . . All these symbols appear in most of our writings as finished products, often without a personal history. As such they appear as mere ideas to be marshalled this way or that in a moral debate'.
What the camera cannot follow and the reporter cannot note down for next day's news is the dimension of the inner world into which only the imaginative language can enter. Nkosi impatiently shrugs at the failure of South African writers to 'illuminate what is going on in the dark recesses of the national psyche. We are told often enough what news journalists have already sufficiently told . . . Only gloom can be induced by the patent laziness of our writers compared to Latin American novelists, by the endless quotations from contemporary history, by a repeated tabulation of events from newspaper headlines.'

Nkosi's viewpoint seems worth discussing at our seminar. To what extent is a literary protest meaningful? To what degree may works of poetry and fiction aid the struggle against apartheid? So far we have seen only the first glimpses of the experience of the children of Soweto, the memoirs of petrol bombers and stone throwers. The renaissance of black literature in South Africa may start with them. Meanwhile, for better or worse, black poetry has become part of the mass struggle. The township student and youth organizations integrated militant oral poetry into their activities in the late 70s. It is performance poetry recited at services for fallen workers in soccer stadiums, hostels and trade union halls. It has been collected, for example in Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle, ed. Ari Sitas (Johannesburg 1986). Though better heard than read, these writers swoop back and forth between the heroic gesture and the everyday slogan, between the plain-spoken and the rhetorical. They are proletarian, urban and nationalist, they ask the real Africa to resurface from the crowded dawn trains and the yawning queues of the unemployed at the labour offices.

The traditional art of praise poetry, its imagery and parallel structures are blended here with new symbols. The heroes are no longer valiant chiefs but organizers of the National Union of Textile Workers. The oral forms of the past are filled with a modern tragic content.

Is there in fact an African road which we can all travel, recognizing women, children, great captains and ancient robbers, and marveling at palavers, jokes, ceremonies? Are there in African literature categories that we might usefully discover and decipher, or are there no descriptions of love, friendship, marital conflicts, social climbing and defeat that we, as Europeans, can recognize because so much of African society is differently structured, so that in African literature you look out for phenomena, people and values that you do not easily encounter elsewhere? Can in fact a shameless but consciously eurocentric way of questioning bring some elucidation from those who write African literature today? I say this a bit tongue in cheek as someone who reads quite a lot of African books but often finds it difficult to interest others in that literature unless they are
fascinated by Africa itself. I must add that the same goes for Swedish literature. Hardly anyone cares about Swedish literature abroad, least of all in Africa, it is like exporting Luo books to Gabon or Hausa poetry to Zambia. No cultural imperialism is possible from here.

At the same time it is remarkable how governments in Africa make cultural assistance a low priority. They seem to suspect the use of culture. Is perhaps literature by definition subversive and seditious? Many governments seem to think so which is sometimes flattering.

But such an attitude presents a dilemma for the donors. If Sweden gives the means of communication to a country—printing machinery, paper, radios and technical equipment—should it not hint that communication is not only one way, from the government to the people? Or is that interference?

The freedom of the writer worth defending does not always look the same. I would like to quote Nadine Gordimer on this issue. 'To me it is the writer's right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from the public conformity of political interpretation, morals and tastes'.

Literature is always on a collision course with the autocrats, not because writers always speak for freedom but because they create in their work people who could observe, reason and make essential choices themselves. Autocrats wish that their people should feel unworthy of justice, private life and independent thinking. The valuable literature tries to counteract people's belittling and despising of themselves, and that means trouble.

One of literature's tasks is to help people understand their own nature and make them realize they are not powerless. Therefore it is not only writers who are hit by censorship but most of all the readers. Just as one can store nuclear weapons, one can, by silencing truth, store hypocrisy, stupidity, immorality, so that they are glued together into a wall hard to penetrate. And that creates endless individual suffering.

When a reader is denied access to a book, his freedom is menaced, his possibility to glimpse the truth diminished. The censor fears the artist because he does not express in mathematical, logical or political terms what he really means. He tells stories instead, writes poems and recites them, as in Soweto, so that people behave in unexpected ways.

The censor fears the unconventional and divergent even when it is not politically charged: thus the mistrust of art and literature trying to break new ground. Perhaps true works of art are always critical and attack something which openly or unconsciously is taboo in society. Censorship likes to create a façade of unanimity, thus showing that the authorities cannot make mistakes. Suffering may not be portrayed because that shows that
something has gone wrong in the social planning. History must be revised, memories of the past explained away so that the power of the day may be seen as legitimate.

There are numerous pressures aimed at authors beside police state brutality. Especially common in the Third World is the demand that writers show solidarity with their country in times of crisis, disruption from within, enormous debts, etc. Such a nation, it is said, cannot afford criticism or even the free exchange of opinion. The demand for loyalty and unity leads to self-censorship or, finally, to exile.

Literature points towards experiences that cannot be measured or weighed. It says that man is unforeseeable: he can never be entirely defined and thus cannot be used as a tool by others. No geometry, no government or computer bank can chart the needs of man. Therefore every work of art liberates. Therefore it has the censor at its heels. Therefore so much energy is devoted to prevent and destroy fragile things like fantasies, thoughts—and their creators.

There is a dream, a vision hard to grasp inside the bulk of the evergrowing body of African literature. It has roots in the past, it attempts to render social justice to people that have been silent so that they should not have lived in vain. Above all, it is contemporary, written by authors alive and active now. A certain percent of these writers are with us here today. That is remarkable enough.

On behalf of the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies I welcome you to the useful isolation at Hasselby Castle, to gossip and cross-fertilize, to tell anecdotes and criticize whoever comes to mind. After a few days of chilly Swedish spring, you will be let loose to wander, read and lecture in the city of Stockholm where a general public awaits you with apprehension and delight. Let me end by repeating what I said at the opening of the first seminar here in 1967:

This is a meeting between a few people, and personal contacts are its main purpose. One may safely say that relations between individuals are what preoccupies literature in all ages; and in the world today, in literature as in politics, nothing seems more important than that we keep talking intelligibly to each other, for man has nothing to trust but himself and nothing to fear more than himself.
Last time I was here, the principal, driving motive for my wanting to get here at all cost, was that we were in Nigeria on the verge of a civil war,—if we had not actually begun then? I think the first shot was about to be fired. I was hoping that here in a comparatively calm and objective atmosphere I could meet Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi, who I think were coming at the time from Biafra, and discuss what we could do in this very grave situation. Unfortunately by that time it was too late, they could not come. It is one reason why my speech on that occasion was rather sombre and gloomy. It has been taken as my philosophy to be gloomy. I believe that it was even one of the earliest occasions of my being accused of having acquired a veneer of European pessimism. I don’t know why one should be optimistic when one is on the verge of a civil war. Today, I intend to talk about a different kind of hazard. The amount of criticism of African literature, which is now probably about a thousand fold of the actual material being put out, really constitutes a barrier, not only to the literature itself, but in fact to the very personalities of the producers of this literature. Much as I like to think that for writers the most common form of professional hazard in our existence, are our governments, present regimes, present ideologies, I sometimes think that the greatest professional hazard is the critic. It is for this reason that I have picked the title; Ethics, Ideology and the Critic, because I think it is time that we should reverse the situation a little bit. It is really the writer who is the centre of our concerns. It is about time the writers took an interest, a methodical interest in critics, applying the same methods of analysis and examining the motivations behind some of the outrageous things they say. All the time we encounter incredible pieces of misinterpretation, the most outrageous claims and direct *ad hominem* criticisms to arrive at what they call truth. Let us look into the background of some of these critics and see whether we can discover anything which enables us to understand the elements of irrationality which we encounter when we read the interpretations. The critics have now outstripped the productivity, i.e., the writers. I think criticism is far more interesting at the moment than the primary product of literature. I hope to nibble at the edges of this strange phenomenon which I have not seen the equal of. I have studied literature and criticism of most societies in the world and
I have not seen anything quite at this level, where criticism in such a proportion outstrips the amount of primary literary work. So we should try to begin to examine this critical phenomenon. I am going to be as light-hearted as possible. I think that having given this sombre speech the last time I was here I should vary it and try to be a little bit light-hearted on this occasion. It will not always be easy but I think that one should always retain a sense of proportion when dealing with critics, even though they don’t have any sense of proportion most of the times when dealing with writers.

Today, there are some four or five categories of practising critics of African literatures. The first is easily disposed of; it is that vanishing breed of lovers of literature, that abnormal type whose interest in literature by Africans commenced by the basic accident that they were born Africans or had, by chance or curiosity, come in contact with African literature and become instantly hooked on it. Their interest was engendered by the fact that it is the product of a different climate of imagination because they are normally passionate about the act of literary creativity. They constitute the type whose time could be just as fruitfully and intelligently employed in immersion in the literature of other societies. Even at their most negative reaction to a particular work or the general direction of a particular writer, it is always clear, through their meticulous analysis, that they have actually engaged the work in question as a product of human labour and imagination, no matter how flawed. Their intelligence is of course, never in question.

The next category which is equally worthy of attention is the committed, critical, ideological partisan, usually Marxist. Literature for this species is a means of opening up the material relations of the world. The work which illuminates this process is already on its way to being a masterpiece. The best of such critics evince sound literary sensibilities, respond to the delicate balances and nuances of the forces which they identify in a literary work. At their worst, they are deaf and blind to any shades and colourings between black and white. The very worst—and indeed the mere opportunists—of this kind often sound as if they have never read the work in question, only heard about it. They are the hacks of the trade, extremists posturing; their baggage is filled with nothing but cliches, substitutes for analytical vigour. Between the first line of a critical essay by this group and the tenth, it is clear that they have lost all moorings with the material product of their enterprise; they could be discussing any work at all, by any author in any time and place. They could even be debating the latest market fluctuation in the price of corn. There is an even lower grade. At the very bottom of this group is what we call the neo-Tarzanist ideologues. It is somewhat unfair to the top of this sector to lump them together but—
ideology is ideology. And the issue is that something is being promoted for which literature, like any other available commodity, provides mere fodder.

Once upon a time in Nigeria, if a child in the family proved to be something of a dead loss, incapable of absorbing anything in school and showing no aptitude whatever for any sort of profession, the consolation formula was, 'Ah well, he can always be a soldier'. Not any more I'm afraid, not since the soldiers began to direct the destinies of our millions—never mind the result. Since then it has become a status thing to know even one soldier. Well, apply that abandoned formula to our next set of critics. Sometime in their career, their parents, teachers or colleagues must have shaken their heads dolefully, sighed with resignation and said, 'Ah well, he can always go to Africa and be a literary critic'. The same as the British used to send their dullest people to become District Officers in Darkest Africa. This category of critics is, needless to say, largely expatriate. You know them easily by the rapid changing of their coats and by the volume of their industry. One moment, they are anti-Negritudinists, the next moment they are passionate Negritudinists. Next year, they are wearing the Marxist garb; the next they are beating the drum of ethnic imperatives—they have become more African than Africans, they dye their cloths a deeper indigo than the house of the bereaved. It all depends on which particular school appears to be most strident at the time—you will find them always one step behind fashion, but you wouldn't guess it from the air of fresh discovery they exude in their writing. I need not waste too much time on this group—I shall sum up by saying that they could not possibly find a living, writing in any other field the way they do on African literature. No respectable journal would tolerate the vacuousness of their writing, their presumptuous ignorance and facile sweeping statements—not even the very journals which print such imbecilities—would accept articles on this level, book reviews etc. by any critic writing on contemporary European or American literature.

I move next to a highly industrious group. For these, African literature is simply an industry and, they want their slice of the action. They are usually not pretentious, make no large claims on the intellect and are well aware of their limitations in that respect. Yet, paradoxically they tend to take a proprietary attitude towards areas they have defined as theirs and get curiously offended if they are not consulted as experts by everyone in their carved-out territory. In order to stay relevant, a permanent irritant in the eye of over-sensitive authors, they will write up any irrelevant or insignificant action or statement by a writer as if it is the most earth-shaking revelation in the world. Sometimes I have a feeling that they have a worldwide network of spies because it does not seem humanly possible that
anyone should be so quick on the draw. I know that all this sounds churlish considering the fact that they are a very good source of primary material—mind you, even this needs constant checking. In their anxiety to be the first to publish, they do sometimes get their facts atrociously wrong. But—no malice intended. Sometimes, indeed more often than not, the targeted writer does get the feeling that he is just a fat juicy chunk of meat on which the long proboscis, tentacles and suckers of several leeches are permanently fastened even from impossible distances. I readily acknowledge that it is not a rational complaint to make but writers are not necessarily rational in their responses to legitimate interests. And, to tell the truth, it is basically a psychic thing. You wake up in the morning sometimes in our tropical part of the continent and there are blood-spots on the sheets—you lie on your back for several minutes eyes rolling round and round looking for the mosquito responsible for the outrage and oh, the relief when you actually hear the buzz and see the bloated anopheles. You are so relieved that there is a physical explanation for those blood-spots that you forget to take your prophylactic.

Finally, there is the smallest, the tiniest group of all. It is an extremist sect, a sort of break-away faction of the well-known neo-Tarzanist school, one which is marked more by its psycho-pathology than any critical intellect or competence. It makes up for its size by the sheer power of its obsession. There is no other way to express it. This tiny group is possessed. In Nigeria the group is now known as the Chichidodo School—after its founder. Those of you who have read Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* will have no difficulty in understanding what sort of critics these are. The Chichidodo bird according to Ayi Kwei, is a legendary Ghananian bird which shrieks out to the world all day how much it hates excrement. Loathes it. Simply cannot stand the filth. Yet what does our Chichidodo bird feed upon? The worms which inhabit human excrement. That's Chichidodo for you. I think that any other elaboration on the nature of the 'labour of love' engaged upon by this group is superfluous; it is their methods however which would well bear scrutiny because of the ethics or lack of ethics involved in their compulsive hunt for their favourite diet. Let me give an example of the latest to this Chichidodo group. It is an appropriate place to narrate this example since Sweden was the cause of all the palaver. You may remember that there was some kind of rumour about the Nobel Prize going to Wole Soyinka. In Nigeria it became more than a rumour. There were people who tethered cows and chickens and bought their drinks to celebrate this event. I asked them, 'Don't you know about the Nobel Prize?' 'No, no, from what we read in the papers, this is it.' It didn't matter that this was all in the realm of speculation. You should see how people were rushed to hospital, heart-attack, blood-pressure,
fainting in the street, it was incredible. Of course there was a barrage of newspapermen chasing me all over the world, and I said, 'Please, will you just leave me alone'. One of them trapped me and asked me: 'What would you do if you got the Prize?' and I said: 'No comment'. 'Suppose you didn't get the Prize, what would you do?' 'No comment'. I thought that would have been a very safe international kind of language to use in circumstances like that. Well, then came the day when everybody was nicely deflated and the whole country went into mourning. Nigeria declared war on Sweden, and on France and I had to calm everybody down and beg them: 'Please don't take everything so seriously. We will try again.' Then an article came out in one of our papers, by a member of this group, and he wrote an interview, which incidently took place even before the results were announced. He said I was interviewed after the Prize came out and all I said was, 'No comment'. 'For Wole Soyinka, who is really so voluble, so articulate on every issue', he said that, 'No comment' indicates clearly how disappointed he was. And that he was disappointed therefore proves what certain critics have said all along, that Wole Soyinka is not a true African. This is the methodology of the Chichidodo group.

But this talk must not be understood, in spite of the title, to be about critics. It is really about non-criticism or uncritical tendencies. And I shall be concentrating on the question of language and the attitude of criticism towards the issue of language—both the choice of language and the strategies employed within the chosen language. The subject for a practising writer who has already made his choice or rather, who has accepted the choice that was imposed on him—is frankly academic. If you have practiced the trade in a certain language for thirty-five years any discussion of the medium becomes absolutely academic. But certain forms of criticism have in recent times sought to place the issue outside an objective framework. A very crude ad hominem hysteria has succeeded in obscuring the very complexity of the creative process. Presumptions of authors' motivation—driven stubbornly into affirmations have replaced, for some of the above listed schools, what should be sincere attempts to evaluate the quest for literary forms. We have reached the incredible situation where totally fictitious backgrounds are being invented for writers in order to explain their stylistic choices in deliberately tendentious terms. I shall give some concrete examples of this. Let us widen our terms of reference a little. Let us travel a little by way of the Americas in order to reduce the burden placed solely on the contemporary African writer.

American poetry of the sixties—Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg and others of the Beat Generation—was a genuine rebellion both against the existing American poetic tradition and against American society itself. It must be acknowledged, mind you, that American culture is one of the most
faddiest cultures in the entire world—fashions are produced and consumed for no other reason than a compulsion towards novelty. I speak here not merely of the literary arts but all artistic genres, music, painting, sculpture, theatre etc. In the process, even the artistic expressions of other societies are brought into this maw of undiscriminating appetite—chewed, regurgitated, spat out and then forgotten. Who remembers Tantric art in America today? Or the so-called Tactile Theatre? Nevertheless it cannot be denied that certain movements did emerge as authentic products of a discontent with or revolt against American society itself or the prevailing ethics of a particular moment. Such was the poetic innovation of the Beat Generation—scorning rhyme, rupturing syntax, free-wheeling, incantatory—an expression of motion against stagnation, a voice of youth liberating its will and reaching out beyond the congealment of the establishment.

The other revolt which was part of, and yet apart from this movement—the Beats were after all, let us face it, the expression of an internal fracture within the dominant white culture—this other revolt was the black revolution. The literature of this revolt was, as is normal in such contexts—just as uneven as the product of the so-called Beat Generation. It did add two qualities however—because of its very nature—to the larger framework—intensity of emotion (which was largely anger) and a recourse to a linguistic idiom, a very special dialect which was inaccessible to the Beat Generation—it is this latter attribute which I wish to underline in these remarks. There was nothing original about it—it had been experienced before, some fifty years earlier to be precise. I refer to the literary elevation of what is often referred to as 'negro dialect'. This is not to suggest that dialect poetry ever ceases to be current in any community that is compelled to adopt the language of its conquerors—I am merely calling attention to the phenomenon of its dramatic heightening when that dominant culture is formally challenged—be the cause economic exploitation, racist prejudice or of course awareness of the very cultural dominance. Even in a so-called homogeneous society, there always exist interior sub-cultures which create—and indeed formalize their own linguistic devices. It is as if every society creates its own ghetto culture, willy-nilly. The phenomenon is only more dramatic, more self-conscious in the case of cultures which have a very distinct sense of being 'dominated'—because of institutional differentiations of physical differences. There emerges a distinct commitment to a linguistic device which characterizes itself as a tool of resistance. And of course it can go on to evolve its own formalism which evinces characteristics or tendencies as negative and constricting as the established language it has set out to combat.

This progressive formalism involves, often, the elevation of what, in
normal times, was a normal instrument of communication, to the status of
cultural flag-bearer, leading to revolutionary romanticization or,
cheapening—picking on the line of least linguistic resistance. This was evi-
dent in much of the poetry of black resistance in the sixties. Not every poet
could be a Nikki Giovani, a Calvin Hernton or Imamu Amiri Baraka (then
LeRoi Jones) whose terse, uncompromising damnation of American white
domination and corruption was couched in imagery which rode furiously
on the rhythms of fundamentalist preachers and—to some extent—jazz.
Others like Sonia Sanchez, Ethelridge Knight, Robert Hayden on the other
hand, posited an equally uncompromising revolutionary thesis in more for-
mal verse forms, recognizing perhaps that their genuine poetic bent did not
lend itself to the more 'dialect' routine. Sonia Sanchez was a particularly
interesting case—even if she rode both horses, so to speak. But she did do
a critique of the extremism of the very simplistic dialect poetry. It goes like
this: 'White mother fucker, white mother fucker, white mother fucker,
white mother fucker—pig. White mother fucker, white mother fucker,
white mother fucker, white mother fucker—bastard. White mother fucker,
white mother fucker, white mother fucker, white mother fucker'. The
point we are making really is this—that for the accomplished poets, there
was meeting ground in content through different formal routes, and that
the mediocre versifiers—whose sole ability was to string together
recognizably 'dialect' lines, duly salted and peppered with the regulation
quota of anti-bourgeois, anti-white expressions, such as 'Shit', 'Fuck',
'Kill Whitey', 'Pig', 'Motherfucker honky' etc.—such triers were soon left
behind and are hardly ever remembered today.

Ironically, to bring in the Beat Generation again, the poetry of Jack
Kerouac and others was far more traceable to contemporary jazz rhythms,
far more consciously so—at least in my analysis. Ted Joans was probably
the only black poet of that movement whose 'jazz-content' was as self-
evident as actually constructed. The black poets of the sixties were not, I
suspect, out to make music. Their message tended to be direct, brutal and
final. The Beat poets invited dialogue, their works read like instrumental
improvisations, sets of responses and counter-response. The black poets in-
sisted on direct monologues, utilizing dialect as a means of distancing
themselves from a society that had rejected them, and which they now in
turn themselves rejected.

Now, as with all stylistic movements in the arts, anywhere in the
universe, the sixties poetry had its parentage, its lineage. If we go back to
the first decades of the century, we find that this was a tradition which pro-
duced quite a respectable corpus of literature during the so-called Harlem
Renaissance, and indeed went further back to some of the monographs of
the earliest slave writers now being discovered. It is, however, sufficient to
begin with its expression in the twenties and thirties, observing its re-emergence in the sixties because it enables us to discuss the various motivations which went into the choice of a particular linguistic strategy at various times in the development (or struggle) of specific cultural communities. Indeed, we are suggesting here that the matter is very complicated, and any canonical position is bound to be contradicted by numerous examples at various stages of that culture’s development. Part of the problem of those who make it their business to comment on African literature is, I regret to say, their limitations in the wide field of their chosen enterprise. A comparative approach would enable them to see that literature, and its many styles and devices, is an organic growth whose manifestations are a complex of time, place, events, AND—never let this be underestimated—the sum of disparate poetic sensibilities. What we have experienced in the majority of African literary criticism in the last two decades is a narrowness of enterprise, a failure to recognize that the evolution of literary forms and choices in any given society has nothing ultimately unique about it except—and of course this is important—except in the actual differences of its environment. To put it bluntly, a number of critics in African literature today are not only ignorant of the general principles of their so-called calling, they remain wilfully ignorant of parallels or contrasts in the literature of other societies which might assist them to understand the phenomenon of this particular development.

When Langston Hughes wrote his occasional ‘dialect’ poetry, which was mid-sixties in goals and motivations, even his ‘history’ was obviously different from that of, let us say Claude McKay. Any critic who will therefore prescribe an aesthetic of black poetry, based on the interior principles and validity both of direct ‘dialect’ language and of cultural imagery cannot take refuge in generalizations if such a critic intends to cite one or the other as exemplifying the virtues which he extols in the would-be aesthetic. To fail to take into consideration Langston Hughes’ own transitional experience, the influences which were at work on him, which he first succumbed to, then resisted, only to begin to re-examine all over in view of his increased understanding of the overall dynamics of his society and evolve his own unique style—to take such an isolated instance—or to be more accurate, to take one isolated aspect of such a development and canonize it into an aesthetic for—shall we say—the entire Caribbean, simply because most of the Caribbean is black, is such an exercise in simple-mindedness that it would be unfair to other practitioners to label it criticism. Let us take the interesting case of Claude McKay in some detail. I want us to have one proposition very clear in our minds: right now, we are not concerning ourselves with the correctness or otherwise of any proposition for a black aesthetic or an ideological perspective for African literature. That will
come later. Indeed, it is not African literature that is our concern at this point but its unoriginal parasitic outgrowth—African literary criticism and its increasingly authoritarian stridency. I am concerned with pointing out the narrowness of enterprise implicit in the base of which these propositions are founded, the shallowness for some of these critical 'certitudes'. I am suggesting that these assaults on the intellect would not have occurred if such critics were not lazy, dishonest, concerned more with promoting their own voices than with elucidating the complex patterns of literary creativity and development. I am speaking, in short, of criticism which, shielding itself under an 'ideological' framework, abandons all critical ethic—including plain industry—and places itself in a position where it can only justify its claims by desperate recourses such as a wilful misrepresentation both of the actual literary material before it, and the motivations of the producer of that material. You shall see in a moment that I do not exaggerate—I shall provide one or two concrete examples.

Now, we do know what reply Langston Hughes gave to his rich, white patroness who wanted him to write in a particular way, that is, in what she considered 'Negro dialect'. By contrast, Claude McKay, the Jamaican poet who was his contemporary, and a prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance, did not even seem to have required much urging. Here is Claude McKay on his white patron's reaction to his poetry:

He read my poetry one day. Then he laughed a lot. . . All these poems that I gave him to read had been done in straight English, but there was one short one in the Jamaican dialect. That was the poem he was laughing about. He told me then that he did not like my poems in straight English—they were repetitious. "But this", he said, "is the real thing. Now is your chance as a native boy to put the Jamaican dialect into literary language. I am sure your poems will sell well".

This was the form of encouragement Claude McKay received from a would-be patron, one English dilettante appropriately named Mr Jekyll. I say, appropriately named because, as you see, there are two sides to his literary face in this little quotation. One, a deceptively altruistic literary interest—'to put Jamaican dialect into literary language' and two—a more straightforward commercial interest which is of importance to you and me: 'I am sure your poems will sell well'. The issue is far more straightforward here, in the case of Claude McKay—on the surface—than the thought-processes which went into, for instance the re-assertion and indeed, recreation of dialect during the revolutionary black movement of the nineteen-sixties. But I hope I need not add that there are certain unmentioned aspects to this linguistic preference by Mr Jekyll. We are not asking whether or not those specific poems of Claude McKay in straightforward
English had any poetic value or indeed any form of originality, any more than that the poems in dialect had anything to offer beyond their quaintness, their exotica. Actually we do know about the latter but, that is not the point. And the point is simply that the Englishman Mr Jekyll was being very patronizing. He 'laughed a lot' we are told, and the poem which made him laugh was the short one in dialect. To Mr Jekyll, Claude McKay was quite simply a performing native full of charming literary antics.

But first, let me at this point elaborate on the issue of the employment of colonial languages, just to get it out of the way, and link it up with the choices of stylistic options within the chosen language itself. I want it understood that the problematique of choice among users of a borrowed or imposed language is not new. It is as old as colonialism—and by that I do not mean nineteenth century colonialism or even the earlier internal colonialism in the Americas of uprooted indigenes from their own homeland. It is as old as war and enslavement, displacement and conquest. Each generation finds its own solutions in its own ways and according to the circumstances in which it finds itself. Nothing is frankly more boring, more simultaneously pompous and pathetic than to have the phenomenon treated like some unique affliction on the face of African humanity. In Europe today, the Welsh and Scots in Britain, the Bretons and Occitans in France, the Basques and Catalanians in Spain, the Georgians and Asiatics in the Soviet Union, the Turks in Bulgaria all, in varying degrees confront, negotiate and adopt varying accommodations with the situation. I, for one anyway, refuse to accept the artificial 'angst' which either Africans themselves, or outsiders attempt to impose on users of a foreign language. An element of irrationality is inherent in it, a refusal to accept the socio-political reality of which the affected users are a part, an attempt to make them stand outside their own national structures—from the judiciary and legislature to road signals and petty commerce, all of which utilize this language—an attempt to make them operate outside the history, outside the reality of their country. Bound up with the issue of language is the issue of national unity or fragmentation, of danger of cultural domination (internal) or cohesion, the fear of Civil War, the opportunism of reactionary forces who are eager to exploit any occasion for divisiveness such as religion or language and of course the options for an ideological fraternity. I must confess I find it extremely incomprehensible that anyone who is not a part of this nexus of actualities should attempt to legislate or agonize in this respect, for African writers. As for African writers themselves who are so tortured, who experience such an internal turmoil in employing the colonial languages, they have a choice. The first is already being practised by a handful of writers and that is—to write entirely—and
by entirely I mean entirely, including the statement of intent—in your own languages. Our own literature has existed in traditional languages and printed literature in indigenous languages exists everywhere on the surface of Africa, side by side with our contemporary literature in colonial languages. I have myself translated a novel, a very famous novel, by a famous Yoruba novelist, which existed probably before I was born. Certainly there has been no shortage in poetry, short stories, essays, written in indigenous languages. In fact this angle has to do with a very small minority of contemporary writers. So even when they go back to write in their traditional languages, I want to have it understood that they are not doing anything original. They should stop parading it, as if they are the revolutionary vanguard of a return to traditional languages. The literature exists still today, recognized in pamphlets, in books, in our traditional languages. So let us not have this exaggeration of coming-homeness, which exists about certain writers. The other is to join those of us who have attempted to promote a common, continental language for black Africa, who have come up against the most irrational but of course also understandable forms of objections. One thing which is unacceptable, because it is self-contradictory and smacks of posturing, is to use the same language to criticize those who write in the colonial language. Such an act of 'having one's cake and eating it' may make such writers feel surfeited with virtue—it does not eliminate its contradictions. But let us take the other option—the continental language. 'Idealistic', 'utopian', 'impractical', 'much before its time', 'distractive', 'not an African priority' etc, etc—these are some of the expressions used to describe the various efforts made by the Union of Writers of the African Peoples to promote the use of Kishwahili as a continental language. While the struggle for such a 'utopia' continues, those whose trade is to communicate with their fellow Africans will not stay mute: they will exploit—stretching and stressing whatever instrument is at their disposal—as the U.S. blacks did, and still do to a lesser extent now that the heat of battle has cooled somewhat.

Let me make this more creatively personal. Only last year I was so moved by Nelson Mandela's rejection of a conditional release that I was literally assaulted by the Muse and completed a series of poems called The Mandela Cycle in what, for me, was a record time. When Mandela ultimately gets his hands on it, I do not want him to have to send for a Yoruba interpreter. When he finally is able to read it I hope he will at least take small consolation in the fact that those of us who feel impotent to do anything about the South African situation at least try to create a bridge of empathy. And of course I also want that portion of the world, every shade and corner of it which has taken up Nelson Mandela's cause as a universal mandate, to share in and reinforce within itself the power of his
example. No, those poems are not just for the Yoruba-speaking race.

But now let us return to the issue of dialect within adopted languages and the many devices adopted by their users. The American blacks we know, went as far as dialect phonetic spelling, deliberate misspelling, ungrammatical constructs, spelling compressions such as blk for black, avoidance of capital letters for the first person singular, countries and places, proper names and, most especially for the white god and his religion. There is also the arbitrary or total avoidance of punctuation, word patterning instead of straight-line arrangements, even the fracturing of a word into parts whose pieces are distributed among other lines for no apparent rhyme or reason. These were all rejection tactics for a language for which the blacks lamented that they had no alternative, a language into which they were indentured, willy-nilly and in which they remained both symbol of and vehicle of oppression. It was an attempt to indict the privileged, the so-called educated white and their collaborative blacks and to elevate the underprivileged and the discriminatory education of the black into an insurgent virtue. A quasi-magical rite was practised on the medium of oppression by stripping its veneer of civilization, of elitist culture, down to minimalist rags, exorcising its evil genius and turning it into a mystic tongue for a black, secretive cult. In short, it went beyond dialect, beyond the mere phonetic transposition of the dialect of urban Harlem or the Southern black dialect, which was adopted (and unwittingly parodied perhaps) by Paul Lawrence Dunbar or Claude McKay. A lot of the poetry in this vein did become, not surprisingly, rather precious. Indeed, consciously or by accident, certain American and European Imagist devices which recalled some of the more extreme experimentations, are to be found in the mish-mash of this literary revolt. And Surrealism of course, which had always tended to appeal to black writers, especially of the European school, was embraced by many black writers as being especially pertinent to the black experience. Aimé Césaire, Ted Joans, Leon Damas (in his later poetry), the self-tortured Malagache, Rabiarivello, all acknowledged their debts to this school, and cited André Breton as a seminal influence. The lesson here of course is that the act of revolting against what is a 'jaded', or simply to-be-avoided literary usage may lead to affinities with yet another pattern of literary devices which may be more politically congenial.

At which point we must ask the critic: Do you have a duty to unravel the nature and cause of these motions, or do you, out of sheer laziness, out of a need to be modish, to be more 'nationalist' than the author, impute perjorative motives to these stylistic choices? And commit yourselves so uncritically to this irreversible track that you actually, as in one or two instances we shall shortly touch upon, actually fabricate events, statements and attitudes so as to establish some kind of damning typology for your
pre-determined conclusions which have no validity beyond being fashionably controversial. Is the goal of criticism now a cheap craving for uninformed notoriety, a success de scandal which catapults a mediocre unliterary talent to instant notice? I have heard the expression 'radical' actually applied to some such freaks whose sole claim to radicalism is the ability to repeat, ad nauseam, the same cavalier distortion of literary evidence on behalf of an unreflective, purely rhetorical ethnic militancy. We insist that the accolade of radicalism, which is a comprehensive condition of mind, is not so cheaply bestowed. It is nothing short of idiocy for example, and here I deliberately reverse the pattern of our popular propositions, for one to cite the straightforward, self-convicted case of a Claude McKay as proof that all writers who write in a simplistic, 'dialect' style are consciously catering to white Europe patronizing taste. All we need do is stop at Claude McKay's confession, not ask: was John Synge, the Irish playwright also bent on winning the approval of the elite English literary establishment when he wrote in dialect? And what shall we say of Dylan Thomas and the Welsh Culture? How do we apportion Under Milk Wood? An attempt to play the cards both ways? Oh, it does not require a great amount of sweat for any third-rate neophyte critic to dissect Under Milk Wood, ignore its poetic evocation of ordinary lives, of mundane relationships and its unique linguistic tonalities and conclude that this was a Welsh sell-out of a poet whose life-ambition was to become lionized both in British and American literary circles. Blasphemous and irrelevant as it sounds, this is precisely the kind of so-called literary criticism which is beginning to make the most noise within the domain of African literature, a situation which would not be tolerated for one moment in informed circles of any literary culture, East or West, but which is found infinitely entertaining and 'significant' by Western patrons and impresarios of African literature. The malicious ego of critical upstarts with vested interests unrelated to literature is now being puffed to an unprecedented degree. We, the primary producers of this material find ourselves in situations where we are actually expected to listen patiently to, and participate in the literary enterprise with so-called critics whose sole credential is a filthy stream of obsessed, ad hominem consciousness, long separated from the material base of the literary product. But now, let us move to the opposite extreme of the 'dialect' position of Claude McKay.

When Paul Breman, a black American critic, quotes, with approval, the following commentary on a poet—'intricate, erudite and obscure'—he is practising a legitimate form of criticism, shoring up his own position with the opinion of another. And, indeed, when the reader encounters the works of the aforesaid poet, he finds that there is more than abundant evidence to justify such a categorization. No, the poet in question is not this speaker
but a little-known black American poet, Melvin Beaunorus Tolson, another product of the Harlem Renaissance. Considering the fact that he was commissioned to write a work for Liberia's centenary, producing a 'Libretto for the Republic of Liberia' he should perhaps be better known than he is. But here is a sample of his poem "From Harlem Gallery", just to back up Paul Breman's position:

Was that Snakeships Briskie
gliding out of the aurora australis of the Zulu Club
into the kaleidoscopic circle?

Etnean gasps!
Vesuvian acclamations!

Snakeships poised himself —
Giovanni Gabrieli's
single violin against his massed horns

This long poem is indeed full of such eclectic mash of imagery and arty-art references. That much admitted, let us now place Brenan's quote in context:

Tolson had fun doing quietly and unobtrusively what no black author had yet succeeded in, that is, breaking into the white poetry syndicate... Tolson found the formula to what whitey wants; he is "intricate, erudite and obscure".

Breman does go on to concede that Tolson does what he does 'skilfully, imaginatively and with a wicked story-teller's humour', but no matter. The important thing is that, as part of his introduction to the selection of Tolson's works in a poetry anthology, Breman has consciously sidetracked straightforward literary commentary for sociology, giving us to understand that Tolson was a whitey-pleaser. This is the fact that stands out. Melvin Tolson's ambition was not to contribute, even as a late developer, to the mainstream of black American poetry. He was not writing for his own people but—to please the white man. Now I am not going to debate here whether this commentary is justified or not—it is not this which really interests me—at least not for now. I would like us instead to refer back to our other writer of Tolson's generation who fortunately we do not even need to accuse of this tendency since he himself admits it. He sought not only white approval but indeed a larger audience than his immediate island.

Back in my mind there had really been the desire to find a bigger audience. Jamaica was too small for high achievement. There, one was isolated, cut off
from the great currents of life [And he goes on to declare]: Some day I would write poetry in straight English and amaze and confound them.

In the meantime however, and in order to achieve this recognition, he sings, according to A.L. McLeod, a 'canticle to King and Empire that must have warmed many a planter's or civil servant's heart'. For Claude McKay, in his poem 'Old England' confesses a longing —

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London walk
An' to see de famous sights dem 'bouren which dere's so much talk
An' to see de fact'ry chimneys pourin' smoke up to de sky,
An' to see de matches-children dat I hear 'bout, passing by.

Claude McKay was dying to see all the London sights, to visit Saint Paul's cathedral and Westminster Abbey in order to:

see immortal Milton an' de wul-famous Shakespeare,
Pastoral Wordswort', Gentle Gray, an' all de great sons buried dere

All this longing, expressed in dialect verses, went down beautifully with his white audience. According to McKay himself:

The wealthy near-whites and the American and British residents all wanted to know me. Mr. Jekyll trotted me out.
Wherever I went, I read my poems in the dialect and they all caused great amusement among the upper-class people.

Written without any trace of irony or resentment. Well, McKay did not impress many of his fellow writers of the Harlem Renaissance, any more than he does McLeod, the writer of the essay from which I have quoted liberally above. He comments:

Unfortunately, this type of verse is to be found in the literary first fruits of most of the Commonwealth countries; and in Nigeria one of the poets, Dennis Chukude Osadebay, produced doggerel much worse in his Africa Sings as recently as 1962.

Now, was Dennis Osadebay trying also to please the white reader? McLeod is of course wrong to suggest that this was a peculiarity of writers from the British Commonwealth. Paul Lawrence Dunbar whom I have already mentioned was born and raised in Ohio, yet he took the same dialect route as Claude McKay, with the same results in some of his work—but certainly not in the majority. And it is also true that in the case of Dunbar, he turned his dialect choice into an instrument of strong political commentary, even when he appears to be re-creating the stereotype Negro. One needs only take a look at his 'An Ante-bellum Sermon' to see this.

But now, to sum up. Here are two wildly contrasting writers; one, 'in-
tricate, erudite and obscure', the other simplistic, yoked to country-yokel dialect, themes and longings—yet both are accused, with or without justification, of playing to the white gallery, seeking a white audience, abandoning their roots, their terrain for alien acceptance. What does it all mean? What does it all add up to? Where does it leave the actual work produced? The ideology of the pronouncing critic is constantly involved in attitudes of this kind. And I do not simply mean an ideology of Left or Right but a far more embracing kind. Claude McKay was eventually to part company with his Harlem friends, leave for the Soviet Union where he remained for a year, having also become a full member of the Communist Party. Was this gesture an extension of the need for foreign acceptance, a substitution of ideological acceptance for white acceptance? Certainly it is suspect, especially as it did not last. But is it not ironic that it is the simple, dialect poet, not the other one who will be generally regarded, in the words of Alain Locke, the great historian of the Harlem movement as 'being caught in the ego-centric predicament of aesthetic vanity and exhibitionism'. If one did not know, I am certain that anyone here would think that that summation was addressed to Tolson's 'intricate, erudite and obscene' poetry, not to the simplicisms of Claude McKay.

It seems to me therefore that we are on very dangerous grounds when it comes to extending criticism into the individual's sociology, especially when that sociology is of a speculative kind. And certainly, as seen from the contrasting examples we have given above, the route to white acceptance, or the search for this so-called white acceptance seems to be just as effective from extreme linguistic radicalism and experimentation as from the goggle-eyed, loin-clothed jungleman aesthetics as represented by Claude McKay, and as preached today by what we have come to dub the neo-Tarzanist school of African doggerel. Here for instance, is a direct quote from the pen of one of the members of this school which, unblushingly actually prescribes an aesthetic in the following terms for the modern African in a modern technological world where men and women are riding out to space and micro-chipping a world-surfeit of human knowledge:

- a landscape of elephants, beggars, calabashes, serpents, pumpkins, baskets, towncriers, iron bells, slit drums, iron masks, snakes, squirrels . . . a landscape portrayed with native eyes to which aeroplanes naturally appear as iron birds;
- a landscape in which the animals behave as they might behave in African folklore, of animals presented through native African eyes.

In all seriousness? Or simply tongue-in-cheek? Did they get carried away on the tom-toms of ethnic passion? Could we pause, give them the benefit
of the doubt and wait for them to qualify such a travesty of African reality? Oh no, to make sure that their intention is absolutely unambiguous, they constantly provide examples of what should correspond to this aesthetics of African poetry. Here is an example. It features constantly in their fulminations as the most beautiful exemplar of correct African poetry:

In our little village
When elders are around
Boys must not look at girls
And girls must not look at boys
Because our elders say
That is not good

Even Claude McKay at his most coy and self-derogatory rose above that level of doggerel which, observe, these voices insist should serve as exemplar for African poetry.

A pertinent observation here by the way is that the most passionate anthropological throw-backs such as these are invariably those who have spent a very formative part of their lives abroad. The originating troika—there are three of these heads on one body proving the adage that two heads are not necessarily better than one—studied in the United States of America where, I presume, they soon learnt to understand Africa from the films they saw of Tarzan's kingdom, hence the name neo-Tarzanists. So here is quite an amusing situation—the critical pot calling the creative kettle black. But they are so humourless, so thoroughly enclosed in their arbitrary world that they do not even perceive or attempt to deal with the irony of the situation. They fail to see the hazards and pitfalls of their position which ally them not merely with the grotesque portraitists of Euro-American Tarzan culture but even with the racist philosophers and ethnographers of the European world—Hegel, Hume, Montesquieu, Gobineau and even that indefatigable discoverer of the already existing—Frobenius. Let us take Frobenius for his immediate pertinence. And the pertinence is this—a refusal to accept the possibility of originality and an authentic creative impulse when confronted by the unexpected—be it artifact or literary product. In this case, Leo Frobenius has come upon the city of Ile-Ife, with its famous treasures and other evidence of an organized, religious community, hierarchically ordered, and organic in its internal social relations. But he cannot accept the material evidence before him. Oh no. All this material evidence must have been left there by the watery ghosts of a lost civilization. He writes: 'There is an element of typical rigidity in the Ilifian. [Yes, Ilifian is the name he gives to the indigenes of Ile-Ife]' and his intellectual poverty struck me repeatedly as his most distin-
guishing quality'. This, naturally, appears commonly strange to the historian of culture, and may at first seem surprising and unintelligible, on remembering that Ile-Ife is the religious centre, or as its people call it, the 'navel' of Yoruba socio-religious existence, the city of the Priest-King, the actual Rome of all the Yoruba realm. This may sound contradictory, for the priesthood of a nation may, indeed, be reactionary, but it is very seldom deficient in thought. The kernel of the conundrum offered by this singular African city is this, namely, that these people are managing an hereditary estate, whose creation is spiritually quite out of touch with their present conception of life. The people of Ile-Ife lie, like a slumbering dragon over gold of a pre-historic treasure-house. Poverty-stricken in mind, because of their ignorance, they guard the old city which lends them respect, and gives them a lofty position and religious supremacy because they reside inside it, because the blood of its original founders and builders has been dissipated and evaporated by diffusion but, most indubitably, not because the salvage has come down to the present in the external form of its original antique creation in an era of productive intellectual activity.

So much in general terms. Leo Frobenius came, saw, and demurred. And when he was finally confronted by the artifact itself, the bronze masterpiece now known as the Ori-Olokun head, here is what he had to say:

Before us stood a head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrusted with a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the olokun, Atlantic Africa's Poseidon. Profoundly stirred, I stood for many minutes before the remnant of the erstwhile Lord and Ruler of the Empire of Atlantis. My companions were no less astounded. As though we had agreed to do so, we held our peace. Then I looked round and saw—the blacks, the circle of the sons of the "venerable priest", his holiness the Oni's friends, and his intelligent officials. I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much classic loveliness.

There it is in a nutshell. Leo Frobenius would have had no difficulty if the natives had not presumed to create beyond the representation of a 'landscape of elephants, beggars, calabashes, serpents, pumpkins, towncriers' etc etc. Their sin was to strive for sublimity and attain it. Incidentally, just what is peculiarly African about beggars? I have been begged from by beggars all over the world including European countries. Or for that matter, serpents and pumpkins? Just what sort of aesthetics are these neo-Tarzanists preaching except from a sensibility—excuse my abuse of that word—a
sensibility shaped by their formative encounter with Africa through Tarzan's films.

As for iron-masks, or any masks for that matter, what we detect in their facile coupling with squirrels and beggars is an abysmal ignorance of the profounder aspects of such artifacts in the lives of their makers and users. If you look closely at the inclusion of iron masks in that quote, you find that our would-be theoreticians are aliens, not merely from the European world but from outer space for whom such representations constitute nothing but exotica, on the same level as the fauna and flora through which 'Me Tarzan, You Jane' are discovered swinging on supple llanas. These 'iron masks' mean far less to them than they did to even Leo Frobenius. The 'classic loveliness' does not exist, its intellectual correlatives, recognition of which led Frobenius to dismiss its guardians as a 'feeble-minded posterity', 'poverty-stricken in mind' denying them creative origination of such masterpieces—that intellectual process totally eludes our neo-Tarzanists. The 'iron masks', a sweeping, reductive expression by the way, is simply another piece of clutter that should only produce in a different medium of expression, such lines as:

In our little village
When elders are around
Boys must not look at girls
And girls must not look at boys. . . .

Why then should one take offence or be astonished when a so-called Marxist opportunist in the philosophy department of an African university operating from a different framework of negation, has the effrontery to dismiss, by implication, the entirety of the African past as: 'cracked, chipped and useless pieces of antique porcelain'. The neo-Tarzanists have provided the justification. And so, under the excuse of a dialectical interrogation of some Nigerian writing, this Marxist calls on African writers to treat traditional thought-systems in terms of false consciousness and stop wasting their creative energy on those 'cracked, chipped' etc etc debris of creative heritage. In the meantime of course, he enjoys a very nice, juicy existence on the sweat of the descendants of the producers of those artifacts which receive such a contemptuous dismissal at the hands of his—superior ideology.

Of course, without the approval of these various traducers of African reality, a number of African writers simply insist on quarrying their way towards an exposition of the full range and depth of their history and reality, refusing to stop at the mere surface gloss. And it is, as it happens, not merely African writers who recognize that there is more to an 'iron
mask’ than its appearance. Among the several other dimensions, Margaret Plass and William Fagg comment as follows:

It may be that when the new-found implications for man’s life of the technological changes inspired by mathematical physics in our time are more fully understood, some new movement in art—let us say Exponentialism—will arise to do justice to them. If so, it seems likely that the new ground will be found to have been reconnoitred long before by the intuitive artists of the world.

One quarrels of course with the ‘intuitive’ tag—we come up against it all the time and, while it is not always inaccurate—it definitely obscures our apprehension of the creative processes of the African. Nevertheless that passage clearly establishes yet another point of view, another dimension and indicates quite clearly that the producers of this reality are not goggle-eyed Hollywood stereotypes cowering at the passage of the ‘iron bird’ overhead, never peeping beyond the squirrels scampering over the pumpkins in the little village gardens. And when a writer quarries faithfully into that environment, it is an insolent invitation to cultural regression to ask him to write in the manner in which Claude McKay or Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote fifty years ago, or indeed in the manner in which the grandfathers of the neo-Tarzanists told fireside tales in their little village.

Most critics, when they find that certain propositions have been made or facts unearthed, which present a possible alternative to their way of looking at culture, modify their position a little, that is, if they are critics of integrity. Not, I regret to say, our literary school of infantile regression. I must confess—and I have to remind you that my field is comparative literature which I have both studied and taught—I must confess that I know of no body of literature which, in such a comparatively brief period of its international exposure, has attracted so much dishonesty in critical pronouncements. These pronouncements range from a deliberate distortion of literary evidence to fabrications of a writer’s intent or guiding philosophy. But there has to be a certain ethical base even for such a commercial activity as African literary criticism has lately become. I mean when critics find they are losing an argument, is it really of any service to knowledge that they resort to outright lies? I am going to quote from an essay written by one of the most notorious of the neo-Tarzanist school—the schismatic Chichidodo.

Since I am not employing this critic’s real name—indeed, it is evident that the name he uses is not his real name, something is missing evidently, but never mind that—I shall also disguise the identity of the writer under reference—let us just call him Ayinde Gbogungboro for short. Now here is the quote which sets the tone and the theme for what attempts to be a
comprehensive essay on the life and work of Ayinde Gbogungboro. Since I assume that this audience is not made of Chichidodos, I shall spare you the actual language of the essay. I shall try instead to set out the themes and indicate the justifications provided. I quote: 'In a well-known remark he made early in his career, Gbogungboro declared that he wanted to be a writer, not an African writer.' Now let me tell you something about this remarkable essay. It covers a hundred pages. The first ten pages set the tone for the rest. They are devoted to elaborating on the theme of white craving, to proving what a despicable attitude this is, citing numerous authorities living and dead. This essay then picks on a particular poem which is titled 'To My First White Hairs' and uses it as the summation of the aforesaid thesis. This critic belabours this poem, described by another critic as 'a wry lament of passing youth' in a language which, I regret to say, I cannot bring myself to repeat to this assembly. This *magnum opus* then goes on for a further ninety pages, examining other works by Ayinde Gbogungboro, every line of it constructed on the foundation of the self-hatred demonstrated both by the earlier cited statement and by the uncontroversible longing for whiteness, provided by the aforesaid celebration of his first white hair.

The essay continues, as I said, for a further ninety pages, ten of which are made up of footnotes. Since this was meant to be a scholarly paper—it had been commissioned for inclusion in a collection of essays by a prestigious university press, Yale University to be exact, our critic ensured that literally every comma received proper attribution. But the interesting thing is this, that among those close-typed ten pages of footnotes, nowhere is the source of that seminal 'well-known remark' cited. Nowhere at all. This 'well-known remark' that forms the basis of logical progression for a one hundred-page essay was apparently so well-known that it required no formal attribution in that generous plethora of footnotes. Incidentally, as a teacher who has marked quite a number of long essays and theses in my time, not to talk of reading numerous essays in scholarly journals, I have yet to encounter an essay whose footnotes work out at ten percent. It is—an historic document.

Well, one of my students who had been doing quite a bit of research on Gbogungboro's work came across this manuscript and attempted to track the 'well-known remark' down to its primary source. Having failed in all directions, he armed himself with a tape-recorder and secured an interview with our famous critic. Could Chichidodo provide him with the original source of this remark? The tape of this interesting interview is another precious historic document of literary enterprise. Our critic Chichidodo was furious that the request should be made in the first place. The remark, he claimed, was so well-known that it was impertinent that he, the
A scholarly essayist should be expected to provide the source just off the top of his head. Did he not consider it, he was asked, somewhat unethical to attribute statements to an author when he could not sustain their authenticity? Mr Chichidodo had a memorable answer to that. He replied, furiously: 'What are you talking about? I've never heard him deny it, so he must have said it. If he wants to deny it now, that's a different matter. But he has never denied it to my hearing.' This is what is known in Nigerian literary circles as the Chichidodo literary ethic, an ethic whose drive is so absolute, so irreversible that it actually governs and distorts the reading of a young man's wry fascination of youth with the first evidence of approaching old age. I challenge anyone, anyone at all, in the entire wide field of literature, to produce one essay, either from a kindergarten school or a lunatic asylum which exhibits the same mental malformation that goes into the interpretation of a poem to a man's white hairs as evidence that that poet wants to change the colour of his skin.

Ah! If only that were all. Alas, there is yet another complicating parameter within the probabilities of the search for unctuous service to European requirements and this, ironically enough, is set squarely within the critical trade. No one here needs to be reminded that even the most repressive regimes can acquire the mechanism for absorbing, then institutionalizing and thereby rendering impotent the most strident dissident voices. They tame it, accommodate it, and turn its erstwhile yell of rage into a lap-dog squeak of pleasure even when sharply pinched. I really ought to qualify that, not all of them do so as many writers have discovered to their cost. But all the sensible, intelligently counseled ones do. Sooner or later they do; they discover that it is a far less costly and risky process than outright revolt. The same 'wisdom' can hardly be denied to the black-white, West-East, colonizer-colonized North-South etc relationships, more especially when the former part of that uneasy coupling contains the mandatory proportion of a liberal conscience, which of course complicates the situation even further. I need only refer to one of my favourite cartoonists, the American Jules Feiffer. At the height of the black revolution in the United States, he produced one of his mordant cartoon strips which reads as follows:

Frame one: A black man stands in a street-corner, haranguing a predominantly white audience. His language is the kind of language of the sixties which we have already spoken of—passionate, uncompromising, black-nationalist in form and content. As his passion rises —

Frame two: the white audience increases. We threatens a blood-bath for the entire white population. Their children's throats will be slit, their wives and daughters raped. Nothing white will escape the just retribution of the black race of America.
Frame three is more of the same, with all the warts and pimples of white civilization held under a magnifying glass, ruthlessly exposed for its cruelty and inhumanity. A crescendo that chills (or should chill) any sane listener, black or white to the marrow.

Frame four: the lecture is over, the nationalist composes himself, readjusts his flying coat-lapels and tie, smooths his hair and is transformed, literally, into a middle-class business executive. He holds out his hands into which the audience tamely, indeed, gratefully slip dollar bills as our lecturer says:
'Same place, same time, tomorrow'.

I remember very well how outraged I was by this cartoon strip, how furious I was with Jules Feiffer, especially as I could see that the black lecturer bore an uncanny resemblance to Malcolm X whom I do consider one of the most intelligent, committed and lucid nationalists of any colour in the struggle for racial equality in the United States. On calmer reflection however, I did recognize that Jules Feiffer was indeed more concerned with a statement on the psychology of the white liberal, with its need for flagellation, confession and catharsis—of a sort, of course. But more critically for me—whether or not Jules Feiffer considered this prominent or not—was the fact that I did recognize, in the demonic caricature of that black nationalist, an accurate portrait of many black revolutionaries I had met. The existence of such sharp black American dudes, whose razor-blade intelligence very quickly assessed the needs of the liberal, guilty, white conscience and catered to it did not in any way negate, or even diminish the revolutionary attainments of figures like Malcolm X, who eventually paid the ultimate sacrifice. Nor indeed of a Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver (never mind his later misconversion), Haki Madhubuti (former Don Lee) and a host of others.

And I do not ignore the fact that all these warriors later fell out among themselves on fractional ideological lines and destroyed one another, to the great amusement and wise head-shakes of 'We knew all along' of those therapy-seeking liberal whites who had encouraged the flawed among them for their daily need of verbal laceration. What I want to point out is that the very tactics of berating white conscience is not necessarily evidence of a racial or nationalist commitment; it may be a very easy way of, once again, having your cake and eating it. Look how some of the most virulent of the black nationalists in the United States became the favourite of the chic liberal set in Manhattan, San Fransisco and crashed through the barrier of even Ivy League colleges for unprecedented lecture fees in order to chant 'Mother-Fucker Whitey', 'Watch out honky, I'm coming to get your sister' etc and then stayed on to hold court at the Dean's reception surrounded by goggle-eyed masochistic co-eds whose fantasy was to be well
and truly screwed by a ferocious black nigger who is actually spilling ashes on the Dean's immaculate carpet. Just as these became the favourite contributors to formerly all-white literary magazines and held literary readings in the American equivalent of the London Athenaeum, so have a number of black Africans profited by their own exploitation of the anti-colonial struggle on all fronts, especially—and mark this very carefully—especially the marginal blacks from the mother continent who found that they could not be part of the mainstream revolution in Europe (especially Great Britain) and the United States, who indeed, did not want to be part of the mainstream revolution—it was far too risky.

And their own wars of liberation were going on in Africa, but Africa was too far so they stayed on, black bohemians, the eternal students. Angola was on fire, Zaire still is, Liberia a United States outpost, Uganda, Cameroon, Malawi—oh they had their own problems. Europe, America were much safer. Those territories were filled with fools who still respected the *habeas corpus* and granted bail for proven terrorists. Hyde Park Corner, the bastion of free splutter, held them in thrall. There, and in New York Times Square they found plenty of uncharted ground to be ploughed in amorphous, ineffectual imprecations on white culture, extolling however only the most simplistic aspects of the black which delighted their white audiences no end. 'A genuine primitive in the seventies?' they chortled. 'We thought we had lost them all!' Never mind that on the home-ground of these new warriors in loin-cloth with straw spears and raffia-shields, authentic battles raged. Never mind that on their given battle-ground, their very land of birth, a vicious battle raged, as in Biafra, waged by their own savaged, outnumbered and out-gunned compatriots. Well, in fairness, they did do their share. They formed lobby groups, they collected money for the starving children of Biafra. They set up magazines to propagate the name and the culture of Biafra. We have not yet had a public accounting of the money so gathered. They were lionized, wined, dined and refurbished. And to ensure that they survived, no matter what happened to Biafra, they embarked on private programmes of future notoriety, lopping off their own clan names and becoming objects with no ties, no linkage, something dropped out of the icy wastes of Halley's comet, yet pounding their puny breasts with ethnic imperatives. My name is Wole Soyinka. There sits Kole Omotoso. Over there is Nuruddin Farah. Then there is Ngugi wa Thiongo. Nelson Mandela is missing. Kwame Nkrumah is dead. But Julius Nyerere is alive. In Africa, only household pets bear a single name—Tant’Olo’un; Gberulale. If you hunt, as I do, with traditional hunters, you would find that all the mongrel hunting dogs have just the one name. So who are these types who deny their own fathers in order to focus attention on themselves? What are they ashamed of?
Could it be that while mouthing a need to return to the jungle of their dreams, they truly need to be distanced from their African identification? To what purpose?

Of course, in this purely hypothetical case, there could be medical explanations. Anyone can wake up one day with partial amnesia. Even the combatant black Americans recognized this. Even, in an act of repudiation of their slave-naming, they shed their surname, they replaced it with X which stood for their African origin. The X said—I came from Africa—its precise place and lineage are missing but let X stand for Africa.

Naming is a critical business in traditional African society, as any neophyte Africanist will tell you. Our names have meaning—every one of them. They are intimations of hope, destiny and affirmations of origin. They also have a history. When you deny that part of you which is both lineage and clan history, the rest is posturing, opportunism. So, it need not be a deliberate act, it could quite simply be the result of an unfortunate, inexplicable accident. If a man, formerly known and addressed as—for example—Chichidodo Ibekwe suddenly chose to abandon Ibekwe—an honourable name well-known in Igboland, there has to be a rational explanation. We are compelled to examine very carefully what the truncated personality says and does, and see whether or not there is a link between the act, the pronouncements and the emasculated rump of social being. When such an individual accuses others of trying to shed links with their origination, to discard proofs of their African identity, is he trying to draw attention away from his own blood thread? I began by saying—opportunism comes in many hues, so let no one think that there is any originality in the method he or she adopts for purposes of cheap notoriety. For the writer, critics are, at best, secondary producers—you will notice that I do say producers, and I mean that. Some critics, even when they are negative, can produce such searching insights that they open the doors wide to critical dialogue and enhanced creativity. Most writers are prepared to give the critic the benefit of the doubt, of good intentions, of a genuine interest in the material before them, in the very processes of creativity. But not from the moment that that critic reduces criticism to an ad hominem basis and most particularly, a fictive ad hominem which he finds necessary to invent in order to boost a personal need and a personalized thesis. Then, and only then the writer asks the question: what nature of animal is this homo sapiens? Is he sapiens? Or indeed homo? A liar, who lacks the courage to retract when confronted with his mendacity, has no place in a gathering of creative people.

So, the issue at stake is—we are all, to some extent, performers. Only don’t let us have any of that holier-than-thou, more-ethnic-than-thou sanctimonious shit. The kind of critic whose identikit I have provided as ex-
emplary has wormed his way into white attention by the very strident tactics which also distinguished the less talented minds of the black American revolution. Nothing is more beloved by their white patron than the sight of the so-called radicals of a new generation uttering clichés about white society which fall harmlessly by the wayside, then inviting them to tea and conferences opening up the pages in their journals for a bit of blood sport between them and genuinely creative minds. Don’t misunderstand me—I approve. I merely say, let us be honest about those motivations and a merry time will be had by all! But please, let no one be in any doubt about the commitment of some, even many, to their calling, or about the limit of their tolerance to alienated opportunists who deny or make superficial the reality from within which the rest of us take our strength, our conviction, and our creative passion. My favourite writer says it all in a poem I have become quite obsessed with, one which, at every available opportunity, I like to quote, preferably as the final word to any discourse. Quite apart from Yambo Oulouguem's *Bound to Violence*, which I consider a masterpiece, no matter all the controversy about its plagiarism and unacknowledged borrowings, this poem of his, for me, encapsulates all those qualities which I look for in African poetry—a critical sense of history as narrated by others, a satirical sense of being, and a supreme self-confidence which eschews self-assertiveness and substitutes a sneaky, surreal superciliousness. It is, I believe, one of the most deceptively ‘simple’ poems ever ‘.................. TOMATOES!’

I find it—delicious!

*From the discussion*

**Njabulo Ndebele:** One particular issue that interested me was the old question of the use of African languages and your references to the fact that some African writers or critics should not give the impression that they are a sort of path-finders. It seems to me that it might be necessary to point out in the same breath that the political circumstances surrounding the use or the many uses of those languages throughout the continent are not uniform. It is quite possible that given a particular context, for example, where the African languages have been consistently attacked, either during or after the colonial regime there is a need to articulate concern regarding African languages whereas in another context it might not be so important.

**Wole Soyinka:** I totally agree with that, and that is what I touch upon when I said, for me, it is always mysterious that anyone from one section of the African continent would even attempt to legislate for another section be-
cause as you said so correctly, the circumstances are absolutely different. A recall to the national language, can in fact be a revolutionary action depending on the particular circumstances. It can be a good way of building cohesion against the dominant culture and the dominant politics of the time. The parameters vary so widely on the African continent, and what I am quarrelling about is precisely the attempt to think that there can be a uniform policy when the circumstances are so different. FRELIMO, for instance, insisted that they needed Portuguese during the period of their struggle. It would be foolish for us to legislate for them and call them names for not accepting our proposition at that time. Similarly, there are no less vital struggles going on, like nation-building, anti-fragmentation etc, within other parts of the continent, and this, I believe makes it impossible for one to say this is the language policy we should adopt.

Emmanuel Ngara: I would like to pick up the point made by Njabulo Ndebele. I agree that the African writer should not be expected to use language outside the framework of the language used in his own society. If politicians, the judiciary and everybody else use English or French, why should the African writer be expected to operate outside that framework. But I would like to point out that while politicians may use European languages, there are very often cases where they use the language of the common people. It depends on the situation. When they are addressing rallies they very often don’t use English or French, they use the language of the people to whom they are speaking. I am only trying to say here that the writer has certain restrictions which the politician and the judician do not have, because once it is written in a certain language the book cannot address itself to different audiences.

W.S.: The first thing to emphasize is that nobody is speaking about exclusivity. The Nigerians are the most avid newspaper readers in the world, and many of our journals are both in English and in the Nigerian languages. During political crises you should see the quality and the intensity of the debates. The radio operates in all languages, Effik, Ibo, Hausa, as well as English. So it is a whole multi-lingual situation, and the official language is the dominant language of the area. Even the use of dominant languages in specific areas has led to a kind of internal crisis, leading to the coining of the phrase ‘Wasobia’. ‘Wasobia’ describes those people who speak either Ibo, Hausa or Yoruba and then there is the rest of the country who speak other languages and who attack the use and the possible domination of these major languages at the expense of the minority languages.

Recently the national television had a habit of saying goodnight in all
three languages. A spate of letters immediately followed saying 'What's all this about? Why these three languages? What is so special about them? We prefer that you continue in English or that you say goodnight in all Nigerian languages.' You see, I am not talking about theory at all when I speak of language. I write some of the songs in my plays in Yoruba. Some of the sketches I have done, the real immediate agit-prop sketches are also in Yoruba, but some of them are in mixed languages. Language is very flexible. In everyday life and circumstances it doesn't produce the anguish which it seems to produce when we writers and critics get together. That is the point I am making. An artificial problem is sometimes being created when we writers and critics get together.

**Wally Serote:** When we look at the question of language we should be aware of the fact that it was in the interest of the colonialist to divide Africa the way they did, so that they could rule it. If we keep this in mind we will not spend the time labouring the question of which particular language to write in. It does not matter in what language I write. I don't think we should say, this question will resolve itself, no, it will not resolve itself, we will have to resolve it. It is important that all the works which are generally accepted as major works should be made international with the help of competent translators.

**E. N.:** I agree that merely using an African language is not in itself an effective instrument of defeating neo-colonialism, and using an African language is not necessarily going to result in the production of better literature. Zimbabwe is an interesting example of a country where the majority of books that have been written are in fact in African languages, and much of the literature that has been written in those languages is of a very inferior quality.

**David Maillu:** I am just thinking about the question of the local languages, and the relationship between the local languages and the publisher, because although the writer can do whatever is within his ability to promote this language or the other there is a second very powerful person, and that is the publisher. Writing is one thing, having it published is another. I am a publisher. The immediate thing that comes to my mind when a writer comes with a manuscript is, if I have to invest 20 000 Kenya shillings or more, am I going to put up this money because I have to publish and also make a profit. So the question of the language in which a particular work is going to appear is actually censored by the publisher. There is also a challenge to the local African writer not to dramatize the question of using local languages. Most of the books that I have read in Africa are published
by British publishers and they do not want to hear anything about local languages. Therefore it is very difficult for new writers to get published if they write in local languages. So I see the established writer as a very important tool in the promotion of these languages, because if we are running away to publish only with outside or multi-national publishers because of the money situation then the commitment of developing the language which is a part of us is going to be killed.

Kole Omotoso: I set out to show that the important issue is not so much the language as the message. Ultimately the issue is not that one language is better than another. It depends on what you are saying in those languages. The issue of language is not a literary issue. It is a problem of education, of structures within neo-colonial societies. Each language makes its demands on the writer, whether English is spoken by one per cent or two per cent of the population: If you talk about 20% in Nigeria you are talking about 20 million people. That is probably more than the population of Sweden. We support a national literature, in which case there is validity in writing in any language that 20 million people can speak. It depends on what you are telling them.

Lauretta Ngcobo: On this question of language I feel there is an air of dismissing some very fundamental points. Language is perhaps the only way that you reach the inner self. And a writer draws from that inner self. The language we are communicating in now is a medium that often confronts us as we write and I find that pretending that this language which we use for convenience, is the ultimate of our expression, is misleading. I personally feel strongly that the real genuine expression lies with our own languages, and that it does matter. Perhaps the real answer would be with inner writers, sitting down to write in their own language and then perhaps, following it immediately with a translation. I am thinking of those agonizing moments I spend with the lines trying to pick the right words and often passing on, making do with the word I know is not saying exactly what I want, so I would wish this debate not to sway us too far away from the essential importance of our own expressions, our own languages.

K.O.: I happen to speak Yoruba, English and Arabic. I also speak some French and I am learning Hausa. All of these are my languages. I choose which of them I will use at what time. My point is that I am a better man because I can use these languages, rather than only one. The world today and tomorrow is a multilingual world. And the choices that have to be made have to be made within the context of what one is doing.
One of the strategies of cultures which control political power by means of the economic system of the area is to underplay or even separate moral from social and political concerns. It should be the duty and the strategy of oppressed cultures to affirm the inseparability of moral from social and political concerns. The question is: can both strategies be carried out in the same language, in the language of the dominant culture; can the slave owner and the slave speak the same language or languages?

The usual reaction has been for the outright rejection of the particular language of oppression by the oppressed since it affronts the humanity of the oppressed. And anyway, we have been schooled to the effect that all the oppressed could do with the language of oppression is curse. This is no use to anyone. An eye for an eye soon makes the whole world blind and a slave who aspires to own slaves in his own right after gaining his freedom has nothing worthwhile to bequeath to the future.

One culture becomes larger than itself, seeks to consume other cultures in the same name of a larger religion, larger political system and/or a larger economic principle. A sacred text inspires the political economy imposed and the oppression which had been perfected in the metropolis is now transported to the colony, from the working class of the metropolis to the colonized workers and peasants of far away lands, for the benefit of the ruling class of the empire. 'If circumstances are favourable', states one academic, 'the imposed language, as it percolates down to more and more of the population, may well be influential in the development of an awareness of belonging to something, a nation or an empire, which is much
greater than the village or town of the immediate horizon. In this way, such a language may play a considerable role in developing a national consciousness and unity among previously separate and perhaps even warring groups." This, of course, is an optimistic representation of what has happened in Africa.

In the first place there had been many previous attempts within Africa of language imposition, one African indigenous language imposing itself on another through empire building. The Muslim revivalists of Uthman dan Fodio are the most spectacular during the nineteenth century and before the British conquest of the area that is known as Nigeria today. Arabic became the lingua franca of the Sokoto Caliphate which Uthman dan Fodio established although Hausa was also used for administration which consisted mainly of tax collection.

There are Nigerian writers of Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba ethnic origin who write in Arabic and look to Cairo and the Middle East for their intellectual replenishment and the publication of their books. One example will do here. Aj-Hajj Adam b. Abd Allah b. Habib b. Abd Allah who was born in 1917 in the west-general Benin Republic. His mother came from Benin Republic but his father came from Ilorin where he grew up and had his earlier education. He then studied in Lagos with Shaykh Adam Al-Abaji, in Kano under Shaykh Adam namaaji Al-Findiki Al-Kanawi, made the pilgrimage during which he stopped over in Cairo to consult with the Muslim scholars of the oldest university in the East AL-Azhar. When Aluri, as he has come to be known since he came from Ilorin, returned to Nigeria, he had his first historical work which had been published in Cairo in 1953 with him. It is called Islam in Nigeria and the career of Uthman dan Fodio. 'The book concludes', writes John Hunwick, 'on a personal note with a call to Nigerian Muslim leaders to co-operate selflessly with one another for the good of all and suggest a programme of action for the improvement of Muslim welfare in Nigeria, including the appointment of a muftii for Nigeria, the establishment of sharia courts in Yorubaland, the setting up of a department to organize Quranic and Arabic schools and the raising of the level of Arabic teaching in schools as well as the publication of the works of leading Nigerian Muslim Scholars of the past such as Uthman dan Fodio, Abd Allah dan Fodio and Muhammad Bello.'

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The next historical work of Iluri is translated from the Arabic, *The Origin of the Yoruba* (*Asl cabail Yuruba*), published in Agege, Lagos, no date), a work which is critical of Samuel Johnson’s *History of the Yorubas*. More recently (1977) Iluri published in Cairo *Islam and Pre-Islamic Customs of the Yoruba* through Dar al-Maarif publishing house, the Penguin publishers of the Middle East.

Even after the British had pacified all and imposed their language and indirect rule, the bigger ethnic groups—Hausa/Fulani, Ibo and Yoruba—were permitted to impose themselves on the smaller ethnic groups of the country. A reading of Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra* and the political pamphlets of Ken Saro-Wiwa reveal the reaction of two writers from two minority areas to Ibo hegemony in the old Eastern Region. Examples of reactions to the Yoruba and the Hausa/Fulani also exist in abundance.

With the existence of these cases of language and culture imposition—successful or aborted as each case may be—within Nigeria, it is the British Christian conquest which has received the greatest attention in the discussion of language and culture imposition. But in spite of this attention, one important aspect of this issue does not receive any attention. The transfer of the oppression of the British working class, to the colonies has been mentioned earlier. What has been achieved in Nigeria to manage the oppression of the majority of workers and farmers of the country, is the creation of a trans-ethnic elite with common economic and common political interests but differing cultural concerns. The economic and political interests are nurtured by neo-colonialism which ensures that the country produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce. Thus, there is a peculiar situation where economic and political infrastructure is not reflected in the cultural superstructure of Nigeria. Millions of Nigerians live hundreds of years from the few thousand trans-ethnic Nigerians who operate this economic and political system of neo-colonialism. That is, the economic infrastructure has not affected, never mind the possibility that it could ever alter, the backward existence of ninety percent of the people of the country. Thus, we have the Chambers of Commerce and the Lagos Exchange side by side with the vagaries of the Rainmaker; we have the certitudes of currency and shares speculation which rules do exist and the irregularity of the supply of water, electricity, public transportation and other ‘essential commodities’. The University of Ife at Ile-Ife in Nigeria produces Nigerian graduates in Nuclear Physics and there is a Nuclear Research Station on the campus founded by the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology, while members of the university staff

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3 In this connection I recommend Tom Steel, *Scotland’s Story* (London, Fontana, 1985).
bear sacrifices of gutted goats and eggs to crossroads to appease angry gods and influence the outcome of supposedly rational procedures. The two worlds exist side by side, sometimes even inside each other, yet separated from one another by time and space. What language can explore that hyphen between and inside?

These two worlds are ruled and expressed through two different languages: English in the neo-colonial world of the trans-ethnic elite and Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulfude, Kanuri, Edo, Ogoni, and many others in the deliberately distanced world of 'our cultures'. Of course, the orderliness of modern science and technology does not touch the world of the trans-ethnic elite since he does not have to produce what he consumes. Thus, while he fulfils his neo-colonial role in English, he pays lip-service to the celebration of our culture and ensures that that culture does not intrude, either in material or intellectual terms, into the twentieth century!

During the discussions that led to the 1979 Obasanjo and Lawyers' Constitution, members of the constitution drafting committee objected to the translation of the draft constitution into indigenous Nigerian languages since the users of these languages would not understand the concepts being discussed. They could forget that some of these same indigenous languages had also been used for empire-building in the past and had acquired the ritual and ceremony of language common to hierarchical societies.

The language policy of the trans-ethnic elite has been a campaign against any education in the first place no matter in what language. When this failed and universal primary education became the thing to mouth, the trans-ethnic elite discouraged any attempt at excellence in English without replacing it with competence in any other language. The writings of Wole Soyinka were libellously accused of being incomprehensible without any of the trans-ethnic elite being able to mention one book they could read cover to cover in Yoruba, Edo, Igbo or Hausa. So, today, we have supposedly educated Nigerians, even to university level, who cannot speak or write or comprehend English and have no working knowledge of their so-called mother tongue. Their neo-colonial reward—producing what they do not consume and consuming what they do not produce—has made them linguistically mute.

Sometimes, some critics, caught up in the traffic jam of traditional western literary criticism of an unspecified period, support Ngugi's advocacy of the use of indigenous African languages without making the breakthrough of writing in them, perhaps unwilling to do so acknowledging that it is not merely the use of any language, indigenous or brought from abroad, that matters. Whatever language one may employ, a body of ideas must form the basis for the political, economic and social systems of which the languages speak. Whatever indigenous languages Ngugi's
Devil on the Cross might be translated into, it succeeds for me in the English rendition I came across and which final year students in our department of dramatic arts at the University of Ife adapted for the stage in their course on 'Language and Drama'.

So, what to do about the issue of language in African literature? Indigenous languages must be allowed to emerge and develop through education and the spread of literacy. The threat of a second 'civilized' illiteracy through the use of electronics must be fought. There is a basic relationship between knowledge and literacy which is superior to knowledge through orality. That should be the duty of all progressive citizens of any community that the indigenous languages of Africa should emerge and develop. The second imperative is that the languages of oppression must be purified of the pejorative terms and expressions which have created and consolidated the oppression of the working classes in the metropolis, an oppression which was transported to other lands in the form of colonies; expressions which contradicted the humanity of the working classes and the workers of the colonies. No more and no less.
The last twenty years have seen African nations grappling with their newly-won independence. Twenty years is a very short time in the life of nations as well as of literatures, but Africa has packed in a couple of centuries of political experiences into that short time. Dreams of Utopia have barely survived a brief honeymoon before giving way to nightmares of horror and chaos. Popular leaders quickly became slaughterers of their own people; privileged persons grew indecently rich on their nations' resources while the nations themselves along with the mass of their peoples grew poor and more miserable. Some countries have completed at least one phase of the continuing cycle by breaking out into Civil War. The political and social stability dreamt of at independence has not come to Africa.

In most of these countries, a system by which just law—rather than the power of individuals or privileged groups—is supreme, has not been evolved. Dictatorships either of individuals or oligarchies (frequently based on tribal affiliations) have led to oppression broken only by coups of one kind or the other and the setting up of new tyrannies. The dancing in the streets which usually follows the overthrow of one government is soon succeeded by secret murmurings and muted cries for deliverance behind closed doors.

In these circumstances, writers, that is, all those who commit themselves publicly to paper—journalists as well as artistic writers—operate at risk. Indeed in this context, journalists who are more closely harnessed to the immediate event, may be in even greater danger; and when, as sometimes happens, the artistic writers cannot avoid the journalist's role, they collide with authority even faster.

The writer is also frequently an activist and makes himself even more visible than he would have been had he confined himself to writing novels and poems—preferably in languages that only the comparatively few could read. Although Soyinka's writings had indicated his attitude to war—as in A Dance of the Forests,—it was his actual efforts to prevent the Biafran secession becoming the Nigerian Civil War, that earned him the wrath of the Federal authorities of Nigeria and detention. Ngugi's Petals of Blood
was launched in Kenya by a government minister, but very similar ideas put into a play (with Ngugi wa Mirii), *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, in Gikuyu, transmitting these ideas directly to village folk, caused alarm, and elicited sterner response from the authorities. Clearly, for the writers of Africa, writing is not enough; in this they are not peculiar; it is the absence of freedom in their countries that makes their position specially vulnerable.' In general African writers in the last twenty years or so have not shirked their social responsibility, and they have often paid the price.

The cases of Soyinka and Ngugi have been briefly mentioned, but the writer's penalty may not always be inflicted by authority; it may be self-generated in the form of the internal agony which emerges in artistic form in his work; it may take the form of social action in the full knowledge that this would lead to suffering—even death. The most painful example of this is Christopher Okigbo's personal decision to volunteer for the Biafran army; he was killed early in that war. Ali Mazrui both within and outside his novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, considered this a betrayal of Okigbo's artistic calling. He puts the following eloquent indictment into the mouth of Okigbo's fictional prosecutor, Apolo-Gyamfi:

—A gift of nature was squandered on a battlefield. An imagination which would normally have had another three decades of creativity was offered as a sacrifice. . .

If the great artist has to sacrifice himself for anything, he should only sacrifice himself for the universal. To die for the truth is martyrdom. To die for art is martyrdom. But when a great thinker or a great artist dies for his nation, that is an indulgence.²

For Okigbo however, life and art were not so clearly separable. His poetry was the fulfilment of a priestly function, consciously assumed:

I am believed to be a reincarnation of my maternal grandfather, who used to be the priest of the shrine called *Ajani*, where Idoto, the river goddess, is worshipped. This goddess is the earth mother, and also the mother of the whole family. My grandfather was the priest of this shrine, and when I was born I was believed to be his reincarnation, that is, I should carry on his duties. And although someone else had to perform his functions, this other person was only, as it were, a regent. And in 1958, when I started taking poetry very seriously,

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1 As I write this, a demonstration in London on the subject of Jewish emigration from Russia is being organized by Tom Stoppard, the English playwright.

it was as though I had felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions as the priest of Idoto.³

Unlike the implied dismissal of Okigbo's self-sacrifice in Mazrui's treatment, Soyinka salvages something more positive from this untimely death:

Yet kinder this, than a spirit seared
In violated visions and truths immured

Eternal provender for Time
Whose wings his boundless thoughts would climb.⁴

Camara Laye's disillusionment with the tinsel of Guinean independence expressed in Dramous faced him with the choice of silence or exile. He chose to publish. Unlike some luckier exiles, Camara Laye's muse did not survive his alienation. Indeed his eventual fate was exile and silence. (Nuruddin Farah, by contrast is able to maintain his vision in spite of his compulsory nomadic life away from home.) Too many of Africa's writers have had to make this choice or face unpredictable sufferings at home. The case of the South African exile is obvious and needs no elaborate discussion here. Dennis Brutus's protracted fight with his reluctant hosts in America has recently focussed the eyes of the world on the plight of the alienated South African writer. A more recent phenomenon is the agony of return to an essentially unchanged situation as dramatized by Mphahlele's decision to break his physical estrangement from his native South Africa:

My very return is a compromise between the outsider who did not have to be bullied by place and yet wanted it badly, and the insider who has an irrepressible attachment to ancestral place anywhere from a rural to an urban setting. The teacher and the writer in me made a deal: that as we both want place, you to teach among our people and regain a sense of relevance, I to create a metaphor out of physical place and its human environment, we should return to the country of our birth.'

The stylistic splitting of the persona may signal a part of the cost of such a reverse move.

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⁴ Wole Soyinka, 'For Christopher Okigbo', in A Shuffle in the Crypt (London, Collins and Methuen, 1972) p. 89.

Writers' engagement with the immediate situation, their personal involvement in it, and in the context of the African situation in which freedom of expression is either absent or is tolerated only within narrow limits (which is itself a denial of this freedom) has earned them suffering. They have had to abandon the mask and chronicle their personal plight in more direct statements like Soyinka's *The Man Died* and Ngugi's *Detained*, which contain not only accounts of their sojourns in prison but also reflections on the political and social conditions which landed them there. Similar in the directness of its statement (but fortunately not involving prison) is Buchi Emecheta's portrayal of her personal experiences in London in *In The Ditch*; even her fictional *Second Class Citizen* has the authentic ring of a personal documentary. This kind of engagement will probably induce more documentary novels than we have hitherto seen.

Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* is a work of the imagination but it quite obviously incorporates more reportage than, say, *The Interpreters*. In *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* I discuss more fully the inter-relatedness of *Season of Anomy, The Man Died,* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* which I summarize in these words:

The three works form a trio of mutually elucidatory material, of which *The Man Died* provides the basic documentary recording (though frequently in very highly charged language), while the other two give, one in poetry and the other in prose, more imaginative realisations of the basic *experiences*.

The march from Ilmorog of the villagers to the city in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is similarly a realisation in fiction of an actual event.

Mariama Bf's *Une si Longue Lettre (So Long a Letter)* chronicles the plight of a Moslem woman in circumstances so close to the life of the author that the autobiographical analogy is unmistakable, adding poignancy to the work. Mariama Bf's protagonist, Ramatoulaye, is a first wife, discarded after twelve children for a younger woman with a casualness that seems to be sanctioned by her society. Although she denies that the novel is autobiographical the similarity between her life—early marriage, nine children, and eventual separation from a husband—and that of Ramatoulaye is striking. This is not to say that only a woman who has herself personally suffered in this way can portray the condition. (Sembene Ousmane in both the film and the novel *Xala* has handled the same theme, and his other works show a similar sensitiveness to the situation of the Senegalese woman.) My point in citing Mariama Bf's novel is to show the

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trend in African literature of the sufferer as his/her own chronicler. It also glancingly illustrates the increasingly stronger voice of African women writers.

In my paper at the predecessor of this Conference nearly twenty years ago, I suggested that in order to free themselves completely from the inhibitions and defensiveness which tended to limit the range of African writers, they would have to look more closely at the negative (as well as the positive) side of their nature and situation. (Soyinka's early—in this context—attempt to do this in *A Dance of the Forests* made that work less than welcome as a guest at the Nigerian Independence Celebrations in 1960.) Writers cannot avert their eyes from the negatives of the African situation either in the past or in the present. Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, a stomach-curdling account of the sickening violence of the Saïf, dramatizes a potential in human nature which is ignored at humanity's peril (a recurrent theme in Soyinka's work). Ayi Kwei Armah's novels are similarly unblinking in their portrayals of negatives in character and their disastrous potential for human progress. Marechera's *House of Hunger* is another of these powerful negative portrayals, but I see a difference between his effects and those of Ayi Kwei Armah. Both authors create depressing effects but there is a sense of movement, of progress in Armah's protagonists, while Marechera presents a more stagnant situation and thus a greater sense of utter hopelessness; one is aware only of the depths from which the cry comes with no suggestion of the possibility of escape.

African writers have been conscious of their responsibility to their societies and have embraced it and often paid the price. Writer after writer has boldly enunciated this role which I will illustrate with the words of the late Mariama Bâ:

> The writer plays an important role in guiding people and making them aware. He has a duty to convey the aspirations of all social categories, especially the most underprivileged. Denouncing the evils and scourges that eat away at our society and delay its full development and striking out at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage—this is the sacred mission the writer must carry out with steadfastness and faith and whatever the obstacles.

In the absence of free speech this is a recipe for personal sacrifice.

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From the discussion

Wole Soyinka: You mentioned *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, and I wonder whether you could elaborate a little on your own thoughts vis-a-vis the arguments which are proposed by Ali Mazrui. I know exactly, of course, what I feel about Ali Mazrui's debate in that book. I just wonder if you would like to say a little bit more about it. I want to pin you down.

Eldred Jones: I quoted that speech, which from a literary point of view was very persuasive, eloquent, but of course I think the view that he expresses is wrong and to me totally contrary to the mission that I think most African writers have assumed. I think the whole attitude of the book and the impression that was given in other comments by Ali Mazrui are too dismissive. In fact the whole point of my paper is to pay some kind of lame tribute to the seriousness with which some of our better writers have approached the role.

Buchi Emecheta: Great artists don't belong to a particular nation, they belong to everybody, so to die for a Biafran cause which will soon be forgotten I would regard as indulgence. A good artist is international.

E.J.: Yes, this is not to say that a writer is not international. The point I tried to make about Christopher Okigbo was that he was essentially a man in whom ordinary life and the poetic mission were indivisible. Nobody was more conscious than Okigbo himself of the role of the writer as a national human being and the internal agony that must have generated that decision must have been very intense and I don't like to dismiss this as a mere indulgence. I think he knew what was involved. I wouldn't like to judge him casually as having renounced his role as an international writer. On the contrary, I feel that African writing is the stronger for having had a martyr.

Lindiwe Mabuza: I represent the ANC in Scandinavia. We have a little problem with the whole point of dying as an as artist being an indulgence. When the apartheid regime raided Botswana last June, one of our best, young artists was killed. It is of course very painful when you know the artist and his potential, but do we elevate him above the level of the six year old child that died in the same raid? Do we really underline the singular importance of an artist in a struggle for liberation, when we know that the very system of apartheid makes it impossible for potential artists and writers to emerge, and we also know that the potential is fantastic if we get rid of the system?
Wally Serote: Regarding the question of artists and commitment, I do not think that the conflict which arises when an artist becomes involved politically is whether the artist will write or be involved. I don’t think that defines the contradiction. What the conflict is about, is whether the artist is prepared to create a consciousness within himself or herself, so that the artist participates in the efforts to do away with oppression or exploitation. I am trying to say that I don’t think that we should think artists have a choice about that.

David Maillu: My personal experience is that writers write for different reasons. Some write because they want to impress somebody. There are writers who feel that they are committed to write to say something about politics and others who feel that they just want to make money, or impress somebody, so at times I think one should dismiss the question of commitment.
The Growth of a Literary Tradition

Chris Wanjala

Introduction

In this paper I would like to discuss the rise of a literary tradition in East Africa and to show that the English language has been decisive in the shaping of a literary culture. It has helped in the creation of an elite in the region. The use of English and the establishment of English studies at tertiary level have encouraged a literature which has served the interests of the colonial elite and created a literary nucleus where judgements on literature have become a preserve of the elite. Having made that statement, however, I would then like to stress how much the East African writers owe to the oral tradition.

The East African writer owes much more to the oral tradition than literary critics would concede. Modern writers today draw from the musical traditions, both dance and song. They embellish their works with myths and legends, stories of origin, stories of migration. A count of proverbs, riddles and other sayings in modern novels reveals a more elaborate use of oral literature than was the case in the early sixties. This trend calls for a new approach to the study of East African literature. There is a new demand on the East African writer. It is no longer possible for a creative writer to reveal the creative ethos of his community unless he integrates his activities into the creative dynamism of his community. In fact the creative writer has a lot to learn from the traditional artist who has always worked as an insider within his community. In defining literature, critics who omit the oral artist and who separate the study of written literature from the study of oral literature become restrictive and discriminatory.

The task of the critic today is to redefine literature, and to identify the oral traditions in the written literature. In discussing African literature in Western scholarship, some of the East African writers seem to be quite clear in their minds about the fact that African literary traditions cannot be adequately separated from the cultural traditions. If you are studying any local literature you have to know something about the stress that community places on certain rituals and indeed, how those rituals help the communities to understand their past.

Most critics from East Africa are disarmed by the classical western view
of literature which seems to define culture as a 'thing', something separate and distinguishable from the communal way of life.

Literature per se is an expression of the soul of a nation irrespective of its language medium. The literary critic must describe its values, and identify the aesthetic concepts and beliefs of the communities from which it emanates. Students of East African literature must explain its traditional world as well as they explain the western world reflected in it. Okot p'Bitek in his essays shows us the African aesthetic values. In elaborately describing the courtship dances among the Acholi of Northern Uganda, Okot demonstrates to us the Acholi concepts of love which we must bear somewhere in our minds when we study his poem, Song of Lawino.

African aesthetics and styles are there in the performing arts, and it behoves the critic of African literature to be aware of them when he is analyzing African literature. The critic who studies narrative techniques, plot and character and who ignores traditional African aesthetics does so at his own peril. Oral literature is a dramatic literary mode. It is not only the narrator but members of the audience who have a role to play in the narrative. The reciter or the narrator has to repeat well known formulae before he comes to the main story. Members of the audience, too, know where in the story they have to enter and either make a comment, or repeat a well known formula. The plot on the other hand is determined by the completeness of the performance. The funeral reciter from Bungoma District in Western Kenya will make his recital long or short, according to the discipline of his audience, the character of the deceased, and the condition of the weather. If a member of the audience offends him or in some way puts his life in danger he stops his recital, asks for his fee and leaves. Again if the deceased man has been an evil man so that the narrator finds his feet heavy and he is unable to walk swiftly when performing the ceremony, he curses the spirits of the deceased, asks them to haunt the clan from which the deceased comes, picks up his staff and leaves. The narrator will not remain in the arena when he knows that it is going to rain. The thunderstorms should not come and find the narrator in the arena for he will not live long to offer more recitations if rain finds him in the arena. The roar of the thunderstorm marks the final interruption of the narrator's life. He must bring his story to a close whenever there are signs of the coming rain.

The duration of the song cannot be measured accurately because, despite the fact that the song contains accepted words and concepts, the individual singer will introduce personal elements into the song. Take the following Bukusu song:
My stepmother is not my mother
she kept the smoked sorghum for me
I came from Butia, and ground it on the stone;
Those were great tales
That was the day
Those were tales of great days

This song was sung to us by Alfred Musebe Marango of Misikhu Friends, in Bungoma District. Although it contains accepted words, the poet started singing it by praising our guide, mentioning his clan, and moving on to praise the guide's father. Then after reciting one of the well known lines in the song he moves on to praise the members of the audience.

There is little room for deviation from the norm in traditional societies. The stress is not so much on the individual but on how he perceives himself as a collective being. In Jomo Kenyatta's book *Facing Mount Kenya*, we learn of the individual's concern with the soil. Among the Agikuyu of Central Kenya, there is a ceremonial chant connected with the fertility of the soil, ritual songs which are sung during the sacrifice to the Gikuyu god, cattle songs and songs in praise of teamwork. The song recorded below is sung by elders during the ceremony of purifying the fields before planting starts:

Mwene—Nyaga,
Peace,
Praise be to you, Ngai

Peace be with us
You have brought us rain
And given us good harvest

Peace,
Praise be to you, Ngai
Peace be with us
Let the people eat the grain of harvest in peace.
Peace, Praise be to you Ngai
Peace be with us

Let us enjoy the harvest in peace
Peace, praise be to you, Ngai,
Peace be with us'

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To understand the growth of an East African literary tradition, we should try and bridge the gap between oral and written literatures. The editors of the *Oxford Library of African Literature* series have put their fingers on the problem when they showed in the general preface to their series that the identification of the past and the present in African literature could benefit from what Eliot said about European literature.

We think it harmful to African literary studies to divide the past from the present. There is a great need to bring to bear upon African literature the interest in living traditions and the concern for discovering order and proportions within them which Mr T. S. Eliot, in particular, introduced into European literary criticism with his *Selected Essays*. If we consider any any artist without prejudice in favour of his personal idiosyncrasy— as Eliot observed of poets in the essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"— "we shall often find only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously".2

Adrian Roscoe is another critic who has made references to the place of tradition in the composition and analysis of African literature. In the first chapter of this book, *Mother is Gold*, he has a sub-section entitled, 'Sew the old days', and in it he quotes T. S. Eliot at length, and makes comments on T. S. Eliot's views on the need for the historical sense in creative writing.

The central idea running through these extracts from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is not new; nor is Eliot the only twentieth-century writer to have subscribed to it, for Chesterton was expressing it when he prophesied that "When the great flowers break forth again, the new epics and the new arts, they will break out on the ancient and living tree". It is also an accepted truth in Africa. "The tree can grow only by sinking its roots into nourishing soil", the Senegalese writer Birago Diop reminded his daughters when dedicating to them his first collection of stories. "Young palm trees grow on old palm trees" runs a proverb from the Cameroons, asserting the truths which Eliot carries in his elegant prose in a more metaphorical, more African, kind of way.3

Adrian Roscoe demonstrates how, for many African writers, true creativity, in the present, begins with the return to the roots which are watered by the deep past. Ezekiel Mphahlele on the other hand does distinguish between the Western tradition and the African tradition. He shows how a discussion of the term is entangled with the reference to the presence

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of ancestors in the life of the author talking of ancestors who are down there inside his agnostic self, and how he feels a reverence for them. There is a category of ancestors who are in spirit still present within the author’s community. This attachment to the African belief system is seen in the essay as being traditional: ‘The larger part of Africa is still traditionally minded in varying degrees.’ Later in the essay, the author shows that a literature which invokes our ancestors makes us think about our traditions and our roots. Mphahlele distinguishes the literature which is based on African traditions from Western literature which is made up of centuries or eras of telescoping into another (a la T. S. Eliot).

Features of tradition, according to Mphahlele, include: ancestral worship (or ancestor veneration), the humanism based on communalism, and respect for age. The critic uses the term tradition as a synonym of the words culture, custom, the source and the past. He talks of a ‘tribal or ethnic tradition’. Traditions are observed in ‘our needs, our family relations, family life, which must continue more or less normally . . .’, and morals of the family, the clan and the tribe. The author refers to indigenous aspects of African life, traditional ceremonies, traditional sculptors, traditional authority, traditional sculpture and traditional music. Apparently what is traditional is what belongs or is inherited from the past. In the field of literature and creativity, what is inherited includes traditional artistic modes. The artist learns artistic modes which are passed on from generation to generation, and he innovates within those modes. He does not slavishly perpetuate a tradition. On the contrary he imbues it with the ‘original spiritual impulse’. Mphahlele demonstrates the banality of the poetry which uses materials from oral traditions but fails to inject into those materials the creative impulse. Traditions are contained in the language poets use. In the case of the performing arts, traditions are there in the spoken word, and the para-linguistic devices which artists bring to the stage. Mphahlele, like Okot p’Bitek, mentions some of the African literary traditions, but he does not fully trace them in contemporary literature.

What Okot p’Bitek and Ezekiel Mphahlele say about tradition must be contrasted with what the Anglo-American poet, T. S. Eliot, says. Although

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5 Ibid, p. 126.
6 Ibid, p. 144.
7 Ibid, p. 126.
8 Ibid, p. 125.
the African men of culture and T. S. Eliot recognize the need for the creative writer to draw his materials and inspiration from the past, there is a difference in the way they see the past. Whereas the tradition of Okot and Mphahlele comes from oral literature, T. S. Eliot's tradition comes from what David Cook has called 'a joint movement of mind'. Poets, whether using African orature or drawing from the Western written tradition, have to employ their creative genius to select their images and modes of expressing them from artists who have gone before them. Similarly, to write, the African writer transforms the artistic traditions from his oral background into the printed media. In fact he has to transmit these traditions into a metropolitan language like English and French. The artist at work synthesizes 'exposition, narrative, idea, feeling and style into a work of art'. The three writers I have discussed here appreciate that tradition must live alongside the present. The African writer must commute between the world of oral traditions and the world of written traditions. While he draws from the tradition articulated by oral artists, the African writer must shape his material to the tastes of his generation which reads literature in the indigenous languages, and also literature in foreign languages. Thus there is a point where the Western writer and the African writer meet. African writers have to recognize the virile tradition based on oral transmission. All the literary genres which people talk about in journals and learned books—proverbs, riddles, tales, the poetic song, myths and legends—were there in the African community before the introduction of written literature. The mode of communication at that time, though based on oral transmission, was fairly sophisticated. Elders employed it to talk among themselves. Their speeches were coloured with allegorical statements, parables, riddles and anecdotes. The artist, who is referred to in West Africa as 'the man of the word' uses his stories to comment on society.

There is still very little contradiction between what T. S. Eliot says and what Okot p'Bitek and Mphahlele say. The three in effect agree that literary tradition is a continuum. They say that the artist must appreciate the traditions which have gone before those of his generation. He must have a historical sense, which includes the keen sense of distinguishing the present from the past. He must write for his own generation but at the same time he must be conscious that this literature has its roots in the literature of the African continent and co-exists with the epics of Sundiata, Ozidi and Chaka the Great.

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9 David Cook, Makererean (March 1965) p. 8.
10 Mphahlele, p. 131-33.
East Africa has a large body of oral and written traditions. But critics and scholars argue that the written tradition has not had a very bright record. In 1959, at the Second Conference of Negro Writers and Artists which took place at the Capitol, in Rome, between 26 March and 1 April, J. S. Mbiti, a Kenyan man of god, read a paper on 'The Literature of the Akamba Tribe'. He made a case for a literary tradition. He argued that as very few Africans at the time were literate, it was difficult for African writers to live off their writing. He recounted the numerous language options which were open to the East African men of letters, although there were few or no books published in those languages. He also pointed to the poverty of the people as the cause for the dearth of readers. Many of the people who were supposed to read books were too poor to purchase and read them. This was in 1959 when some of us were in Standard Six in Western Kenya. We were not drawing our inspiration from our immediate environment or from the many traditional musicians in our society. Rather we were making a desperate effort to catch up with English literary traditions. Just at the time that J. S. Mbiti was speaking about a literary tradition, an important school was being established in my district. This was the Friends School, Kamusinga. People in Western Kenya wanted to catch up with the people of Central Province, and had no time for stories in traditional forms. The education which we received had to enable us to compete with the 'cream' which went to Alliance High School, in Central Kenya, leaving the remaining 'skimmed milk' in provincial schools. But from 1959, pupils who came from the Southern part of Kisumu (i.e. Kisii or Kericho) were sent to Yala and Butere. Pupils north of Kisumu were to be admitted to Kakamega and our new school, The Friends School, Kamusinga.

Before The Friends School, Kamusinga was inaugurated, Quaker literary education revolved around worship meetings. Students sang hymns, listened to readings from the Bible and learned to say prayers. Teachers used the worship period to preach against sin. But when the spirit of competition was instilled in us, we realized that English was very important for our success. The examinations which we were to sit were based on the education system in Britain. We were prepared to sit examinations set in Britain. We had to master English approaches to the study of science, mathematics, history, geography and other subjects of the English Grammar School curriculum. Our education disregarded the political, educational and cultural tensions around us.

We were told that writing English compositions was to be at the very heart of our training. The topics which were set for us to write about revolved around sports and current affairs in England. They were traps.
The examiners used technical expressions which were alien to us. They knew that these technical terms had not been mastered by us. Our set books did not throw light on the current affairs situation in our country. We were taught English narrative poems which ranged from short ballads to 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. The poems talked about maidens with raven hair and flaxen locks, cherry lips and cheeks like apples. They talked about snowy bosoms which we from 'the dark continent' could not visualize. But whenever we asked our teachers questions about cherries, apples and snow, they put down the copies of the books we were reading, dashed across the compounds to their houses, and returned carrying lumps of ice from their refrigerators. With rusty knives, they shaved the ice, and produced little piles of snowflakes. In some kind of grateful consciousness, they hurled the snowballs across the classroom at some unsuspecting student and thus brought the subject of snow home to us. Their houses were the unending sources of visual aids in the teaching of English culture in the classroom. The Friends School, Kamusinga, was not built to produce a well-integrated Kenyan African. It was built to counteract the African cultural values enunciated by the anti-colonial Dini Ya Musambwa movement. The English teacher who gave lessons in peeling apples at our school and indefatigably ploughed through the verses of 'The Pied Piper', taught English syntax, English idiom and English vocabulary.

This erosion of the African ethos did not stop at the secondary school. For a long time, East African writers have preferred to compose their verse in English. Indeed the questions which bothered J. S. Mbiti in Rome still bother critics of East African literature. Recently I received a journalist from the Weekly Review, the leading news magazine in Kenya, in my office at the University of Nairobi. The journalist sat there and asked me questions from which he produced an article for his magazine under the headline: 'Kenyan Writers: What Went Wrong?' Had Kenya run out of creative writers capable of making a mark outside the country's borders? Was it true to say that Kenya had produced only a handful of writers who, since independence, had gained international readership and reputation? What had happened to creative writing in Kenya?

East African Prose Fiction

Some of the questions asked about East African literature are mere speculation. For example in 1965, Gerald Moore asked readers whether there was exile literature in East Africa. He tried to answer his own ques-
tion: 'East Africa has produced very little writing which could be placed in this category. Kenya Land of Sunshine and Child of Two Worlds may be exceptions. Even Facing Mount Kenya, though it was written in exile and much of it is a kind of extended argument with the invisible European reader, is filled so strongly with a sense of Kikuyu highlands and their radiant rain washed light that it manages to annihilate the distance which separates it from Africa.' Gerald Moore did not delve into the uniqueness of Facing Mount Kenya as a work of literature. He failed to see the book as one of the most articulate defences of African cultural practices. But he noticed an aspect of Kenyan writing which has remained true to this day.

Writing in the foreword to his volume of short stories published in 1975, Ngugi wa Thiong'o demonstrated his inability to write 'exile' literature."

In March 1965, Pat Howard made statements on East African literature which showed that the literature of the area had matured. At the same time she was writing no one expected East Africa to produce such works as Origin East Africa, which had been edited by David Cook, a lecturer in the English Department at Makerere University. Pat Howard was surprised by the quality of the work which had been written in the mid-sixties. She wrote:

Six years ago, when I was helping to plan a special Commonwealth literature supplement in Britain, there seemed little to say about East Africa, although Nigeria and South Africa could claim each a full critical article. It remains true that West Africa may have produced longer, more full-length novels, and greater extremes of English style (from Tutuola to Achebe). But it now emerges that East Africa is producing a style which for grace and exactness does not mean uniformity or pedantry, but rather a suitability to the subject being treated; the grace not floweriness that tires but a real elegance which rouses real admiration.12

The publication of Origin East Africa marked the flowering of Ngugi's short story form. Ngugi is said to have written prose fiction because he had been moved by the bloodshed and violence of the Emergency period in colonial Kenya. While studying for his degree in English literature at Makerere College, he wrote 'The Return', 'The Village Priest', 'Gone with the Drought' and 'The Fig Tree'. In between he wrote 'And the Rain Came Down', 'A Meeting in the Dark', and 'The Martyr'. His other short story, 'The Wind' which was published in Penpoint (March 1961) has never been reprinted. But Cook and Okenimkpe say that Ngugi revised the short

12 Pat Howard, Makererean (March 1965) p. 15.
stories from *Origin East Africa* for publication in *Secret Lives*. He edited out terms which were derogatory to his people. He revised the content of the story entitled, 'The Village Priest':

This sequence [of first publishing in a Makerere University college magazine which was later to be called *Penpoint and Dhana* and in *Origin East Africa* and *Secret Lives*] provides valuable evidence of Ngugi's development as a writer. He revised these stories for appearance in book form, tightening the phrasing, and pruning wording that seemed to labour a point or oversimplify emotional subtleties.  

In his article on the literary barrenness of the East African literary scene, Taban Lo Liyong, shows that if the reader of East African literature in the mid-sixties was told, at gun-point, to produce names of East African writers, he would have given those of Rebeka Njau, Grace Ogot and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Taban says of Ngugi's two early novels: *'Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, by James Ngugi, as we all know, are fictional treatment of the Kenya problems.* As a follow-up to Taban’s discussion of East African backwardness in creativity, Bren Hughes showed in January 1968, that there was a need for more writing to be done in the area to facilitate a widespread cultural awakening. He called for more sharpened critical attitudes and greater powers of observation in creative writers, as well as for a general disciplining of artistic methods among them.

### The Popular Novel in East Africa

Another question, however, which has come from literary critics actually more like an assertion than a conclusion after research, is Angus Calder's claim that the African novel is dying 'from its own high seriousness'. Calder was uncomfortable with the novel written by Africans who had

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studied English at university levels. He was uncomfortable with the painful, and painstaking descriptions of village life in fiction. But from his assertion it could be concluded that the composition of the novel in East Africa has not remained faithful to English literary traditions. In fact Calder himself demonstrated that there was a 'tour de force' in the writing of East African literature. He said that Charles Mangua's *Son of Women*, in spite of its treacherously bourgeois conclusion, looks already like a solid beginning for an authentically popular application of the novel form in East Africa.  

By the 1960s East African writers were dealing with serious problems affecting urban dwellers. Their writings culminated in the novels of Meja Mwangi. In September 1967, Wilson Kyalo Mativo wrote a short story which was later developed into a film called, 'The Park Boy'. Bren Hughes, writing about this short story had this to say:

Here a poor boy who is the sole support of his family tries to live upon the gratitude of the rich—he directs the drivers of cars into the much needed parking bays—but is ruthlessly kidnapped, by the rich to make the rich richer and himself and his family much poorer.  

The Song School

The development of East African literature has been trifocal. There are writers who have thrived through employing the English language; there have been others who have employed Kiswahili, and finally the third category of writers who have utilized other indigenous languages. Okot p'Bitek’s work grew outside the university literary tradition and he has helped in East Africa's partial severence of links with the English literary tradition.
Conclusion

East African literature is based on indigenous languages, Kiswahili and English. This paper has not touched on the wealth of literature available in local languages. It has not treated writers like Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley who have been associated with the Eastern African literary scene. It has mainly used the experience of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Okot p’Bitek to discuss the evolution of an East African literary tradition. The issue of language has not been examined sufficiently. But the role of oral literature in creating an indigenous literary tradition has been emphasized. There is a new spirit of criticism in East Africa which seeks to depart from the sweeping thematic overview of literature which characterized the critics’ pronouncements on literature. Questions about the process of composition and the practicality of craft have to be answered. It is not enough for a critic to make sociological or political statements using literary symbols and characters in novels. The entire process of creativity which Eliot, Okot, and Mphahlele discuss in the essays I have alluded to here must be explained, so that the critic may show how the African writer employs language and how he makes his artistic choices to create a literature which seeks to change the reality around him.

From the discussion

Njabulo Ndebele: While it is important that the oral tradition should be kept alive and regarded as a source of inspiration, I wonder if there might be a danger in romanticizing oral literature, particularly if we project an anthropological image of a static tradition that is transfixed in history through the retelling of old tales. The oral tradition is, on the contrary growing all the time, and you don't have to go to the rural areas, to the grand-mothers, it exists in the slums, in the cities of Africa. It takes various forms and more often than not it uses the modern imagery of the city. In Lesotho for example there is a form of oral poetry that was developed by miners, who are migrant workers. They have developed a very personal startling new imagery, often concerned with the mines and their experiences at work, so the oral tradition is also extremely flexible and highly inventive.

Chris Wanjala: I agree that there is a danger of romanticizing. It depends on how the oral tradition is used by the individual writer. For example when you read Devil on the Cross you find a new way of using songs to
express a very new ethos, which is critical of present ideology. I am thinking of *Song of Songs*. Ngugi uses the song to shock and educate. He puts it into a new framework, so that in the hands of a writer who knows what his literature is all about this danger is not there. It is only there when writers are collectors of proverbs for the sake of collecting. These are the people who celebrate the romantic aspect.

**Emmanuel Ngara:** I thought that I detected in your lecture the idea that a writer must necessarily make use of our tradition. I find it very difficult to accept that because using traditional material is not necessarily the way to write a good book. I would rather judge each book on its own merits. Are we not in the danger of perhaps overreacting to a period when we didn't give sufficient attention to our own culture? I believe that culture is dynamic. It doesn't remain the same. We can not go back to our traditional ways of life, we are in modern Africa and therefore whatever material is available in present society can be used to produce good African works of art.

**Eldred Jones:** African novels have been written which because of their subjects, have no proverbs, no references to traditional life. I am thinking of A.K. Armah's *Why are we so blessed.* And even *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which is a very African novel, because it deals with African lives and the African environment. Although it makes references to the Chichidodo bird there is no special straining after a recreation of the past. How would you judge an African novel which made no reference to African traditional life, which does not mention a single proverb or anything of that kind? Would this be a mark against such a novel?

**C. W.:** I think what I was trying to do is to ask the question according to the definition of tradition and the individual talent by T.S. Eliot. The writer continues a tradition which has been started by his predecessors, who are also writers. How do we define a similar situation for the African experience, taking into account that the African writer is not preceded by a body of literature in the sense in which the Western writer is? Can we redefine this concept in relation to our own situation? That is the question that I am really asking and I think we should try and face it.

**Jack Mapanje:** I would like to find out what impact Ngugi's absence from Kenya has had on the literary scene? There was a time when we thought that the Kenyan scene was extremely lively, but suddenly it is no longer exciting. What has actually happened?
C. W.: During the 70's the Department of Literature at Nairobi university was manned by mainly creative writers. Okot p'Bitek, Taban lo Liyong, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Micere Mugo and many others. We were celebrating new books almost every day, and there was a lot of activity, debate about the language issue, the new syllabus etc. But then what really brought this to stagnation was when Ngugi was detained in 1977, and Okot went for a kind of sabbatical leave to Nigeria, and came back only to die, and Taban lo Liyong became the first patriarch from East Africa in Papua Guinea. Since then there has been a lot of self-censorship. People are scared of saying anything really substantive, so at the moment people are busy writing guides for schools. Even if there is no overt censorship people measure their words, and you find that those who are writing plays are writing mainly for entertainment on TV or in what we call "College Drama Festivals" for schools. So the literary activities revolve around the classroom, and we are no longer writing the essays that we used to write or having the debates and public lectures that we used to have at the Department of Literature. The structure of the University is an added difficulty. New jobs will be created, and it seems to me that intellectual life is revolving around self-promotion. People are tailoring themselves to the civil service way of moving up the ladder.
Reverend Doctor John S. Mbiti is a Thief of Gods

Taban lo Liyong

African Religions and Philosophy by Professor John S. Mbiti was published in 1969. Professor Mbiti, a Mkamba of Kenya, studied at Makerere University College, before going on to Barrington College, Rhode Island, and then rounded off his studies in Cambridge University with a doctorate in theology. Appointed Professor of Religious Studies in 1968 at Makerere, he is also an ordained priest of the Anglican church and he has done some pastoral work in Birmingham. He left Makerere University in the seventies, and is now working in Geneva for the World Council of Churches.

He tells us in the book under scrutiny that: 'African Religions and Philosophy' deals almost exclusively with traditional concepts and practices in those societies which have not been either Christian or Muslim in any deep way, before the colonial period in Africa' (p. XI). This whets our appetite. He further goes on to say:

In my descriptions I have generally used the present tense, as if these ideas are still held and the practices being carried out. Traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples, though obviously this differs from individual to individual and from place to place. I believe, therefore, that even if the educated Africans do not subscribe to all the religious and philosophical practices and ideas described here, the majority of our people with little or no formal education still hold on to the their traditional corpus of beliefs and practices. (p. XI)

On the next page, we are told that the author has 'emphasized the unity of African religions and philosophy' in order to give an overall picture of the situation. He concedes that this approach does not permit for 'the treatment in depth of individual religions and philosophical systems of different African peoples' (p. XII).

Up to now the reader is led to believe that an objective study of tradi-

1 John S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London, Heinemann, 1969)
tional African religions and philosophy, continent-wide, is about to take place. The next paragraph of the preface then introduces the main theses of the author. We now quote it in full:

Since modern change cannot be ignored, I have devoted one chapter to it towards the end of the book, emphasizing particularly the human aspects of this change and how these affect individuals and families. In another chapter I discuss the present situation of Christianity, Islam and other religions in Africa, all of which are very relevant to any study of traditional religions. Both Christianity and Islam are 'traditional' and 'African' in a historical sense, and it is a pity that they tend to be regarded as 'foreign' or 'European' and 'Arab'. It is, however, in their contact and relationship with traditional religions that I have discussed these religions. The final chapter is an attempt to assess the place and role of religion in modern Africa which has inherited these different religious systems and is subjected to a world-wide and radical change. (p. XII)

Please note that by the 'role of religion' in the above quotation, Rev. Mbiti means Christian religion.

As one goes through the book, one begins to realize that this African clergyman of the Anglican Christian denomination, Reverend Dr John S. Mbiti, set out to study African religions, not to glorify and/or propagate them, but with the view to reduce them and their effectiveness to the extent that they begin to look like precursors to Christianity; as if Christian monotheism evolved from their polytheism.

But, Professor Mbiti is a smooth dealer: he takes one for a ride, and an enjoyable ride it is. He praises African religions, or rather pays them lip service, so that, should he at the end lead them to church, they would joyfully sing their way to extinction therein. Not satisfied with individual conversions, Mbiti attempts to convert whole religions to Christianity.

In chapter 1, 'Introduction', Professor Mbiti, in a sinister way, opens the discussion with this ploy:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. (p. 1)

One's expectation is now raised to follow this underhanded praise, with the perjorative word 'notorious' carefully chosen to describe our addiction to religion. But, a lament soon follows. The scarcity of written knowledge of traditional religions is decried. The little that there is we are reminded, alas, comes from anthropologists and sociologists. 'Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions theologically.' (p. 1) Now the notorious ogre is rampaging in God's
Eden, whence comes archangel Michael to the rescue?

We must be clear. By 'theologians' Reverend Mbiti means Christian theologians. And by 'describing' and 'interpreting' these traditional religions 'theologically', he means to use Christian perspective, vocabulary, outlook—indeed that vast Christian theology stretching from the pagan-religion slayer St. Paul, developed through Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine of Hippo, and so on to modern times where Mbiti has already carved out a role for himself. But, the task is formidable:

We speak of African traditional religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system. These religions are a reality which calls for academic scrutiny and which must be reckoned with in modern fields of life like economics, politics, education, and Christian or Muslim work. To ignore these traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to a lack of understanding of African behaviour and problems. Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and experts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned. (p. 1)

The Reverend is more at home with theology. He knows his religion; he can discern it through the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and religious officiants of traditional African religions.

Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through word and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind them. This involves interpretation of the information before us, and interpretation cannot be completely free of subjective judgement. What, therefore, is 'African Philosophy', may not amount to more than simply my own process of philosophizing the items under consideration: but this cannot be helped, and in any case I am by birth an African. (pp. 1-2)

It is as if the Blacks in America were to assert that because they are blacks, they could automatically know Swahili, their African mother-tongue. Philosophy is a noble subject. It deserves respect, even African philosophy. Unless, of course, one is referring to one's grandmothers' rule-of-thumb philosophy. An admission is made:

Philosophical systems of different African peoples have not yet been formulated, but some of the areas where they may be found are in the religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the society concerned. . . . "African Philosophy" here refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life. (p. 2)

All the time, the place of religion in our traditional life, is kept in view:
Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion. (p. 2)

One must now visualize Africans, who were called 'Kaffirs' by Muslims, 'Animists' by Western anthropologists, 'heathens' by overzealous white missionaries, now nodding their heads at this approbation. But, if the whole African life is bound up in religion, then why worry? What is the trouble? The problem is:

One of the sources of severe strain for the African exposed to modern change is the increasing process (through education, urbanization and industrialization) by which individuals become detached from their traditional environment. This leaves them in a vacuum devoid of a solid religious foundation. (pp. 2-3)

The causes for the break are attributed to all other agencies but the one which is chiefly responsible: the advent of Christianity and Islam. Who brought 'education' but Christian missionaries? Who fought against traditional African religions but Christian and Muslim missionaries? Who saw traditional religions as deadly adversaries but Christian missionaries? Who therefore detached the African from his religion but the church people?

Unfortunately, Islam and Christianity failed to satisfy the African. The Reverend has this regret:

They (the Africans) are torn between the life of their forefathers which, whatever else might be said about it, has historical roots and firm traditions, and the life of our technological age which, as yet, for many Africans has no concrete form or depth. [emphasis mine] (p. 3)

In other words, the protesting mission has failed. The foundations of the old house were rocked, but the expected renovation has failed. And the tenants who had a roof over their heads, are now exposed to the ravages of very strong winds from the north and everywhere else. Now, comes Reverend John Mbiti to the rescue with props, Christian props:

In these circumstances, Christianity and Islam do not seem to remove the sense of frustration and uprootedness. It is not enough to learn and embrace a faith
which is active once a week, either on Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is virtually empty. (p. 3)

'Empty' is the wrong word. One would have wished for the truth to be told. Sundays are for church, but Monday to Saturday for traditional beliefs, just as Friday is for the Mosque. Now, conscious of the above, the dragon-slayer comes in with the ultimate prescription:

Unless Christianity and Islam fully occupy the whole person as much as, if not more than, traditional religions do, most converts to these faiths will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly in times of emergency and crisis. The whole environment and the whole time must be occupied by religious meaning, so that at any moment and in any place, a person feels secure enough to act in a meaningful and religious consciousness. (p. 3)

Now, a subtle twist has been introduced: only what happens in the mosque or church is religious, has religious meaningfulness and religious consciousness. The traditional actions from Monday to Saturday, are now periods of insecurity, void, and loss. The rationale for writing the book is given us:

Since traditional religions occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversions to new religions like Christianity and Islam must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community. (p. 3)

A total victory, no less, is what Islam and Christianity are to win against traditional African religions. The task cannot be difficult: the adversary is meek, scattered, unco-ordinated. 'A great number of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not, however, formulated into a systematic set of dogmas a person is expected to accept' (p. 3). (emphasis mine)

When he wants to mollify us, he makes semantic concessions: 'Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved. One traditional religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group.' (p. 4) Although this assertion is false, this is not the place for refuting it. Another weakness, the Christian proselyte tells us, is that 'there is no conversion from one traditional religion to another' (p. 4). And furthermore, 'African religions have neither founders nor reformers' (p. 4). Were they then revealed religions, one is forced to ask, or created by the heathen gods?

What is wrong with traditional African religions that they must be
totally eradicated and replaced by Islam and Christianity? They have 'neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter' (p. 5). The whole African continent has been shaken up just because of Christian hypothetical fear of hell and love of paradise. Let me give a fuller quotation:

Belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies, as far as I have been able to discover. But this belief does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life. No line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. The soul of man does not long for spiritual redemption, or for closer contact with God in the next world. (pp. 4-5)

The here and now, rather than the here and the hereafter are the primary occupations of African religions. That is why African religiosity concentrates on 'earthly matters, with man at the centre of this religiosity', (p. 5) (emphasis mine)

Different religions respond to the human condition in different ways. So, what is wrong with African religions putting man's welfare at the centre of their religiosity? Why should other religions come and take away our philosophy of humanism, with man and man's welfare at the centre because of some dubious aspiration after paradise or fear of hell? One would have expected that by now one of these philosophers and priests would have walked off the pulpit returning his congregation with him to our sacred grounds, and reinstated him in the faiths of their fathers and mothers.

To fully discredit African religions, Dr Mbiti says all Africans' concept of time is backward looking. We think of yesterday and today. We have no word for tomorrow and paradise. Hence a religion which has a paradisiac life after death in which man's spirit will commune with God's spirit, is a more advanced, better, and more useful religion.

Traditional religions and philosophy are concerned with man in past and present time. God comes into the picture as an explanation of man's contact with time. There is no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision with God stepping in at some future moment to bring about a radical reversal of man's normal life. God is not pictured in an ethical-spiritual relationship with man. Man's acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical. (p. 5)

Instead of deriving the essence of African religions, the Reverend could have cast a glance at the Asian mainland to look for analogous religious beliefs. One would have wished religious scholars from Hinduism, Bud-
dhism or Shintoism had come here to study the relationship between their faiths and African religions. One also wished the ancient Egyptian religious practices and texts were made available and useful to modern Africans for us to derive inspiration from, to see the possible connections; and even to revive some aspects of, if need be. Most probably, the religion of Christ without the theology of St. Paul, and the props of Greek thoughts, and the consequent rise of Islam, would have been close to Africa in terms of man's relationship to man.

In chapter 2, Professor Mbiti surveys the study of African religions and philosophy. He opens the survey with these words:

The world is just beginning to take African traditional religions and philosophy seriously. It is only around the middle of the twentieth century that these subjects have begun to be studied properly and respectfully as an academic discipline in their own right. (p. 6)

He then goes on to decry the fact that during the last one hundred and fifty years it was American and European missionaries and students of anthropology, sociology and comparative religion who had to 'describe' African religions. Of these, some had 'never been to Africa', and only a few had done 'serious field study'. We are further told that their works were done under the theory of evolution. We are informed that the evolutionary type of interpretation places African religions at the bottom of the supposed line of religious evolution. It tells us that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are at the top, since they are monotheistic. (p. 7)

As we shall see later, Professor Mbiti also subscribes to this thought. In fact, he goes one stage further: he lifts Christianity above Islam, and leaves out Judaism (which but for the Falasha is regarded by some as a religion foreign to Africans).

In a rumour-mongering fashion, Reverend Mbiti struggles to reduce our religions in this manner:

In classifying the religions of the world, we hear that 'redemptive religions' like Christianity, Judaism and Islam incorporate into their teaching the doctrine of the soul's redemption in the next world. (p. 8)

That is why they are superior even to the other great religions of the world like Shintoism and 'the teachings of Confucius' which lay a great emphasis on moral considerations, and are therefore called 'morality religions'. But, compared to the morality religions, African religions are termed 'primitive' or 'savage' and we hear—to use Mbiti's words, they are 'lacking in either imagination or emotion'. (p. 8)
After surveying the approaches of Father Placide Tempels in his *Bantu Religion* and finding his philosophy of 'vital force' inadequate in applicability throughout Africa; and after tearing Jahnheinz Jahn's *Muntu* to pieces for raising African philosophy above that of Europe; after disqualifying J. V. Taylor's *The Primal Vision* for being Eurocentric, 'too sympathetic' to Africa's 'primal vision' and presenting 'everything as if it were so sacred, holy, pure and clean that it is being polluted by Christianity, westernism, urbanization and the ways of technological life' (p. 12) he comes at last to E. C. Parrinder's *African Traditional Religion* which he terms excellent. He writes:

The writer is both sympathetic and critical, and handles his material from many parts of Africa in a simple but scholarly way. Having lived and worked in western Africa, Parrinder had made a field study of African religions (both traditional and Christian), and writes with confidence. (p. 12)

Of course, Mbiti is better than Parrinder: first he is an African born and bred and therefore must have known African religion from infancy, and secondly, he puts 'more emphasis on the philosophical content of African religions'. And, what is this much vaunted philosophy of his? He says:

My approach in this book is to treat religion as an ontological phenomenon, with the concept of time as the key to reaching some understanding of African religions and philosophy. (p. 14)

First, in a simple layman's language, Mbiti states his thesis thus:

The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life. For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of "no-time". What is certain to occur, or what falls within this rhythm by natural phenomena, is in the category of inevitable or potential time. (pp. 16-17)

Have you got that? In case you have not, the thesis is rephrased for your own intellectual clarification:

The most significant consequence of this is that, according to traditional concepts, time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking. (p. 17)

Outside the reckoning of the year, African time concept is silent and indifferent. People expect the years to come and go, in an endless rhythm like that of day and night, and like the waning and waxing of the moon. They expect the
events of the rainy season, planting... and so on to continue for ever. Each year comes and goes, adding to the time dimension of the past. Endlessness or "eternity" for them is something that lies only in the religion of the past (p. 21). (emphasis mine)

Elsewhere we are told that for the Africans, there is no 'World to come'. (p. 23) A new phenomenon, only noticed for the first time by Professor Mbiti, is discovering for Africans or extending the future dimension of time. He says:

Partly because of Christian missionary teaching, partly because of western-type education, together with the invasion of modern technology with all it involves, African peoples are discovering the future dimension of time. (p. 27)

To this new discovery Mbiti is urging us to look for 'the key to understanding African political, economic and ecclesiastical instability'. (p. 221) An all-out war has to be waged to restore stability into African life. It is the war of the religions. As the Professor had said at the beginning, his approach is ontological. In traditional life

It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships. (p. 262) (emphasis mine)

You notice he no longer belongs to us. Instead of using 'our' he opts for 'their' in the above quotation.

However, that was before the advent and challenge of Christianity and Islam: 'up to a point in history this traditional religious attitude maintained an almost absolute monopoly over African concepts and experiences of life'. (p. 262) Now the battle is on:

Numerically, the main and most influential contestants are African Traditional Religions, Islam and Christianity. The last two are missionary oriented: they aim at winning converts from those who are outside their allegiance. They expand by pushing traditional religions on to the defensive, expecting them to keep silence, listen to their sermons, copy their examples, yield, give up, disappear and be forgotten. Both Christianity and Islam employ all kinds of methods to reduce traditional religions to ashes and historical anachronism. (p. 263).

Négritude, a rival philosophy, comes in for a hard knock on the head from the Christian priest:

The concept of Négritude with its many forms and definitions, is an ideological point of reference for the few elite particularly from the French-speaking countries of West Africa. Nobody in the villages understands or subscribes to its
philosophical expressions. It is a myth of the Zamani when it means "the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world". It is also a myth of the future when it aims at contributing to the macro-mythical "civilization of the universal". Négritude is, then, a comfortable exercise for the élite who wants, seeks and finds it when he looks at the African Zamani and hopes for an African future. It has neither dogmas nor taboos, neither feast days nor ceremonies. (p. 268)

African Personality fails to realize that 'the majority of African peoples are brown and not black' (p. 270), and is therefore untenable; African Unity and Pan-Africanism are merely political ideologies and economic attempts [which] point to a progress in search; it lacks concreteness, historical roots, and a clear and practical goal, at least for the individual to be able to find in it a sense of direction worthy of personal identification and dedication. (p. 271)

The only answer to Africa’s instability, the supreme religion for all Africa is Christianity which, the Professor claims, is 'indigenous', 'traditional' and 'African'. For, it 'holds the greatest and only potentialities of meeting the dilemmas and challenges of modern Africa, and of reaching the full integration and manhood of individuals and communities'. (p. 271). Not only that:

It is highly doubtful that, even at their very best, these other religious systems and ideologies current in Africa are saying anything radically new to, and different from, what is already embedded in Christianity. (p. 277)

The priest now does not pull his punches:

I consider traditional religions, Islam and the other religious systems to be preparatory and even essential ground in the search for the Ultimate. But only Christianity has the terrible responsibility of pointing the way to that ultimate Identity, Foundation and Source of security. (p. 277)

Just like communism is the ultimate goal of all social systems, so says the communist, and the communists may tolerate all the other impure, but necessary stages, so may Christianity co-exist with other impure religions on its way towards its ultimate evolution as the only right religion of Africa.

However, until that goal is attained by the individual and community, Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religions and the other religions and ideologies must continue to function, for the sake of their own survival and that of mankind as a whole. Until then, there is sufficient room for religious co-existence, co-operation and even competition in Africa. (p. 277)

The Reverend Priest has the audacity to say:
In certain circles there is even a revival of tribal rites and customs, the use of magic in cities is on the increase, and there are national efforts to preserve and take pride in tribal cultures. (p. 222)

On the same point, he goes on to say:

Traditional societies have been disrupted: we can neither cry over that, nor ignore that this is a *fait accompli*. There is no going back, and the only way open is to go forward for better and for worse. (pp. 223-4)

If going forward is for the 'worse' is it not wiser to stop and go backward, or find other ways which promise 'better' prospects?

As if that is not enough, he adds:

Traditional religions must yield more and more their hold in shaping people's values, identities and meaning in life. *They have been undermined but not overthrown.* (emphasis mine) (p. 262)

Why, why must they yield?

Professor Mbiti is a wily opponent. He yokes together disparate concepts, and urges you to swallow them both. Or, in any case, you will have a hard time choosing between the Chimera and the Sphinx. Is it the head of man which is more formidable or the claws of the lion?

Modern change is clearly evident almost everywhere and at least on the conscious level. But the subconscious depths of African societies still exert a great influence upon individuals and communities, even if they are no longer the only final source of reference and identity. With the undermining of traditional solidarity has come the search for new values, identity and security which, for both the individual and his community, were satisfactorily supplied or assured by the deeply religious background which we have sketched here. (p. 262)

The benevolent Father of the Church applies the coup de grace on the powerless 'living anachronism', i.e. Traditional African, Religions thus:

Traditional religions do not have scholarly champions to advocate their case, or to modernize their content and expression. Their main contribution, however, lies in the fact that since they permeate into every department of traditional society, any appeal made to traditional values and practices is ultimately a religious appeal. So long as people appreciate and even idolize the traditional present and past, this religiosity whether recognized as such or not will continue to enjoy a comfortable and privileged place in the emotions of African peoples. (pp. 273-4)

With tauntings like the above, is it not time we championed our traditional religions and advocated their case?
Writing Against Neo-colonialism

Ngugi wa Thiong’o

The African writer who emerged after the Second World War has gone through three decisive decades which also mark three modal stages in his growth. He has gone, as it were, through three ages within only the last thirty years or so: the age of the anti-colonial struggle; the age of independence; and the age of neo-colonialism.

First was the fifties, the decade of the high noon of the African people's anti-colonial struggles for full independence. The decade was heralded, internationally, by the triumph of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and by the independence of India about the same time. It was the decade of the Korean revolution; the Vietnamese defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu; the Cuban people's ouster of Batista; the stirrings of heroic independence and liberation movements in Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. In Africa the decade saw the Nasserite national assertion in Egypt, culminating in the triumphant nationalization of the Suez Canal; armed struggles by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, Mau Mau, against British colonialism and by the FLN against French colonialism in Algeria; intensified resistance against the South African Apartheid regime, a resistance it responded to with the Sharpeville massacre; and what marks the decade in the popular imagination, the independence of Ghana in 1957 and of Nigeria in 1960 with the promise of more to follow. In Europe, the immediate postwar decades, particularly the fifties, saw a consolidation of socialist gains in Eastern Europe; and important social-democratic gains in the west; in USA, the fifties saw an upsurge of civil rights struggles spearheaded by the Afro-American people.

It was, in other words, the decade of tremendous anti-imperialist and anti-colonial revolutionary upheavals occasioned by the forcible intervention of the masses in history. It was a decade of hope, the people looking forward to a bright morrow in a new Africa finally freed from colonialism. Kwame Nkrumah was the single most important theoretician and spokesman of this decade. Towards Colonial Freedom: that was in fact the title of the book Kwame Nkrumah had published at the beginning of the fifties. How sweet it must have sounded in the ears of all those who dreamt about a new tomorrow! His Ghana became the revolutionary Mecca of the entire anti-colonial movement in Africa. Hutchison, a South African nationalist, captured Ghana's centrality to the era when he called his book—
itself an account of his life and his escape from South Africa—simply, *Road to Ghana*. All the continent’s nationalist roads of the fifties led to Mwane Nkrumah’s Ghana. Everywhere on the continent, the former colonial slave was breaking his chains, and singing songs of hope for a more egalitarian society in its economic, political and cultural life and Nkrumah’s Ghana seemed to hold the torch to that life!

The African writer we are talking about was born on the crest of this anti-colonial upheaval and world-wide revolutionary ferment. The anti-imperialist energy and optimism of the masses found its way into the writing of the period. The very fact of his birth was itself, whether in poetry, drama or fiction, even where it was explanatory in intention, was assertive in tone. It was Africa explaining itself, speaking for itself, and interpreting its past. It was an African rejecting the images of its past as drawn by the artists of imperialism. The writer even flaunted his right to use the language of the former colonial master anyway he liked. No apologies. No begging. The Caliban of the colonial world had been given European languages and he was going to use them even to subvert the master.

There is a kind of self-assuredness, a confidence, if you like, in the scope and mastery of material in some of the best and most representative products of the period: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*, Camara Laye’s *The African Child*, and Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood*. The decade, in politics and in literature, was however best summed up in the very title of Peter Abraham’s autobiography, *Tell Freedom*, while the optimism is all there in David Diop’s poem ‘Africa’. After evoking an Africa of freedom lost as well as the Africa of the current colonialism, he looks to the future with unqualified, total confidence:

Africa tell me Africa
Is this you this back that is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun
But a grave voice answers me
Impetuous son that tree young and strong
That tree there
In splendid loneliness amidst white and faded flowers
That is Africa your Africa
That grows again patiently obstinately
And its fruit gradually acquires
The bitter taste of liberty.
Here the writer and his work were part of the African revolution. Both the writer and his work were products of the revolution even as the writer and the literature tried to understand, reflect, and interpret that revolution. The promptings of his imagination sprung from the fountain of the African anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movement of the forties and fifties. From every tongue came the same tune: Tell Freedom.

But very often the writer who sang Tell Freedom in tune and in time with the deepest aspirations of his society did not always understand the true dimensions of those aspirations, or rather he did not always adequately evaluate the real enemy of these aspirations. Imperialism was far too easily seen in terms of the skin pigmentation of the colonizer. It is not surprising of course that such an equation should have been made since racism and the tight caste system in colonialism had ensured that social rewards and punishments were carefully structured on the mystique of colour. Labour was not just labour but black labour: capital was not just capital but white-owned capital. Exploitation and its necessary consequence, oppression, were black. The vocabulary by which the conflict between colonial labour and imperialist capital was perceived and ideologically fought out consisted of white and black images, sometimes freely interchangeable with the terms 'European' and 'African'. The sentence or phrase was ‘... when the whiteman came to Africa ...’ and not ‘... when the imperialist, or the colonialist, came to Africa ...’, or ‘... one day these whites will go ...’ and not ‘... one day imperialism, or these imperialists, will go ...’!

Except in a few cases, what was being celebrated in the writing was the departure of the whiteman with the implied hope that the incoming blackman by virtue of his blackness would right the wrongs and heal the wounds of centuries of slavery and colonialism. Were there classes in Africa? No! cried the nationalist politician, and the writer seemed to echo him. The writer could not see the class forces born but stunted in a racially demarcated Africa.

As a result of this reductionism to the polarities of colour and race, the struggle of African people against European colonialism was seen in terms of a conflict of values between the African and the European ways of perceiving and reacting to reality. But which African values? Which European values? Which Black values? Which White values? The values of the European proletariat and of the African proletariat? Of the European imperialist bourgeoisie and of the collaborationist African petty bourgeoisie? The values of the African peasant and those of the European peasant? An undifferentiated uniformity of European, or white, values was posited against an equally undifferentiated uniformity of African, or black, values.

The uniformity of African values was often captured in the realm of pol-
itical parlance by the grandiloquent phrase, African socialism. Socialism (and therefore its opposite, imperialist capitalism) was reduced to a matter of beliefs, moral absolutes, and not that of a historically changing economic, political and cultural practice. Values without the economic, political and cultural practice that gives rise to them even as they in turn reflect that practice were seen as racially inherent in a people.

In short the writer and the literature he produced did not often take, and hence treat, imperialism and the class forces it generated as an integrated economic, political and cultural system of its opposite: national independence, democracy and socialism.

And so the writer, armed with an inadequate grasp of the extent, the nature and the power of the enemy and of all the class forces at work could only be shocked by the broken promises as his society entered the second decade.

The Age of Independence

The beginning of the sixties saw an acceleration of the independence movements. Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire, Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Congo (Brazzaville), Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali: country after country won the right to fly a national flag and to sing a national anthem. At the end of the sixties only a few smudges on the map represented old colonies. The OAU was the symbol of the new age, or rather it was the promise of greater unity to come. But if the sixties was the decade of African independence, it was also the decade when old style imperialism tried to halt the momentum of the anti-colonial struggles and the successes of the fifties. Old style imperialism tried to make a last stand. Thus Portuguese colonialism clung tenaciously to Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. In Zimbabwe Ian Smith and his Rhodesian Front, with the active covert and overt encouragement of the big imperialist bourgeoisie, tried to create a second South Africa by means of an American sounding Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). Internationally—that is, outside of Africa—this last stand of old style imperialism was represented by the USA in South Vietnam. But US domination of South Vietnam also represented new style imperialism—that is US-led imperialism ruling through puppet regimes. Thus in Vietnam lay a clue as to what was happening to the Africa of the sixties, happening that is, to its independence from classical colonialism. New style imperialism was dependent on the ‘maturing’ of a class of natives, already conceived and born by colonialism, whose positions and
aspirations as a group were not in any fundamental conflict with the money juggling classes, the financial gnomes of the real centres of power like Zurich, the City of London and Wall Street. There is a Kikuyu word, *Nyabaara,* which means an overseer which adequately describes these mediators between the imperialist bourgeoisie and the mass of workers and peasants in the former colonies.

To the majority of African people in the new states, independence did not bring about fundamental changes. It was independence with the ruler holding a begging bowl and the ruled holding a shrinking belly. It was independence with a question mark. The age of independence had produced a new class and a new leadership that often was not very different from the old one. Black skins, white masks? White skins, black masks? Black skins concealing colonial settlers' hearts? In each of the African languages there was an attempt to explain the new phenomenon in terms of the 'White' and 'Black' symbols by which colonialism had been seen and fought out. But really, this was a new company, a company of African profiteers firmly deriving their character, power and inspiration from their guardianship of imperialist interests.

The new regimes in the independent states increasingly came under pressure from external and internal sources. The external pressure emanated from the West who wanted these states to maintain their independence and non-alignment firmly on the side of Western economic and political interests. Where a regime showed a consistent desire to break away from the Western orbit, destabilization through economic sabotage and political intrigue was set in motion. The US role in bringing down Lumumba and installing the Mobutu military regime in Zaire at the very beginning of the decade was a sign of things to come.

The internal pressure came from the people who soon saw that independence had brought no alleviation to their poverty and certainly no end to political repression. People saw in most of the new regimes a dependence on foreigners, grand mismanagement and well-maintained police boots.

Some military intervened either at the promptings of the West or in response to what they genuinely saw and felt as the moral decay. But they too did not know what else to do with the state except to run the status quo with the gun held at the ready— not against imperialism—but against the very people the army had ostensibly stepped in to save.

Thus the sixties, the age of independence, became the era of coup-d'états whether Western-backed or in patriotic response to internal pressures. Zaire in 1960 and 1965; Nigeria and Ghana in 1966; Sierra Leone, Sudan, Mali, Uganda: all these and more fell to the armies and by 1970 virtually every independent state had experienced a measure of military coups, at-
tempted coups or threats of coups. The result was often intraclass fratricide as in the case of Zaire and Nigeria but one that dragged the masses into meaningless deaths, starvation and stagnation. Wars initiated by Nyabaaras! The era of coups d'états also threw up two hideous monstrosities: Bokassa and Idi Amin, two initial darlings of the West, who were to make a total mockery of the notion of independence, but who also, in those very actions, made a truthful expression of that kind of independence. Hideous as they were, they were only symbols of all the broken promises of independence.

What was wrong with Africa? What had gone wrong? The mood of disillusionment engulfed the writer and the literature of the period. It was Chinua Achebe in A Man of the People who correctly reflected the conditions that bred coups and rumours of coups.

A Man of the People, coming out at about the same time as the first Nigerian military coup, had shown that a writer could be a prophet. But other writings—particularly Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, and Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino—were equally incisive in their horror at the moral decay in the new states. The writer responded to the decay by appealing to the conscience of the new class. If only they would listen! If only they would see the error of their ways! He pleaded, lamented, threatened, painted the picture of the disaster ahead, talked of a fire next time. He tried the corrective antidote of contemptuous laughter, ridicule, direct abuse with images of shit and urine, every filth imaginable. The writer often fell back upon the kind of revenge Marx once saw the progressive elements among the feudal aristocracy taking against the new bourgeoisie that was becoming the dominant class in 19th century Europe. They, the aristocracy, 'took their revenge by singing lampoon on their new master, and whispering in his ears sinister prophecies of coming catastrophe.'

In this way arose feudal socialism; half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of history.

(The Communist Manifesto)

Thus the writer in this period was still limited by his inadequate grasp of the full dimension of what was really happening in the sixties: the international and national realignment of class forces and class alliances. What the writer often reacted to was the visible lack of moral fibre in the new leadership and not necessarily the structural basis of that lack of a national moral fibre. Sometimes the writer blamed the people—the recipients of crimes—as well as the perpetrators of the crimes against the people. At
times the moral horror was couched in terms perilously close to blaming it all on the biological character of the people. Thus although the literature produced was incisive in its observation, it was nevertheless characterized by a sense of despair. The writer in this period often retreated into individualism, cynicism, or into empty moral appeals for a change of heart.

The Age of Neo-colonialism

It was the third period, the seventies, that was to reveal what really had been happening in the sixties: the transition of imperialism from the colonial to the neo-colonial stage. On the international level, the US-engineered overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile showed the face of victorious neo-colonialism. The decade saw the clear ascendancy of US-dominated transnational financial and industrial monopolies in most of Asia, Africa and Latin America. This ascendancy was to be symbolized by the dominance of the IMF and the World Bank in the determination of the economy and hence the politics and culture of the affected countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The era saw the USA surround Africa with military bases or with some kind of direct US military presence all the way from Morocco via Diego Garcia to Kenya, Egypt and of course the Mediterranean Sea. The aims of the Rapid Deployment Forces, formed in the same decade, were unashamedly stated as interventionist in Third World affairs—i.e. in affairs of the neo-colonies. Indeed, the decade saw an increasing readiness of former colonial powers to militarily enter Africa without even a trace of shame. The increasingly open, naked financial, industrial (e.g. Free Trade Zones etc), military and political interference of Western interests in the affairs of African countries with the active cooperation of the ruling regimes in the same countries, showed quite clearly that the so-called independence had only opened each of the African countries to wider imperialist interests. Dependence abroad, repression at home, became the national motto.

But if the seventies revealed more clearly the neo-colonial character of many of the African countries, the seventies also saw very important and eye-opening gains by the anti-imperialist struggles. Internationally (outside Africa), the single most important event was the defeat of the USA in Vietnam. But there were other shattering blows against neo-colonialism: Nicaragua and Iran, for instance.

In Africa, the seventies saw a victorious resurgence of anti-imperialism. The armed struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Zim-
babwe had clearly gained from errors of the earlier anti-colonial move-
ments in the fifties. They could see the enemy much more clearly and they
could clearly analyze their struggles in terms that went beyond just the
question of colour and race. Their enemy was imperialism. Within the in-
dependent African countries, coup d'etats began to take on a more anti-
imperialist and anti-neo-colonial character.

Although occurring in 1981 and 1983 respectively the Rawling's coup in
Ghana and Sankara's in Burkina Faso (previously Upper Volta) are the
better examples of this tendency. But a more telling symbol was the
emergence in the seventies of a people-based guerilla movement fighting
for a second independence. The armed liberation guerilla movements in
places like Uganda, Sudan and Zaire may well come to stand to neo-
colonialism what the Kenya Land and Freedom Army and the FLN in
Algeria stood to colonialism in the fifties. The phenomenon of university
educated youth and secondary school graduates opting to join workers and
peasants in the bush to fight on a clear programme of a national
democratic revolution as a first and necessary stage for a socialist transfor-
mation is something new in the Africa of the seventies. Whatever their
ultimate destiny, these post-colonial guerrilla movements certainly sym-
bolize the convergence of the worker's hammer and the peasant's machete
or jembe with the pen and gun.

The awakening to the realities of imperialism was reflected in some very
important theoretical political breakthroughs in the works of Amilcar
Cabral, Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Dan Nabudere, Bala Mohamed,
Nzongola-Ntalaja and in many papers emanating from university centres
in many parts of the continent. Imperialism was becoming a subject of
serious and even passionate academic debate and scholarly dissertations.
The Dar es Salaam debate, now published as a book by Tanzania
Publishing House under the title Debate on Class, State & Imperialism,
stands out. But other places like Ahmadu Bello University and the
Obafemi Owolowo University of Ife in Nigeria; Nairobi University in
Kenya; and the Universities of Cape Coast and Ghana were emerging as
centres of progressive thought. But even outside the University campuses,
progressive debate was raging and it is not an accident that the Journal of
African Marxists should emerge during the seventies.

Once again this new anti-imperialist resurgence was reflected in litera-
ture. For the writer from Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, his content
and imagery were clearly derived from the active struggles of the people.
Even in the countries that became independent in the fifties and the sixties,
the writer started taking a more and more critical stand against the anti-
national, anti-democratic, neo-colonial character of the ruling regimes. He
began to connect these ills not just to the moral failings or otherwise of this
or that ruler, but to the perpetuation of imperialist domination through the
comprador ruling classes in Africa.

The writer in the seventies gradually began to take imperialism seriously.
He was also against the internal classes, those new companies of profiteers
that allied with imperialism. But the writer tried to go beyond just explana-
tion and condemnation. One can sense in some of the writing of this period
an edging towards the people and a search for new directions. The writer
in the seventies was coming face to face with neo-colonialism. He was
really a writer in a neo-colonial state. Further he was beginning to take
sides with the people in the class struggle in Africa.

The writer who edged towards the people was caught in various con-
tradictions. Where, for instance, did he stand in relation to the neo-
colonial state in which he was a citizen, and within which he was trying to
function?

A neo-colonial regime is, by its very character, a repressive machine. Its
very being, in its refusal to break with the international and national struc-
tures of exploitation, inequality and oppression, gradually isolates it from
the people. Its real power base resides not in the people but in imperialism
and in the police and the army. To maintain itself it shuts off all venues
of democratic expression. It, for instance, resorts to one-party rule, and
since in effect the party is just a bureaucratic shell, this means resorting to
one man rule, despotism a la Marquez's novel, The Autumn of the
Patriarch! All democratic organizations are outlawed or else brought
under the ruler, in which case they are emptied of any democratic life. Why
then should the regime allow any democracy in the area of culture? Any
democratic expression in the area of culture becomes a threat to such a
regime's very peculiar brand of culture: the culture of silence and fear, run
and directed from police cells and torture chambers.

Neo-colonialism in Kenya

The Kenya that emerged from the seventies is a good illustration of the
workings of a neo-colonial state. At the beginning of the decade Kenya was
a fairly 'open society' in the sense that Kenyans could still debate issues
without fear of prison. But as the ruling party under Kenyatta and later
under Moi continued cementing the neo-colonial links to the West, the
Kenya regime became more and more intolerant of any views that ques-
tioned neo-colonialism. In the fifties, Kenyans had fought to get rid of all
foreign military presence from her soil. In 1980 the Kenyan authorities had
given military base facilities to the USA. The matter was not even debated in Parliament. Kenyans learnt about it through debates in the US Congress. Now within the same decade which saw the Kenyan coast turned over for use by the US military machine, the Kenya regime had banned all centres of democratic debate. Even the University was not spared. University lecturers were imprisoned or detained without trial; among them were writers like Al Amin Mazrui and Edward Oyugi.

How does a writer function in such a society? He can of course adopt silence or self-censorship, in which case he ceases to be an effective writer. Or he can become a state functionary, an option some Kenyan writers have now embraced, and once again cease to be an effective writer of the people. Or he may risk jail or exile, in which case he is driven from the very sources of his inspiration. Write and risk damnation. Avoid damnation and cease to be a writer. That is the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state.

There are other contradictions of a writer in a neo-colonial state. For whom does he write? For the people? But then what language does he use? It is a fact that the African writers who emerged after the Second World War opted for European languages. All the major African writers wrote in English, French and Portuguese. But by and large, all the peasants and a majority of the workers—the masses—have their own languages.

Isn't the writer perpetuating, at the level of cultural practice, the very neo-colonialism he is condemning at the level of economics and that of political parties? For whom a writer writes is a question which has not been satisfactorily resolved by the writers in a neo-colonial state. For the African writer, the language he has chosen already has chosen his audience.

Whatever the language the writer has opted for, what is his relationship to the content? Does he see reality in its unchangingness or in its changingness? To see reality in stagnation or in circles of the same movements is to succumb to despair. And yet for him to depict reality in its revolutionary transformation from the stand-point of the people—the agents of change—is once again to risk damnation by the state. For a writer who is depicting reality in its revolutionary transformation is, in effect, telling the upholders of the status quo: even this too shall pass away.

I think I have said enough about the writer in the third period—the seventies—to show that his lot, particularly when he may want to edge towards the people, is not easy. But what are his choices, his options, as he faces the eighties?
The Writer in the 80s

In the world, the struggle between democratic and socialist forces for life and human progress on the one hand, and the imperialist forces for reaction and death on the other is still going on and it is bound to become more fierce. Imperialism is still the enemy of human kind and any blow against imperialism whether in the Philippines, El Salvador, Chile, South Korea is clearly a blow for democracy and change. In Africa, the struggle of Namibian people and of South African/African people will intensify. And as the Zimbabwean, Angolan, and Mozambican struggles took the African revolution a stage further than where it had been left by the FLN and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army in the fifties, in the same way the successful outcome of the Namibian and South African peoples' struggle will push the entire continent on to a new stage. In a special way, the liberation of South Africa is the key to the liberation of the entire continent from neo-colonialism.

With the neo-colonial states, the anti-imperialist alliance of democratic forces will intensify the struggle against the rule of the alliance of the comprador classes and imperialism. There will be more and more anti-imperialist coups in the Rawlings and Sankara type. There will be an increase in the Uganda type anti-neo-colonial guerrilla movements. There will be a greater and greater call and demand for a Pan-Africanism of the proletariat and the peasantry through their progressive democratic organizations. Each new stage in the struggle for real independence, democracy and socialism will have learnt from the errors of the previous attempts, successes and even failures. The main thing is that the eighties and the nineties will see the heightening of the war against neo-colonialism. For as in the days of colonialism, so now in the days of neo-colonialism, the African people are still struggling for a world in which they can control that which their collective sweat produces, a world in which they will control the economy, politics, and culture to make their lives accord with where they want to go and who they want to be.

But as the struggle continues and intensifies, the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state will become harder and not easier. His choice? It seems to me that the African writer of the eighties, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. In that situation, he will have to confront the languages spoken by the people in whose service he has put his pen. Such a writer will have to rediscover the real language of struggle in the actions and speeches of his people, learn from their great heritage of orature, and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of
human beings to remake their world and renew themselves. He must be part of the song the people sing as once again they take up arms to smash the neo-colonial state to complete the anti-imperialist national democratic revolution they had started in the fifties, and even earlier. A people united can never be defeated and the writer must be part and parcel of that revolutionary unity for democracy, socialism and the liberation of the human spirit to become even more human.

Author's note: The terms 'he' and 'his' as used above are not meant to denote the 'maleness' of the person. It should be read to indicate an individual person, whether male or female.
As I intend to take you through a series of bizarre and largely personal anecdotes which might overshadow what I am trying to say, let me summarize my talk. First, in the last twenty years in certain independent African countries, we have witnessed an unprecedented development of indiscriminate censorship of African writing and other cultural artefacts under the pretext of protecting African societies against the decadence of writers and artists. The situation has become so serious now that writers, scholars and others must take stern measures to counteract this development. I suggest to this distinguished gathering that writers use as much subtlety and imagination to fight censorship as they do to fight the injustice and exploitation of this world in their works. This is particularly so because censorship in Africa no longer concerns itself with the protection of human rights or civil and political liberty which African governments ratify at the United Nations as soon as they join that international body. The objective of most Censorship Boards is first and foremost to protect the censors from dismissal and to protect the oppression of the governments which establish them; censorship ultimately protects African leadership against truth.

Secondly, I suggest that there are no 'collaborators' and no 'exiles' in this fight. These labels which we have tended to throw at each other over the years are dated. Today it is generally accepted for instance, that the children of Soweto and other townships in South Africa have contributed more to the war against the injustices of apartheid than most exiles would care to admit. Therefore let us all fight together and I suggest that we adopt the arrogant and complacent tone which the censors adopt when they deal with writers. African writers, artists and scholars must be the custodians of African culture; not the censors and the politicians they represent. Writers know as well as any what's best for African societies. I suggest further that we even peep into the drawers of censors, in order to properly counteract every move they make against us.

Finally, although such actions might be dangerous and success limited, I suggest that the victory or reward to be gained (even if it comes after
one's life time) has its delights. Naturally the ideal situation is not to fight but to go on writing in spite of the censors, but if censors become a menace as they are in some countries, then the declaration of war, however lonely and thankless the results and however frustrating and humiliating, is probably the best move. On this point the famous Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki recently noted the following in *Index On Censorship* of March 1986,

> . . . writing under censorship has positive aspects. It can be like gambling or doing battle. The fact of having to face a censor can mobilize a writer to create ways of by-passing censorship; it forces the writer to employ metaphors which raise the piece of writing to a higher level.

I will now take through one or two experiences I have had with censorship in Malawi. In 1981 I published a book of poetry in the United Kingdom called *Of Chameleons and Gods*. Let me trace briefly its banning story. The book had an auspicious launching at the National Poetry Society in London, where friends, a few critics, publishers, students of African literature, cynics and two informers of the Censorship Board in Malawi came. So it was an event. I mean Malawi ought to have been grateful that one of her sons was putting them on the literary map; he was joining others who had done the same before. But this was not to be. For a while I was in London and after several positive reviews of the verse, news had it that the book would be banned in Malawi. I had heard for example that the Special Branch had bought all the fifty copies of the book left in the Malawi University Bookshop and thrown the copies into pit latrines. Another bookshop was told to send the books back to London. No reason was given for the withdrawal of the book. I then wrote a letter to one of the censors, whom I knew, to find out whether the stories I had heard were true. I was told instead that I should have sent the manuscript of the poems to them before publication; but I was assured that the book was still in circulation; university students could read it as part of their course on East-African writing. I was satisfied.

One year after its publication however, I got an unusual letter from one of the publishing companies in Malawi. It was dated 13th April, 1982 and among other things the editor said:

> I have been contemplating a Malawian version of *Of Chameleons and Gods* which should give our literary series a blasting send-off (sic). This is an area I am trying to develop. I need something powerful to start us off with. Should you give us your consent to proceed it would be necessary to delete certain titles (poems) which to quote one anonymous analyst 'poke at wounds that are still raw in Malawian history'.

My friend, for so he called me, went on to enumerate the implications of his request. 'Malawians will have the chance to read freely at least eighty percent of your poems, and I think that both you and the Malawian readership do desire to share experience contained there. For this to happen of course, we will need to buy a license from Heinemann (publishers), after you have given us a written consent to proceed to publish it with the omissions'. Then my friend asked me to give his regards to my family. The mind still boggles about what the Malawian version of already Malawian verse would be and what the omissions would have been. It was at this stage that I decided to try to get to the bottom of the matter. I would have to go home and find out what actually was happening. The concluding words in my friend's letter were particularly revealing. He said, 'I hope you can give me a quick reply to this note, even if the answer to my proposition is "no"'. In my reply I told my friend to wait until I finished my studies. When I returned home, we would sort out what he had proposed. I suggested to him that perhaps I should write a poem one day called 'On Poking at Raw Wounds of the Nation'. When I returned home in April 1983, the matter was never raised. We politely avoided mentioning the 'blasting send-off' which they (whoever they were) were probably planning to give me, rather than the poems.

In 1984 Of Chameleons and Gods was reprinted, mainly because of sales outside Malawi, and much to the anger of several numbers of the Censorship Board. For if copies of the book sold within Malawi, it must have happened unofficially. I will not record all the jokes and reactions people confronted me with about the poems. 'One day we will freely buy your book in these bookshops', said one sarcastically. 'Why do you bite the finger that feeds you', asked another. There was more. All this time however, I had been doing my own private spying. I wanted to know who had read the book for the censors for it to be in such a limbo and what they had actually said about the poems.

One day one of my ex-students who was teaching in a secondary school wrote me a letter to ask what wrong I had done. He then enclosed a photocopy of a circular letter which he had got from the Ministry of Education and Culture about my book. The letter was dated June 1985 and it read:

I would like to inform you that Of Chameleons and Gods a collection of poems by Dr Jack Mapanje has been declared an unsuitable book for schools and colleges in the country. And copies of the collection should be withdrawn from use in our schools and colleges without delay.

It has also come to the notice of the Board of Censors that some copies of When Sunset Comes to Sapitwa, another collection of poems by Professor Felix
That Felix Mnthali’s poems eluded the censors was surprising because the book first appeared in Zambia before mine and lots of people in Malawi had copies. To date nobody has brought a copy of Mnthali’s poems to the censor to my knowledge; obviously the book is so precious that nobody wants to give up their copy.

We can all read what we like into the events I have just sketched. What was fascinating to me was the arrogance of the censors; why they did not give reasons for the withdrawal of the books; if the aim was to stop anybody writing a similar book surely they had not succeeded in showing how future writers ought to proceed. It was at this point that I had a breakthrough in my search. I had discovered by pure chance that the readers of my book for the Censorship Board had been academics, writers, and respectable members of the community. The fact that the readers were mostly graduates was in itself a great achievement for the Censorship Board and for the country as a whole. We got used to readers who could not read English or French properly and who only banned a book because of its title (if it sounded revolutionary) or because of the use of four-letter words. On this occasion one distinguished professor’s report to the Board on Of Chameleons and Gods said; ‘This is serious literature. Profoundly moral in its concerns’. A writer and lecturer had the following opinion, ‘I personally don’t see anything explicit, referring to the local scene here’. Another person whom I knew said, ‘These poems are on the surface trivial and difficult to understand. But as the publisher and the author say, his voice has been muffled. He is naturally critical of the situation. Recommendation — it may not be necessary to ban these poems as a whole or in part, but some should be deferred for the time being’. Another ex-student of mine working in government said, ‘My own impression about these poems is that the poet is expressing his bitterness against the system; but I could be wrong because it is very difficult to decode somebody’s camouflaged works in the absence of some inside knowledge into what he had in mind when writing them: Verdict: Doubtful’. Then there were two literary pedestrians who couldn’t care less and who simply said, ‘Verdict — no problem’.

Yet even after these reports which had effectively recommended that the book should not be banned, the censors decided not to allow it to circulate. Why? I discovered that there was an influential man in the University who was consulted on matter like these. It was he who was supposed to have
decided to do nothing about the book. It was the same person who was rumoured to have had informers, students as well as lecturers, who would report to him about the political activities of some students and lecturers so that he in turn could report to the appropriate authorities. Apparently it was these informers who had told him that I was not intending to go back to Malawi after my studies in the U.K. But there was another reason for not banning the book. I was told by one of the censors that banning was too drastic a step to be taken. It would make me a hero and they didn't want many of those. Or if it was later discovered that the book was wrongly banned (and this is apparently what happened when the head of state brought a gift of a book from America, only to discover that it had been banned and as a consequence he had to force its unbanning and change the composition of the Censorship Board!), they would be safe from blame; or if I became sufficiently important in time, then I would have no serious grounds to have the Board sacked. All these trivial matters raise the major question of who actually censors and for what purpose?

There is yet another version of the banning or withdrawing of my book. It was the introduction which caused the problem and the introduction read, 'The verse in this volume spans some ten turbulent years in which I have been attempting to find a voice or voices as a way of preserving some sanity. Obviously, where personal voices are too easily muffled, this is a difficult task. . . But the exercise has been, if nothing else, therapeutic; and that's no mean word in our circumstances!' Clearly to those people who have not suffered or whose relatives have not been imprisoned, the claim inherent in these words can only express ingratitude to the establishment. I also discovered one poem which some 'friends' said was too dangerous. It is called 'Making Our Clowns Martyrs'. The scenario I describe in the poem is so commonplace that it is difficult for any normal person to see the source of the trouble. A government minister has lost his job. He has to go back home to his hut in the village. In his folly he had not tried to improve his hut whilst he was a minister. The problem was that in a country where these matters are not discussed publicly and freely this poem is too explicit. Everybody reads their own personalities into the scenario. And unfortunately as more and more ministers fall or lose their job, the poem gains more relevance.

You might think I am exaggerating the issue, but this is what is actually happening in certain countries in Africa. The point is, it is easy to see for instance, why in a recent production in Malawi of Ntwa and Ngwema's South African play Woza Albert the censors should insist that producers cut out lines such as 'She killed my brother with a fuck'. At least the four-letter word is there. But here is a passage which was censored from the same play. Percy is an employer threatening to cut
the wages of Mbongeni, a servant/worker, and others. The following discussion between the two was censored,

**Mbongeni.** The boss can't cut salary.

**Percy.** Ek gaan dit doen! (I'm going to do it)

**Mbongeni.** That's not showing sympathy for another man. The cost of living is too high. There is too much inflation.

**Percy.** Zuluboy! Zuluboy! You sit around waiting for Morena and then you come and tell me about the cost of living? You talk about inflation? What do you know about inflation? I've got you here, just here. One more mistake, once more cheeky, and you're fired!

**Mbongeni.** Okay. All right boss. Let's talk business like two people.

**Percy.** (Bangs on the box): He-ey! Push the truck, man!

**Mbongeni.** (Furious, bangs on the box. Percy retreats towards his office space): Hey! You must listen nice when another man talks!

**Percy.** Okay. Talk, talk. (Mbongeni advances.) No-talk over there, talk over there!

**Mbongeni.** (Backs away): All right, okay, okay. The people want increase. Where's the money for the people?

**Percy.** Increase?

I suggest that the reason this discussion was censored is that the idea of cutting people's salaries was very much alive in government at the time of the censoring; that everybody was talking about inflation and the cost of living and that people in government were talking about the need for salary increases.

In order to protect the establishment, which is the target of these activities, the censor cuts this passage out so that the relevance of the discussion and the play to the present Malawian situation is minimized, and the status quo is maintained. In Kole Omotoso's play *The Curse* the following short speech by ailing Chief Alagba was also cut by the censors:

'I cannot leave my property without anyone to take care of it. Sometimes they say that for the man who has no relatives, the government can be his relative. But I don't want any of those people to get hold of my property. I will develop a stomach ulcer if I felt that one of those fat oaves was riding about in my Mercedes Benz. Or on any of these'. (He points to the woman.)

We can see how the censor becomes the interpreter of this employer here. The censor ingeniously builds parallels between the ailing chief who has a lot of property and women but no relatives or heirs to the throne, and the prevailing ailing political leadership. The censor does not want the audience watching this play to relate these words to the present situation in a country where succession is a problem.

Another most obvious form of censorship consists of tearing out pages
from books of references to people who have contributed to the independence of the country but who are now discredited because they criticized the system and left the country when their lives were threatened. I remember, when I first joined the staff of the university, seeing the late Professor James Stewart going through the humiliation of ripping David Rubadiri's poems out of the Heinemann anthology called *Poems from East Africa* edited by David Cook and David Rubadiri. And in 1976 James Gibbs edited *Nine Malawian Plays*, a book which had been cleared by the Censorship Board before its publication by Montford Press in Limbe. But after the third week of publication Gibbs and the publisher were ordered to withdraw all copies of the plays and the introduction which Gibbs had included after clearing it with the censors was to be removed from the book and another more acceptable one written. One could only guess at the reasons for such irrational behaviour; even Gibbs was not told what was wrong with the introduction, which as I say, had been acceptable before the publication of the book.

Don't ask me how we manage to write under such circumstances. In 1970 we started the Writers' Group at the university. Most of the Malawian writers who are writing today, with the exception of our earliest and most eminent writer David Rubadiri, have at one time or another been members of this group which holds its informal meetings every Thursday and where lecturers and students as well as people outside the university discuss their works before publication. It is a thankless cultural exercise to the nation; only time will probably tell of its impact.

In certain parts of independent Africa then, censorship is deliberately established to discourage the development of authentic African culture. The objective of censorship is to humiliate writers or 'trim them to manageable size'. Writers are meant to feel guilty; to feel that they are not good citizens, that they are not doing things for the good of the nation; that they are ungrateful people.

The development of national cultures is supposed to be controlled by a few censors and their informers. The writer is a nuisance. Even constructive criticism from writers (most of whom are responsible citizens by anybody's standards) is scorned. Those who have political and economic power are the people who know best what is good for the masses of our people. Poetry does not feed anybody; it only exposes the dirty linen of Africa to the World Bank and IMF. African countries must be projected as calm, orderly and peaceful, otherwise IMF and the World Bank will not lend us the money the starving masses require. We are all familiar with the story and the travesty of truth it entails.

When I was coming to this conference I decided to confront one of the censors again. I suggested to her that we are all trapped. They banned my
book because if they didn't they would lose their jobs, especially when somebody discovered the poems and provided his/her own interpretation to the events described there. But the censor insisted that my book had only been withdrawn from circulation. I asked, 'Is that what I should tell my friends at Stockholm when they ask me about the book?' The answer was, 'Just tell them that your book has not been banned, it has only been withdrawn from circulation; that means you could have the book in your house if you wanted; it's not illegal'. I continued, 'How could anyone have the book in their house when it has been withdrawn from circulation; when it's not even available'? The answer shot out, 'Technically, because you have not been gazetted no one could harass you'. I will spare you the story of my harassment. Instead allow me to conclude by these incomplete lines which I have been struggling to gather into some coherent poem:

**On Banning Of Chameleons and Gods** (June, 1985)

The fragrance of your banning order is not
Pungent enough after four years & one re-
print dear sister & your brother's threat,
'Your chameleons poke at the raw wounds of
Our nation!' won't rhyme however much you
Try. To ban, burn or to merely withdraw from
Public engagement, what's the difference? It
Still humiliates our readers, you & me. And
What do you see in these senile chameleons,
These gouty, mythical gods & libertine Mphunzi
Leopards to warrant all the heat? Haven't you
Heard the children's riddles yet or the jokes
At the market place about your chiefs & their
Concubines? How do you enjoy squinting only
At lines without bothering to ask what even
Swallows perched on the barbed wires of your
Central prisons already know? Who doesn't
Know who pokes at whose nation's wounds raw?
& why should my poking at wounds matter more
Than your hacking at people's innocent necks?
No, for children's sake, unchain these truths
Release the verse you've locked in our hearts.
Africans like, or love, or have a propensity for changing names. That may explain why I am no longer the Robert Daudi Mullandi I used to be, but David G. Maillu; why Jonstone Kamau became Jomo Kenyatta, or why there is Ngugi wa Thiong’o instead of the James Ngugi who wrote *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between*. It is this propensity that inspired me to change the original title of my discussion from 'The African Writer and His Black Man' to the one given above. Hence, for cultural reasons too, I neither offer apology, nor would I need any sympathy from the listener. And for the reason that the African loves talking in parables and riddles, added to the fact that this conference is of, and for creative writers, for a second time I seek no apology to deliver my speech through the parable medium. By adopting that medium, I become close to the novelist that I have always been. I also choose the medium so that I may honour you with a taste of what I dare call 'African aesthetics'. There is also an African proverb that a guest should not defecate in the yard of the host, so I am only being diplomatically careful. In Africa especially, words shoot and kill. Would it then be true that in Africa the gun and the pen (the typewriter included) are one and the same appellation, so that Ngugi wa Thiong’o should be justified in naming his book *The Barrel of the Pen*?

Let me name my character after 'Africa'. And since the masculine appellation of Africa is Afrikanus, I decide to name my female character, Afrikana. The story told here is of a bastard, called Afrikana; not the Boer’s Afrikaaner, of course. If I want, I could also name my bastard (the girl under discussion here) Miss or Ms Uhuru, where 'Uhuru' means independence. But since the appellation 'Uhuru' sounds rather masculine, and since all that is female is associated with elegance, I have therefore decided, once and for all that, the bastard girl should remain Afrikana, alias Uhuru for clarity.
Birth of Afrikana

She was born in Africa—south or north of the Sahara, in west or east Africa. That was millennia after the fall of the Egyptian dynasties and the retirement of the Os-Aburian system, or Osaism (that is, the embodiment of the biological sciences; namely, botany and zoology; astronomy and astrology; physics and chemistry; medical science and sociology). Several thousand years before the Christian era, Africa, not the bastard Afrikana, gave the world the doctrine that Nature is not only an immortal animal, but also a perpetually pregnant woman who is continually reproducing herself. And in such a unity of life (and in that antiquity) the African, again not the bastard Afrikana, discovered that biology is the most complete and complex of all sciences. For plants and animals are the combination of all the elements in nature. The Afrikana period was much, much later.

Even though the parents of the bastard Afrikana, Negrato and Yuropa (not Yoruba), had brushed against each other in the time of the Pharaohs, they actually met face to face somewhere in the heart of the African jungle, only during the slave-trade times, but particularly in 1493 when the Pope divided the new lands between Spain and Portugal; and thereafter giving birth to the 'asiento' that enabled Spain to bring slaves into Spanish colonies.

Negrato, the mother of Afrikana, was a black woman, shortish, with woollen hair, a short nose, brown eyes, and thick passionate lips. She walked erect, with the grace of a satisfied gazelle, capering in the field. Her teeth were milk-white. Her legs were full. Her buttocks firm and starchy. The most prominent feature of Negrato was her erect, youthful, and dearly sharp breasts that talked and winked as she walked, always beckoning the youth. Breasts that had large moons, prominent nipples; and the whole equipment stirred up when touched during which occasions Negrato giggled. Then she suddenly would stop and ask what the nature of the play was, for it had made her nipples erect. In Africa when a girl moves a man, he does not kiss her. He touches her breasts by applying his full palm on its nude face, so that the nipple may burn him in the centre of the palm and give painful delight with the waves.

At the beginning when Yuropa met Negrato, there was a lot of her he didn't understand. In fact, he understood nothing of her spoken and unspoken language. And he did not understand her for a long, long time, up to the end of the sixteenth century. To be precise, he began to really get to know her in the nineteenth century, when the slave trade was dominated by the Dutch, the French, and the English. The Danes and Swedes also participated, but on a smaller scale.
After he had begun to understand her, first Yuropa ignored her because of her peculiar mannerism, perhaps because of the way she laughed and squealed with joy when touched on the breast by a boy. Or because of the exotic manner in which she spat, walking provokably naked, exactly like today's member of a French or German or Swedish nudist club. Or could it be that Yuropa was still sorting out his feelings as, in a Shakespearian view, the greatest dilemma was, and is always, to be or not to be. That is, to do, or not to do. However, Yuropa would have made his first mistake by kissing her, instead of touching her breast.

It was a calm night, with the full moon staring out in the sky. The sea, seen through an array of whispering palms, glimmered in the direction the breeze came from. He was taking his heart out for a beach walk as he could not sleep however much he tried. When he arrived at the beach, he took a deep breath. Wonderful! The sand felt cold under his bare feet; but it soothed him just as much as the breeze did by caressing his body hair. . . From his left came the sound of a sea-gull. Or was it a nightingale? In Africa, you never knew, there were many birds that looked alike and sang alike. . . Never mind, the night was neither cold nor warm, but just right, a climate in which all potent men suffered from the desire of lying with a woman somewhere, saying things to her as the earth turned on its axis. . . All this time Yuropa had been thinking about Negrato, the girl he had seen. Funny, he had been seeing her all that time, but not in the glamourous fashion she had appeared in that night. Had she bewitched him? He had spent ages staring at her naked breasts that were demanding an embrace.

His heart beat and beat. . . He went down and scooped a handful of the cold sand, then he let it run through his fingers. He swallowed and tried to correct the flow of his emotions by telling his heart, 'Quiet, please. . . sleep. . . nights are too long in the African jungle. On Christmas Eve, I will take you to Europe and let you kiss Catherine left and right, the two of you sitting by the fire-place, and letting things happen the way they should, indeed, by the crackling fire of passion. . . This is Africa, don't forget: there are hyenas, snakes, buffalos, crocodiles, and dreadful mosquitoes.'

But he could not stop thinking about what he had seen at the dance. Charged fully by the spirit of the dance, the bandmaster's voice had cracked hoarsely, then the voice was answered by the throb of the drums, followed by the drama in which Negrato had gyrated in absolute abandon, shaking her shoulders and hands and, Oh! everything, so possessed by the spirit of the dance, as the naked breasts wrote many figures in the air, painting and writing the language of Africa. Could he forget what he had seen?

He paced up and down the beach, listening to the storm of the passion within himself. . . He was so hung up! Then, after he had considered
everything and the distance between here and Europe, he let himself break from the European orbit of civilization, if not decency, and raped Negrito. That was before dawn. And he did it so uncouthly as if he was angry. Oh yes, he was under the spell of the demon of rape. He pushed a cloth into her mouth so that she could not scream, then, by pinning her hands down with his masculine ones, he broke into her. He let the cannon go off and he broke the dam. This was between the nineteenth and twentieth century, when the colonial phallus was at its best.

'No, don't!' said Negrito as she fought, but it was too late. That was when he had already died with the typhoon in her, when she had managed to spit out the piece of cloth that had blocked her voice. But, as the proverb went, a fuck that had been committed could not be undone, so it stayed.

Then, and unfortunately, Negrito became pregnant.

By then the rapist had gone into hiding and had built himself a bunker to protect himself from the anguish of Negrito's suitor, Afrikanus. Afrikanus had been looking forward anxiously to marrying her.

'So you raped my girl?' cried Afrikanus when he ran into Yuropa.

'What about my girl?' cried Afrikanus.

'You're getting on my nerves!'
managed to get back to his feet, he tore off through the woods as fast as an arrow, back to the jungle.

From that time onwards, Yuropa built himself a giant castle with tall, very tall walls that almost touched the sky, where he lived heavily guarded. In his castle there were millions of guns. He knew that he was not safe any more. Darwin had taught him the principle of survival of the fittest—kill before you are killed, and in diminishing aggression, rob before you are robbed. So from now onwards, he had to live by the barrel of the gun. As for his communication, now he had to rely on his errand boys and emissaries who, from time to time, sent a few presents to the pregnant Negrato, together with letters of persuasion in which he tried to justify his rape and point out to the benefits of bearing his child. 'My sperm,' he said, 'will produce super-children.'

Negrato began to be confused.

'You'll bear a son that looks like me,' he added. 'It was for your own good that I raped you. Your Afrikanus is hopeless, just a bushman. My son will be tall like me, with blue eyes, and a long shapely nose unlike the ridiculous one he would have got from Afrikanus. His lips shall be shapely, thin and civilized like mine, not thick like the vulva of a pregnant cow.

'Those are terrible features,' cried Negrato, 'I don't want to have a child with those features!'

To comfort her, that evening he sent her a bunch of flowers with a note: 'I'm so proud of my child which you are carrying.'

She did not understand the metaphor of flowers. She thought they were herbs. Or some kind of vegetables. So she cooked them. But when she tasted them, damn him, they were tasteless! She was puzzled.

'What is the meaning of this?' she asked his emissary. 'I cooked them, tasted them but they tasted awful! Is he mad?'

The emissary laughed tears. Oh, his ribs pained.

'What is so funny?' she cried.

'You see,' he wiped his tears, 'they were not for cooking. They were for the eyes only.'

'How?'

'Beauty for the eyes. For seeing only. It was a great gesture of love from him.'

'He never loved me. He never touched my breasts, danced with me, and lay down with me chest-to-bosom, churning the passion with which life is eaten. He only raped me, and here he sends me pieces of weed!'

If he raped you, he must have loved you. And he still loves you, that is why he sends you the flowers.

'If he loves me, take me to the castle to live with him as a wife'.

'I can't do that.'
'Why not?'
'I am only doing my duty.'
'Then go and tell him to come and meet my parents, my relatives, my people, and let us discuss...' 
'There is nothing to discuss.'
'Yet you say he loves me?'
'Yes, he does.'
'Words don't make a bride pregnant. Why do you sound so much like him?'
'I'm just doing my duty.'
'Then go and tell him to send his parents to come to meet mine, then discuss the bride gifts and the prospects of marriage eventually.'
'No, it can't be done that way. It will have to stay the way it is now.'
'Then go and tell him he is a porcupine!'
'He'll shoot you dead if he hears that.'
'Can he rape me and then kill me?'
'He can, yes, it is not a joke. He is a no-nonsense person. And you know, the big fish live on the small ones.'
'If I get him, I will uproot his penis.'
'He should never hear that!'

The gestation period saw the years that preceded World War Two. In the first place, Negrato was at a loss with regard to what diet to take. In the meantime, Yuropa continued to send her flowers, sometimes with some palace cakes and sweets. Her natural diet had been called into question. He had sent her a list of the menus she should not take. Most of the forbidden ones, of course, were the local ones that her past generation had always lived on. Me even gave her instructions on how to walk, how to lie down, what to sing, and even what to think!

'If you don't do these things,' went the message, 'you will die at childbirth. A baby of my kind of sperm is also easily destroyed by primitive diets and music.'

Negrato was so scared by these warnings, she could hardly eat. So she grew weaker and weaker, and was mentally disturbed.

'That can't be true,' cried Afrikanus. 'Yuropa is a terrible liar. You should continue to eat your kind of food.'

'I'm so horrified,' she said in tears. 'Afrikanus, please don't run away from me at this most crucial period of my life. Forgive me for everything. It was not my wish that this happened. Let me die in your hands.'

'I can't stay,' replied Afrikanus in a warrior's tone. 'I must go and fight against him... Weep not child... I will kill him, just wait.'

'I'm so afraid he'll kill you before you kill him. Let us surrender to him, please.'
'Never!' cracked Afrikanus, and returned to the forest to prepare for a bigger battle against Yuropa.

Nightmares

The years that followed World War Two were bad. Yuropa could hardly sleep a wink. Already, terrible attempts had been made on his life in spite of the secure castle he lived in. But what really horrified him were the kind of nightmares he had started having. Every time he closed his eyes, whether he was sitting in his sofa or lying on his royal bed, a most frightening face burst before his eyes. It looked like a mask, very dark, and the rest of its body disappeared in the dark. When it talked just before his nose, its eyes spat fire. Its long fangs gnashed and rattled, and the voice that came out of the creature was accompanied by a stench such as he had never smelt in his life. It made him vomit for hours. It was a metallic voice, fierce like a thunderstorm. At other times it sounded like a jazz band that had been ordered to play in discord with the sounds amplified a thousand times.

Yuropa's breath failed him whenever this horrifying creature appeared. As he gasped for air, his joints, too, could not move. He could neither stand nor scream however much he tried. Finally, the creature would fade out into Afrikanus's face, laughing in a hollow sound that brought back repeated echoes in high frequency as the new face disappeared, leaving behind the stench. The experience usually left Yuropa wet because he urinated in fear.

It had become too much. Yuropa could stand no more. So, by the beginning of 1950s, he began to pack his belongings and shipped everything back home. It would nevertheless take him nearly a decade to pack up and, so reluctantly, go home. His kingdom was falling in spite of his efforts to keep it standing. He had also tried in desperation to strike a compromise with Negrato by begging her to talk to her people and let him be adopted, but much as she would have liked him to stay in spite of the rape, she knew that, in accordance with the oracle of the mask, Yuropa's stay in this land had come to an end, and whether she liked it or not, there was a series of calamities that were going to befall him. The best thing he could do to save himself was to give up everything and go home.

'If you can't save your property,' Negrato advised him, 'then you must not fail to save your own life.'

Yuropa did not wait to see the birth of his child as things had really be-
come worse. In these later days, he walked like a zombie, because of sleeplessness.

Then Negrato gave birth to a baby girl. But after the birth she bled to death. They buried her by Yuropa's castle, to the north, wrapped up with the flags of Yuropa's castle in accordance with the oracle.

Afrikana's childhood

The first years of Afrikana alias Uhuru, the bastard, were, naturally marked by the usual anxiety that accompanies the health of a baby. But hers was more so. Afrikanus had adopted the child because he had loved her mother so much. It was a strange child this one. He was not sure whether such a child could survive on the local diet and sleep where other people slept. Some people warned that unless that child was raised in Yuropa's castle, and on Yuropa's diet, she was surely going to die. But others did not agree with this.

'Why don't we get her an ayah from Yuropa's country?' others suggested.

'That would be terrible,' protested Afrikanus. 'Such an ayah would remind me of Yuropa always. No, I can't take it.'

'It is a child of two worlds,' noted another speaker. 'Why not be brought up by people from the two worlds?'

There was a great deal of confusion as to what should be done. The questions were too many. What language shall we bring her up in? What kind of clothes must she wear? Do you think her blood can stand our climatic conditions? Can she survive without taking a warm bath? I don't think so. Is cows' milk good for her? When she grows up, who shall we tell her was her father?

There were those also of the opinion that, in spite of her colour and background, she should be brought up strictly in the Afrikanus tradition. If brought up thus, they were sure, she would acquire all their mannerisms and be one of them.

As Afrikana was being brought up in an extended family background where the community was involved in raising her, she would land in many hands with conflicting ideas. So she was in the danger of growing confused.

'This is an evil child,' others opposed Afrikanus. 'You should not have adopted her. She will bring calamity to our people!'

'I can't abandon her,' fought Afrikanus. 'She reminds me so much of
her mother, I have told you many times of the struggle I had fighting against Yuropa whom I have driven out of our land. So, this child is Afrikana's spirit and her extended life. In this child, Afrikana lives and still talks to me and to us. Otherwise, a child is free from the sins of its parents. We shall cleanse her thoroughly of any suspicious evil spirit.'

The beauty of Afrikana as a child was superb. A promise that out of this child an extraordinarily beautiful girl would grow up. The news of Afrikana's birth reached Yuropa in his country and he was delighted, although it was rather a disappointment that it had turned out to be a daughter instead of a son. He sent his emissaries with great presents, bearing the message that she should be raised in his castle. The emissaries brought with them a baby caretaker. They brought the child many clothes, toys, baby-oils and even pre-primary school books.

'My child must learn my culture too,' glowed Yuropa.

He asked that the emissaries should take photographs of the child. He was going to buy himself an album in which he would keep Afrikana's photographs.

More controversy rose with regards as to whether or not the people of Afrikanus should accept the gifts and, in particular, the caretaker.

'These are bribes,' cried some members of the family. 'Reject them totally.'

'If he loved Negrato,' pointed out another, 'he would have married her. They would then have lived together to raise an honest family. He only used her, chewed her like a piece of sugarcane, swallowed the juice and spat out the pulp.'

'A stone that has been thrown cannot be recalled,' replied an elder. 'Afrikana is our child. Have you heard it said that the hand of God creates with contradictions?'

'Let us take whatever Yuropa offers the child. He used Negrato. So, it is our right to use him too. Let him give and give so that we may recover, at least, a little bit of what he took from us.' That was the opinion of the majority.

'Shall she be circumcised?' a villager asked the caretaker.

'No, never! Not as long as I am this child's caretaker,' argued the caretaker with heat.

'This is not your child, your anus!' a warrior lost his temper and fired.

'She should be circumcised,' pressed an elder. 'Circumcision is not the mere operation as such. It is mainly what the operation stands for, and what comes with it. It is the key that opens the education of the youth.'

'I'm not going to allow such a barbaric thing to be done to Afrikana,' insisted the caretaker.

'Who are you? We don't know you!' fought another villager.
'I am what I am,' replied the caretaker in a mechanical voice. 'I'm going to report this nonsense to Yuropa, and I do not have to tell you what he will do with you.'

'We don't know him,' returned one of them. 'We know him as a rapist.'

'You should know him because this is his child, what are you talking about? You could not produce one like this one—see how glamorous she is!'

'Neither could Yuropa produce her without our Negrato.'

The caretaker kept quiet and thought. By then Afrikana had become a child who could walk on her own. She had already got used to taking some of the food. She wore different clothes, slept differently, and even spoke Yuropa's language. The caretaker had established a line of communication in which he could talk to Afrikana in a language that the others did not understand. They feared that Afrikana was being prepared for a life in Yuropaland. So they became extremely worked up.

'You should've kicked out this bloody caretaker!' a villager told Afrikanus.

'It is not too late to do that,' another person observed.

Yet another one wondered, 'Is it really good to do that? You see, he who goes to sleep does not know the dream she will have. Life is a sleep in an adventurous land. Let us not try to pretend to know what we shall dream tomorrow. Afrikana is a metaphor. She is asleep. So, let us wait and see what dreams she will bring to us. The oracle says that we should not interrupt her sleep.'

So, the controversy continued. There were potent dangers too kicking out Yuropa's emissaries and caretaker. For, 'in all fairness' said the oracle, 'Afrikana should be taken care of by both sides.' So, the toys, the biscuits, the frocks, and the books from Yuropaland were there to stay. It was this controversy which was responsible for some of the clashes because, as the proverb put it, when 'the devil had got between your legs, you do not know how to run'.

'Why had Negrato not tried to prevent the rape?' cried a traditionist. 'We would not have all this trouble if she had.'

'No, that is not correct,' came another voice. 'The person raped does not choose the rapist. Fate does it for her.'

'What is fate?'

'Fate is God.'

'Did God order the rape?'

The soothsayer put him back to silence by another question, 'Do you think God watched the rape take place?'

Afrikana's life was very difficult and delicate due to these confusing ideas and debates. Sometimes the people got so much involved in these
ideological debates, fights, and sabotage that Afrikana, the bastard, was forgotten and was in danger of collapsing healthwise. Often she fell sick and nearly died. At the peak of the panic due to her illness, some people demanded that Yuropa should be asked to come and tell them how to nurse her.

‘But this is just a child like any other child!’ explained one herbalist. 'All small children, all young things, be they trees, kittens, cubs, chicks and so on, are vulnerable. Immunity takes time to develop. All that one can do at this moment is to stop this argument and fight and give Afrikana a healthy diet, sleep, and a peaceful place to grow in. And don't bother her with so many questions. She has not acquired a mind of her own yet to enable her to cope with these expectations. Neither Negrado nor Yuropa acquired their maturity overnight. Watch out, too, at this age, she is attracted to many things, some of which are very dangerous'.

Afrikana's adolescence

By the 1960s, Afrikana had become a teenager. Of course, she had survived the childhood dangers, but she had come to an age that was characterized by far too many explosive dangers. To start with, Afrikana had developed into a most striking girl. Her worst dangers were attracting dangerous men. They could rape her. It is always very expensive to keep such a beautiful woman safe from men of powerful desires. She can also be very easily deceived as she did not understand the complexity of the world. Worst of all, she seemed to believe that what people said was what they were.

As a teenager, she was busy trying to explore her own body and desires. She was aware of boys, and boys excited her. She was aware of what they could give her in terms of bitterness. She was most vulnerable to the romantic language of men. She could very easily give away everything of hers to make those sweet poems and letters hers; and she became shattered when she was called 'darling', 'sweetheart', 'honey', and any other sentimental appellation.

What then worried the family of Afrikanus was not so much Afrikana's beauty, but the many men who had started dreaming of her. All kinds of boys and men of Yuropaland who had heard of her and seen her photographs, were dying to see and touch her, then get engaged to her. They had started coming, each one bearing his best present for Afrikana, each poet, each singer, and each dancer with his best work. Rich and handsome men came, each coming to sell himself to Afrikana. Men from Bri-
tain, France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, America, Japan, Australia—all lusted enthusiastically after Afrikana. Each man was determined to be the winner. Not that there weren't men from Afrikanus's community that dreamt of marrying her.

'She is our woman,' protested the Afrikanus men, 'keep off your long nose from her! You have your own women, why can't you leave our girl alone and for us?'

'A woman is every man's woman,' snapped an American lover. 'Have you forgotten your proverb which says that a woman is like a cob of maize for anyone with teeth?'

In the meantime, a Soviet lover was attempting to kiss her on the mouth while she was backing away from him.

The competition grew more intense. Darwin had said it: the fittest would get Afrikana. If Yuropaland men were not going to give up easily, then it would be better to pick up the guns and fight and kill.

'You people,' argued the men from Yuropaland, 'without our help you would not have been able to bring up Afrikana to be what she is today. And we are the father, mark you.'

'So what?' fired back the Afrikanus men.

'He who feeds you can beat your mother while you watch. That is what it is.'

'Father, through rape?'

'Oh come off it—does it matter? Whether through rape or mutual love, the material thing is that Afrikana was born.'

'We don't know you, go away.'

'You'll know us in given time. The guns have remained too long unfired,' he warned.

The competition was not merely between the Yuropaland men and those of Afrikanus. The Yuropaland men competed among themselves for Afrikana too. The most notorious, loud and complacent were four men: a Frenchman, an Englishman (but no 'gentleman'), a Soviet, and an American, blond with a deep voice. Each one approached Afrikana with extraordinary bribes and philosophy of deception.

Two of the notorious competitors had already threatened Afrikana that if she didn't give in, they would beat her up and maim her. Men versus men. And eventually they got into a situation where they hated each other like hell.

The Afrikanus men found themselves worrying deeply for the safety of their daughter. Were they going to lose Afrikana to those crooks as they had lost Negrato to Yuropa? Those crooks were out to get her through murder and rape.

If only Afrikana's mind had been fully developed, she would have put
an end to that competition by putting her foot down and saying who should be her boyfriend. But then, she was only a teenager. To make matters worse, the folk wisdom that had been developed by her culture had not dealt with such situations. Here were new problems to Afrikanus men. She desired a literature to help her understand herself, make her confident enough to tackle these difficult issues, but she could not get such a literature. The books she got from Yuropalanders were too foreign to her problems. She was, indeed, a bastard. She was really confused. She had also got herself into an awkward situation by accepting the material gifts and love letters from those men. . . She could not quite say no to an Afrikanus man or a Yuropalander.

Towards the end of the 1960s, Afrikana had become such a beauty that she even feared going out on her own lest she become a victim of rape. Her mulatto complexion worried too many lovers. She walked straight and erect like her mother Negrito. She had sharp and seductive eyes, full lips, full eyebrows, long and graceful eyelashes, shapely nose, brown eyes; and her breasts, like her mother's, made men dream. Her smile was electrifying. Such a smooth, extra-smooth skin. . . Those legs, Oh! And the hips told endearing stories when she walked. And when she sang, as she did usually, her clear, sharp and poetic voice went out echoing in the woods and made many lovers sleepless.

But Afrikana was not circumcised.

The debate about how to bring her up, what ideological path and education she should receive and what values to uphold, had immediately involved the question of tradition. Beautiful as she was, there were some Afrikanus men who didn't recognize her as a woman because she was not circumcised and initiated into proper womanhood. Afrikanus spirits had not accepted her, so she needed cleansing.

Afrikana herself didn't know who she was. That is, she did not belong and that was very bad. One needs to belong. She needed Afrikanus's great thinkers, creative people, and pioneers to redesign the Afrikanus home where, naturally, she should belong. Maybe, after all, it was a little alteration that was needed and the home would be perfect for her.

The Soviet lover was already too busy trying to mouth his communist philosophy. The blue-eyed American lover was hammering capitalist philosophy into her. Socialism from another lover. Christianity from that one. Islam from that one. Bahai faith from the other. Buddhism from this one. Pentecostalist. Jehovah's Witness. Soviet atheism. French language. She must be a Catholic. No, a Lutheran of Protestant calibre. She should be a Methodist instead. A Baptist if not an Anglican!

'How am I supposed to pull myself through this maze!' she cried one morning, overcome by depression. She surely needed a solid ground to
stand on. What books must she read? Written by whom, from which university? Who was going to interpret Negrato's philosophy to her? What kind of philosophy would she bring up her own children in when she got married? Capitalism? Communism? Communalism?

She had been messed up badly by the conflicting opinions of the books she had read. She was, again and indeed, a bastard. This explained why in the 1960s, both her conduct and thoughts were so unstable. The worst had struck her many times. She had got constantly raped and terribly beaten up during other rape attempts. Her face had several scars, and her beauty was highly threatened. It was during that time she wrote this poem:

When you see a tear in one eye
  don't ask me how I cry
  for I cry, and sing, and dance
  to a bastard tune
  played on the instrument
  of ideological and economic necessity
  born to a mother through rape

My mother was a woman of Afrikanus land
  my father was—I don't know who... my memory fails me, for
  he might as well have been
  an English soldier
  or French
  or Portuguese
  or Dutch
  or Catholic Father —
  ...RAPIST...

My mother used to suffer
  from the horror that when she died
  she would be eaten by vultures
  those ugly birds
  with sun-tanned necks
  and glass-eyes...

When you see a tear in one eye
  don't ask me how I cry
  he who cries does not choose
  how to cry
  and crying lips can't be pretty.
  So I sing and cry
  and dance with heat
  to a bastard tune
played on the instrument
of ideological and economic necessity
born to a mother through rape.

I have been so poor, in thoughts
and a spiritual home.
I'm a vagabond
too tired of myself...

The 1970s saw the ending of Afrikana's adolescence. But there was not much difference between the problems of a teenage girl and one who was in her twenties. For they say that nine is near ten. But it was an improvement, for the age brought some important disillusionments. It looked as if now Afrikana had an idea of who to take for a permanent boyfriend. At least, it would try to keep the others off. She had had enough of that trouble.

Finally, she had chosen an Afrikanus man. But by so doing, she had created another very big problem, regarding the many gifts she had accepted from the Yuropalanders. They were going to hit back, they had vowed. If need be, they were going to destroy Afrikanus. She was so scared and worried about Afrikanus's safety. When those people meant to hit back, they were very barbaric.

Her nights became sleepless.

How was she going to explain her stand? The philosophy she had learned offered too little to her for a local use. For, you see, when you brought ice to the Sahara, it melted. . . In Afrikanus's land, there were no bears but lions. . . If they let the Chinese eat the dog, and let the Germans eat the snail, and let the French eat the frog, were they ready, at all, to let the people of Afrikanus eat the locust? That was for the thinkers of Afrikanus to expound.

Afrikana knew that the battle was far from being won. But she kept her courage and hoped that, one day, she would grow out of these precarious situations.

Even her Afrikanus men had not been kind to her. Some of them had beaten her up too. The material gifts from Yuropaland had also been used to buy the hearts of many Afrikanus men, urging them to accept that the suitor should come from there. These bribes had set the minds of many Afrikanus men against one another. Some of them had killed others already, arguing over the ideological values of Negrato and Yuropa. Others had become great enemies of each other.

The 1980s will see Afrikana at the end of her twenties an age that, by all means, cannot be described as completely mature. She will marry the man she loves, but she will have so much to learn about married life yet. . .
Will she ever be free from exploitation? And what a pity: Afrikana has had her own two bastards already. One out of rape. And another out of false love. She has a kind Afrikanus man for a lover, at last. . . But he does not know what to do with her bastards who need special attention and education. He appeals to the thinkers for help. What a staggering responsibility the creative writer has in the land of Afrikanus.
The African Writer and African Independence

This paper focusses on the role of literature and the writer in Zimbabwe, a country that has gone through a war of national liberation and has embarked on a programme of economic development and social reconstruction. However, in order to see the role of the Zimbabwean writer in its proper perspective, it is necessary to examine the function the writer has performed in other independent African states as well as in Zimbabwe before independence.

In talking about the function and status of any group of writers we must take into account the influence of historical conditions and the class character of the writer. Literature is socially conditioned and every writer represents certain ideological concerns and class interests. The African writer of the 1950s and 1960s was part and parcel of the African petty bourgeoisie that was deeply involved in the promotion of African nationalism. For some of the writers the involvement was directly political as in the case of Peter Abrahams, whose novel *A Wreath for Udomo* can be described as a political novel *par excellence*. For others the focus was on cultural nationalism. The case for the involvement of the writer was most cogently put by Chinua Achebe way back in 1965:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. You have all heard of the African personality, of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan’t need any of them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist
To Achebe, speaking during the first half of the 1960s what he called 'the revolution' was more important than contemporary issues, than politics in 1964 or city life or the latest coup d’état. He was concerned about what he called 'the fundamental theme' that had to be disposed of first. This was the role of the writer in a new nation:

This is my answer to those who say a writer should be writing about contemporary issues — about politics in 1964, about city life, about the last coup d’état. Of course, these are all legitimate themes for the writer but as far as I am concerned the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme — put quite simply — is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain.²

Achebe’s view was shared by many African writers at the time. They felt that the West had to be shown not only that colonialism was evil but that the West was wrong to regard Africa as having had no culture, no literary tradition of its own and no civilization. The act of writing in itself was a weapon. It was not only a way of fighting colonialism but of putting Africa on the literary map of the world and of proving that Africa could no longer be regarded as a world without a culture, a continent without a literary tradition. These ideas found expression in the themes of such works as Camara Laye’s The African Child, Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s The River Between and Leopold Senghor’s poetry.

We must point out, however, that African writers were not alone here. They were part and parcel of the political re-awakening that was sweeping the continent. Concepts like negritude and the African personality were theoretical and philosophical expressions of that general mood of African nationalism. As part of this new social consciousness the writer believed that with the coming of independence a new ethos would be created, a new kingdom where Africans were free, proud of themselves and their culture and respected by other nations.

But alas these hopes were shattered! In less than a decade of their rule

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many African rulers proved that they were incapable of shaking off the shackles of neo-colonialism and joined hands with international capitalism to exploit the mass of the population. The writer, disappointed and taken aback by this new state of affairs, began to produce what has been referred to as the novel of disillusionment, exemplified by Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. Achebe was now writing about contemporary politics and about the latest *coup d’état*. There was now a rift between writers and politicians.

With this turn of events we entered a new phase in the development of literature in East and West Africa. At first, the African writer had joined hands with the African politician in the fight against classical colonialism. This was in accordance with the general trend and laws of socio-political struggles. In times of social upheaval democratic forces, regardless of different class interests, often come together to confront a common enemy in a national democratic revolution. In Africa, members of the petty bourgeois class, particularly intellectuals, small businessmen, teachers, nurses and traders, joined hands with the peasants and workers to fight foreign domination. Once this goal was achieved, however, there was a tendency for the different classes in society to pursue different class interests. The bureaucratic petty bourgeoisie, now in control of political power, pursued goals which were at odds with those of workers and peasants. Many preserved the economic and social structures left by former colonial powers and joined hands with imperialist forces in promoting a new form of colonialism, namely, Neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism not only leads to the economic exploitation of a former colony, it is also inimical to true democracy, and this is a point I shall come back to in a moment.

In any epoch literature either supports the ideology of the ruling class or opposes it. In modern Africa literature has so far tended to oppose the ideology of the ruling class. Committed writers see the exploitation of their fellow citizens and the mismanagement of the economies of their countries and feel with the continent and with the masses. Nuruddin Farah has described the writer in these words:

> A writer, however, is in a sense everybody: he is a woman, he is a man: he is as many other selves as those whose shadows reflect his ghostly images; he is as many other selves as the ones whose tongues he employs to articulate his thoughts; he is as many others selves as there are minds and hearts he dwells in. He is the raped continent; he is the maltreated worker; he is the struggle itself—or at least its spokesperson.3

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In the wake of neo-colonialism, committed writers in Africa have become the spokespersons whose role it is to awaken the oppressed, to make the citizens of Africa aware of the new reality so as to challenge that reality and fight for a more humane society. The more perceptive of these writers realize that the African bureaucratic elite is only an agent of a more powerful and exploitative force—international capitalism. Hence some of the West and East African literature produced in the 1970s and 1980s has been much more vehement and radical than the literature of the pre-independence era and the literature of disillusionment when writers appear to have been taken by surprise at the turn of events and were not yet fully aware of the implications and the extent of the ideological and class struggle taking place in their own societies. The more pronounced the new struggle became the more fervent and radical some of the writers; this is evident in the political content and style of such works as Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* and Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*. Inevitably, writers themselves have become victims—hence some have been imprisoned, some have been forced to live in exile, while others live in their own countries but in fear of arrest, banning orders and other forms of victimization. Indeed writing has become so hazardous that some writers are now resorting to obscure imagery and symbolism, making their works less accessible to the general reader than is desirable.

This brief discussion on the relationship between the writer and the politician in West Africa and East Africa forms the background to my comments on the role of literature and the writer in Zimbabwe.

**Literature and the Struggle for Independence in Zimbabwe**

There have been protracted liberation struggles in Angola, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. There are liberation struggles being waged at this very moment in South Africa and Namibia. Writers have no doubt played their part in these struggles. Some of the writers were active politicians so that they contributed to the war effort both as political activists and as creative artists. In Angola, the first President of the the independent state, Agostinho Neto, was also a leading poet. In Mozambique, some senior members of the ruling FRELIMO party, including Marcelino dos Santos and Jorge Rebelo, became renowned poets during the struggle for
the independence of their country. In South Africa numerous writers have suffered not only for their writings but also for their active involvement in politics. These include the late Alex la Guma, Dennis Brutus, Ingoapele Madingoane, Hugh Lewin and many others young and old who are either in exile or languishing in South African jails or living in fear of constant harassment by the South African oppressive machinery. In these cases as, presumably, in the case of Leopold Senghor, the dichotomy that we have noticed between the politician and the writer becomes rather difficult to characterize, but I suppose the question that arises is whether the politician who is also a writer keeps to the ideals of the creative writer after independence when he or she is part of the ruling elite. This is a pertinent question, but one which my paper is not in a position to discuss. My intention now is to examine briefly the role of literature and the writer during the war of national liberation in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe is one country which is not well known for the production of revolutionary literature. That country has not seen the rise of literature giants like Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma or Agostinho Neto. The bulk of the literature published in Zimbabwe before independence was written in Shona and Ndebele, the major indigenous languages, and much of it sheds very little light on the liberation struggle except in an indirect way. Shona and Ndebele works which saw the light of day before independence were published under the auspices of the Rhodesia Literature Bureau, a government department which placed itself in a very ambiguous position. It was charged with the responsibility of promoting literature in African languages while at the same time ensuring that such literature did not upset the existing social system or challenge the ideology of the settler ruling class. Hence it had its own censorship system. As a consequence most of the literature the Bureau published had little to say about the burning issues of the day. The focus was on traditional society where there was no conflict with European imperialism; it was on questions relating to Shona and Ndebele morals and on differences between urban life and country life. The theme of culture contact and conflict which other African writers had explored so profoundly and with such great art was expressed in rather simplistic and uninspiring terms by Zimbabwean writers. There were exceptions such as the works of Charles Mungoshi, author of *Waiting for the Rain* and *Coming of the Dry Season*, who is recognized as the leading Zimbabwean writer in both Shona and English, but Mungoshi tends to steer clear of direct involvement in political themes.

But one novel, in fact the first novel to be published in the Shona language, went to the heart of the matter as far as the socio-political conditions obtaining in white-ruled Rhodesia were concerned. I refer here to
Solomon Mutswairo’s *Feso*. On the face of it the novel is about a conflict between two Shona kingdoms before the coming of Europeans to Zimbabwe. In reality *Feso* is a rich allegorical novel which portrays the oppression of the people of Zimbabwe under British colonialism and foretells the titanic struggle that had to take place before the oppression could come to an end. Central to the theme of the novel is a powerful poem called *Nehanda Nyakasikana* which evokes strong feelings in the reader and seeks to reflect the nature of the conflict between the indigenous and oppressed people and their colonizers. The poem was so inspiring that it was read at political meetings and helped the masses of Zimbabwe to see more clearly the nature of the sharp contradictions in their country, contradictions that were bound to end in violent eruptions as oppression became more and more unbearable. This novel is the only work in an African language which had the honour of being banned by the Rhodesian authorities. *Feso* has some major artistic flaws, but here is an instance of an African writer who produced a work of art which was not only relevant to the nationalist cause, but had a direct appeal to the masses and could have played the role of sharpening the consciousness of the oppressed and of assisting to move them into action by reason of its ideological weight had it not been banned too soon. What I find fascinating about this novel is that the author wrote in a disguised form and yet managed to convey his message quite effectively.

Mutswairo’s novel was published in 1957 during the period of nationalist politics in Zimbabwe. Time was to come when the nationalist movement was to develop to a higher level of struggle, when the major parties fighting for the liberation of Zimbabwe were to be transformed from nationalist parties to liberation movements guided by the ideology of socialism. Much of the literature falls under the category of ‘song’ for it consisted of songs composed and sung by guerrillas on the battlefield, by refugees in neighbouring countries and by peasants, workers and intellectuals. These songs were an important component of the whole liberation struggle. They helped to mobilize the oppressed people of Zimbabwe behind the liberation forces. They and socialist ideology were the spiritual food that spurred the fighter to fight on and if need be die for the liberation of Zimbabwe, to suffer and persevere until Zimbabwe was free.

This was a literature of combat by the people and about the people. Chivaura has correctly observed that:

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Both in the composition of the songs and their performance, the distinction between artist, performer, critic or spectator are non-existent. On that stage, the battlefield, the fighter, the composer and the singer were one. They were inseparable from their fighting, and from their songs and dances.\footnote{V.G. Chivaura, 'Where is the Literature of National Liberation and Class Struggle in Zimbabwe? A Critique of Zimbabwean Authors', paper read at seminar on 'The Role of Socialist and Progressive Books and Magazines in the Transformation of Zimbabwe Towards a Socialist Orientated State', Harare, August 1985), p.8.}

Small wonder then that after collecting and analyzing these songs Alec Pongweni decided to call his book \textit{Songs that Won the Liberation War},\footnote{Alec J. C. Pongweni, \textit{Songs that Won the Liberation War} (Harare, College Press, 1982).} for indeed it was with the help of this type of literature that the war was won, a good example of the role of literature and the arts in social change.

It was also during this period that many hitherto unknown poets suddenly discovered their talent and put it to full use by composing poetry in English, Shona and Ndebele both on the battlefield and in other places—in homes, universities and places of work both in Zimbabwe and abroad. Many of these poems were read at political meetings and rallies and had the function of strengthening the people of Zimbabwe in their support for the liberation war and in their ideological transformation. Some of the poems were collected and published in a volume entitled \textit{And Now the Poets Speak}.\footnote{M. Kadhani and M. Zimunya, \textit{And Now the Poets Speak} (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1981).} Other works that portray aspects of the war of national liberation and celebrate independence include \textit{Chenjerai Hove's Up in Arms},\footnote{Published by Zimbabwe Publishing House (ZPH) 1982.} Stanley Nyamfukudza's \textit{The Non-Believer's Journey}\footnote{Published by Heinemann (African Writers' Series and ZPH) 1980.} and Tim McLoughlin's first novel, \textit{Karima}.

The Writer and the Building of a New Social Order

A striking feature of the Zimbabwean literary scene today is the absence of literature on socialism and the contradictions that have come to the fore since independence. Some works have been produced, including the plays of Thompson Tsodzo and Gonzo Musengezi, but these are not particularly inspiring as works of art.

\footnote{Published by Mambo Press, Gweru, 1985.}
The latter author has recently published a play on a politician who betrays socialism and the people who voted him into power, but the play does not accurately capture the mood of the new epoch in Zimbabwe and is in fact a poor imitation of Ngugi."

It is not easy to determine with any degree of accuracy and certainty the reasons for the silence of writers on the new social order, but the following would seem to be plausible. First, most of the established writers are not people who were directly involved in the liberation struggle and so there appears to be a lack of confidence to handle themes that relate to the revolution. This may also account for the fact that very few works have been written on the armed liberation struggle. Our writers seem to doubt their own credentials on matters such as these. Another probable reason is the sudden change in ideological direction that came with independence. Whereas politicization had reached a very high level during the war the cessation of hostilities in the wake of the Lancaster House Agreement was soon followed by the declaration of the policy of national reconciliation which necessitated a lull in the ideological campaign against capitalism, colonialism and racism. Voice of Zimbabwe enthusiasts felt that a whole cultural ethos was being swept away as the war-time songs and political propaganda were stopped or replaced. Added to this was a certain amount of ideological confusion and uncertainty among revolutionaries as the ruling party settled down to the practical business of running the country and developing the national economy. Some writers may therefore feel that more ideological guidance would have been desirable. It could also be argued that writers are afraid to comment freely on the contradictions they see in the new society, meaning that there is some form of self-censorship. A combination of some of these factors may have some bearing on the ideological content of literature in Zimbabwe during the last six years, but there is a programme of national reconstruction going on and it is pertinent to ask what the role of the writer is in the new society. I shall preface my discussion of this part of my paper with a comment on the social forces operating in the country.

I have already stated that during a struggle for independence it is common for different classes to unite to fight a common enemy and that after independence members of various classes tend to pursue their own class interests. Before independence two classes controlled the major means of production in Zimbabwe—the national bourgeoisie consisting almost entirely of white settlers who owned many small and medium-sized enterprises, and the international bourgeoisie or international capitalists who

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owned multinationals. These two classes are the greatest hurdle in the way of socialist transformation as they still control the wealth of the country. But a new development has taken place since independence in that many blacks have been absorbed into the national bourgeoisie and could become a major force of resistance to Government policy. As if that is not enough, some prominent citizens and some civil servants have been convicted of involvement in corrupt practices. Add to this the fact that although ZANU (PF) has officially declared its adoption of Marxism-Leninism as its guiding philosophy there are evidently many in its ranks who do not genuinely subscribe to socialism, and you have some idea of the nature of the class struggle going on in the country.

Against all this one must concede the following: First, ZANU (PF) is beyond doubt a mass party which is ruling with the mandate of the majority of the population of Zimbabwe. It has twice won a clear victory at the polls and was returned with a larger majority in the 1985 elections. Secondly the Party has officially declared that socialism is its guiding philosophy and adopted a leadership code which is meant to ensure that the political leadership puts the ideology into practice. True, socialism is not a declaration of faith and leadership codes have failed in other countries. Nevertheless, ZANU (PF) has proceeded to implement programmes aimed at helping society to transform towards socialism. These include a phenomenal educational expansion, the fixing of minimum wages for workers who laboured for a pittance before independence and the formation of workers' committees in all places of work. Thirdly, while corruption is rearing its ugly head, there has been what appears to be a genuine attempt to expose it where it occurs and punish the culprits. Some highly placed people have lost their jobs and several have lost their positions in the Party as a result of corruption or misconduct. A good example is the first black commissioner of police, Mr. Wiridzayi Nguruve, and two of his deputies who were dismissed in December 1985 and are facing trial on charges of corruption and various other malpractices.

I have given this account in order to show that in Zimbabwe there is a government which can legitimately be described as people-oriented and which is genuinely trying against all odds to develop the economy of the country in the interests of the majority. The question that naturally follows then is what is the role of the writer in all this? In these circumstances should writers pursue a policy of confrontation with the Government? Or should they see themselves as agents who exist merely as part of the propaganda machinery of Government department? Or should they regard themselves, both individually and collectively, as participants in the development process with their own ideals to go by? How does the writer relate to the state in such a situation?
In a recent publication a friend of mine and I had occasion to comment as follows:

The development of society is not purely scientific and technological. The building of a socialist society must go hand in hand with the building of a socialist culture and the inculcation of socialist values. Literature, theatre and cinema have an important role to play here because art shapes and sharpens our consciousness and our perception of the world around us.\footnote{F. Chung and E. Ngara, *Socialism, Education and Development: A Challenge to Zimbabwe* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985), p. 115.}

We then go on to argue that Zimbabweans cannot hope to build a sound basis for the development of science and technology in an ideologically neutral environment because that is impossible.

You either take a conscious decision to break away from neo-colonial patterns of economic and social development or you become a satellite of imperialist forces. I submit that the building of socialism requires the development of socialist consciousness which cannot be achieved by politicization alone but is greatly enhanced by literature and the arts. Literature does not only reflect and reproduce society—it also passes judgement on society and helps to shape social development. Thus in a transitional society like Zimbabwe, writers can help their readers to acquire a deeper understanding of socialist ideology and to perceive more clearly the contradictions that are inevitable in the struggle for development and socialist transformation. In such an environment there is room not only for promoting socialist consciousness but also for constructive criticism. It is the function of writers to show society where things are going wrong.

Writers are cultural workers and as such one of their functions is to help in the building of a democratic culture. Socialists believe in the principle of democratic centralism which promotes democratic discussion in the decision-making process by requiring the Party leadership to provide ideological guidance and also to consult closely with the people. This is meant to prevent a system where there is only vertical communication from the top to the bottom. It encourages a two-way form of communication from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top. It is my conviction that writers and other thinkers have a duty to promote the development of this relationship which compels those in power to listen to those over whom they rule. In this way writers can assist in the creation of a democratic culture and help prevent the development of a culture of silence and fear which is very common in developing countries whether capitalist or socialist oriented.
For the writer to perform this function satisfactorily and effectively he or she needs not only to study and understand socialism as a system, to identify its strong points as well as its limitations, but also to explore new forms and novel ways of capturing and portraying the dynamics of the new society and of bringing out the complexities and contradictions of the new situation in an artistic form. Moreover, the writer is called upon to acquire new sensibilities, to ponder over the dialectical relationship between the rights of the state over the individual and the freedom of the writer, between the social responsibility of the writer and the developmental needs of the state on the one hand, and, on the other, the right to hold and express individual opinions. Discovering ways of exploring and expressing this dialectic becomes a major task for the committed writer.

What I have said above applies to serious and committed literature which addresses itself to the major social, economic and political problems of the day. However, this is not the only type of literature that is likely to develop in a new nation if genuine creativity and freedom of expression prevail. There is another category of writers who are not concerned about the great issues of the day, who simply wish to explore human problems such as family relationships, love affairs and personal tragedies, or to celebrate the joys of life. Such writers also have a place in a developing country for even those who are involved in serious matters of state have a time for relaxation, and lighthearted literature can provide that for them.

Conclusion

In the first part of this paper I examined very briefly situations in which writers who at one time fought hand in hand with political leaders may later find themselves parting company with their erstwhile comrades and playing the role of the people's spokesperson when, in their view, politicians have failed to deliver the goods, to give the people what they expected. Although I have taken my examples mainly from West and East Africa this relationship between the writer, the politician and the mass of the people can take place in any situation where oppression, exploitation and injustice have reached unacceptable proportions. In nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia writers found themselves more and more committed to the struggle of democratic forces against the excesses of feudal-bourgeois Tsarist rule. Maxim Gorky is an example of a writer who put his works at the service of a democratic revolution and epitomized the
break between the ideology of the ruling class and the ideology of progressive forces by publishing the first socialist novel of the world, namely *Mother*. In Africa writers like Ngugi and Ayi Kwei Armah have become more and more radical as the plight of the masses has worsened in the wake of oppressive and exploitative neo-colonialism.

I have also attempted an analysis of the role of the writer during Zimbabwe's war of national liberation and before the situation in that country escalated. There are similarities here with the first period of African writing when the writer and the African politician joined hands in fighting European colonialism, only that in the case of Zimbabwe and other countries which have experienced the armed liberation struggle the fight is physical and fierce and literature becomes part of the ideological arm and spiritual fuel of the struggle. In the case of Zimbabwe it is not established writers who occupy the centre of the stage in this phase of literary production but the fighters themselves as well as the masses and revolutionary intellectuals. This is not necessarily a normal tendency in liberation struggles of this kind. During the Chinese revolution for example large numbers of experienced writers went to the base areas where they produced works of art and debated the role of literature in national liberation. Their role was regarded as being so important that the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art was convened in 1942 at which Mao Tse Tung himself delivered his famous 'Talks' which have been so influential in the development of modern Chinese literature. There is also no doubt that in South Africa writers and other artists are playing a significant role in the fight against *apartheid* and a discussion of the role of literature in that struggle is most appropriate.

The final section of the main part of my paper deals with the period after independence has been achieved in Zimbabwe and the stage is set for socialist reconstruction and economic development. Here writers, most of whom were not directly involved in the national liberation struggle, seem to find themselves in an uncertain position. There is a flowering of literature but writers seem to be hesitant to address the issue of socialist reconstruction and to record the heroic exploits of the people during the war of national liberation. Here the literary critic has a duty to promote debate on the role of the writer and literature in national development for it is part of the function of the critic to participate in the creative process of the writer by helping to shape the intellectual climate of opinion in which literature is produced, read and evaluated. In performing this task literary theoreticians also define their own role in society for they cannot expect creative writers to show a degree of commitment which they do not expect of themselves. In our circumstances literary theoreticians cannot meaningfully talk about the role of literature in society unless they them-
selves are concerned about the well-being of fellow human beings, unless they are committed to the building of a free, just and humane social order. However, in order to perform this social function without betraying their ideals as literary people, critics, like writers, should be both active participants and critical observers.

It is this ability to be both part of a revolutionary process and to stand outside of it for purposes of critical reflection and objective analysis that enables the critic and writer to belong to a political party and to embrace an ideology like socialism without losing the other role which Nuruddin Farah has so magnificently defined, the role of being the raped continent, the embezzled funds, the humiliated woman and the maltreated worker. I have no doubt that the late Soviet writer, Mikhail Sholokhov, was a supporter of both socialism and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union but he also became a Nobel Prize winner for he was able to portray with such great art and such ideological clarity the hopes, aspirations and contradictions of the leaders and people of the Soviet Union in his great works, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, *Virgin Soil Upturned* and others. He was an active participant, a critical observer and a spokesperson for the ordinary man, woman and child who was affected by the twists and turns of Soviet history.
African motherhood is one experience that is shrouded in layers of assumptions. At a distance these appear like billowing soft, pink clouds of a joyous, profound and an exciting experience. Ask many people about this in this audience, and they will nod their heads in concurrence. This impression is derived directly or indirectly from some of the literature that we read, written by Africans themselves, some of them in this audience. To be fair, few of them, if any have actually written that motherhood is beautiful and joyous. But what they have indicated, most of them not being mothers themselves, is that they respect motherhood and that in Africa they preserve a special place of honour for motherhood and that they love their mothers. But away from this hall of writers, into the streets and hills of Africa one will meet hordes of mothers who will smile shyly, allow you your frothing excitement and quietly qualify what motherhood, the institution, really means, for them. If you have the humility to listen you will soon realize that you do not share the same understanding. If you are a conscientious researcher you will want to know why. You might even talk to some of their happy children — African motherhood is about children. You might look through their school books. And if you can read the indigenous languages that they are written in you will soon understand, for that literature will present impressions of motherhood that are very revealing and are alive with a different reality. They come out of the seething experience of African life rather than the dreamlike recapture of an escaping tradition such as many of us write about and read from each other's books.

As elsewhere, marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group. There is a high premium placed on children and the continuity of each lineage. To facilitate this transfer of fertility, a dowry must be paid; not to buy the wife as missionaries have wrongly understood. The dowry not only gives exclusive sexual rights to the man, but essentially it is a means of social control over the children that the woman might bear
in marriage. This becomes clearly evident where the dowry has not been paid, for no matter how long and strong a relationship may be between a man and woman, in many societies in Africa, the children they get will belong to the wife’s people, taking her family name as well. And where a man dies after paying the dowry, and the wife later enters other relationships with other men, her subsequent children will continue to belong to her deceased husband, taking his name with no social reference whatsoever to their biological father or his family. That is why, in most cases, the husband’s family are anxious that the young widow is taken over by her deceased husband’s brother or a close relation of his in order to keep the children within the family, biologically and socially.

The reason why African families desire high fertility have to do with 'human capital' and 'social security'. This all important need for children has led to the institutionalizing of motherhood through fertility rites, taboos and beliefs and has acquired some religious significance. For a man it has become a sacred duty towards his whole lineage. Failure to immortalize the ancestors is taboo and a shame that a man cannot bear. As a result, childlessness is associated with women, for the alternative is unthinkable. Central to many African beliefs is that there are three states of human existence—the land of the unborn, the land of the living and the land of the ancestors and the dead. Belief has it that the children of any given family are always there waiting for the mothers to come and rescue them from oblivion and bring them to life in the land of the living. Failure therefore, to 'rescue' the children is a sorrowful capitulation and a betrayal. In cases of childlessness, people do not think of and share the couple’s or woman’s agony—rather, they hear the echoing cries of the unborn children that she (the mother) will not 'rescue' and bring to life.

Marriage is a relationship between two groups, not just two people. Sometimes even the death of one partner does not invalidate the marriage itself. If it is the wife who dies, the husband may go back to his in-laws to ask for another wife for more or less the same dowry. This makes the position of motherhood socially and cosmologically very central. In many societies, to this day, the choice of partners is exercised by the parents on behalf of their daughters and sometimes their sons as well. This emphasizes the paramount reason for marriage itself. It is not marriage; it is the children of the marriage; it is not the companionship, nor the love or friendship, nor the mutual emotional satisfaction of the couple.

A little girl child is born to fulfil this role. She is made aware of the destiny awaiting her development and is prepared from the earliest age possible for the role of motherhood that she will play elsewhere, away from her family home. She is well loved but her rights within the family are limited compared to those of her brothers. She is aware that somehow she
is on her way out. It is significant that in some of the Bantu languages the word marriage is synonymous with journey. In short, from earliest childhood she is an outsider who is being prepared for the central role that she will play at her in-laws. Many young girls will be forgiven for their eager anticipation of their marriage and a place where they will finally belong. But as we shall soon see, disillusionment awaits them. This is double jeopardy, for they will never really belong anywhere.

The major weakness in this formidable role of motherhood is that women can only exercise it from the outside, for they remain marginalized at their new husband's homes. At her in-laws she does not move in to attain her independence or find her place of centrality. Instead, she is reduced to a permanent state of dependence and estrangement. She will always be an outsider among his people, always the first suspect when things go wrong. And her position of motherhood entails hard labour to provide food for the family. Nothing will change this until in old age, if she is a powerful woman or a senior wife, she will be empowered to move centrally, to exercise authority and train the younger women in the practised art of walking the tight-rope, which is exercising her immense power from the outside—the paradox of a position of centrality which is exercised from the periphery. For, let us make no mistake—motherhood as an institution is very powerful in our societies.

Right from the earliest stages of the marriage there is a conscious effort to distance the young wife from the young husband. Men and women live diverse segregated lives. In most societies they will not eat together. Men often share their food in a communal meal away from the women, while the women eat in their own houses or at best with other women. A young wife is in close touch with the other women in the home rather than with her husband, for social organization and work roles tend to keep the sexes apart in everyday life. In most societies like the Bemba of Zambia, young girls are taught that a 'good wife does not talk to her husband much'. Sometimes she is supposed to leave her husband with her co-wives as soon as she is pregnant. The rationale is that she has got what she wanted and throughout her pregnancy and lactation she will no longer need the husband. This at a time when the rigours of pregnancy may render her weak and in need of him emotionally if not physically. This distancing of the young bride will affect all aspects of her life. In some societies like the Nguni she will never be called by her own name. They might call her by her father's name—the daughter of so and so, or they may simply call her 'the bride' until she has her first child. Then she will be referred to as the mother of so and so—thus living her identity through her father or her child. The fact of losing their names distances and isolates married women emotionally and further confirms the alienation in their new home. To
further confirm her alienation her position is attended by many taboos. Depending on the society, there may be complicated patterns of behaviour towards each member of the new family. She will call none of them by their names, except the very youngest; sometimes not even her husband. She might call him as the brother of so and so, referring to his youngest brother or sister. That will be his name until he has his first child when she will call him 'the father of so and so'. Nowhere that intimacy that existed before marriage. She will not only avoid calling her 'father-in-law' by name, but she will adopt a conduct of avoidance between the two of them—she will never ever bare her head in his presence. In extreme cases of the practice, she will avoid in ordinary conversation all those words that have the same sound as his name. Another area of strong taboos is food. She may not be allowed to eat certain foods. This might be milk. Among the Nguni this will mean that she brings her own cows from her father, so that where milk is a staple diet she will continue to be fed by her father years after she left his home to be a valued member of the other family.

It must be clear also that she has no property that accrues to her entirely. She has no rights of inheritance nor can she give legacies to anyone. Many studies have shown how the contribution of women to labour is underrated, especially in rural areas. The problem lies with the arbitrary demarcation between the so called 'economic' and 'non-economic' work which bears no relation to the actual physical input. Dr Evelyn Amarteifo, a Ghanaian woman, has researched extensively in this area and she confirms the common male habit of letting women do the bulk of the work in the home, as in the fields, but giving them nothing for it. Under matriarchy women have more rights than under patriarchy. Although matriarchy in itself does not imply real social power on the part of the women, they certainly have more say in the community and within the family structure. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, a woman enjoys definite inheritance and property rights and elderly women are consulted in the making of community decisions. Whereas in patrilineal society a woman cannot own land or cattle; neither can she participate in a debate or negotiation concerning property. As a 'minor' she cannot be a party to a legal action. She has always got to be represented by her father or brother or husband or son. Also, she often has limited authority even over her sons who are above a certain age. Matrilineal law is incompatible with private ownership of land. Historically we note that the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy was fraught with social struggles, with some Africans supporting private ownership of land under patriarchy and others supporting matriarchy and its communal ownership of land. It was also in the interests of the colonialists to support the patriarchal system which enabled them to acquire private ownership of land. But this option, more than anything else
deprived women of their customary rights. A typical case occurred among the Tonga along the Zambezi during the building of the Kariba dam in the 1950s. Under matriarchy Tonga women have the same land rights as men upon inheritance. But when the communities were moved to be resettled, to make way for the dam, the women's rights were seriously affected. When the land was redistributed upon resettling, it was allocated to the male members only and the women lost their rights. And slowly matriarchy is becoming outdated and contradictory.

But worse than that is that our men themselves are losing out to the capitalists who exploit all the African people. Africans have yet to work out a system of social organization of their own that is not founded on the exploitation of one group by another, within the same society nor preyed on by other societies, nations or political systems from outside.

Polygamy is almost universal in Africa, although under the money-economy it is showing signs of stress. In places like South Africa it is decidedly on the way out. Relations among the co-wives are seldom wholesome. Rivalry and insecurity within the institution often result in hatred. This sort of bitterness has little outlet, for its expression is discouraged.

The indigenous literature reflects a turbulent change for the worse in the condition of women in a changing Africa. In the reality of Africa where fathers live away from home, working in the cities or are weakened by liquor in the stressful life of those cities, women often have to combine the roles of motherhood and fatherhood in bringing up the children. They themselves have to be strong to take on both roles, loving, protecting and counseling in turns. African women may not be born that way, but they do wax strong, faced with the challenges in the African context. It is not surprising that the relationship between mothers and sons, far from being harmonious and loving is often ambivalent and erratic. When the sons are young it is loving, loyal and close. In polygamous or large families, where the wider family relationships are competitive, mothers and sons can get very close, for mutual protection. This is particularly so where matters of inheritance are concerned. But in non-competitive situations mothers are depicted as strong disciplinarians, therefore admired and feared. In many books written by Africans in our languages and in English this image appears again and again. In Marechera's *The House of Hunger*, the mother is strong, fearsome and unloved. After all, she not only beats the sons up when they are mischievous, but she beats the father as well when he is drunk. She is forthright and unflinching to the point of embarrassing her sons, such as when she tells him to stop masturbating on her sheets. Sometimes the mother's manly ways can cause embarrassment and are a challenge, and mothers may be regarded as unreasonable or even mentally
disturbed. In *Aftermaths* in the story 'Crossing the River' Stanley Nyamfukudza quotes the son saying of his mother 'her laughter carried so much disdain that you knew nothing you said would make any difference with her'. She dares the conductor and wins the bet. The son is proud of her courage but he has a socially determined expectation of how mothers ought to behave—so he vacillates between embarrassment at her stubborn insistence which is unwomanly and pride when she triumphs.

Sometimes mothers are seen as making unreasonable demands, full of high expectations. Mothers have to drive their sons hard and far because they themselves are driven to the ultimate in their struggle to survive. What sons see as unreasonable demands have to do with the pressing needs of today and the hopes for a better tomorrow. Where fathers are weak, absent or dead, sons often assume that the mother drove him away, if not through her shrewish ways, perhaps through her malevolent ways. Thus it is not uncommon to read of sons who accuse their mothers of witchcraft against their fathers or their wives or even their children.

The accusation involving witchcraft is a common ploy designed to cause the mother's social demotion. It will often be used against a powerful woman when the real aim is to discredit her socially or even to have her physically removed from her in-laws and sent back to her people, even after many years. Often it is levelled against women who are old and beyond child bearing age, and have therefore outlived their usefulness in the homes of their affines. In Mazibuko's *Umzenzi Kakhalelwana* Masibanda, the mother, is accused of witchcraft by her son, Mloyiswa and his wife, MaNdlovu. Several of their children have died in infancy. She is also accused of having neglected and thus caused the death of her husband, Mloyiswa's father.*

This is the conflict mothers often find themselves in, for the long years of separation under migratory labour often lead to years of neglect, causing strained and distant relations between wives and husbands. Children in general and sons in particular will grow unaware of these stresses and tensions, filled with their own longing for a full life with the father—he remains distant, desirable and untainted in their eyes. Unlike the mother, he manages to get away with sweet talk and token gifts, seldom having to discipline or harass them for any slackness on their part. When, in old age he comes home, ill perhaps, they sense a coldness between the parents. This they blame on the hardness that they have known in the mother, and the belief that she kept him away all those years is confirmed. As the sons get

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older they slowly acquire authority, as empowered by tradition. This too gradually leads to tensions, if not open conflict with a mother who will not give way to the son when the time comes. This will most likely coincide with the time of his marriage when he seeks to assert his own authority, not only as a husband but as a son as well.

Another source of conflict has to do with the mother's personal interests. In the absence of their husbands most women will develop their own interests such as a passionate belief in some religion or even a secret love affair. Almost invariably, such personal interests will lead to family conflicts and bitter accusations against the mother. It could be said in general that the greatest cause of conflict occurs when mothers pursue their own personal interests and are seen to be neglecting the welfare of the family.

The arrival of the daughter-in-law introduces an added strain and a triangular one in the relationship between the mother, the son and his wife. The mother and the wife see themselves as competing for his love and income. But underlying all this is the tug for authority between mother and son. Sons are often at a loss how to handle these conflicts between mothers and wives. On some occasions they take the wife's side and accuse the mother of malevolence. In short, this is a complex tangle of relationships. But in spite of all the conflicts there are strong ties that bind mothers to their sons on the one hand, and mothers to their daughters-in-law on the other. Often in a quarrel against her son, the mother will climb down first, for her security in her home is firmly rooted in her sons. Without the support of her sons, she is redundant, especially if she is beyond child-bearing age. The authority to keep her secure in the home and well-provided for lies with him. On the other hand the sons are aware of the earlier struggles that the mother put up to secure them a foothold and a claim in the competitive politics of an extended family. They know they owe her a lot. And between the mother and her daughter-in-law there is the ever present awareness that the two have a lot in common—that they will always be outsiders in the family lineage of their husbands. They share disadvantages and the young woman can always learn from the older woman; one serving apprenticeship, the other tutoring. The son/husband on the other hand is aware of the necessity for a healthy learning relationship between these two women for he knows that soon, in her turn, his young wife will be fighting to secure her own children's position in the family structure. The whole relationship is governed by power and intrigue more than anything else. And in all this, fathers-in-law emerge uninvolved and unscathed. It could be said they are outside the whole play for power and security. As a result, they come out well liked on all sides.

On the other hand, relationships between mothers and daughters are
close and often assumptions are made that a good mother will have a good daughter, and that an evil mother will invariably influence her daughter. In a large number of books this close relationship is portrayed. Rudo Gaidwanza in her book *Images of Women* catalogues a long list of books that portray this—a domineering wife will influence her daughter to do the same: a mother of loose morals will teach her daughter to cheat her husband; a witch of a mother will impart her craft to her daughter. In many books written by male writers this collusion between mothers and daughters is given prominence, but this is not so evident in books written by women. This perhaps is a reflection of what men feel about the vices in their wives—often blaming their mothers-in-law for whatever problems they encounter in their wives. Disagreeable as this may sound, there could be some truth in it, for mothers prepare their daughters for the alienating experience of marriage in the almost hostile home of the in-laws.

Newly married daughters will often ask their mothers for advice in matters of running a household, raising children and handling a husband and difficult in-laws. Needless to say, these 'tricks of the trade' that mothers will pass on to their powerless, intimidated daughters will border on the manipulative and will of necessity be exclusive of male experience. This is threatening and intriguing to most men.

The ideal wife is defined through her relationship with her husband and her children. More so if this commitment entails the sacrifice of her own interests. Tsitsi in Chakaipa's *Garandichauya* is the ideal wife for she is loyal even when he deserts her for another woman. She goes home and waits almost a lifetime for him to return. When he finally does so, a broken man, she is happy to have him back. Vida in Kuimba's *Rurimi Inyoka* sticks to her post even when she is taunted and maltreated by her mother-in-law. She remains reasonable and amiable even under the curse of childlessness, offering to leave him if she is the culprit and to stay with him if he is the one. Mandlovu in Mazibuko's *Umzenzi Kakhalelw* passes the test then she bears the pain of all her children dying in infancy, staying on in the home of her in-laws without her husband and her mother-in-law. This type of character constitutes the ideal wife.

A close analysis of these characters and their motives reveals characters who opt for the path of martyrdom for lack of any alternatives. But those women who fail to make it as good wives are treated very harshly—the authors are merciless against a woman character who fails to conform to traditional expectations. They commonly die for their mistakes. Jordan's *Ingqumbo YeMinyanya* is one such work.

On the whole widows are respected and get a lot of sympathy from the community. This is the case particularly where they are young and have young children. It also depends on whether they are not suspected or ac-
cused of causing the death of the husband directly or indirectly. On the surface this would seem to cater for a small percentage of women, as few would say that women would deliberately kill off their husbands. But this is a complex issue, complicated by the politics of inheritance in Africa.

In many parts of the continent the death of a man attracts a lot of attention from his relatives in relation to his property. Underlying all this is the feeling that what he owns, rightly belongs to his family group, not to the wife who remains an outsider. This is the case even when a wife has worked hard to assist in the accumulation of the family property, as many wives do. So, at his death, to salvage their conscience as they plunder his family goods, they will discredit the wife through accusations of adultery or of killing him directly or indirectly. As a result, not many widows get away with sympathy and understanding. This scene is well documented in Mariama Bâ’s book *So long a Letter* when Modou dies suddenly and Ramatoulaye lies helplessly propped up on pillows and watches them ransack her home. And this, even without any specific accusation against her.

Most older widows, seeing that old age and motherhood confer power and status, are content to remain at their in-laws to assist their grown sons in anchoring a strong male dominated establishment against young wives and outsiders. In return they are well looked after by their sons and their grandchildren. It is from this vantage point that a lot of books written by male writers see the women of Africa, propped high on a pedestal of power, virtue and conformity and well loved. But younger widows face a much more difficult time of decision. Seeing marriage is primarily for procreation such women are at the mercy of circumstances. To continue her role of motherhood and also to get some economic support from the family, she may have to agree to being inherited by one of the members of the family who is to continue giving her children on behalf of her deceased husband. If she is older the question of re-marriage will not even enter the debate, for the need for companionship and sexual compatibility is not considered.

The image of divorced women in our society and our literature is negative. Only a handful may earn the understanding of the community such as in cases where the woman has a clean reputation which contrasts sharply with her husband’s maltreatment of her. Only in a few cases do some women win the sympathy of the public. This is confirmed if they are seen to behave with dignity after the divorce. On the whole a wife will do everything to endure even a stressful marriage, for in a divorce she comes out the loser: Even when her husband is the offending party, society sees her as having failed to hold him in place—therefore his failure is her failure as well. The welfare of the children constitutes another consideration. Children will always belong to the husbands lineage and in a divorce the
wife loses the children and leaves them behind. So the concern for the children's welfare will force even divorced women back to the in-laws to live with them.

Seen from these various points of view the plight of a woman is desperate, especially if she is left on her own. Many will hang on to the same man long after he has lost interest. This raises a crucial question for African women today—that of self-definition and self-determination. We have seen how the married woman and the widowed woman and even the divorced woman are defined by their relationship to men, a father or a husband or their sons. Thus the anguished cry that Emecheta's main character Nnu Ego makes in *The Joys of Motherhood*: 'God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?' Women have been driven to this position where they may only live through men. So great is the power of tradition that no single woman in Africa, in spite of her awareness, is able to shift the power of tradition. Abandoning certain practices in tradition does nothing for the embedded attitudes of African men.

These attitudes which are enfeebling to our women, are perpetuated by our writers in our own literature. A writer observes and interprets the norms, the values and the customs of society. He or she affirms or negates those values according to his or her personal convictions. In this way he creates or destroys social values. His interpretation will depend largely on his vantage point and could sway public opinion one way or another. In most of the books we have referred to we see women punished severely, even by death, for the mistakes they have made. There are no acceptable extenuating circumstances to justify any of their crimes—adultery, promiscuity, disobedience, a domineering nature—they incur vicious and immediate condemnation and punishment. On the other hand, men guilty of adultery or desertion or cruelty, suffer no severe punishment for these. They are often accepted back by their families, chastened, wiser but forgiven. None die for their mistakes. These attitudes are inculcated into the minds of the young African readers—for these are the books that are read in our schools and which help to perpetuate unfair attitudes towards women.

If writers took time to explore the circumstances, the pressures and the deprivations that their characters suffer, this would soften the social conscience and society's scales of justice would shift towards the correct balance. Punitive literature perpetuates the oppression of women; it denies them justice. All these crimes against women stem from one fundamental principle—the social and sexual subordination of women. There is an age-old fear that the independence of the female spirit will destroy the pillars of our society. Writers have a responsibility to society, and in this instance,
to women in particular. We are looking for a changed portrayal of women in our books; an accurate and a just portrayal that will recognize the labour that women put into the economy of their societies, a liberating literature that not only forgives women their mistakes but condemns men who take advantage of women and does not condone men's fallibility. Women should not have to be martyrs to win the respect of their societies. We are looking for a self-defining image of women who win respect in their own right because they are strong and achieve things in their lives and triumph, not only because they are men's wives or mothers of sons but because they are valued members of their societies, outstanding in their societies as bread winners, teachers, farmers, nurses, politicians and whatever else. These portrayals will in time focus correctly on the values that our societies should uphold and preserve.

Perhaps things will not always be the way they are for the African woman—we may not always plead for justice and fair play—under the glare of world movements like feminism and human rights, African women may have to fight for their rights. But those structures and attitudes that cripple us must be done away with, for in the context of our African struggles for freedom—freedom from imperialism, neo-colonialism and all oppression—it makes little sense to condone such extremes of oppression as our men are prepared to put the women of Africa through.

From the discussion

Buchi Emecheta: I am making a point about what you call in East Africa lobola. We call it bride-price. You may maintain that where you come from, women are not really sold or bought, but I come from a place where a woman is paid for, really paid for. Until I had five children I was still on hire-purchase because my husband could not afford to pay for me. As soon as my mother in-law realized that I was leaving her son the first thing she did was to sell the family house to pay for me. In that way I would not be able to leave him. I could have taken my children to another man, I could have changed my name, but she tied me down. Now we are friends because between the two of us we are pushing the men aside. I have the money, she can sneak out land for me and I buy it. I don't buy in my own name, I buy in the names of my sons. Everything I acquire I get through them. In my own village people consider me wealthy, but it is only possible through my sons. Why is this so? Because my mother in-law has paid the bride-price. What made me fed up was that I went through school with the help of scholarships. Nobody in my family paid for my education, but
when it came to the bride-price, they were all there, and so was I. They haggled about my price as you do in the bazaar. These are people who can't even pronounce the word, but they said 'She has got English education,' so I went to the highest bidder. The main character in my novel *Joys of Motherhood* is called Nuu Ego. That means 20 million dollars. A common Hausa name for a girl is Kudi. That means money. These are the kind of names they give to girls. We women are the money. I agree with the missionaries. We are being sold. So we have to abolish that before we start being independent.

Emmanuel Ngara: I would like to make two comments on Lauretta's paper. The first is related to lobola. You objected to the missionaries' view that the lobola is really meant to buy the woman. I would agree with you in the traditional society, yes, it wasn't meant to buy the woman. It was a bond of relationship that existed between the two families. But with the coming of the money economy, surely the use of the lobola has been corrupted and the in-laws of the man who wants to get married take advantage of their daughter to exploit the man and make him pay a very high price. And because of that, husbands can say to their wives, I have bought you, I've paid for you and therefore I have the right to treat you as I like. If we are going to change the relationship between men and women the question of lobola has got to be looked at.

My other comment is that I thought that maybe you over-simplified the matter a little by focusing on traditional society. I think that in a day-to-day situation now the position is a lot more complicated with women being breadwinners and claiming their own positions in society. It is true that there are changes. But what is essential is the attitudes that this practice over the centuries in our past has left in the minds of men and women in our societies. What is behind the real oppression can never be uniform. One husband will come out being more generous than another, but essentially the position of the woman is the same. The difference is simply one of luck. So in discussing the specific practices in various parts of the continent I am more concerned with the attitudes that are left behind. For example, after the minister has succeeded in passing laws in Parliament these attitudes will remain, unless we work at that level of attitude transmission in our books. I think Zimbabwe is doing a great deal for women. More than many other states, but there is a great difference between the thinking of those who are shaping the future of the country and those who are simply getting ideas from books. That is why I concentrate on the writers. When I talk to the writers here I am not accusing them of perpetuating these ideas, rather I am hoping that you will go back to your writers' groups and give guidance to the up and coming writers, to show them how
to portray a different future for women, how to argue reasonably the case of women, how to write proper character development, do proper case studies. I hope all our work-shops are going to try and include this element.

It may be true that Lauretta overlooked the fact that women's role is changing in African society, but when you look at the classics of African literature, what do you find? I think I will mention names. You take a book like *Things Fall Apart*. And what do you find? Okonkwo beats his wives during the holy week, and nobody in the society is outraged by the fact that he has beaten the wives. What they are outraged about is the fact that he has beaten them during the week of holiness. You take *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. He created one of the most beautiful characters in literature. I am talking about the girl, Sidi. What options are offered Sidi? The buffoon that is Lakunle or the feudal crazy, vicious, decadent chief called Baroka. One of the most sobering experiences I have had in literature is to read the scene where Sidi cuts the chief's nails. Ayi Kwei Armah creates in *The Healers* two types of women. Ajoa, may be beautiful, but she is really just there to show us what a great man his hero, Densu, is. And then he creates another woman. Jesiwa, articulate, viable. But what does he do to her? He puts her in a plaster cast. After creating a strong woman, he breaks all her limbs in some phoney accident. From the beginning of the book to the end, Jesiwa is lying there. When she gets up, she gets up as some kind of *deus ex machina* who comes in order to resolve things and to set our hero free. That is the African woman in literature. These are the images of women that are being presented to our young people in the schools. What is even more vicious is that some of the African women have not even done any better when it comes to presenting the images of African women. This is not a question of attacking people. I am just asking for a re-assessment.

**Wole Soyinka:** I just wish to sound another warning here. I think that literature is a little bit more complex than you try to make it out now. Let me just tell about an incident I had not long time ago in the U.S. with *Brother Jero*. A young lady in my class was very distressed about what I consider the most hilarious scenes in the play, where Brother Jero, the charlatan priest told the husband to go and beat up his wife. Of course he has a very tough time getting her on the bicycle to take her home and beat her. She refuses to go. They have a mock fight and of course he loses out. This young American student-girl was astonished. 'How it is possible' she asked, 'to write a play in which the man is authorized to beat up his wife?' I said, 'Where is your sense of humour?'

**Ama Ata Aidoo:** I don't think this should be a two way argument. I think
the question of humour, you will have to admit, can be rather political. What might seem funny to one person might not seem funny to another. I think that the issue of how we portray women is really important, whether we are men or women writers. What we do with the characters, we create, is essential. To repeat what I said earlier on and what has been said from this side of the room [the women writers were all sitting together in one section of the room.] we are asking for a reconsideration of the whole issue.

Bibliography

To Be an African Woman Writer —— an Overview and a Detail
Ama Ata Aidoo

I have attempted to provide an introduction to some of the continental African women who are writing, zeroing in on a personal detail, and I have also tried to give a general idea of what it means to be an African woman writer.

I am not pretending to cover the whole area of the field, and other areas that should be seriously explored include the following:

African women and orature
Books by non-Africans about African women
Books about women not written exclusively by women
Books in African languages written by women. (The omission of this topic from the workshop's concerns was particularly tragic and unnecessary)
Books by women of the African Diaspora
Books by any category of professional continental African women which were the products of research and scholarship. This with apologies to Micere Mugo, Nawal El Sadaawi, Rudo Gaizanwa, and a host of other sisters. For they all researched and wrote at immense personal cost to provide vital critical analyses or contribute to our scientific knowledge, our history, our sociology and other important areas of African life. Some, like Mugo and El Sadaawi have done imaginative writing as well.

Editing, binding printing and publishing in short, the book industry. How it affects women's lives, whether as participants or victims (!) could do with some examination.

One horrid fact that jumps out at anyone who tries to look for African women writers is that they are a batch of "only's".' For on our conti-

1 Tillie Olsen, Silences, (London, Virago Press, 1980). According to Olsen 'Only's' is 'an expression out of the 1950s Civil Rights time'. She quotes the Reverend Abernathy ad-
nent, millions of women and girls have been, and are being prevented from realizing their full potential as human beings, whether it be the possibility of being writers and artists, doctors and other professionals, athletes or anything else outside the traditional roles assigned to women. Whereas one is not saying that all the women in the world could be writers if their basic needs for shelter, food, decent medical care and maximum education were met, it should still be possible to imagine how many hundreds more writers we could have. In any case, if it chanced that every single one of those millions of women actually turned out to be a writer, wouldn't that be superb? (And that's quite conceivable with African women!) Yet we would never know how many of all those women could have been writers, and this is because they never had even those limited opportunities which came the way of some of us. Indeed, just as Virginia Woolf said of middle-class English women earlier in the twentieth century:

Genius of a sort must have existed among them. . . but certainly it never got itself onto paper. When, however, one reads of a woman possessed by the devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even a remarkable man who had a remarkable mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet. . .

In fact, apropos our African environment, some of us were convinced that there never were any witches at all anywhere: only women—and sometimes men—who had probably turned cantankerous as a result of their geniuses getting dammed (and the pun is fully intended), by history, accidents of birth and ineffective or downright anti-people governments. That is, if such people did not go properly mad sooner or later, with the frustration of it all.

It is definite that anything that had to do with African women was, of all vital pieces of information, the most unknown (or rather unsought), the most ignored of all concerns, the most unseen of all the visibles, and we monishing people for almost getting used to pointing out with pride, "the Only Negro Federal Circuit Judge . . . the only full black professor of Sociology . . . the only black senator . . . in town. 'WE DON'T WANT NO ONLY'S’ " the Reverend is reported to have screamed out at one time in protest. It must have been obvious to him that being an 'Only'—naturally of an oppressed group he or she is supposed to represent—is difficult. For people tend to invest in the 'Only' a number of rather contradictory expectations. For example, whereas their excellencies are their own, their failures are the group's.

2 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own (London, Granada, 1983). Needless to say, this has become a classic quotation. See also Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (New York, Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1983) pp. 239-240' from the piece of the same title, in which she discusses how African-American women, and women generally, managed to survive as artists, by successfully converting their genii into creating wonders in areas where one would normally not look for the evidence of artistic talent.
might as well face it, of everything to do with humanity, the most despised. This had nothing to do with anything that African women themselves did or failed to do. It had to do with the politics of sex and the politics of the wealthy of this earth, who grabbed it and who held it. Since both the zero meridian and the equator pass through Africa, we could claim that Africa is geographically, the centre of the world. Yet, geo-politically, the continent and its people had become everyone’s football for more than five hundred years. We let everybody kick us around. So that for a rather long time, we were regarded as being at the bottom of the human pile. Consider for instance, the storm that was raging about starving Ethiopians, and the politics of famine relief. If it is humiliating enough to sing for your own supper, then at what depths of degradation must you be, when you have to have others sing for all your meals?\(^3\) Definitely, if any non-earthling had seen television and newspaper appeals in the mid-1980s for help and aid, they could not have told the difference between Africans, black rhinos and other endangered species. So hoarsely, keenly and equally, were Westerners screaming for our safety and well-being. Meanwhile, since women everywhere at all times have been mercilessly used and abused, you can then imagine what it has been like, to an African woman.

Therefore, we experience some sadness—though mixed with some more positive emotions—at the mere confrontation with the notion of African women and writing. Nothing really tragic, and nothing really worthy of jubilation either. Certainly however, there is no denying the pathos and the wonder in being an African (and a woman) with sensibilities that are struggling ceaselessly to give expression to themselves in a language that is not just alien but was part of the colonizers’ weaponry . . . There is pathos in writing about people, the majority of whom will never be in a position to enjoy you or judge you. And there is some wonder in not letting that or anything else stop you from writing. Indeed, it is almost a miracle, in trying and succeeding somewhat to create in an aesthetic vacuum. For, from the little we learnt of one another’s backgrounds, none of us writers in our formative years was involved in any formal process, through which we could have systematically absorbed from our environment, the aesthetics that govern artistic production in general, and writing in

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\(^3\) There is an English nursery song, sung of course by children from more secure backgrounds about an obviously destitute youngster called ‘Little Tommy Tucker’ which exposes the contempt with which any philanthropist regards the needy:

Little Tom Tucker
Sings for his supper
What shall we give him?
White bread and butter
particular. Some of us were lucky enough to have had mothers and grandmothers who could sing traditional lyrics. Some of us grew up around griots and other traditional poets. But those are few and in any case, even they could not have had that much. Because after primary or early primary school, we all left the village, the urban slum or township through the medium of some scholarship, and went to some exclusive school. And in those places, further development of the child, artistic or otherwise, depended on the communicative talents of a teacher and the skill with which she or he conveyed the aesthetics of good European literature and other dynamics of Western civilization... or at least, a version of it which was well-pruned to suit the colonial or neo-colonial environment.

"Do you write only in French?" asked the interviewer of Mariama BB. "I do not know any other written language, only French", answered Mariama BB, of So Long a Letter.4

That indeed is the pathos underlying much of 'modern African literature' and that too is the wonder of it.

If anyone protested than none of this was any different from what male African writers had to confront, my response to that would be: 'But of course not'. There could not be any earth-shaking differences. Indeed, if we thought that anyone was providing us with a platform from which to prove that African women writers were different in any way from their male counterparts, or that they faced some fundamental problems which male African writers did not face, some of us would not really want to use such a platform. How could there be? Did we not all suffer the varied wickedness of colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and global imperialists and fascism together? What we are saying though, is that it is especially pathetic to keep on writing without having any consistent, active, critical intelligence that is interested in you as an artist (or creator). Therefore, it is precisely from this point that the African writing women's reality begins to differ somewhat from that of the male African writer. Once we have faced the basic fact of the oppression and marginality that is almost endemic in the lives of the peoples of the so-called Third World, and especially those of Africans, we also begin to admit that at least, some people are interested in the male African writer. These include African, non-African, male and female literary critics, different categories of publishers, editors, anthologists, translators, librarians, sundry academic analysts, and all other zealous collectors of treasures! (My apologies to Bessie Head—A.A.A.)

Am I jealous? But of course. In March of 1985, Professor Dieter Riemenschneider came to Harare to give a lecture on some regional approach to African literature. The lecture lasted at least two hours. In all that time, Professor Riemenschneider did not find it possible to mention a single African woman writer. When this was pointed out to him later, he said he was sorry, but it had been 'so natural'. I could have died. It had been natural to forget that quite a bit of modern African literature was produced by women? Why should it be 'natural' to forget that some African women had been writing and publishing for as long as some African men writers? Efua Sutherland of Ghana must have begun to write in the late 1950s because her plays, Foriwa and Edufa were produced in 1962. These were subsequently published. Since then, she has also published, among others, The Marriage of Anansewa, a hilariously modern portrayal of the folk villain, Ananse, the Spiderman. How can it be natural to forget the existence of Bessie Head, who between 1971 and 1974 published two of the most powerful novels to have come out of Africa? I speak of Maru and A Question of Power. In relation to Bessie Head, we have not even thrown in When Rain Clouds Gather (1969) or The Collector of Treasures (1977) which, according to Hans Zell, is a 'carefully sequenced collection of short stories in which she has refashioned myths, examined the problems of Christianity and traditional religions', besides being an 'exploration of the women in Africa'. How could Riemenschneider not remember that Flora Nwapa published Efuru in 1966, Idu in 1969, Never Again in 1976 and since then both Wives at War and Other Stories and Once is Enough in 1981? Micere Mugo is formidably uncompromising, both in terms of the aesthetic criteria and the political relevance against which she judges the achievement of the few African women writers whose works she has analysed. In her hands, quite a number of the fictional characters from the group virtually come tumbling down, but even she hails Efuru, her warmth, her love, her enterprise:

Efuru truly symbolises the struggles that face millions of female workers and peasants all over the African continent [who] daily wage heroic struggles against the shackles of the negative tradition, muffling religions, overwhelmingly hostile natural forces and exploitative econo-political systems that seek to silence them all together.

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7 Micere Mugo
Furthermore, whereas one might just wonder how anybody can forget the existence of *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *Anowa* (1970), and *No Sweetness Here* (1970), the question is how anybody dares to seriously discuss the so-called contemporary African literature and not mention *Our Sister Killjoy* or *Reflections from Black-eyed Squint* (1977)?

Maybe, Mariama Bâ and her brilliant novel did not feature in Riemenschneider’s lecture because she came from the Francophone zone and his lecture was on Anglophone writing? But then, doesn’t one remember him saying something about *Houseboy* by Oyono of the Cameroun, a book whose original title was *La Vie de Boy*? In any case, linguistic and any other such basis cannot continue to be valid for discussing African literature, if it would mean the exclusion of the first winner of the Noma Award for publishing in Africa, and to date, the most movingly intimate picture of what Lauretta Ngcobo describes as 'the educated, urban, middle-class women of Africa'. Ngcobo goes on: 'Rarely is this class acknowledged in print in African writing, let alone its fears and pains explored.' If we agree with the critic, and therefore, Ramatoulaye becomes a symbol of such women, then frankly, their utter spinelessness is frightening to behold. Except that, it also takes a great book to bring that out, doesn’t it?

Actually, it is not only the good German professor who forgets African women and their books. He is only nice enough to admit it. It is standard practice. In a volume whose purpose was 'to offer an account of the best work of African novelists since 1950 in the context of a discussion of the competing claims made on literature and on all of us by the idea of "the modern"', Neil McEwan does not mention a single novel written by an African woman. Then to literally add pain to injury he has the temerity, under *Select Bibliography Suggesting Further Reading*, to say that 'the novels of the exiled South African Bessie Head are the most glaring omission from the present study'. So why the omission if it was so glaring? The fact that McEwan then goes on to mention other omitted African female and male novelists does nothing to lessen the outrage. For after all, within the pages of this book on *Africa and the Novel*, he finds a solid raison d’être to discuss works by Nadine Gordimer and Laurens van der Post, presumably as 'some novels by outsiders inspired by experience of Africa', as he declares with some vague determination in his introduction.

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8 Works by Ama Ata Aidoo
However, McEwan too is a relative newcomer to the 'if-we-are talking-about-African-writers-who-are-those-female-scribblers-anyway?' game. All analysts in the field do it." Do you remember Gerald Moore and his *Seven African Writers*? That was 1962. So long ago, and so few writers? No one had the courage to ask questions of the honourable pundit then. So now, are we expected to take notice or not, that the booklet, updated and expanded to cover the work of *Twelve African Writers* and published in 1980 still does not look at the work of a single woman writer? Yet, Hans Zell says of it that it is a 'critical introduction to . . . Africa's most significant and well-established . . . authors whose work represent Anglophone and Francophone writing and draws from West, East, and Southern Africa', as well as the 'richness and the range of the continent's writing'\(^\text{12}\) and on and on and on!

Maybe it is time one even confessed that precisely because of one's own nationalism, one feels most bewildered by such slights when they are administered by other Africans, that is, African critics. And they do it all the time. According to Lloyd Brown, African women writers are: 'the voices unheard, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and predictably male-oriented studies in the field'.\(^\text{13}\)

Jane Bryce (who quotes Brown in her review of Oladele Taiwo's *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*) goes even further. She names names:

One only has to skim the contents page of the manifold publications with weighty titles like *The Emergence of African Fiction*, or *The Growth of the African Novel* to verify this. For on each occasion women's writing is conspicuously absent. Even a radical text like *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* by Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike omits to mention a single woman writer.\(^\text{14}\)

Actually, in *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* the authors mention Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa; but very much *en passant*, as an afterthought; and frankly, it is not clear whether that hurts even more. What is clear is that there is a truly shocking and everlengthening list of

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\(^\text{11}\) The situation is completely bad. Virtually every single commentator has been guilty, from Gerald Moore and onwards, including Charles Larson (1972), Eustace Palmer (1979), Kolewole Ogungbesan (1979), S.O. Anozie (1981), Emmanuel Ngara (1983), the list is endless and keeps on growing.


African commentators on African literature who manage to convey—solidly—to the interested world community, an impression that either there are no African women writers around at all, or if there are, then their work is not deserving of serious critical attention. Have you heard of *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*, published by Heinemann as recently as 1985? Quite clearly Emmanuel Ngara did not mention a single African woman writer even in passing because he did not think anything African women are writing is of any relevance to the ideological debate. Unless of course, we learn to accept that a study of Nadine Gordimer (again!) answers all such queries.

We have heard of editors of some well-known journals on African literature who routinely refuse good studies on the work of women writers on the pretext that they 'are not ready with our special issue on women writers'. Of course, the question again is: why a special issue on the work of women writers, especially as these supposed special issues never come out at all, or once in a half-decade? Maybe it is time we confessed that precisely because of our own unashamed commitment to African nationalism, we feel most bewildered by such slights when they are administered by other Africans.

In fact, the whole question of what attention has been paid or not paid to African writing women is so tragic, sometimes one wonders what desperation keeps us writing. Because for sure, no one cares. To have blundered our way into this one more exclusively male sphere of activity can be forgiven. After all, clumsiness is a human failing. We all make mistakes.

What is almost pathetic is to have persisted in staying there in the face of such resistance and sometimes resentment. Some of us believe that for writers and other creative persons any critical attention is better than none at all. Therefore it is also obvious that one factor that has definitely damaged the career of so many women writers is the absence of attention from the critical world. There never was a question of African woman writers wanting to be considered better than African male writers. We were not asking to be hailed as geniuses, it was simply that some African women have written books that have been as good as some of the books written by some of the African male writers, and sometimes better. We wanted to be noticed. For not only is is true, at least part of the time—that 'literature (is) an occupation in which you have to prove your talent to people who have none',' but the fact that we wrote at all in the face of the greatest odds should be enough: 'whether that is literature or whether that is not

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15 Jules Renhard quoted by Tillie Olsen, *op. cit.*
literature we will not presume to say'. What we dare say though, in agreement with Virginia Woolf, is that 'what so many women write explains much and tells much and that is certain'.

Consider Lauretta Ngcobo's *Cross of Gold*: are there any more vivid portrayals of how an individual could be hounded into a realization of what it is to be black in South Africa? The need to Struggle against powerlessness and dehumanization?

Or Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at the Metropolitan*: its loving albeit tongue-in-cheek concern with which Tlali has demonstrated that there could be no black petit-bourgeoisie in apartheid South Africa? That is assuming that anyone was unashamed enough to sympathize with that selfish class and the efforts it makes to survive, no matter what the cost might be.

We are not saying that either Ngcobo or Tlali with one book apiece are in the class of Alex La Guma. But then, how many other writers with one book can be in the class of La Guma? What we are asserting though is that Bessie Head is in anybody's first class, that wherever the African novel is discussed, depending on the scope of the discussion or its bearing on life within South Africa or of South Africans in exile, the novels of Bessie Head, Alex La Guma and others must be discussed.

Certainly, the issue can be viewed from several angles. For instance, if we did not talk about the class positions of writers or the political contents of their writings, and therefore allowed ourselves to enjoy Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* as a tender love story with a dash of the mystique, then could we not talk of Rebeka Njau's *Ripples in the Pool* as a look at the tragedy of loving with a dash of the mystique?

The stuff we write deserves to be looked at and judged, seriously, like those by our male counterparts, because the very act of creating has cost us too much. Nor should this be strange, or hard to believe, since every artist/writer suffers to produce. After all, 'all art is subsidised by artists with their lives'. The lost lives and loves, the atrophied careers and the need to give up more lucrative alternatives inevitably results in the sheer poverty of existence for all of us, except a few very highly successful ones. And throughout our lives, some questions that we can never answer but which keep nagging at us:

Was it worth it?
Has it been worth it?
Is it worth it?

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All writers are plagued by fears, real and imaginary, by all sorts of uncertainties and some very solid problems. After all, we are also human. The truth though, is that some of us suffer a little more, simply because we are women, and our positions are nearly hopeless because we are African women.

Naturally, we would have to admit that the realities of our lives are nowhere as harsh as those of our sisters, who, with the most meagre formal education or none at all, have to struggle out their lives in deprived rural environments and oppressive urban slums. Yet in relative terms—of what could be possible for us even as the few whom circumstances of birth and environment colluded to rescue—our situations are unenviable enough. Consider the fact of just about everybody around us feeling abandoned, because we have to abandon if we are to write. How silly, how ridiculous, that when our loved ones are jealous, they are not jealous of other humans they suspect we love and who could, perhaps, return the affection, but of the pieces of paper which it seems to them we give so much time to, which claim so much of our attention. The unpolished poems, the half-written plays, the never-finished short stories, the novels that are forever 'in progress'.

And of all the pain, the hardest to bear is that which results from the writer/mother situation. That one is very real and very hard. According to one Western woman writer, her 'grandmother who wrote and sold short stories before raising six children used to claim with some bitterness that bearing and raising children drained a woman's creativity'. Sally Bingham then continues: 'I don't believe there is a solution to this problems or at least, I don't believe there is one which recognizes the emotional complexities involved. A life without children is... an impoverished life for most women: yet life with children imposes demands that consume energy and imagination as well as time and that cannot all be delegated even supposing there is a delegate available'.

Consider the fact that such woefully inadequate 'delegates', even when available, include the fathers that begat... and God knows they are often not available? In the face of such testimonies, how can anyone be unimpressed with Buchi Emecheta, who bore five children, struggled to raise them single-handed in a decidedly hostile milieu, and in the years between 1972 and 1984 managed to publish nine novels? Quality is important of course: but its presence or absence in a novel can be exposed only through a reading of that novel, and in comparison of it with others. Therefore, any

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reasonably lengthy discussion of the African novel that is not limited by any special sub-regional bias to my mind becomes automatically invalid, if it was done within the last decade, and did not demonstrate any awareness of the works of Emecheta. I speak of *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1974), and *Double Yoke* (1981), to mention only four.

Considering how we thirst for attention, what do we do, when the little that comes our way is of the wrong and damaging kind? And there can be damaging critical recognition. Listen to no less a genius than the eminent English novelist William Thackeray on no less a genius than the English novelist Charlotte Bronte:

The poor little woman of genius! . . . [The] . . . homely-faced creature! I can read a great deal of her as I fancy her in her book [Villette] and see that rather than have fame . . . she wants some Tomkins or another to love her and be in love with . . . here is one genius . . . longing to mate itself [but] destined to wither away into old maidenhood with no chance to fulfil the burning desire."

Nobody knows de trouble (we) see, O lawd! Nearly everybody takes women writers for a joke, or worse. That includes publishers, literary agents and any others who profit from our existence and our toil, when they can. 'There was but little feminine charm about her, and of this fact she was herself uneasily and perpetually conscious . . . I believe she would have given all her genius and all her fame to have been beautiful'.\(^{19}\) Guess who said that about whom? It was said about the same Charlotte Bronte by her publisher, George Smith. Can anyone imagine anybody saying anything so scurrilous about any male writer, dead or alive? Yet Bronte's publishers could say that about her, forty-five years after her death, and just when they could begin to print and sell all they wanted of her books, and make all the money they could, without even pretending to look for which of her heirs owned the copyrights.

I bring the foregoing to our attention because, any writing woman is vulnerable to such insults and naked slander. Already in the discussion of modern African writing, even when women writers are vouchsafed any mention, it is often absent-minded at the best, and at the worst, full of veiled ridicule and resentment. When commentary on African women in literature is none of the above, it is certain to be disorganized (or rather unorganized) and choked full of condescension.


In 1984, Oladele Taiwo published *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*, a book whose publishers *blurbed* it as 'as an important study' and for which the author himself claimed in the preface that it is a 'celebration of the literary activities of female novelists of modern Africa'. For any writing woman, reading that 'important study' should be a fairly sobering experience. For, hard as it is to believe, and apart from the fact that he only manages to see the books in one-dimensional categories without attempting to do any comparative analysis, he virtually treats those African women writers whose novels he discusses (and short stories when the spirit moves him) as though they were his co-wives to whom he dishes out his whimsical favours. He constantly remarks on their intelligence or story-telling capabilities in the best 'dancing dog' tradition, or as if they were a bunch of precocious six-year olds who had demonstrated some special abilities to the headteacher.

Since it is possible for one to be unfair, it would be good to listen to Taiwo himself. To begin with, just because the writers are women, he thinks

Their economic and literary contributions, and their important functions in home and family life, [should be] compared with their present pre-occupations as novelists to see what transfer of knowledge and skill has taken place. (p. IX).

This literary critic then proceeds with a homily on how to raise children:

A happy and stable family life is essential for the child's ultimate success. His future happiness depends to a large extent on the kind of environment provided for him as a child by his parents. Every occasion should be exploited [including] family dinners . . . (p. 11)

He had more to say on the issue of the relationship between a woman novelist and her responsibilities as a mother:

If the correct attitude is fostered at home, in school and the community, the child has no difficulty in interacting with people and serving his nation loyally as an adult. It is only then that the mother can claim she has successfully carried out the more important obligation of parenthood [read womanhood, AAA] which is the proper upbringing of children. (p. 11)

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20 Oladele Taiwo, *Female Novelists in Modern Africa* (London, MacMillan, 1984). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

21 This is a prevailing attitude towards the fact that a woman performing in any capacity normally only expected of a man was almost as strange as 'a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all' — Dr. Johnson, quoted by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.
Can you imagine anything of the sort in a study of the works of Achebe, Armah, Ngugi, Mpahlele, Soyinka? Yet Taiwo does not only imagine it is possible but considers it imperative because he is discussing books written by Aidoo, Emecheta, Nwapa, Head and other women writers. In the main body of his thesis, he regularly calls up those he considers for scolding, and none is spared his patronizing tone. Of *Daughter of Mumbi* by Charity Waciuma, he says with avuncular disapproval: 'The author quite rightly concentrates on the sufferings of the individual Kikuyu'. One can't help wondering what is so right about concentrating on the sufferings of the individual? Is this because the agonies of whole communities are not real tragedies? Again, Taiwo says grandly of *Idu:* 'In this work the novelist pursues her interest in home and family life. She portrays different kinds of marital connections in order to highlight what factors make for success or failure in married life'. (p. 56) And he leaves one speculating as to whether Flora Nwapa could not have gone to less trouble and done much better writing a book with a title like *How to Avoid Disastrous Marriages.* Sometimes, one cannot help wondering whether this particular critic really reads the books he comments on. Often, his very strong remarks seem to have less to do with the books the author wrote, than a determination on his part to scold women writers for what he suspects are all sorts of newfangled, foolish notions they are entertaining—without his permission.

He declares censoriously of *Our Sister Killjoy:*

> It may be the intention of the author to prove that women can do without men in their private relationship . . . Ms Aidoo is quite entitled to put women at the helm of affairs in her novel. But it is an error to think that they can live a full life without men. If such a situation is tenable in Europe, it has no chance of succeeding in Africa. (p. 26)

Definitely, anyone who had read *Killjoy* would want to ask Taiwo at which 'helm' of what 'affairs' does he think the author has attempted to put women? But then Taiwo comes down with equal heaviness on Buchi Emecheta:

> The novelist's treatment of polygamy is uninspiring. By making Nnaife so completely ineffective as the head of the extended family, she may be suggesting that polygamy is one of the traditional practices which need to be changed. (p. 111)

Taiwo’s self-righteousness is not only pervasive, but also seems to be laced with a baffling insensitivity. This comes out very clearly in his comments on the books by Bessie Head:

> why does a man like Makhaya not stay on and fight the system from within, instead of fleeing to another country? . . . one does not change . . . "false beliefs" by running away from the situation which they have helped to generate. (p. 186)
Ama Ata Aidoo

Does this critic really know what he is talking about? How can any African in the early 1980s manage to arrive at the conclusion that the black people of South Africa helped to generate apartheid? One thing is clear: Professor Oladele Taiwo would not have dared assume such a posture vis-a-vis *When Rain Clouds Gather* if it had been written by a man. In his zeal to play the schoolmaster, Taiwo forgets—along with so many other critics—that we shall continue to learn nothing until we all begin to recognize what must be a fundamental hypothesis in the science that should be literary criticism: *that any writer can be judged only on what she (or he) wrote, and against the background of what is perceived to have been her or his intentions.* There are, and indeed there should be other considerations: but they can only be secondary to this.

Taiwo of course regularly falls into his own as well as everybody else's traps, one of the latter being a mind-blowing but widely-held opinion that literature is better served only through the portrayal of heroic (or even non-heroic) males as they grapple with the problems and challenges of existence. This of course means that if women writers want their works to be considered as 'literature', then their characters, or at least the main ones should be men. All this works out to a fairly simple formula: men writers should write about men, and women writers should write about men. In *Our Sister Killjoy* and *So Long a Letter* the scene is almost completely monopolized by women, wails Taiwo. What makes this complaint really ridiculous is that he himself does not seem to be aware that he had been consistently accusing each one of the women writers of writing a novel that is 'packed full of women'! Maybe one should hasten to add at this stage that as writers, we are not even necessarily looking for approbation. What we have a right to expect though, is that critics try harder to give our work some of their best in time and attention, as well as the full weight of their intelligence, just like they do for the work of our male counterparts.

It has also to be granted that perhaps, Taiwo never really meant any harm. In fact, considering that to date his is the only full-length study of books by African women at all, we should be grateful; and he clearly says that he wrote it to 'celebrate us'. One can imagine him lamenting, with some irritation if he should ever hear or read the foregoing comments on his book—'Ah, these African women, you can never please them'.

On the other hand, we must not forget that so often and especially when critical comments on books by women are compared with or contrasted to any written by men, the comments nearly always come out as a put-down, casting doubts on the talents of the women as writers, and sometimes even throwing shadows on their integrity. I should know, because I in particular have been the victim of a rather vicious and consistent campaign of defamation which I have never known how to handle.
The ancients have said that every story has a day for its telling and this seems to be quite an appropriate occasion for the telling of this particular tale. In 1962, I wrote a short story with the title 'No Sweetness Here' which won a prize in the short story competition organized by Ulli Beier and the Mbari Club. Beier subsequently published it in one of the issues of the *Black Orpheus* journal in 1964. When I later collected some of my short stories for re-publication as a volume, I gave that title to the whole volume. That was in 1970. Meanwhile in 1965, I had met a fellow Ghanaian who had just returned to Ghana from the United States, and who became a very good friend and a brother. That man is Ayi Kwei Armah, who later published *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* a novel which has become one of the best known books in all of modern African literature. In one of the passages in which there is a definitely successful 'merger between the authorial voice and (his) character's reflections', we learn from the man that ‘The listening mind is disturbed by memories from the past. So much time has gone by, and still there is no sweetness here’. The book was published in 1968, and somehow, from then, critics of African literature seemed to find the phrase 'no sweetness here' so original and just so fascinating, any time they talked of Ayi Kwei's book, they commented on it. Meanwhile, a number of these same critics seemed to have also concluded that since the phrase embodies a concept that could be quite profound, it could not possibly have first come from the mind or issued from the pen of a woman. The credit should rightly go to a man. That must explain why over the years a number of critics have twisted and turned until a way was found to say against the indisputable evidence of the printed word and all logic of chronology, that Ama Ata Aidoo borrowed the phrase from Ayi Kwei Armah. One outstanding example has been Robert Fraser: 'only in the native township does a whole generation grow into an ingrained awareness that there is, in the phrase borrowed by Ama Ata Aidoo for her volume of stories so similar in mood, 'no sweetness here' '.

Actually, in his study of *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* which is undoubtedly the silliest and most unresearched piece of criticism it has been one's chore to read, Fraser extends the assault on me. Apart from the usual 'no sweetness here' harassment, he implies that the main character of the play *Anowa* has got something to do with Anoa, a character in Ayi Kwei's *Two Thousand Seasons* whom the author portrayed as being one of the rather special and positive people we have had on our African odyssey. To

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support his fraudulent theories, Fraser hints at non-existent Akan legends, and even goes to the extent of actually altering the spelling of the title in my play, so that it would agree with Ayi Kwei’s spelling of the name!! It is unbelievable, this nasty piece of perfidy, especially when we are not dealing with hearsay, but with books, printed, bound and published. My play, Anowa, came out in 1970. Before then, it existed in a draft form as Anua, and I had even mailed a copy to Ayi Kwei as a brother and fellow writer whose opinion I respect enormously in 1967.

I have seized this opportunity to tell the story because I can no longer carry the secret terror these critics have engendered in my soul. I am genuinely frightened by the sheer primeval weight of the attacks. For instance, one almost gets the feeling that Fraser thinks that in order for him to evoke the true stature of Armah as a novelist, he had to diminish me, a Ghanaian woman writer, somehow and he gets as petty as consistently misspelling my name, in spite of the fact that we were colleagues in the same university and the same department. Not to mention the fact that he could not possibly have referred to any of my books in his bibliography or listed me in his index without noticing how my name was spelt. Meanwhile, apart from the fear, I also experience rage, that critics should confirm that some of my ideas are quite original, then proceed to take them from me, give them to Ayi Kwei, patent them in his name, and finally turn round to literally convict me for daring to invent things that a brilliant man could use.

I would like to add at this point though, that I believe Ayi Kwei Armah himself does not know what is going on. He is on record as saying that he has very little time for critics.

As I said in the first part of what has turned out to be an on-going examination of what it is to be an African woman, a university teacher and a writer,

An inquiry of this nature runs the risk of getting charged with pettiness. Yet petty or not, it is legitimate. Our ancestors have said that if you assume indifference at a meat-sharing, you end up with the bones. And we all know that with not only our indifference but also our acquiescence, [and even connivance], women have ended up with very much less than bones.24

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24 To Be A Woman, A Writer and a University Teacher—originally a paper for UNITAR’s Workshop on Creative Women in Changing Societies, Oslo 1980. The paper has since been published as the contribution from Ghana to Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women’s Anthology, edited by Robin Morgan (New York, Anchor Press Doubleday, 1984).
Besides any lover of bones, if she is human and not a dog, would admit that the charm of occasionally chewing a bone lies in the knowledge that one does not have to. Or in fact there is some soft lean meat around should it be preferred. In any case, malign or benign, the long-term effect of disinterested comment and/or vicious disregard of African women writers and their works is bound to be diminishing and stultifying, with a possible loss of collective confidence. Therefore, the decision to swallow my pride and let the world have a peek at our pain and our vulnerability was very conscious. For as Tillie Olsen bluntly reminds us:

"eclipsing, devaluation neglect, are the results of critical judgements, a predominantly male domain". The most damaging and still prevalent, critical attitude remains "that women's experience, and literature written by women are, by definition, minor". Indeed, for a sizable percentage of male writers, critics, academics, writer-women are eliminated from consideration, (consciousness), altogether.  

So please, try to read African women writers yourselves. Fish our books out, for either they exclude them, or even worse, where they also are present, they hide them behind shelves that carry the books of authors who are considered more displayable, racially or genderwise. (As my own publishers did—and might still be doing—to my books in their showrooms somewhere near Oxford Street in London).

The writers who have been mentioned already are just some of those who have been writing longest, or most. And always, Mariama Ba, who gave voice to her vision too late, and died before she could see her second novel come out. 'Till tomorrow my friend' promised Ramatoulaye. There was no tomorrow.

In the meantime, Senegal has produced other women writers: like Aminata Sow Fall, another prize winner, famous for the incredible The Beggar’s Strike, Nafissatou Diallo and Awa Thiam. There is also Kine Kirama Fall, a well-known poet who writes 'mystic poetry' much of which is about 'God and religion'.

Nigeria has produced a whole crop of women writers that includes Ifeoma Okoye and Adaora Lily Ulasi. The latter is currently the most consistent who-dunit-story-teller in Africa, having four titles already to her name. There is also Zulu Sofala who has published five plays which are never mentioned in dispatches because most students of 'serious' literature really do not care much for drama, unless of course, it was written by William Shakespeare or in African terms, Wole Soyinka!

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Mrs Grace Ogot of Kenya should on the other hand be considered as one of the more established writers, however we regard that term. She has been writing since the mid-60s, and so has so far published at least two novels and three collections of short stories. These include The Promised Land (1966), Land Without Thunder (1968) and The Graduate (1980). Other women writers in Kenya include Miriam Were.

In Zimbabwe, there is Barbara Makhalisa who, like some male Zimbabwean writers, has achieved a truly enviable feat by making it possible for herself to write in both her first and second language. All over the continent, there are new writers coming up: Bertha Msora and Kristina Rungano both of Zimbabwe, Zayab Alkali also from Nigeria, Hazel Mugot of Kenya, Simone Kaya of the Ivory Coast, Jeanne Ngo Mai of Cameroun, Adzo Zabede-Thomas of Ghana who is a poet as well as a composer. . . The list, against all odds (and some of those odds are really heavy!) is getting longer each the year.

Therefore, I repeat the plea that you try to interest yourselves in what African women are writing. Indeed I would like to add my voice to that of Tillie Olsen again, and quote her in full:

You who teach, read writers who are women. There is a whole literature to be re-estimated, revalued. . . Read, listen to, living women writers; our new as well as our established, often neglected ones. Not to have an audience is a kind of death. Read the compass of women writers in our infinite variety. Not only those who tell us of ourselves as ''the other half'', but also those who write of the other human dimensions, realms. . . Teach women's lives through the books of the women who wrote the books, as well as through the books themselves;. . .

And please, do not ever allow yourselves to say or imply that ''considering the book was written by a woman, it is quite good really''.

This paper was presented for the first time to the writers' workshop on Women and Books, Harare, July 30-August 2, 1985.

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26 Tillie Olsen, op cit, p. 44
I am just an ordinary writer, an ordinary writer who has to write, because if I didn't write I think I would have to be put in an asylum. Some people have to communicate, and I happen to be one of them. I have tried several times to take university appointments and work as a critic, but each time I have packed up and left without giving notice. I found that I could not bring myself to criticize other people’s work. When my husband burned my first book, I said to him 'If you can burn my book, you can just as well burn my child, because my books are like my children, and I cannot criticize my children'. When I had my babies they were very, very ugly; they had big heads, like their father and their bodies looked like mine. But if anybody looked into the pram and said 'What an ugly baby', I would never talk to that person again. And I know that I am not the only writer who finds it hard to accept criticism. One critic asked me 'You have so much anger in you, how can you bear it?' 'Well', I said, 'I can't bear it, so I have to let it out on paper'. I started writing in 1972, and a few weeks ago I handed in my sixteenth novel. In order to make you understand how I work I will tell you about my background.

I was born in Lagos, Nigeria and was raised partly there and partly in my village, Ibuza, and this explains my wish to tell stories when I was a child. My parents both came from Ibuza and moved to Lagos in search of work. As both of them were partly educated they embraced the C.M.S (Church Missionary Society) way of life. But being of the old Ibo kingdom they made sure that my brother and myself never lost sight of home, of life in Ibuza.

We worked at home during the rains, to help on the farm and to learn our ways. If I lived in Lagos I could start to have loose morals and speak Yoruba all the time. So my parents wanted me to learn the rigorous Ibo life. You can see that even in Nigeria we still discriminate against each other.

At home that I came across real story tellers. I had seen some Yoruba ones telling their stories and songs and beating their drums whilst we children followed them—Pied Piper like—from street to street. But the Ibo story teller was different. She was always one's mother. My Big Mother was my aunt. A child belonged to many mothers. Not just one's
biological one. We would sit for hours at her feet mesmerized by her trance like voice. Through such stories she could tell the heroic deeds of her ancestors, all our mores and all our customs. She used to tell them in such a way, in such a sing-song way that until I was about fourteen I used to think that these women were inspired by some spirits. It was a result of those visits to Ibuza, coupled with the enjoyment and information those stories used to give us, that I determined when I grew older that I was going to be a story teller, like my Big Mother.

I learned to my dismay at school in Lagos that if I wanted to tell stories to people from many places I would have to use a language that was not my first—neither was it my second, or third, but my fourth language. This made my stories lose a great deal of their colour, but I learned to get by. My English must have been very bad because when I first told my English teacher, who came from the Lake District, and who was crazy about Wordsworth that I was going to write like her favourite poet, she ordered me to go to the school chapel and pray for forgiveness, because she said: 'Pride goeth before a fall'. I did not go to the chapel to pray because even then I knew that God would have much more important things to do than to listen to my dreams. Dreams which for me, coming both from the exotic so-called Ibo bush culture and the historic Yoruba one, were not unattainable.

Some of these early missionaries did not really penetrate the African mind. That incident confirmed what I had always suspected as a child, that the art of communication, be it in pictures, in music, writing or in oral folklore is vital to the human.

I never learn from my experiences. My first attempt to write a book, called The Bride Price was resented by my husband. He too, like my English teacher, told me that 'Pride goeth before fall'. I left him and I found myself at twenty-two, husbandless with five young children. I thought I would wait to be as old as Big Mother with a string of degrees before writing. But I had to earn my living and the only thing I could do was write. Whilst looking after my fast-growing family I decided to read for a degree that would help me master the English language and help me write about my society for the rest of the world. I chose sociology and continued writing. I had enough rejection slips to paper a room. But in 1972 the New Statesman started serializing my work and those recollections later appeared as my first book, In the Ditch.

I have been writing ever since, and I am now living entirely on my writing. Those babies of mine are now beginning to leave home. One of them has started to write as well, so perhaps writing runs in the family. I am not doing anything particularly clever. I am simply doing what my Big Mother was doing for free about thirty years ago. The only difference is
that she told her stories in the moonlight, while I have to bang away at a typewriter I picked up from Woolworths in London. I am not good at reading, and sometimes when I write I can't even read my writing. Writing is a very lonely profession. One is there at one's desk, thinking of ideas and reasoning them out and putting them into works of fiction or stories, and if one is not careful, one will start living the life of the characters in the book. Conferences like this one save some of us from becoming strange.

Writers are often asked 'Who are you writing for?'. How am I supposed to know who is going to pick up my works from the library shelf. I wonder sometimes if people ask painters, when they are doing their paintings, who they are painting them for. The painter can control the picture while he is still painting it, but can we expect him to foretell who is going to love looking at it? A book is akin to a child on his mother's back. The mother knows she is carrying a baby on her back but the child can use its hands to lift anything that passes by, without the mother knowing. I find this question sometimes rather patronizing. In fact it is sometimes healthier not to think of one's readers at all. Writers are communicators. We chronicle everyday happenings, weave them into novels, poetry, documentary fiction, articles etc. The writer has the freedom to control, to imagine and to chronicle. I write for everybody.

The writer also has a crucial control over the subject s/he writes about. For myself, I don't deal with great ideological issues. I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f. In my books I write about families because I still believe in families. I write about women who try very hard to hold their family together until it becomes absolutely impossible. I have no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children, neither do I have sympathy for a woman who insists on staying in a marriage with a brute of a man, simply to be respectable. I want very much to further the education of women in Africa, because I know that education really helps the women. It helps them to read and it helps them to rear a generation. It is true that if one educates a woman, one educates a community, whereas if one educates a man, one educates a man. I do occasionally write about wars and the nuclear holocaust but again in such books I turn to write about the life and experiences of women living under such conditions.

Maybe all this makes me an ordinary writer. But that is what I want to be. An ordinary writer. I will read to you two pieces from my own observations. The style is simple but that is my way. I am a simple and unsophisticated person and cultural people really make me nervous. First I
want to read a short piece about polygamy. People think that polygamy is oppression, and it is in certain cases. But I realize, now that I have visited Nigeria often, that some women now make polygamy work for them. What I am about to relate happened only a few weeks ago. I was in my bedroom in Ibuza listening to a conversation. It was cool and damp and I was debating whether to get up from my bed or not. I knew it was about six in the morning. I did not have to look at the clock. I just knew because I could hear the songs of the morning, children on their way to fetch water, a cock crowing here and there. Then the penetrating voice of Nwango, the senior wife of Obike came into my thoughts. 'Go away you stinking beast. Why will you not let me sleep? I have a full day ahead of me and you come harassing me so early in the morning. You are shameless. You don't even care that the children sleep next-door. You beast. Why don't you go to your new wife.' Now the man: 'All I have from you is your loud mouth. You are never around to cook for me, and when I come to your bed, you send me away. What did I pay the bride-price for?' The voice of Obike was slow and full of righteous anger. 'Go to your wife.' 'She is pregnant', said Obike. 'So what, get another woman. I need my energy for my farm and my trading, and today is the market-day', Nwango insisted. I was sorry to miss the end of the quarrel because my mother-in-law came in and told me not to mind them. 'They are always like that, these men. They are shameless. They think we women are here just to be their partners at night. He can marry another girl. But again which girl in her right senses will take him? He is too lazy to go regularly to his farm.' My mother-in-law should know. She had thirteen children. They lived in the capital, Lagos, and her husband did not have room to bring home another wife, so she had to do everything. If they had spent their life in the village it would have been different.

I know this is a situation which our Western sisters will find difficult to understand. Sex is important to us. But we do not make it the centre of our being, as women do here. In fact most of the Nigerian women who are promiscuous are so for economic reasons. The Yorubas have a saying that a woman must never allow a man to sleep with her if, at the end of the day she is going to be in debt. Few of our women go after sex per se. If they are with their husbands they feel they are giving something out of duty, love, or in order to have children. A young woman might dream of romantic love, but as soon as they start having children their loyalty is very much to them, and they will do everything in their power to make life easier for them. In the villages the woman will seek the company of her age-mates, her friends, and the women in the market, and for advice she goes either to her mother or to her mother-in-law. Another woman in the family will help share the housework, like Nwango cited earlier. The day her husband
wanted her was an Eke day, a big market day. She had to be up early to be at the market. She had to contribute her twenty naira which is almost ten pounds, to the savings fund of the market women. That is the way we raise capital for our business without having to go to the bank, because most banks will not lend money to a woman. So she had to contribute her twenty naira and later on in the evening, she had to put on her otuogu and she had to be at the Agbalani group, as they were going to dance at the second burial of the grandmother of one of their members. For that dance they had to tie the otuogu with the Akangwose style; all of which took them three years to save up for. They had to wear a navy-blue head-tie and carry a navy-blue Japanese fan and wear black flat shoes or slippers. None of these items was bought by their husbands. Nwango worked on her cassava farm four days of the week—we have a five-day week—and sold the garri made from the cassava on the fifth day, Eke market day. She gave twenty naira esusu of her profit to the collector who was one of the women in her group. It is from this esusu forced saving that she is sending her son to college, and she spends the rest exactly as she likes. At the funeral dance the group will give the bereaved lady a thousand naira (about five hundred pounds), from their fund to help out. And the dance will go on till very late. At about eight p.m. one will hear these women going home, singing their heads off. They drink anything from whisky, beer, gin, brandy, you name it, and no man dares tell them not to. Cooking for the husband, fiddle sticks! Get another woman to do it. Especially if the other woman is still a young seventeen- or eighteen-year old with her head full of romantic love. By the time she is twenty-five she will become wiser too. Nwango’s husband is almost a stud. Not a nice word, but that is the way most village women feel.

Sex is part of life. It is not THE life. Listen to the Western feminists’ claim about enjoying sex, they make me laugh. African feminism is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic. We believe that we are here for many, many things, not just to cultivate ourselves, and make ourselves pretty for men. The beauty in sisterhood is when women reach the age of about forty. The women who cultivated sisters either through marriage or through the village age-group start reaping their reward. In England for example I belong to the war-babies. They call us 'the saltless babies'. That means we were born in Nigeria when they didn't have salt because of the war. So in our village we were called 'the Saltless Women'. There are about sixteen of my age-mates in London, and we have our own group here too. Last year a member of our group was in hospital and she said that other patients called her the Princess of Africa. On visiting days the nurses and doctors invariably shooed us away. She was there for three weeks, and the two days I went
to visit her I had to wait over fifteen minutes before it came to my turn. I live in North London, a long way from her house, but those members who lived near her made sure she had visitors every night as well as her seven children. Her husband left her over three years ago to do some business in Nigeria, but we all know that he lives with another woman over there. Did our group member care? No. She is too busy to care. If he returns, good, if not, better still. She is training to be a hairdresser, now that all her children are at school. She is converting her large house into flats so that she and her older daughter can start a bed-and-breakfast business. And when she is ready she is going to come to our group and take an interest-free loan from our funds. If her husband had been around he would probably have been a help, just by being there, since he had no job anyway, but he could also be in the way of our member's self-realization. Looking after a man for sexual rewards does take a lot of time. I assure you.

In the West many women hurry to get married again after a divorce or a bereavement. Our women are slower. And many who have children don't even bother, because a new life opens for them. A new life among other women and friends. Women are very quarrelsome and jealous. We always make it up, especially after we have had a few brandies and consumed. I don't know how many chicken legs. This is because we realize that what we gain by forgiving one another is better than what we gain by being alone in order to avoid jealousy. In my book *Joys of Motherhood* I describe a family in which the women went on strike and refused to take the housekeeping money, because they knew that the husband was drinking the greater part of his income. I also describe a life of another woman who was so busy being a good mother and wife that she didn't cultivate her women friends. She died by the wayside, hungry and alone. In the same book I describe how jealous she was, when her husband brought home a new wife. Instead of going to sleep on the first night she stayed awake listening to the noise made by her husband and the new wife in love-making. She learned only a few days later that it would be better and to their mutual advantage, if she and the new wife became friends, rather than quarrel over their shared husband. They soon became so busy in their everyday life that sexuality was pushed into the background.

In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated. The husband has no reason for stopping her from attending international conferences like this one, from going back to University and updating her career or even getting another degree. Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time and each time he comes to her, he has
to be sure that he is in a good mood and that he is washed, and clean and ready for the wife, because the wife has now become so sophisticated herself that she has no time for a dirty, moody husband. And this in a strange way, makes them enjoy each other.

The small son of one of our group-members in London told his teacher that he had two Mummies. 'My Mummy number one is working. Mummy number two will come and collect me.' The teacher did not understand until she realized that his solicitor father had two wives, and the little child enjoys being loved and looked after by two women, his mother and the senior wife. What a good way to start one's life. In Ibuza it is the same. Once a woman starts making money she stops having children regularly. This is because women who are lucky to find the work which they love and which they are good at derive the same kind of enjoyment from it as from sex. Many female writers, many English female writers I have spoken to claimed that they find their work, not only sexually satisfactory but sometimes masturbatory. I certainly find my work satisfying. Sex is part of our life—it shouldn't be THE life.

In this next section I will give you a quick overview of some issues concerning black women. In many parts of Africa only one's enemies will go out of their way to pray for a pregnant woman to have a girl-child. Most people want a man-child. The prayers will go: 'You will be safely delivered of a bouncing baby boy, a real man-child that we can and make jolly with whisky and beer.' The pregnant woman will not protest at this prayer because in her heart, she too would like to have a man-child, who will not be married away, but will stay in the family home and look after his mother when she becomes weak and old. In most African societies the birth of a son enhances a woman's authority in the family. Male children are very, very important. Yet, this girl-child that was not desired originally comes into her own at a very early age. From childhood she is conditioned into thinking that being the girl she must do all the housework, she must help her mother to cook, clean, fetch water and look after her younger brothers and sisters. If she moans or shows signs of not wanting to do any of this, she will be sharply reminded by her mother. 'But you are a girl! Going to be a woman.'

It is our work to bring the next generation into the world, nurture them until they are grown old enough to fly from the nest and then start their own life. It is hard. It could be boring and could sometimes in some places be a thankless job. But is it a mean job? I had my photograph taken once in my office where I do my writing. The photo-journalist was a staunch feminist, and she was so angry that my office was in my kitchen and a package of cereal was in the background. I was letting the woman's movement down by allowing such a photograph to be taken, she cried. But that
was where I worked. Because it was warmer and more convenient for me to see my family while I put my typewriter to one side. I tried to tell her in vain that in my kitchen I felt I was doing more for the peace of the world than the nuclear scientist. In our kitchens we raise all Reagans, all Nkrumahs, all Jesuses. In our kitchens we cook for them, we send them away from home to be grown men and women, and in our kitchens they learn to love and to hate. What greater job is there? I asked. A mother with a family is an economist, a nurse, a painter, a diplomat and more. And we women do all that, and we form, we are told, over half of the world's population. And yet we are on the lowest rung. Men did not put us there, my sisters, I think sometimes we put ourselves there. How often do you hear colleagues say; 'Oh, I don't know anything I am only a housewife'?

There should be more choices for women, certainly women who wish to be like Geraldine Ferrara should be allowed to be so. We need more of her type, especially among the black women. We need more Golda Meirs, we need more Indira Gandhis, we even need more Margaret Thatchers. But those who wish to control and influence the future by giving birth and nurturing the young should not be looked down upon. It is not a degrading job. If I had my way, it would be the highest paid job in the world. We should train our people, both men and women to do housework. A few privileged African women are now breaking bonds. They live at home and work outside. Most of these women were lucky enough to come from families where the girls were allowed to go to school and to stay there long enough to acquire knowledge to equip them to live away from their families and to rub shoulders with men. Black women are succeeding in various fields along these lines.

This we must remember is not new to the black woman, because her kind has always worked. In the agrarian setting women do petty-trading. Usually, they have small children with them. They trade in anything from a few loaves of bread to a few packages of matches. The lucky ones have stalls or sheds. Others not so fortunate use the front of their house as their stall. Many Nigerian women live in the cities, collect their esusu profits and bank it when they think it is big enough. I have a great number of friends who have built up their families this way. This means that the others who were trained to do the lower-middle-class jobs of, for example, teaching have invariably given up their work in order to take up trading.

Being successful in whatever we undertake is not new to the women of Africa. The Aba riot is a case in point. This was a riot that spread from Owerri in Eastern Nigeria to Calabar among women who did not even speak the same language, and it included all the towns in the area to Onitsha by the river Niger and went further across the river to include women from the Asaba area. Although the white male chroniclers called it a riot...
it was a real war. It was a marvel that women at that time were able to organize themselves; remember, there were no telephones, no letters, only bushtracks and dangerous rivers. The whole area was equivalent to the distance from London to Edinburgh. The actual war was organized with women from different groups wearing various headgears and all using their household utensils as weapons. The war, which took place in 1929 was in answer to British demands that women should pay taxes. The black women of that war were praised by all their menfolk. They received admiration not rebuke. And in desperation, the British administrators jailed all men whose wives took an active part in the war. They could not acknowledge that women, especially barbaric women, could organize themselves to achieve such a feat.

Working and achieving to great heights is nothing new to the woman of Africa, but there are still many obstacles in her way. Her family still prefers to educate the boy, while she stays at home to do the important jobs called 'women's duties'. And we accept the tag, knowing full well that the boy, however clever he is, would not be where he is today without the sacrifices made by his mother, his sweetheart, his wife or even his sister. The African woman has always been a woman who achieves. This does not necessarily mean that she becomes a successful international lawyer, a writer or a doctor, although African women in these professions are doing very well, and there are quite a few of us. But for the majority of women of Africa, real achievement—as I see it—is to make her immediate environment as happy as is possible under the circumstances, by tending the crops or giving comfort. But she still will have higher aspirations and achieve more when those cleverly structured artificial barriers are removed, when education is free and available to every child, male or female, when the male-dominated media does not give exposure to a black woman simply because she is a beautiful entertainer, thereby undermining our brain power, and when we ourselves have the confidence to value our contribution to the world. It is about time we start singing about our own heroic deeds.

From the discussion

**Jack Mapanje:** I want to make a practical suggestion. A lot of men do not know what feminism is about, they don't even understand the principles. If we started with a discussion of the principles of feminism, we could perhaps develop a concept of literary criticism out of that.
Ama Ata Aidoo: It is not as if the visions do not exist. What we are protesting about is the refusal to recognize that they exist. There is an opinion which insists that the very fact that a woman writes about women characters makes her a feminist. That you must see is rubbish. We are women and the fact that one writes about women should be taken as a very legitimate way of seeing the world. The issue about feminism which you are raising is very central and very legitimate, but we should be able to separate the natural tendency of women writers to see women characters as a valid proposition in their own right.

Buchi Emecheta: At the beginning of my paper I said that I write about everyday happenings. I think most of us women don't really dabble in big issues. We include small talk about everyday things, the colours, the bits, which are mostly lacking in writing by men. For example, in one of my books I describe the sound of pounding yam. I don't think men have time to put things like that into books, because they think they are writing something important. Even if you don't tell me the name of the writer I can always tell writing done by a woman. Maybe she has eyes to see more, where men are too blind to see.

Lauretta Ngcobo: I think we can run into difficulties if we assume that there will be clear differences of style and treatment between men and women writers. Perhaps if there is an area where distinctions could be isolated and be said to be marked I think it would be the area of themes. Women have brought in themes that men have not discussed before, and there are some themes which men discuss much more than women, for instance the theme of prostitution. They are concerned with the morality of women. Unfortunately, none of them is making the connection between the traditional pattern of behaviour and the pattern called upon by prostitution. Prostitution in broad terms in our setting is very different from the Western kind, it has a direct link with our behaviour in traditional society. In marriage we bring nothing but our physical service. We buy our security in marriage through our sex and we offer the product of our sex as the only offering in life, our children. The same women are moved by circumstance into cities, and when they get to the cities, for the first time in their life, their physical labour is unacceptable. Women in the African cities find that for the first time nobody really wants their labour. Especially outside South Africa you find that even domestic work is often done by men. Women leave the country situation hoping to find employment in the cities and live independently at last, but what they find is that nobody wants their labour. The only means of survival is that old offering, the only lesson they ever learned was to offer themselves. This analysis does not come through
the many books that male writers write on the subject, and that is important.

Taban Liyong: I hope that at the end of the day we will still have African motherhood intact and African sisterhood intact so that at least even after all the problems they will still bring up another child who will still remember the mothers and the sister who brought him up. I am trying to say this because I suspect that feminism may destroy that which up to now has enabled Africa to withstand all the buffeting from other cultures. Perhaps also, let us be careful. Somebody may decide to throw pepper into the African household and inside the house we may be sneezing left and right and the husband will think that it is the woman who threw the pepper and vice versa. I have been writing as a contribution towards understanding our position in the world, not as male chauvinist pig. I have also been reading the writings of African women and other women as a contribution towards understanding the position and the problems of human beings. I get a book, I don’t ask myself, should I today read a male book or should I today read a female book. I get a book and I read it in order to find out how it deals with certain problems. Let us have all of those women writers, African, Asian expressing their point of view. That is a good thing. But to say—I am going to be a feminist writer, I am going to take a position vis-a-vis that man, I am going to shoot him. That upsets me. I think I should appeal to us to keep the African household intact at the end of the day, otherwise we may have our younger sisters going off and joining in dances in Lapland which concern the people of Lapland only.

A.A.A.: Please don’t let us oversentimentalize anything. Anytime it is suggested that somehow one is important we hear that feminism is something that has been imported into Africa to ruin nice relationships between African women and African men. To try to remind ourselves and our brothers and lovers and husbands and colleagues that we also exist should not be taken as something foreign, as something bad. African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community is very much a part of our heritage. It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad, from Lapland. Africa has produced a much more concrete tradition of strong women fighters than most other societies. So when we say that, we are refusing to be overlooked we are only acting today as daughters and grand-daughters of women who always refused to keep quiet. We haven’t learnt this from anybody abroad.

Njabulo Ndebele: I just wanted to make a small point on the whole issue of the differences of the writing of men and the writing of women. I get
somewhat uneasy when this kind of comparison is made for fear that problems of genetic fallacy might begin to creep in and cloud the whole issue and might even back-fire in the sense that it may reinforce unfortunate images of men or women. For example it has been said that if you look at the history of Western philosophy you will find that there are very few women philosophers. And the reason is not a genetic one, it seems to me, it is a problem that the opportunities for education for women were not available in those cultures for a very long time. Today because of the greater democratization of society and the availability of education more and more women assume intellectual roles. It seems to me that the difference has a lot more to do with the historical roles of women in the culture of various societies than it has to do with some kind of innate capability.

**Emmanuel Ngara:** I would like to suggest that we must distinguish between feminism and what our women are fighting for. I may be mistaken, but from what I know of the women of Zimbabwe, the idea of feminism is something which they don't entertain. They are interested in creating a more humane society, where the question of equity is addressed.

**A.A.A.:** I think we are in danger of being misunderstood and misinterpreted. One man says: 'Oh, don't talk about feminism, because that is a Western influence.' Then when we say that as a matter of fact when we voice our problems we are not necessarily just parroting somebody's notion of feminism, then you say: 'Why are you afraid of doing that?' It is becoming a fairly slippery area for us. It seems as if we can not say anything right, at this juncture of the discussion.

**L.N.:** Just one word about feminism. We are on slippery grounds because we are trying not to get into that debate of feminism or no feminism. We are prepared to stop at the fact that women in Africa have been in the struggles, especially political struggle, for example, when the British suffragettes were very active. We are trying to show you that there have been women active on all sides. But is is also undeniable that the movement in the West enlivens our own consciousness, but at the same time we are at the point when we have not decided fully to follow the line that the Western movement is taking. We feel that first of all, they have not sorted out their solutions well enough. And we think that they have not consolidated it through their own structures. We find that the movement is restricting itself to a certain class. They are failing all together to penetrate the working class. And for us that wouldn't work at all. Their solutions of male exclusion we feel are not solutions. We think they have got to work through the problems rather than opt for a political lesbian solution. We don't
think at this point that would be our line but that does not mean we do not recognize the fight that white women are putting up, that we do not recognize the possibilities that there are for us within the feminist movement. After all it was those struggles in the early part of the century which won us the vote. We did not have to argue for that. When independence was handed over the question did not arise whether black women would have to fight for a vote or not. So we recognize the possibilities in the feminist movement and whilst we disagree on certain points we are not denigrating feminism.

**Miriam Tlali:** Well, I was going to comment on the subject on feminism. In South Africa the question of Western feminism, encroaching into the minds of the African women is a very, very sensitive question, particularly for the African man. **Anytime** you ask him to do something, to go and fetch the child today, or something like that he says: "Look, you are already a feminist. You are a white women and a feminist." It is thrown into your face in the same way in which Communist is thrown into the face of the blacks in South Africa. So the fear is a concrete thing, there is a definite fear of feminism in the African men, especially in South Africa.
To What Extent is the South African Writer's Problem Still Bleak and Immense?

Sipho Sepamla

So much is written on South Africa, past and present, that one wonders what more to say. Today the war on apartheid is fought on so many fronts that it is a wonder apartheid is still alive. And as long as that monster is alive, so long will the writer's problem be bleak and immense.

Let me share with you some of the origins of apartheid which have unfortunately become imbedded in the minds of most whites including so-called white liberals. An authority of the South African situation writes as follows:

The South African approach to the position of the traditional ruler in changing African Society was unique on the continent . . . .

Since the South Africans in power held that the ways of living developed in the past by a people were best for them, it seemed logical to assume that subsequent changes in their modes of life must be undesirable . . . .

In other words the apartheid people told blacks and the world that changing times could not be allowed to bring about a better life for blacks. Listen to this statement quoted by the same authority:

the latent power of the Bantu’s own system in harnessed to play the leading part in the programme for the development of the Bantu community.

The question to ask here is who did the harnessing?

The thinking of the government has not moved far from the above position. In fact the tricameral parliament is a classic example of this type of reasoning. The terminology used in the country by officialdom speaks of 'own affairs'. In other words there should be separate facilities for the various ethnic groups. At present there are four ministers of education. It may

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2 Ibid., p. 359.
be laughable and tragic at the same time, but that is the reality of South Africa today. But what is illogical is the fact that the Africans are represented by a white minister. In the same breath one wants it to be noted that there are four ministers of finance. Again the Africans have no minister from their ranks. They are spoken for.

Thirty years ago the position of the writer in the country was bleak and immense. It has not changed. In a sense it has got worse. Thirty years ago an observer was dealing with a situation which was coming. Today the writer deals with the consequences of an evil system. There was sanity all around then; there is sickness everywhere today.

The passage of time has brought changes all around the world of the writer. For one thing the number of laws enacted to control the black man in particular has increased. Arrogance and desperation on the part of the rulers evidence themselves everywhere. While freedoms were eroded, people silenced, the road for puppets to walk on was smoothed and widened, the separation of people was completed. It has to be emphasized that there never was a time when the rulers had it their own way. Resistance in the cities was as evident as in the villages.

I want to share with you the words of a nineteen old boy.

'Our village'
Since two gents with white suits rolled up
Our village is not the same anymore
They pumped our chief full of bullets
They bumped off all our elders
They keep talking of a new life for us
They say this thing is also elsewhere
They have our whole country tied up
They have come a long way to help us
They want us to have faith in them

Our village is not the same anymore
Since two gents with white suits rolled up

This is a straightforward statement. It could have come from the mouth of any youngster from any of the so-called homeland villages. It is the imagination of a youngster given the chance to brood in a prison cell. Instead he went on to compose a number of poems. One is amazed at the lack of bitterness or the so-called shrill voice. What the poem does is to confirm that the South African writer is confronted with such devastating material that he need not embellish it by exaggeration. At the same time it seems

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3 Stanley Mafike, unpublished work
to me necessary to mention that the writer has a rapidly changing situation, events almost telescoping into each other with such speed that there is no time for reflection. One is here pleading for understanding. The choice faced by the writer is between recording for posterity or producing those rare gems for a handful of academics.

Apartheid has cost us our humanity. Since Dennis Brutus is banned in the country, it is only recently that I've laid my hands on his work. These words touched me:

'Their Behaviour'
Their guilt
is not so very different from ours:
— who has not joyed in the arbitrary exercise of power or grasped for himself what might have been another's and who has not used superior force in the moment when he could,  

The words staggered me. I couldn't reconcile them with the image of the writer I've heard so much about. His fight against apartheid has seemed single-handed in academic circles. But even if one is unaware of the circumstances surrounding these lines, they remain a terrible indictment against the evils of man against man. There was a time when many blacks might have said to the rulers, 'Let's talk'. Alas! That time is no more.

It is now history that the apartheid people buried alive many writers in 1963. This was particularly so for people who went into self-exile. In retrospect we find this step was nothing more than pettiness. There was no basis to ban many works: it all depended simply on where the writer lived, in or outside the country and since as I've said many were exiled, their works were banned. If the writer died in exile, his works became available. If he returned home, his works were made available. A more laughable situation I've never known.

But the point one wants to make relates to the vacuum created. It relates to the quality of work produced in ensuing years. Lewis Nkosi wrote in 1965:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both vigour and imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa.  

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5 Lewis Nkosi, Home and Exile (Langman America, 1983) p. 131.
For one who has been living inside the country all his life and thus a victim of censorship laws one wonders what Mr Nkosi is talking about. Given the Suppression of Communism Law of 1955, the Publication Acts of 1963 and a number of other laws waiting like vultures to pounce on the aspiring writer, one would ask how could the imagination come into play in a situation which is farcical even before pen is put on paper? But of course Mr Nkosi tells us something about the origins of writers of his day. We have already mentioned that most came into the field via journalism so any sins they committed could be placed on the doorstep of that profession.

Rather, we think Es’kia Mphahlele had a better perception of the matter. He came to this conclusion:

— as long as the white man’s politics continue to impose on us a ghetto existence, so long shall the culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to sink lower and lower; and for so long shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute fraction of life.\(^6\)

Mphahlele's statement was made in the early sixties but remains true in the eighties.

There are a number of things to take into account when a review is made of writing by blacks in South Africa. Censorship has been the most vicious in the crippling of creative writing inside the country. The effects of Bantu education have been devastating. Not only was knowledge of English undermined but interest in literature suffered likewise. The tastes of teachers and their scholars left much to be desired. But it is the work of the security police that we want to condemn in the strongest terms. Over the years one has watched the diabolical manipulations of these men. As soon as they found out that a young man had potential as a writer they found ways to discourage the youngster. Fear was implanted in the young mind so that sooner or later the community lost a writer. A popular way often used was to detain a young writer for being in possession of banned literature. One writer was actually waylaid by the police who followed him to his home. His home was searched yielding a banned book. But the book was banned for distribution and not possession. He was taken in all the same. As often happens the court dismissed the charge but the memory of it all soured the young writer. Many of us were fooled by the enthusiasm of one writer. He provided a newsletter, organized writers' seminars and showed concern for disadvantaged young writers. In the end he was exposed as a policeman not just an agent.

The polarization between blacks and whites over the years has meant the

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path travelled by a black writer has been hard and thorny. Too many obstacles were placed on aspiring writers. For instance, in the last thirty years blacks could identify with only two magazines: The Classic and Staff-rider. And some white publishers made it a condition that before they could publish a writer's work in book form, they had to have been published in magazines. The result has been predictable. The numbers of writers has gone down so much that their existence is debatable.

The fragmentation of society into ethnic groups based in their respective residential areas has meant the break-up of a community that has already been split by professional rivalry typical of human nature.

I couldn't conclude these rambling thoughts without reference to the role of the writer in present day South Africa. While many may have ceased to write, they have not disappeared from the daily struggle going on in the country. In fact what distinguishes today's writer from his predecessor is his active involvement in the pull and push of life. His job was essentially to stand back as it were, to observe and then describe for the world at large his observation. In other words the writer could afford to be detached from a situation. No wonder he could still laugh at what he witnessed.

The urgency of today's problem can be penned briefly. That means poetry is the medium. The writer is pressed for time, he must duck bullets or the sjambok; he languishes in jail for taking part in an illegal march or gathering. He is in crises in conferences. His voice denounces the increase of house rents in church halls because community halls are out of bounds. He reads his impromptu poem at mass funerals thus reviving the oral tradition downgraded by the colonizer.

What I am saying is that today's writer has merged with the crowd almost to a point of losing his identity. In the past the novelty of writing made the writer stand above the crowd. In other words it earned him respectability. Today that public's respect is earned by marching shoulder to shoulder with others or breathing in and out the stink of prison cells.

Let me return to the young poet:

'The State of Emergency'
As the sun descended
Spectres of tension ascended
Is this illusion or imagination
Long shadows of darkness
Unwavered by the night's loneliness
After a hard earned day

O’ what a shattering bang
That deafening rattle of panes
Confusion prevailed
Police! Police! Police!
All scattered for shelter
Maak oop! Maak oop! Julle k.
Dazed, I scuttled to the door
Camouflaged clad red faces
Armed with rifles and sjamboks
Pounced like vultures
It dawned to all
That we are under siege

The poem becomes the image. All sorts of feelings are aroused by these lines. And in my view the writer succeeds in informing us of the fear and degradation of the victim. But at the same time we are enlightened about the beastliness of his captors. The action tells us a lot about the confrontational life experienced by the victim. One would then ask when and where would a nineteen-year-old gain the technical skills expected by some evaluators? We think the choice is between remaining ignorant of the life of the young writer and others like him or accepting what he says regardless of the so called artistry expected of writers. One day there will be time and calm for all those fine points.

Let me touch very briefly on the current situation in the country. I do so as an observer because writing in the common understanding of that concept is almost dead. You may be interested to know that Skotaville, the only genuine black publishing house, has in the past three years produced not the creative writing books it had been founded for, but commentaries and research papers by academics. Journalists remain the recorders of our daily lives. None pretend to be creative writers as was the case thirty years ago.

An observer of South Africa will not fail to read gory stories of police brutality and the killing of blacks by blacks. The latter victims we are not able to substantiate but they make up some of the terrible stories we read. South Africa is going through what one might call a revolutionary phase. The incidents of brutality grow by the day. Three months back we were telling audiences that the past year saw on the average two deaths a day. The death toll according to a study by the South African Institute of Race Relations is now five people per day. The lifting of the state of emergency has made very little difference to blacks because they have lived under emergency regulations all the time.

What we find tragic for the country are the perceptions of blacks and whites: they differ greatly. While blacks see no change in the country,
many whites proclaim changes. But some will go on to say that admittedly the changes are not fundamental. In other words apartheid remains alive. In fact there are signs that apartheid will continue to be the order of our lives for a long time. The South African regime is adamant about seeing the country compartmentalized to fit in the various racial groups. On the other hand the youth are very clear about their goals: they want the land back into their hands. For them there’s no more time to negotiate. And they are prepared to die for this ideal. Anyone attending a mass funeral—often in defiance of the law—cannot fail to be nostalgic about the good old days of the fifties when the ANC held rallies around the country.

The balloon of white power has burst. The police and the SADF have failed to intimidate the people. The silence of the sixties is shattered at every funeral by the chants of freedom songs. The most popular of these is 'Siyaya Epitori'—‘We are going to Pretoria’ which is the seat of the law-makers. 1976 was the turning point in the struggle of the people. It brought with it many gains amidst the numberless dead sacrificed for truth. The eighties have chiselled a different mind amongst blacks. There are a number of slogans carried along the dusty streets of townships. Amongst these are 'Freedom Today, Education Tomorrow', another goes something like 'Always Forward or Sideways Never Backwards'. It is clear that unless the government yields to the will of the people by releasing their authentic leaders, such as Mandela, Sisulu and others, there is no way peace will return to the country. At the same time the authorities have to accept that they have to unban the ANC and the PAC.

However bleak and immense the writer’s problem is, it gives hope. Somehow a few of us will continue to be truthful witnesses of the dark and catastrophic situation. We know it is bound up with the problem of apartheid. Thus the emphasis for the moment is on the destruction of apartheid. And the writer has shown that he cannot be said to be wanting at this critical hour.
The African National Congress (ANC), and the people of South Africa have a history of having had to sacrifice all basic human needs: family warmth, friendship and the right of living in one's country. The ANC demands from each individual the highest form of discipline so that their actions define them as freedom fighters, so that each South African forges a lifestyle which equates freedom with life. That is one part of the story. The other is that the African National Congress, having demanded only the best of itself and of the people of South Africa, then forged alliances and friendships with governments, organizations and peoples whose purpose is to make the world a better place to live in.

The people of South Africa have not only rejected apartheid, but have gone further, and created an alternative to it. We define culture as the way people organize themselves to harness nature so as to better their lives; they make rules for themselves so that they know how to relate to each other in the process of harnessing nature, ensuring that the rights of individuals, groups, and the nation are protected, in order that the national collective talent contributes to progress, joy and peace of the world in general. It naturally follows that apartheid, whose basic principle is discrimination based on skin colour and super-exploitation of the majority by a minority, which apartheid defines as the major-race, is a violent cultural and political programme. In the South African context, a few get the best, the majority the worst.

History has taught us that it is not in the nature of man to accept oppression and exploitation, and the people of South Africa are no exception to this rule. Therefore, a regime in power which formulates apartheid and implements it, will naturally be faced with rejection and hostility from its victims, and therefore will have to devise strong means of making its violent cultural and political programme acceptable.

The minority white regime in South Africa then, having devised apartheid and having created a strong security system to protect and implement it, has had also to seek allies and friends to make progress out of its backwardness and to share the loot. Faced with the might of the 'master
race', the African National Congress and the majority of the people of South Africa, declared, 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people', and set a new cultural reference for the people of South Africa and the world to relate to.

This is the story about two forces, one fighting for the oppression and exploitation of the majority, and the other fighting for the majority to become free, non-racist and democratic. It is a story of how a people can degenerate to the lowest form of human life. It is also a story about how people can emerge in glory as they release their power for creativity to utilize the individual and collective talent and put these to the use of all. To the glory of humanity!

Three hundred years of living under oppression and exploitation is a thorough process of generations upon generations being subjected to a systematic programme of dehumanization; and, seventy-four years of being an organized people struggling to become part of the humanity is on the other hand a pointer to the size, depth and height of odds faced, also to the vastness of the wealth of experience gained. This, in varying degrees of ability has been the exploration of the cultural manifestation of South Africa.

In my opinion, it is against this background that South African cultural work and cultural workers must be judged. Whether we are looking at films, paintings, photographs, theatre, dance, and/or music our guide is the role these cultural manifestations have played to record the story of the people of South Africa, to portray the people of this country, to contribute to the betterment of their lives, to inspire these same people to reach their aspirations, and to give lasting, sustaining hope, so that their lives can be ruled by optimism.

It is not possible then, under these circumstances, to have cultural workers in South Africa who create art for art's sake, or cultural workers who have taken no side in this serious conflict. Nor is it possible to be alive and creating in a world which is, on a daily basis, fighting for peace for all in it, while its other part creates means and prepares for the complete annihilation of human-kind, if the majority refuses to succumb to oppression and exploitation. We, as cultural workers, like everybody else, must take positions on these matters.

Having said that, I want then to confront a very difficult and very serious reality which faces everyone on a daily basis, for, without doing this, art becomes irrelevant. Also, since I am dealing with South Africa, it is best to focus on the recent reality in that country. The African National Congress made a call to our people to make apartheid structures unworkable and the country ungovernable. The apartheid regime has directed
all those who support it, especially its supposedly invincible security system to, by all means, defend apartheid, this crime against humanity. What do these opposites mean for the people of South Africa on a daily basis?

I want here, to use literature, since that is what has brought us here together, to look at the issues of my country. The pictures of today's reality are grim, and can be blood-curdling. Let us isolate one incident, which is grim, which most people in the world are aware of because it is taken from the bloody streets of South Africa into the homes of the people inside the country and into large parts of the world. A young woman, who was still a student, was brought into living-rooms at newstime. She had just been bound, made to wear the necklace, and we watched as she wriggled beneath the raging flames which were consuming her clothes, her flesh and eventually, her life. Those who did it said that she was working for the police. They were doing this as they were burying ten young men of their own age who had been killed by grenades. The people of the township where this was happening said that the grenades were a booby-trap set by the police, and that this young woman who died such a grim death was responsible, for she had directly participated in planning this grim incident of grenades. A funeral procession united by revolutionary songs, brought together by the deaths of ten young men, whose bodies were in the coffins which the procession held aloft as it marched, watched as the young woman was caught, bound and burnt. What is all this? Well, the death of this young woman, more than anything else, must make us sober. It must demand that we find out how it is possible for a young woman, or for the matter, for anyone to die such a ghastly death.

Suppose it is true what the people are saying about this young woman, what does this say to a writer, and what can a writer do with such grim information? Even, if it is not true what the people were saying, the question remains: what does this say to a writer and what can a writer do with such information? What are the tools and skills which a writer must have to handle such matters? And, why must a writer deal with such matters, or does a writer have a choice: is it matter of take it or leave it? For the past twenty years the world has witnessed the South African regime, with frightening coldness, send its soldiers and police into the streets of townships all over South Africa to kill hundreds of young girls and boys in defence of white domination. We have heard what the reasons are for

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1 ‘To wear a necklace’ means to have an old car-tyre put round your neck, soaked in petrol and set alight, so that you burn to death. This is street justice whose victims have been people who are suspected of being informers and thus collaborating with the South African police. (Editor’s note.)
all this. What does a writer say to the many other fighting young girls and boys who have decided that no one will stop them from facing the soldiers, as long as the white minority regime remains in power. We also know what the regime says about all this and, daily, we witness what it does to those who say it through flowing blood, their own blood, that South Africa must change, will change. We have also heard the ANC call to the people of South Africa to render South Africa ungovernable and that they must form organs of popular power. Each side is going to use all its resources to achieve its objectives. Whose resources are South African cultural workers?

We must answer this question, for then, the answer enables us to answer once and for all the issues raised by the death of the young woman and the death of the ten young fighters. We may not know the details of these terrible incidents, but we know one thing: the minority regime has no respect for international law, for the sovereignty and independence of other countries, as the people of Southern Africa have come to know. It has no respect for life, will stop at nothing to maintain white domination. To them, we can say, it must be very clear that we do not want our children to be used for or killed to save apartheid which is a crime against humanity. Then we must as writers, arm the minds and hearts of our children with knowledge, with hope, with optimism, with courage that not one of them must be used to save apartheid.

South African literature which does not address itself to these issues is irrelevant. Writers who are not part of this unfolding process cannot write about the lives of these people. Why? That is so because we can only know how green the grass is and how many brown patches of earth hide themselves by reducing the distance between us and the grass we are looking at.

A bloody conflict is ensuing in South Africa. The people are saying that they have created street committees. These committees are taking control of the hearts and minds (use words that have been made bloody) of the oppressed. These committees are receptacles of new ideas which must challenge and do away with old ones. The courage, the hope, the optimism of these people, young and old, including children, who are part of the street committees, hold and hang on every second, every minute and every hour which passes everyday as blood flows, as gunshots crack, and gunsmoke smells. What literature must these people read, or what can the world read and learn from the literature of these embattled people? That to me is the issue in question which South African writers must answer through what they know best and it is the only tale they can tell well to their own people, and to the world.
Oh comrade
We would love less
You and I
If we loved not freedom more²

There is one truth that a South African writer knows: the world hears a lot about young men and women, the under thirties, who, through their lives, articulate the day-to-day struggle of the people. We as writers also know that the daily struggle of these youths is a manifestation of the presence of the African National Congress which is leading and guiding the process of struggle. This struggle is for the people to seize political power so that they can use the creative ability of everyone to build a new South Africa. What contribution can South African literature make to this process? That question, in my view, is one reason for our being in this conference. The presence of writers from other countries enables us to learn from them and their people, and they can learn from us and our people, and, since South Africa is part of the world and as a result part of this conference, it is our task as writers to support firmly this noble objective of the people of South Africa, also, to learn from them for our creativity.

In her poem 'Childhood in Soweto', Lerato Khumalo, a South African poet, ably portrays the life of a child who has to grow up in this township, where 'there are no playgrounds/there are no stars/to twinkle twinkle little eyes'. She concludes:

But I have seen new plays
in one act
announcing the birth
of childhood
grenades clearing the night
of blinders of smoke
and hurdles
passing the child
into star-grappling teens
adulthood without passes
in Soweto
in towns and cities
north and east
growing from
Soweto³

² Lindiwe Mabuza, 'To a comrade' in ed. Sono Molefe, Malibongwe ANC Women: Poetry is also their Weapon. ANC, p. 100.
³ Lerato Kumalo, 'Childhood in Soweto', in op. cit. p. 40.
I will start this lecture by recounting to you what happened to me back in South Africa just before I left for Sweden. I travelled from Lesotho to South Africa to tell my step-father that I was going to Europe, and I had quite a lot of material with me, as I had been in Lesotho for a while. On the border some of my books and some of my literature were seized, and I was detained and interrogated for a number of hours, and as you may expect, it was quite a ruffling experience. When we were on our way to Soweto the bus stopped at a place called Nanceville, and the driver told us that since he had to make some deliveries, half of us should change to another bus, so that it would not take all night to take people to their homes. Whilst we were waiting there, a whole contingent of soldiers, no not soldiers, men in plain clothes converged on our bus from five cars. It was only after a while that we realized that these people were all armed, and white. They ordered us to sit down in the bus and do nothing and say nothing until they had carried out whatever they were doing. They went into the bus, and in the back of the bus sat a young black man. They told him to stand up and raise his hands, and he went out of the bus with them. They asked him where his luggage was, and he pointed to his briefcase, and they said 'take it down', and he took it down. Then they went out of the bus with them. All these people searched him, with a gun pointed at him, and someone shone a torch right in his face. He was searched and undressed, and all this happened when we were sitting and watching. We did not know what was going on. Later we were told to get off the bus and put our luggage next to us, and police dogs were going to come and search our luggage. We waited there. By the time it was all over, it was already Monday morning, just before I was coming here on Tuesday. The whole thing really left me feeling quite empty and quite ruffled.

Is protest still the dominant tone of black South African writing is the topic on which I have chosen to speak today. The prevailing South African situation has been studied and analyzed by eminent economists, sociologists, politicians, historians and writers from many countries. These scholars have described the position in our country objectively as they com-
prehend and understand it. I shall therefore not dwell on what has been said about the black South African writers in this crisis. Two weeks ago I was with a white woman who takes an interest in black writers and is always willing to buy books and meet writers. She had just returned from Holland, and when I informed her that I would soon be attending conferences in Europe, she asked: 'Just what are you going to tell those people that do not already know? Those people in Europe seem to know more about what is happening here than we do!' I thought I could detect a note of disgust in her remark. 'Well', I replied, 'perhaps you differed with them in your opinion of what is actually happening here. It is a healthy situation to differ sometimes', I said. 'That is what makes the world such an interesting place to be.' She did not look happy though and she shook her head disappointedly. She perhaps did not realize that the South African black writer needs critical attention and argumentation in order to grow. For too long now an impermeable wall has been created around us. The time has now arrived for us to break down the barriers.

Martin Legassick, an eminent economist, in his article entitled "South Africa in Crisis. What Route to Democracy" states that: 'South Africa is in an unparalleled turmoil.' One does not need to be a scholar of repute to realize just how true that statement is. Legassick further remarks that 'Apartheid or its segregationalist precursors or its new apartheid and federalist successors is not merely a theory or practice concerned with racial and cultural identity and division, but the means of sustaining profits, domination and survival of the capitalist class and its system'.

We who live under the system have to try to overcome the massive pressures, psychological, emotional and spiritual that result from it. The committed black South African writer, whose task is to reflect the day-to-day experiences of the individual is in many instances hampered or even paralyzed by the ever-threatening forces around him or her. The black South African writer writes because there is so much around him or her that hurts and needs to be expressed and exposed. He or she writes to protest, to hit back, to keep pounding at the clamped door until it opens. In terms of doubts and uncertainties, people search for the truth in the written word. They turn to books, the daily newspapers or they go to the theatre. Black South African writers continue to probe, to question and to analyze. What is constant and dominant is the word of protest and perhaps revolt.

The recent spurt of writings in black theology—published by Skotaville Press—or Bishop Tutu's hope and suffering and doctor Alan Boesak's black and reformed church are good examples. Speaking for Ourselves, a booklet published by the Institute for Contextual Theology, protests against misrepresentation and distortion of facts as far as African religion
is concerned. All express the need for black churches to struggle against the fetters which have chained the minds and the souls of the black people in their quest for freedom of expression. In Speaking for Ourselves, history as recorded by the whites is under scrutiny. To quote some examples, ‘There is one enormous omission throughout the whole history that has been written by outsiders. The work of the holy spirit throughout our history has simply been left out. The events of our history have been recorded as if everything could be accounted for simply by sociology and anthropology. The authors tried to explain everything that happened by pointing to the influence of some social force or some idea or some human leader. What about the influence of the holy spirit?’ The book states ‘We believe that our churches are founded by the holy spirit. That is the independent churches. The founders of the churches of the people were inspired by the spirit who instructed them to start a church. It was the spirit who moved the members of the churches to leave the white churches and to come and join us’. With regards to our customs, the writer remarks

‘One of the most important reasons for the dispute between the white churches and the churches of the people is our attitude towards African customs. This is also a great source of misunderstanding and confusion in the books that have been written about us. From our point of view, the attitudes of the whites to our customs is totally incomprehensible. Why in the world should the African customs be regarded as heathen while European customs are regarded as Christian? Why should our African names be called heathen names while European names are called Christian names? Why are our traditional doctors called ‘witchdoctors’ and why is our way of showing respect to our ancestors rejected as pagan superstition? All this makes even less sense to us when you observe that the culture and customs that we read about in the Bible is far closer to our culture and customs than to the Western culture of the white churches?’

This booklet does not stop at the point of protest. It envisages concentrated effort and in depth research to establish the African religious experience as we understand and appreciate it through investigation and study. It states ‘This time a questionnaire will be circulated which will be based, not on assumptions of Western theology’, and they will be asking people interviewed for their experience rather than simply their ideas.

Black drama appears to be one of the most active spheres of black writing. In addition to the many offers of assistance from many influential organizations, there has recently been a series of shows arranged by the French government. They call it the Grand Festival. A series of shows arranged on the initiative of these people was recently carried out in Soweto and other townships. It was meant to encourage as many black people to attend the theatre as possible. Black playwriters from many parts of the country were encouraged to submit their manuscripts and make their
groups available for a series of shows. These were widely advertised in the newspapers and the response of the black audience was phenomenal. The entrance fees to these shows were reasonably low and within the reach of the people generally as they were subsidized. Unlike shows which are usually performed inside town at the Market Theatre, these were performed at the centres inside townships at the doorsteps of peoples' homes, to make them easily accessible.

Black theatre continues to allude to and to ridicule some of the so called 'changes', changes which are supposed to be in the process of being implemented as reforms by the government. This black theatre is explicit in exposing some of the fears, and conflicts experienced by the whites, especially by the poorer classes who have been most brain-washed, the 'verkrampte' throughout South African history, since the arrival of the white men. These whites find themselves in the unique and preposterous situation in which they are called upon to surrender their most coveted god-given rights to privilege and superiority. For centuries now, they have been pampered and led to believe that the colour of their skins is indeed the deciding factor. They have to go through a very painful process of de-conditioning. They found themselves being subjected to very humiliating experiences; for example, white motorists have been arrested in the streets within full view of everyone by black traffic officials for traffic offences. I think that was unheard of just a few years ago. The big shopping complexes like OK and the Agas, actually expect those with lily-white complexions to queue up with black faces and wait for their turn into the toilets. I could go on and on quoting some of these so called 'changes' which are viewed as laughable and trivial by blacks and ever so crucial by whites. The blacks ask 'Who wants to be offered to marry their daughters anyway? We want universal franchise. One man one vote, nothing else. Our dignity as human beings is at stake here and is not a negotiable issue at all'. Plays written by black playwriters, are quite explicit in expressing the aspirations of the Africans, and the voice of protest is their common denominator. Last year, I wrote a play, *Crimen Injuria*, for a Dutch theatre group in which there is protest against the cunning use of involuntary sterilization of black women under the guise of family planning in the government-sponsored means of population control.

One of the resolutions passed at our conference of African writers at the end of last month is that writers should continue to determinedly and furiously voice their protest against the detentions without trial, shootings by the police and army, disappearance of leaders and others, the torture of people in detention. In his/her works the writer has to express the anger of the oppressed. Black journalists, the committed ones, are faced with the task of reflecting the truth as it is and taking a firm stand against writers
and the media who twist and distort facts. As we all know, perhaps, all the very influential newspapers and the radio and television are under the direct control of a system which wants to spread propaganda which is in their favour. Protest writing is inevitable under the prevailing conditions. Some maintain that the stubborn stand by the censorship board has had to be abandoned, if only partially. This seems to be evident in the kind of books, volumes and plays which are now being allowed to appear. With few exceptions many formerly banned books have been unbanned. When I went to the Dutch Consulate Office to obtain a visa the ambassador said, 'Have you noticed the kind of plays and shows at the market theatre lately? One would think one is in Europe'. In fact for quite some time, now, many of us have noticed that. Some kind of good sense has prevailed in the minds of those who decide what the people of South Africa may or may not hear, read or see. Many who know the kind of material which was formally allowed to circulate, remark that the films and plays are too daring. Plays like that normally don't pass, instead others depict these sentiments. When I noticed this trend I wrote to the censorship board, not to appeal against the ban of my books but to enquire if they were still banned and if so why? The director of publications, professor J. C. W. van Rojen replied and informed me that the three novels had in fact been unbanned. Amandla in March and the two versions of Muriel at Metropolitan in April last year. This came as a shock to me as I had never been officially informed by the board, nor by my publishers or even the press. The unbannings had, the gentleman said, been made known in the government gazettes of March and April 1985. The professor then concluded 'Thank you for your letter of the 18th of September 1985. I appreciate you having watched the programme and hope that better relations between black writers and this board will develop. I made contact with Sipho Sepamla and enjoyed the exchange of ideas'. I wondered whether the lifting of the bans on my books was not because the board was aware that they are totally unavailable inside the country after six to eight years of banning! One of my short stories which was in fact banned without ever having been published in 1979 titled 'Just the Two' was not listed in these letters. I therefore have reason to believe that it is still banned.

In conclusion, the writers within South Africa are more than ever before, affirming their stand against the ever intensifying oppression of the present regime. We are not prepared to stand cap-in-hand and receive whatever comes handed over to us by those who have made themselves our masters. We are determined to demand and to take what is in fact our birthright.
From the discussion

Sipho Sepamla: About two weeks ago there was a conference of African writers and the question of African women writing was raised, and I made a statement that some people thought was outrageous, but I would like to put it again to this meeting. I said that they [the women] should decide whether they wanted to be housewives and continue their traditional African way of life or not get married and become writers. If they are going to be moaning to the black men that they don't have time they'll moan until Doomsday. I still hold that view. If you look at the American scene you find either the women there have not gotten into the trappings of marriage or they have gotten out of the married status. Our women are going to be moaning about how they are being treated by the black men until they take up the fight themselves and liberate themselves.

David Maillu: I don't think one should see writing or marriage in isolation from the many other problems in the complex situation which exists in Africa. Referring to the question of women writers, however, the pathetic thing is that it has not come to women's attention that if you want to write, you will create the time, whether you have a child on your back or whether you are pregnant. I think the time is there, and there is a tendency in Africa to blame things on outsiders.

Lauretta Ngcobo: We are in a situation where we have got to understand what writing really means in terms of exchange of ideas. When a woman writes she crosses boundaries of traditional outlook towards ideas. Women in our societies have never been entitled to initiate ideas. Women have been receptive to men's ideas, and women could not change ideas in society, because they did not have the scope to present the ideas. And so when a woman writes she is crossing barriers, and first of all, before she confronts the world, she confronts her husband. Buchi Emecheta's first book did not come out, because it was burnt by her husband. This might be the extreme case of what I am trying to say, of men not granting you the right to express ideas, but at the last Book Fair in Zimbabwe we had a session where many women stood up and said, 'My book has been destroyed, he would not let it be published.' In Africa it is simplistic to say, 'Just stand up and write', because though the women might want to write, they are not free to express the difficulties they come across in their marriages. And no woman will stand up in public and say, 'I have been trying to write, but my husband will not allow it.' So she says 'I have been too busy.' Those are the problems. When I make an appeal to the men in this gathering to
let us write, to present our views differently, it is against the background of an unwilling male world.

Wally Serote: It is a fact that women are oppressed, and exploited and I think it becomes our task to look at the problem in terms of how it manifests itself historically. It begins when social systems are formed and a certain social position is given to women. It is important for us to understand that whether you are talking about feudalism in Europe or in Africa it is the same thing, it affected the women in the same manner. By so saying I am trying to say that the problem of the oppression of women is an international problem. I do not share the view that the problem should be solved by women only. I think that it is a problem that should be solved by both men and women.

Njabulo Ndebele: I think that it is a terrible choice to place before women, that they have to choose between writing and having a family. The point is that we have to have the family, but we should look for the kind of family that would permit maximum creativity of all members in a given social situation. So I think that questions of sexism in family and the feminist movement are inseparable from the question of what kind of society we are fighting for.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o: I believe that the struggle to overturn the entire system from the point of view of women will not come from initiatives from men, but will come from the kind of offensive which is being waged by, for instance, the women writers in front of us, both through their actions and through their articulation of the problems, and I would say, please go on articulating the problem even more vigorously and do not apologize, because it is important in correcting this imbalance. I see you from the outside, but I cannot see you from the inside, and only the person who is affected can actually articulate the problems.
Beyond 'Protest': New Directions in South African Literature

Njabulo Ndebele

Recently, I have suggested that what has been called 'protest literature' may have run its own course in South Africa. It is my intention here to probe further into this evaluation by attempting to bring out clearly its theoretical foundations. Basically, the problem is that 'protest literature' appears to have lost its objective basis. The fact that much of the writing produced in the townships of South Africa since 1976 still reproduces this protest tradition with little modification, reveals what seems to me to be the characteristics of a socially entrenched manner of thinking about the South African reality; a manner of thinking which, over the years, has gathered its own momentum and now reproduces itself uncritically. It is like a train whose driver has lost control; it runs dangerously on its fixed rails, passing, with great speed, where it is supposed to stop. The difference might be that in the case of the train, its driver will know almost immediately that he is in trouble. He is, after all, not the train. In the case of the writer of 'protest literature', on the other hand, it may not be so easy for him to separate himself momentarily from his mind.

The problem is to be located in the nature of South African oppression and how its unabating pervasiveness has induced, almost universally in the country, a distinctive manner of thinking about the socio-political realities in the country. It has induced a socio-political epistemology that conceives of reality purely in terms of a total polarity of absolutes. Such an epistemology is, of course, entirely understandable: South African society is a highly polarized society. It is understandable that its constituent polarities should dominate the thinking of its citizens. This is even more so when we realize that one major characteristic of the South African social formation is how the racist rulers have done very little to hide the polarities produced by their iniquitous domination. On the contrary, these polarities have been and continue to be displayed fully. There can be no doubt, for

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example, about who is in power and who is not; no doubt about who commands vast resources of wealth, and who lives in abject poverty. There is no doubt also, in general terms, why things are the way they are.

In general, this situation has resulted in two ways of perceiving the South African reality. For the oppressed, political knowledge came to be equated with the recognition of the blatant injustice which occurs in various forms throughout the country. To know has been to know how badly one has been treated. Every other thing is irrelevant if it is perceived as not contributing to the extension of this knowledge. Beyond that, having this knowledge implied that one either gives in to the bleak reality revealed, or commits himself to removing this general condition of injustice. How this is actually carried out will depend on what means are available to the oppressed at any particular moment.

On the other hand, for the ruling white racists, knowledge has been equated with the quest for mastery over the political and economic means of maintaining privilege and domination. To know has been to find ways of maintaining dominance. As a result, the white racists have, over the years, built, and now have access to a complex structure of government and its related institutions, as well as an array of other social and economic institutions, all of which have diversified the sources as well as the means of acquiring information and knowledge for the preservation of political and economic domination.

In order for us to get a practical sense of this situation, I thought it useful that we examine a recent drama between African miners and the white mine managers of the Impala Platinum Mine in that part of South Africa called Bophuthatswana. This particular drama seems to play out for me some important aspects of the history of the African struggle for freedom in South Africa.

Recently in South Africa some 23,000 African miners were summarily dismissed from their jobs. This figure is immense, but the real figure is much larger, when we consider the fact that the dismissed men came from families who depended on them for a livelihood. So there is a real sense in which it was not just the miners who were dismissed, but also at least 100,000 other people. But the drama of South African oppression is such that it has become customary for its observers, both those involved and those on the sidelines, to focus on its most observable aberrations. We concentrate on the 23,000 men, the most observable proof of injustice, and consequently, the most immediate in terms of the imperatives of political activism. The other 100,000 maintain a blurred presence, seldom becoming a serious factor of analysis and reflection. They were not there at the scene of the action. This point I shall come back to later.

The two parties involved in this labour dispute reveal their perceptions
of the problems before them in the following manner. Following their dismissal, a representative of the striking miners observed: 'Management does not have sympathy for people. They don't listen to what we have to say. They regard us as animals. That is why it is possible for them to do this.' On the other hand, a representative of the mine management observed: 'you run into a point where they get completely unreasonable. The alternative is to get rid of the whole labour force and replace them. There is a condition of massive unemployment in the country and that encourages us to take this kind of action.'

Firstly, at the most immediate pre-critical level, we cannot fail to recognize the them-us polarity. There is no need even to state that the management is white and the miners are black. The them-us polarity already exists within that other larger polarity. Secondly, the miners seem to be almost completely powerless against the massive power of the management. The management controls the means of livelihood. It controls a complex organization which is itself firmly placed within the even more complex structure of exploitation characteristic of the South African social formation. Furthermore, the habit of working within a complex system develops the manipulative capacity of those in control of the system to take advantage of the laws of that system to their own benefit.

Against all this, the miners, having been effectively denied the opportunity to create comparable adversary systems of their own, have had no opportunity to develop their own manipulative capacity. They have nothing of comparable organizational status to set in motion in order to defend and project their interests. Indeed, all they have is their voice, and the capacity of that voice, under the circumstances, is limited largely to articulating grievance, drawing its strength and validity from the moral law: 'Management does not have sympathy for people.' But, as it is clear, the moral law can be tragically impotent in the face of economic laws that do not recognize its intrinsic validity.

It seems clear that in this situation, the structural position of the miners (the aggrieved) permits them, in their response to their terrible ordeal, very few options besides the mere articulation of grievance. This structural position of the miners in this case, is identical, it seems to me, to the structural position of the oppressed majority in South Africa during that time in that country's history when protest literature flourished: the period between

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3 Ibid.
4 Although miners outside of the Bantustans have access to trade union organizations, those working in Bophuthatswana still cannot legally form unions.
1948 and 1961. It was a period characterized by a greater institutionalization of repression. There was much organized resistance, but it was often brutally crushed. This increased repression created a charged atmosphere for protest such that the resulting articulation of grievance, at both organizational and personal levels, became the very index of powerlessness.

The result of this situation was that increasingly, the material dimensions of oppression soon assumed a rhetorical form in which the three chief rhetorical components were: first, the identification and highlighting of instances of general oppression; second, the drawing of appropriate moral conclusions from the revealed evidence and, lastly, the implicit belief in the inherent persuasiveness of the moral position. The identified outward evidence of oppression then, prompted a rhetoric which emphasized the moral embitterment of the oppressed. It is this kind of rhetoric that began to dominate the consciousness of the oppressed in such a way that the oppressed could easily lose the sense of the actual mechanisms of their own oppression. This condition can have devastating effects on the capacity of the oppressed to develop a creatively analytical approach to their predicament.

For example, the pervasive images of wealth and poverty, of power and powerlessness, of knowledge and ignorance, of form and formlessness, may easily lead to the simplification and trivialization of moral perception. The oppressed need only cast their eyes around and they see a universal confirmation of their status. Evil abounds. There is no need for further analysis. The mere pointing of a finger provides proof. In this situation, the rhetorical identification of social and political evil may easily become coincident with political and intellectual insight. The recognition of a source of grievance does not necessarily imply an understanding of a possible range of political implications which that recognition may entail. This problem, as has been hinted above, might give us some understanding of the effect of oppression on the general intellectual development of the oppressed.

It needs to be stated that the moral position, when we consider the overall circumstances in which recourse to it was taken, was, of course, entirely valid and correct. What one is attempting to do here is hint at its possible limitations. This task is essential when a particular way of viewing reality gathers its own momentum over a period of time and becomes a predominant mode of perception even when the conditions justifying its existence have passed. At that point the mode of perception, by failing to transcend its own limitations, can become part of the oppression it sought to understand and undermine. It does not do so intentionally, of course: it simply becomes trapped. Such entrapment may even lead to the develop-
ment of a dangerous predisposition to reform rather than to radical change.

Indeed, the entrapment of resistance in an unreflective rhetoric of protest could easily be one of the sources of reactionary politics even among the oppressed. Where the dialectic between good and evil has been simplified, the predisposition, on the part of the powerful, to satisfy the oppressed's moral sense with minimum concessions, asserts itself. This happens at those moments when the oppressors feel that it is in their own interests to make concessions. Such concessions, if they can be perceived as significant gains, particularly by the oppressed, can lead to the politics of reform. Reform easily appeals to the moral sentiment; whereas radical change relies on continuous critical engagement with reality such that not only nothing is taken for granted, but also that the reformist manipulations of the oppressor can even be anticipated and neutralized. However, that the moral sentiment can be compromised in this manner does not invalidate it; it is simply that the conditions in which it can continue to inspire confidence ought to be brought into being, for they do not as yet exist.

I have so far devoted much of this paper to a discussion of the general situation in order to suggest the unenviably onerous position of the writer in this situation; to indicate how writers can themselves be encapsulated by the material and intellectual culture of oppression, and how difficult it can be for them to achieve a transcendence. For example, it became the responsibility of the writers to codify the predominant modes of political perception by transforming those perceptions into literary figures. This led to the predominance of certain themes, characters, and situations which were welded into a recognizable grammar of protest. We were shown the predictable drama between the ruthless oppressors and their pitiful victims: ruthless policeman and their cowed, bewildered prisoners; brutal farmers and their exploited farm hands; cruel administrative officials and the bewildered residents of the township; crowded trains and the terrible violence that goes on in them among the oppressed, and a variety of similar situations. Of course, what we are looking at here is a trend. There were other writings that handled the issues very differently.

For the bulk of the writings, however, their characteristics, as has been suggested above, are entirely understandable when we consider not only the structural position of the oppressed African population as a whole, in the South African social formation, but also the social position of the writers within the oppressed population. The bulk of them were either teachers or journalists or both, more often than not with an Anglican educational or religious background. It is understandable that they should express the predicament of the oppressed not in terms of what structurally
produced it, but in terms of its implied opposite: white political and economic power and privilege. There, lay the moral problem. The writing sharpened the moral sense which, under the circumstances, may have been the only effective way to validate and maintain the sense of legitimate political opposition. From this perspective, moral opposition should properly be regarded as both historically and politically apt.

If protest writing in the fifties was in tune with protest politics, protest writing in the sixties and seventies was not entirely in tune with political developments. Protest politics effectively ends in 1968 with the establishment of the South African Students' Organization (SASO), and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). But protest writing, significantly, did not end with the end of protest politics. It simply assumed a different form of protest. Certainly, it reflected the militancy and confrontational attitude of the new Movement but while the new Movement represented a decisively new political orientation, the writing that it inspired represented no remarkable contribution to literary figuration. The new writing did not appropriate the analytical sophistication of the BCM into its own handling of literary form.

The reason for this situation is not hard to find. The political analysis of the role of literature in the struggle for liberation did not go beyond the general agreement that literature must be committed. A rhetorical attitude toward literature was adopted which did not analytically spell out how literature could express its commitment. What we have, as a result, is protest literature that merely changed emphasis: from the moral evil of apartheid, to the existential and moral worth of blackness; from moral indignation, to anger; from relatively self-composed reasonableness, to uncompromising bitterness; from the exterior manifestations of oppression, to the interior psychology of that oppression. That may be why the bulk of the writing was poetry. But while the poetry turns its attention towards the self, it is still very much conscious of the white 'other'. Although the new writing has begun to make a move away from that preoccupation with the 'other', it is still rooted in the emotional and intellectual polarities of South African oppression as discussed above. And this is the point at which protest literature turns into a pathology: when the objective conditions no longer justify or support an entirely emotional or moral attitude.

There is much to indicate that the structural position of the oppressed in South Africa had altered significantly, particularly from the time of the

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5 Of course, the major liberation movements, ANC and PAC, in opting for the armed struggle immediately following their banning in 1961, declared the end of the politics of protest. But, at the time, that new approach did not have a lasting impact in the country.
labour strikes that shook the country from 1973 onwards. The phenomenal
growth of the economy up to that time is clearly responsible for a signifi-
cant change in relations of power between the oppressed and the oppressor.
Increased industrialization had enhanced the capacity of working people to
assert their collective power. The intensity of the labour disputes, for ex-
ample, led eventually to the capitulation of the state to demands for the
legal unionization of labour. Meanwhile, the events of June 1976 also
helped to consolidate the new relations of power. Clearly, the structural
position of the oppressed now was such that they could no longer be cowed
into the kind of submission reminiscent of the fifties. The inevitable
growth and consolidation of this new power would definitely lead to the
new general perceptions of what was possible. While the range of what was
possible had been severely limited by the condition of powerlessness, now
the newly found power could extend that range considerably in all kinds
of directions. Suddenly, the possibilities are immense.

The rest of this essay is premised on the belief that the greatest challenge
of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways
of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological
structures of South African oppression, structures which can severely com-
promise resistance by domination thinking itself. The challenge is to free
the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception
that have characterized apartheid society. For writers this means freeing
the creative process itself from those very laws. It means extending the
writer's perception of what can be written about, and the means and
methods of writing.

It seems to me that we begin to formulate a redemptive approach when
we as writers ask the question: where is the struggle in South Africa at the
moment? Many events in there have led to that question. For example, the
prolonged school boycott that began in 1976, has finally led to similar
questions with regard to education: where do we go from here? What kind
of education do we want for the future? It is the momentum of events that
has led inevitably to these questions. Such questions already suggest that
the closed structures of thought under oppression have been cracked. Any-
thing is now possible. Indeed, the possibilities of answering the questions
are themselves infinitely vast.

It seems to me these are the most important questions that have been
asked by our people in recent times, and they are questions that can only
be fully answered from a full understanding of the position from which
they are asked. They suggest that as far as education is concerned, the op-
pressed have reached a position at which an aspect of the structure of
domination has, through their own actions, been rendered completely in-
operative. A point has been reached, therefore, whereby the oppressed
have now to ask themselves fundamental questions about their own future. In this case, the issue is no longer the moral condemnation of Bantu Education; rather, it is the creation of a new kind of education.

The significance of these questions is that they indicate the freeing of the social imagination from the constraints of attempting to envision the future under the limitations of oppression. The future is, at this point, a clean slate; a clean sheet of paper waiting to be written upon. It is a challenging yet daunting task, amenable to no easy answers, for it represents the very beginnings of a new society. The task of an alternative ideology, therefore, is to provide, among other things, new ways of thinking about the future of South Africa.

The starting point is the need and demand of the oppressed for liberation. The political imperatives of that demand are the positing of an alternative future followed by the seizure of state power. For the political activist, the task seems clear. For the producer of cultural artifacts, on the other hand, the situation may not be so clear because his role as well as that of his work, has not been so clearly defined. The South African writer, in particular, appears not to have begun to ask fundamental questions about his role, as well as that of his artistic practice. By and large, he appears not to have handed over this task to the political activist, who may not himself have articulated a comprehensively analytical position about the role of the arts in the struggle. This situation, it seems to me, has been responsible for much of the slow growth of South African literature.

The problem has been that questions about art and society have been easily settled after a general consensus about commitment. This has led to the prescription of solutions even before all the problems have been discovered and analyzed. The writer, as a result, has tended to plunge into the task of writing without fully grappling with the theoretical demands of that task in all its dimensions. Armed with notions of artistic commitment still constrained by outmoded protest-bound perceptions of the role of art and of what constitutes political relevance in art, he set about reproducing a dead end. Consequently, the limited range of explorable experience characteristic of writing under the protest ethos, has continued to plague South African writing. We can perhaps begin to edge away from the situation by addressing the issue of the nature of art as well as the question of what constitutes relevance under a situation of radical flux.

One accusation that has often been levelled at writers, particularly in those countries hungry for radical change, is that many of them have not offered solutions to the problems they may have graphically revealed. It seems to me that this accusation has always revealed a certain confusion, on the part of the accusers, on what the nature of the relationship between art and society really is. More often than not, the accusation has been
premised on the demand that artists produce works that will incite people to political action. That, we will all agree, is, strictly speaking, the task of the professional propagandist. The aims of the propagandist are immediate action. His propagandist intentions are entirely practical.

The artist, on the other hand, although desiring action, often with as much passion as the propagandist, can never be free from the rules of irony. Irony is the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction. Its fundamental property, for the literary arts in particular, is that everything involving human society is in a constant state of flux; that the dialectic between appearance and reality in the conduct of human affairs is always operative and constantly problematic, and that consequently, in the representation of human reality, nothing can be taken for granted. If the writer has an ideological goal, and he always has, he has to reach that goal through a serious and inevitable confrontation with irony. The writer, then, must earn his conclusions through the resulting sweat. And when he has won that battle, he will most likely leave us, the reader, more committed, but only on the necessary condition that the reader has been made to reflect deeply on the nature and implications of his commitment.

The relationship between politics and art is by definition always mediated by reflection. We distinguish only between immediate action, on the one hand, and delayed action, on the other. We do not choose between politics and art; rather, we participate in the dialectic between them. To understand this is to understand the creative possibilities of both.

The way seems clear now for us to deal with the question of relevance. The more limited understanding of the relationship between politics and literature would define relevance as any subject or act that is perceived to contribute dramatically to the struggle for liberation. The operative word here is dramatic. What is dramatic is often defined according to the imperatives of realpolitik. The dramatic can easily be determined: strike action, demonstrations, alternatively, the brutality of the oppressive system. It should not be difficult to realize that the range of what is traditionally regarded as relevant is tragically limited in comparison to the complex structure of oppression itself. The system does not only send tanks into the townships. It does a lot more. It works at subtle co-optation; it tries to produce a middle class; it sets up a series of diplomatic initiatives, it seeks to create normalcy by insidiously spreading a hegemony that the oppressed are designed to accept willingly. It mobilizes its own range of extra-governmental institutions in an attempt to impose and propagate its hegemony. For example, it will open up private schools to Africans where they can absorb a wide range of hegemonic practices that may ultimately not be in their own interest. In other words, the system responds as a total system.

Clearly, if it is the entire society that has to be re-created, then no aspect
of society can be deemed irrelevant to the progress of liberation. Clearly, the broader the focus, the more inclusive, then the more multifold and more complex the attack. In this context, relevance, for the post-protest South African writer, begins, as it should, with the need for the seizure of state power, but this need, during the process of struggle, necessarily fragments into a concern with an infinite number of specific social details which constitute the primary reason why the struggle occurs in the first place, and why state power ought to be seized eventually.

However, and most paradoxically, for the writer, the immediate problem, just at the point at which he sits down to write his novel, is not the seizure of power. Far from it. It is the single-minded focussing on a range of social conditions, most of which are left out of the purview of populist politics, which are the major ingredients of social consciousness. Otherwise, exclusion on the grounds of dramatic political statement will limit the possibilities of any revolution, by limiting its imagination.

What are the practical implications of all this? We have already seen how the structural status of the oppressed within the South African social formation has altered radically. The implications of this newly found power are the writer's starting point. That power is clearly aware of itself, and that self-awareness seems destined to grow. But, judging from the fundamental questions being asked, that power is still not fully aware of what can actually be achieved with it. Details still have to be worked out. And this is where the writer's role becomes crucial. It is his task to contribute effectively to the consolidation of that power, by consolidating consciousness of it at all levels of society. He can do so in a number of ways.

First of all, there must be a freeing of the imagination in which what constitutes the field of relevance is extended considerably. What is relevant is the entire community of the oppressed. Politics is not only the seizure of state power, it is also the seizure of power in a woman's burial society in the township; it is the seizure of family power by children, thus altering drastically the nature of the family, something that might have tremendous implications for the new society to be born.

This issue is so important that a few more examples should be given. Firstly, for a highly industrialized society such as South Africa, there is a tragic paucity of imaginative re-creations of the confrontation between the oppressed and the tools of science. Supposing a character wants to study science, what goes on in his mind when he makes that decision? What is his vision of the social role of the scientific endeavour? Turgenev, for example, in Fathers and Sons provides a compelling view of the impact of the scientific method on human behaviour. Alternatively, what kind of relationships are created between a worker in a factory and his machine? The answer to this question is not necessarily obvious. Will he necessarily feel
oppressed and alienated, as traditional wisdom would assume? There is much to suggest that this confrontation is much more problematic than is traditionally thought.

Secondly, we have, for better or for worse, a group of politicians in the so-called independent countries of South Africa. Stooges, no doubt. But what are the intricacies of their flawed diplomatic practice? We have no literature of diplomacy which can reveal the human dimension to the barreness of this kind of politics. It behoves an artist to help the reader bury a stooge while understanding something of his motivations. That way the reader learns something about the psychology of the co-opted. The aesthetics of protest would be content to kill off the man, thus enacting what might be necessary, but leaving us with no knowledge.

Thirdly, the pressures of modern life on family life have been immense. We know the causes: migrant labour, influx control laws and a variety of others. Protest literature has done a commendable job in keeping these causes in our minds. But what has happened to the family itself? If the ethical codes that governed family relationships have been changed, what have they become, and how have the new codes helped to bring about either relief or more misery?

Fourthly, the energetic and creative world of sport and fashion has seldom been treated beyond the sensationalism of the popular press. Since Mphahlele's 'Grieg on a Stolen Piano', that particular theme has not received much imaginative attention. Lastly, I have commented in the past about the lack of compelling imaginative re-creations of rural life in our literature. All we know about are dejected peasants, suffering pathetically under a tyrannical Boer farmer. Alternatively, the peasants are the focus of Christian evangelism. Beyond these two examples, the settings as well as the themes are infinite.

One other way the South African writer can move effectively into the post-protest era is, in certain circumstances, by working towards a radical displacement of the white oppressor as an active, dominant player in the imagination of the oppressed. This tactical absence will mean that the writer can consolidate the sense of a viable, psychologically self-sufficient community among the oppressed. This attitude can only work, though, if the writer genuinely believes in the oppressed, in the first instance, as makers of the future. This implies a radical rearrangement of the dialectical poles. Where the thesis was the oppressor, it is now the oppressed confidently introducing new definitions of the future to which the oppressor

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6 N. S. Ndebele, 'Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Literature', Staff. rider, Johannesburg, 1984.
will have of necessity to respond. The latter, no longer having the power nor the intellectual capability to initiate necessary redemptive action, has to be relegated to the reactive pole of the dialectic. He is no longer in possession of the initiative.

Lastly, there must be an accompanying change of discourse from the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration. This would imply an open-endedness in the use of language, a search for originality of expression and a sensitivity to dialogue. The complexity of the day-to-day problems of living in fact coincides with the demands of creativity. As the writer begins working on that story, he may not know where it is going, and how it is going to get somewhere, but he has to find a way. That means a search for appropriate form and technique, which would enable him to grasp the complexity and render it understandable.

Earlier, in my discussion of the mine dispute, I made reference to the fact that at least 100,000 people were dismissed by the mine management. It is the silent 100,000 that our writers must also turn their attention to. I use the issue analogically, of course. The operative principle of composition in post-protest literature is that it should probe beyond the observable facts, to reveal new worlds where it was thought they did not exist, and to reveal process and movement where they were hidden. This way, the social imagination of the oppressed can be extended considerably and made ready in concrete terms to deal with the demands of a complex future. The aim is to extend the range of personal and social experience as far as possible in order to contribute to bringing about a highly conscious, sensitive new person in a new society. This, it seems to me, is the function of art in, and its contribution to the on-going revolution in South Africa. It means that the writer has to develop a range of artistic techniques that will enable him to grasp the complexity before him and render it understandable. All of which would appear to indicate that probably the novel, because of its ability to explore any chosen human perspective fully and comprehensively, is the only art form that can encompass the range of problems before us, organizing them into a comprehensible totality.

These suggestions, it should be stated, are put forward not as laws, but as possible guidelines by which our writers can conduct a debate and bring to bear further analysis on the tasks of writers and the role of their art in the unfolding revolution in South Africa. The tasks themselves are immense and challenging, and vigorous discussion of them will, in itself, I believe, be a significant act of freedom.
From the discussion

Sipho Sepamla: Njabulo has highlighted a tragic thing that is happening inside South Africa. We have four or five universities which are meant for black people. One would have expected that we could have carried on a debate with those universities, but as they have been placed in the wilderness no such dialogue can take place. The result is that we who are writing in South Africa, are writing in a vacuum. The trouble is that a number of us who are supposed to be writers, inside the country, are no longer expected to be just writers, we are expected to be leaders in the daily struggle. Someone like Es’kia Mphalele for example who is a terrific writer, thinker, and essayist spends a lot of his time trying to educate the people. I am on the committee that has to decide whether we pay the rent or not. That is the kind of thing that we are busy with, and there are only very few of us, so we have practical problems as a result of being thinly spread.

Emmanuel Ngara: The paper indicates my own stand-point as a critic. I take the Marxist approach to criticism, which claims that art is socially conditioned. Protest literature is a result of protest politics, and revolutionary literature comes out in revolutionary moments. Art also sometimes lags behind the political development, so the artist who has not risen to the same level as the combatant is likely to remain with outmoded ways of thinking, However, when the revolution has moved to a higher level the writer is also likely to be affected by it, and I think that the realistic theoretical stand-point is an expression of a new phase in South African politics. The focus is no longer just on the white man and what he is doing, but on a future South Africa, on what kind of South Africa we want to produce and what kind of art should be produced in that situation.

Njabulo Ndebele: I am fully aware of the problems you have outlined. At the same time, I am addressing myself specifically to people who aspire to be artists and writers. Describing and understanding our situation and being involved in it should not prevent us from being analytical about it. Secondly, the problems I am talking about are not long-term. I am asking for a change now, from writers who are trying to be serious about the craft of writing. Take for example the question of the necklace. How does a writer look at that? I would like to write a short story about that. I would be very interested to know what goes on in the minds of people once the person is lying dead, and they go home. That is what fascinates me as a creator of character and fiction, because I want to understand the
psychology of the situation, what leads to it and consequently what effect does it have on people's perception of who they are. Writing is an attempt to contribute to a human understanding of the tragic problems that are confronting us.
About the Contributors

Ama Ata Aidoo was born in Ghana. She is a poet, playwright and short story writer and was at one stage a minister in the Ghanaian government. She has taught at the University of Nairobi and Cape Coast, Ghana, and she is at present living in Harare as a free lance writer. Her published works include The Dilemma of a Ghost and Our Sister Killjoy.

Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria and went with her husband to London where she left him and supported her five children under appalling conditions whilst doing a university degree and endeavouring to write as well, events which are recorded in her two novels In the Ditch and Second-Class Citizen. She received the New Statesman Jock Campbell Awards 1978 for The Slave Girl. Her published work also include The Bride Price and The Joys of Motherhood.

Eldred D. Jones is a well known critic of African literature. He is professor of English at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone and editor of African Literature Today. His published works include Othello’s Countrymen and a study of Wole Soyinka.

Taban Liyong was born in Uganda. He took his graduate degree at the University of Iowa, the first African writer to attend this school. He has taught at the University of Papua New Guinea and since 1978 has been at the Faculty of Literature at Juba in the Sudan. His published works include The Uniformed Man and Another Nigger Dead.

David G. Maillu was born in Kenya. He worked as a graphic designer for the Voice of Kenya and acted in comic roles on television. In 1972 he set up Comb Books and he is at present living in Nairobi and working as a writer and publisher. His published works include Kadosa and For Mbatha and Rabeka.

Sack Mapanje was born in Malawi and educated in Malawi and England. He is at present Head of the English department at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. He is a poet, and his published works include Of Chameleons and Gods. As this book goes to press, Mapanje is imprisoned.
on a charge of sedition, and his fate is unknown. Amnesty International has taken up his case and further information can be obtained from them.

Njabulo Ndebele is a critic and a writer. He grew up in townships in South Africa and now lectures in African, Afro-American, and English literature at the University of Lesotho, Roma. His published works include the short story collection *Fools*, which won the Noma book award.

Emmanuel Ngara was born in Zimbabwe. He is at present Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Zimbabwe. He is a well-known literary critic and educationalist, and his published works include *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* and *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel*.

Lauretta Ngcobo is a South African exile living in England. Her publications include the novel *Cross of Gold*, and she has also edited a collection of essays about black and coloured women living in England for Pluto Press.

Kole Omotoso was born in Nigeria and is among the most widely published of the second generation of Nigerian authors. He is at present attached to the University of Ife, Nigeria. His published works include *The Edifice* and *Fella’s Choice*.

Kirsten Holst Petersen was Danish researcher at the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies 1984-87. She has taught literature, especially African literature, in Aarhus, Denmark, Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, and Adelaide University in Australia.

Sipho Sepamla was born in South Africa. He is one of the so-called 'township poets' and he has spent several years bringing the magazine *The Classic* to life again as *The New Classic*. His published works include *Hurry Up To It!* and *The Soweto I Love*.

Wally Serote was born in South Africa. He spent nine months in solitary confinement in a South African prison in 1969 and is now the cultural secretary for the external wing of the ANC. His published works include *No Baby Must Weep* and *To Every Birth Its Blood*.

Wole Soyinka was born in Nigeria. He is a poet, playwright, novelist, critic, and lecturer. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986 and works as a free lance writer. His published works include *Kongi’s Harvest*.
(play), *Aké: the Years of Childhood* (memoir), and *Season of Anomy* (novel).

**Ngugi wa Thiong'o** is a Kenyan writer and playwright. He spent 1977 in detention without trial because of his critical attitude to the Kenyan government and his success in spreading his ideas through popular theatre. Since then he has lived in exile. His published works include *Weep not Child, Detained, A Writer's Prison Diary* and *Petals of Blood*.

**Miriam Tlali** was born in South Africa. She is one of the founders of Scotaville Press and lives and writes in Soweto. Her published works include *Muriel at Metropolitan* and *Amandla*.

**Chris Wanjala** is professor of literature at the University of Nairobi. He is a critic of African literature, and his published works include *For Home and Freedom* and *The Season of Harvest*.

**Per Wästberg** is a Swedish novelist and critic. He has published several books on East and Southern Africa and has edited anthologies of African literature.
Seminar Proceedings from the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies

These writers took part in the Second Stockholm Conference for African Writers, organized by the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies in April 1986. They came together to discuss current issues in African literature. These included the role of the writer in society, and the writer's commitment to either society or to his or her craft, an issue which had also been discussed at the first Stockholm conference in 1967. They also included the new development of a woman's voice in literature, and a new voice in South African literature, superseding the protest tradition.

This book presents the collected papers and excerpts from the ensuing discussions of the conference.