

**LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY IN THE AFRICAN  
NOVEL:  
CHINUA ACHEBE AND ALI MAZRUI**

by  
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'It simply dawned on me two mornings ago that  
a novelist must listen to his characters who  
after all are created to wear the shoe and  
point the writer where it pinches'

- Ikem in achebe's **Anthills of the Savannah**

The successful creative writer is also in an obvious and fundamental sense a critic; he possesses the critical awareness and carries out the self-criticism without which a work of art of respectable quality cannot be produced. Indeed, T.S. Eliot, as is well-known, was led to opine that "it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person".<sup>1</sup> In contemporary Africa, the view is widely held that the creative sensibility is other than and superior to the critical; and, in the tradition of the wide-spread and age-long "dispute" between writers and critics, that the critic is a junior partner (to the writer), even a parasite.<sup>2</sup> Yet the evidence is abundant that some of Africa's leading writers have also produced considerable and compelling criticism: Achebe, Ngugi and Soyinka, to name a few.

Their independent critical works aside, African writers have continued in their creative works to give information and shed light on critical and literary theory. The special attraction of this practice of embedding, hinting at or discussing critical and literary ideas or views in creative writing is that the cut and thrust of contemporary critical debates, the shifting sands of critical taste and fashion, and the interweaving of personal opinion and public demands are gathered up and sifted through the imaginative process and the requirements of the particular literary genre; its greatest danger is to be expected from a disregard for the imperatives of form. The practice, done with due regard to

form, has the additional attractiveness of objectivity as out of the discussion and debate, interiorized and exteriorized, can emerge an image which will not be a still life and which will not be a straightforward self-portrait. Prose fiction, with its basic features of action (which subsists normally on conflict), dialogue and authorial comment, has done handsomely in promoting the literary and critical debates, at different levels - within the writer, between the writer and his characters, among the characters, and between the writer and his reader.<sup>3</sup>

Notable among novelists who have explored at some depth and length aspects of the nature and roles of artists are Wole Soyinka in **The Interpreters** (1965) and **Season of Anomy** (1973), Ayi Kwei Armah in **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born** (1968), **Fragments** (1970), **Why Are We So Blest?** (1972) and **Two Thousand Seasons** (1973), and Ben Okri in **The Landscapes Within** (1981). These novels collectively and severally draw attention to the artist's sensitive receptivity which invariably builds up in the artist-characters (given their unavailing circumstances) into a burden of social responsibility - even though, with the exception of **Season of Anomy** and **Two Thousand Seasons**, the artist-characters are too driven into themselves to be capable of taking appropriate action. The novels, especially Armah's, also dwell on the priestly and spiritual aspects of the artist's character; they all imply a close inter-relatedness between the various media of artistic expression (painting, music, writing, film and sculpture), and **The Landscapes Within; Fragments** and **The Interpreters** pursue with some emphasis the subject of the artist's efforts in cultivating his intellectual and imaginative powers, and his search for the efficient tools and means for transmuting raw experience into satisfying art.

Rather than discuss art in broad terms, two African novelists, Chinua Achebe and Ali Mazrui have chosen to focus particularly on the literary medium; the emphasis is signposted by the significant, sometimes dominant, roles assigned to literary figures as characters in the novels: Achebe's **A Man of the People** (1966) and **Anthills of the Savannah** (1988), and Mazrui's **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo** (1971). Of course, the views and ideas expressed and debated about the writer's vision, the writer and his society, the writer's language etc., can hold more or less equal validity for other artists and art forms. The views and ideas represent, re-examine, reshape and

extend the debates which have attended the development of modern African Literature; no one interested in the study of the evolving theory of literature over the times can ignore this type of evidence. This article highlights this body of evidence as contained in these three novels - and anatomizes it.

In giving expression to artistic and critical views in their creative works, African novelists are doing nothing new or unique. They may arguably have found immediate inspiration in the tradition of the oral artist-a tradition whose death has certainly been exaggerated<sup>4</sup> - who interpolates into his performance information on his biological and artistic geneology, and his views on artistic modes and standards of excellence in performance. In other lands and at other times, in any case, writers have used their creative works as a vector for literary and critical ideas which were either personal to them or of general interest. This practice (together with Greek mythology) is what, for instance, comes readily to the aid of the scholar of literary criticism interested in the ancient Greeks before Plato and Aristotle (the one primarily a socio-political philosopher, the other a physical and biological scientist before all else) and their critical inheritors began to study, analyse and evaluate extant and contemporary works of literature. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point. Among the masters of crafts Homer groups the prophet, the healer, the ship-builder and the "god-like minstrel who gives us delight with his song" (*Odyssey*, bk 17, ll. 383-85)<sup>5</sup>. Hesiod's Muses take man into confidence in declaring:

We know enough to make up lies which are convincing,  
but we also have the skill, when we've the mind, to speak  
the truth.

(*Theogony*, 11.27-29)<sup>6</sup>

In his *Suppliants*, Euripides tells the audience:

The poet's self in gladness should bring forth His offspring,  
song: if he attain not this, He cannot from a heart  
distraught with pain Gladden his fellows.

(11.180-83)<sup>7</sup>.

**The Frogs** by Aristophanes is a play written virtually on the subject of literary criticism, with the playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides (already dead at the time) engaged in an aesthetic competition. The real didactic intentions of the following dialogue are quite obvious:

**Euripides:** And did I invent the story of Phaedra?

**Aeschylus:** No, no, such things do happen. But the poet should keep quiet about them, not put them on the stage for everyone to copy. Schoolboys have a master to teach them, grown-ups have the poets. We have a duty to see that what we teach them is right and proper.

(11.1052 ff.)<sup>8</sup>

Ali Mazrui's **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo**<sup>9</sup> is a novel whose plot, like that of Aeschylus' play **The Frogs**, involves an encounter with a writer in after-life; and close to the heart of the literary views expressed in it is the concept of the universality of aesthetics. Curiously, the African novel, like the Greek play, attempts to make a discussion of literature its primary subject. Perhaps the main achievement of the novel is that it fairly summarizes the leading issue which underlay critical debates and discussions of Modern African Literature in the 1960s, some of which issues are still alive, even if less vigorously. Its main weaknesses arise directly from its very ambitions as a novel of ideas (to the extent that this precipitates insufficient attention to the nature of the relationship between the world of day-to-day facts and that of fiction) and from the author's inability to dismount his socio-political hobby-horse. A political scientist first and foremost, Mazrui sets out in the novel to examine the critical issues which were thrown up by the unprecedented literary creativity within two decades of political independence in Africa; in the event, the work is far more interested in, and obviously more at ease with, socio-political matters than literary. The drama of the novel is resolved in political not literary terms: Okigbo's tragedy is in the judgement of the Elders of After-Africa inseparable from the continent's travails, and the travails are traced to what the author calls the curse of the Trinity in Africa's destiny, and in the quoted words of Nkrumah's **Consciencism** "to the tripartite cultural personality which had afflicted Africa" (p 137).

The sociological and political issues are predictable enough and are tackled in Mazrui's characteristic manner; an analytical probing which is sweetened with a search for patterns such as symmetry, ambiguity and the reconciliation of apparent contradictions.<sup>10</sup> Dominant among these issues so pursued may be noted Pan-Africanism, the principle of a trinity seemingly presiding over the

continent's fate, the modern African, like the character Hamisi, as some "odd mixture of Westernism, Orientalism, and residual Africanness" (p. 21), African socialism which is rooted in the collectiveness of African experience (itself informed by a sense of solidarity and bonds of kinship), the rites of passage in the life of the African (in which context life is to be seen "not as interruption but a continuation, "p. 37); Africa as the origins of mankind, the necessary links between leadership, heroism and nationalism in Africa, the African concept of "Pure" victory and "the monotheistic lead". With the relish and aplomb with which these and other related matters are touched on here and elaborated there, the firm impression that **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo** is, in the heart of its writer at least, more politics and sociology than prose fiction is far from shifted by the author's use of the words and voices of a number of writers such as R.E.G. Armatoç, Milton, Byron, Oscar Wilde and Soyinka.

Yet, the novel's interest in the critical views and perspectives on African Literature in the 60s is never in doubt; the charges pressed against Okigbo in the Here-after and the efforts to present a defence together cover the field adequately. The role of Okigbo is obviously symbolic not simply of the poet but of the African writer of the period; a number of the accusations against him were (in some cases, still are) made against some of the leading African writers published about the time of independence or since then. Soyinka, Okigbo, Clark, Echeruo and Armah, for instance, have most frequently been accused of opening themselves to foreign influences and of obscurity and literary elitism.<sup>11</sup> What the novel does is to restate outstanding critical views and perspectives of the time of its writing; it highlights them further by dramatising them (as in the "trial" scenes) and thus approximates the sharp exchanges and debates at conferences and on the pages of magazines and newspapers.

The critical views and perspectives cover a rather large ground, encompassing the language of modern African poetry (or literature, for that matter), poetic tradition and aesthetic canons, the meaning of the greatness of the poet and the nobility of the well-spring of his vision, the links between vision, its communication and usefulness to society. On the one hand, the novel affirms the greatness of the poet as a gifted man, often the beneficiary of many influences and inescapably the inheritor of the accumulated knowledge and graces of different places, cultures and times; and it asserts that the poet

owes a duty to contribute to the general, universal store-house and thereby maintain the poetic chain of continuity between past, present and future.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the novel states that the "art of a great poet... carries the seeds of immortality" in itself and in accretion with what it inherits, all of which it has to bequeath; therefore, Okigbo's decision to fight in defence of his immediate ethnic group was "to subordinate the interests of generations of Africans to the needs of a collection of Ibos at an isolated moment in historical time" (p. 41). It is also asserted that, given the honour as well as the burden of the poet's calling, "to die for art is martyrdom" (p. 72); and that the artist must recognise and respect the privacy of the self which however needs the prop and support of the universality of aesthetics; for it is by respecting the "doctrine of aesthetic universalism" that the artist can best serve his own society (p. 69) - in the words of Apolo-Gyamfi, the Counsel for Damnation, "Small men have duties only to their societies; great men have duties to mankind" (p. 69).<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, to counter aspects of this strain of thinking, the novel asserts that in Africa, art, like all experience, is a collective activity<sup>14</sup>; that African poetry in African languages is good especially because it conveys the spirituality of the people, and that art is to be used to teach in Africa<sup>15</sup>; finally, that although Okigbo's use of dense imagery at the expense of meaning is undesirable, the crime is mitigated by his attention to music in his verse, as required by the aesthetic of African poetry.<sup>16</sup>

In a sense, all these intertwined issues can be said to arise from the fundamental question of the relationship of the artist or poet to his society and his duties to that society. Debate on these flamed to life in the 60s, and grew in intensity and sometimes in acerbity in the 70s and 80s;<sup>17</sup> and this question is turned this way and that way in **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo**. Yes, the writer is a member of his immediate community but aesthetic principles are universal; therefore, argues Apolo-Gyamfi, Okigbo had, in championing the cause of his ethnic group, "descended from the mountain of human vision into the swamp of tribal warfare" (p. 71) and polluted "art with the blood of tribalism" (p. 70). That, in any case, by going to fight for Biafra, Okigbo had turned traitor to his earlier acceptance of artistic universalism as demonstrated by his refusal to be cast and judged as a good **African** or **negro** poet.<sup>18</sup> No, the poet belongs to a community

before he belongs to the world; and he can serve the world by serving his immediate community. Therefore, argues Hamisi, since Okigbo's death resulted from his response to the needs of his people, his death itself was "a piece of poetry at its deepest" (p. 90). The resolution of the matter lies in the voice of Soyinka which is called to testify; it is the voice of Soyinka at the Stockholm Conference (1967), in the very familiar passage about the artist in Africa serving as the record of social mores and as the voice of vision. In other words, the novel attempts to tread the middle ground by re-interpreting the notion of social commitment in art: to be committed to one's society in one's writing was not the same thing as to condone, justify or champion the path of government, establishment or orthodoxy.

The last question touches off echoes of the debate regarding the necessity or otherwise for erecting critical criteria by which African literature is to be judged; and this is important here because it provides an additional support for what is clearly the central interest in the critical issues raised in the novel, namely the view that aesthetic principles are universal. The impression created in the reader of **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo** is that the aesthetic creature (never really defined, characterised or analysed in the novel) inhabits an autonomous world, timeless and everywhere; that this world does not bear intrusion by politics; that a writer's colour or nationality has no place in a consideration of the quality of his art. This is both the context and the basis of the significance of Miss Bemedi's argument that

politics in contemporary Africa had manufactured a number of Trojan horses as a method of subtle invasion into kingdoms which should otherwise remain basically non-political. Enthusiasm for weak African writers simply because they were African was itself a Trojan-horse invasion by politics into aesthetics. (p. 12)

In **A Man of the People**,<sup>19</sup> Achebe is not intent simply on holding up to ridicule political ineptitude in an African nation newly independent; he is also interested in examining the people's inadequate appreciation of the place of culture in the life of a nation. It is a superficial reading of the novel which does not recognize its demonstration of the complexity of artistic observation. In other words, what is often regarded as mere satire of writers and writing, for example, is complemented by a desire to underline the necessity of culture and

art in society, and to commend by subtle means the role of literature to the respect of even those who consume, use or enjoy it without fully realising their debt of gratitude. In **Anthills of the Savannah**,<sup>20</sup> in addition to examining the corrupting tendencies of power and the throes of a nation groping for the path by which its soul may be saved and allowed to grow, Achebe attempts an ambitious definition of the nature, role and methods of creative writing.

The dominant figure of **A Man of the People** is Chief Nanga, the uninformed Minister for Culture. The dominance of this character and his official position enable the novelist to introduce - without seeming to force the issue - matters of culture and creative writing in the life and consciousness of the nation. The Minister's duties include, for instance, the opening of an exhibition of books, an event which attracts members of the Writers' society and a small band of would-be writers, dilettantes and critics of art. On this occasion, the activities and various personalities provide fodder for the novelist as satirist but also, at a deeper level, provide an opportunity for broaching or suggesting more worrisome aspects of the subject. Thus it is revealed that the Minister does not know Jalio, President of the Writers' Society and author of **The Song of the Black Bird**; indeed, he has never heard the name before, even though this is a nation which boasts of only few writers. The fact that this is "the first ever book exhibition of works by local authors" (p. 65) may not exculpate the philistine Minister, but it does enlarge the target of the satire.

It is crucial to note that in this and other matters, neither Odili nor Chief Nanga is a reliable guide. On meeting Jalio, Chief Nanga's immediate reaction is to take umbrage at the writer's "improper dressing"; on his part, Odili is hurt by the writer's failure to remember his name from their university days and promptly forms "a poor opinion of him and his silly airs" (p. 69). Although he seems to respect Jalio's individuality when the writer tells the Minister that he dresses to please himself, Odili nonetheless goes to ridicule the consciously arty and non-conformist appearance and manners of the writer:

In those days before he became a writer he had seemed reasonably normal to me. But apparently since he published his first novel **The Song of the Black Bird** he had become quite different. I read an interview he gave to a popular magazine in which it came out that he had

become so non-conformist that he now designed his own clothes. Judging by his appearance I should say he also tailored them. (p. 69)<sup>21</sup>

Yet, Odili is sufficiently interested in creative writing to have ambitions of writing "a novel about the coming of the first white men to my district" (p. 66) - an ambition which clearly points in the direction of Achebe's own **Things Fall Apart** (1958). Odili is also well-informed enough to set himself the task - from which he obviously derives pleasure - of putting down foreign critics who attribute things genuinely African to European or American sources as well as critics, foreign or African, who grandly misrepresent the essence and significance of African art and culture.<sup>22</sup>

If Odili draws attention to and provokes a discussion of widely-held views on writers, artists and culture, it is Max who gets closest to demonstrating the role of the writer in society. He gained some recognition as Poet Laureate in his schooldays, even if he has also been laughed at for wanting to share in the glory of the school football team's victories by inserting his name as the writer of the eulogy to the team. It is significant thematically that it is his poem, written seven years earlier and set to the tune of highlife music, which more than anything else captures for Odili (to the point of shedding tears) the disappointment into which political independence has turned. In this respect, Max points the way to the role which the literary writer Ikem plays in **Anthills of the Savannah**.

**Anthills of the Savannah** takes an obvious interest in politics in contemporary Africa: the dangers of the rise of dictatorship, corruption and socio-economic inequalities, and the hope reposed in the collective will and action of intellectuals, students, workers and market women to fight such political outgrowths. About this central subject is a cluster of other issues: the potential which power has to pollute the foundation of friendship (even threatening to dry it up), its ability or liability to wither the spontaneity of inter-personal relations, the hard lot of women in a male-dominated society and the need for a variety of reconciliations - the past with the present, male with female (symbolically, the female child that Elewa has for Ikem is given a boy's name), youth with age, traditional religion with imported Christianity and Islam, and the different ethnic groups in the fictive West African country with one another. In addition to all, indeed

within the web of these issues raised, the novel is a study of literary art and the artist; in the end, it gives a clear outline of a theory of literature.

Three figures, all male, Sam (His Excellency), Chris (Information Minister) and Ikem (**National Gazette** editor), linked in the chain of friendship as in the chain of official duties, together help to define power and its corrupting or corroding influences on both humane values and the most cherished bonds between individuals.<sup>23</sup> Three figures, two male and one female, namely Ikem (as literary artist), the leader of the Abazon delegation (illiterate but versed in the ways of tradition) and Beatrice (1st class English graduate from London University and priestess of Agwu) help to expound the novel's literary views. Between the first and the second group, Ikem and Beatrice provide links: Ikem as writer, public servant and friend to both Sam and Chris, and Beatrice as civil servant, friend to both Chris and Ikem, and as priestess of Agwu. As a group, Ikem, the old man from Abazon and Beatrice represent the cross-breeding of literary traditions - oral and written, traditional and contemporary, African and European - and are, therefore, in a position to relate the local to the universal; their being grouped together also underlines the fact that creativity has both male and female aspects or components.

To mark out areas of similarity and of contrast in present-day practice by literary artists and critics in Africa and Europe is, for instance, the fundamental point of interest in the social occasion provided when Chris, Beatrice, Elewa and Ikem pay a call on Mr John Kent ("MM") and his visiting friend Dick. When John Kent, whom Ikem once described as "an aborted poet" (p. 55), introduces Ikem as "a fine journalist... he is an even finer poet, in my opinion one of the finest in the entire English Language" (p. 62), not only does Dick not have anything to quarrel with about the literary status of Ikem, he in fact goes on in a very sweeping trivialising way to endorse it:

'That doesn't surprise me in the least. I understand that the best English these days is written either by Africans or Indians, and that the Japanese and the Chinese may not be far behind', said Dick with somewhat dubious enthusiasm. (p. 62)

For Dick, as a matter of fact, the high point of the evening is reached when he takes credit for the democratisation of literature in Europe. Dick's democracy of the arts is of course no more than decadence.

even the perversion of values and tastes. As founding editor of a poetry magazine with offices in Soho, Dick enthusiastically takes pride in naming the magazine **Reject**, with the object of publishing manuscripts which established magazines have rejected. Dick enthuses: "Our success was immediate and total" (p. 58); he adds:

'In under two years we exploded the pretensions of the poetry establishment and their stuffy party organs. It was the most significant development in British poetry since the war'. (p. 59)

Clearly, Dick has never heard the voices of poets and critics such as Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, relentlessly drawing attention to the firm rocks of literary tradition and the rigorously moral core of Literature.

In contrast to Dick's concept of successful poetry, literature is, as articulated and reflected upon by the trio of the Abazon leader, Ikem and Beatrice, a firm centre of values drawn from the past and reinforced by the present and serving as a loyal handmaid to the realities of daily life, personal and institutional. As editor of **The National Gazette**, Ikem demonstrates that he is one of the few remaining pillars of a society seriously in danger of parting company with ethical and moral rectitude. Confident and stubborn in his beliefs, he works to infuse decency and reform in the society (his unyielding struggle on the road for space with a taxi-driver is fairly symbolic of this). He may appear individualistic and seem to have odd personal views and habits; he may even appear to the morally supercilious as irresponsible ever so often. But there is reason in his apparent madness: he has preferences for women who are either peasants, market women or intellectuals; he is humorous, convivial and genuinely concerned with the socially underprivileged. He uses his editorials as a tool for crusading on social issues; thereby he worms his way into the affection of taxi-drivers, students and all those who believe in social justice. He lives a simple life, owns and drives a battered old car and by example no less than by words, he identifies with the poor; in truth, he has "always felt a yearning without very clear definition, to connect his essence with earth and earth's people" (pp. 140-1). This explains why, when the delegation of the Taxi-Drivers Union pays him a visit to show that they appreciate his efforts to promote their interests, Ikem feels the joy of "an explorer who has just cleared a cluster of obstacles" (p. 140).

**Ikem has used the newspaper to oppose oppression and “ past regimes of parasites” (p. 142); he continues to use it to inveigh against the present government’s corruption, subservience to foreign interests, its doomed second-hand capitalism and its lack of “vital links with the poor and dispossessed” of the land (p. 141). As writer, his play and novel, both inspired by the Women’s War against British administrators, confirm Ikem’s commitment to the use of art to resist and throw off domination and oppression. It is in this context that the writer’s visit to Beatrice can be properly appreciated: he has called on her, Ikem says, to thank her for giving him “an insight into the world of women” (p. 97). He proceeds to make a disquisition on feminism in which the view enlarges to include all oppressed groups in the society. Ikem, of course, also says that this visit is an opportunity for the artist to listen to his character: clearly even if indirectly, Ikem therefore links the political or social platform and the artistic vision.**

**Ikem is not by this proffering a simple explanation of the social roots and goals of the artist’s vision. He reflects on the fact that even though French colonialists had made efforts to make Africans believe they descended from the Gauls, this “didn’t stop Senghor from becoming a fine African poet” (p. 38). This is not to deny the place of foreign influences but rather to assert the strength of the essential experiences of the poet; as Ikem has come to realise for himself, there is truth in Whitman’s view that contradictions are the very stuff of life and are capable of sparking creativity:**

**Every artist contains multitudes... a genuine artist, no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy. (p. 100).**

**The artist, Ikem declares, must recognise “the complex and paradoxical cavern of Mother Idoto” (p. 101). Christopher Okigbo by allusion and Senghor by name are illustrations of the African poet who carries in himself complexities, who is alive to local and other influences and is able to respond correspondingly through paradox and complexity. Ikem’s own poem “Pillar of Fire: A Hymn to the Sun” not only serves to illustrate the relation of fact to fancy in art, but also to highlight the poet’s ability to focus artistically on a subject such that the fullness of vision attests to the complexity<sup>24</sup> both of his response and the influences which have formed or shaped it. The “Pillar of Fire”**

provides a profile of a man who has been exposed to European poetic traditions but who has also attained a familiarity with the culture and traditions of his own people. Specifically, the poem combines personal and communal ideas which have been enriched and enlarged with elements of legend and myth; even as the poem reflects an acquaintance with conventional European diction and imagery since classical times, the images can also be startling in their direct relatedness to the immediate environment (Chris discovers and observes when he encounters the savannah setting which inspired the poem).

The special relationship between Ikem and Beatrice represents the fusion of the male and female aspects of the creative force; it also underscores the links in the world of art between the material and the spiritual, the human and the divine; in Beatrice

Perhaps Ikem alone came close to sensing the village priestess who will prophesy when her divinity rides her abandoning if need be her soup-pot on the fire, but returning again when the god departs to the domesticity of kitchen or the bargaining market-stool behind her little display of peppers and dry fish and green vegetables. He knew it better than Beatrice herself. (p. 105)

But she knows it enough to correct Chris's view of her as "goddess": "As a matter of fact I do feel sometimes like Chielo in the novel,<sup>25</sup> the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves" (p. 114). She feels now and then possessed by "Agwu the capricious god of diviners and artists" (p. 105). Ikem is an artist who inhabits the "hermit's hut in the forest" (p. 46) from where he is quite capable of divining the Emperor's thoughts. Apart from being a priestess, Beatrice tries her story in relation to that of the three male friends who show her experiencing the agonies and ecstasies of the writer possessed.

It is the white-bearded leader of the Abazon delegation who expatiates on the ineluctable role of the artist and on the closeness of creativity to madness:

'Agwu does not call a meeting to choose his seers and diviners and artists; Agwu, the god of healers; Agwu, brother to Madness! But though born from the same womb he and Madness were not created by the same **chi**. Agwu is the right hand a man extends to his fellows;

madness, the forbidden hand. Madness unleashes and rides his man roughly into the wild savannah. Agwu possesses his own just as securely but has him corralled to serve the compound. Agwu picks his disciple, rings his eye with white chalk and dips his tongue, willing or not, in the crew of prophecy; and right away the man will speak and put head and tail back to the severed trunk of our tale'. (p. 125)

The old man goes on to expound virtually a theory of art in a traditional context; the theory illustrates, as does Ikem's discourse on the myth of the female as scapegoat, striking and interesting parallels between the African and European traditions.

The tradition which informs the old man's mind as he traces the anatomy of the story-teller's art and lays bare its soul shows evident affinity with the world of ancient Greeks whose mythology conceived of Mnemosyn as the mother of the Muses; yet, the old man's view that the story-teller's art is superior to that of the man of action (rulers, war generals, etc) contradicts Plato's view.<sup>26</sup> The old man explains rather curiously that his age has enabled him to see the matter in this light; that in his younger days he would certainly have thought otherwise. Now he is certain:

'It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.' (p. 124)

It is his view, furthermore, that the story is, like fire, difficult to put out with puny efforts; and when not blazing, "it is smouldering under its own ashes or sleeping and resting inside its flint-house" (p. 124). Not everybody can tell it, only the few chosen priests of Agwu can. In the gifted mouth of the anointed, the story lives on and its eternal verity derives from the fact that the story, by its very nature, does not aim to "affirm", to use the term of Sir Philip Sidney.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the story-teller is permitted to misrepresent or distort literal facts: he may, for instance, describe the marks left on him by small-pox or yaws as the scars of wounds received in battle:

'But the lies of those possessed by Agwu are lies that do no harm to anyone. They float on top of the story like the white bubbling at the pot-mouth of new palm-wine. The true juice of the tree lies coiled up inside, waiting to strike... (p. 125)

Ikem the writer and journalist has his note in this tradition, much as he has also benefitted from other influences and backgrounds. How much he absorbs and adopts the old man's literary ideas is evident at his lecture at the University of Bassa; he appropriates the story told by the old man, of the fight between the Tortoise and the Leopard, to provide a handle to an analysis of the present fears and actions of the rulers of the land. The old man who told him the story, Ikem explains to his audience, is at the very moment, being held in solitary confinement

'Because story tellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit - in state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the University or wherever. That's why'. (p. 153)

(Ikem soon meets a worse fate as government security forces come knocking on his door at night, take him away and kill him in cold blood). When the chairman at the proceedings, appropriately a Marxist professor of political science,<sup>28</sup> reiterates the view that Third World writers should rise beyond documenting social problems to "proffering solutions", Ikem shouts: "Writers don't give prescriptions... They give headaches!" (p. 161).

Through plotting, narrative and action, through characterisation, dialogue and discourse, the outlines of a literary theory emerge in **Anthills of the Savannah**. Creative writing, the story-teller's art, is the divine will made manifest among men, for the guidance of man and as a curb on the forces of oppression; the nature of its methods is unique, needing to be understood to be appreciated. The story-teller or writer is a chosen, ordained vessel; his art stands firmly on the acute, complex vision and response to his environment. The eternal verities of his work are superior to, therefore not to be judged by, the demands of representational faithfulness or literal factualness.

To summarise, Mazrui's **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo**, and Achebe's **A Man of the People** and **Anthills of the Savannah** together touch on a great number of issues regarding the nature and

criticism of modern African literature. Mazrui puts at the centre of his novel the death of a (real) Nigerian poet as a means of raising a literary debate; the debate ranges over several topics and is largely reflective of the questions which were actually asked about African literature in the 1960s. Through the debate, the novel seeks to assert two things: that commitment to his art ought to claim and hold the artist's foremost attention and loyalty,<sup>29</sup> and that aesthetic values are universal. Although the debate is rather lively in parts, Mazrui's pursuit of ideas means that art ironically suffers severely in the novel. Achebe adopts satire as a means of evaluating cultural and literary awareness in **A Man of the People**; although the satiric mode necessarily puts the spotlight on comic and ridiculous aspects of the habits of literary figures, it also leads to a deeper reflection on the whole underlying subject, hinting at the proximity of art to the soul of a people's collective life, and in **Anthills of the Savannah**, Achebe harnesses the resources of the novel to articulate a theory of literature.

These novels imaginatively take up critical and literary topics which have engaged the minds of writers, critics and readers of modern African Literature since the 60s. Because the topics are rather fundamental, their significance and interest transcend the immediate socio-political and cultural context of the discussions and conclusions, important though that context is. The discussions and conclusions deserve the attention not only of literary historians and scholars of literary criticism and theory but also of critics and informed readers in Africa and elsewhere.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 T.S. Eliot, "The Perfect Critic" in **Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot**, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 58.
- 2 It is in the tradition which regards criticism as existing by the grace of other men's genius that George Steiner, himself a distinguished, clear-eyed critic, declares: "when he looks back, the critic sees a eunuch's shadow. Who would be a critic if he could be a writer?" - "Humane literacy" in **Language and Silence** (Hammondsworth: Penguin 1969), p.21. Armah allows that the "competent literary critic... combines the analytic and the creative, the scientific and the artistic types of intelligence", but demands

that the practice of criticism be predicated on demonstrated creative competence. See Ayi K. Armah, "The Lazy School of Criticism", **West Africa**, 25th February, 1985, pp. 355-6. For a recent Nigerian debate on the role of literary criticism, see Abiola Irele's "Literary Criticism in the Nigerian Context" (1-3), **The Guardian** (Lagos), June 1, 8 & 15, 1985, pp. 9, 13 & 9 respectively, and Dan Izevbaye's "Literary Criticism in the Nigerian Context: Another View", **The Guardian** (Lagos), June 29, 1985, p.13.

- 3 Obviously at a level less fundamental than that at which the reader, according to Sartre, engages the text as an intelligent and cultured man but more basic than that at which, according to Walter Stein, the reader should encounter a literary mode such as tragedy as a person morally and culturally committed to a self values. See: Jean-Paul Sartre, **What is Literature?**, tr. B. Frechtman (London: Methuen Paper backs, 1967), pp. 30-38; Walter Stein, **Criticism as Dialogue** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
- 4 For views, still largely valid over the years, on the influence of the oral tradition on the modern African writer, and especially on the pertinence of tradition to the core of most "modern" Africans, See E.N. Obiechina, "Transition from Oral to Literary Tradition", **Presence Africaine**, no. 63 (1967).
- 5 Homer, **Odyssey**, tr. S.O. Andrew (London: Dent & Sons, 1953), p. 223.
- 6 Hesiod, **Theogony in Theogony, Works and Days and Theogonis, Elegies**, tr. Dorothea Wender (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 24.
- 7 Euripides, **Play**, tr. A.S. Way (London: Dent & Sons, 1956), vol. 1, p. 206.
- 8 Aristophanes, **The Frogs in The Wasps, The Poet and the Women. The Frogs**, tr. David Barret (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 195.
- 9 Ali Mazrui, **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo** (London: Heinemann, 1971). Page references are to this edition.

- 10 For the preoccupations and the typical methods, see for example: **On Heroes and Uhuru-worship** (London: Longmans, 1967); **The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis** - originated from The Reith Lectures, 1979 - (London: Heinemann, 1980); **The Africans: A Triple Heritage** (London: BBC Publications, 1986).
- 11 These charges have been forcefully expressed by Chinweizu et al., **Toward the Decolonization of African Literature** (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), and Lewis Nkosi, **Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature** (Harlow: Longman, 1981) - among others.
- 12 Clearly, this is redolent of T.S. Eliot of "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone". (Frank Kermode, ed., **Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot**, p. 38).
- 13 For Achebe's answer to the charges here made against Okigbo, see his "Thoughts on the African Novel" in **Morning Yet on Creation Day** (London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 53-54
- 14 In the debate on whether the African should address local or universal subjects, a compromise was presented by Eldred Jones: "The happy paradox is that to be truly universal one must be truly local" ("The Decolonization of African Literature"), **Topic**, no. 2 (1966), p. 19.
- 15 Cp. Achebe's well-known essay, "The novelist as Teacher" first published January, 1965, in **Morning Yet on Creation Day**, pp. 42-45.
- 16 Cp. Senghor's view that for the African the "poem is not complete unless it is sang or at least given a rhythmical musical accompaniment" - **Prose and Poetry**, ed., John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 89.
- 17 Not long after Achebe's essay "The novelist as Teacher" (see note 15, above), came the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in 1967 at Stockholm on the theme of the writer in the modern African society: see Per Wastberg, ed., **The Writer in Modern Africa** (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968). In 1972, a conference on a very similar theme was held at Nsukka: see D.I. Nwoga, ed., **Literature and Modern African Culture** (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corp., 1978). In the 70s

and 80s, the dominant critical voices supported the view, indeed often demanded, not only that literature be socially committed but also that social commitment adopt a Marxist socialist perspective; Ngugi is arguably the most widely-known of this group.

- 18 Cp. Achebe's rejection of the African writer (such as Armah of **The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born**) in pursuit of universality, and his weak confrontation with the enigma represented on this score by Okigbo in his essay "Africa and her Writers" in **Morning Yet on Creation Day**, pp. 25-29.
- 19 Chinua Achebe, **A Man of the People** (London: Heinemann, 1966). Page references are to this edition.
- 20 Chinua Achebe, **Anthills of the Savannah** (London: Heinemann, 1988). Page references are to this edition.
- 21 For one critic's view that Soyinka may well have provided the model for the aspects of Odili here satirised, see Oyin Ogunba, **The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka** (Ibadan: IUP., 1975), p. 6
- 22 Cp. Achebe's answer when questioned on his objections to European critics of African Literature:

I don't object to critics at all. What I do object to is preaching from a position of ignorance, and you'll find quite a lot of this in criticisms that are made of our work. Even when they are praising you, it is not really for the right reasons. I'm not saying that they should shut up, but I hate the kind of cultural or literary people who pontificate on the "real" African Literature... ("Conversation with Chinua Achebe", **Topic**, no. 1 1966, p. 8)
- 23 Cp. the fact that the "highest form of social life was considered by Epicurus to be friendship" (E. Zeller, **The Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics**, tr. O.J. Reichel, New York: Russell & Russell, revd. ed. 1879, p. 493.
- 24 On the complexity of the artist's response, cf Achebe: "The problem I fight all along is an attempt to make things straightforward. The artist is there to show just how complex reality is... Someone who cannot marry up past and present

shows a lack of understanding of what our business is about and cannot have a promising future" (Achebe interviewed by R. Moss, "Writing and Politics", op.cit., p. 1676).

25 Achebe's **Things Fall Apart**.

26 See for instance Plato's **Republic**, ch. xxxv.

27 Cp. the argument in his **Defence of Poesie** to the effect that the poet cannot be accused of telling lies:

Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth... He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in truth, not laboring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be.

Frank Kermode et al, ed., **The Oxford Anthology of English Literature**, vol. 1 (New York etc.: OUP. 1973) , p. 644.

28 A point on which "Marxist" writers, critics and commentators in Africa have harped since the 1970s.

29 Ali Mazrui's discussion of Salman Rushdie's **The Satanic Verses**, for which he thinks the writer could be charged in after-life for putting art before ancestral commitment, suggests either an inconsistency or at best absence of commitment to art in the order assumed in **The Trial of Christopher Okigbo**. See Mazrui's "Poetic Hatred", **West Africa**, no. 3741 (1-7 May, 1989), pp. 685-86.