

UNIVERSITY OF IFE · NIGERIA

Inaugural Lecture Series 36

LITERARY ART  
AND LITERARY  
CREATIVITY IN  
CONTEMPORARY  
AFRICA

by Oyin Ogunba



UNIVERSITY OF IFE PRESS

**LITERARY ART AND LITERARY CREATIVITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA**

by

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**An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ife  
on Tuesday, 21st November, 1978.**

**Inaugural Lecture Series No. 36**

(i) **Invocation**

THE QUESTION of the kind of literature a community should cultivate at any given time is an important one and is as crucial to the health of the community as any of the other major issues which usually pre-occupy the attention of societies. Literature is, after all, the great teaching power of the world.<sup>1</sup> It is the vehicle for societies to give sensitive expression to the innermost thoughts and feelings of individuals as well as the communality. It is also often used to amplify and advertise ideas, and sometimes even to persuade the generality of the people to new directions. Hence J. S. Mbiti has written:

To know the literature of any people is to know them well . . . it is the precipitation of their mentality, their customs, their habits, their hopes and ideas about life itself.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, whether one is thinking of a folktale, an oral chant, or a pseudo-philosophical poem like Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*,<sup>3</sup> the ultimate aim of the author or cantor appears to be the same, namely, to probe the fundamentals of our nature to the furthest reaches of our being and also to make available to the ordinary man in a mode he understands the great truths of our situation.

If literature occupies such an important position in the life of a community, it follows that the more indigenous it is, the better, because it, can then better fulfil its crucial function to that community. It follows also that no nation can live on alien literature and hope to attain spiritual or psychic fulfilment;<sup>4</sup> indeed, such a nation would be infantile because her ideas, moods and sentiments are bound to be shaped according to the prejudices of other lands. No one should, therefore, be unduly disturbed if the importance of foreign literature, English, French or Arabic, declines in our community. The primary concern of a people is with their own literature in whatever way this is defined.

This point has been well made in a different context by the novelist V. S. Naipaul. He ridicules some early West Indian writers who spent all their time imitating English writers and creating images of the English winter even in the sunshine and heat of the Caribbean. For Naipaul this imitativeness is synonymous with death and it is one of those things which have led him to despair about his home country and develop an exaggerated contempt for everything West Indian, as is evident in his novel *The Mimic Men*.<sup>5</sup>

Happily in Africa there is not the same degree of imitativeness; indeed, there is no reason why there should be, because there is no dearth of a tradition to build on. On the contrary, the problem is

one of too many competing traditions, for there are in existence today at least three principal kinds of literature, namely, oral literature, written literature in African languages, and literature written in European languages, that is, in English, French and Portuguese. Thus there is an unprecedented scale of literary activity in the continent today and it is no longer possible to sneer and say (as it was being said ignorantly about fifteen years ago) that African literature is no more than a few novels of Achebe and a few plays of Soyinka.

Although the study of African oral literature is usually traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century, this is merely a concession to a handful of anthropologists, explorers and adventurers who made some collections of tales, proverbs and riddles.<sup>6</sup> The really systematic study has had to wait for our own contemporaries. Forty years ago B.W. Vilakasi<sup>7</sup> of South Africa wrote an M.A. thesis on Zulu oral literature and it caused a stir. In 1959 J. S. Mbiti<sup>8</sup> of Kenya was still lamenting the almost total absence of published versions of the oral literature of East Africa. Here in Nigeria when Adeboye Babalola wrote a Ph.D. thesis on Ijala in 1963<sup>9</sup> it was national news. But the study has made striking progress in the last twenty years and there is now a large corpus of material on oral literature from various parts of the continent on which we can base a reasonable assessment.

The more one knows about the oral form, the more one is bound to admire the skill and ingenuity of our forefathers. In the folktale, they reduced virtually every conceivable human situation to one story line or another, so that there is no occasion which could not have its appropriate story woven in fictitious stance either about man and the animals which surround him or about man and man. In poetry, they explored in great detail all the known genres of the art. In their festivals they incorporated a good amount of dramatic material and in some communities there were itinerant performers and travelling theatres.<sup>10</sup>

The very perfection of the oral form, however, poses a great threat to originality and fresh creativity. We are no longer in a mythologizing age and it is virtually impossible to create a new folktale. Indeed, each time an effort is made in that direction the product sounds like a deliberate trivialisation. In the same way in poetry, especially, heroic, incantatory and didactic poetry, our forefathers having explored all the nuances of the form have left us little or nothing to fabricate. They celebrated gods and goddesses, kings, chiefs, high and low, the altruistic and sometimes even the

wicked, inanimate objects—trees, rivers, and all the flora and fauna surrounding them.

The only area of oral literature which is genuinely fruitful of creativity today is the satire, as can be observed in a community like Ikorodu. There, twice a year at the Magbo and Liwe festivals,<sup>11</sup> the whole male population in their thousands goes chanting hundreds of new satirical songs for about three days ridiculing prostitutes, insolent youths and elders, men of double personalities and sometimes the politically over-ambitious. But even these satirical songs, new as they are, do sometimes show signs of cracking up. With time, as we become more and more divorced from our roots, they too will lose their freshness and become cliché-ridden. This means that our age can only hope to achieve minimal fresh creativity in oral literature. We will, of course, continue to study the various forms, but it must be to make us appreciate the heights attained in the past, as well as give us some of the materials which we can use for our own kind of creativity.

Our general finding is, therefore, that a great part of our oral literature will not survive for much longer in spite of our heated (though necessary) effort at preservation. The reasons for this state of things are various. First, preservation is not the same thing as vigorous life and the dynamics of continuity in art require that there are fresh entrants into the profession from time to time. This is not happening today because nobody in this audience, for example, would voluntarily choose that his children become *akigbe*<sup>12</sup>. So we merely pay lip service to culture and indigenisation of education. More importantly, however, the standards of excellence enshrined in oral literature are becoming gradually irrelevant to our age. The literature emphasises *eloquentia* in a Ciceronian or Elizabethan sense, but our age is likely to become more and more suspicious of the satanic connotation of eloquence. Fulsome praises of successful men, bountiful gods and awe-inspiring phenomena will probably give way to greater criticism and keener circumspection. Above all, the theocentric universe conjured up in oral literature, with its magic and incantations, is bound to decline in favour of a more prosaic apprehension of our world.

The second kind of literature in contemporary Africa, the literature written in African languages, need not detain us for long. In general it is a direct offspring of oral literature and it borrows freely from it, indeed, some of the writers using these linguistic media hardly acknowledge a difference between their art and that of oral literature. When these writers are not borrowing directly from

African oral literature they are doing so from the Bible or popular works like the Arabian Night stories, which are themselves largely the oral literatures of their respective communities.

Although creative writing has been going on in African languages for a long time (Abimbola<sup>13</sup> puts that of the Yoruba as 1852 and B.L. Leshoi<sup>14</sup> mentions some Xhosa plays in the first half of the nineteenth century) but the writing, until recent years, has not been sustained. I think it is fair to say that, apart from the earliest times, only a few of those best equipped to write have chosen to use the medium of the mother tongue. In general, there has been a reluctance to experiment and, in the case of Yoruba, an extreme fidelity to the traditional forms and style of Yoruba utterance. Afolabi Olabimtan<sup>15</sup> has, for example, found himself on several occasions calling on his fellow Yoruba literary artists to experiment and use forms like the sonnet in a new and potentially fruitful context. He could not have been more correct, for a literature which refuses absolutely to borrow from other literary traditions is bound to stagnate and die.

But the real focus of this lecture is the African literature written in European tongues, and in this case specifically the one in English. There are good reasons why this should be so: first African literature in English raises more pertinent questions about our contemporary situation than the two kinds already discussed; secondly it takes Africa straight into the international scene and advertises us to the world (and in this respect the relative fortunes of Fagunwa<sup>16</sup> and Tutuola<sup>17</sup> are instructive); and thirdly it has tried to grapple with far greater problems of art and creativity than the other two literatures.

In 1884 George Alfred Henty wrote a novel titled *By Sheer Pluck: a tale of the Ashanti War* in which the following words appeared:

Africans . . . are just like children . . . They are always either laughing or quarrelling. They are good-natured and passionate, indolent, but will work for a time; clever up to a certain point, densely stupid beyond. The intelligence of an average negro is about equal to that of a European child of ten years old. . . . They are absolutely without originality, absolutely without inventive power. Living among white men, their imitative faculties enable them to attain a considerable amount of civilization. Left alone to their own devices they retrograde into a state little above their native savagery.<sup>18</sup>

Henty was a journalist and, ten years earlier, he had accompanied a

British expeditionary force to Ashanti and witnessed the defeat of the Ashanti armies, which is the subject of the novel from which this quotation is taken. He spent the rest of his long life writing about a hundred novels for boys propagating the idea of Empire and extolling British military achievements.

I have resurrected this corpse not to sound sensational, but to give an indication of part of the background against which African literature in English is to be viewed. Henty epitomises the ethnocentricism and paternalism of his age and his writing had a great influence on the young people who were to build and shape the British empire. But he was only the beginning of a tradition of representing Africa in an unfavourable light in English fiction, a tradition which includes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*<sup>19</sup> and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*.<sup>20</sup> For although these other works are informed by a greater liberalism and sympathy than Henty's, they nevertheless still treat Africa as an exotic place. With Conrad, Africa is the dark mysterious place where events are always larger than life, and with Cary it is a rollicking, demoralising place, an ideal world for a mock-hero. Indeed, this tradition is only an extension of the idea of the noble savage which was already in the air in Shakespeare's time (as witness the strange mixture of nobility and savagery in Shakespeare's *Othello*) and was to find further expression in seventeenth and eighteenth century English writings, for example Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe*.<sup>21</sup> Surely, the Ghanaian philosopher, Willie Abraham, is right when he writes:

The writing of the history of one culture from the milieu of another culture, which is not—relevant to the events and situations concerned—isomorphic, raises serious questions of cultural bias and distortion. It does not necessarily offer objectivity, and indeed could not offer it in any sense in which this involved freedom from cultural colour. In terms of objectivity, where it touches evaluation of facts and events, a cultural alien can only offer an alternative set of prejudices.<sup>22</sup>

African writers since the beginning of this century have usually felt, perhaps keener than others, that they have been consistently maligned in European representations of them.

The foregoing has implications for literary art and literary creativity in contemporary Africa. First, it ensures that the early writings in English by Africans at the beginning of this century—Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*<sup>23</sup> (1911) and Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* (1915)<sup>24</sup> to mention just two—were directed towards proving that the African was not an infantile human specie

as has been alleged. The writings were often political, sociological or philosophical treatises thinly disguised as novels or plays to prove that the African has a soul and that he is as much guided by his philosophy as Western man. The writings, as a result, usually lack any great artistic merit, because the main concern was not art but convincing proof of humanity. To take *Ethiopia Unbound* for example, the main character, Kwamankra, is merely an abstraction, a device made to function merely as its creator's mouthpiece. And although F.N. Ugonna<sup>25</sup> in a recent edition of the work has defended it as a work of fiction, the general impression is still that it is essentially a study of race relations, and that Kwamankra is too rarefied a being, too single-mindedly intellectual to be credible as a life-and-blood character. Secondly, and more significantly for our own purpose, this condensing attitude to Africa ensures that the writings of our own contemporaries also have their own peculiar features, that they too do react like the earlier generation of African writers to unfavourable representations of their race.

In most cultures of the world the literature of a people is integral to the life of the people and usually grows from within. In the case of African literature in English, however, the initial stimulus to create the literature appears to have come from outside, that is, the need to counter prejudices and misrepresentations, for example Achebe's. Most literatures in the world start by being local, tribal or national literatures, and then sometimes achieve continental or universal appeal either by merit or as a result of some accident of history, whereas modern African literature in English started by being continental or international, and it is only now that individual national literatures are beginning to emerge. Most literatures also have their primary audience and critics from within the generating culture, whereas until very recently the vast bulk of the audience and critics of African literature in English have come from outside the continent.

This peculiarity has provoked doubts about the authenticity of this literature and questions have been raised as to whether it is merely an extension of English literature or some kind of class or elite literature, that is, that class which is specially privileged to be fluent in English. Thus Obi Wali<sup>26</sup> wrote, some twelve years ago, that only literature written in African languages can be properly called African literature. Recently, James Ngugi of Kenya changed his name to Ngugi wa Thion'o and threatened to stop writing in English in preference for Swahili because he was finding it increasingly difficult to justify his writing and convince himself of its authenticity. Here at Ife Kole Omotosho has also said once or

twice that he would stop writing in English. Soyinka's own experience as a Visiting Fellow in the University of Cambridge in 1973 is also instructive. He had been billed to give some lectures in a programme on *Literature and Society* in which he was to discuss African literature. But the Department of English later pulled out of the arrangement because some key individuals there 'did not believe in any such mythical beast as "African Literature"'.<sup>27</sup> Even critics like Ben Obumselu<sup>28</sup> for some time had doubts about the authenticity of the literature in English created by our contemporaries.

There is, of course, no doubt that modern African literature in English has been rather heavily influenced by the European tradition. Virtually all the writers have learnt their craft from the West. Achebe's mentors are Shakespeare Hardy and Auden;<sup>29</sup> J. P. Clark, when not invoking Hopkins is modelling his plays on Aeschylus' trilogy; Soyinka's writings assimilate a good portion of English and American writings, but his humour owes a great deal to Restoration witticism; Armah's orientation is that of American left wing writers; even the unpretentious Tutuola has assimilated some Bunyan and some Arabian Nights stories.

Yet, it is the Africanness of the writings of these authors that is more in evidence. Many of them have gone back to roots to find specific African themes and modes of expression. The most remarkable of them is probably Chinua Achebe who in the late 1950s fashioned the theme of culture-contact and culture-conflict which has become a distinctive feature of modern African writing. Achebe's main artistic achievement, apart from the pathos and depth of his tragedies, is the creation of a convincing mode of speech, one which faithfully mirrors traditional Igbo life. Early in his career he hit on the use of transliterated proverbs to express the thoughts of his people and, although the device has sometimes been over-exploited by his disciples,<sup>30</sup> it has nevertheless been a most apt technique of penetrating into the psychology of the traditional African.

J.P. Clark is another good example of this fruitful return to roots. Even in his neo-Aeschylean trilogy—*Song of a Goat, The Masquerade* and *The Raft*<sup>31</sup>—the problems, prejudices and resolutions are African rather than Grecian. The issues are impotence, tribal prejudice, shipwreck and destruction in the Niger Delta and they are given a peculiarly African treatment. But Clark has even gone beyond this point to create in *Ozidi*<sup>32</sup> a most authentic African play. In this monumental epic virtually all the

features of life of a riverain people—birth, death, conspiracy, magic, war, pestilence, witchcraft—are incorporated. All are rolled together with the inimitable skill of the traditional storyteller who takes us through a whole lifetime. Clark was, of course, adapting a traditional Ijaw ritual ceremony mimed and danced for seven days, but in the process he has given the old story of violence and blood a contemporary relevance.

The sum of all these is that modern African literature in English is a hybrid literature. But it is not more so than the society which has generated it. Just as our present society seeks to legitimize itself even though it is made up of seemingly disparate elements drawn from the traditional and the modern, in the same way contemporary Africa literature in English seeks legitimacy even though the tongue is foreign while the body is indigenous. Indeed, one main point of this essay is that the literature created by our contemporaries in whatever language is as authentic as any other one ever created on the African soil and there is no need to be apologetic about it. Every age defines its own character in terms of its own particular perception of reality and, therefore, ought primarily to be evaluated against the goals it sets itself.

## (ii) Celebration

In the next few minutes I propose to examine some representative works to highlight the richness and diversity of modern African literature in English. The first is *Arrow of God*,<sup>33</sup> Chinua Achebe's master-piece. In this novel, more than in any of his other works, Achebe attempts to evoke the great African tradition, to demonstrate the great African humanism in contrast to widely held prejudices in the Western world. He is thus able to suggest the immensity of our loss, the great falling apart which has characterized the African world in the twentieth century. The argument is whether there is an intrinsic sanctity in the African tradition which is now violated by the coming and establishment of the whiteman or whether the time of tradition is up and a community which has thus far lived in blissful isolation has to be roused from its slumber and rolled willynilly into the reality of the machine age, in which case the whiteman is only an impersonal agent of an inexorable wheel of fate.

In treating this Achebe maintains a judicious balance rare among literary artists. First, he creates two different worlds in the novel and then keeps them rigorously separate. He is thus able to show the apartness, the incoherence, so that when later they drift

together they do so with disastrous consequences. On Government Hill it is the Queen's English of native speakers and Achebe matches this with his own elegant, yet matter-of-fact style. In Umuaro, on the other hand, the diction shows the superabundance of word-minters in a tradition in which "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." It is a world of set speeches, of the primacy of eloquence, of maxims and moral statements.

Winterbottom is the satirical butt in much of what takes place on Government Hill. He is the old coaster, the old colonial straight, as it were, from George Henty's days. For him the Igbo people are *savage* and the country itself turns into a *furnace* about mid-morning, the first rain in the year is a *riot*, and the cool wind which usually follows the heat is *treacherous*. The festivals are *unspeakable rites* and the war between Okperi and Umuaro is a *big savage war*. Palm wine is a *dreadful stuff* which natives consume in large quantities. He says specifically to Tony Clarke, the freshly arrived young colonial administrator:

One thing you must always remember in dealing with natives is that like children they are great liars.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, even Winterbottom is not totally destroyed by Achebe. He has a passion for what he believes to be the truth and is willing to pursue it to the farthest extent possible.

Achebe's art is, however, at its best in his treatment of Ezeulu. This is Achebe's grand Shakespearean character, the all-knowing chief priest who over-reaches himself. He has his sterling virtues: circumspection, an enquiring mind, and a deep philosophical insight into the nature of things. He brings to bear on his priestly duties the whole intellectual armourage of generations of Igbo traditional thinkers. But he is also a proud man with a secret ambition he cannot completely disguise, and so it is always difficult to know whether it is himself or his god who is making a pronouncement at any given time. And so when his tragedy comes it is catastrophic in the extreme because it is also the tragedy of the whole community, of a whole civilisation. Surely, this is not the Auden type of tragedy which happens in a little corner with the rest of the world unaware of it; it is rather an elemental tragedy, cracking the whole edifice and tearing down seemingly impregnable structures.

The foregoing shows that Achebe practises the art of the well-made novel and, here in Africa, epitomises it. He is, indeed, the artist of the great tradition and his art the quintessence of the conventional, for he takes on the whole history of a community,

indeed of all Africa in the twentieth century, and gives it a unique, unparalleled treatment. This is probably why he has sometimes been accused of extreme romanticism in his total appraisal of traditional African culture. A.J. Shelton,<sup>35</sup> for example, accuses him of blaming all the ills of traditional Africa on the intrusion of the whiteman. But this can only be a mis-reading of Achebe's motive and achievement, for Achebe himself believes that the time of tradition was up and that the Umuaro community could not continue to be isolated from the rest of the world. Besides, Achebe exposes enough of the contradictions of the traditional society to obviate any charge of undue romanticism.

The second representative work is Soyinka's play *The Road*,<sup>36</sup> In many ways Soyinka's writing is different from Achebe's. He distrusts illustrious ancestors and suspects that the whole of the human race is preoccupied with glorifying violence and blood-thirsty maniacs. *The Road* is the work most typical of his art and creativity. This is a play about motor drivers and touts, about winding roads and broken bridges, about forged driving licences and policemen who are themselves marijuana addicts, about thugs, riotous festivals and political violence. Presiding over this gargantuan disorder as a kind of Lord of Misrule is the character called Professor, about sixty, in his younger days a garrulous lay-preacher, and now a dabbler in magic and a trade in death.

*The Road* is a highly accomplished piece of writing. On the surface it presents just a day, a fateful one, in the life of a group of interesting rascals. But below that surface is a whole criticism of our contemporary society. At the time Soyinka wrote the play the offending road was the Lagos/Ibadan road; today, sadly enough, it has become the Ife/Ibadan road,<sup>37</sup> a road of almost hourly terrible accidents and of senseless, almost maniacal drivers. I have in my study of Soyinka's plays already discussed the significance of the road in the playwright's psychology.<sup>38</sup> Suffice it here to say that the road is projected as the image of our country and the indiscipline of drivers and touts on it represents the chaos and disorder so obvious in our society. Like Samson and Say Tokyo Kid in the play, many of the drivers believe that once they have a talisman or have made appropriate sacrifices to Ogun they can do anything on the road and still be save. It is a pathetic picture of a society engulfed in its own illusion, vainly hoping to solve today's problems with yesterday's solution, a society drifting, if unchecked, to sure disaster. Professor himself is the grand image of the contradictions of our society. He is at once a churchman and a dabbler in magic; a saint and a sinner; a man in passionate quest

after the truth and yet a thief; a man of elegant taste and yet a speaker of incredible trifles. He reminds one of Alexander Pope's lines:

His wit all see saw between *this* and *that*  
Now high, now low, now master up now miss  
And he himself one vile antithesis.<sup>39</sup>

In creating such a monstrosity as Mr Professor, Soyinka wanted to deflate the messianic preoccupations of our society, to show the so-called intellectuals as puffed up, empty headed, hollow men. He has developed this point further in the character of Professor Oguazor in his novel *The Interpreters*.<sup>40</sup> Oguazor wears gloves in our hot country, speaks in a borrowed accent, and condemns student immorality, even though he himself has a daughter through his housemaid.

So Soyinka is a satirist *par excellence* and he has an acute awareness of the absurdities of contemporary society. His main target is the elite in Africa, the leaders and would-be leaders, whom he sees as power prostitutes. His art is urban art, the art of comment, of insinuations, of deliberate juxtaposition of opposites to bring out one absurdity or the other. He tends to see contemporary Africans, especially the leaders, as a whole horde of masquerades,<sup>41</sup> and sets himself the task of unmasking them. To do this, he invokes all the artistry he has learnt from the West (flashback, flash-across, multiple and contiguous settings etc.) and summons personages, illustrious and otherwise, from his own culture, the two collaborating in a fruitful union.

Our third example is *Fragments*<sup>42</sup> by the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah. Armah's writing is in many ways similar to Soyinka's. Like him, his writing has a high political content and he feels intensely the abnormalities of our day. Like him too, he seeks a potent and better alternative to the *status quo*. But his writing shows greater commitment, greater intolerance than Soyinka's. Where Soyinka would have used the subtle art of mockery and ridicule, Armah pumps in a high dosage of virulent attack. He belongs, in fact, to a new generation of African writers and critics, usually American trained who believe in the violence of the word, who are partially disillusioned with Soyinkean writing and accuse him of ambivalence, and who want an immediate solution to Africa's problems.

*Fragments*, Armah's second novel, is largely autobiographical, Baako being the mouthpiece of the author. Baako, like his author, has recently returned from studying abroad and is disillusioned

with the Ghanaian society, especially the top men who are a bunch of idlers. Ocran, Baako's old art teacher at Achimota, says, for example:

Nothing works in this country. What can you expect? The place is run by this so-called elite of pompous asses trained to do nothing. Nothing works . . . There are dozens of organisations, supposed to take care of this and that. But if you want anything done you have to go running all around these stupid organisations themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Baako himself has a full dose of the frustrations of his society: in spite of his qualifications he needs a godfather to get a job; at Ghanavision talent is positively discouraged and trash is enthusiastically sponsored; in the world of art itself deadweights like Akosua Russell parade themselves as champions and leaders; and in the whole society there is a monomania for materialism, for what you can show or what you can buy. Inevitably, a sensitive artist like Baako runs mad in such a society and in his madness sees the impasse of his society even more clearly. Ocran's statement to him at this stage is the final light, the resolution of his dilemma about his loneliness:

. . . Look well at all the people needing to have things to set them above people—position, power, cars, wigs, houses, money. If they lost those things they'd get sick with their own emptiness.<sup>44</sup>

Armah is, of course, an artist who habitually goes to the extreme to express the intensity of his feeling: in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* he goes into latrine imagery and describes various categories of fresh and caked shit to indicate the filth—physical and moral—of contemporary Ghana; in *Two Thousand Seasons* he explores various types of the perversion of the sexual act in order to demonstrate his notion of the moral depravity of Arabs; and in *Fragments* he conceives his society in terms of incoherent bits and pieces, in terms of cargoes, of unthinking masses of flesh.

These are unflattering looks and, accordingly, a number of critics have taken issue with his negative stance, his tendency to peddle anti-Nkrumah propaganda, his almost total lack of humour; and his extreme indulgence in the ugliest form of imagery. Nevertheless, Armah is a supreme artist, and his excess is often poetic excess. He luxuriates in the word and is often disposed to pursue a thought or an image to the last ounce.

Underlying all Armah's writing is the socialist point that the

ordinary man is far more noble and human than the 'new elite of pompous asses'. And so his art often takes the form of deliberate confrontation or implied contrasts between the high and the low in society, in which the lowly placed come off much better. In *Fragments*, for example, whereas the newly rich class like H.R.H. Brempong and Asante-Smith are pre-occupied with their cars, houses, the next big man they are going to flatter to retain their position and other frivolities, the taxi driver who takes Baako and the woman in labour to the hospital is a being from a totally different universe in his selfless concern for human life and deep gratitude for a small gift. Armah's abiding hope is that this bastard elite will soon destroy itself and leave the stage for the genuine humanity of the ordinary man to flourish.

Our fourth example is the play *Anowa*<sup>45</sup> by Ama Ata Aidoo, A Ghanaian woman playwright. *Anowa* is based on the popular folktale of the young woman who is too choosy about a husband and ends up marrying a fool, a mouthy, handsome sluggard. Anowa, the heroine, is a spoilt child, a child of several incarnations who had to be teased out of the goddess on the promise that she will not marry but rather devote her life to the service of the goddess as a priestess. There is, therefore, the Olurombi<sup>46</sup> element in Anowa's make up, that is, a pre-natal vow which is unfulfilled and the vengeance of an offended goddess. Anowa's life is thus blighted from the very beginning and nothing she lays hands on will be successful. Ironically, Kofi Ako, the lazy husband Anowa marries soon becomes rich, indeed, becomes the richest man in the West African coast, trading first in skins and later on in slaves. But this is merely to deepen the final emptiness because the wealth is not accompanied by any kind of satisfaction or fulfilment; instead, it further aggravates the differences between Anowa and Kofi Ako. The husband becomes a bloated, oily figure, large, expansive and useless, the wife, barefooted, hungry-looking. In the end both perish, destroyed by the over-riding wealth of Kofi Ako.

This play, though set in nineteenth century West Africa is a comment on contemporary African society. Badua's failure to keep the vow about her daughter represents the failure of our age to keep promise with Mother Africa, with the result that we are beginning to produce monstrosities. In the same way, Kofi Ako represents contemporary Ghanaian (and ultimately African) manhood, an indolent, depraved, barren breed which is seeking the easiest way to success and wealth. When the success comes suddenly, the barrenness becomes even more obvious, for Kofi Ako does not know what to do with the wealth beyond absurdities like employing

people to fan empty chairs in his multi-million cedi mansion. Thus Kofi Ako ends up as he has started—a good-for-nothing cassava man, a watery male of all watery males. For the same reason the union of Kofi Ako and Anowa is doomed to disaster. Anowa, the driving force of the marriage, is soon alienated because the priestess in her is scandalised by Kofi Ako's singleminded drive for materialism.

The great artistic experiment in *Anowa* is the use of the folktale technique to distance the action of the play so that character and event have both ordinary and archetypal reality, the most successful of the lot being the twin-characters Old Man and Old Woman jointly called The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper. They are still alive but are, in fact, characters from antiquity and they are used subtly to make important pronouncements on the present generation. Aidoo's art is a fascinating combination of convention and experimentation. On the one hand she uses the well-worn symbolism of storm, thunder and lightning to indicate Kofi Ako's progress into greater and greater inhumanity and to show the growing discord between him and Anowa. On the other hand there is a whole range of homely and often original symbolism: Anowa comes on the stage several times with an empty pot which is meant to give a visual impression of her predicament; Kofi Ako is referred to several times as 'swollen pod' or 'ripe tomato'.

Our last example is the long poem entitled *Song of Lawino*<sup>47</sup> by the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. The poem is particularly interesting because it was first written in the Acholi language under the title *Wer pa Lawino*<sup>48</sup> in 1956, rejected by publishers presumably because of its frank sexual references, re-worked over a period of about ten years, and then published in English in 1966 under the present title, with the Acholi version later published in 1969. So the poem bestrides the competing linguistic worlds of contemporary Africa and has made an outstanding impact in each of them.

The poem is a satire on modernisation in contemporary Africa and is a deflation of the arrogance and presumption of the new elite. It takes the form of a complaint by Lawino, Ocol's traditional wife, who has been neglected by her husband in favour of a modern literate wife. Ocol's rejection of his traditional wife is only one aspect of his more comprehensive and total rejection of traditional culture in all its forms: religion, adornments, hair-styles, cooking methods, and even traditional values. Thus Ocol is the grand image of the Westernised African who has totally swallowed foreign culture irrespective of relevance and is prepared to outdo colonialists in his derogatory remarks about his own culture. This is the

monster whom Lawino now finds in place of her husband, the erstwhile full-blooded son of the Bull. Hence the tone of the chant is one of lament not just for the spiritual death of Ocol, whose testicles have been smashed by big books, but also for the imminent death of African values because of the wanton action of the new elite.

Lawino, who used to be chief of the girls, is a clever, sharp-tongued woman who is often able to reduce to absurdity some of those things which the modern educated African holds very dear. She says, for example:

Like beggars  
You take up white men's adornments,  
Like slaves or war captives  
You take up white men's ways.<sup>49</sup>

And of the modern women the husband prefers, she says:

They cook their hair  
With hot iron  
And pull it hard  
So that it may grow long

...  
They fry their hair  
In boiling oil

...  
There is much water  
In my husband's house

...  
But the woman  
With whom I share my husband  
Does not wash her head.<sup>50</sup>

Ocol, too, has become unnatural.

If a child cries  
Or has a bad cough  
Ocol storms like a buffalo  
He throws things

At the child  
He says  
He does not want  
To hear noises  
That children's cries  
And coughs disturb him.

Is this not the talk

Of a witch?  
What music is sweeter  
Than the cries of children.<sup>51</sup>

In this way Lawino takes one feature of the modern African's equipment after another—the religion in which he is called upon to become a cannibal; his politics in which he becomes a deadly enemy of his blood brother—and reduces it all to shreds.

Okot p'Bitek has, of course, been accused of deliberate exaggeration in his picture of the absurdities of modernisation.<sup>52</sup> Ocol, it is said, is hardly more than a caricature. To do this, however, is to miss Okot p'Bitek's sense of humour, for he seeks to persuade his audience not by exact, factual enumeration of points like a chronicler but by constructing a memorable picture of the grotesqueness of the bastardised African.

The example of *Song of Lawino* is the more important because Okot p'Bitek is one of the African writers whose work is least influenced by the Western tradition. He organises his poems rigorously along Acholi traditions and when he departs from them it is not to echo some Western writer, whom he claims to be ignorant of<sup>53</sup>, but to deepen his own originality and creativity. His writing, soaked as it is in the traditions of his people, represents the farthest end and possible from those of Armah and Soyinka.

These examples have, I hope, indicated the range of African writing in English. In just about twenty five years of active writing, African writers have made major achievements in all the genres of the art and the literature itself has come very much of age. Perhaps this has to do with the political independence of the various countries, for the prospects and achievement of independence are remarkable in kindling a corresponding literary awareness. In the same way the disillusionments which have generally followed independence everywhere in Africa have also produced their own literature of doubt, disappointment and even anger.

One very fascinating feature of the literature is that the writers almost to a man, have been eager to experiment and have brought to bear on the material they are handling forms and effects from other world literatures. This, coupled with the fact that fundamental issues of our day have been discussed far more in this literature than in any of the other two mentioned, has made African literature in English one of the most interesting and most viable literatures in the world today.

### (iii) Benediction

I hope I have not given the impression that all is perfect and well with modern African literature in English. The tension between matter and manner in a work of art has not always been satisfactorily resolved by our literary artists and this has been most obvious in poetry. In general, there has been too much concession to learnedness, too much wilful cultivation of obscurity, so that even the initiated cannot sometimes comprehend the verbal somersault of some of our writers. Two of the greatest sinners in this respect are Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka. It is as if some of these writers want, in their more ambitious works, to inflict their whole verbal power on their readers. Thus in fourteen years of teaching Soyinka's works to undergraduates I have not found any class that has not complained, sometimes bitterly, about his failure to communicate with them. When that happens, when the painstaking, intelligent, enthusiastic reader fails to make sense of the basic issues in a literary piece and needs elaborate commentaries then the fault is partly that of the literary artist.

A similar point has been made by a group of three critics. In a wide-ranging article entitled *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*<sup>54</sup> Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike complain about artistic failure and inadequacies in Nigerian poetry in English. Their very first paragraph is worth quoting in full:

There is a failure of craft in Nigerian poetry in English. Despite the high praise heaped upon it from all sides, most of the practitioners display glaring faults, e.g., old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction, a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from African oral poetic tradition, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism. And as for the Nigerian critics who have served as encouragers and mentors to these poets, the presuppositions of their criticism, and their actual practice, instead of clarifying texts have worked to further obfuscate them, and instead of educating taste have led readers into a wilderness of insipidity, thus serving as a maleficent influence on whatever taste there was to begin with.<sup>55</sup>

Further on in the essay they attack the Ibadan/Nsukka school of poets and critics and accuse them of cultivating archaic language, of creating an obscurantist cesspool, of voluntary cultural servitude. Okigbo, Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Egudu, Anozie and Echeruo are subjected to scrutiny and dismissed with devastating comments. They insist that a poem must not just *be* it must also *mean* and that

poetry is not a puzzle. Soyinka's poem *Dawn*, they say, is heavy tongue-twisting, not poetry, and his *Idanre* is a failure because the language is a formidable barrier to understanding.

Of J.P. Clark they write, *inter alia*:

Clark speaks of Io (Greek mythology) in *Cry of Birth* and Joan of Arc (mediaeval France) in *Olumo*. Can't he find an outcast or a woman of stubborn heart in indigenous African mythology or history?<sup>56</sup>

They call Okigbo one of the more accomplished practitioners of all the vices of the school and complain of his unnecessary Latinisms and Catholic impedimenta. His poem *Heavensgate*, they say, is just a dressed up Christian ritual. But he triumphs belatedly over these faults in his poem *Path of Thunder* and finds at last his true voice. They write:

*Path of Thunder* is a supreme example of what we mean by a healthy traditionalism. The trajectory Okigbo was blazing might have launched him into the orbit of the great poets of the world. But he died too soon—just as he had jettisoned all the retarding baggage. Therefore he remains in our memory only as a candidate for greatness.<sup>57</sup>

But the man who receives the most virulent shaft of the lot is critic Anozie. They write:

Anozie claims to be experimenting with critical approaches. Using scraps dredged from Claude Levi-Strauss, he is engaged in constructing a critical pseudo-system which he calls 'structuralism'. Issue after issue of his periodical, *The Conch*, is deluged with structuralist paraphernalia: mathematical formulas, circles, squares, triangles, swiggles and other geometric doodles, all encased in opaque scholarly jargon. Simple ideas are elaborately draped in esoteric rags, blocking understanding. From the point of view of central critical concerns, Anozie's structuralist analysis of African literature approaches unedifying irrelevance . . . Whether applied to African poetry, prose or folklore, the result has been equally disastrous. It is like alchemical experiments trying to turn gold into ash.<sup>58</sup>

They conclude that they are disturbed that African culture is still under foreign domination, that our poets should stop regarding themselves as primarily Orphic messengers to the West, and that it is from the oral tradition that we must extract the foundation elements of a modern African poetics.

Soyinka wrote a rejoinder entitled *Neo-Tarzanism: the poetics of pseudo-tradition*<sup>59</sup> to this essay in which he accuses the troika, as he calls them, of buckshot criticism, random pellets, misinformation and irresponsible scholarship. He likens their image of Africa to that of Hollywood's pop-eyed African and says that African oral literature is far more complex than they think. Their case, he says, is not only over-stated; it is *mis-stated*. He even ridicules their love of slogans:

Elite, elitism . . . catch-call phrases, facile cover-up expressions for the lack of a painstaking concern for truth . . .<sup>60</sup>

He quotes a number of passages from the Ifa corpus to show that traditional poetry is not always the simple nursery-like composition that the troika suggest, and argues that prescriptive comments by self-appointed pontiffs of African literary criticism should stop.

I have gone to such length with this controversy because it highlights many of the issues of modern African literature. In spite of their extravagance and some inaccuracies it is the collective voice of the troika that is the more convincing. Their central charge of the failure of craft is proved against our major poets using English. Nobody quotes them because in most cases they are unquotable; instead our contemporaries are reduced to quoting third-rate musicians who offer little more than clichés. Even Soyinka concedes the point of obscurity. He writes:

The troika cannot however be dismissed on this note. The central issue of their contention—wilful obscurity and private esoterism—is one which does plague a good proportion of modern poetry of Africans and some of the examples they provide are justified . . .<sup>61</sup>

The danger is the greater because a number of our aspiring writers are modelling themselves on these same writers and going further into the obscure.

One cannot argue, as Soyinka tends to do, that because Christianity and Latin are part of our twentieth century experience we should not object if our poetry is deluged with Christian and old world imagery as Okigbo's and Echeruo's are. The risk is that such a poet will soon become irrelevant to his society since his contemporaries can find that experience better expressed elsewhere. The career of Shakespeare in this respect is instructive. His contemporaries—Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, John Lyly, Philip Sydney and others—were learned men and university wits. Their writings demonstrate their learning, for they made references to both popular and obscure gods and goddesses in the Greek and Roman worlds and to the minutest incidents in

Classical times. But many of the writings are hardly read today except by the woolly-headed specialist. By contrast, Shakespeare, who knew 'little Latin and less Greek' went for the folktale and refurbished it and for ordinary stories which he amplified and transmuted with his inimitable art and skill. Even when he cultivated the sonnet form like his contemporaries, he made sure he brought it home to the people. If our poets regard the message they want to pass to their contemporaries as important they had better drop their obscurity. Okot p'Bitek's is a shining example. The Ghanaian poet Atukwei Okai is also already adopting the technique of the town-crier.

Happily, the problem of obscurity and extreme show of learnedness which we have highlighted for African poetry in English does not bedevil the other genres. With very few exceptions our playwrights and novelists have communicated relatively easily with their age. The greater problem of our literature is that of a readership. Our authors are hardly read by their own contemporaries in spite of the fact that they are discussing many of the burning issues of our day. The average adult Nigerian, the average adult African hardly reads anything apart from newspapers. It appears, indeed, that our contemporaries are finding it difficult to move from the oral to the literate tradition. Our appeal, therefore, is not to any government, but to the ordinary Nigerian to cultivate the habit of reading so that our literary artists do not continue to be voices crying in the wilderness. If the average Nigerian reads, he will discover that our own contemporaries here in Africa are already creating a literature which he can truly call his own and that there are now hundreds of titles he can choose from. He may also come to realise that there is no reason for today's African to be irrevocably committed to the literature of England. Our ideal situation is one in which African literature serves as the core of our concern while the literatures of other lands remain at the periphery as points of comparison.

Vice Chancellor, this year there is an unusual presence of African writers here at the University of Ife. Apart from Wole Soyinka and Femi Euba in the Department of Dramatic Arts, Kole Omotosho and Akin Isola of the Department of African Languages and Literatures, there are in the Department of Literature in English David Rubadiri of Malawi, Okot p'Bitek of Uganda and Amos Tutuola of Nigeria. They are all here not for a conference but to fulfill that other role of the writer, that is, the writer as teacher. It looks as if Ife has become the effective centre of modern African writing. To all these writers, and in particular to Chinua Achebe

who in a few weeks will be conferred with an honorary doctorate degree of this university, this inaugural lecture is dedicated.

#### Notes and References

1. For a development of this theme see David Cook: *Literature, the great teaching power of the world*, Inaugural Lecture, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, 1971.
2. See J.S. Mbiti: 'Reclaiming the Vernacular Literature of the Akamba', *Presence Africaine* (Special edition, 2nd Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, 1959), pp. 244-261.
3. Alexander Pope: *Essay on Man*, 1732-1734.
4. For further development of this theme see Oyin Ogunba: 'Shakespeare in Nigeria', *Journal of the Nigeria English Studies Association* (NESA), v. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, 1972.
5. V.S. Naipaul: *The Mimic Men*, Andre Deutsch, 1967.
6. Some of the early collections are the following: S.W. Koell: *African native literature; or proverbs, tales and historical fragments in the Kanuri or Bornu language*, 1854; H. Callaway: *Nursery tales, traditions and histories of the Zulus*, 1968; H.H. Barker and C. Sinclair: *West African Folktales*, 1917.
7. See B.W. Vilakasi: 'The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu' *Bantu Studies*, v. 12, 1938, pp. 105-134.
8. J.S. Mbiti, op. cit.
9. The thesis was written for a doctorate degree of the University of London. It formed the basis of the book entitled *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala*, O.U.P., 1966.
10. See 'Alarinjo': *The traditional Yoruba travelling theatre in Theatre in Africa*, edited by Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele, Ibadan University Press 1978. pp. 27-51.
11. See Oyin Ogunba: 'The Content and Form of Yoruba Occasional Festival Songs', *African Notes*, v. 6, No. 2, 1971.
12. An *akigbe* is a Yoruba praise chanter and can be a man or a woman.
13. See Wande Abimbola: *The Study of Yoruba Literature*, Inaugural Lecture Series 24, University of Ife, 1977.
14. See B.L. Leshoai: *Black South African Theatre in Theatre in Africa*, edited by Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele, Ibadan University Press, 1978, pp. 115-130.
15. See Afolabi Olabimtan: 'Oro ti Afolabi Olabimtan so si Egbe Ijinle Yoruba Eka Eko ni ojo kerinlelogun osu keji, Odun 1966' (Afolabi Olabimtan's lecture delivered to the Yoruba Language Society, 24th February, 1966) *Olokun*, No. 7, 1968.

16. D.O. Fagunwa is a celebrated Yoruba novelist. His works were particularly popular in Nigeria in the 1940s. But until recently he was little known outside Nigeria. His best known work, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* was posthumously translated into English by Wole Soyinka under the title *The Forest of a Thousand Demons*, Nelson, 1968. See also Ayo Bamgbose: *The Novels of D.O. Fagunwa*, Ethiope Publishing Corporation, Benin, 1974.
17. Amos Tutuola is regarded by the Yoruba as generally less gifted than Fagunwa. But his works, especially *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, have had a world wide acclaim partly because he wrote in English.
18. G.A. Henty, op. cit., p. 118.
19. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1902.
20. Joyce Cary: *Mister Johnson*, 1939.
21. John Dryden: *Aureng-Zebe*, 1676.
22. Willie Abraham: *The Mind of Africa*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, p. 11.
23. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* was first published in 1911. The second edition was published in 1969 with a new introduction by F.N. Ugonna.
24. Kobina Sekyi's *The Elinkards* was first published by Rex Collings in 1974, with an introduction by J. Ayo Langley.
25. F.N. Ugonna, op. cit. p. xxxv).
26. Obi Wali: 'The Dead End of African Literature', *Transition*, No. 10, p. 13. Also 'African Literature and Universities—Comments', *Ibadan*, No. 25,, pp. 39-41.
27. Wole Soyinka: *Myth, Literature and the African World*, C.U.P., 1976, p. vii.
28. Ben Obumselu: 'The Background of Modern African Literature', *Ibadan*, No. 22, 1966.
29. Achebe's education at the University College, Ibadan emphasised Shakespeare and some Hardy. He himself refers to Auden in his novel *No Longer At Ease*, a phrase taken from T.S. Eliot's poem 'Journey of the Magi'.
30. See for example Onuora Nzekwu's *Blade Among the Boys*, Heinemann, 1972.
31. These plays are published in a collection entitled *Three Plays*, O.U.P., 1964.
32. J.P. Clark: *Ozidi*, O.U.P., 1966.
33. Chinua Achebe: *Arrow of God*, Heinemann, 1964.
34. op. cit. p. 45.
35. A.J. Shelton: 'The Offended *Chi* in Achebe's Novels', *Black Orpheus*, No. 13, 1964 *Transition*.
36. Wole Soyinka: *The Road*, O.U.P., 1965.
37. At the time Soyinka was writing the play he used to ply the Lagos/Ibadan road frequently and some of the incidents he describes are real life ones. . . A new Ife/Ibadan road was opened in 1976 and has claimed far more lives than any other road in the country in recent times. Soyinka was appointed a Road-Marshall by the Oyo State Government some months ago with the duty to arrest dangerous drivers. His area of operation has been mainly the Ife/Ibadan road.
38. See Oyin Ogunba: *The Movement of Transition*, Ibadan University Press, 1975, introductory chapter and Chapter Six.
39. Alexander Pope: *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 1735, lines 323-325.
40. Wole Soyinka: *The Interpreters*, Heinemann, 1965. See also Oyin Ogunba: 'The Image of the University in Nigerian Fiction' *West African Journal of Modern Languages*, No. 2, 1976 at pp. 127-135.
41. Such a horde of masquerades can be seen at Ijero-Ekiti in Ondo State of Nigeria during the Ogun festival in mid-August of each year.
42. Ayi Kwei Armah: *Fragments*, Heinemann, 1974 (First published by H. Mifflin, 1970).
43. Ayi Kwei Armah, op. cit. p. 116.
44. op. cit. p. 274
45. Ama Ata Aidoo: *Anowa*, Longman, 1971.
46. Olurombi is a character in the Yoruba folktale. While other women made promises of goats, sheep etc. Olurombi vowed to offer her daughter, the beautiful one, in order to obtain her from the Iroko spirit. But once she has the daughter she is reluctant to part with her. It is the standard example of the Yoruba conception of extravagant promises.
47. Okot p'Bitek: *Song of Lawino*, East African Publishing House, 1966.
48. See G.A. Heron: *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek*, Heinemann, 1976, pp. 33-45.
49. Okot p'Bitek, op. cit. pp. 47-48.
50. op. cit. p. 59.
51. op. cit. p. 93
52. G.A. Heron op. cit. Chapter 5.
53. op. cit. p. 1-2.
54. Chinweizu, O. Jemie I. Madubiike: 'Towards the Decolonization of African Literature', *Transition*, No. 48, pp. 29-37, 54-57.

55. op. cit. p. 29
56. op. cit. p. 30
57. op. cit. p. 34
58. op. cit. pp. 45-46
59. Wole Soyinka: 'Neo-Tarzanism, the poetics of pseudo-tradition', *Transition*, No. 48, pp. 38-44.
60. op. cit. p. 41
61. Wole Soyinka, op. cit. p. 43.