Article:
Debating Relevance: African Literature in Politics and Education

Ruth Browne

This essay was offered in response to a question that asked students to trace the development of African literature with reference to a specific paradigm: authenticity, the language debate, orality and so on. For this reason many of the theorists cited in this essay may seem dated. I do, however, point to more recent writers on these subjects for a deeper understanding of how the debates have evolved into the present day. The following quotation was provided as a starting-point for thought and discussion:

> "We may use 1958, the year of the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, as the moment of the inauguration of African Literature as it has come to be known in the world of formal education. We may go back a further ten years, and use instead the collection *anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache de langue francaise* (1948). Either way, the institutional category we have come to know as "modern African literature" did not exist some fifty years ago. What this implies is that five decades or so ago, this book could not have been written – principally because its object was not a category available to theoretical attention."

–Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*[1]

With this quotation in mind, I turn my attention to the development of African literature as a body of texts along with its surrounding scholarship and critiques. By tracing the literary paradigm of *relevance*, I investigate some of the key problematics at stake in the growth of African literature as an object of knowledge.

Olakunle George's statement implies that African literature, defined as a novelistic tradition specific to Africa, only emerged as a recognised form sixty years ago: my grandfather is older than the consensus of texts which is called modern African literature. Such a chronology should give us pause. English literature as it is known and studied in universities today is – even in the strictest evaluation – many generations older, developing gradually as it did alongside narratives of linguistic evolution, cultural shift and empire. By contrast, African literature was conceived in a remarkably brief stretch of time. When a distinct cultural paradigm comes together, it does so via a gradual process of legitimation: these are said to be our ways, those are not, and the authorities that direct these choices are themselves subject to change and revision. According to this pattern, African literature was formulated as a discursive space, albeit in an atmosphere of urgency which has contributed to some quite contentious debate and polemicising. Questions of relevance and authenticity, language choice and

fair criticism, have shaped the way readers, writers and critics of African letters approach and define the object of their study.

Harry Garuba identifies three main areas of critical debate that have all played founding roles in the provenance of African literature: the position of orality in a genre dominated by writing and its built-in literary conventions; the ways in which African writing ought to be read and critiqued, and whether Western standards were sufficient to accomplish this; and the complexities of writing fiction in a nation struggling to self-identify as independent, where a great deal may be expected of writers and of literature in shaping that identity.[2] The latter raises the question of *relevance* as it interrogates the usefulness and applicability of critical standards and literary techniques to the overarching theoretical category we call African literature.

Relevance, as a guiding paradigm, is concerned with the writer's function in an African nation. It explores the connection of her work to the experience of her people and deals with the role of literature in the education of young people and adults in an African context. Considering the artificial borders on the African continent the concept of nation easily imposes a false logic of collectivity that exists largely without reference to the groupings, tribal, ethnic and so forth, of precolonial African communities. While such enforced nationalisms may become reified with time and repetition, works like Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* (2007) show how soon after independence the underlying divisions within a “nation” (in her case Somalia) may reassert themselves. In the same way, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) explores the secession of the short-lived Biafran state from the “nation” of Nigeria, itself characterised by multiple ethnic and linguistic identities. The challenges and failures of African nationalism have been explored by various modern Europhone authors whose work I will not address further here. It is sufficient to note that their scholarship traces the attempted forgings of discrete African nationalities – Somalian, Ugandan, Nigerian, Angolan – from their optimistic origins to their present-day ambiguities. The disjunct between ideas of nation and the real experience of people bound by that construct remains a concern for today's authors and essayists. Thus relevance, a crucial concern since the early days of independence, remains central to African literature.

During the years when African literature was first subjected to intensive consideration and critique, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o emerged as one of the leading theorists addressing the question of relevance. He advocated “the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and other selves in the universe”.[3] Ngugi intends this “liberating perspective” to be interpreted in two ways: first in the sense that a clear comprehension of Africa and its literature in relation to the rest of the world opens up a space for African self-expression, and second that this process can only be understood in the context of an unequivocal liberation from the discursive constraints imposed by a lingering imperialist presence.[4] For this reason his work is consistently involved in the deconstruction of “the inherited colonial education system and the consciousness it necessarily inculcated in the

African mind".[5] For Ngugi, the quest for relevance relates directly to the struggle against neo-colonial policies perpetuating old imperialist doctrines. The African poet, novelist, critic or dramatist, if he is sincere, must seek to ground his literary work in the workers' culture, which becomes the foundation for a new narrativisation of the African nation.[6] In this way literature takes up the "tradition of resistance"[7] and emerges as socio-politically engaged and therefore relevant. This kind of relevance cultivates progress and development, not only in the field of a growing African literature but also in terms of a nation devoted to "human equality, justice, peace and progress".[8] Njabulo S. Ndebele throws this perspective into question by problematising the relationship between fiction and the real human experience it is intended to represent.[9] To those who pursue relevance only insofar as it signifies art's radical political engagement with the liberation struggle, Ndebele grants only the "more limited understanding".[10] He goes on to delineate a much broader field of discourse that exists between culture and politics, with which it is the writer's responsibility to engage. Even those elements of society that are not immediately available to the emancipatory struggle must be represented so that cultural production takes into account the full consciousness of the nation. Ndebele designates this as the starting point for a "literary revolution"[11] which will move beyond the "surface symbols"[12] of moralising protest fiction and take on the "immense and challenging"[13] burden of integrating and expanding the class, race and gender consciousnesses of a newly independent African nation.

The above exposes one of the most intricate aspects of relevance: the balance between a commitment to one's art and a necessary engagement with one's political circumstances. Lewis Nkosi suggested that authors of African literature should pursue "a commitment to craft, to being good writers".[14] If this is the alternative proposed to creating work that is merely, overtly political, is it the non-ideological artistic choice it appears to be? A.O. Amoko defines aesthetic value of this sort as "a form of cultural or knowledge capital that is produced and disseminated within specific institutional contexts", the result of "a restricted process of formal training"[15] that replicates economic divisions in society. A writer who abdicates from the responsibility of producing writing that is relevant to the difficulties and challenges of his surroundings achieves not a pure dedication to his craft but rather a troubling identification with prefabricated aesthetic ideals. At the 1967 conference near Stockholm, Wole Soyinka found a "lack of vital relevance"[16] connecting the preoccupations of African writers to the socio-political reality encompassing them, a reality that for Soyinka constitutes "the very collapse of humanity".[17] The South African writer Alex La Guma argued in a similar vein, asserting that "African literature concerns itself with the realities of Africa", which for him meant understanding and resisting the forms of oppression then active in South Africa that denied non-whites the right to empowerment through education.[18] La Guma's identification of the right to an uninhibited process of learning - especially relevant to his people's struggle - was also taken up in 1986 by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind.*

Ngugi's position on education is as elementary and polemical as his stance on whether African literature can be written in a European language (to which his

answer is an emphatic no). In fact, the question of how a child in Africa is educated is very much bound up with questions of how she, as a novelist for example, might go on to express herself in writing. If she chose to write in a non-European language, her choice would be as it was for Ngugi a deliberate one, and the Afrocentric education system of her youth would likely be implicated in her recognition of her home language as valuable. In Garuba's opinion, critics often reduce the decision to write in an African language to the level of a simple and unqualified preference, thus passing over the ways in which language defines being, self and subjectivity.[19] As Obi Wali claimed, "[a]n African writer who thinks and feels in his own language *must* write in that language" (italics in text).[20] From Ngugi's perspective, this is all a matter of "base".[21] Education in Africa must begin with African literature and languages as the centre for study, displacing the old colonial impositions of English, French or Portuguese cultural constructs. If educational institutions do not put these foreign forms in their proper place as periphery or tributary rather than core, they risk perpetuating the alienation of the African subject from her African context: instead of knowing herself "through London and New York", the Kenyan child must be introduced to "*the world context of the black experience*" (italics in text).[22] Ngugi recognises that underlying ideological motivators of class and philosophical outlook will affect the move towards an Afrocentric syllabus in schools and universities, and that this move will be further complicated by problematics of nationhood (a questionable construct, as above) and modernity.[23] In this context Olakunle George draws attention to the 1958 publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as "the moment of the inauguration of African Literature as it has come to be known in the world of formal education". Coming in the wake of Ghana's 1957 claim to independence, *Things Fall Apart* was indeed a novel conceived in a time of national change and upheaval. It came onto the scene just as the "postcolonial university"[24] and other African institutions of learning were emerging to service a generation of newly independent citizens.

The novel, despite its status as an imported form, figured large in what Garuba terms the "decolonizing [of] the school curriculum",[25] and became essential to the new system of education in the humanities that Ngugi was proposing in Kenya ten years after Achebe was first published. This explains the importance of *Things Fall Apart*, which was amongst the very first novels of its kind: offering tropes of character and plot development familiar enough to a foreign audience, it also asserted Igbo idioms and ways of storytelling. In contrast Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) gained little positive critique abroad. Based on the linguistic specificities of his mother tongue Yoruba, the novel is written in a non-standard English prose. Dylan Thomas' offhand remark in the *Observer*, where he called the book "...brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching",[26] illustrates how difficult it was for readers to access the novel. Achebe characterises Tutuola as a "natural artist" whose "half-strange dialect" is the result of a second language only partially acquired,[27] making his writing less accessible both at home and abroad. Thus Achebe succeeded where others had not. By making the necessary concessions to his chosen form, he ensured that publishers (and his fellow Nigerians) would not reject his novel out of hand. At the same time, he resisted the constraints of the novel as European to the furthest

extent possible. The rhythm and nuance of his writing derives from the importation both of *orality* and African idioms and loanwords.

When Achebe introduced West African writers to a form of plain-spoken prose fiction which seemed to grant access to the expression of a uniquely African experience, *Things Fall Apart* became the seminal text on which to model a canon of African literature. It yielded neither to the ambiguities of *Négritude* nor to the condescension of stories written about Africa from the outside. In this respect George's orientation of African letters in “the world of formal education” is apt. Not only has Achebe's novel been integrated into school syllabuses worldwide, it has also provided the rubric for a formal academic consideration of what African novels should be and do. Much like the tradition of literary criticism developing in Africa around the same time, Achebe's reinterpretation of European norms and ideals “became itself a standard by which critics judged individual works of literature”.[28] In short, it was a form that was perceived as truly relevant to the written representation of African life and experience. In this way the novel not only contributed to the recentering of African education, but also became what Garuba terms “the major literary instrument needed to accomplish the ethnographic project of nationalist desire”.[29]
This is the point at which Amoko problematises “optimistic postcolonial nationalism”[30] and insists that the conflation of “an existing *school culture* with a substantially imagined *national culture*” is a mistake.[31] Within African universities, African literature was shaped by the same questionable processes of institutionalisation and legitimation that grant power to particular English canonical texts. Amoko's text investigates the unequal distribution of cultural and knowledge-capital for which the “singular discursive formation”[32] of English literature in the university is responsible. This school culture privileges a select academic elite, who in Kenya claimed responsibility for the directing and development of a national culture, as well as the theorising-into-practice of what it means to be a citizen in postcolonial Africa.[33] There is a disjuncture here between the multiple cultural formations of a nation and the postcolonial x.

Notes

[1] George, Olakunle. *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. Print. 196.
[2] Garuba, Harry. “The Critical Reception of the African Novel.” *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. Ed. Abiola Irele. Cambridge University Press: 2009. 243-262. Print. 246.
[3] Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey, 1986. Print. 87.
[4] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 88.
[5] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 101.
[6] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 104.
[7] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 103.
[8] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 103.
[9] Ndebele, Njabulo S. “Redefining Relevance.” *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 126-131. Print. 128.
[10] Ndebele, “Redefining Relevance”, 128.
[11] Ndebele, “Redefining Relevance”, 129.

[12] Ndebele, Njabulo S. "Turkish Tales, and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction." *Staffrider* 6.1 (1984): 1-30. Print. 15.
[13] Ndebele, "Redefining Relevance", 131.
[14] Soyinka, Wole. "The Writer in a Modern African State." *The Writer in Modern Africa*. Ed. Per Wastberg. Upsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968. 14-36. Print. 27.
[15] Amoko, A.O. "The Problem with English Literature: Canonicity, Citizenship and the Idea of Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 32.4 (2001): 19-43. Print. 20.
[16] Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State", 14.
[17] Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State", 16.
[18] Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State", 22.
[19] Garuba, "The Critical Reception of the African Novel", 252.
[20] Obi Wali. "The Dead End of African Literature." *Transition* 11 (1963): 13-15. Print. 14.
[21] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 88.
[22] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 97-98.
[23] Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 102-105.
[24] Amoko, "The Problem with English Literature", 22.
[25] Garuba, "The Critical Reception of the African Novel", 245.
[26] Tutuola, Amos. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. London: Faber and Faber, 1952. Print.
[27] Achebe, Chinua. "The African Writer and the English Language." *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1975. 55-64. Print. 61.
[28] Bishop, Rand. "African Literature, Western Critics." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 414-421. Print. 415.
[29] Garuba, "The Critical Reception of the African Novel", 249.
[30] Amoko, "The Problem with English Literature", 22.
[31] Amoko, "The Problem with English Literature", 23.
[32] Amoko, "The Problem with English Literature", 26.
[33] Amoko, "The Problem with English Literature", 31.