

CHINUA ACHEBE

THOUGHTS ON THE AFRICAN NOVEL

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was born in Ogidi, Nigeria. After studying English at University College (now the University of Ibadan), he taught for a short time before accepting a position at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. While working there he wrote his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which won the Margaret Wong Memorial Prize. This was followed by the novels *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966), which focused on the tensions between traditional and colonial ways of life. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) he travelled to various countries to raise awareness of the conflict, and after the war he became a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. The following excerpt is from a talk given at Dalhousie University in May 1973, which was published in the winter 1973-1974 issue and included in the collection *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975).

LET ME PRESENT TWO SHORT PASSAGES of the kind that has been causing me great discomfort:

This is the confrontation which *The Interpreters* presents. It is not an “African” problem. Events all over the world have shown in the new generation a similar dissatisfaction. . . . Thus Soyinka, using a Nigerian setting has portrayed a universal problem. This is what makes both this novel and the whole corpus of Soyinka’s work universally valid. (Eldred Jones, *The Essential Soyinka*)

Before I go on, let me make two points. First, I am not in disagreement with Professor Eldred Jones’ evaluation of Soyinka but with the terms he has chosen for that evaluation. The second point is that I regard Eldred Jones as our finest literary scholar, a man of great sensitivity and perception, whom

I should have much preferred not to disagree with. But the dogma of universality which he presents here (I believe, absent-mindedly) is so patently false and dangerous and yet so attractive to callow minds that it ought not to go unchallenged. For supposing “events all over the world” have *not* shown “in the new generation a similar dissatisfaction . . .” would it truly be invalid for a Nigerian writer seeing a dissatisfaction in *his* society to write about it? Am I being told for Christ’s sake that before I write about any problem I must first ensure that they have it too in New York and London and Paris?

What Professor Eldred Jones is proposing is that I renounce my vision which (since I do not work with the radio telescope at Joddrel Bank) is necessarily local and particular. And I declare my total and unconditional rejection of that proposition.

Not so long ago a similar proposition was made to me, an attempt to discredit my vision and the absolute validity of my experience. But it came from “expected quarters.” At the end of the war in Nigeria (in which, you may know, I was on the wrong side) I had an invitation to visit New Guinea and Australia. But some official or officials in Lagos saw to it that I did not get a passport. When I protested to the Commissioner for External Affairs, he wrote me a nice, intriguing letter with words to this effect:

Dear Achebe,

Thank you for your letter in which you complained about difficulties which you thought you had with my officials etc.

You can see, can’t you, the close kinship between that letter and the proposition by Eldred Jones? Once you agree to “clear” your vision with other people you are truly in trouble. Now let us look at another short extract from the same essay written by Eldred Jones in a book called *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*:

When Wole Soyinka writes like this his audience is not a local one, it is a universal one. Indeed at this point he widens his immediate range of reference by making the Court Historian invoke the precedent of the Trojan War.

Thus in the first extract Eldred Jones praises Wole Soyinka for not writing about an African problem but a universal one; and in the second for not

writing for a local but a universal audience! Surely, African criticism must be the only one in the whole world (or perhaps universe) where literary merit is predicated on such outlandish criteria. But I don't really believe that Jones is serious. I think what has happened is that he did not really think about this one. Which I must say is most unlike him. Perhaps I should point out in fairness that in the first extract he did put *African* in quotes. Now it is not clear to me exactly what the quotes are supposed to do. Perhaps they hint at a distinction between *real* and *so-called* African problems. This may redeem the situation somewhat, but not very much. For *real* and *so-called* Africa are metaphysical retreats for all kinds of prejudice. Like the critic who said of Ekwensi's *Burning Grass*, "At last Ekwensi has drawn real Nigerian characters" She did not say what *unreal* Nigerian characters looked like. But what she meant was that a Lagosian or an African from Nairobi was less real (or *authentic*) than a Masai or a Tuareg, which is surely a matter of taste and not reality.

I shall look at one other aspect of the same problem and I shall be done. In our discussion yesterday Professor Emile Snyder reminded us that politics was always present in literature and gave examples from Dante to Eliot. Why, he asked, do we get all so worked up about it in discussing African literature? Of course the reason is clear. We are late starters. I mean really late—after the track judges have all packed up their things and gone home. Such late starters are usually extremely conscientious. They will cut no corners even though the last prizes had long been given out.

That is why, for instance, we must now have a debate on art for art's sake. That is why we must have pundits decreeing to us what is or is not appropriate to good literature and even tell us what social or political roles artists may (but more usually, may not) perform. Thus in a curious novel entitled *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* Ali Mazrui has a poet tried in the hereafter for throwing away his life on the battlefield like any common tribesman. There is no condemnation of war as such, only of poets getting involved—for "some lives are more sacred than others." In the words of one leading character (an African Perry Mason clearly admired by Mazrui):

a great artist was first of all an individualist, secondly a universalist,
and only thirdly a social collectivist.

Since these roles and attributes are not known instinctively by the art-

ist in question (otherwise how would Okigbo not know what was legitimate activity for him?) it stands to reason that he requires someone like Mazrui to tell him (a) the precise moment when he crosses the threshold of mere artist and becomes a great artist and (b) how to juggle with his three marbles of individualism, universalism, and social collectivism.

What I am saying really boils down to a simple plea for the African novel. Don't fence me in.

I dare not close without a word of recognition for that small and proprietary school of critics who assure us that the African novel does not exist. Reason: the novel was invented in England. For the same kind of reason I shouldn't know how to drive a car because I am no descendant of Henry Ford. But every visitor to Nigeria will tell you that we are among the world's most creative drivers!

Only fifteen years ago a bright, sceptical academic at a Nigerian university could raise a laugh by saying: *That would be the day when English literature is taught from Chaucer to Achebe*. Today, I much regret to say, that same academic makes a living teaching African literature in some cozy corner of the globe, presumably teaching more Achebe than Chaucer. So it will be with the others.

In conclusion all these prescriptions and proscriptions, all these dogmas about the universal and the eternal verities, all this proselytizing for European literary fashions, even dead ones; all this may in the end prove worse than futile by creating needless anxieties. For as everybody knows anxiety can hinder creative performance from sex to science.

I have no doubt at all about the existence of the African novel. This form of fiction has seized the imagination of many African writers, and they will use it according to their differing abilities, sensibilities, and visions without seeking anyone's permission. I believe it will grow and prosper. I believe it has a great future.