

Africa: Literature and Politics An Introduction

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The first issue *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* devoted to written African literatures appeared nearly ten years ago. Despite its linguistic limits—it was centered on works in French and in Portuguese—the volume had two ambitious purposes: to promote that body of works and to contribute to the research in the area. Its success and its impact encouraged the editorial board to undertake a second special issue on the subject. From such a desire comes this collection of articles entirely dedicated to the continent. To be sure, it appears belatedly, but the passage of time helps us realize how much has been accomplished, how much the audience for such literatures has grown in the West, how much deeper and more sophisticated is the research done today, how much more we know, but also, as African writers continue to create new styles and new genres, how much more we must accomplish if we want to grasp the meaning and importance of these literatures.

Many changes have occurred on the continent during the eighties, unfortunately some of them for the worst. An unprecedented growth in population accompanied by poor management of natural resources has increased the danger of famine and war and has accelerated desertification; a depressed economic situation plagues many countries; heads of state and their cohorts are in many instances all-powerful, tyrannical, and more interested in their personal enrichment than in the welfare of their people; intellectuals and businessmen are emigrating to the West, frustrated by the living and working conditions in their own countries—these factors and other conditions too complex to consider here have seriously diminished the hopes generated by independence. Yet, during this period literature has flourished. While older authors continue to produce interesting books, a pléiade of younger ones have tried their hands at writing,

some with great originality, others seeking mostly to please and entertain, while still others have published with a political or social agenda in mind. All this has resulted in a great diversity.

In an effort to forget or, more often, to expose their bleak situation, African writers have been very creative despite the obstacles they encounter when publishing. Some of their difficulties concern the material aspects of writing: the high price of stationery, the luxury of a typewriter, and the lack of proper accommodations conducive to literary activities. The economy causes other problems: few publishing houses exist in Africa, particularly in the francophone countries where writers still depend on French publishers (a circumstance that makes their works too expensive for the common reader). Furthermore, these commercial ventures rarely prosper, thus limiting the number of volumes they print. However, most of the hindrances come from politics, from the attitudes and the policies of the governments. No African government permits freedom of speech as we understand it in the West. In the name of unity, they all demand the right to decide what appears in print. They might not have in all cases created special bureaus of censorship, but they encourage “good” behaviour on the writer’s part or they suppress those who dare oppose them. To do so, they use all sorts of methods. Apart from usual punishments of jail and physical violence, writers might lose their jobs, houses, or reputations. As due process often depends upon the good will of officials, their whims, their familial or tribal ties, and bribes can decide a book’s fate, a fact that makes censorship even more unpredictable and pernicious.

To be sure, every government has policies to control education, and like their counterparts in Europe and America, African officials choose not only textbooks but also the works of literature to be read in high schools. Although university professors supposedly have the right to decide which texts to use in their courses, they risk censure if their reading material does not suit the government. One should note here that because the largest group among the readership consists of students between sixteen and twenty-six years old—years during which people develop their literary preferences—any educator’s decision about a particular book affects not only its sale but also, in the long run, its impact on the nature of African literature. In addition, governments own newspapers, publishing houses, and radio and television stations—a circumstance that enables them to impose their concept of what a good book is and what it should contain. They

determine which ones will become available in which libraries, whose number and location they choose. They regulate bookstores by dispensing or withholding permits. Customs agents have the power to refuse the import of certain books. In this manner, governments exercise very strong control over printed matter. Certainly, oversights occur. To reduce their impact, administrations find ways of discrediting writers by declaring them parasites in a revolutionary society, accusing them of moral turpitude, of accepting Occidental values, and often they denounce them for not being “true” Africans. These attitudes, admittedly, change somewhat from one country to another and vary in their intensity over time, but they are pervasive and they have not improved in recent years.

African governments behave in an even more authoritarian manner than the colonialist ones in this matter of writing—after all, publishers in France printed anti-colonialist books by Blacks. Recent governmental conduct explains why the writers, having developed ways to circumvent white censorship, continue to employ them today against black regimes. So this volume contains a number of articles about “writing double,” the various textual strategies used to imply a meaning not explicitly stated.

Politics and literature are always intertwined, perhaps not as openly as in Zaire’s political theater, where the public, lead by supporters of the regime, must applaud on cue and where some rebellious citizens find themselves forced to act in a play glorifying the President Mobutu Sese Seko. Yet the social and political engagement of the writers and the involvement of governments in literary matters mean that books can never escape this uneasy relationship. It may at times be tenuous or not so obvious, but it exists nevertheless: such as is the case with the obsession of writers with “decolonizing” African literature, as the articles of this issue will demonstrate.

For the authors, the term signifies not only the need to develop a truly African esthetic, but also to find ways to subvert governmental attitudes toward the printed word, as the term “neo-colonialist” describes the new class in power. Consequently, the first two articles in this issue explain why the concept of “decolonizing” is historically important. Having experienced the arrogance of colonialism, writers had to assert their identity. So, for example, the Cameroonian Ferdinand Oyono and the Nigerian Chinua Achebe promoted the creation of books that, although written in the colonialist language, would be truly African in their content and in their style. All the other

articles suggest various ways of “decolonizing” African literatures: by using violence toward the language (Eric Sellin); by returning to the past and combining it with the present (Hédi Abdel-Jaouad); by turning Occidental forms to a purpose not intended (Renée Larrier); by drawing from oral literature (Derek Wright); by deconstructing the Occidental discourse (John Erickson); by denouncing inequities in society (Janice Spleth); by using literature as a revolutionary weapon (Janis Pallister); and by the writers courageously accepting their responsibilities in their society (Gay Wilentz). Only then may come “‘the guest of the future’—the artist as prophet of the resolution of divided cultures” (Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Barbara Temple-Thurston’s piece).

The articles in this issue cover nearly forty years of African writing. They speak of literatures written in English, French and Portuguese; they deal with the Islamic and Christian religions; and they represent geographically the four corners of the continent. To be sure, this volume does not pretend to offer a complete view of the literary landscape of contemporary Africa, but it does try to convey an idea of its diversity—all the more so because the authors of these articles have distinctive backgrounds: some were born in Africa, others in the United States or in Australia; they approach their subjects from different points of view, a number of them employing “traditional” tactics, others presupposing modern literary theories. This variety should add to the interest of an issue which the editorial board hopes will not only advance research in Africa literatures, but also support the writers in their creative endeavors.