AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LANGUAGES

THE NOVELIST AS HISTORIAN:
EXPLORING THE SOCIAL COMMENTARY, ACTIVISM AND POLITICALITY OF
POST-COLONIAL AFRICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT
This dissertation focuses on the role of the African writer in the politics and societies of Africa, especially how this role has been reflected in the work of the African writer. Drawing on the premise set by Chinua Achebe’s 1965 essay “The Novelist as Teacher,” this research establishes the African writer as a continuous function, allowing this description to embrace the dynamic hybridity of African writers from the past, present and future generations. It is remarkable how the role and focus of the African writer has evolved through the years. This research aims to show that in redefining the African writer as a function, the reader is now equipped to view the turmoil in African writers and their literary works as representative of the turmoil in Africa’s politics and politics of identity.
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0.1 Statement of the Problem:
This research attempts to tackle the question of the definition of the African writer by establishing the writer as a function. Rejecting prior definitions which have so far been unable to capture the variabilities of the African writer, the thesis of this research is concerned with a redefinition of the African writer – one which embraces the complexities, abstractions, and futurisms of new generations of African writers while retaining their art as an important tool for intervention and social reformation. Drawing upon the premise of Chinua Achebe’s designation of the African writer as teacher, while that essay has set the precedence for the role of the African writer as a function, this research will establish that the African writer is teacher to the detriment of their art, and is historian as a matter of necessity. In describing the writer as a function, this research will focus on the role of the African writer and the African writer’s art in the politics and societies of Africa. Because this research proposes that the function of the African writer in African societies is directly tied to articulating the varying perceptions of identity, the concept of African identities forms the foundation of eventual evaluations and conclusions.

0.2 Scope of Research:
For accuracy, this research has focused primarily on what the African writer has had to say about their function; examining the reasons for the acceptance or rejection of this role as the case may be. Secondary data has also been drawn from African literary works, for analysis of the underlying philosophies of the works themselves as reflections of the stance of the African writer.
Careful attention was paid to ensure that a cross-section of the literatures examined, adequately represented the varied societies of Africa. For this reason, literary works were drawn from Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, Gabon, Kenya, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt, and Algeria. There is an abundance of materials from Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o because they, more than any other writer, have devoted time to philosophizing about the role of writing in African societies. Nevertheless, considerable attention was also paid to younger, lesser known writers.

0.3 Method:

This research utilizes the critical approach of New Historicism in evaluating the role of the African writer as a function in post-colonial African literature. To this end, historical analysis has been undertaken to excavate materials from the 1960s to date. Because this research focuses on the African writer in post-colonial African literature, archival data from that period retains its relevance in evaluating the changes that have occurred in the place that the African writer has occupied in African societies, and how these changes are reflections of the political and social changes in African societies themselves.
CHAPTER ONE

LET’S TELL THIS STORY PROPERLY

Through the years, African literature has been characterized by a singular, unifying factor: colonialism. This should not be surprising given that Africa’s history is in itself characterized by colonialism and officially begins only when the West is already in Africa, expunging and exploiting. However, Africa’s history, in the real sense of the word, surpasses its history of slavery and/or colonialism. This research was started in part, as proof that African societies especially as depicted through African literatures, have, and continue to thrive — and by this I really mean survive in some way — outside of their colonial history. Unfortunately, this research also falls into the age-old trap of reminding its readers that Africa is the way it is today; that African literature and by extension its writers, are also shaped by its colonial past. While the ‘blame-game’ might seem tiring, I would like to remind the reader that colonialism did happen, and that Africa for a time, even until now, has been culturally displaced given the erosion of its history. Therefore, to understand African literature as it explicates African societies, and the role that the African writer plays in this regard, is to understand all of the prevailing factors that have led us to where we are now, and what we are. We must in other words, tell this story properly.

If there is anything that is obvious from Africa’s historical timeline, it is that the role of the African writer is continually evolving, adapting to the circumstances of its society. The pre-colonial form of literature in Africa which has drawn the most attention, is oral literature. I believe strongly that anthropological excavations of Africa’s ancient scripts will reveal a new dimension of literature in Africa pre-colonialism. Nevertheless, Africa’s traditions of orature reveal a societies of inherent spirituality and devotion to familial and communal expansion. But the point
that must be proven is this: that the messages of the griot even in those times were always intentional, always political in a way. Orature was always engaged in communal history, always engaged in the initiation of the younger generations into the shared cultures and beliefs of their society, always engaged in teaching. This research attempts to reevaluate the post-colonial, contemporary African writer as a continuation of this function of intentional art.

The first time in modern, post-colonial history that we are asked to think of the African writer as a function, is in 1965. Chinua Achebe’s penned essay “The Novelist as Teacher” will go on to set the precedence for how African novels will be perceived by their Western audiences, and then, how African novels will be written for Africans by newer African writers. Achebe puts to words, the one thing which the writers of his generation were striving to do, and defines it extensively. Most of all, he presents the African writer as something other than a being; a function, and one whose role it was to teach the continent. This essay is the premise upon which this research is based.

In Achebe’s time, to appoint the writer as teacher was to place the African writer as a central figure to Africa’s history and culture, a task that was as daunting even then as we might imagine it to be today. Achebe’s teacher-writer is not merely a teacher, but a radical anthropologist, one who has had to rise up to help the African society regain belief in itself after the years of denigration and self-abasement. But the work of the writer is primarily the writer’s art; therefore, to appoint the African writer as teacher is to commit the writer’s art, and to commit the writer’s art is to perhaps make the literature less enjoyable and potentially less enduring. While there will be literatures such as Achebe’s Things Fall Apart which on the surface discredits this preset, still, the problem with the novelist as teacher, is that the reader must be learner. Furthermore, if we have designated the reader as learner, have we not – to interpret the words of Roland Barthes – “imposed
on that text a stop clause, furnished it with a final signification, closed the writing?" (“The Death of the Author”)

Achebe’s claim that the African writer exists not for expressive art, but to fulfil a function geared towards building and consolidating the African identity after centuries of Western intrusion, serves only to relegate the place of storytelling. To draw upon Achebe’s own metaphor, the work of art is like a masquerade dancing in the market square. Granted, traditionally, the spectacle serves to summon the spirits who then pronounce judgements or blessings, yet all viewers see what they can and take from the experience whatever they choose. Like the masquerade that attracts crowds with its striking music and all of its exquisite paraphernalia, the weapon of African writers is not their protest or activism; rather, it is their art, their ability to craft and deliver stories.

Can one be defined as a writer simply because one has composed what one thinks is relevant about socio-political issues, simply because one’s supposed great book is built on the basis of a great theme? In order for the art to survive, we must hence redefine the role of the African writer. We must first of all recognize that art is autonomous and politics or sociology must rely on the art for conveyance and relevance, and not the other way round. Michel Foucault says that we must view the author as a function, and that function as transcending the author’s work. So, whatever role we attribute to the African writer must exceed the writer as a being, and institute instead, the writer as a continuing function of the writer who came before and who will come after. We must determine that the sensibilities of writers as members of society and their art forms are conditioned by the happenings of the politics around them. In fact, we must view the African writer as one who speaks about the culture, social structure and politics of the society, including its customs, conflicts, changes and transformations. We must not only view literature as discourse, but examine this discourse in accordance with its modes of existence. We must accept that African
literature is an adequate and exhaustive representation of the fluctuations and moods of African societies. Ultimately, the relevance of African writers must be located within the writers’ understanding of the interplay of social forces as contained by their reality, and how they harness their art in reaction to these forces. This research, in attributing the African writer as historian, therefore accepts that the African writer is defined not by the writer’s relation to a text of literature, but by the satisfaction of the writer’s socially and culturally defined role in relation to that text. Here, the African writer through their art, is a chronicler of political history, and advocate of radical social change.

Art has always had purpose. Given the attitudes of Africa’s pre-colonial orature, art is social, it is political, and it is economic. Art is, and should always be, a reflection of the sum of living. Therefore, the African writer is historian not at the detriment of the writer’s art, but because it is only the writer who can temper Africa’s societies with words. For Achebe, it is not what the writer expects from society, but what society expects from the writer and it is this mindfulness that makes the writer conscious of the need to use art in shifting the frames of reference for society. It is important to think of the African writer as historian because in many ways, in depicting and preserving Africa’s precarious history, it is only the African writer who has then been equipped to predict its future.
CHAPTER TWO

THE AFRICAN WRITER IS…

The African writer is the name we do not recognize: Akwaeke Emezi, Take Abdulai Sila, Anne Dafeta.

The African writer is the name we do recognize: Chinua Achebe, J. M. Coetzee, Ayi Kwei Armah. And what these writers have in common is space, in the sense that essentially, African writers are rooted in the space that they occupy and that they react to, in the sense that that space is pervasive of time, of geographical boundaries.

2.1 On Being:

Every other year or so, in an attempt to either redefine or reinforce what African literature is or should be, there will be that one incident which will reignite the fiery debate on who is the African writer, and what constitutes African literature.

Soon after Uganda had gained its independence, Makerere University played host to the first African writers’ conference. Titled: ‘A Conference of African Writers of English Expression’, it had, by the most remarkable stroke of luck, three of the biggest names to emerge out of African literature in that era: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. A considerable amount of time was spent in an attempt to define ‘African literature’ at this conference. And in a phenomenon that will repeat itself throughout the ensuing years, these writers, talented and distinguished in their field, driven by a love for Africa and African stories, were yet unable to define ‘African literature’, or determine the boundaries of what it entailed. Perhaps what is more striking about this conference is that while these writers worked at defining ‘African literature’,
neither the North-African writer, the maligned Muslim African writer, nor the indigenous language African writer communities were directly targeted or invited as a part of this discussion. Chinua Achebe, reflecting on the failure of the Makerere conference years later, writes:

There was something which we tried to do and failed – and that was to define ‘African literature’ satisfactorily. Was it literature produced in Africa or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? (“English and the African Writer” 27)

Literary critic Obi Wali, in a response titled “The Dead End of African Literature?”, captures this failure in pristine words: “perhaps the most important achievement of the last conference of African writers… is that African as now defined and understood leads nowhere” (13).

Roughly a year later, in 1963, African Anglophone writers met again at another conference in Fourah Bay and while this conference in particular was more concerned about restructuring the African literature curriculum in schools, they did one thing at least: they defined African literature as “creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral” (qtd in “English and the African Writer” 27). This is what critics of the Makerere conference such as Obi Wali wanted, a direction for African literature. Yet, there was a problem with this definition. Writers like Chris Abani, with The Secret History of Las Vegas, Aminatta Forna, with The Hired Man and Helen Oyeyemi, with Boy Snow Bird, are immediately excluded as African writers in terms of these particular works which deal exclusively with non-African settings, characters and/or themes. Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness interestingly makes the cut as an African literature.
There is a problem with African literature in that it is so diverse as to defy all forms of classification or attempts to classify it. And if the work itself eludes classification, what does this say about the writer? In the words of Maaza Mengiste:

It is difficult to apply a single identity to the African writer. As individuals, we are each comprised of a series of contradictions. We are not neatly constructed sets of qualities. At our best, we should defy simple categorization. (“What Makes a 'Real African’?”)

It is necessary to understand all of the peculiarities that give rise to a general African literature: it is the absence of identity for the African writer, the lack of African history, recurring stereotyping of Africa and its literatures, and the burning requisite to change the global perspective about Africa and rewrite the narrative. In this context, the brand of ‘African literature’ becomes necessary – burdensome, but necessary.

The Caine Prize for African literature, is the most prominent structure that in recent times, has been unwittingly tasked with the role of defining African literature and by extension, defining the African writer. In 2013, in an unprecedented move that was largely applauded, and following numerous campaigns by diasporic African writers, Tope Folarin, born to Nigerian parents in America and steeped in an American childhood, emerged its winner. This was an outright affirmation of writers lacking in the “African experience” - whatever that is - as African writers. Achebe in response to Obi Wali’s criticism of the Makerere conference’s inability to define African literature, offered his personal definition: “I do not see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units. In fact, the sum total of all the national and ethnic units of Africa.” (“English and the African Writer” 27). Achebe, in his essay, uses this definition to predict a transition in African literature from the continental outlook to a focus on individual complexities as an imitation of the transition from colonialism to nationalism.
It is 2017 and a few years southwards and yes, there is a new, bubbling generation of writers of African descent or African cognition. Teju Cole, a delightfully cosmopolitan merger of photography and poetry, describes himself as an “afropolitan pan-African afro-pessimist” whose writing is possessive of “European antecedents, Indian influences, Icelandic fantasies, Brazilian aspirations” (Bady). In The New York Times, Felicia R. Lee is purporting “a New Wave of African Writers with an Internationalist Bent,” a wave which includes writers such as Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, NoViolet Bulawayo, Calixthe Beyala; the new generation of writers whose works might be considered African literature, who even from across the shores of the motherland infuse their writing with an experience of, an activism for, and a reflection of Africa as they deem fit. In the true sense of the word, an internationalist African writer should not be surprising at all, and while debates have run on about the non-efficient African publisher, or the non-effective African reader as convincing foundations for the internationalist African writer who has a better situated publisher and reader in the West, that is just one side of the story. The internationalist African writer is emulative of the redefinition of Africa which Achebe had so long ago predicted: a vibrant, diverse and pluralistic state of being.

The burden of the African label on the 21st century African writer has become one of the singularity, where the definitions of ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ have specifically remained ‘the sense of a place, a culture, a people’ while Africa in actuality has moved on, evolved. The boundaries of the African writer have dissolved into ‘afropolitan’ and ‘cosmopolitan’, weaving in and out of cultures, geographies and European-Asian influences; situating themselves in, and borrowing from the fantastical oratures of the past, resting in the present. Achebe, the prophet, was right. African writers have undergone a shift in their narrative construction and aesthetic. Yet, Achebe’s definition of the African writer, inclusive for its time, very clearly neglects to mention
or even consider the African writer who has been displaced. It is for this reason that writers such as Taiye Selasi and Maazi Mengiste refuse to be recognized as African writers on account of their africanness as a nationality. In fact, Selasi proclaims bluntly that “African Literature Doesn’t Exist,” echoing the words of Ben Okri: “I think Ben Okri is a writer who works very hard to sing from all the things that affect him. I don’t know if he’s an African writer. I never think of myself in terms of any classification. Literature doesn’t have a country” (“Talking with Ben Okri”).

It is easier to argue about what being an African writer does not mean. In claiming not to be African writers, we understand that these writers reject the limitations which metropolitan literary circles have reserved for non-white writing. Besides, with nationalism, though the need for continental literature diminishes, it does not necessarily mean that the need for the African writer becomes irrelevant. It is a role that evolves with its subject.

Chimamanda Adichie in “The Danger of a Single Story” calls on the writer to eschew the single story, where for the African writer this is a cautionary ‘beware the singularity of the African label’. The caveat here is that the African writer more than anyone else, is tasked with documenting the conflation-expansion-metamorphosis of the African experience. Without the advantage of time, this is a complex, often confusing process, because there is no one African experience and therefore, there cannot be a single book about Africa. In this context, perhaps Taiye Selasi is right: African literature does not exist but only because Africa is too vast to be contained in the pages of one book. Perhaps a more succinct way to put it, is to say that the African writer of yesterday is not the same one who will take tomorrow. Emmanuel Iduma’s reply to Selasi, “No Selasi, African Literature Exists”, is more revealing than is immediately apparent. For Iduma, there are two categories of African writers: the ones who write primarily for other Africans, and then, the ones
who situate themselves within the context of a global, international audience. To these categories, we can add the African writer who writes only for a specific African audience, and the African writer who embodies the non-African experience. For Iduma, African literature as a label of all the literatures produced in Africa or about Africa, effectively accounts for the diversity, dispersity and multiplicity of the African writer.

The question of the African writer’s identity has to transcend the fixed notions of gender, race or geography. Therefore, isolated, none of these should or can be used as a basis for the definition of the African writer. Why the obsession to reduce fine literary distinctions to wholes and sums? Why not just embrace the lack of consensus in African literature? The function of the African writer encompasses an existence, a specificity, and special burdens as granted by the society within which the African writer is situated. For instance, J. M Coetzee bestows on the label a sort of performativity in which the African writer is called upon to “perform their Africanness,” until the novel becomes a book of sociology, politics, ethnography, anything but literature (51).

According to Chigozie Obioma, we must reject the African writer as a label because “labels are of little consequence to my work. I could be an Igbo writer… or even a Nebraskan writer” (“Who Should I Write for?”).

For the work of literature to breathe, does the writer have to die? Thus far, all the arguments for or against have not diminished the place that the African writer inhabits. Whether or not one identifies as an African writer, whether or not one has lived in Africa, works of literature which focus on Africa as a character, carry strong repercussions. And this debate, like literature, accentuates the multiplicity and hybridity of African societies. So, we propose a new definition where the African writer, rather than operating as a label, is a function, a state of being. In this function, the African writer responds to the consciousness, and expresses the sensibilities of the
African experience, whatever that might be and whatever the African writer determines it to be. We can therefore take our definition of the African writer to be the writer with an African cognition, who occupies the place where art through writing, actively reflects all of the societies, identities and constructs that are available, and that change throughout Africa’s history.

2.2 On Identity:

In tackling the question of the identity of the African writer, we are confronted first with the identity of the African. But which African? There is the African whose cultural heritage has been eroded; the African who has been violently assimilated into French culture; the African heavily influenced by American culture; the African who happens to be in a sort of cultural limbo – something W.E.B Du Bois refers to as the ‘double consciousness’. ‘What does it mean to be African?’, like the question ‘What does it mean to an African writer?’, is yet to appoint a consensus. What becomes rather imminent therefore, is how the African writer traverses this African experience of identity or non-identity as the case may be.

Adewale Maja-Pearce is a Nigerian-British who starts off his memoir *The House My Father Built* by detailing the conflict he faces with the tenants of an inherited house which has just come into his possession. Maja-Pearce is the epitome of the African writer with contrasting identities:

Childhood was an unreliable guide, made more so by my privileged upbringing where the gutters didn’t overflow and there was more than one bathroom with running water…

Nigeria was all that engaged me as a writer. (175)

The African writer with contrasting identities feels a certain twoness. For Maja-Pearce, is he Nigerian this time then British the next? Or should it be switched: Nigerian in England, then British
in Nigeria? Most important, however, is that this twoness is the feeling of not having a place or not completely belonging where he thinks he should. Nothing captures this state of being as immaculately as Maja-Pearce’s own documentation of his confrontation with tenant, Ngozi:

But I wondered whether there was more to it again; that she saw me essentially as a foreigner, whatever I might claim to the contrary; that I was a white man oppressing her in her own country…an impostor, an outsider. (57)

One day, when colored Lee is walking home from work, he is suddenly made to fight a group of white boys even though he tries to refuse. This story as outlined in Peter Abrahams’ autobiography Tell Freedom, ends in this telling exchange between Lee and the man who has just chased his bullies away:

“Why did they beat you son?”

“They say because I’m black.” (163)

This is representative of apartheid South Africa, where the black South Africans have been forced to share their land, resources and identity. Not only that, the black South Africans given the vestiges of colonialism, have had to make do with half their humanity in a society where branding is everything. We can see this when Aunt Liza says to Lee “you are colored. There are three types of people: white people, colored people, black people. The white people come first, then the colored people, then the black people” (46) or where Ellen says “I’m dark and I have kinky hair” (184) as justification for why Lee should not or cannot think of her as beautiful or desirable.

Peter Abrahams’ Tell Freedom is groundbreaking in that it transcribes the experience of the black South African who as a result of his other non-African roots, is suddenly elevated to some farce importance over his other, black parent. Trevor Noah’s Born a Crime is also an important, necessary addition to the recording of this experience. The South Africa that Abrahams
and very recently, Noah reflect upon, is one where all of the nicest things were ‘RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY’. Therefore, Peter Abrahams in the function of a writer, heart wrenchingly details for us, the lives of black South Africans in apartheid South Africa. That feeling of not belonging to your home: “I was the intruder. And like the intruder, I walked carefully lest I be discovered” (193). The matter of the double consciousness for Lee is heavily reflected in the words of Anne: “Peter, you say we are as good as they are…then why do these things happen?” (260)

It is telling that the literatures just explored are both auto-biographies. More so, that they are firmly rooted in the ‘What do you do when you do not belong in your home?’ African experience. For instance, North-Africa is geographically African yet shares a deep affinity and belonging with Middle-Eastern, Arabic and French culture. So what does Africa go ahead and do about this? Nothing. And this, as before, is indicative of Africa’s multiplicity and the role of the African writer in carrying that multiplicity.

In a book that is refreshing yet deeply political, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addresses the Immigrant African experience of identity and blackness. “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (283) and: “dear black, non-American, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care” (290).

In Americanah, Ifemelu is the daring black African who writes about race relations in America from the view point of an African, an ‘other.’ When Ifemelu visits the hair salon – an extensive scene that kick starts the novel – it is immediately apparent that this is for her a safe space. Constantly surrounded by the non-Africanness of Princeton, her numerous non-African boyfriends, strangers she meets while journeying, etc. This place, with other Africans, is closest to home and the instant camaraderie she feels with the hair dressers is proof of that attachment to
Africa. But if we are tempted to define this camaraderie as one of an Africanness based on a singularity, Adichie is quick to curtail us. Aisha the Senegalese, expecting Ifemelu to recognize a Nollywood actor, is eerily reminiscent of ignorant Europeans asking if the random African knows their friend “Joe, who is from Africa.” But the issue of the singularity for Adichie through Ifemelu, is a serious one: “My friend know many Igbo people in Africa. She sell cloth” (15), as also demonstrated when the South African woman, in waiting for her box braids, instigates a conversation with Nigerians as the ‘other’. What is evident more than anything else in the salon scene, is a collective awareness of the African identity, against the many facets of what it means to be African, or how one expresses one’s Africanness.

Adichie, in dismantling the problem of the singularity of the African experience, juxtaposes Obinze and Ifemelu’s experiences as immigrants in the global West. When Ginika picks Ifemelu from the airport, what follows is a checklist of all the things that are very unlike their Nigeria and what permeates the book is a settling: a quick settling into the American life for Ginika, a sturdier settling for Aunty Uju, an unsettling for Obinze, the nostalgia of home and for that which feels familiar for Ifemelu, and a resettling with the perspective of one who has been away from home for a while. In Americanah, Adichie details with remarkable precision the experience of dispersion, and then settling in an incredibly unfamiliar environment. If there is anything to take from this, it is that the huge numbers of Africans who migrate to Europe every year have to take to heart the advice that Ifemelu is immediately given in America “…make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans as this will help you keep your perspective” (141).

Dropping the fake American accent, letting her natural hair grow, etc. With an embrace of her Americanness, Adichie’s Ifemelu also comes to terms with her Nigerianness. Ifemelu is the quintessential modern African; with technological advancements, it is irrelevant whether or not
they have ever visited beyond the shores of geographical Africa in that they occupy a place of in-between or again, W.E.B Du Bois’ double consciousness, a state of identity in which Ifemelu is neither wholly American nor wholly Nigerian. She just is, and she eventually learns to navigate this being.

Identity is important for the African, hence, in assembling all of the various African experiences, identity becomes important for the African writer. In fact, we must view their excavations of Africa’s varied identities as reflections on their own identity. Therefore, when we are trying to define the African writer, we must accept the African writer’s hybridity as a reflection of, and commentary on Africa’s hybridity and multiplicity. Identity is a process of movement and mediation, so the questions of identity continue with time, morphing and forming with the new people who come along to ask the questions and attempt the answers. The African writer is a state that is continuous and continuously evolving; therefore, in such a society of cultural erosion, Western imperialism and fractional attempts at Africanism, it falls on the African writer to navigate the varied waters of African identity. So, what does it mean to be African? Many things, it means many things; the African writer tells us so.
CHAPTER THREE

THE AFRICAN WRITER IS A VOICE

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard” (Arundhati Roy).

Africa’s post-colonial society has been conditioned as one where voices outside of the elite cannot, and will not be heard. Because the African writer occupies a space that cannot be penetrated, the African writer becomes conditioned to speak, sometimes alone.

3.1 Through Language:

The question of language in African literature, the subject of such great controversy spanning many different generations of writers, cannot be meaningfully discussed or evaluated outside the context of those social and historical forces which make it exigent. African literature as has been shown, is directly tied to African history. Therefore, the language problem, peculiar to African literature as well as the literatures of the formerly colonized, has to be situated within the broader context of the socio-cultural politics native to the seat of that literature, to attain any relevance. What elevates this problem is the role that language plays outside of literature, and the role that literature plays in culture.

Language is a condition of culture. It is through language that history as well as culture itself is passed down to generations. With culture as a product of, and reflection of human interaction, language’s dual character as a carrier of culture and as a means of communication, favorably situates it in the position where it is intrinsic to society as the vehicle for interpreting reality. As defined by Thiong’o, “language is thus mediating between me and my own self;
between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being” (*Decolonising the Mind* 13).

Story tellers employ language in their craft. In pre-colonial African orature, language for the griot, with its inflections and intonations, embodied layers of meaning and cultural awareness. For the future writer situated in this culture of orature and language,

…had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. (Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* 8)

In many ways, language is symbolic for its historical and cultural associations. Because language is specific to culture, it bears the capacity to hold identity as well. Post-colonial African literature in adopting the language of the colonial master, allowed for the shifting of realities from one where the African experience was central and sacred, to one where the African experience had been infiltrated and relegated, giving rise to books and languages which separated us from our ancestry, from ourselves and boldly situated us in non-indigenous worlds. For the African writer, the problem with colonial languages lies deeply in their dissociation from the immediate environment and culture upon which they are forced. This sentiment is best expressed in the words of the South African writer Mazisi Kunene: “European languages are totally inadequate to express the African philosophical reality” (38). If language is a carrier of culture – and it is – and language is specific to culture, then it cannot be that alien languages can or should occupy the place of any indigenous language. Senghor affirms that “we are cultural half-castes, because, although we feel as Africans, we express ourselves as Frenchmen…because French is a language with a universal vocation…” (“Modern African Poets” 95). Although Senghor’s excuse is a rowdy bastardization of Africa’s
powerlessness given that he himself is very enamored of French culture, it is true what he so pointedly distinguishes: that Africans outside of their language are outside of their culture, and Africans outside of their culture are outcasts.

The language problem in African literature is quite simply thus: that literature is now impeded by language. Post-colonial Africa had achieved political freedom, but now found itself entrenched in a new kind of constraint; one of expression. This reality begs the question of Africa’s independence; political independence without cultural independence is meaningless. “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to the natural and social environment, indeed, in relation to the entire universe” (Thiong’o, Decolonising the Mind 4). Therefore, the crux of the language problem is not entirely focused on what language to write in, but in what language is true to the experience the writer intends to express. It is in other words, tied directly to the identity of the writer and the identity of the writer is in turn, tied to the identity of the people they represent.

African representation in European literature will always be lopsided, biased even – the African has always been the ignorant, barbaric and uninventive savage. The focus on the West, even in African literature, forces Africa to accept its role as the colonized, and to act thus. Hence, African writers have, in writing in indigenous African languages, placed Africa at the center and forced a new world view through the African lens, with an examination of Africa as it relates to the world. In fact, “the mother tongue is not only the repository of cultural heritage, intrinsic values, and philosophic leanings of a society, it is also essentially a means of expressing a people’s “being-in-the-world” (Okolie 205). Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Obi Wali use their writing to advocate for a return to the use of African languages in African literature. Literatures in non-African languages according to Thiong’o, cannot qualify as African literature if they can be
better designated as Afro-European literature. To express African realities in colonial languages incapable of the meanders natural to native African languages, is to in turn, steep these realities in European culture, robbing them of their Africanness. For whom is the African writer who writes in the colonial language of English, or French, or Arabic, or Portuguese writing? Is it for the Western audience whose ideas of Africa and its literature have to be dismantled, or is it for the African whose definitions of self and identity have been marred by years of colonization and consequently has to be rebuilt? The lens of colonial languages beclouds African writers’ perception of themselves, their environment, and themselves in relation to their environment. This is the language problem: that identity cannot be carried in a language that is largely inaccessible to the people; that writing African literature in non-African languages limits African literature to only the elite; that “if we wish to assert and preserve distinctly African ways of being and distinctly living, we must cultivate distinctly African ways of speaking” (Owomoyela 93).

Because language is intrinsically tied to identity, the language debate is one that questions identity therefore, we can view the African writer’s reflection of, and participation in this phenomenon as social commentary on identity and all of its trappings. It is here, more than anywhere else, that the role of the African writer is stretched, tested and completed. The complexity of the language problem is wide-ranging and easily proven by the great divide among African writers: those for, those against. Within the historical context, as literatures in colonial languages demand a certain subservience of self and sense, it is also important to note that European culture has impugned on the African identity not only in literature, but also in everyday life. In reality, it is difficult to separate the language of the colonizer from the experience of the colonized. African literature in European languages “has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience, which is naturally expressed in
the tongue of the former colonizer” (Irele 25). So, African writers, like the everyday African, are caught between expressing their innermost realities, and using colonial languages to express the deep, most-affecting issues of post-colonial cultural and social experience.

The problem with the use of indigenous African languages in African literature becomes evident when it is evaluated with respect to the thousands of African languages available to the African writer. There is no central African language – a problem which greatly discouraged Ghanaian writer, Ayi Kwei Armah – this means that whatever language the African writer chooses to write in, the activism of the writer will be limited to those few who can understand that language. Isn’t the role of the African writer in redefining the African identity to reach the widest audience possible? Madagascar for instance, boasts a host of writers who capture the politics and society of their times. These writers write only in Malagasy, and the occasional French. This year, the first novel from Madagascar in English opens up a window into the literary culture of this small island, for the rest of the world. This is remarkable for the curious writer and reader yet, for the language debate, it raises a pertinent question. If the intention of the African writer is to reach the widest possible audience, is writing in an indigenous language the better option? Wouldn’t it be best to pick a globalist language?

Senegalese writer, Boubacar Boris Diop, proposes a solution to the language problem: translation. For Diop, the African writer stays true to the writer’s experience and roots in writing in an African language. To reach the highest possible heights, African literature must therefore return to its roots; “the tree rises to the sky only by plunging its roots into the nourishing earth.” With translation, a work of literature can become available to a wider audience. This preserves the sanctity of the African writer’s expression, yet opens up this experience to a global audience. With the tool of translation, literature becomes available not only to the majority, but, to every targeted
audience. However, this solution raises newer problems: in a translated work, is the reader reading the African writer, or the translator? For the translator is a writer too. Therefore, with the constraints of language, is the translator’s rendering of the literary work representative of the translator more than of the writer? Is this issue relevant?

Colonialism, migration, education, etc. have opened up the African continent and in turn, its literature to interaction with the West, and the rest of the world. African writers write to preserve their culture, their perceptions of their Africanness, to predict their selves. However, postcolonial globalization demands a shift in the African writer’s audience. If the African writer is burdened by the need to reflect on Africa and then reflect Africa to the world, the problem translators are now burdened by is in carrying forth in this new language, the essence of the African writer’s work. A 2012 essay, “Translating Culture: Problems, Strategies and Practical Realities,” claims that when translating, “when cultural differences exist between the two languages, it is extremely difficult to achieve a successful transfer, if not impossible (no matter the competence of the people involved)” (Guerra). The problem with translation is thus that in translation, one is translating not only text, but generations of culture and emotions and messages.

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir 69)

In this process, because culture is intrinsically tied to language, culture is lost.

Nigerian Yoruba writer, D.O Fagunwa, is popular for one thing: putting to letters those fables, folk songs and legends which for years, in pre-colonial times, were an intricate part of Yoruba culture and orature. Fagunwa’s work has been described by Nigerian critic Ayo Adeduntan as “appropriated from the indigenous past, tempered in the modern present, and prefiguring the
future.” Wole Soyinka, another Nigerian writer, a Nobel Laureate who in 1968, took upon himself the burden of translating Fagunwa’s most poignant works such as *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo in Irunmale* into English, replies those contemptuous criticisms of his translation of “*agiliti*” as “toad” rather than lizard, as quoted by Chigozie Obioma:

But neither toad nor lizard is the object of action or interest to the hero Akaraogun or his creator Fagunwa at this point of narration...a translator must select equivalents for mere auxiliaries where these serve the essential purpose better than the precise original.

This quite clearly illustrates the problem. Translated works are “ingenious in their own right but unavoidably marred in many respects” (Adeduntan). Author of the *Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Armah, posits that translation is too complex a solution. A general African language for literature instead should be appointed. Diop supports this.

### 3.2 Through the Language of Contemporary Africa:

Diop and Armah, Ngugi and Wali, Diop and Irele; these writers do not take into consideration that the new crop of writers, post-colonialism, whose Africanness has been eroded or heavily influenced by Western culture, ideals and languages, do not – because they cannot – use native African languages as their medium. Culturally, the post-colonial African writer, for a varied number of reasons, inhabits a state of perpetual hybridity. And if post-colonial African writers are to remain true to their craft, then, this hybridity; this African interaction with the West has to be reflected upon. African languages are unfortunately insufficient for this task. “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? I have been given the language and I intend to use it” (Achebe, “English and the African Writer” 29). Even more elaborate, Achebe’s message is thus:
What I [do] see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a worldwide language. So, my answer to the question ‘Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?’ is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask, ‘can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?’ I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so…the African writer should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (28)

Achebe’s subversion lies in his campaign for the use of the English language and the western narrative tradition for the purpose of conveying the African story to the world. A refashioning so to speak, of the English language in such a way that it is able to adequately endure the encumbrance of the African experience. “Some may regard this way of writing in English as a desecration of the language” Gabriel Okara declares, “this is of course not true…why shouldn’t there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?” (qtd in Thiong’o, Decolonising the Mind 7) Achebe as quoted by Thiong’o, further solidifies this idea with the words “I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” (6). This new language, the African Arabic or African English or African French or African Portuguese, is better positioned to carry the post-colonial experience. Writers like Amos Tutuola, Binyavanga Wainaina, Uzodinma Iweala, Ahmadou Kourouma, even Ken Saro-Wiwa, etc. claim these colonial languages’ potential for global outreach for themselves yet, are not afraid to bend the language, to make it sing. This is referred to as ‘Provincial Writing.’
‘By how much is the African writer allowed to utilize the tool of provincial writing?’ Is another argument that has risen in African literary circles post-colonialism. Chigozie Obioma in a reply to Eghosa Imaseun’s claim that provincial writing is always political, reminds us that the first role of the writer is to ‘show, not tell.’ So, saying “a beat-up squeaking, yellow-painted bus with a constant metallic rattle” instead of ‘molue’, will allow the internationalist audience to picture this iconic bus (Obioma). Regrettably, the molue is not just a yellow bus. There is an entire socio-cultural relevance, history and expression which the description “yellow bus” dismantles and just refuses to defer to. This is the problem with the argument that Obioma makes: if the African writer is to write in a purely internationalist language, there will always be a lack of context. Against this school of thought, Thiong’o proclaims “I Write in Gikuyu.” “I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples” (Thiong’o, “I Write in Gikuyu” 7-8). Unfortunately, where Thiong’o stands, there is only a handful of other writers.

Once more, the language debate continues to represent for us the continuous search for a sustainable identity that all formerly colonized people are plagued by. To unanimously accept as a continent to revert to our indigenous languages, is to wash away all of the most obvious effects of the cultures of colonialism. Therefore, we must view these debates sometimes as debates of culture outside of the scope of language. Thiong’o thought so too. “How did we arrive at this acceptance of the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of Western languages in our literature; in our culture and our politics?” (Decolonising the Mind 9) and perhaps, this is the most profound argument against the African writer’s use of colonial languages. The African writer using colonial languages, is compelled to write for, or write back at Western audiences; case in point, Achebe’s Things Fall Apart as a reply to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Writers in indigenous languages are
in contrast, not always concerned with writing back. In this regards, the African who chose instead the medium of local dialect, more than the African writer who preferred a Western language, was putting Africa first.

There is a reason the language debate has waxed - and keeps on waxing - within African literary circles for years: “the language question cannot be solved outside the larger arena of economics and politics, or outside the answer to the question of what society we want” (Thiong’o, Decolonising the Mind 106). In language, the identity of a people is contained and there is nothing more complex than the concept of identity. To acknowledge the African writer as a function, we must thus view the African writer’s representations of the language debate as the writer’s representation of African identity and as further commentary on the role that colonialism has played in fragmenting African societies. Most importantly, we must view these discussions on language as the African writer attempting to determine their primary audience: to write in African languages, is to write to Africa; to write in colonial languages, is to write to the West; to write in manipulated colonial languages, is to write to Africa about its colonial experience; to engage in provincial writing, is perhaps to tailor the African experience to suit the West, and so on.

What language should be used in writing? The post-colonial African writer can write in an indigenous African language, for a primarily African audience. This African writer will however, be constrained by the different dialects, different languages and the lack of canonized written language forms of which Africa boasts. The African writer who for this reason writes in a colonial language, must acknowledge that this indelibly limits the African reader’s access to the work. That the writer, as Obi Wali proposes, in refusing to “accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration” (“Dead End of African Literature?”). Still, there are those
African writers who exist in that sacred space of double-consciousness, of adoptive Westernness and rooted Africanness, those who endeavor to tame the English language and put it in their pocket, and use it when they must (Udeozo 21). In 2005, during a lecture on African literature at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, Armah ventures:

We are suspended while waiting for a breakthrough; if an African language is adopted it will be a big solution. Africa is vast and it requires a vast language to put through all our ideals, and that language is not yet born.

What language should the African writer write in? Perhaps it is not for us to say, perhaps it is not for anyone to say. The language debate only further emphasizes the role of the African writer in African societies, and questions its efficacy. The most relevant solution to the language problem, therefore occurs in the words of Obioma: “I should write only what seems to me to be honest…I believe that fiction, with its untrammeled nature, speaks to no one, and by so doing, speaks to all. It must transcend boundaries, time and space” (“Who Should I Write for?”). Ultimately, the African writer is a function of literature like language is a function of culture.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFRICAN WRITER IS A HISTORIAN

British-Indian writer, Salman Rushdie, thinks of the writer as handcuffed to history. By implication, the African writer is handcuffed to African history. Perhaps this connection to history is a result of Africa’s past with colonialism – perhaps. Nevertheless, the African writer does not just write meditations on the past. More often than not, because of a dearth in actual historicity, it is the African writer who has to document Africa’s history.

4.1 To the Past:

Pre-colonial Africa baked its stories in words and rhythms. In the arguments to justify Africa’s oral literature tradition as a valid form of literature, it is easy to forget, or define as inessential, what should be more important. The aesthetics of African orature are quite distinct: communal sharing and cohesion, social commentary, moral implications, actions and consequences. For the African writer, the roots of literature grow deep and down, nourished by the waters of orature. Amos Tutuola is a name that springs quickly to mind. His books and stories, foremost of them The Palmwine Drinkard, are the epitome of the modern African writer, and the influences of the writer’s tradition of orature. Tutuola, like Daniel Fagunwa; Achebe, like the numerous griots before him, pepper their stories with all these features that are rooted in orature. Therefore, like the griot, it falls on the African writer to document the passage of time, and the experiences of that time. However, unlike the griot, the African writer is more restricted in how much legend can be allowed to usurp history.
African, for many and complex reasons including colonialism and imperialism, suffers the dearth of a documentation of history. For this reason, it becomes necessary to look to the body of written work that Africa has amassed. African literature is historical in its very nature, because it needs to be. The pot of political dysfunction and unstable economies can get overwhelming very quickly, and it is in these times that we look to its literature to “reflect the temper of the age” (Okri, “Mental Tyranny”). In observations of African societies, it becomes impossible for the African writer not to represent starkly what is available. Therefore, in a way, the historicity of African literature is purely a result of chance. However, apart from necessity, there is another force more compelling and much more intentional about shaping African literature, and that force is the writer, who is compelled by writers’ traditional roles as political and cultural griots.

Solomon T Plaatje is South African. In 1920, Solomon T. Plaatje is the man whose letter speaks of a novel he is writing: “a love story after the manner of romance, but based on historical facts.” In 1930, Mhudi, with “plenty of love, superstition and imaginations” is the book that Solomon T. Plaatje publishes (qtd in Chennels, 37). In the words of Aristotle, “the aim of art, is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” Mhudi is exactly the sort of hybrid that the African writer subconsciously strives to project.

Contextually, and for many reasons, the art of writing constitutes for the writer, a way of conceiving and/or approaching the world. What literature is gains social significance only in respect of what literature says – or stands for. In many ways, the written work is the writer’s outreach to the outside world and the relevance of the African literary work spans many distinct societies: there is the Western society which has until recently, viewed African literature as inadequate; an impressive feat yet, inadequate when compared to the other literatures of the world. Then, there is African societies, whose histories it falls to the African writer to document. In my
definition of the African writer, I determine that their art must be at the center therefore, in
describing the African writer as a function, I am careful to ensure that the writer, in the strictest
sense of the word, is ‘as historian’, not ‘is historian’. For instance, for the art to remain at the
center, the writer cannot choose a certain work to represent one thing, or some other specificity.
The writer’s work, in the way that I mean it, can thus never become the work of activism, or say,
the activist work. The activism must therefore become a thing of itself, represented by the work of
art; it must become a spirit that permeates the art. This is what I mean when I say that the work of
art is the vehicle. The activism in the literature, must be retained in the art by its own quality of
thinginess, by its permeability, its infinity of relations with other things especially the art.

In his 1975 novel, Chinua Achebe declares staunchly, that “art is, and always was in the
service of man…rather than an end in itself” (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 19), that the work of
the African writer must deal primarily with the problems of society. In exploring the role of the
African writer in enforcing literature as historical, we are reminded strongly of the words of Ken
Saro-Wiwa, shortly before his death:

> Literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers
> must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must
> play an interventionist role. (*A Month and a Day: The Detention Diary* 81)

And although this is the role that the bulk of African writers have taken upon themselves, it cannot
be any less difficult than it seems to be. In fact, Wole Soyinka in examining this role in one of his
lesser known essays, “The Writer in an African State,” more or less calls this role out for what he
thinks it is, a distraction. In intentionally assuming the role of the historian, the writer’s shared
focus results undeniably, in a sacrifice of the sanctity of the work, and perhaps the work, rather
than history, should be the priority of the writer. But this is a dangerous thought to have. As a
matter of absolute necessity, because no one can mirror society and comment on that reflection with the astuteness that the African writer can, “African [writers] cannot afford the luxury of literature as a recondite art” (Angmor 182).

The question which thence becomes imperative is this: why the African writer, why not the historian? Because art, more than drab history, infringes upon society and elicits reactions. The African writer, in contrast to the historian, not only describes society and its happenings, but with novels and short stories and plays and poetry, contemplates social life; reflecting it, mirror-like, but also reflecting upon it. In contemplating the social process through literature, the African writer does not simply reproduce prevalent modes of thought, but traverses all the possible perspectives in understanding the African reality.

The African writer offers the kinds of abstractions, comparisons, frameworks and critical reflections on the African experience and the place of the African in the global context without which it would be impossible to fully account for the nature of being, and reality, and the nature and scope of knowledge in the African context. (Adebanwi 407)

More than we realize, as predicated by the past’s bequeathal of cultural and political importance to the griot, the teller of a story can become a powerful force in shaping the way a people think about their social and political order, and the possible progressions of change. “I only know one rule…to write only out of necessity…What sustains [me] is the will to say or the fierce desire to not forget” (Djebar). It might have been Ngugi who described writing, especially writing about Africa as a creative process which mimics the creation of the universe as order from chaos. Sometimes, an important work has a significant subject, but it is usually its art, rather than its subject, that makes it continuously relevant to us. “If the subject were the most important thing we would not need art, we would not need literature, history would be sufficient…therefore, we go to
[African] literature for that which speaks to us in time and outside of time” (Okri, Some Aphorisms).

Can the African writer reject the writer’s role as the purveyor of history and social commentary? Perhaps. But the call to mapping out Africa’s direction politically and socially overtime, is a persistently loud and necessary one: “if I am ever liberated from this bondage of racialism, there are some things much more exciting to me, objectively, to write about. But this world has such a social orientation, and I am involved in this world, and I cannot cut myself off” (Abrahams, Interview).

4.2 To the Future:

How we view ourselves, our environment even, is very much dependent on where we stand in relation to imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages; that if we are to do anything about our individual and collective being today, then we have to coldly and consciously look at what imperialism has been doing to us and to our view of ourselves in the universe. (Thiong’o, Decolonising the Mind 88)

Post-colonial Africa was initially characterized by the struggle with and against the vestiges of colonialism and a reclamation of identity. Colonialism had brought with it a corrosion of culture and religion therefore, post-colonial Africa in addition to gaining independence, was a continent undergoing rapid cultural transformation: the dismantling of the limitations that colonialism had placed on attitude and thinking, a re-africannization, and the dealing with a now deeply-rooted Westernization that cannot be overthrown.

_Blue Dahlia, Black Gold_ by Daniel Metcalfe, presents a complex, yet contradictory Angola post Portuguese rule, post-civil-war and 27 years after the era of the MPLA party within the sheets
of a travelogue. Mongo Beti’s characters especially in the *Poor Christ of Bomba* are satirically, excessively pious and broken, but, what could be truer about the modern African? Achebe refutes the ‘Africa’ of Joseph Conrad and Joyce Carey’s savior complexes - an Africa lacking in history. Adichie strongly follows in his footsteps, curating a compelling story of the Nigerian Civil War and painting for us with words what we dare not request of historians – the picture of humanity.

Examining the historicism of post-colonial Africa, represents an important way of engaging with its literature, especially since its literature is one of protest and social reflection. As Africa struggled to find its footing in an independence of resources, and political freedom from direct colonial interference, classes were springing up, the have, and the have-nots: “why do I walk barefoot while I sew your shoes? / …Is this my destiny? God will settle accounts with you!” (al-Tunisi, “The Egyptian Worker” 1-3)

The new, elitist class of Western educated, culturally assimilated Africans, was growing from the middle class, and rapidly too. And the features that many Africans vehemently renounced during the colonial rule were being replicated with rapid intensity. “Most of Africa today is politically free; there are thirty-six independent African states managing their own affairs – sometimes very badly” Achebe writes with brutal honesty. The African writer’s burden, Achebe further argues, is to “express our thought and feelings, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say will be taken as evidence against our race. (Achebe, “The Black Writer’s Burden” 139) In other words, it was necessary for the writer to document the political struggle within Africa even if it was at the expense of the cultural struggle for blackness abroad.

Since it was no longer necessary to redefine Africa’s identity, the modern African writer turned to depicting the new, now African leaders, as no better or worse than their colonial predecessors. In fact, Thiong’o in cultivating the history of the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya,
especially in works such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, categorically paints these new African leaders as betrayers of their brothers. Where the struggle for independence from colonial rule in many African countries was bought with the blood of martyrs, rebels, and innocent citizens, to turn around and then begin to perpetuate the same kind of injustice as those before you, for Thiong’o, was to betray your brother as Judas did Jesus – sacrifice them for a couple of coins.

The African writer’s work “is often an attempt to come to terms with ‘the thing that has been,’ a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people’s history” (Thiong’o, *The Writer and His Past* 39). Pages later, Thiong’o reiterates this lesson:

> The African writer was in danger of becoming too fascinated by the yesterday of his people and forgetting the present. Involved as he was in correcting his dis-figured past, he forgot that his society was no longer peasant…his society was no longer organized on egalitarian principles. Conflicts between the emergent middle-class and the masses were developing…And when he woke up to his task, he was not a little surprised that events in post-independence Africa could take the turn they had taken. (44-45)

For Achebe, the African writer’s fanaticism with romanticizing Africa’s past as further proof of colonialism’s dark shadows only detracts the African writer from the true purpose, to tell the story because it hasn’t been told yet. Therefore, “the best way to plead the cause of the past is to project an accurate but maybe unexciting image, not a romanticized one which though beautiful, is really a distortion” (Achebe, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” 158). In this call, Achebe extols the African writer to a greater calling, one perhaps even greater than the calling to write, just write - the calling to be an African writer. In this role, the African writer is heavily rooted in a commitment to tell the truth of Africa’s past; of the present; for the future.
The pre-independence dream of a brave new world reinstating the former glory of Africa, too-quickly turned into a post-colonial nightmare (Lindfors). African writers as a matter of necessity given their role, found themselves situated in the exploration of dimensions of human condition, in a bid to document the human element of history. The religion of disillusionment and disenfranchisement saw the African writer desperately ask and answer time and time again, ‘How do Africans react to their inept politicians and politics?’ To effectively function in this new capacity, African writers were forced once more, to reassess their approach.

The African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past if he is to fulfil his function as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. (Soyinka, “The Writer in an African State” 44)

The 1963 Publications and Entertainments Act gave the Apartheid South African government the power to ban anything it deemed immoral, objectionable or obscene. Suddenly, without provocation, the political writer was in danger of exile, house arrest or being silenced for good. The black South African writer, denied access to publishing, turned to the short story, and the autobiography became the fallback option for exiled black South African intellectuals, detailing abhorrent discrimination and a search for identity in a world that was gladly and boldly, ‘FOR EUROPEANS ONLY.’

In West Africa, Ayi Kwei Armah’s vivid obsession with stench and filth in The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born, is an apt representation of the rot which had molded and spread all through West-African politics. The unnamed protagonist’s angst is at a society so driven by the need to bribe and be bribed that it condemns him for refusing to dabble with greed. There is pressure from his family, from his friends, to do the thing that can be done and like the emerging elitist class, accept bribes to provide his family with the better life he wishes he can give them. Leadership thus
becomes an opportunity for enrichment, and the rot that characterized the last years of Kwame Nkrumah’s inept rule in Ghana is a dominant theme throughout the book. Like Thiong’o, Armah believes that “there is something so terrible in watching a black-man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European” (81) “True, I used to see a lot of hope. I saw men tear down the veils behind which the truth had been hidden. But then the same men, when they have power in their hands at last, began to find the veils useful” (92)

Niyi Osundare is perhaps one of the most striking yet potently ignored poets to have explored politics in Nigeria and indeed, Africa. With symbolisms that sink deep into orature and draw from comparisons to animals, to nature, to tradition, to music, Osundare’s scathing criticisms of politics continue to be relevant even until this day. The African writer who has been asleep to the direction that early post-colonial Africa was taking, suddenly awakened to the unexpected reality that was:

We thought here at last,
the friends of the poor who know the price of food in the markets…
we thought they had arrived who know the agonies of soles without shoes…
Hence we ask are you revolutionaries or feigning kings waiting for crowns? (Village Voices: “Feigning Rebel” 20-21)

The African politician with his two mouths “like Esimuda’s sword” became our worst enemy, who “sends us to pluck a fruit deliciously beyond our reach” (Village Voices: “The Politician Has Two Mouths” 13). This is what Ngugi refers to as the brotherly betrayal of Africa by the leaders who were supposed to lead it to the many promises of paradise. This peculiarity is why the African writer has been cemented as the custodian of Africa’s history. To refuse to document Africa’s political struggles, will be to refuse to acknowledge that regardless of direction, given its past,
Africa has always been history in the making. And no one but the African writer has been better equipped for this role.

Alumidi Osinya’s *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshall Abdulla Salim Fisi or How the Hyena Got His* is a powerful commentary on Idi Amin, and Idi Amin as Uganda’s post-independent president.

The point about the story that follows is that there really is perhaps no better way of talking about the rape of Africa by Africans themselves...Now, perhaps more than ever, when ruthless military dictators are the order of the day and shoot human beings as easily as they shoot the elephants in the national park (except that at least with elephants they get the tusks). (Foreword ix-x)

Where a few own too much and many, none at all, the people are uneasy. Where this freedom could have been accessible to all, the leaders have chosen instead to forge unequal knives, and Osundare’s “The Padlock and the Key” is an interesting ode to the culture of dictatorial governance by African leaders in Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Zimbabwe, Uganda, etc. in a list that is possibly growing.

We ask the tyrant: when will you end your torture he asks us when will the snake stand on its own legs?

When will the rat wed the mouse’s offspring?

We ask the tyrant when will you destroy your chains?

He says when there are fires in the land hot enough to melt their links. *(Village Voices 65)*

The poem continues on to pose a solution to the problem of the tyrant:
Call in the blacksmith today
and let forge heat smother all castles of death
Is it not the fire
which molded the padlock
that also forged the key? (13-18)

What Osundare says with the melody of poetry, is what the African writer says with every work that is put out that intends to address Africa’s problems: that it is the people, it is the people who must lead and who must win. To do this, they must become angry enough, they must know their history. Here, again, the role of the African writer as historian, is highlighted. It is exactly as Osundare predicts. Because it is the role of the African writer to curate for the future, it becomes necessary often, to juxtapose the hope of that future against the realities of the present and the criticisms of politics allow for that juxtaposition. So, the African writer must write – and continues to write – about all the things that Africa needs to know or do to lead the revolution. So, the writer writes, documenting history for the revolution, until the revolution, for that is when the writer will no longer be required to teach history because after all, in many ways, the African writer with literature, like Osundare, is asking a pertinent question: “how can we see tomorrow if we eat its yam today?” (Village Voices: “Eating Tomorrow's Yam”)

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE AFRICAN WRITER IS A MOVEMENT

Post-colonial African writers audaciously storm where those who came before them had feared to tread; offering relish while commenting on profound issues touching on human nature, and carving for themselves new paths towards identity.

I believe that the African intellectual [writers] must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization that will free the manacled spirit energy of our people so we can build a new country and sing a song. (Thiong’o, Homecoming 50)

Therefore, for the purposes of a national ideal, and according to the words of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the African writer must function as an advocate of radical social change. Because the African writer possesses the abilities of observation and introspection, because the African writer possesses a voice, it has therefore fallen on the writer be at the forefront of speaking truth to power and in turn, speaking power to the people. For this, African writers are adequately positioned because they are concerned with commentary on society and because they act as a radical function. It is therefore necessary for the works of these writers to be viewed as activist, and intentionally so.

5.1 For Self-representation:

Foremost in mind is the Negritude movement. Poet and former president of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor, was one of the founding fathers of Negritude, and arguably its loudest voice. The Negritude movement, like the many other movements embarked on by the post-colonial
African writer, is centered on individual and communal identity. To understand the importance that identity plays within the context of post-colonial African societies, is to acknowledge the excavations of self and history that colonialism invariably instituted.

In Francophone Africa, during the colonial era, Africans were subjected to a system of government referred to by their French colonial masters, as ‘assimilation’. A system which ensured that African philosophy, religion, politics, and culture was politically and systematically suppressed in favor of French philosophy, religion, politics, and culture. Blackness was degraded until it invariably came to mean ‘less than human’. Negritude, as a response, was the reclamation of pride in blackness and black culture from that brand of suppression of ‘negre’, perhaps in the same way that Africa reclaimed its literature from those who once wielded it to keep the continent “black.”

Prospero, you are the master of illusion

Lying is your trademark / and you have lied so much to me

(Lied about the world, lied about me)

That you have ended up imposing on me an image of myself

But now I know you, you old cancer

And I know myself as well. (Cesaire, Une Tempete)

When Aime Cesaire writes his French play, Une Tempete, he is writing to be radically anti-colonial, and has just been told for years, in France, that his blackness is a disease. That is why Caliban who leads a revolution in the play remains in slavery and Ariel who coyly requests his independence is free. The difference: Caliban is black through and through, and Ariel is mulatto. For Cesaire, Prospero’s conquest of Caliban’s island is symbolic of the Western infiltration of Africa, and Caliban who was once king of the island, like Africa, is subjected to slavery. But now,
also like Africa, Caliban is rejecting his denigration; Africa is rejecting its formerly imposed image. The works of Francophone African writers such as Senghor, Birago Diop, Bernard Dadie, David Diop, etc., use Negritude to react to the European denigration of African culture and instead praise African values, spirituality and humanity, putting their Africanness at the center. “I give you thanks my God for having created me black” (Dadie, 1).

The African writer, with the Negritude movement, replicates the agitation with which black, post-colonial Africa for instance, attempts to rediscover and redefine its image and identity. For many Africans, the end to colonialism spelt the end of forced perceptions of their identity and heralded the need for self-representation and self-pride. This is a theme that in this period, is vastly explored by African writers across the continent and it does not matter that there are writers who disagree staunchly with the need to so and vehemently proclaim a blackness and black pride. The African writer who believes in Negritude acutely engages with and reflects the growing consciousness of identity in Africa, while examining its socio-political repercussions.

Post-colonial African writers in their observation of the Negritude movement, reveal to us more than just the quest for identity. While the Negritude movement launched a full and massive rebuttal against the loss of African identity in Francophone Africa, and even extending beyond African shores into the West Indies, in West and South of Africa, the movement trudged and trudged, lethargic, until it could trudge no more: “the tiger does not have to proclaim its tigerness” Wole Soyinka for Anglophone Africa, claimed. The reason for this, is simple. Francophone Africa suffered a violent loss of identity and culture and then had to accept the imposition of a “superior” foreign culture through assimilation. West Africa did not. West African colonial politics was built around the notion of ‘Indirect Rule’. The Western colonizers propagated and institutionalized whatever traditional government they deemed fit, and while the colonized suffered an initial
dissatisfaction, they were allowed to continue in the ways of their culture; deferring to the colonizer only in politics and religion. Therefore, for the West-African writer who had found a way to merge Westernness with Africanness, there was no urgency in reclaiming a pride in blackness. Boubacar Diop captures this phenomenon with the following words: “we have the same history, but not the same memory.” In a way, the Negritude of the West of Africa was the African writer’s way of saying:

African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; [that] their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty. That they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. (Achebe, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” 157)

This much at least is clear amongst African writers; that there is a solidarity to represent Africanity, and Africans.

It is quite noteworthy that Negritude would probably have not made such a strong impact on the French-speaking world had it - dressed in the culture of the French - not been packaged in such an impeccably “civilized” form.

At a time when the whole world was given over to racialism…at a time when the whole of humanity raised voice in competitive cacophony, there was a single pistol-shot in the middle of this concert – negritude. It shook a few consciences and brought a few Negroes together, and this was a good thing. (Adotevi 169)
The modern African writer sees no need for Negritude, it is just as well. However, in the time of Senghor and Diop; underneath blatantly racist systems, the Negritude movement was picking up Africa from the ashes, and dusting it clean.

5.2 For the Revolution:

“The revolution will not be televised” (Gill-Scott Heron), it will be captured in books; African books.

Post-colonial Africa has been no stranger to corrupt, dysfunctional governments, or the rampant lack of infrastructure despite its rich resources. It is therefore important that African Writers have been flagrant in their call for political revolution in Africa. It is important for Africa today, that its writers have carefully collated and curated all of the facets of this revolution. “Who buys my thoughts / buys not a cup of honey / that sweetens every taste; / he buys the throb, / of young Africa’s soul” Dennis Osadebay declares. “Who buys my thoughts / buys the spirit of the age, / the unquenching fire that smolders and smolders…” (“Who Buys My Thoughts” 15).

In North-Africa, extending into the Middle-East, a movement is borne of the spirit of revolution with citizens demanding that their governments, regardless of geography, do better. In Egypt, in 2011, men and women and children took to the streets determined to topple a government that had no regard for their well-being. At the root of that movement, and on the lips of these thousands of protesters, was the Arabic poem “To the Tyrants of the World”: “Imperious despot, insolent in strife…a gale of flame shall suddenly consume, a bloody torrent sweep you to your doom” (al-Shabi 1, 19-20). However, it was the line “he who grows thorns reaps wounds…” which predicts repatriation for the tyrant who refuses his people freedom that acted as the intensifier, guiding the movement, helping it to spread and solidify.
The words of the post-colonial African writer invariably pursues the state of African politics until it can yield to the desires of the people. In African politics, the function of the African writer is to demand of the people of Africa, an urgency to action to end tyranny and corruption and destitute governance. “We must smash this wall built of the inequities of class and crime then shake new hands over the ashes of severance” (Osundare, Village Voices: “A Reunion” 29). “Let this war be fought by President’s children, Governors children, Senators children, bankers children, Bishops children and others who cut up the country like an unending cake” (Osundare, Village Voices: “Dying Another's Death” 56).

Because the role of the writer is to reflect and reflect on society, too often, African literature is the most poignant representation of government policies and African relationships with the West. Often times, this relationship is in fights against rebel or terrorist groups such as in Uzodinma Iweala’s Beasts of No Nation (2005), or foreign aid such as in NoViolet Bulawayo’s We Need New Names (2013). Many times, the African writer, in a bid to reflect these stark realities, will decompress history, uncovering even starker realities such as in the Mozambican poet Jose Craveirinha’s “Curse.”

. . . But put in the hands of Africa your left-over bread
And for your gluttony I’ll give you what’s over from Mozambique’s hunger
And you’ll see how the nothing which I return
From my banquet of left-overs also fills you
As I see it, all the bread you give
Is everything you reject, O Europe! (19)

Here, Craveirinha’s truth is profound. Foreign aid is never really aid, and Mozambique devoid of exploitation, was never really poor. According to writer and environmental activist, Tanure Ojaide,
literature, especially African literature, “has to draw attention to the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights” (42). This is what the African writer strives to do. Therefore, because the African writer is able to renounce African politics when it is going wrong; because Wole Soyinka, Mongo Beti, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, have all had their voices taken away at some point because of their truth and yet they kept speaking, the implications are clear.

On a continent marred by dysfunctional, corrupt politics, African literature can be the vehicle upon which the African revolution will ride.

5.3 For Feminism:

Africa, with its many and varying traditions had one other thing in common at least; post-colonial Africa encompassed a new generation of women struggling against the systems of patriarchy as mostly left-over vestiges of the Arabian and later Victorian invasion of Africa. For many African women, to decolonize, was to free themselves from the unnatural shackles present society was committed to enforcing on them.

In Africa’s post-colonial literary scene, a sudden wave of female African writers were writing novels whose primary aim was to confront the traditional installations of African women as submissive and small. Botswana’s Bessie Head, Ghana’s Ama Ataa Aido, Nigeria’s Flora Nwapa, Kenya’s Grace Ogot, Egypt’s Alifa Rifaat, all explored and offered new directions into African folklore and mythologies, and the reclamation of female bodies. This activism was driven towards overturning the ideas perpetrated by patriarchal African literature, and reclaiming for the African woman her space, her voice. And this new message, like the beginnings of Africa’s post-colonial literature, dared to contest its oppressor head on.
When armed men came where did you hide?
I didn’t. I was taught to stand.
They were looking for something in the dark,
and I was the light….
Who are you?
I am free. (Shiferraw, “Twenty Questions for Your Mother”)

On the wings of literature, the African woman was entering into a freedom that was hitherto denied her and in no other place does this manifest more than in the works of Egyptian writer Mona Eltahawy.

In 2012, after a video of her mistreatment at the hands of the Egyptian police during the Arab Spring protests goes viral, Eltahawy writes an article aptly titled “Why Do They Hate Us?” In it, she details with astounding clarity, all of the many factors that have made the modern stubborn woman a threat to the system, and hence worthy of hate. A few years later, she has transformed this article into a widely acclaimed, highly criticized book that is a scathing diatribe directed at the established Arabian principles of womanhood, and the complacency and oftentimes complicity of religion. The title is as provocative as Eltahawy herself. *Headscarves and Hymens* she names it.

To Eltahawy, the root of her persistent suppression is clear: “a toxic mix of culture and religion.” The headscarf – the Islamic prescribed dress code for women - in her eyes, is both cause and symptom, reinforcing women’s status as subaltern and subservient. Eltahawy’s other marker of subjugation is the hymen, that membrane whose virginal state is so enthusiastically policed by families, religious authorities, lawmakers and security forces alike. In reality, the causes, and therefore the solutions for the oppression of women in African societies, are harder to pin down.
There are various configurations of religion, politics, gender and power which paint African and
Middle-Eastern patriarchy as a complex issue; the reality of the African woman varying
differently geographically and historically (Aspden).

The fight against traditionally ascribed roles of gender often come at great personal costs
for these female writers. For Eltahawy, “I have had to fight hard to keep these paragraphs in,
knowing that my family will see them and disapprove, but this is my revolution” (205).

In Headscarves and Hymens, Eltahawy isolates, dismantles and exposes the puritanical
culture, established to keep women bound. For Eltahawy, as she claims in her book, casting away
her headscarf and virginity felt like radically freeing acts. She is adamant to the people she
dedicates this book to, the girls of North Africa and the Middle East. “Be immodest, rebel, disobey,
and know that you deserve to be free.”

Mariama Ba’s So long a Letter launches her into instant international attention in part for
the experimental nature of her work – it is after all, a letter in book form – but mostly because of
the space she is resolutely claiming in writing such a feminist book, and being so obvious about it.
In So Long a Letter, Ba sums up the African woman’s experience thus: “a woman gives up her
personality, her identity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her” (4). For
a lot of women, the use of literature allows them to demand to no longer be held to standards
undefined by the African female identity. In fact, Ba is an advocate for literature as a tool: “like
men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. Within African literature,
room must be made for women” (qtd in Schipper 46).

The woman of the feminist African writer is grounded in the harsh realities of Africa’s
gendered societies, extrapolating with precise incision the many layers of historic forces which
have led them to this place of otherness. Little wonder that when these writers are women –
as they so often are – they are writing about their own lives. Aissatou in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, for instance, bears her surname and like Ba, is divorced. Buchi Emecheta’s stories chronicle a lot of her own experiences with women’s education and marriage, especially in *Second Class Citizen*, and parallels can be drawn between some of these literatures. Aissatou in Ba’s *So long a Letter*, is Adaku from Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*. These women charge at the walls that society has set to detain them, and bring them down with such vibrancy. They have taken upon themselves the responsibility of sheltering their children and very fast become the epitome of economic independence for the traditional African woman.

Nevertheless, if we have been tempted to to present Ba and her successes as representative of the singular African story, here, we must recant. While the ratification of Senegal’s Family Code allowed Ba to dare, write, and own her own expressions, in Algeria, after 130 years of violent colonialism and many more years of unstable politics, the eventual passage into law of the Family Code in 1984, designated the status of Algerian women as ‘permanent minors’. So, when Assia Djebar assumes the cover of a pseudonym to write, it is because it is unheard of and unacceptable for a woman to write in Algeria. Therefore, in writing about feminist issues, given the space that she occupies as a writer, Djebar writes to “inscribe the silent and often obscured history of women, to repair… the amnesia of our society concerning an essential part of it” (Armel).

Feminism in African literature, is a reminder to post-colonial Africa that the repercussions of colonialism exist not only outside of personal life. In documenting the experiences of African women, Africa writers are intentional about their activism. It is just as Eltahawy has said, that “we must not sacrifice women at the altar of political correctness, or in the name of fighting the powerful” (*Headscarves and Hymens* 256). We can therefore view these women’s attempts to
reclaim their bodies and their space as a vocal rejection of post-colonial societies being defined as one unit of religion, or culture, or politics.

5.4 For Justice:

“Disgust for injustice may sharpen the desire for justice” (Armah). In this generation, contemporary African writers are vehemently condemning constitutional laws targeting African Queers and Queers in Africa. For the African writer who demands that society be held accountable for its wrongs, these laws are inhuman. Sex and sexuality are well advanced, present themes in African literature, and because African writers are also the ones most capable of engaging and reflecting humanity, almost no one is better placed to reject the ideals that African politics attempt to force on human behavior. In documenting the experiences of these individuals so unjustly maligned because of their sexual identity and/or orientation, the African writer has provided for them a space to be; imbued them with the dignity which their government and fellow country-men have denied them. While African politics would rather ignore the existence of these non-heterosexual individuals, pushing a culture of heteronormativity, the African writer, staying true to the African experience, speaks on behalf of these non-hetero-sexual Africans at the mercy of an unjust system saying “We’re Queer, We’re Here” (Chibuihe Obi), sometimes even in the face of bodily harm or death such as in the kidnap of Chibuihe Obi after said essay, the harrasment of Romeo Oriogun, winner of the 2017 Brunel International African Poetry Prize, or the death of Pwaangulongii Dauod’s C Boy.

Queer literature is not new to this age. For over 50 years, Africa has had its Queer citizens represented in literature. Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965), Yambo Ouologuem’s *Bound To Violence* (1971), Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth, My Brother* (1971), Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two
*Thousand Seasons* (1973) are all proof of the African writers’ keen commitment to their role in reflecting society. What these stories lack however, is validation for their queer characters. On the other hand, what is consistent, is the constant puzzling of these characters’ queerness by their writers. Therefore, while representation for queer Africa has been available, it has not always been about queer Africa as well-rounded human beings.

These days, there has been a remarkable spike in queer African literature written by, and produced for Africa, by Africans. This is due in part to the emergence of organizations like Gerald Kraak and Queer Africa who encourage and provide the platforms for the sensitization of Africa; for the movement to humanize queer Africa. In a continent comprised of majorly anti-queer countries and policies, once again, the African writer is at the forefront, thoroughly challenging systems of oppression. Egyptian Alaa Al Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* (2002); Zimbabwean Tendai Huchu’s *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010); Gabonese Wame Molefhe’s *Go Tell the Sun* (2011); Somali Diriye Osman’s *Fairytales for Lost Children* (2013); South African K Sello Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001); Nigerian Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015); and Nigerian-German Olumide Popoola’s *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) are indispensable qualities of Africa’s cultural renegotiation. “Central to these stories – and in their attendant relationships – is humanity” (Makhosazana Xaba and Karen Martin).

In restoring to queer Africa a humanity and dignity, the African writer’s movement is against the death penalty prevalent against queers on the continent, against mob and jungle justice, against jail time. And African writers such as Shamim Sharif and Jude Dibia fervently carry that torch.
5.5 For a New Africa:

In March 2015, South African students at the University of Cape Town, brought to prominence the #RhodesMustFall campaign. At the core of this campaign, was a radical revision of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history. The implications of this movement ignited by the demand to bring down a Cecil Rhodes statue, have recalibrated the discussions about afro-centrism in higher education, a decolonization of education, and brought to the forefront of learning, African books steeped in African ideals. The #RhodesMustFall movement by extension is a battle for African space in African societies, but this is not the first of its kind. In 1968, three African researchers sparked up a year-long debate for African literature at the center. This story sets the backdrop for the fourth chapter of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind*. To fully grasp the need for African literatures to be at the center, is to conduct with careful attention, an excavation of Africa’s history. In 1959, in Rome, Leopold Sedar Senghor is quoted as saying:

> The problem we blacks now face is to discover how we are going to integrate African Negro values into the world. It is not a question of resuscitating the past; it is a question of animating the world, here and now, with the values of the past. (‘On African Homelands and Nation-States” 42)

African literature at the center demands that relevance and validity be given to the African experience and this relevance is necessary for a pride and identity.

To insert African literature at the center of African societies, is to imbue African writers with the audacity to codify their own literature, to define it. And there is a history of the African writer at the center, attempting to traverse this space, to claim it. To have it otherwise, is to thrive in ‘Black Africa, Pink Literature’. As response, Cameroonian writer, Mongo Beti, started and manned his *Librairie des peuples noirs*, or, *Bookstore of the Black Peoples*. Présence Africaine,
by Alioune Diop, Heinemann’s African Writer’s Series, by Chinua Achebe, and Les Vies Africaines in the 1970s, were the direct results of this audacity; these African writers claiming their own space. This new power determined for the writers and readers of African literature, a new image of Africa. One that accepted its past of colonialism, its present of dysfunction, and future of hope. This new image of Africa quite frankly, inserted itself brazenly into the space that books like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Joyce Carey’s *Mister Johnson* had created for the images that Western societies continued to perpetuate about Africa.

In many ways, the function of the writer is to define for its reader, the image of Africa. But this is a tasking burden. The modern African writer is limited to the publishing resources and career acclaim available only in the West. There are quite laudably, organizations such as Cassava Republic, a vibrant Nigerian publishing house, attempting to break that deadlock but unfortunately, there’s a market that the West offers African literature that the writer cannot refuse. What has emerged, is not African literature with a world view, but African literature tailored to suit the West, or the African writer ‘performing Africa.’ In a 2013 *Guardian* review of Noviolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, Helon Habila defines this performativity as:

> To inundate one's writing with images and symbols and allusions that evoke, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, pity and fear, but not in a real tragic sense, more in a CNN, western-media-coverage-of-Africa, poverty-porn sense. We are talking child soldiers, genocide, child prostitution, female genital mutilation, political violence, police brutality, dictatorships, predatory preachers, dead bodies on the roadside.

This performativity more than anything else, holds true for Ben Okri who disavows the “tyranny of subject” over black and African writers, where the subject is nested in an obsession with the aesthetic of suffering. Black and African writers, writes Okri, must attain “mental freedom. We
must stop writing about overwhelming subjects such as slavery, colonialism, poverty, and war; we must stop burdening our literatures with suffering and heaviness” (“Mental Tyranny”). This is the simplistic notion upon which Binyavanga Wainaina’s “How to Write About Africa” 2005 essay and soon-to-be-book runs. Binyavanga launches his essay thus: “always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title.” In 1955, Mongo Beti authored a book just like this. He titled it *Romancing Africa.*

From Okri to Diop to Habila, the African literary scene is evolving into an entire generation of African writers; an off-shoot of the ‘Africa Writes Back’ breed, who have mastered the art of the expression of contemporary experiences, and for whom Africa’s image is important.
CHAPTER SIX

THE STORY IS OUR ESCORT

Long ago – and this is what whatever history that has been passed down through the generations tells us – the griot was the most important member of any African community. This is true because of the place that the griot occupied as the keeper of stories, but also mostly because of the power that stories contain in defining a people, in shaping their past, and therefore their future.

We have already established that the writer’s attempt to define self, provides great insight into the concept of identity, dissociation, and representation that characterizes the discourse of everyday life in contemporary African societies. That the writer in observing and in mirroring society, serves to render society on a canvas of words for the present and for the future. That the writer in reflecting society, seizes upon the chance to likewise reflect upon society. That the personas and identities of the African writer are as varied as the societies of the continent itself. That identity is never one thing, that a lot of Africa’s perception of self and worth is hinged upon this inexplicable hybridity. That most of all, the African writer is a voice, and that the story is its weapon.

We have already shown that the story is our escort because for years, it has been the vehicle upon which the role of the African writer has been carried, and will continue to be for many years afterwards. The story is our escort because without it, the place of the African writer is rendered naught. What is the farmer without his farm? The painter without his canvas? The writer without his story?

Only the story…can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story that saves our
progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather, it is the story that owns us and directs us. (Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah 75)

In emphasizing the role that the African writer inhabits in our society, we must never relegate the place of the story. The African writer has attained this level of importance because of the writer’s story and because the African story holds Africa’s identity, it falls on the African writer as the keeper of stories, to shape these stories in truth and wisdom. Indeed, a viable future research might be to concentrate on how Africa’s radically activist literature can serve as the vehicle of instruction for Africa’s future development, and also how other formerly colonial societies have espoused their literature.

It is perhaps telling that this research has focused a lot less on the story itself, favoring instead, what African writers have said about their role and how this philosophy has been carried through their stories. Perhaps this is because the stories of Africa have majorly been the same: colonialism, dysfunction, elitism. Chinua Achebe captures the bleakness of Africa’s eerily similar societies: "Africa now... Yes, there's disappointment, pain, sorrow. But I say to myself, when was it in the last 500 years that Africa has not been in great pain and sorrow and disappointment? The answer is, very rarely” (Feldman). This research has not attempted to discuss at length, Africa or its stories. Many have travelled that path, and many more will. Subsequently, as a result of this research and its redefinition of the African writer, we can begin to look forward to the days when the discourse surrounding Africa’s literature will acknowledge and validate the new crop of writers and the boundaries they are pushing.
If the African writer is a function, it is at this point that we accept that the African story is a function too. One that serves to nestle, between folds of words, the spirit of the African writer and the writer’s society. Long after Achebe and Armah and Emecheta, we will continue to fall back on their stories as reflections of their time, as preservations of their form of history. The African writer as a function, allows the African writer to be. Therefore, the African as a function, is what happens when the writer is just being. And this is what we really mean when we describe African writers as historians. We mean that they have at their disposal, an inalienable, incorruptible tool for carrying out their function.

How we begin to view African literature in relation to the function of the African writer will perhaps change our understanding and analysis of Africa’s many stories. Most of all, perhaps modern African writers can now reevaluate their function in society and position themselves for a more futuristic outlook. But this is what is clear at least: the African writer as a function is Africa’s past, it is Africa’s present, but it is also Africa’s future.

If we think carefully about the following lines of Eritrean-American Aracelis Girmay’s poem, we can hear in the literatures of Africa, the laughter of the past and of the future; and we can hear the tears too. In examining the way African history can be curated, taught and organized, there is no mistaking what the African writer is. And as readers and critics, we would have come to a suitable conclusion: that the African writer whatever it might be, whomever, is “the future continuous.”

I am listening in

On the last century

With my ear to the door

But there is no mistaking laughter.
It is laughter

And we will call these sounds

“The future continuous,” us. (To the Sea)
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