

## African Literary Aesthetics and the English Metaphysical Empire

“Nothing looks to fit him well” - James Baldwin describing the painting, *Yoruba Man on Bicycle*.<sup>1</sup>

In 1962 at Makerere University, Uganda, a conference for “African Writers of English Expression” was convened. Africa was in the throes of decolonization and for the group of young writers attending the conference anything was possible. Their goal was to define, or at least agree upon, the parameters of an African literary aesthetic that would also be in the service of political and cultural decolonization. Reading their post-conference write-ups in the *Transition Journal*, the excitement with which they greeted their role as the instigators and vanguards of an emerging literary tradition is palpable. Indeed the writers in attendance, Chinua Achebe (age 32), Christopher Okigbo (age 32), Wole Soyinka (age 28), and James Ngugi<sup>2</sup>(age 28), Bloke Modisane (age 39), Ezekiel Mphahlele<sup>3</sup>(age 43), set in motion, within a few years, a literary tradition that would engulf subsequent generations in debates around the definition and category of African literature, the languages of African literature, the role of writers in political change, the writer in continental Africa versus the diaspora, and the relationship of African aesthetics to European aesthetics.

The literary vanguard would in just a few short years run against the repression and violence of post-independence African states. Disillusioned with the promises of decolonization, they would turn their pens against their neocolonial governments and the

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<sup>1</sup>. Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Politics of Culture*. N.p.: Methuen, 1991. Print.

<sup>2</sup>. He would later decolonize his name and drop the Christian name, James, and become Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1977.

<sup>3</sup>. He would change his name to Es'kia Mphahlele to reflect his growing black consciousness in 1977, the same year as Ngugi's name change.

pay the price of death, detention and exile. Chinua Achebe became a spokesperson for Biafran independence from Nigeria, doing ambassadorial work in both Africa and the West. Christopher Okigbo was shot dead fighting for Biafra's independence in 1967, five years after the conference. The Nigerian military government of General Yakubu Gowon detained Wole Soyinka for his peace activism in 1966. In 1977, the Kenyan government of Jomo Kenyatta detained Ngugi for his political writing and theater work in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. Both Ezekiel Mphahlele and Bloke Modisane, coming from apartheid South Africa, were already living in exile at the time of the Makerere Conference, Mphahlele in France and Modisane in Britain. Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi each wound up in political exile, ultimately joined by writers like Micere Mugo from Kenya and Nawal El Saadawi from Egypt. The Makerere generation of African writers would suffer death, exile and detention for not separating their literary aesthetics from the material work of politics, for not separating the author from the citizen.

Rajat Neogy started *Transition Magazine* a year before the conference. By the time it folded in 1976, it had become the most influential African literary journal.<sup>4</sup> In a reminder that literature and politics in Africa have never been separate, *Transition* almost buckled under the weight of revelations that it was in part being funded by the CIA through its front, the Congress for Cultural Freedom in 1967.<sup>5</sup> Neogy was also not spared the fate of the writers he was publishing and was detained by Milton Obote's government in 1968. But in 1962, his journal was well on its way to becoming the single most important intellectual meeting ground for African intellectuals and writers and it provided

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<sup>4</sup>. The magazine was later restarted and relocated to Harvard University in 1991.

<sup>5</sup>. Hall, Tony. "Rajat Neogy on the CIA." *Transition*, No. 75/76, The Anniversary Issue: Selections from *Transition, 1961-1976*(1997), pp. 312-316

a natural home for the Makerere conference proceedings.

The Makerere Conference was not the first literary event to involve the African continent and diaspora. The First Congress of Black Writers and Artists was held in Paris in 1956, organized by *Presence Africaine*, a Paris-based literary journal, with a second in 1959, featuring writers such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, George Lamming, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Josephine Baker, and Jean-Paul Sartre (who had aligned himself with third world revolutionary causes). After attending the 1956 conference, Ulli Beier, a Yoruba Scholar, and literary critic Janheinz Jahn, started a journal, *Black Orpheus*, with the goal of showcasing “African writers from French, Portuguese, and Spanish territories in English translation” and “works by West Indian and American Negro writers.”(Lindfors; 1968, 509). A year before the Makerere Conference, Nigerian writers and artists including Achebe and Soyinka were brought together by Ulli Beier to form the first Mbari Club, with the mandate “to support the arts: to organize drama and musical festivals, to publish literature, to mount art exhibitions, and to hold art classes<sup>6</sup>.” It would turn out that the CIA cultural front had also in part financed both the club and journal. In fact the Congress for Cultural Freedom had also sponsored the Makerere conference but back then it was not a known fact that the CIA was behind the organization.

Unlike the others, the Makerere conference was the first to be held on African soil with African literary aesthetics and decolonization at the center. Langston Hughes attended the conference. In the foreword to his 1963 anthology of African poetry, *Poems from Black Africa*, he captured the literary mood by writing that the African “emotional

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<sup>6</sup>. Naifeh, Steven. “The Myth of Oshogbo.” *African Arts*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Feb., 1981), pp. 25-27+85-86+88

climate” was “one of hope and of faith in a future that is coming more and more into the control of the peoples of Africa themselves” (13). The young and optimistic Ngugi also captured this excitement when he enthusiastically concluded in his post-conference write up, “With the death of colonialism, a new society is being born. And with it a new literature.” (Ngugi; 1962, 7)

As per Chinua Achebe’s account in his 1965 essay, “English and the African Writer”, the participants spent considerable time debating and eventually failing at a definition of African literature. Was African Literature to be limited by being:

...produced in Africa or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? Should it embrace the whole continent or South of the Sahara, or just Black Africa ? And then the question of language. Should it be in indigenous African languages or should it include Arabic, English, French. Portuguese, Afrikaans, etc. ?” (18).

The 1962 Makerere conference failed to answer the question, but one year later a conference held at Faculte des Lettres of Dakar University in Senegal succeeded in “tentatively” coming up with a definition. Ezekiel Mphahlele in a conference report for *Transition* recorded the definition:

...as creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral. This therefore includes among others, writing by white Africans like Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson, Doris Lessing, Elspeth Huxley, Alan Paton and so on, and that by non-Africans like William Plomer (a man of many fascinating worlds), Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad (specifically, *The Heart of Darkness*). Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* could have been given any setting outside Africa, and so it does not qualify. (16)

This definition raises many questions – who defines what is an authentic African setting? And these experiences originating from Africa – what is the appropriate length of time for a character to experience something African? Chinua Achebe pointed out the difficulty of limiting African literature. In the same 1965 essay, he wrote:

I could not help being amused by the curious circumstances in which Conrad, a Pole, writing in English produced African literature! On the other hand if Peter Abrahams were to write a good novel based on his experiences in the West Indies it would not be accepted as African literature. (18)

To put it another way, is the African novel an extension of the African writer so it qualifies no matter the setting and content? Or is it the setting alone that matters? This definition of African literature that could allow for the inclusion of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an African text, while a novel by an African writer set outside the continent could not, led Achebe to conclude that:

...you cannot cram African literature into a small, neat 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 literatures of Africa. (18)

National literature for Achebe was "literature written in English; and the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Effik, Edo, ijaw, etc" (27). By raising writing in English to national and major literature, and relegating African languages to producing ethnic literature, Achebe contributed to a language hierarchy that still undergirds and informs African literature today. But language hierarchy notwithstanding, for Achebe the term African literature can carry within it an immediately assumed diversity.<sup>7</sup>In the same way when one says European literature, a diverse history and array of writers is assumed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>. The poet John Pepper Clarke writing in 1965 had also called for African literature to be recognized as a body containing different identities and cultures. He argued that he places "high premium on difference of identity":

...because there is the need to do this so that we do not fall into the popular pastime of indiscriminately lumping together African peoples. The truth is that these differences do exist among the numerous peoples of Africa, forming for each that special cultural make-up and sensibility of which any artist anywhere must partake and be impregnated with before he can bring forth any work of meaning to his people and mankind in general. (18).

<sup>8</sup>. There is the question of an established European literary canon and the 'minor' writers who have been cast to the margins but even then European literature is not immediately understood as a singular aesthetic, produced by the same kind of authors for a functional project such as nation building or to carry and showcase a singular European culture and history.

More than fifty years after the Makerere Conference the debate continues. But whereas in 1965 the argument was for the recognition of African literature as diverse, the debate today is around whether the category of African literature has any meaning at all. Taiye Selasi (34), a contemporary African writer and the author of *Ghana Must Go*, delivered a keynote speech at the 2013 Berlin Book Fair, titled, “African Literature Doesn’t Exist.”<sup>9</sup> Selasi knew she was being deliberately provocative, stating, “I’m sure I’ll regret having given this talk once the scholars swoop in, but for now, I’m young and idealistic enough to relish the risk of defeat,” and terming her own paper an act of “blasphemy” (1). Her main argument, that in the West, the category of African literature has come to mean one kind of writer and one kind of writing, has resonated with the younger generation of African writers. For her, ignoring Africa’s diversity, where there are “over two thousand languages spoken,” or “dismiss[ing] this linguistic complexity as a symptom of primitive clannishness, as if these two thousand languages were spoken by one hundred people apiece” (6) can only see a singular Africa. In addition, she argued, there is a tendency to see African writers as “sociologists in creative writers’ clothing” which “betrays a fundamental disrespect for those writers’ artistry” (8). She used Achebe’s 1965 essay to make her point that the category, African literature, itself was the problem:

Achebe, writing in 1965, concludes, “Any attempt to define African literature in terms which overlook the complexities of the African scene at the material time is doomed to failure.” Fifty years later I would argue that the only way to define African literature is to overlook these complexities. (4)

For her the term is simply too opaque to allow for a diverse catalogue of literature and writers to shine through. But whereas for Achebe the point was to have the term African

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<sup>9</sup>. Opening Speech: Taiye Selasi (GB / I): »*African Literature Doesn't Exist*«. Sep 04, 2013

literature carry the complexity that came with it, Selasi argued for the bankruptcy of the term itself – the category could not help but carry within it a simplified sociological/anthropological reading of African literature.

There is little argument that African literature across multiple generations has suffered a kind of Africa-is-a-Country<sup>10</sup> literary criticism that, in place of diverse aesthetics, reads it as anthropology - as representative of a single country, culture, and language – coming from a singular body politic.<sup>11</sup> But part of my argument in this book is that the question about what is African literature cannot be answered outside the question of how and why African writers from former British colonies and their Western publishers created an African literary aesthetic that centered the realist political novel in English. And why these same African writers, after finding themselves in the peculiar position of producing national and Pan-African literatures in English, became the biggest defenders of English while condescending to African languages. And how, in turn, the post-Makerere generation African writers have responded to a literary tradition that privileged the English language and aesthetics over African languages and aesthetics.

### **The Growth of English in Britain and Colonial Africa**

A study of African literature must consider the growth of English and the philological debates around its standardization in England, its growth in Africa through colonial education, and the debates around African writing in African and European

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<sup>10</sup>. There is a satirically named popular blog called *Africa is a Country* whose stated mission is not to be about “about famine, Bono, or Barack Obama.” <http://africasacountry.com/>

<sup>11</sup>. Mphahlele on the literary criticism limiting itself to functionality wrote that in the conference, “One felt the tendency throughout was to place an emphasis on what one might call the sociology of African literature rather than talk about it as literature”(16).

languages and how they mirror yet remain different across different generations of African writers. To put it differently, questions around a diverse or singular African literary identity, language, politics and aesthetics cannot be answered outside what Michael Beach called an English “metaphysical empire” (119). In his essay, “The Creation Of A Classical Language In The Eighteenth Century: Standardizing English, Cultural Imperialism, And The Future Of The Literary Canon”, Beach looked at the ways in which standardization of English was a successful attempt at making English a world language and carrier of Englishness - a well from which other cultures could draw the best of what English culture had to offer. Writing of standardizers like Samuel Johnson who in 1755 created an authoritative dictionary of Standard English, Beach argued that their hope was that English culture:

...would become the building block of ... a metaphysical empire, an empire of language and literature that would outlive the actual British Empire... While sometimes openly disavowing the martial nature of Rome, theorists could still wax eloquent about its metaphysical empire and the continued transmission and reproduction of Latin and of Roman letters. These epic metaphysical empires were a source of great inspiration to those thinkers who fantasized that British texts would eventually become "classics" to formerly colonized peoples. (119)

This movement was not just about standard English serving as nationalist armor by protecting English identity from outside forces while keeping Britain a solidified whole. ‘Standardizers’ like Johnson were going after future history itself. Today, that the Commonwealth Prize is given for writing from Britain and former British colonies, and that the few major African literary prizes such as the Caine and Etisalat prizes are awarded for African writing in English can be seen, for better and indeed worse, as a



celebration and perpetuation of the metaphysical empire.<sup>12</sup> If I were to sum this whole book in one sentence, it would be to say that it is about how pre-Makerere, Makerere and Post-Makerere generations of African writers have responded to the English metaphysical empire.

Why was it so important for the conference to declare boldly in its title that this was a gathering of “African Writers of English Expression” as Obi Wali was to ask in his essay, “The Dead End of African Literature?” Why was it so important to signal to the attendees that African writers using African languages were not welcome? Or even worse, had the writers just taken it for granted that African writing should be in English?

To draw out the issue of English as the language of African literature, Wali built his essay around the question of why Amos Tutuola was excluded from the conference. After all, Tutuola had published *The Palm Wine Drinkard* to critical albeit debatable acclaim in 1952, six years before the publication of *Things Fall Apart*. Indeed by the time *Things Fall Apart* was being published, Tutuola had written, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) and *Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle* (1955). For Wali, Tutuola’s exclusion was “partly<sup>13</sup> because he has gone out of line, winning acclaim overseas for

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<sup>12</sup>. For these reasons, in 2001 Amitava Ghosh withdrew his novel, *The Glass Palace*, from being considered for the Commonwealth prize. He argued the term “can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries” and the term commonwealth literature “anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past.” He went on to ask, “Would it not surprise us, for instance, if that familiar category “English literature” were to be renamed “the literature of the Norman Conquest”? See, Ghosh, Amitava. “Ghosh Letter to Administrators of Commonwealth Writers Prize.” N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Aug. 2014.

<sup>13</sup>. The other reason why Wali thinks Tutuola was excluded from the conference was “because influential critics [had] repeatedly grouped him with the Negritude school.” Negritude was understood by writers and activists like Mphahlele as not only apolitical, but ahistorical.

using a kind of English expression that is non- Ibadan and non-Makerere” (Wali, 330). That is to say, his use of uneducated, broken non-university English, ‘vulgar’ English. His conclusion was that “African literature as now understood and practiced [was] only a minor appendage in the mainstream of European literature” (332). To put it another way, one cannot conceive the English today writing British national literature in French: or the Chinese writing in Japanese, or the French in German and so on. But for African writers writing in an imperially enforced foreign language was taken as the starting point. The question before the Makerere generation was not how to write, translate and market books written in an African language. Rather, it was how best to make English work for the African literary imagination.

Amos Tutuola, through his biography and his writing, illustrates how questions of African aesthetics were immediately caught up in the politics of material and cultural decolonization but all within the web of the English metaphysical empire. Due to lack of school fees, he had managed only a standard six colonial education. Any randomly picked sentence in his most famous work, the *Palm Wine Drinkard*, published by the London-based Faber & Faber in 1954 reveals a poor command of English. The first sentence in the opening chapter titled, *The Meaning of “Bad” and “good”* in PWD reads, “I was seven years old before I understood the meaning of “bad” and “good”, because it was at that time I noticed carefully that my father married three wives as they were doing in those days, it was not common nowadays” (17). It is not clear to me why bad and good are in quotation marks. And the chapter title and the construction of the sentence establish an infantile voice, even though we get to know the narrator is an adult. The idea of three wives is both mitigated and judged by, “it is not common nowadays” and the

reader cannot be sure whether the ambiguity was deliberate or not.

If the questions around authorial intent in relation to the novel's intrinsic qualities can be tricky, it was however clear that it was not Tutuola's intention to use grammatically incorrect English. He wanted his English corrected and standardized. He had written to his editor, Allan Pringle, saying, "I shall be much grateful if you will correct my "WRONG-ENGLISH" etc and can alter the story itself if possible, of course it is not necessary to tell you as you are an expert in this work."<sup>14</sup> And Pringle replied telling him that his peculiar English, essentially his standard six English grammar was integral to the aesthetics of the book.

About the text – we agree that your English is not always conventional English as written in this country, but for that very reason we think it would be a great pity to make it conform to all the rules of grammar and spelling. Just as no one but a West African could have had such a strange tale to tell, so your manner of writing has a charm of its own. (Lindfors, 1999; 118)

That the book seemed to have captured a West African cultural pure essence was why the book appealed to Faber & Faber.

Not surprisingly, Western literary critics mostly saw the novel as an authentic representation of African culture often in condescending and sometimes in racist terms.

Cecil T. Lewis in his review of *Life in the Bush of Ghosts* told his readers:

Take a modern Nigerian. Give him six years of formal education. Let him with rampant and febrile imagination enclose within a rudimentary fictional framework his tribal lore – a lore in which mythology and reality are often indistinguishable for those whose culture itself is a *mélange*. Result: a coupling of the predominantly primitive with outcroppings of sophistication in a book to delight the ethnologist, the psychologist, the theologian, the linguist. (116)

Lewis here went beyond paternalism – "rampant" and "febrile" made Tutuola out as a writer out of control and in a feverish state, one who cannot distinguish the real and

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<sup>14</sup>. Lindfors, 1999; 117

imaginary, who cannot distance himself from his subject and in the end only succeeds in writing a novel that captures his primitive state. Taken to its logical conclusion, a perverse delight for students of human nature and language was going to be derived in witnessing Tutuola's attempts at sophistication while learning about his primitive music, language and religion. Lewis recommended the novel for all the wrong reasons. For Lewis, Tutuola's usage of English, what the poet Dylan Thomas in a positive but condescending review called "young English" authenticated the African content that Dylan had also termed as "bizarre."<sup>15</sup>

How Africans going through decolonization felt how they and Africa were perceived by white Westerners informed how *PWD* was received by. Where Western critics welcomed Tutuola as a major voice in African literature albeit paternalistically, African critics were less enthusiastic and sometimes out rightly hostile. One has to employ emotive words such as anger and shame to describe Tutuola's reception by African critics. Charles Larson in *The Ordeal of the African Writer* made the point that, "Reviewers were largely divided into two factions: English and American critics were captivated, enthralled by Tutuola's exotic story as well as his style; African critics, however were made uncomfortable by a fear that westerners would regard Tutuola as a 'typical educated African' (3). Oyekan Owomoyela, writing on the Western versus African reception of *PWD*, spells it out this way:

Nigeria and West Africans were confounded for yet another reason, that the praises showered on Tutuola were inconsistent with what they had been taught – often by the same Westerners whose selected authors included the likes of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Milton, Moliere, Dostoevsky, and Arthur Miller – about

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<sup>15</sup>. Dylan Thomas. "Blithe Spirits." *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola*. Ed. Bernth Lindfors. Washington: Three Continents, 1975. 7.

what consisted good literature. They had been led to believe that creative writing required a mastery of language, adeptness at plotting, ability to create believable characters, and a clear idea of the theme(s) the work will convey. (102)

The colonially educated African elite greeted the elevation of *PWD* to the level of literature with derision because it violated, in content, form and language, aesthetic standards set by British colonial education.<sup>16</sup>To portray *PWD* as an aesthetic masterpiece was taken as further condescension of African people by Westerners. Tutuola's English was an anathema to Standard English, and literature – he was everything the English metaphysical empire discouraged. He was not an African writer of English expression.

Why didn't Tutuola simply write in Yoruba and get his works translated? Why is writing coming from former British colonies mostly in English in spite of African languages continuing to thrive via newspapers, music, film and so on? And why is it that the instances where African writers have written in African language and been translated into English have been a rare exception rather than a growing norm?<sup>17</sup>The answer to that question is tied to the growth of English and standardization.

Eight hundred years ago, in relation to a young English language, Latin and French were the languages preferred by the English elite. Melvyn Bragg, in *The Adventure of English: The Biography of a Language*, writes that when in 1215 the

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<sup>16</sup>. This is further underlined by an African critic, I. Adeagbo Akinjogbin who judged that Tutuola's writing "will just suit the temper of his European readers as they seem to confirm their concepts of Africa...And once the harm (I call it harm) is done, it can hardly be undone again. Mr. Tutuola will get his money and his world wide fame all right, but the sufferers will be the unfortunate ones that have cause to come to England or Europe" (Larson, 7). Larson uses the term uncomfortable. Akinjogbin sees Tutuola as actually doing harm to other Africans.

<sup>17</sup>. For example, Wole Soyinka translated D.O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* in 1968 from Yoruba to English. Ngugi writes his fiction in Gikuyu which is then translated, sometimes using a translator, sometimes doing his own translation, into English. But this remains the exception to the rule.

“barons rebelled against King John and presented their demands in the most famous document in our history, the Magna Carta, they had it drawn up in Latin. Latin was the language of God, the language of deep tradition, the common language of the Western civilized world, a sacred language” (54). But over time, the value of English would become apparent – first the King needed to speak a language people would understand. And English could help forge a national identity against the French and Germans in a time of war. In 1362, King Edward III passed a law in which English “was acknowledged as a language of official business” while replacing French as the language of instruction (Bragg, 63). The statute was explicit in its reasoning – it was so that “every man of the said realm may better organize his affairs without offending the law, and better keep, save, and defend his inheritances and possessions” (Omrod, 756).

As English grew to become the national language, its various existing dialects and provincialisms were standardized following class lines. In *The Politics of Language*, 1791-1819, Olivia Smith argued that those who came from the lower classes were understood to be speaking vulgar English that revealed the “inability of the speaker to transcend the concerns of the present, an interest in material objects, and the dominance of passions” (3). And those who spoke ‘proper’ English were seen “as allegedly rational, moral, civilized, and capable of abstract thinking” (3). The higher classes and the English they spoke exemplified civilization while the lower classes were incapable of making unique contributions to English civilization. This was in line with the concept of “universal grammar [which] at that time stipulated that languages were fundamentally alike in that they represented the mind, and fundamentally different in the quality of the mind and civilization they represented” (Smith, 3). Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the*

*English Language* (1755) was in practice a codification of the view that language carried the best of one's civilization.

Colonialism in Africa and elsewhere made true Johnson's dream that the standardized English language would propagate Englishness. The English that came to Africa did not carry with it the battle scars of its struggles against French, Latin, dialects and provincialism. The rough edges were smoothed over by standardization and the English that was introduced was singular. For example, John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678 in everyday, colloquial English that was at first seen as vulgar. But when it was introduced to Africans as a must read exemplar of English Christianity and culture, it was in Standardized English. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, already widely read, debated and translated into many African languages, was rehabilitated from vulgarity to carry Englishness.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas in England lower-class English was vulgar, in Africa it was African languages that became vulgar. Standard English represented the modern, rational and philosophical, in essence, civilization. Smith's description of Standard English in relation to peasant English is echoed in the relationship between African languages and English. African languages came to represent the "inability of the speaker to transcend the concerns of the present, an interest in material objects, and the dominance of passions," while those who spoke 'proper' English were seen "as allegedly rational, moral, civilized, and capable of abstract thinking" (Smith, 3). African languages took the derided place of lower-class English. In British colonial Africa, the English language developed at the expense of African languages. The language of education was English. The official

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<sup>18</sup>. See Isabel Hofmeyr in "How Bunyan Became English: Missionaries, Translation, and the Discipline of English Literature."

language was English. English teachers and colonial officials viewed African languages as backward, incapable of carrying abstract knowledge. Norman MacKenzie, a literary critic and professor of English at the University of Rhodesia in a 1959 essay<sup>19</sup> wrote that for an African:

... a study of his vernacular will lead him backwards into a past with which he has generally scant sympathy, the very vocabulary and style having changed since the dignified days of his grandfather. In literature it has little of distinction to offer him... Through English, on the other hand, he can have access to innumerable sources of vital knowledge - on politics and health, on scientific and technical matters (manuals about horse-power instead of legends about hares), - and a religion which will at any rate stand modern investigation better than his own. (217)

For MacKenzie, African languages were incapable of growing and learning and carrying science and “technical matters.” It was a case of a racist ideology being made a reality because it meant that colonialism was not going to throw resources at languages already suffering from arrested development. English as the passport out of an inferior African culture was a cornerstone of colonial education.

Tutuola, like other African writers, then could not write in Yoruba because it was not the language of power and civilization. And he himself had come to believe that English was the language of literature, and Yoruba an inferior language. And the only choice was working with the English language, no matter how poorly, to carry the African experience. Yet historically there were examples of Africans writing in African languages, and then getting their work translated. The question also of interest in this book is why for the Makerere generation writing in their mother tongues was not an option they seriously entertained. And again the answer has everything to do with the

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<sup>19</sup>. “The Place of English in African Education.” *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1959), pp. 216-223



metaphysical empire.

### **Pre-Makerere Writers, Lovedale Press and publishing in African Languages**

By the time of the 1962 conference, South Africa had had a long history of literature written in African languages and then later translated into English, as well as novels in their original English. Thomas Mofolo, who was later to be known for the epic novel *Chaka* written in 1909 but only published in 1931, was the author of the first novel, *Moeti oa Bochabela*, in an African language published in 1907. *Moeti oa Bochabela* was translated into English as *Traveller to the East* in 1934.<sup>20</sup> R. R. R. Dhlomo wrote in both English and isiZulu - *An African Tragedy* being first published in 1928 and *UNomalanga kaNdengezi* 1934. And there are later writers like Mazisi Kunene that spanned the colonial and independence eras who wrote primarily in Zulu and then later had their work translated into English.

Missionary presses, though in real terms an educational and aesthetic extension of colonialism, published most of the major works in South African languages and English. A.C. Jordan in *Towards an African Literature* observed that to be “able to preach the word, the missionaries had not only to learn the languages of the people but also reduce these languages to writing” (37). Jordan wrote the most famous isiXhosa novel, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*, in 1940 (translated into English as *The Wrath of the Ancestors* in 1980) which was first published by Lovedale Press.<sup>21</sup> The press was founded by the Glasgow Missionary Society in 1823 with a mission to “promote Christian knowledge in

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<sup>20</sup>. See Thomas Jeffrey’s, “A Hundred Years of Thomas Mofolo.” *English in Africa*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (OCTOBER 2010), pp. 37-55

<sup>21</sup>. Jordan notes that the first novel in Xhosa was published in 1821, and authored “by John Bennie, one of the three Glasgow missionaries who founded Lovedale” (38).

southern Africa and to propagate "civilised" norms of conduct and moral behavior" (White, 69). Even though it specialized in educational and Christian books, starting in 1932 it branched out to publishing general literature books under the directorship of R.H.W. Shepherd. Shepherd believed that a "mission press needed to exercise a more creative responsibility and that it should provide more general reading matter for the African public" (White, 70). The first novel in English by a black South African was Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* written in c. 1920 and published in 1930 by Lovedale.<sup>22</sup>

The mission of the presses and those of the politically conscious South African authors clashed. And in the ensuing compromise, Christian themes would find their way into the texts. But if the Makerere generation and publishers had seen the Lovedale Press and South African writers as examples offering a flawed but promising solution and built on it, there were important lessons to be gleaned. Translation was a way for readers to access writing in African languages and English – mutual translations between African languages, and between African and European languages were possible. And that a writer could work in more than one language and across multiple genres at the same time. It was neither a choice of either/or. In other words, South African literary history provided a path out of the metaphysical empire. Had they taken that path, it is likely that the face of African literature would be different today. The literary tradition would be rich, having within it thriving African languages literature and also literature in European languages. There would be English literary prizes and journals alongside those for

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22. Jeffrey, Thomas. "A Hundred Years of Thomas Mofolo." *English in Africa*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Oct. 2010), pp. 37-55

African languages. In short, English would be just another language out of the thousands that a writer could choose from.

But for the Makerere generation of African writers, it was as if this literary history did not exist. For them, it was a foregone conclusion that the future of African literature was going to be in English, that African aesthetics were best conveyed in the English language via the form of the English novel. And consequently without a road map to that part of the African literary tradition, the post-Makerere generation cannot think and write outside the English metaphysical empire. For Adichie, Binyavanga, Habila and others, the past of African literature begins with the 1957 publication of *Things Fall Apart*, a time when, even those who were to later argue for African languages later like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, were working in English only.

### **The Heinemann African Writers Series as counter narrative to Tutuola's aesthetics**

African writing in English would not have survived and thrived without an active participation by British publishers in the metaphysical empire. Writing about the Oxford University-owned Three Crown Series, and which, just like H.E.B in 1962, had started publishing African writers, Caroline Davis connected the rise of British publishing of African authors to the fall of the British Empire. For her, the “end of formal colonization in Africa gave British publishing companies the opportunity to become more, not less, deeply entrenched in the cultural life of the continent” (227).<sup>23</sup> Even though she did not use the term, it becomes clearer that she was talking about the afterlife of the physical empire when she analyzed the language used by a May 1976 committee convened to

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<sup>23</sup>. James Currey, a central editorial figure in the rise of the Heinemann Africa Writers Series in *Africa Writes Back* expressed a similar sentiment.

"examine the function, organization, and operations of the Press and its relationship with the University." She concluded that:

The language of economic and cultural imperialism resonates in the report. OUP is described as "a leader among United Kingdom publishers and an instrument of learning, education, and culture of national and international importance." The committee resolved that the press's world expansion should continue, "not simply because of the financial rewards but because of the benefit to the spread of British culture and influence. (230-231)

The committee recognized that OUP was opening a new largely untapped English speaking market while bringing new fiction to Britain. They also recognized what for Johnson was a primary concern, the propagation of Englishness.

However as I will show, to argue that British publishing of African writers contributed to a metaphysical empire is not to be confused with contributing to a material colonial empire driven by violence, greed and a racist ideological superstructure. The British publishers thought that bringing African writers to the West was a way of rolling back Western racism, and African editors and writers saw their work as contributing to decolonization - as best illustrated by the Heinemann African Writer's Series (AWS). And the African writers largely did not see them as a cultural arm of a dying colonialism. Even though there were the usual tensions between writer and publisher, the general feeling from the eager to be published young writers was that the publishers were within the decolonization consensus.

The AWS was founded by Alan Hill, a director at it's educational books division who, after witnessing the success of *Things Fall Apart*, felt there was a need for literary works written by Africans available not only in the Western market but African countries. The Western market could bear the costs of hardback novels, but for the African market, cheap paperbacks were to be also published (Currey, 2). As Hill narrated in his

autobiography, *In Pursuit of Publishing*, he also wanted to change the way books were published in Africa by big Western publishers whose sole interest he saw as profit, while “putting nothing back in the way of investment in local publishing and encouragement of local authors” (122-123). Seeing these companies driven by profit and nothing else “outraged” his “radical, nonconformist, missionary ethos” and felt AWS could provide a “publishing service for African authors” (123).

Hill was also very much aware that Africans viewed Tutuola’s *Palm Wine Drinkard* as doing a disservice to African literature and the image of Africans and Africa in the West, and its paternalistic reception by Western critics. In his autobiography, he recounted how the arrival of *Things Fall Apart* “came as a revelation to many of my colleagues in Britain whose opinion of Africans as writers had been influenced by the works of Amos Tutuola – particularly his quaintly-told allegorical fantasies” while for Africans Tutuola’s was “anathema to many educated Nigerians – to whom his linguistic virtuosity seemed plain illiteracy” (121). *Things Fall Apart* in contrast “affirmed permanent human and social values in the context of a traditional tribal society in crisis, and which expressed those values in terms which the Western educated reader could understand” (121).

*Things Fall Apart*, first published in 1958 by Heinemann and then republished again in 1962 under AWS, was met with an almost palpable literary relief: it was not in the style of Tutuola; here English was standardized, and the content rather than being bizarre, showed a dynamic Igbo culture clashing with British colonial culture. *Things Fall Apart* was the first of AWS novels that in the words of Hill dealt with “the confrontation of two civilisations, European and African, and the shock this caused

individuals and society” (124). So Achebe was applauded for his learned handling of the English language and showcasing a pre-colonial dynamic African culture on the precipice of colonial domination. Norman Mackenzie in his 1959 essay in support of English as the language of education in British colonies compared Tutuola to Achebe:

In English literature people like Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, have emerged from University Colleges in British territories and have begun to write of African themes in an English manner. But the British public has shown more interest in the work of Amos Tutuola whose highly imaginative books...are couched in the pidgin English of Nigeria...It is true that the unaccustomed themes drawn from the teeming folk-lore of West Africa are excitingly fresh to British readers, and that the strange style, with its child-like repetitions and incessant ambiguities, lulls them into the suspension of disbelief...We can only hope that African writers will not adopt some debased form of English in an effort to titillate the British palate. (220)

The “English manner” MacKenzie refers to could also be a matter of form, the realist fiction tradition as opposed to the folkloric superstition-riddled tradition of Tutuola, and he was unhappy that English readers had not been more critical. But it was the language use, which he called “debased” that he found most offensive. He praised Achebe for writing in the tradition of Standard English and derided Tutuola for writing in what he calls “Nigerian Pidgin English.” In a 1958 review<sup>24</sup> of *Things Fall Apart*, Mercedes Mackay wrote:

Amos Tutuola has given us specialized and extremely interesting fantasy, and Cyprian Ekwensi excellent realism and the modern Lagos scene; but now at last a Nigerian writer has appeared who can give as a straightforward, penetrating and absolutely honest picture of African village life before the advent of the first missionaries. In powerfully realistic prose the writer set out to write a fictional but almost documentary account of the day to day happenings in a small Nigerian village without evasion, sophistry or apology...Many books and anthropological treatises have told about the power of religious superstition, but here is one which forcefully but impartially gives us reasons for both. (243)

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<sup>24</sup>. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe Review by: Mercedes Mackay *African Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 228 (Jul., 1958), pp. 242-243.

All in all, Tutuola's style and English usage was not seen as a setting or contributing to a literary tradition, rather it was seen as a one-off style that had no future. If it was true that Tutuola's style was a "fascinating cul-de-sac" but a dead end all the same<sup>25</sup>, Achebe's opened up a literary superhighway for African writing. So powerful has been the counter narrative to Tutuola's aesthetics and reception that Achebe was popularly credited with being the "father of modern African literature" (a term he himself did not accept<sup>26</sup>) even though Tutuola had published three novels before the arrival of *Things Fall Apart*.

With Achebe getting on board in 1962 as the editorial advisor to the AWS, the series would go on to set the African literary tradition on the path of realist novels that, whether first in English or translated into English from French, were political and in Standard English even as they tried to 'Africanize' that English. At the same time, if the books were going to become set books, and at the same time offer a counter narrative to the image of Africa confirmed by the *Palm Wine Drinkard*, the writing had to be in Standard English whether Africanized or *English* English.

The decision by Heinemann to publish the African novels through its Educational Books imprints was a practical one. The colonial cultural machinery had not been interested in cultivating African literary culture or reading for pleasure. Publishing was for educational books. It was easier for Hill to push books written by African writers through the educational publishing model. And this meant publishing African literary books with the idea that they would in turn become set books in Kenyan primary and

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<sup>25</sup>. Gerald Moore, *Seven African Writers* (London: Oxford, 1962), p. 57.

<sup>26</sup>. Flood, Alison. "Achebe Rejects Endorsement as 'father of Modern African Literature'" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 12 Nov. 2009. Web. 09 Mar. 2012.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/12/achebe-rejects-father-modern-african-literature>>.

high schools. As Hill explained, H.E.B was the only firm with “the faith - the passion almost – and the will to do the job” and they had the “necessary business set-up to sell the books” in a continent where the “book trade...was almost entirely educational,” (Currey, 6). The idea was that the books that sold well would support newer and even experimental works. But what was a progressive idea became retrogressive - over 50 years later, the publishing monopoly has been held by educational books publishers.<sup>27</sup> There has been no concerted effort to develop a general readership because the goal is to have novels become exam set books, which in turn sell well. There has never been a market driven need for readers outside the educational system.

The question of what kind of aesthetic those trapped within the metaphysical empire produced is central to the African literary tradition. What does practicing anti-colonial and decolonization politics within the growing metaphysical empire mean in terms of literary production? And the even harder question: Could, just perhaps, the African writers and British publishers contribute to decolonization while empowering the metaphysical empire? Or to put it differently, is it possible for an ideological superstructure in a Marxian sense to outgrow and exist outside its material base? When the questions are put this way, it becomes possible to circumvent literary cultural nationalism, and allow us to look at the African and British contradictions propelling the production of African literature.

### **Everybody’s Pan-African Novel**

To hearken back to Taiye Selasi, she was eliding over two central realities in the creation of African literature in her lecture. First, the category was not just a creation of

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<sup>27</sup>. Ngugi’s work for example is today published by East African Educational Publishers, a now independent off shoot of H.E.B.



Western critics that they then imposed on writers from Africa. It is in fact a category that was also actively created and courted by Africans as part and parcel of cultural and intellectual decolonization. And that while African literature was not necessarily seen as a rejection of European literature, it was understood that whereas during colonialism European literature was the center, African literature would become the starting point of African students embarking on literary journeys whether as writers or critics. And all within a Pan-African literary identity that was decidedly political in nature.

In the acknowledgements in an AWS book, *Two Centuries of African English: A Survey and Anthology of Non-Fictional English Prose by African Writers Since 1769*, Lalage Brown the editor appended a note with the heading, NOTE: LITERATURE AND POLITICS, that reads:

Not all modern authors included in this anthology are necessarily in good political standing in their own countries. It should therefore be made plain that this is a book concerned with modes and styles of literature and that all the extracts are used to prove one point: that African authors have produced good and interesting writing in English prose. Whether or not all those who write interestingly have sound political judgment is a question outside the scope of this book. (xii)

To my mind, it is an unusual note to have as one of the first thing that the reader comes across, and it raises the question what sort of reader is being addressed. Is it a censorship in South Africa because the anthology includes those exiled by the apartheid government like Mphahlele? Or the Kenyan authorities where Tom Mboya by the time the book was being published had already been assassinated, as would J.M. Kariuki two years later by the Jomo Kenyatta government? Or does the note betray the author's own feelings about the political nature of African writing? Regardless of its peculiarity, the note does capture the political nature of African writing. So political that Alan Hill could write:

Our involvement in African writing introduced me to a new aspect of publishing –

the author in prison. At one time or another our African authors have become political prisoners...In fact at one time, our weekly in-house circular which lists forthcoming visits by authors carried a column headed 'Authors in Prison' which we updated each month" (127).

Thus the novel by being borne off an imagination formed by colonialism and anti-colonial struggles was simply political because it worked on Manichean ever-present contradictions. For the African writers, they had a duty to expose those contradictions through their art.

So Wole Soyinka in a 1967 essay, *The Writer in the African State*, argued that the African writers had undergone three stages: The first during decolonization required that the writers contribute to the nationalist cause toward independence, meaning that the writers had to "postpone that unique reflection on experience and events which is what makes a writer and constitute himself into a part of that machinery that will actually shape events" (11). In the second stage the writers now became part of nation building and the writers put "energies to enshrining victory, to re-affirming his identification with the aspirations of nationalism and the stabilisation of society" (12). And in the third stage the writers found themselves in a state of "disillusionment" leading to Soyinka calling for "an honest examination of what has been the failure of the African writer, as a writer (12). He concluded his essay by asking writers to reengage with the material reality of the societies:

Where the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience he must recognise that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post- mortem surgeon. But there can be no further distractions with universal concerns whose balm is spread on abstract wounds, not on the gaping yaws of black inhumanity. A concern with culture strengthens society, but not a concern with mythology. (13)

Soyinka was decrying Negritude and the concept of a return to a mythological past, "the

myth of irrational nobility” and “racial essence” but it is clear that he recognized the existence of the African Writer who then for better or worse had a duty to society.

Indeed while African writers in the 1960s were to debate what constitutes African literature, that they had a duty to society, was never in really question.

Ngugi, a Makerere University alumnus, was still a student at the time of the 1962 conference. In 2013, 51 years later, he returned to give a keynote address<sup>28</sup> in which he reminisced about the conference and the role it had played in African literature and what Achebe who had just died and the other writers had come to mean:

These writers would later give us what’s the nearest thing to a genuine Pan African intellectual article: the book, African literature. When Achebe passed on recently he was mourned all over the continent. His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the text most discussed at the conference alongside that of Dennis Brutus of South Africa, is read in all Africa. The work of others like Okot p’Bitek and Wole Soyinka, and that of the generations that have followed, Dangarembga, Ngozi Adichie and Doreen Baingana are equally well received as belonging to all Africa. Thus if Makerere was the site and symbol of an East African intellectual community, it also marked the birth of literary Pan-Africanism. (5-6)

Along the same lines even though Simon Gikandi in his essay, “Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture” first lamented about “about the institutionalization of *Things Fall Apart* and the wisdom of using it as supplement for African culture or the authorized point of entry into Igbo, Nigerian, or African landscapes” he recognized it for its Pan-African historical moment:

It is not an exaggeration to say that my life was never to be the same again. For reading *Things Fall Apart* brought me to the sudden realization that fiction was not merely about a set of texts which one studied for the Cambridge Overseas exam which, for my generation, had been renamed the East African Certificate of Education; on the contrary, literature was about real and familiar worlds, of culture and human experience, of politics and economics, now re-routed through a

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<sup>28</sup>. Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. "Makerere Dreams: Language and New Frontiers of Knowledge." University of East Africa 50th Anniversary Celebrations. Makerere University, Kampala. 29 June 2013. *Makerere University*. Web. 24 June 2014.

language and structure that seemed at odds with the history or geography books we were reading at the time (4).

And a little later he added that, “there is consensus that *Things Fall Apart* was important for the marking and making of that exciting first decade of decolonization.” (4) For his generation, *Things Fall Apart* was so central in their intellectual development that, on meeting each other, intellectuals from different countries could ask each other where they were when they first read it.<sup>29</sup>

And with an emerging Pan-African literature, it was only a matter of time before the role of English literature (and not the English language) in African education was questioned. In a 1968 essay titled, “On the Abolition of the English Department”, three professors at the University of Nairobi, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Henry Owour-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong argued that in the teaching of literature was a “basic assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage” in which “Africa becomes an extension of the West.” “Why can’t African literature be at the center so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?” they asked. They called for the abolition of the English Department and in its place a Department of African literature and languages. They were clear that they were not “rejecting other cultural streams, especially the western stream” (439). The ideal curriculum would constitute, the oral tradition, Swahili literature (with Arabic and Asian literatures), a selected course in European literature, and modern African literature, and knowledge of Swahili, English and French would be a must (440).

They concluded that “with Africa at the center of things, not existing as an

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<sup>29</sup>. Gikandi also reads it as a decolonizing text: “there is consensus that *Things Fall Apart* was important for the marking and making of that exciting first decade of decolonization.” (4).

appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective. The dominant object in that perspective is African literature, the major branch of African culture. Its roots go back to past African literatures, European literatures, and Asian literatures. These can be studied meaningfully in a Department of African literature and Languages in an African University (441). Their goal was to change the curriculum from a British based one to one that reflected World literature with African literature at the center.

The Makerere African writers right from the beginning understood their written work as contributing to political and cultural decolonization. And when decolonization turned into a mess of neocolonial authoritarian military and civilian regimes, they saw their work as contributing to egalitarian and democratic societies.

### **The Post - Makerere Generation of African Writers and the Language Question**

To Samuel Johnson and the other architects of the metaphysical empire, the idea that literary tradition could be divorced from language would have been met with incredulity. In fact their struggle on behalf of the English language was so that language and culture could grow each other. But one also suspects they would have been pleased to hear post-Makerere young African writers defending and promoting English with the same rigor and marked with derision of African 'vulgar' languages.

Whereas the Makerere generation grew up speaking their mother tongues, for some of the post-Makerere generation of writers, English is the only language they negotiate life in. Even if they wanted to write in an African language, they simply cannot because they simply do not know enough of their mother tongue. And even those who

have grown up speaking an African language, sometimes fluently, cannot write in it because the education system in former British colonies continues the same colonial language policies. The same attitudes that informed colonial language policy where African languages were seen as vulgar and incapable of carrying serious literature, science and philosophy still informs education policies today. Only this time around it is with the blessing of societies that have themselves internalized African language inferiority. Chimamanda Adichie in an interview explained this very well in a 2008 interview when asked what were her views on writing in African languages:

I'm not sure my writing in English is a choice. If a Nigerian Igbo like myself is educated exclusively in English, discouraged from speaking Igbo in a school in which Igbo was just one more subject of study (and one that was considered 'uncool' by students and did not receive much support from the administration), then perhaps writing in English is not a choice, because the idea of choice assumes other equal alternatives.

Although I took Igbo until the end of secondary school and did quite well, it was not at all the norm. Most of all, it was not enough. I write Igbo fairly well but a lot of my intellectual thinking cannot be expressed sufficiently in Igbo. Of course this would be different if I had been educated in both English and Igbo. Or if my learning of Igbo had an approach that was more wholistic. (Azodo)

Colonial education had divorced African languages from any intellectual work. For Adichie, English is reserved for serious issues and African languages for emotive issues. In an illustration of how knowledge can be transmitted unquestioned from generation to generation, she echoed the negritude mantra of "Emotion is African, as Reason is Hellenic."<sup>30</sup> In this instance, emotion is to be expressed in African languages, and reason in European languages.

It almost feels like the post-Makerere generation of African writers are simply

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<sup>30</sup>. Hountondji, Paulin J. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983, 18.

victims of a historical drama not of their making. Adichie raised one more point: If you have a whole generation brought up with English as the language of intellect can they read novels in African languages?<sup>31</sup>The question of audience deserves some attention. As I argue later, if the literature existed in Igbo, the Igbo people could find innovative ways to access it. For example, when Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* was published in Gikuyu, the literate would read to the illiterate.<sup>32</sup> And if the peasants who go to church are literate enough to read the translated Bible in their languages, they are literate enough to read a novel.

To be fair though, Adichie did call for African children to be taught African languages by their parents before adding that underlying the choice of English over Igbo, there “are deeper questions of self-esteem and fundamental pride in who we are” (3). But for her English is the language she best expresses herself in. Achebe ended his 1967 essay on English and the African writer by claiming that he had “no choice” and that he had been given the language and he intended to use it. Thinking through the language question forty years later, Adichie went farther than Achebe to say that English had been domesticated enough to be her language, as a Nigerian living in Nigeria. Unprompted by the interviewer she then added:

I'd like to say something about English as well, which is simply that English is mine. Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency,

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<sup>31</sup>. In the interview Adichie said:

The interesting thing, of course, is that if I did write in Igbo (which I sometimes think of doing, but only for impractical, emotional reasons), many Igbo people would not be able to read it. Many educated Igbo people I know can barely read Igbo and they mostly write it atrociously.

I think that what is more important in this discourse is not whether African writers should or should not write in English but how African writers, and Africans in general, are educated in Africa. (Azodo)

<sup>32</sup>. See section on Ngugi in James Currey's *Africa Writes Back*.

as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English. (Azodo)

The Makerere generation was taught Standard English and the aesthetics standards were British. For the post-Makerere generation, while the education system is in Standard English the aesthetics standards are not British – they have access to literatures from all over the world. And they have a literary tradition that they can trace to Achebe but one that in reality goes back to the Pre-Makerere South African generation. But for both generations, Standard English is the medium of expression and it is distinct, or can be made distinct from British English.

In her introduction to *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration Material Culture and Language* Brenda Cooper captured some of the difficulties of using an English language formerly deployed as cultural colonial tool. For her English is “steeped in imperialist and patriarchal tropes and symbols” and therefore the younger generation of writers “are challenged to find an English into which to translate their more than one culture, language and knowledge base without being sucked into some of those older tropes and imperial metaphors” (1). But its not just language and the historical baggage it carries that African writers writing in English have to contend with; there is the question of the disjuncture between the language of the literature, and literary tradition. For Cooper when V.S. Naipaul said that the “the English language was mine; the tradition was not” what tradition meant here was “the deep meanings of metaphors and associations that the dominant culture shares with the insiders” (4). Can English given the short time it has been in Africa be said to be so well entrenched as to carry deeper meanings of metaphors and associations found in Igbo or Yoruba culture? After all,



Yoruba culture and Yoruba language have been in tandem for hundreds of years.

In contrast to Adichie who sees English as her only choice but allows for the importance, if not the equality, of African languages, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, the author of the novel *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*<sup>33</sup> in a 2010 New York Times essay actively argued against African literature written in African languages. In an op-ed titled “In Africa, the Laureate’s Curse” that was ostensibly calling for new writing away from the Makerere canon, she argued that because Ngugi wrote in an African language, he should not be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. She wrote:

I shudder to imagine how many African writers would be inspired by the prize to copy him. Instead of acclaimed Nigerian writers, we would have acclaimed Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa writers. We suffer enough from tribal differences already. This is not the kind of variety we need. (NYT, 11/10/10, 9)

For her writing in one’s language exacerbates ethnic differences. Not even Achebe who saw African literature in African languages as contributing to lesser ethnic literatures and writing in English as contributing to the higher cause of national writing went as far as blaming African languages for civil strife.

But underlying all this is the question raised by Obi Wali in response to the Makerere conference: Can African literary tradition be built on the backbone of the English language and novel? But working within the English metaphysical empire has become so much the norm that the post-Makerere generation cannot see the extent to which it distorts and contradicts their worldview. Helon Habila in a blog post, “Tradition and the African Writer” about judging the 2014 Caine Prize was equally dismissive of African writing in African languages:

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<sup>33</sup>. Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia. "In Africa, the Laureate's Curse." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 11 Dec. 2010. Web. 11 July 2014.

Looking at this diversity and profusion of style and theme it feels strange to remember that there was a time, and not too long ago, when some theorists tried to limit what can or cannot be called African literature; some said a work can never be African literature unless it is in an African language – and actually, people like Ngugi wa Thiong’o still believe so. I wonder what people like Obi Wali, the arch-proponent of ‘African literature in African languages only’ would say now if they were to hear that there are writers who write their novels in languages like Flemish and Italian and who unapologetically refer to themselves as African writers. Clearly there is more to it than language and style – it is most importantly about tradition. (Habila)

It would not be farfetched to argue that the metaphysical empire has swallowed up the younger generation of African writers to an extent that they themselves cannot see the fallacy of defending African writing in Flemish or Italian while dismissing writing in African languages. Using Eliot’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and his idea of tradition as both historical and temporal, Habila wrote:

I don’t aspire to write like Achebe, or Ngugi or Bessie Head, but understanding them and the history and aesthetics that shaped their work improves and also shapes my work. This is not mere copying or imitation, it is not indulging in what Eliot calls mere “archeological reconstruction”, it is having a sense of tradition. The beauty of it, as Eliot again points out, is that a contemporaneous work always alters the meaning and the perception of works that came before it, for in a canon no work is greater, none is better, they just make use of different materials.

What the Makerere generation did in burying the pre-Makerere consensus of writing and publishing in African languages narrowed the debate for the post-Makerere generation. As a result, the post- Makerere generation cannot see the questions begging to be asked: Can the idea of literary tradition be divorced from language? Can a literary tradition be built using the language from another literary tradition? And in African countries where culture is still being produced in African languages, where newspapers, radio stations, and popular music are produced in African languages, what is the relevance of African writing in English to the majority populations that do not speak English? What are the costs of boldly claiming, ‘English is mine’? In other words, regardless of where one

stands on the language question, these are questions worth examining.

### **An Image of Africa in the West Yesterday and Today**

A scholarly work on the rise of the African novel cannot be complete without an examination of how African writers responded to Western racism and paternalism across the Makerere and Post-Makerere generations. And how the obsession with the European gaze has in fact contributed to a singular and oppositional African literary canon.

Looking at *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe argued that the novel “projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.” (3) My argument is that he was at war with the Africa imagined by the colonial ideologies that are traceable to enlightenment thinking about the state of nature.<sup>34</sup>

The central issue for Achebe was not whether or not *Heart of Darkness* was great art that deserved to be part of the British canon, but rather its portrayal of Africans as essentially being still in a noble and savage state of nature. And because of that, it could not be great art. For him, on moral grounds and as a matter of conscience one:

...would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall, such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients...poetry surely can only be on the side of

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<sup>34</sup>. Clement Abiaziem Okafor in his essay “Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe: Two Antipodal Portraits of Africa” did a “a point-by-point comparison of the African image” (17) in the *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*. (17). For Okafor, Achebe in the novel is essentially undoing Conrad’s image of Africa by portraying an Ibo culture “in which there are clearly defined parameters of right conduct on both personal and communal levels” (22); a society that is not predatory in nature and therefore that can “shield the weak from the strong by re- straining the mighty” (23) and where Conrad’s’ Africans grunted and screamed, Achebe privileged oratory skills (25) and so on.

man's deliverance and not his enslavement, for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and not for the doctrines of Hitler's master races or Conrad's rudimentary souls." (9)

Thus for Achebe aesthetics mattered less than moral content and what eventually counted was the extent to which a novel was in the service of humanity.<sup>35</sup> Achebe in the lecture did acknowledge that "Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book" and that it was "the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination" and he had merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it" (13).

As did Clement Abiaziem Okafor who did "a point-by-point comparison of the African image" (17) of both books. Okafor saw *Heart of Darkness* as Conrad's "effort to portray the pernicious effects of colonialism not only on the subjugated people but ironically on the colonial agents as well" but he was "a veritable offspring of nineteenth-century European prejudices about Africa" (15). But they did not follow the enlightenment thread, through the image of Africa, back to England. Once Achebe dismissed Conrad as a racist he also closed the door to the Enlightenment, a project that was liberatory in nature but carried with it the contradiction of not extending full humanity to Africans. And understanding this contradiction is important in understanding the ideological beginnings of the metaphysical empire.

It was the enlightenment thinkers who asserted the centrality of human reason – think of Descartes exclaiming – I think therefore I am – but did not extend it to the African. Immanuel Kant in his essay, "What is Enlightenment?" argued that:

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<sup>35</sup>. Achebe goes on to argue that "All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy, or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people" (9).

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. *Dare to know!* (*Sapere aude.*) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

Where before the world existed as willed by God, human beings were now seen as being in charge of their destinies. And things that before had been god-ordained now had a rational basis. Inequality was not god-ordained – it was a result of how human beings had organized their societies. But reason, science and freedom were reserved for white Europeans. Kant, in *On the Different Races of Man* was to argue that blacks were naturally inferior:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of the African as irrational, primordial, ahistorical, violent and at war, living in a state of nature, or alternatively, as child-like, emotional, friendly, a junior to whiteness harkens back to the enlightenment.

This is not to say that there was no debate within the enlightenment philosophers. Arguing against Hume's contention that other races are inferior to whites, and that

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<sup>36</sup>. More from Kant: So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour. The religion of fetishes so widespread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird's feather, a cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.

civilizing Africans would make them parrots (Eze, 33) Beattie made the counter claims that, civilizations come and go, that which enslaved yesterday can be enslaved today. Using a linear progression he argued that Europe was savage 2,000 years ago just like America and Africa today and civilization takes time [Eze, 35]. For him, those called savage did have intricate art and governance but happened to lack science because they could not write. But nevertheless, he argued, they had great orality skills. And Beattie understood that inferiority arguments in the end justified slavery and called for the British generosity that in turn “animated with the heroic passion, the love of liberty” to be extended to all (Eze, 37). And in Romantic England, writers such as Coleridge and Wordsworth were opposed to slavery. Wordsworth for example wrote a poem<sup>37</sup> in celebration of Toussaint L’Overture who was betrayed by Napoleon and starved to death in the dungeons St Helena where, ironically, Napoleon was to find himself just a few years later.

Loius Sala-Molins in the *Dark Side of the Light - Slavery and the French Enlightenment* captured the central contradictions of the enlightenment, freedom and chains by asking: Or even more succinctly<sup>38</sup>, “How can the Enlightenment be interpreted? Only with the Code Noir in hand” (9). But even then the French society was not a monolithic body singularly concerned with only French liberation as per the Enlightenment ideals –

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<sup>37</sup>. TO TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE 1803, Morning Post, London, February 2, 1803.

<sup>38</sup>. Or more fully, Loius Sala-Molins writes:  
The enlightenment composes the music, fills it with the most beautiful harmonies of a grand symphony to the glory of Reason, Man, the Sovereignty of the individual, and universal philanthropy. This score is being beautifully performed until suddenly a black erupts in the middle of the concert. What at that point becomes of Man, the Sovereignty, Reason and Philanthropy? They disappear into thin air. And the beautiful music pierces your eardrums with the gratings of the sarcasm. (8)

it was a society itself working through the contradiction of liberation for some and enslavement for others. Tom Reiss in *The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo Book* captured the contradiction of revolutionary France – where a black man could become a General and command respect within French society, marry a French woman without as much as opposition from the society. After much debate, revolutionary France was to abolish slavery. But Reiss noted as soon as Napoleon decided that colonies such as Haiti were too valuable, he went about abolishing rights for black people in France, attempted to reinstate slavery in Haiti and racism returned. And then the contradiction leaned heavily against liberty for all and as Reiss records, Alexandra Dumas lived a free life whereas in the same France a few years later, his son the novelist would struggle to survive in racist France.<sup>39</sup>

My point is that if Marlowe's gaze had gone beyond the banks of the river, he would have seen an African village very much like Okwonkwo's Umofia, its inhabitants engaged in the business of living before being engulfed by colonialism. Like Umofia, there would be some contradictions especially in the treatment of women and in the struggle against colonialism, but overall it would be a dynamic culture, one on the move. And by the same token, Okwonkwo's gaze should have gone beyond the missionary church to find a British culture itself besieged by the contradictions of a vicious class system, one that would hold on to enlightenment ideas of the social contract while

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<sup>39</sup>. That in 2007 the then president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy could say, "The African peasant only knows the eternal renewal of time, rhythm by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this imaginary world where everything starts over and over again, there is no place for human adventure or for the idea of progress" goes to show that the post revolution views of black people and Africans still influences French policy. "Sarkozy's Africa Vision under Fire." *News24*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 July 2014.

justifying colonialism. To put it differently, *Heart of Darkness* can shed light on the psychology and economic incentives that drive the district commissioner in *Things Fall Apart* who on returning to England wants to write a treatise to be titled, “*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*”

Why shouldn't *Heart of Darkness* be a companion novel to *Things Fall Apart*? It allows the reader to look at the contradictions inherent in enlightenment and colonial ideologies. And African writers have been in conversation, more of than not a tense and corrective one, with European authors and aesthetics – but a conversation nevertheless - that has influenced and informed their writing. And they have entered this conversation through writing back to European authors. For example, Achebe while broadly responding to colonial European paternalistic understanding of Africans, specifically wrote *Things Fall Apart* in response to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, a novel in which the main character is a perpetually untroubled African clerk who helps his colonial British boss come to terms with his humanity. Or take John Coetzee's *Foe*, which rewrites Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* through Susan Barton, a woman who is a castaway around the same time as Crusoe, and wants her story told by Defoe. In many ways, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* writes back to Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*. African writers entered into this conversation precisely because they had in part been formed by the same history of colonizer and colonized. The reader of African literature then to understand the conversation has to also understand the various historical and sometimes disparate circumstances that forcefully made this conversation necessary.

Achebe ended his lecture on Conrad by telling the audience that he had hoped to end on a more optimistic and conciliatory. However he said, “as I thought more about



the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the willful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of your television and the cinema and newspapers, about books read in schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible” (13). In the end, for Achebe what mattered was not what Conrad the writer had through his narrator revealed about imperialism, or even the myopia of Marlowe who in spite of having general sympathies with the Africans still sees them as inferior, what matters is the damage *Heart of Darkness* has done to Africa’s image. Thus the consensus emerging from the Makerere generation, as it grappled with defining African literature was that such literature had no relevance to the African reader. One of the questions raised at the 1963 Dakar Conference was the criteria for choosing what to read along with the African literature. Mphahlele reported back that for a non-African novel to be read “side by side” with African literature:

...it was insisted that only such literature of the British Isles should be presented as is meaningful to the African. The African should be able to identify himself with character and setting and share the thought and feeling of a work. Much of Milton would have to go, for instance. On the other hand, an African can easily share the thought and feeling within which *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *The Wife of Usher's Hell*, *Sir Patrick Spens* and so on move. Shakespeare's plays should not be handled before sixth form. Again, the literature syllabus, it was felt, should include English writing from North America, India and Australia, translations of non-English works as well as the literature of the British Isles and Africa. (18).

Following this argument then *Heart of Darkness* could not be assigned in Literature class in an African university. African students would not be able identify with the novel being on the receiving side of Kurtz’s brutal civilizing mission, they will certainly not identify with the corrosive nature of imperialism on the soul of the colonizer. By positive identification with a novel becoming the basis for studying literature, an opportunity to

read colonial literature as a way into British contradictions was lost.

### **Reception of new African writing through an image of Africa**

The younger post-Makerere writers have inherited this anxiety over image and representation from the Makerere generation of African writers, they themselves afflicted while doing the work of dismantling the Africa of the colonial imagination. But there is a twist; the battle that Achebe carried to Conrad has now become fratricidal to the extent that it is African writers and critics accusing other African writers of offering the West a Conradian Africa. In a move that again mirrors Tutuola's reception by African critics, today we find criticism fueled by feelings of shame at the way Africa is portrayed in the West.

Commenting on NoViolet's Caine Prize winning "Hitting Budapest," Ikhide Ikeola in 2011 wrote that "many writers are skewing their written perspectives to fit what they imagine will sell to the West and the judges of the Caine Prize." And the evidence he offered was that the Caine Prize's five shortlisted stories were about "roaming band of urchins" "a child soldier, "an interracial marriage gone awry" and "drunken simpletons." He argued their crime is in writing stories weighed down by a "monotony of misery."

Reviewing NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* ("Hitting Budapest" was the first chapter of the novel) in 2013, Helon Habila used the term the Caine Prize Aesthetic to describe an otherwise very complex piece of fiction. By Caine Prize aesthetic he meant writing that fed what Achebe had called in his lecture, a desire or need in "Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest," (2). In the Guardian review, Habila lamented that

Bulawayo was writing as if meeting a list of demands set by an African poverty porn committee:

There is a palpable anxiety to cover every "African" topic; almost as if the writer had a checklist made from the morning's news on Africa. There's even a rather inexplicable chapter on how the Chinese are taking over Africa, and how, as one of the street kids puts it, the Chinese "are not even our friends".

There are ways in which African literature is expected to do the work of representing Africa – to play an ambassadorial role and counter the Conradian vision of Africa. Or as I have put it elsewhere, the job of the African writer and that of the tourism board in this type of criticism has been conflated. Caine Prize judges have not been immune to the criticism around how the winning stories are portraying Africa. Evaristo Bernardine said of the 2012 shortlist:

These stories have an originality and facility with language that made them stand out. We've chosen a bravely provocative homosexual story set in Malawi; a Nigerian soldier fighting in the Burma campaign of the Second World War; a hardboiled noir tale involving a disembodied leg; a drunk young Kenyan who outwits his irate employers; and the tension between Senegalese siblings over migration and family responsibility...What we don't have is the sort of familiar tragic stories – there is no war, no starvation, no children in really terrible situations. I don't want to disparage this sort of story, as these are things which happen on the continent and need to be written about. But I wanted to show there is a bigger picture.

And in a panel at the 2013 Africa Writes Festival in London, she narrated how she had actively fought against a story that was a favorite amongst the judges because it was telling the story of the stereotypical Africa.<sup>40</sup> This feeling of shame, of wanting to protect Africa's image in the West, of wanting to provide a sanitary Africa ignores existing and historical contradictions in order to make way for an Africa friendly literature. This over-

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<sup>40</sup>. <http://carmenmccain.com/2013/07/08/in-anticipation-of-tonights-announcement-by-the-caine-prize-for-african-writing/>

defensiveness can only allow writers and critics such as Bernardine and Selasi to look at Africa through the lens of either sanitary or dirty, rather than as a place of contradictions where skyscrapers coexist with slums, where wealth and poverty create each other. It allows for a literary criticism that elides over those contradictions, the hard material and identity issues facing Africans living at home or abroad - the kind of questions and contradictions raised by *We Need New Names*. If dismissing the *Heart of Darkness* as racist closes the door to British contradictions, dismissing *We Need New Names* as poverty porn, or catering to the Caine Prize aesthetic closes the door to the contradictions surrounding being rooted in Zimbabwe and the United States.

A novel like *We Need New Names* speaks to African parents who immigrate to the West and in wanting their children to assimilate they do not teach them African languages – yet they give them African names that mark them as African right from the beginning. Sometimes the African parents are not documented but the children are citizens. In the United States, some states are trying to force immigrants to go back to their countries by attrition – that is, to make their lives so miserable that they will have to go back – no driver’s license, no health insurance and no employment. So some families are moving to immigrant friendlier states, or the children who can operate legally are becoming the *de facto* parents – signing forms, or being the primary drivers when they reach the driving age.

At the same time *We Need New Names* is squarely rooted in Zimbabwe and the United States. Darling is an insider in the United States as much as she is an insider in Zimbabwe. In contrast to earlier novels like Tayeb Salih’s *Season of the Migration to the North* where the main character, Mustafa in London is going to go back to Sudan, and the

West becomes the theater for colonial and anti-colonial conflict, *We Need News Names* is squarely an African, and at the same time a Diaspora and American novel. In this sense also, it is not an immigrant novel. For one, it is not solely concerned with life in the West, the cultural clashes and alienations. The characters are as concerned about home, where they are coming from as they are with where they have planted new roots. They remain connected to both homes even as they follow the tropes of immigrant literature and recreate or reimagine the communities<sup>41</sup> that they left behind, that become places of nostalgia and dreams of a return that cannot happen.

Critics do not know exactly what to do with this kind of literature that is at once belonging to a contested African literature category and at the same time resisting the easy label of immigrant literature where characters deal with cultural assimilation and discontentment. The reception of *We Need New Names* has mirrored Tutuola's reception. Critics have applauded Bulawayo for capturing an authentic Africa in the Zimbabwe half and criticized her for the second half set in the United States because her characters express no gratitude to the host country for the many opportunities to improve their lot. On the sustained critical ungratefulness of Darling, Michiko Kakutani in her review titled "A Child of Two Lands" argued that the "one misstep in this otherwise stunning novel," is "speaking of the move to America, and the bitterness so many immigrants feel, as they are forced to take menial jobs or find their hopes frustrated" because:

...they try to project one point of view onto the experiences of a wide and varied group of immigrants, but also because they are not always true. For instance, the remarkably talented author of this book, the novel's jacket tells us, was "born and

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<sup>41</sup>. For Benedict Anderson, the nation is an "imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (7). I am arguing then that immigrant communities are reimagining and recreating what was already an imagined community, sovereign because in most instances you have geographical areas that are predominantly inhabited by that group (e.g. little Mogadishu in Minneapolis) but also limited because the national laws trump communal laws, etc.

raised in Zimbabwe,” and moved to the United States, where she earned an M.F.A. from Cornell and is now a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford — which sounds very much like a dream achieved.<sup>42</sup>

This strikes me as an unusual line of criticism – as if Bulawayo has falsified her biography in her fiction. Her title points to the instinct of wanting to read this new literature using an older lens of “a child caught between two worlds, one African and older, and one Western and newer.” And this was the general trend of the early reviews – applauding the first half set in Zimbabwe and castigating the second half set in the United States. What Kakutani reveals here is a profound discomfort with literature that defies the more comfortable trope of immigrant literature that in spite of the hardships of the immigration and assimilation still finds mitigating factors such as jobs, education and so on. Most of the reviews followed this line. Rayyan Al-Shawaf reviewing the novel for the Boston Globe wrote:

When, at the beginning of the novel’s second half, she moves to Michigan to live with her Aunt Fostalina — first in Detroit, and then in Kalamazoo — the stage is set for a host of observations concerning her new home. But they prove disappointingly run-of-the mill: the biting cold; the smorgasbord of food available for purchase at supermarkets; Americans’ ignorance of the diversity of Africa; the cultural coexistence between obesity and obsession with skinny women as a feminine ideal; commercialization of sex through pornography; and the new names immigrants give their children to “make them belong in America.”<sup>43</sup>

Jenny Shanks reviewing the novel for Dallas News observed that:

When Darling moves to America, she’s suddenly there, with no building of suspense or detailing of plans that the move is imminent. Characters appear and quickly disappear. Each of these chapters is intense, moving and vivid, but it’s best to enjoy them as stories, and not look for overall plot momentum. This isn’t Bulawayo’s fault, but that of the pesky, sales-seeking subtitle “A Novel” that marks many linked story collections.

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<sup>42</sup>. Kakutani, Michiko. "A Child of Two Lands." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 15 May 2013. Web. 01 July 2014.

<sup>43</sup>. Al-Shawaf, Rayyan. "Book Review: ‘We Need New Names’ by NoViolet Bulawayo - The Boston Globe." *BostonGlobe.com*. N.p., 5 June 2013. Web. 01 July 2014.

Not all the critics read the novel as a successful Zimbabwean novel and a failed American novel. Shay Howell in a New York Daily News review titled “In 'We Need New Names,' NoViolet Bulawayo sketches a heartbreaking portrait of Zimbabwe” wrote that:

Relocating to "Destroyedmichygen," Darling encounters racism, America's own brand of poverty, and an endless feeling of missing Zimbabwe. Darling bears witness to universal problems of poverty, hunger, and loss, and in her relocation, Bulawayo asserts that there are Darlings in need all over the world.<sup>44</sup>

But even then the tendency was to universalize Darling’s experiences as opposed to trying to tease out what was peculiarly an American experience from a Zimbabwean experience. And the reviews that saw equal opportunity criticism of the United States and Zimbabwe spent more time talking about the Zimbabwean half, reserving the discussion of the United States to one or two paragraphs. Even Shay Howell’s title of the review calls attention to Zimbabwe only. The point however is that what Darling experiences is not just universal – yes poverty is universal, but her being a poor black Ndebele Zimbabwean and a victim of Mugabe’s government policies who immigrates to a racially and class charged United States makes her experiences also particular and local.

Brenda Cooper in *A New Generation of African Writers* made the same mistake of universalizing and hence de-racializing African experiences of the West when she wrote that, “nothing so much distinguishes the post-colonial, black migrant from the European citizen. The migrant, as much as an aspiring member of the an underclass, is trapped in what Bourdieu dubs the dilemma of the ‘parvenus’, the uneasy, in-between people, who have to choose between conforming to, or ostentatiously rebelling against, the mores of

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<sup>44</sup>. Howell, Shay. "In 'We Need New Names,' NoViolet Bulawayo Sketches a Heartbreaking Portrait of Zimbabwe." *New York Daily News*. N.p., 17 Oct. 2013. Web. 1 July 2014.

the upper-class to which they aspire” (5). If we take the United States to be host country *We Need New Names* and *Americanah*, by looking at the relationship between Africans and African-Americans and race in general, challenge this universalizing of the migrant experience. Indeed in the *New York Times* essay, looking at the new African literature, these issues come up in a way they would never in relation to White and black American literature. Following the wider relationships between African and African-Americans and competition over resources and how whites perceive them, there is the question of whether African writers are being published at the expense of African American writers. Adichie responds to say that “In the U.S., to be a black person who is not African-American in certain circles is to be seen as quote-unquote, the good black...Or people will say, ‘You are African so you are not angry.’ Or, ‘You’re African so you don’t have all those issues.’”

How then are we to think of the new and emerging literature that is at once local and international?

### **African Literature Today: Afropolitan, Transnational or World Literature?**

A celebratory June 2014 *New York Times* essay, "New Wave of African Writers With an Internationalist Bent" by Felicia R. Lee declared that “Black literary writers with African roots (though some grew up elsewhere), mostly young cosmopolitans who write in English, are making a splash in the book world, especially in the United States.” But the essay schemed over historical, complex and changing questions on the identity of African literature. In the 1960s the question was about limiting inclusion as African writers and critics tried to define a literary tradition with Africa as the center.

But today, writers who identify as African, or as African and American for



example, are all over the world. These are writers like Teju Cole who were born in the United States, lived in Africa as children and teenagers then moved to the US. Or NoViolet Bulawayo who was born and lived in Zimbabwe before coming to the United States as a teenager. Or Okey Ndibe who migrated to the United States as an adult but has now lived most of his life in the United States. As Selasi asked in her Berlin lecture, “I speak no African language and hold no African passport. But the protagonists of my novel were born in Ghana and Nigeria respectively. Does this make *Ghana Must Go* an African novel, me an African novelist?” (10). What term is to be used to describe these new wave of black writers with African roots?

Selasi in an earlier essay “Bye-Bye Babar (Or What is an Afropolitan)”<sup>45</sup> coined the term Afropolitan to describe “the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you.” She defined Afropolitanism this way:

You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen... We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (Selasi, 2005)

In her Berlin lecture she distanced her identity (Afropolitan) or otherwise from her writing arguing that, while she has an identity it is not to be conflated with her writing.

That is, she might be an Afropolitan, but her writing is not Afropolitan. For her, “Afropolitan is a personal identity” and “fiction has no need for such things” (12). But it

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<sup>45</sup>. Selasi, Taiye. “Bye-Bye Babar (Or What is an Afropolitan).” *The LIP Magazine*. N.p., 3 Mar. 2005. Web. 01 July 2014.

was too late – the term at once seductive in that it captured the first generation European or American Africans in a way that had not been done before, grew a life of its own. Afropolitan magazines, fashion shows, art shows rose out of images of a shiny Africa rising.

The term spawned debates with some African Writers like Binyavanga declaring, “I am a Pan-Africanist not an Afropolitan” due to the way the term has been commoditized. In a blog essay, “Why I’m Not An Afropolitan” Emma Dabiri argued that she was at first attracted to the term because she was “looking for a language that expresses [her] position as an Irish/Nigerian woman who is deeply connected to her Nigerianness” and it “positioned [her] with others through a shared cultural and aesthetic leaning rather than a perceived racial classification.” But the term soon lost its luster as she found “it reeks of sponsorship and big business with all the attendant limitations.”

But it was Salah Hassan in his African Studies Association 2013 presidential address<sup>46</sup> that captured both the promise of the term Afropolitan and at the same time what the term gets to sweep under the rag of privileged cosmopolitanism. That is, there are different classes of Africans living in the West experiencing the West differently. For Hassan:

On the one hand, we witness a growing number of exhibitions and other events celebrating the talent of contemporary African artists, writers, musicians and other creative figures living in the West or moving in and out of it. On the other hand, the press and media continue to carry (and sometimes deliberately ignore) the tragic images of African youths, men and women, who have perished trekking through the deserts of North African countries in transit to Europe, and of thousands upon thousands of others who have drowned (sometimes deliberately left to face such tragic destiny) while journeying on makeshift boats across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Those who have made it alive have encountered a

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<sup>46</sup>. Hassan, Salah. "Rethinking Cosmopolitanism: Is 'Afropolitan' the Answer?" N.p., n.d. Web. 1 July 2014.

new fortress of draconian laws in a continent that has devoted its energies and legislation to its “security” — read “curbing immigration” — as felt on a daily basis by Africans living in Europe or the USA. (4)

In this sense, the term Afropolitan, while signaling there are Africans outside the categories of immigrant and citizen, glosses over gender, class and sexuality. It cannot be an adequate lens through which look at new African writing. For example, Adichie’s *Americanah* is dealing with Afropolitan type Africans both in Nigeria and the United States where dating, identity and studying and working with the comforts of the middle and upper classes is expected. The arguments between Africans and African-Americans in *Americanah* are fought within middle to upper class consensus. In contrast to *Americanah*, NoViolet Bulawayo’s characters in *We Need New Names* are not Afropolitan. Indeed they are unlike anything encountered before in African literature — the ungrateful toiling African immigrant who is in the West to stay. The African immigrant at the blunt end of the anti-immigrant laws that Salah references above but who stays without apology.

At the same time, *We Need New Names* is not transnational in that it explores Zimbabwe’s nationhood and citizenry as it does United States citizenry and nationhood. If we take transnational literature to mean work that “explores the intersecting effects of colonialism, decolonization, migration, economic and cultural globalization” (Jay, 91), at a first glance, *We Need New Names* seems to have found a category. That is until one asks, what then is not transnational literature? All novels, even the most local are transnational by nature — the local cuisine, the music, fashion, every facet of life once in interaction with the outside world carries tinges of transnationalism. The point is not necessarily to find the intersections, but rather the contradictions in each of the meeting

cultures meeting - what is interesting in *We Need New Names* is that the novel is looking at the contradictions within borders, and those that emerge when characters break out of one border only to be engulfed and defined by the borders of another. A transnational arc will reveal only the contradictions of the meeting, of Darling in America, or American culture in Zimbabwe but not the contradictions that are peculiar to Zimbabwe and the United States even though globalization allows them to intersect and be in conversation.

There has been one point of agreement regardless on where previous generations have stood on African literature and aesthetics debates – that is, African literature is world literature. For Selasi, it follows that if Africa is a complex and diverse continent, without ties that bind one country to another, and full of distinct cultures and languages within the different countries, the category, African Literature, is meaningless in that it hides more than it illuminates. And if there is no African literature, then there can be no African writers. To call her an African novelist “is first to invent some monolithic Africa, and also confine her “characters, their color—from overstepping its bounds and it means that there is “something important in common with all other African authors, who, together with [her] produce African literature” (4). Invoking Goethe’s call for world literature, she called for a classification of literature along content as opposed to the nationality of the writer.

In the Berlin lecture, she asked, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we classified literature not by country but by content so that one would find categories of the love story, the city novel, the novel of the nation-state, the war novel, the bildungsroman?” (13). In essence her essay is a call for the abolition of literary categories usually along

lines of identity and culture in world literature.<sup>47</sup>

In *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, Ngugi also invokes Goethe and calls for African literature to be read as both local and universal. For Goethe, Ngugi argues there was “no such thing as a patriotic art or science: both belong, like all good things, to the whole world” (44). One needs to approach world literature through a “globelectical imagination” in order to “crack open a word, gesture, encounter, any text—it enables a simultaneous engagement with the particularity of the Blakean grain of sand and the universality in the notion of the world” (Ngugi: 2014; 42). Where Selasi is calling for the abolition of the category African literature, he is arguing that African literature be freed to be in conversation with other literatures:

Reading globelectically is a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its content and themes to form a free conversation with other texts of one's time and place, the better to make it yield its maximum to the human. It is to allow it to speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present. It is to read the text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text. (60).

Put this way, African literature as a category becomes less important. An African novel then is freed to be read in relation from where it's coming from and in relation to other literatures of the world, and to be freed to be read locally, as speaking to a place where it is being read. This way world literature does not become a universe without local departures or even end points, where texts reveal universal lessons as if they are not formed by material histories and cultures at play. World literature becomes a meeting place for literatures from different cultures and parts of the world – without favor or

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<sup>47</sup>. She does not deny that writer's have an identity. She writes, “I consider myself West African, among other cultural identities, and a writer, among other creative ones. But I am not an African writer. At no point in my writing process—in the act of actually being a writer: seated at the laptop, wherever I may be—do I experience a nationality” (13).

hierarchy. To put it another way, as physicists point out - the center is everywhere, the center is nowhere.

Yet to see African literature as world literature<sup>48</sup> without doing the work of accounting for its past engagement with the world through European colonialism, to be sure a violent and oftentimes genocidal encounter driven by profit and fuelled by Enlightenment imagination of Africa, is to call for an African literature without a literary history. Part of the work then calls for understanding the contradictions that were propelling the standardization of English for example, because those contradictions were to later form a chiral or incongruent relationship with the contradictions around the growth of Standard English in Africa at the direct expense of African languages.

If the foundational question in the 1950s was how Africans Africanized the English novel, the question today ought to be how European debates and aesthetics influenced and informed the African literary debates. As argued earlier, we cannot look at the language question in African literature without looking at the debate in England over the growth and standardization of English.

In addition, it becomes necessary to look at the ways in which African literature was created by a number of actors: African writers and critics and Western publishers and critics. While there was tendency by the Western critic to anthropologize African literature, the Makerere African writers and readers also created an aesthetic that favored political and realist novels written in Standard English even when that English was

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<sup>48</sup>. Povey in his essay, "How do You Make a Course in African Literature?" argued that the "basic assumption, which ought not to be so surprising is that one can study African literature for the same reason one reads French, German or Bengali writing. One assumes that it explores human concerns that are, in the final analysis, universal. One reads African literature not because it is African but because it is good" (18). This raises the question, is there a difference between universal and world literature?

Africanized. And if the African novel was in part supported by the likes of Heinemann and a counter narrative to Tutuola and the disservice they saw his work doing, the African novel today is still charged with the duty of representing and presenting Africa in the West.

The Post-Makerere generations of African writers have inherited these questions around language and the identity of African literature. For a majority of them, the African novel as they know it has to be realist and in Standard English. Even when their characters wrestle with contradiction of speaking English only in Lagos or Nairobi, or attempt to Africanize and urbanize English, it is within the Makerere consensus of Standard English. But they are also producing a literature doing different things in terms of aesthetics, form and content that has to be seen within a contested African literary tradition. Kwei Quartey's detective fiction, or Nnedi's Okafor Science fiction, NoViolet's episodic multi-rooted fiction, Adichie's usage of blog writing to explore blackness and race in *Americanah*, Habila's multi-voiced fiction, Binyavanga's essayistic memoir, and many others are challenging the African literary canon.

### **Literatures of Africa or Commonwealth African Literature**

There is one last point to be made here that has to do with how African literature was going to be defined, and where and when the African diaspora started producing African-American literature that was not African. For example, the anthology, *Two Centuries of African English*, moved from the premise that the writings now called slave narratives were part of an African literary canon. The writing included spans widely in terms of time and space. It has letters written by Ignatius Sancho in 1769 while living in Richmond VA, a free slave but born on a slave ship, includes excerpts from Olaudah

Equiano's *Experience of Slavery* (1789) about his life in Nigeria before being captured and sold into slavery and polemical pieces by the likes of Mphahlele (1962) and Ali Mazrui (1969). Brown's criteria for inclusion was the degree to which one identified as African (3) while excluding persons of African descent who have become part of other cultures and societies, because they represent other traditions...(3). Brown's premise is fascinating in that it includes writings not usually associated with African writing thereby raising the question: Why is it that we don't read early slave narratives as part of African literature? Seeing the narratives as part of African literature does not make them any less foundational in African American literature, neither does it make African literature any less African.<sup>49</sup>

In fact it adds another dimension to early and ongoing conversations between Africans and African-Americans. It sets an excellent foundation for Africans to enter into African-American literature and vice versa. And it gives a solid basis with which to think about contemporary works by African writers that are rooted in Africa and the United States and whose plots deal with African and African-American relationships via whiteness such as Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*.

The argument can be extended to early Afro-Arab and Afro-Latino writing as well. Janheinz Jahn in *New-African Literature: A History of Black Writing* for example

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<sup>49</sup>. While Achebe was not making the argument that the book be read as African literature and used Equiano to show that Africans can master English, he observed that:

Equiano was an Ibo-(I believe from the village of Iseke in the Orlu division of Eastern Nigeria). He was sold as a slave at a very early age and transported to America. Later he bought his freedom and lived in England. In 1789 he published his life story, a beautifully written document which, among other things, set down for the Europe of his time something of the life and habit of his people in Africa, in an attempt to counteract the lies and slander invented by some Europeans to justify the slave trade. (29)



includes Antar, a foundational poet for Arabic literature, a son of a black female slave writing in the chivalric Bedouin tradition around 600 A.D in Saudi Arabia(26) and Juan Latino, born in Guinea in 1516 before being enslaved in Spain at the age of twelve (31).

If the former empire can through its creation of commonwealth literature and prizes claim literatures coming from former colonies, why can't African countries also claim the literature coming from former empires that directly impacted the trajectory of African aesthetics if only to understand that which in part forms it? And claim literatures by enslaved Africans for whom Africa remained a large part of their identity?

In short rather than arguing about the identity of African literature along content, race and geography, the category should be opened to allow not just for African diaspora or literatures coming from black Atlantic, but for a non-hierarchical African commonwealth literature or Literatures of Africa.

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