

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF LITERARY STUDY IN KENYA SINCE 1970

Peter S. O. Amuka

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies; Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. E-mail: peteramuka2009@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is a small slice of a history of the study of literature in the Kenyan academia since 1970 or thereabouts. The paper makes reference to some of the scholarly writers of the time including Andrew Gurr, Masizi Kunene, Owuor Anyumba, Chris Wanjala, Ngugi waThiong'o and reacts to Henry Indangasi's comments on postmodernism as a theory some critics use in literary interpretation and analysis.

Key Words: Literature, Comparative Literature, History, Criticism, Theory, Post-modernism

Introduction

Before passing on in September 2018, Professor Christopher Lukorito Wanjala had suggested to me that we organize a workshop in which those interested in “literature, literary criticism and theorizing” would converse freely for at most two days. There would have been a moderator or moderators to guide the exercise but there would be complete freedom of expression and thought. The conversations would be recorded on tape and thereafter transcribed. Limited editorial interventions would then produce a book on nearly all disciplines in the humanities. He said the publication would provide a forum for all shades of opinion and ideas on what literature and literary study should be in the world of human knowledge. Sadly death took him away before this grandiose dream could be realized.

If Wanjala had lived and I had delayed in organizing the get-together in Eldoret, he would have, as he did many times in the past, accused me of “chronic procrastination.” As if Busolo Wegesa and Tobias Otieno knew I was withholding and suppressing some precious suggestion by the departed Kenyan Literary icon, they suggested that we create a journal. They also suggested that I include some recent local literary debate in my contribution. Which is what I have done: for these exchanges take us back to the 1970s during which period, and up to his death, Chris Wanjala was easily the most active and best known Kenyan critic. He invariably published commentaries virtually every other week, authored books and edited collections of essays by himself and others. I remember *Standpoints on African Literature* as published in the early 1970s. It carried essays by critics from all over East Africa and was a reference literary text in the sub-continent. This is not the place to analyze the context and nature of

Wanjala's literary activities but suffice it to note that his massive intellectual canvass encompassed the humanities. Thus when he started the *Journal of Literature and Society (JOLISO)*, in 1975 or 1976, the first and last contributors included political scientists and historians among others. The journal was published only once but he was certainly a comparatist who died without calling himself one.

When Professor Oluoch Obura and myself decided to move to Moi University in 1987 to start the Department of Literature, the late OwourAnyumba and Chris Wanjala encouraged us to "try new things in literary study". They advised me to make use of the comparative literature I had studied at the University of California, Los Angeles. My answer was that even the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi was deep in the comparative studies without saying so. In this very publication, we have done the same. We don't say we are involved in a comparative exercise but the multifarious areas of intellectual indulgence betray us. All this bespeaks freedom of thought.

Every author in this journal reads literature, film, theatre and drama from as many perspectives as they deem necessary for their target audience. Whichever way they interrogate the text and issues, my take is that this collection is a kind of resurrection of Wanjala's defunct *JOLISO* or beginning of tributes caring Kenyan literati owe his legacy of scholarship without disciplinary boundaries.

I introduce my small contribution by referring to a recent encounter with a student. Sometime near the beginning of 2019, a discerning former student of Moi University casually observed that there was very little if any written history of literary study in Kenya¹. By this, I took it that he meant the study of literature in the Kenyan academy, namely schools and universities. He concurred and suggested that I look at the "rear view mirror of Kenyan literary studies" and say something about what I could see².

My convenient self-serving interpretation was that I should narrate the development of literary studies in the country but the student logically countered that that would be too big and unwieldy. He suggested that it should be an "abbreviated biography of such studies"³. I agreed to do the student's bidding but chose to focus on what I could remember from my own personal experiences as a student and teacher in the Kenyan literary academy. Later on I would visit the library and archives to complete what would be called a 'historical study'.

My brief response is by no means exhaustive and largely depends on scanty yellow notes, memories, recent exchanges in the mass media and general references.

There is much more than this in the other essays and reviews that follow. Some of the articles interrogate issues of identity at the personal, communal, ethnic and national levels. Perhaps the most germane and all-encompassing is the subject of the post-colonial state and the deferred dreams of the post-colonial subject. Germane because the troubled state of the post-colonial

intellect and psyche not only delves into the history that precedes it (the pretext) but also attempts to formulate and apply theories and methodologies for understanding and interpreting particularly literature in the present and knowledge in general.

The articles do not therefore have a fixed way of analyzing and drawing conclusions but are rather an introduction to a debate that is ongoing. Mine is thus a mere introduction and not a conclusion.

Kunene and Sterility

I start off by recounting a rather negative view of Kenyan literary studies by poet Masizi Kunene at a seminar in the early 1980s. He accused Kenyans of indulging in “sterile literary theorizing and criticism” (Kunene, 1981). I was then a postgraduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, and here was a self-righteous professor belittling my alma mater, the University of Nairobi. He proceeded to point out many names. Chris Wanjala was the most promising and creative critic but could not stomach left-leaning critical views which he condescendingly characterized as “youthful dogma”⁴. Although Ngugi waThiong’o was already out of the university after his detention and release, Kunene argued he was the most articulate and productive but partisan and tolerant in equal measure.

There were two “shrines” in literary studies, one to the left and another to the right and none tolerated the other⁵. Acolytes “worshipped” separately and at variance and could therefore not produce a viable vibrant critical environment because they spent all the time battering and bleeding one another instead of indulging in what he called “cross-fertilization and intellectual discoursing”⁶.

While Kunene’s claims of sterility remain questionable because each camp produced its own ideas, I think he failed to factor in the global political dynamics in which one was either leftist or rightist. When the Berlin Wall finally went down and the Soviet Union collapsed in to Russia and the smaller nation states, my immediate feeling and reflection was that Kunene had been talking about the Iron Curtain in Kenyan literary scholarship without saying so.

In other words, and for many years, the two camps unknowingly fought a cold war for Russians and Americans or the ideological East and West. With the departure of Ngugi and Micere Mugo from the theatre of action at the University of Nairobi, the complete Westward recession began in earnest. If Kunene were to rise from the grave, he would accuse Kenyans of tending towards literary sterility, cultural stagnation and re-colonization. If Owuor Anyumba were still alive he would most probably accuse Kenyans of denying themselves the creation and growth of an indigenous homegrown literary tradition.

In my paper, Anyumba stands out for Kunene because of views he expressed privately to him. Which views coalesce with what he, Anyumba, taught me: that each Kenyan cultural group has an oral literary tradition replete with terminologies in indigenous languages; that there

ought to be a deliberate research policy to collect and study all those literatures and terminologies and have what would be called Kenyan Literature. This would in turn create a corpus of traditions that would imbue the country with a literary and cultural identity and not an imitation of other nations' traditions. All this is contained in an essay Anyumba never published. I read the only copy he had. He then lent it to a colleague who, according to him, "feigned" its loss⁷. In brief, Anyumba's argument was that the diverse tens of Kenyan cultures and languages contained what should be called national literature⁸.

Thus in a way Kunene was using his rear view mirror to reflect on what not only Anyumba stood for on his own but had actually joined hands with Ngugi waThiong'o and Taban lo Liyong in the late 1960s to spearhead. They overhauled and revolutionized the English curriculum at the University of Nairobi and created the department of Literature with a very Afro-centric bias and plenty of spaces for Literatures from within Kenya and the whole world. Put differently, they globalized the study of the discipline, transcended its colonial British modernity, and by literally admitting that there were more literatures and texts than one and numerous ways of interpreting them, plunged Kenyan literary scholarship into post-modernity. I am a child of that revolution and imbibed many practical approaches to literary study from Okot p'Bitek, Ngugi waThiong'o, Oluoch Anyumba, Chris Wanjala, Bahadur Tejani, Margaret Marshment, Micere Mugo, Taban lo Liyong and others in the early to mid 1970s. I related very easily and cosily to literary goings-on in Kenya and beyond. The theories and methods were dubbed Marxist because they mainly questioned the inhumanity of capitalist imperialism and neocolonialism. That is why Ngugi's intellectual activities as head of department and prolific creative writer led to his detention without trial and eventual dismissal from the university.

The Cultic Cul-de-sac

Many other heads of department followed as the government of the day cracked the whip on academics and ruthlessly curtailed real or perceived anti-establishment intellectual and political activities. To the best of my recollection, the longest serving head of department was Professor Henry Indangasi, easily one of Kenya's most articulate scholars. He arrogated himself the onerous task of 'de-Nguginising' the department in many ways. His mission was to reverse the gains made from the early 1970s and return the study and teaching of Literature to the old British ways of F.R. Leavis' claims of the world's only Great Literary Tradition. On many occasions, I have heard and read Indangasi's remarks on how Ngugi had reduced the reading of literature to mere identification and glorification of peasants in literary texts (Indangasi, 2017). It is very difficult for anybody to believe that Ngugi can be that simplistic and still end up at the University of California, Irvine with an endowed Chair! As his undergraduate and postgraduate student up to the Master of Arts degree, I can testify that the claim is far from the truth.

Yet another accusation by Professor Indangasi is that Ngugi was behind the kind of literature education that ignored good English expression and writing rules and only dealt with content. This inability to write well trickled down to high schools and below. The 'Indangasian mantra' is that students should be taught the writing of grammatically correct compositions or essays within a constricted ideological space in which the free flow of theories and ideas is literally banned. There is thus a spirited attempt to counter what Anyumba et al started off in the early seventies. This in fact is the intolerance Kunene mentions or what I call counter-revolution that has not achieved much to write home about because Kenyans continue to domesticate and create their own English. The leading and guiding light in the department is so stuck in his Leavisian and stylistic ways that he is willing to get burnt, for example, in order to avoid embracing the theories and methods of postmodernism: "Even if Prof. Amuka and Dr. Siundu were to threaten me with the worst form of torture - like walking barefoot on burning coal - I would still not subscribe to this intellectual fraud that goes by the name Postmodernism"¹¹. Of course oppositionality typifies literary study and theorizing and that is why we have so many theories coming up over the years and always contradicting what precedes them. That is why New Criticism, for example, is full of contradictions and new ways of appreciating literature that arise between Matthew Arnold on the one hand and T.S. Eliot and group on the other. Of course literary theory and criticism are the richer for this without the name-calling that has typified the post-Ngugian era. I have heard and read many remarks to the effect that conflict and differences are the stuff that literary criticism and theory is made of and that without "lit-crit" wars there would be no literary study. This calls for methodological and ideological tolerance and a sense of history devoid of territorial strictures that Chris Wanjala schooled me against.

Calling postmodernism a fraud is as historical as Indangasi's views are. When Professor Andrew Gurr was doing his last year as the chairman of Literature department before handing over to Ngugi, he remarked in my first undergraduate lecture that there are no such things as universal literatures and cultures. The professor was very postmodernist long before the likes of Lyotard, Baudrillard, Guattari and Deleuze hatched and packaged what was to bear that name.

Prof Indangasi's claim that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not comparable to what he calls a "cheap" play at the Kenya National Theatre or the Kenya National Drama Festival can only be described as premodern because modernity is democratic and all-inclusive and does not allow one cultural item to be superior to the other. Postmodernity is the spirited attempt to actualize that (modernity) by being artistic in drama, film, fiction, poetry, fashion, architecture, music, and other forms of cultural expression without a care that the British have their own *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's sonnets and D.H. Lawrence's novels. Nothing – no art form – is cheaper or greater than the other in the post that modernity gives birth to and calls postmodernity. And this can be said for the various genres and texts tackled by the various essays in this journal.

A good Kenyan student of oral literature can, for example, elevate Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the artistic world of the riddle and investigate the oracy of "to be or not to be". That also means numerous other versions of the play can be replicated all over the world. A postmodernistic reading therefore transforms Hamlet into a world and not British text. Postmodernity stands for a multiplicity of art forms, cultures and therefore multiple identities and values because this is humanistic and overarching.

Typical postmodernist thinking does not operate on one fixed theory and method of study. There is no single centre from which theoretical and practical knowledge emanates. The world has as many knowledges as the uncountable cultures it carries. Everything is open-ended and depends on what a particular research project requires as implied by its topic and other components.

I am aware that the Aristotelian position that a story requires a beginning, a middle and an end has long been joined by other possibilities like flashbacks, time-shifts and the postmodernist murder of one monolithic centre. I therefore join many others in positing that theory is basically speculative and helps a researcher reflect on a possible topic, method, research problems and others. There is certainly no single direction for conducting research just as there are no eternal unbending standards for judging and classifying texts. Essays contained in this journal attest to this.

I need not delve into the details of how texts may be evaluated but it is certainly not true that postmodernists "don't believe there are standards by which literary works are judged"(Indangasi, 2017). Every line of textual assessment taken by a postmodernist entails the heavy scientific task of reasoning and arguing and is not simply a belief that a priest or monk explicates in church.

The judgement of any text is based on pure logic and not fundamentalist religious articles of faith. Belief comes with a finality that intrinsically leads to going on one's knees and worshipping unthinkingly rather than by intellectual discoursing. Associating postmodernism with belief as Professor Indangasi does is equal to reducing it to a cult that it is not. Nor is any other theoretical construct as binding as religious beliefs or cults are.

Conclusion

My take is that the departure of Ngugi waThiong'o deprived Kenya of a literary colossus and an icon that could not be and has never been replaced. Matters got worse when Micere Mugo also went into exile. Chris Wanjala sadly passed on in 2018 to join Anyumba. But there are other Kenyans in and outside the country to help counter the "intellectual cultism" threatening free and creative thinking.

End Notes

1. Communication with Julius Sigei of Nation Media Group, Nairobi, February 2019
2. Julius Sigei, 2019.
3. Julius Sigei.
Masizi Kunene: A graduate seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles, 1982. Among other things, he accused me of negative criticism from the University of Nairobi. He called me a vulgar narrow minded Marxist thinker. For him, Karl Marx was a sociologist, historian and political scientist rolled in one and therefore a proponent of a holistic understanding, interpretation and production of knowledge. As far as he was concerned, there were no “leftovers” of Ngugi and therefore little chance of literary production by any individual except Chris Wanjala.
4. Chris Wanjala often accused leftists at the University of Nairobi of “youthful dogma” in the 1970s. He argued that they embraced Marxism unthinkingly and uncreatively and regurgitated Karl Marx’s argument word for word as if he had bequeathed them commandments to follow.
5. Masizi Kunene, 1982.
6. Kunene, 1982.
7. I read the essay in Anyumba’s office at the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi in the late 1980s. He could not let me read it outside his office: one or two individuals at the university had “embarrassed” him by proceeding to publish “far from complete” essays in his name and he therefore didn’t want to take risks with me. Interestingly he later told me had lent the essay to a colleague to read and return the same day but somehow the borrower “feigned” its loss. I can thus only recall the gist of the argument because I had not photocopied and the author had lost the only copy. Yet this was the one writing in which Anyumba’s lucidly expressed thoughts agreed so well with Ngugi’s on what constituted authentic Kenyan Literature.
8. OwuorAnyumba.
9. This is but one of Indangasi’s arguments for belittling and suffocating Ngugi’s immortal legacy. Masizi Kunene argued that unless a fly is loaded with very special and lethal substances, it cannot kill an elephant. The literati is yet to produce literary substance to neutralize Ngugi.

Work Cited

Indangasi, H. (December 2, 2017). 'On Postmodernism and Postcolonialism: A Detailed Response to Amuka and Siundu'. *Saturday Nation*.

Indangasi, H. (1981). 'A Persecuted Poet from the Far East: A Literary Supplement.' *JOLISO* 1(2), 1-10.

Kunene, M. (1982). 'The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain.' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15(1), [https:// www.jstor.org/ stable/i210971](https://www.jstor.org/stable/i210971).