

ISSUES IN AFRICAN LITERARY RESEARCH: AN EXAMINATION OF KEY CHALLENGES

GEORGE IJEZIE-ASOEGWU

Department of English, Faculty of Arts
Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus.

Abstract

African literature refers to the literature of and for the African people, but can also be written by non-Africans who have deep interest in African literature. African literature is different from American, European, Asian or any other literature in terms of its experiences and values. African literature helps to promote cultural heritage of the continent and helps to foster cross-cultural understanding among multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nations in Africa and beyond. It is used to provide historical context of the continent as well as the impact of colonization, slave trade and apartheid regime. African literature is used to tackle social issues in the African society, such as poverty, inequality, corruption and human rights. It is used to address certain happenings in the society, spark up important conversations and reflections. African literature is gaining attention of many scholars both Africans and non-Africans. However, African literary research presents a major challenge for researchers across the continent. Some of these challenges include language and cultural issues. Some scholars believe that African literature must be written in African language otherwise it is no longer African literature. Others have a contrary view. Also, a large portion of African literature are oral literature which require specialized research methods to capture and interpret performances and narratives. Besides, the linguistic diversity of the continent makes it difficult to translate a particular work into all the different languages in the continent thereby creating a gap. Other challenges include: lack of adequate archives and libraries for African literary works, lack of funding for African literary research, lack of institutional support, amongst others. This paper tends to address all of these key challenges in African literary research and proffer solutions to these challenges.

Key words: African literature, African languages, Cultures and Historical context.

Introduction

African literature refers to the literature of and for the African people. African literature is different from European literature in terms of its experience and values. As Chinweizu et al (1980), noted:

African Literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures. It has its own traditions, models and norms. Its constituency is separate and radically different from that of the European or other literatures. And its historical and cultural imperatives impose upon it concerns and constraints quite different, sometimes altogether, antithetical to the European (p.4).

For a work to be considered as African Literature, such a work must be done for African audiences, by Africans and in African Languages. According to Chinweizu et al, these “constitute the historically indisputable core of African Literature” (p.12). Looking at these considerations we see the challenge in defining African Literature. The African society is a multi-linguistic/cultural society. The African writer is faced with the challenge of communicating to diverse ethnic nationality in Africa and beyond. This constitutes a limiting factor, to the meeting of African writer’s desire to write in his native language, it means. In view of this, do we consider the works of African authors like Amos Tutola, Ayi Kwei Armah, Efua Sutherland, Flora Nwapa, Wole Soyinka, Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, or Ifeanyi Menkiti, for example, who write in English for Africans as non-African Literature?

African nations are predominantly a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nations. European languages like English, French and Portuguese are usually used as operational language across the ethnic barriers. These languages are used to facilitate communications in social, political, economic, commercial and religious circles. In the Anglophone third world countries where the English language was foisted on the people which had to accept it because of its prestigious status and functions.

Besides, the English language as well as the French and the Portuguese languages are contact languages. Africans are mostly colonized by the Europeans. For example, in Nigeria, the contact of English language with the native languages results in the transfer of features from the indigenous languages to the English language and vice versa. Some words from the native language are borrowed into the English language thereby giving way to a new variety of English. This is one of the possible implications of languages in contact.

Some of these features of languages in contact with reference to the use of English by Nigerians is referred to as 'Nigerianism' (Bokamba, 1983). According to Aremu (2015), Nigerianisms in English includes: translation/transliteration, coinages, code-switching, code-mixing, semantic shift, proverbs, idiomatic expressions, first language interference, acronyms, etc. He further posits that Nigerianism is evident in written Nigerian literature as in the works of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus* and a host of others.

This language issues in African literature form the major bulk of our discussion in this paper. Other challenges in defining African literature include:

- The Issue of Foreigners Writing about Africa for Africans (Eurocentric bias)
- Lack of literary archives for the preservation of African works.
- African's lack of interest in African works.
- Funding constraints
- Little or no institutional support
- Political and Social conflicts

The Language Question in African Literature

One of the critical issues raised by critics on African literature is the language question. Most of African written literature is in European languages owing to European colonization of the continent from the 16th century to the mid-20th century. During that period, European languages supplanted African languages in government, education and to a great extent in daily communication. By far, the most widely used European language in African literature is English, followed by French and Portuguese, respectively. Works written in African languages and traditional oral texts went virtually unacknowledged until late 20th century, but today they are receiving increased recognition. Many scholars prefer to speak of African literatures, rather than African literature, to emphasize the many different literary traditions the term encompasses. The linguistic heterogeneity of African society constitutes a limiting factor to the actualization of African writer's desire to write in his native language. In the words of Adesanmi (2002):

...The problem that the interested parties sought to resolve border, not so much on the relationship between language and the geographical location of the writer but whether literary texts produced by African

writers in the imperialist languages of Europe English, French and Portuguese were indeed “authentic” African texts (p.160).

There has been much debate on the language issue. Writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong’o are clamouring for a return to the indigenous African languages in our Literatures. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o seems to be persuaded that the African writer working in English, French or Portuguese is nothing but a betrayer of the African cause: a renegade (Adesanmi, 2002). Critics like Wali, Obiechina and Nkosi believe that African literature should only be produced in African languages. Wali is of the view that African literature cannot be authentic unless it is written in African languages (Akwanya, 2004). Nkosi maintains that writing in the colonialist’s language can only promote colonial values rather than undermine them. His task to African writers are two-fold: to rebuild the African past and overturn the values of the colonizer. He states thus: “If in trying to rehabilitate their smashed-up cultures African writers are forced to write in a foreign language, their task must obviously remain incomplete... the best of African literature reflects a formal colonial dependency.” (quoted in Akwanya, 2004, p.13-14).

Nkosi and his group see language as a tool for the production of literature but some African intellectuals disagree with this assertion. They believe that a language is the material which becomes transformed into literature. This is the view of Leopold Senghor. In an interview with Egejuru (cited in Akwanya, 2002), he states as follows:

I am obliged to modify the French language in such a way that it meets the demands of Negro African aesthetics. I am led to make African music with French Language which is musical but not very expressive. For instance, the French language is not tone marked, it is an abstract and vivid language (p.14).

In manipulating French language for his own purpose, Senghor’s French is no longer the colonial French. Writers like Achebe believes that in African literature, English can be reshaped as a first attempt towards the domestication of the English language. In the words of Taiwo (1967).

Chinua Achebe for example adopts English language to his own needs in an intelligent manner. In him, we recognize the beginnings of a successful experiment. While refusing to adopt slavishly recognized English usage, he uses the language to put

across ideas and concepts which were originally foreign to it (p.66).

It is not surprising to find that no colonial language remains the same in its colonial community after a hundred years. African writers like Achebe and Senghor are in full agreement on the inevitability of altering the received language. The language pattern is usually altered to reflect the local setting indigenous to the people. According to Achebe (1988):

Most African writers write out of an African experience and of commitment to an African destiny. For them, that destiny does not include a future European identity for which the present is but an apprenticeship. And let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it (p.50).

In assessing the above view on the language, Akwanya (2004) concludes as follows:

Language is the 'raw materials' named by Senghor and Achebe in literary production. In Nkosi, it is the 'tool'. But in either case, whether as raw material or as a tool, the source of the value associated with the product is the writer; he is the worker who adds value, whose labour gives the objects a new status (p.15).

The crux of the matter is that of producing a kind of literature that will be peculiarly African experience. It is on the basis of this view that most Nigerian writers (both colonial and post-colonial authors) like Achebe, Soyinka, Nwapa, Okara, Adichie, Ujebuonu, Asika and so on, creatively encode their experiences in English.

In Nigeria for instance, most of the literature is written in English. Nigerian writers have introduced certain linguistic elements in their use of English in an attempt to give their work a distinct African quality. This is profound in the works of Achebe, Okara, Soyinka and a host of others.

There is a relationship that exists between language and literature. The relationship is based on the fact that language is the expressive medium of literature and a systematic study of language is then a pre-requisite for proper appreciation of literature.

Literatures in African language have received little scholarly attention in the past because of a Western bias in favour of literature in European languages. Another barrier is that few scholars know an African language other than their own. The best-known literatures in African languages include those in Igbo,

Yoruba and Hausa in West Africa, Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu in Southern Africa, and Amharic, Somali and Swahili in East Africa.

Nigerian writers like Goddy Onyekonwu, Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa and Bello Kagara published their works earlier in Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa languages respectively. Their works did not receive attention and recognition like those written in English. Works like Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) published two decades after the vernacular works, came to be known by the international community. It received a wider attention and audience than the one written in vernacular because they were written in English Language.

Having looked at the argument (for and against) on the use of African language in writing African literature, the researcher is of the view that the use of African native languages alone in writing African literature cannot suffice because the audience will be limited. There is need to communicate the African culture in a language that will give it wider audience such a language can be domesticated or localized to meet the cultural perspective of the African people as we have it in Nigerian English.

The Issue of Foreigners Writing about Africa for Africans (Eurocentric Bias)

African literature seems to be shrouded in obscurity and controversy. One of which is the issue of foreigners writing about Africa for Africans. The question is how objective are the works of foreign authors on Africa? George Joseph (1996), noted that "... the European perception of literature generally refers to written letters, the African concept includes oral literature." He further stated that European views of literature often stressed a separation of art and content, African awareness is inclusive. In his words: "... Rather than write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society."

Most African critics accuse them (foreign authors) of concentrating their works on the negative aspects of the African continent. For example, George Cary's writing on *The African Witch*. Some African writers have often been criticized by foreign critics, American critic, Bernth Lindfors in an article entitled "Cyprian Ekwensi: An African Popular Novelist" concluded that Ekwensi's novels were failures, combining some of the "worst features of western popular literature with some of the least subtle techniques of African oral art." His last line was: "Ekwensi lacks artistic discretion, and for a popular novelist there is no more fatal flaw." (quoted in Gibbs, 2002, p.39).

In a swift reaction, an African critic of African literature, Ernest Emenyonu took issue with Lindfors' in "African Literature: What does it take to be its Critic?" He wrote that Lindfors' insight was restricted and his analysis limited. In sarcasm Emenyonu wrote:

Perhaps as soon as Ekwensi writes a novel about black magic, ritual, medicine men, and the thatched huts, banana leaves, palm trees, and rolling rivers, Mr Lindfors will cease to see his works as "un-African and unimaginative." I dare say he may have to wait too long. (quoted in Gibbs, p.54).

The European perspective of African literature cannot be free from being bias or lack of sufficient knowledge about African culture. A prevalent tendency to interpret African literature through a Western lens can lead to misinterpretations and overlook the nuances of local cultural contexts.

Lack of Literary Archives for the Preservation of African Works

Another issue that made African literary research appear difficult to define is the lack of literary archive for the preservation of African works. This may have been as a result of poverty and lack of technological advancement of the African continent. In the words of Ogunbiyi (quoted in Gibbs):

Many of our writers (Achebe, Soyinka, Armah of Ghana, Ngugi of Kenya) have reported again and that a majority of the Euro-American Adventurer-Critic-Friends of our literature are mere opportunist who exploits the fact that ours is a young literature still waiting to be most competently evaluated ... The Nigerian people ought to be alerted to the sordid fact that the pilferage of our art works which may have begun with the first Portuguese "explorers" through the plunder of the priceless works stolen from Benin during that British expedition in 1896 has continued to this day in far subtler ways. In 1978 we are still being offered glass-beads for our gold (p.98).

The above assertion explains why earlier African works are difficult to come-by in the continent. Commenting on Lindfors paper, "The Future of African Literary Studies" Gibbs writes that:

He (Lindfors) then asked a series of "aggressive" questions about the provision of literary archive and concluded by explaining that his "obsession" with the "preservation of literary documents" arose from his belief that "some literary truths are virtually

impossible to establish in the absence of trustworthy records” (p.42).

Indeed, we have a very limited access to materials in African literature. Many African archives and libraries lack comprehensive collections of literary works, particularly from marginalized communities, making it difficult to conduct thorough research. More so, a large portion of African literature emanated from oral tradition. As such, they are mostly transmitted orally, requiring specialized research methods to capture and interpret performances and narratives that might not be readily available in written form.

Africans’ Lack of Interest in African Works

Most Africans publish and sell their works abroad which make their materials difficult to get by Africans within the continent. Negative attitudes of scholars and researchers towards African literary research appear to make African literary research a difficult area of research. This lack of interest in African literary works will create problems for the upcoming ones. This is what played out when Emenyonu complained about his fellow Nigerian critics. In his words “yet Nigerian critics have nothing credible to say about Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi.” (quoted in Gibbs).

Lack of interest by Africans in African works do not promote African literature and by extension African literary research. Some of the reasons that can be adduced to this attitude is not different from some of the challenges mentioned earlier in this paper.

Funding Constraints

Limited funds is always a challenge in any project. African researchers often face limited funding opportunities to support their research projects, especially when dealing with the complexities of cross-cultural analysis and field studies. This often lead to discouragement and abandoning the research work.

Little or No Institutional Support

Most African institutions lack the necessary infrastructure and capacity to effectively support literary research such as standard modern library for African research, technology and training programmes for African literary researchers. Others include lack of support funds to institutions for African research, poor institutional policies that hinders African literary research capacities and insufficient research support funds with little impact on actual research capacity.

Political and Social Conflicts

African literature involves delving into sensitive political and social issues. These include colonialism, post-colonial struggles, bad governance and contemporary conflicts such as poverty, inequality, corruption and human rights abuse, etc. Analysing these issues could set the researcher up against various interests in government, which can pose a big challenge in research and publication.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, African literary research appears to be faced with mires of challenges. On the issue of languages, African languages alone cannot project African literature beyond its shores. There is the need for a language with wider audience participation. English language for example has been domesticated in Nigerian literature thereby giving the English language a local variety of the people. Some African writers have resorted to the use of transliteration as a stylistic device in order to make their works have an African uniqueness. This they do by manipulating the European languages to suit their African culture and values. Writers like Achebe, Adichie, Soyinka, Senghor, Okara and so on have gained recognition through this technique.

African Literature is getting concrete by the day. Modern African writers like Chimamanda Adichie, Odili Ujubonu, etc, who towed the line of Achebe, Nwapa and others in their writings are celebrities today. There has been an increasing interest in African critics and scholars today. However, this paper cannot be exhaustive without proffering solutions to address these challenges:

- ❖ **Collaboration with Local Communities:**
Engaging with local communities, including oral storytellers and language experts, can provide valuable insights into cultural contexts and literary traditions.
- ❖ **Interdisciplinary Approach:**
Combining literary analysis with fields like anthropology, history, and linguistics can offer a more comprehensive understanding of African literature.
- ❖ **Digital Archiving and Accessibility:**
Utilizing digital technologies to preserve and disseminate African literary works can improve access to materials for researchers.
- ❖ **Capacity Building Programmes:**

Developing programmes to train African researchers in specialized methods for analysing oral literature and navigating the challenges of African literary studies.

❖ Funding Initiatives:

Advocating for dedicated funding streams to support research on African literature, including projects that focus on understudied regions and languages.

❖ Promoting African-led Scholarship:

Encouraging and supporting African scholars to lead research on their own literary traditions to ensure authentic interpretations.

By actively addressing these challenges, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of African literature, promoting its value and global recognition.

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