

Pragma-criticism: An AfriEurocentric Reaction to the Bolekaja Agenda on the African Novel

by

Afolayan, S. Olusola

afolayanhod@yahoo.com

Department of English, University of Ado Ekiti

Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract

The trio of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike call themselves the *Bolekaja* critics in their unabashedly polemical book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, stating, "...we are Bolekaja critics, outraged touts for the passenger lorries of African literature". In this book, the Troika (as they are also called) claim that their mission is to rescue Africa's prose literature from the dominant Eurocentric criticism. Because of certain misconceptions traced to the ideology of the three writers, the book was summarily out-modeled. However, it is clear that in spite of its notoriety, the book could not be easily forgotten as it subjects the tendentious Eurocentricism to the mercy of the rampaging African centered position. This essay, though not extremely Afrocentric in position, stemmed from the need to curb the excessive and indiscriminate (mis)application of Western theories to the generality of African literature. This supposed "misappropriation" of literary theory accounts for why the African novel has become a victim of the Eurocentric theories that have often been mis-contextually applied. This has resulted in the problem of "misidentity" and "wrong" definition for the genre. For instance, while the Western novel is marked by certain structural changes at each stage of its transformation from Defoe to the post-Conrad period of its development, the African novel is conservatively un-absorbing to major structural changes. This is because the genre is not well defined by linguistics, but also by its context of content which is perhaps what explains the similarity between most African novels. It is basically in recognition of this that we have identified pragma-criticism, a conception which encapsulates context-sensitive prognostic critical tools for the criticism of the African novel. This is an attempt at the identification of social and the historical-political conditions that brand the aesthetics for the African novelist.

We must approach African literature with an insight into, and a feeling for, those aspects of African life which stand beyond the work itself, its extension into the African experience, and its foundation into the very substance of African existence....This approach, in its fullest and widest meaning, implies that our criticism should take into account everything that has gone into the work, and specifically for our literature; everything within our society which has informed the work....

- Abiola Irele

Introduction

Abiola Irele's pronouncement used epigrammatically as a scaffold for this essay is a reminiscence of the influence of the Afrocentric movement on the African literature. Afrocentric reasoning has led to various attempts to dislodge the literature from the canonical influences of the Western literary tradition and criticism. This has indubitably divided the critics of African literature into two broad camps. While some – Izevbaye (1969), Palmer (1981) and Oyegoke (2003) for instance – advance the argument that any conscious attempt to break African literature away from the theoretical postulates of Western criticisms will amount to a suicidal dismemberment from the unified body of literary activities, others like Ngara, Iyasere, Nnolim, Achebe *et cetera* strongly defend the need to discourage the pseudo-universalist's critical approximations of African literature by the damaging encrustations of the imperialists. These opposing dispositions have resulted into a palpable gulf between the critics of African literature to whom we refer (like the Bolekaja) as either “*Eurocentric*” or “*Afrocentric*” critics. The Eurocentric critics of African literature are those who exhibit Western literary attitude in their approach to the literature. Their critical practice places African literature in a literary realm where its aesthetics is evaluated with the postulates of the Western critical theories. The Afrocentric African critics are, however, those who advocate literary/critical autonomy for the African literature. These critics, most of whom are radical African intellectuals, often seek to rescue African literature from the dominance of Western literary theories.

The genesis of a critical African perspective in the criticism of the African literature dates back to the desire among the African elites to liberate the literature from the poly-dialectic criticisms of Western aesthetics. Afrocentric African critics, therefore, seem to recommend the ‘*Africanized*’ tools for African literature. This is, perhaps, as a result of the bid to puncture the inflated dominance of the Eurocentrically governed prejudices which have viewed African literature as an appendage of its Western counterpart.

Anadolu-Okur however tells us that Afrocentricity had developed as “a paradigm which recognizes the centrality of African ideals in African phenomenon since 1960’s in the Black American literary foundations” (1993:88). This no doubt takes the foundations beyond the Bolekaja critics who employed the term to “grind axes” with the like of Soyinka and Izevbaye. In a broader term, the African perspective “calls for a redefinition or elimination of certain terms that connote racism and prejudice” (Anadolu-Okur, 1993:98). There is no doubt that the Bolekaja critics themselves are mere apostles of the ideology. The Bolekaja’s radical dimension to an African centered perspective revolutionized the criticism of African literature and it has since become apparent that the ideological gulf between the African centered and Euro-centered has come to stay.

The aligning tendency with the African centered as may be exhibited here does not suggest a total repudiation of Western literary theories. Hence we do not intend to adopt the brutish techniques of absolutists like the ‘Troika’ (who rained “pettifogging abuses” on almost all the African apologists of the Western critical dogma) here. Even as we say that the trio of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike are quite useful in the Afrocentric renaissance, their radical suggestions on African novel as having its matrix in the pre-novelistic African verbal form will not be wholly acceptable. This is mainly because of their failure to provide ample codification for their suggestions. One major flaw of their ideology lies in, according to Nnolim, their failure to recommend the expected standard for the criticism of the African literature especially since their intention had been to abrogate any form of consanguineous relationship between the literature and the Western interpretative machinery.

Despite its flaws, Bolekajism inexorably started the crusade that labeled many of the critics of African literature as too theoretical and Eurocentric in their approaches to the literature. Though we agree that Chinweizu and his friends were right in their opinion that many critics of African literature “habitually view African literature through European eyes”, it is worthy to mention that their inability to devise and define the critical poetics of African literature obviously sent their argument to the archives (Chinweizu et al 1980:03). As their idea suffered a monumental set back, Nnolim could not help crying out that:

For the moment we urgently need our own version of Northrop Frye to pen for us the Anatomy of “African” criticism; we need our I.A Richards to write us Principles of ‘African’ criticism; we need our own T.C Pollock to write us the Nature of ‘African’ literature; we need our own Welleck and Warren to write us our own Theory of ‘African’ literature. (1986:30)

It is therefore hoped that this essay will answer Nnolim's prayer as it intends to articulate the basics of the criticism of African literature, with a view to recommending the critical tools suitable for the African novel.

The Afrocentric view in the criticism of African literature started to gain momentum when it seemed the literature could not achieve any literary independence. It also seemed that African works with influences from Western forms could not be totally insulated from the critical reflexes of Western criticism. This resulted into the violent call for a unique African aesthetic/critical poetics to cater for the need of African literature. Izevbaye throws more light on this:

The call for an African aesthetics was first made in the fifties as part of the larger political emancipation which was sweeping the continent at that time. The first international congress of Negro writers and artists which was held in Paris in 1956 had as its theme "The Crisis in Negro Culture" and was much concerned with criticism. At the congress literature was considered only as one of many disciplines which the participants put forward as part of African studies to be emphasized and improved in the fight for cultural freedom and rehabilitation of the black man on the world scene (1968:04).

Sequel to this, conferences and congresses of African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean writers and critics were staged to examine the positive, or negative, impacts of the drive for a unique black critical aesthetics. According to Fashina "the 1980's marked a decisive phase in the evolution of African literary theory" and coordinated efforts have been made "and are still being made to forge a distinct critical poetics of African works" (1993:51). Writers like Henry Loius Gates Jr, Ayi Kwei Armah, Chidi Amuta, Sunday Anozie and a host of others have advanced arguments in favour of Afrocentric criticism.

The Bolekaja Agenda and Eurocentric Logic

The elusive nature of the criticism of the African novel has led to an intellectual war among the critical intelligentsia. Hence, there has been a clear-cut distinction between those who believe that the idea of an African critical aesthetics is absurd especially since criticism should be criticism and modern aesthetics of literature is expected to be scientific and based on general principles accepted as crucial to all literatures of the world; and those who share the opinion that "there is the need to devise a criticism adequate to African literature" (James, *African Literature Today* 7, 147).

The Bolekaja critics did not take lightly the parochial assumption that “criticism is criticism” as this is evident in their proposition that:

...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 (p4).

Consequently, they observe that the seeming universality of the Western literary canon must not be allowed to extend beyond the manageable limit in the domain of the African literature.

It is worthy to mention here that the misconceived universality of the Western critical dogma lies in its claim to possess a scientific praxis to all literatures. This is perhaps the basis for the Eurocentric belief in the universal relevance of the Western critical theories. However, Larson, one of the foremost white critics of African literature, surprisingly, sees the situation differently. He says:

But the Western critic [or his Eurocentric African disciples] has not been completely fair in his evaluation of African writing if he has been content to limit his approach to linguistics alone... (1971:12)

Larson has therefore, identified that apart from the extreme science-centered focus of Western criticism, often grounded on the extended study of the language of literature, the Africans’ use of Western language – English, French and Portuguese – in their writings has always misled the Western literary theorist to erroneously believe in the centrality of his theoretical tools in the analysis of African literature. This, the Bolekaja agenda has questioned.

Achebe in his essay, “Colonialist Criticism”, castigates the colonial critic who he believes is arrogant, and according to Ngara, “Achebe advises the European critic of African literature to cultivate humility and get rid of his air of superiority and arrogance” (1982:04). Achebe assumes a position that “we are not opposed to criticism but we are getting a little weary of all special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is limited” (1975:79). Achebe’s idea of “special criticism” simply refers to the various theories from the Western traditions which have inundated the canon of African literature.

In “Where Angels Fear to Tread”, Achebe posits that “the question is not whether we should be criticized or not, but what kind of criticism?” (1975:07). And in the same essay, Achebe categorizes the critics of African literature into three: the hostile critics; the critics who are not comfortable that Africans can write in English (or French and Portuguese) too; and critics who say that African writers should be judged by Western standards.

To these three we have already added the Bolekaja critics who believe that the canon of the Western literary theories cannot adequately cater for the critical needs of the African literature. Achebe is therefore not comfortable with the claim by the European and American critics to know too much about Africa, “when in actual fact they do not understand the African world view and cannot [even] speak African languages” (Ngara 1982:04).

Furthermore, in maintaining the need and necessity to explore the possibility of devising critical poetics of African art, Gates (1986) accepts:

I once thought it our most important gesture to master the canon of [Western] criticism, to initiate and apply it. But, I believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literature (20).

This view was buttressed by Abiola Irele when he admitted that a Eurocentric attitude “doesn’t make you African; it displaces you” (“Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele”). This statement was made when Irele, in an interview with Na’Allah was attesting to the inescapable Eurocentric education made available to the generation of the fresh elites, adding:

... coming to our education, you’re right to say it was Eurocentric. In my case, it was decidedly so, because I grew up a Catholic... It was after all the only one available to us at that time.... Those of us who also received that colonial education; and I include people like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. We had to rediscover our African background ourselves. It is very important to bear in mind that we had to come back and relearn our own traditions – sometimes even to tell the truth, relearn our own language. (“Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele”)

The implication of this is that the beginning, for the African elite was unavoidably Eurocentric and we cannot deny the facts that the first generation of African writers were influenced by the Europeans. This influence, no doubt reflects in Achebe's inspiration to draw the title of his seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart* from W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming", and that of his second, *No Longer at Ease* from T.S Eliot's "Journey of The Magi". This is perhaps why the English critic logically considers these novels and others like them, as extensions of the English literary domain. Ngara explains further that even in Soyinka's poetry collections, *A shuttle in the Crypt*, there are at least four poems whose titles are derived from archetypal figures found in European literature and the Bible: Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver and Ulysses. Even some of the writers using indigenous African languages have been influenced by European literature (1987:07). However, Achebe and the other Afrocentric critics still hold on to their African roots.

Armah virulently reacted to Larson's opinion about African works and he, in "Larsony of Fictions as Criticism of Fiction", opposes those Western critical dogmas "which consist of the traditional distortion of African truth to fit Western prejudices" (*New Classic No 4* p 8) and he hurriedly brings the question which seeks to know the appropriateness of the Western critical theories in the analysis of African literature to mind. Armah believes that Western critics have taken many things for granted, which forces them to make wrong assumptions

For long, many African scholars of Western literature relied on the critical axioms supplied by the Western theorists. The case was the same for African literature as the literature has often been made bendable to, and dependent on, the foreign critical doctrines and secondary materials on African literature, written from second-hand knowledge of Africa, were often the available ones. For instance, the critical efforts of James Gibbs remained, for long, compulsory for any successful and complete research on Soyinka and Gibbs continued to maintain the position of Soyinka's specialist. Gibbs and other acclaimed Western specialists of African writings might have got their authority from the abuse of critical license which they took as automatic 'visa' to sojourn in the republic of African literature forgetting that the right to excel in a literature cannot be supplied by theories alone.

For example, in many African novels, the use of proverbs and other folklore materials is crucial. The proverbs often concealed in these novels will always manifest as the "non translatable" materials for Western readers or critics. Consequently, within the sequence of words in a particular syntactic relationship to one another in the African novel, we may have the 'translatables' and "non translatables". Whereas the linguistic materials which make direct semantic appeal to the non-African readers are the translatables, the non translatables, the proverbs and folklore materials, are of greater value to the overall meanings of the text. What, therefore constitute the non-translatables to the Westerners are indeed "the palm oil with which words are eaten". Proverbs according to Irele,

... function first of all as repositories of thought in Yoruba [or any African indigenous language] culture and then they are what I call meta-linguistic in nature. That is, they are refinements upon the forms of the language. Therefore, proverbs give you a mastery of the language. They enable a certain level of discourse in the language itself... When I came to read Chinua Achebe, I could see the result of the re-education he had undergone. I think *Death and the Kings Horseman* represents really a summation of that process of re-education, because when you read *Death and the Kings Horseman* in English you know that you are reading Yoruba transposed into English – a magnificent transposition. (“Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele”)

What Irele tried to establish here is that the linguistic tool box in the custody of the Western critics cannot wholly supply the sufficient criticism that African literature desires to match its hybrid nature since “that authentic communion with an African text is possible only (if at all) from the pure African him/herself” (Mphahlele-Haugson and Hyland 1997:20). This is because, according to Irele, “we live those [African] realities and we can understand them in an immediate kind of way”. Thus, as Irele concludes,

... when Achebe says that proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten, the underlying idea is that when you have a piece of roasted yam and you eat it with palm oil with salt – that is a distinct experience. That’s what it suggests to me. I don’t know how many of those of our Western colleagues have had this experience. They will [only] see that as an image. I see it a sensual experience. (“Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele”).

No wonder, while accusing Larson and his colleagues of “Larsony”, Armah argues that the Western critic “does not operate from a plain and logical framework” but from “received frameworks, values and prejudices (8). For this reason, “if a critic regards African literature as part of European literature he will obviously use norms applied to European literature for evaluating African literature” and this will not work for the literature since much of the Western literary scholarship have not been based on “empirical research grounded in fact” about Africa. (“Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele”).

The African Critic: Combating the Western Critical Recklessness

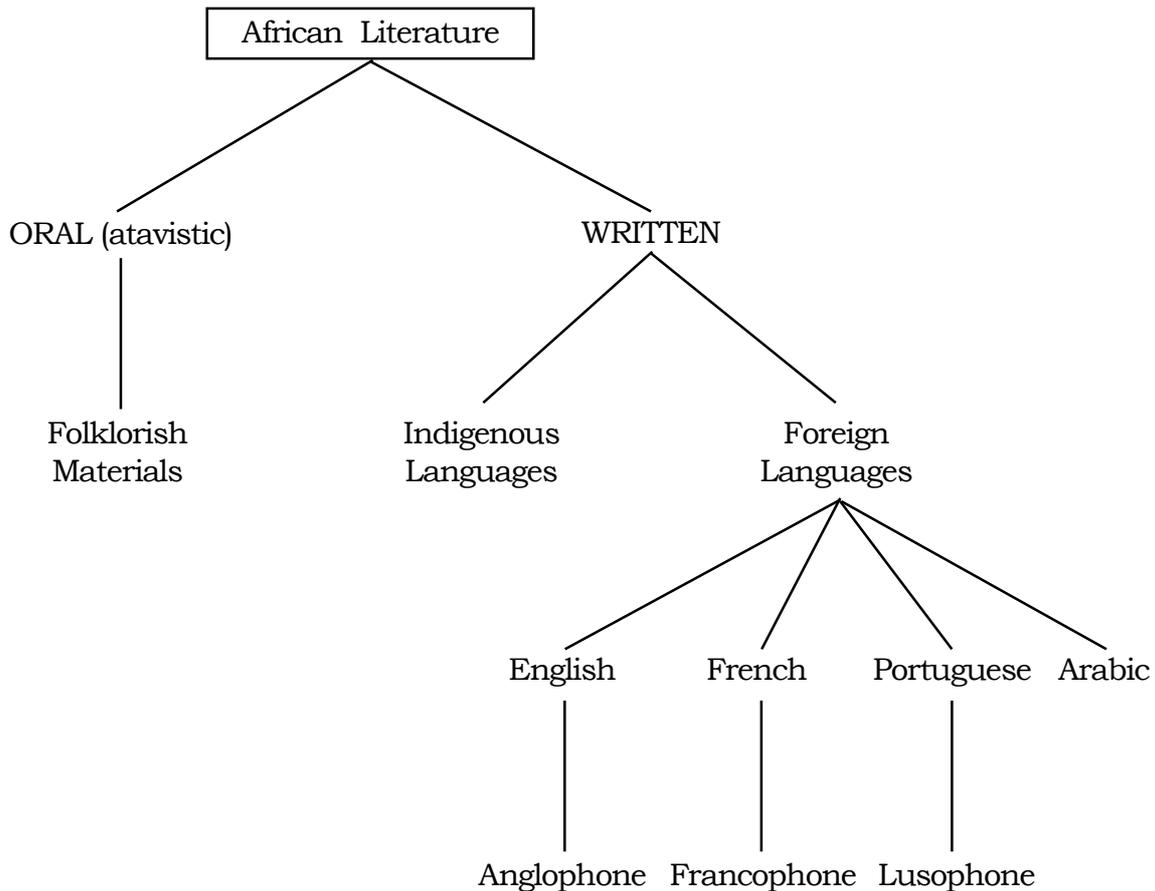
As Ngara wants us to believe, the Western critics themselves do not take lightly the view that confines their critical activities to their racial domain. This is evident in the comments they put forward as reactions, for instance, Wright (1973) sees African literature in English as part of English literature because to him African literature “presents a particular problem within the broad field of literature in English (12). Here, Wright hits the actual problem of the criticism of African literature right on the head. African literature still suffers from the residue of foreign domination because of its clothing in imported languages – English, French and Portuguese. We may say that the advocacy for a merger between the African novel in English and the English novel is mainly because of the language deployed in its formation. At least we know this from the fact that Fagunwa’s novels, which were all written in Yoruba, have not enjoyed as much critical attention from Western critics as those of Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka which were written in English.

At this stage, it may be quite revealing to further clarify those aspects that continue to enslave the African novel to the critical hegemony of the colonizers and this perhaps may help educate critics like Wright. African literature, like any, exists in oral and written forms. This, most literatures take from language, which is the main signifier. According to Owomoyela “Africa’s oral literatures take the form of prose, verse and proverb, and texts varying in length from the epic, which might be performed over the course of several days, to single sentence formations such as the proverb. The collective body of oral texts is variously described as folklore, verbal and oral literature or (more recently) orature (Owomoyela 2002)”.

The written African literature came into existence with the turn of literacy, which did not come to Africa only at the instance of the Westerners. For instance, rudimentary forms of writing were already developed in some secret societies and other exclusive groups. An example of this “is Amharic, which for centuries had been used in written form in the Horn of Africa” (Owomoyela 2002). Literacy in Arabic education also came to sub-Saharan Africa from a different place from the West. With the introduction of the Islamic religion into the kingdom of Ghana in the Eleventh Century by the Tuaregs; and, as Islam spread into other parts of West African through Jihads, literacy in Arabic spread as well.

The kind of literacy that evolved and dominated the African literature came into the sub-Saharan Africa with Christianity. After the abolition of Slave Trade, Christian missionaries became active on the continent. Schools were established, especially to help raise attendants with whom the whites could communicate. This was how the foreign type of literacy came to Africa and since then four foreign languages – English, French, Portuguese and Arabic – have dictated the tenor of what and how the African writes.

The influence of Arabic on African writings was not as pronounced especially as the literature produced in the Arabic areas was allowed to evolve freely with African languages. But in countries where literacy was introduced by the Christian missionaries, the majority of literature was in English, French or Portuguese. The schema below will sufficiently paint the picture well:



From this schema we know that written African literature could be sub-divided into the ones written in the indigenous languages and those in the foreign languages. More than its counterparts, in indigenous languages, the African literature in European languages plays host to Western criticism. This is because the Western critics see African literature as their rightful possession, basically because of their languages that have been used.

However, contrary to Wright's opinion, African literature goes beyond the boundaries of English language since it also encapsulates the literatures written in French, Portuguese and the indigenous African languages like Yoruba and Swahili. Wright's logic therefore, will not do any better than claim African literatures in the Western language for the English, French and Portuguese.

Mcloughlin, conceptualizing the African novel, insists that "the African novels in English are not *sui generis*. They are writings within a generic and linguistic tradition which the reading public is conscious of" and "the argument for critical separatism strikes one as unsound (cited in Ngara 1982:20)." However, Mcloughlin fails to realize is that an African writing about Africa with an African audience in mind "will have a different orientation from a European writing about Africa with a European audience in view" (Ngara 1982:21). Mcloughlin's conclusion here is not accidental since there has been that erroneous belief that the first generation of novelists in Africa (Tutuola, Achebe, *etcetera*.) wrote with the Western audience in mind. Reacting to this wrong notion, from a Nigerian perspective, Irele argues that,

... contrary to what has been said, Tutuola received early recognition in Nigeria. It was Mr. Olayide, my first English teacher in high school, a Nigerian, who first drew my attention to *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and this was in 1952 at its publication. This was the audience that immediately responded to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* when it appeared in 1958. I go into all this because people still cling to this idea that the readership of African literature is outside Africa. Even Michael Chapman, the Professor in South Africa, has restated this view in a recent article in *RAL*, but this is not true at all ("Literature, Culture, and Thought in Africa: A Conversation with Abiola Irele").

As Webb condemns the manner literature is being taught in Nigeria where he believes, literature is "so bound up with politics in a very simple way", he should be well informed that African literature "reverberates the structures of African culture and history on which English literature sheds very little light but much distortion" (Webb in TSL) and (Ngara 1982:5).

Today, it seems what we get from the criticism of African literature is a repetition of the Western clichés like romanticism, classicalism, realism *et cetera*, which circumscribe the critic to a particular philosophical attitude. This, perhaps, often forces the white critic of African literature to view Africa from his subjective perspective "which in many cases is simply what Africa means to him" (Ngara 1982:05).

Fortunately, the impulse created by the whites' undue dominance of African writings brings to mind the fable of the six blind men and the elephant which Lindfors has used to epitomize "the problem of every critic who is confronted with a new work of art, especially the one which comes from a culture different from his own" (1975:53). This fable presents six blind men as they try to feel and guess what an elephant could be:

Each man, seizing on the single feature of the animal which he happened to have touched first, and being incapable of seeing it whole, loudly maintained his limited opinion on the nature of the beast. The elephant was [to the blind men] variously like a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan or a rope, depending on whether the blind men had first grasped the creature's side, tusk, trunk, knee, ear or tail. (Lindfors, 1975:53)

Hence, the fable presents individuals with impaired visions and subjective conclusions. According to Hirsh, "the parable itself is far more rational and comforting than the inference it is supposed to support in literary criticism" especially since "an intelligent and energetic blind man could conceivably move about and touch different parts of the creature to conclude that he was touching an elephant" (Hirsh, 1993:259).

Any of the Western critics of African literature may presumably be represented by, at least one of these six blind men. Their findings about Africa and African literature will continuously be adjudged as misrepresentative and biased except they emulate the approach of Hirsh's "intelligent and energetic" blind man. Only then will their suggestions on African literature make meaningful impact in the African literary scene. Hirsh further suggests a modified version of this fable in which it is possible for several blind men to stand in different positions around one of the elephant's legs, and yet persist in their disagreement about what they are touching. This seems to paint a vivid picture of what happens in the criticism of African literature. As Hirsh tells us, this fable has to be presented that way since textual meaning in literature "is not something to be approached from different points of view. It is not there for the critics in any sense until he has construed it" (Hirsh, 1993:259).

The autonomy of critical approach may more often than not lead to "perspectivism", the theory that the interpretation of literary texts varies with the interpreter's standpoint. Even where this is acceptable, a European standpoint cannot wholly interpret African literature. This might have been the problem of literary criticism as a whole – the problem that spread to the literary scholarship of African literature. Granted there are several critical approaches to literature supplied by the Western critics – Russian formalism, Marxism, structuralism, historical determinism, new criticism, feminism, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, German hermeneutics, and so on – this does not, however, legalize hermeneutic tendencies to perceive literature as a kaleidoscope which radiates extraneous meanings.

To Hirsh, “if a Marxist critic construes a text differently from a formalist critic, that is an irrelevant accident” (Hirsh, 1993:259). This is because the intrinsic meaning of any text cannot be altered by different critical approaches; only that the most conscious of the critics will accurately arrive at the truest interpretation while the others will miss the point. What therefore makes the most appropriate critical approach to literature is a pre-critical vision which is often supplied by the critic’s knowledge of “culturally alien meaning”. By culturally alien meaning, Hirsh meant the meaning that the author’s cultural background imposes on the literary text in question.

Hirsch had asked, “If all interpretation is constituted by the interpreter’s own cultural categories, for instance, how can he possibly understand meanings that are constituted by different cultural categories?” To answer the question, Hirsch himself cited Diltley’s reaction that “we can understand culturally alien meaning because we are able to adopt culturally alien categories.” This seems a very explanatory and straightforward answer. This confirms further that a critic cannot be too rigidly theoretical especially if he should adopt these culturally alien categories to solve the ensuing problem of culturally alien meaning which by implication is indicative of what Renete Poglioli labels “unwritten poetics”. According to Poglioli, unwritten poetics refers to the fact that “literary forms and genres inevitably exist in the minds of the author and audience before being codified by critics and theories” (102).

The burden of this essay is not to proclaim as totally redundant and insignificant, the Western literary theories of literature in African literary domain to the elevation of Bolekajism. But how are we to take the Western literary theories of African literature seriously since their advocates have fallen short in the areas of adoption of the culturally alien categories that will make them to understand the culturally alien meanings that abound in, and define the African literary texts that interest them? If the Western mode of interpretation of African literature hinges only on language, for instance, the tendency is glaring for the critic of the French translation of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to present a different interpretation from the English version of the same novel. Hence, what makes up the totality of African literature at the disposal of the Eurocentric readers goes beyond its language of expression as any African fictional form is a “compound” product of lived experience – linguistic and non linguistic.

Adopting the culturally alien categories will manifest, for a Western critic of African literature, in a better approach than the tourist perusal often given the African novel. Tutuola, Achebe, Ngugi, Armah, have all presented experiences that constitute the “culturally alien meanings” whose interpretation depends solely on the foreigners’ adoption of “culturally alien categories”. Foreign critics with their alien theories will therefore do themselves a lot of favour to empathize on those experiences that manifest as formal artifacts of African literature.

As already expressed, the canon of Western literary theories contains some not-too-theoretical hypotheses that can be more appropriately applied to the African novel. This is why Ngara (1987:06), for instance, says that “Marxist criticism seems to have much to offer the critics of African literature.” Ngara believes that while African critics search for solutions for African problems they should “search for those solutions which, though not specifically African, will nevertheless do justice to African works of Art” (Ngara 1982:6). This should sound a monumental lesson to the Eurocentric critics of African literature who have immersed “themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become more English than the English” or generally speaking, more European than the European (Ngara 1982:6).

It is true that many available critical approaches provide alternating outlets for the literary critic as he has relied on theories ranging from the classical mimetic routine through the Objectivist theories and (post) structuralism to deconstructionism and Marxism, we must, however, be careful to desist from those theories that intersect the relationship between the author and the work as they will further compound the problem already created by Western interest in the African literature. All these theories, we must emphasize have evolved as a result of the convoluted and pluralistic nature of the modern world and “there is [even] a diversion from the monolithic theories to more (syn) chronic ones” (Kehinde, 2003:161). Hence, what one gets today as a true criticism of the African novel borders on theoretical romanticization with imperial coinages which little explain the textual realities of the genre.

For the African novel, “there are configurations and connections between works and writers” and the formalists’ or structuralists’ recommendation may not do better than supply African literary studies with critical jargons that will not wholly explain or interpret the reality and the true spirit of the literature. (Kehinde 2003: 161). Here we agree with Hyppolyte Taine in his *positivistic* recommendations which posit that a literary text “must be regarded as the expression of the psychology of an individual, which in its turn is the expression of the milieu and the period in which he lived and of the race to which he belongs” (Jefferson and Robey 1985:03). Taine’s historicist approach, therefore, allows a firmer critical orbit in the interpretation of the African novel especially since it is glaring that ‘there is the glittering amalgam of traditional epics, folk tradition, legends, myth, folktales and history of the people in the contemporary African novel (Kehinde 2003:161).

What therefore constitutes the “intra text” of the African novel is an admixture of linguistic and meta-linguistic, cultural and bicultural; and socio-political experiences that have shaped the author’s psyche. There is consequently that link between the intrinsic semiotic artifacts and the extra-linguistic ones in the African novel. This link is the working of “intertextuality”, a literary theory which posits that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Clayton and Rolhstein 1991:02). It is hence credible to identify with Kehinde in his belief in the theory of Intertextuality as one of the critical solutions to the problem of criticism confronted by the African novel since the theory believes exclusively that “each literary text takes its meaning from other texts, not merely prior text but other concomitant texts and expressions of culture and language” (Coyle et al 1990:613).

The hybridized nature of the African novel is unavoidably workable into the postulates of intertextual theory especially as it establishes literature as a center of myth-cultural artifacts and historical materials. This theory becomes very useful to this thesis as we hope to establish later that some African novels are nothing but mere adaptations, or replications of the autochthonous African oral texts that even predated literacy in the continent.

Frye (1957:72) argues that since criticism often thrives on “simultaneous developments of several different schools of criticism” especially giving the impression that a text operates with many meanings, there has been that absence of cohesion in critical thoughts. Therefore what most critics do, according to Frye, hinge on either the acceptance of “manifold” meaning for a text, leading to anarchy in criticism, or the adoption as a choice “one of these groups [schools of criticism] and then try to prove that all others are less legitimate.” This means that, we can either stop with a purely relative and pluralistic position, or we can go on to consider the possibility that there is a finite number of valid critical methods and they can be contained in a single theory (1957:72).

Of the two options recommended here by Frye, we identify the latter as the viable choice in the criticism of African literature since; from the outset of this paper we have identified the fallacy in accepting, in totality, the canon of Western critical aesthetics as absolute explanation of the African literary spirit. If we therefore take into account, Frye’s recommendation of a “single theory”, then we may be forced to bring all our critical choices under the umbrella of one heading: “contextualist poetics”. This is in our recognition of the fact that the African novel, for instance, is a product of certain lived experiences that constitute themselves as the raw materials for its producer. All the literary theorists could thus be grouped into two camps (though not in Eurocentric or Afrocentric terms): the formalists and the contextualist, to borrow the parlance of philosophy.

The formalists restrict themselves to a text religiously in their analyses with the belief that any link with the “extra textual explanation” is fallacious, hence leading to certain critical misdemeanor – intentional fallacy. The contextualist are the critics who believe that there is immeasurable analytical success in accepting that there is a connection between textual symbols and the extra textual “truth” outside the text, which must be construed in its own context. The contextualist therefore, summarily conclude that “correspondence between phenomenon and verbal sign [symbol] is truth; lack of it is falsehood; failure to connect is tautology, a purely verbal structure that cannot come out of itself” (Frye, 1957:74).

Because of the favorable attitude of the essay to contextualism, we have proposed all those literary theories of criticism that operate on such links recommended by critical contextualism for the African novel and this leaves us with four critical options: intertextuality, Marxist aesthetics, historical determinism or diagnostic/psychoanalytic criticism.

These four critical options, we believe are very useful in the objective analysis of the African novel, especially since all of them can come under our conception of critical poetics for the African aesthetics. This is because they recognize the “immunity” of contextual materials in the analysis of any literature, and will, by implication, give credibility to the socio-political factors that the literature peculiar.

Conclusion

We conclude with the notion that any critical theory that does not recognize the immunity or sacrosanctity of contextual elements in the analysis of the African novel constitutes one of those “sonorous nonsense” in the discussion of African literature. This thought, though emanated from Bolekajism, is not brutally Afrocentric. Thus, for the fictional aesthetics of the African novel, we recommend that pragma-criticism alone can evolve a true critical poetics and attitude. This is because the African novelist does not write from a *tabula rasa*, but from a mind that has been conditioned, reconditioned and decorated with experiences.

This essay evolved out of the need to find a lasting solution to the extant problems of criticism of African literature in general and the African novel in particular. The problem itself is an offshoot of the opposing ideological positions of the critics of African literature whom we have, like the troika, divided into two camps – Eurocentric and Afrocentric. As we have also identified, the opposition between both “schools” of African literary criticism dates back to 1962 conference and since then, the situation has been more complicated as the proponents of each school continuously and vigorously refine their respective postulations.

Difficult as it appears to device acceptable model for the aspired theory of the African novel, so it has been to find Eurocentric explanations for a good number of the myth-chronic literary artifacts in the form. This is a confirmation that both the postulations of the Eurocentric and Afrocentric critics have remarkable loop-holes even in spite of their laudable arguments. It is on this note that we have adopted Frye’s “situationalist” posture, which radiates in our *democratic* and expansionist position that transcends formal postulations of the Classical or the non-Classical poetics. This is an indication that critical chauvinism is far from the idea entrenched in this essay as it is obvious that we have drawn copiously from both the Western and African critical submissions. The commitment has therefore, been to present the “European Poetics” as not wholly accommodating to the African literary evolutions, at least with respect to the African novel.

This is in the instance that some of the critical principles of the Western criticism base their aesthetic judgments on a text's approximation to an ideal form, however, de-emphasizing the fact that any practice that attempts to enumerate life in African literature based on canonical literary models like *Iliad* and *Odyssey* may complicate the problem of poetics for the African literature.

What has been done here may amount to a repudiation of the extremes of both “centrics” – euro and afro – in the partial embrace of applicable instances from both. What Eurocentricism, for instance, has in stock for the African novel manifests as the four theories of criticism which we believe are very sensitive to its peculiarity as a vehicle of African orature, socio-political experiences and the European aesthetic artifacts. This informs our choice of the coinage: “litorature” as the form, and Afriurocentricism as the true spirit of criticism. This choice is necessary because of the belief that literature is from the people, about the people, and for the people with meaning-oriented intentions, not a mere vehicle for the semiotic components in it.

Finally, it is apt to end this essay by going back to where we started. Soyinka is an anti-Bolekaja. However, little did he know that it was his position that “it is the responsibility of today's African intellectual...to avoid the conditioning of the social being by the mono-criterion methodology of Europe” which the Bolekaja critics have come to complement in their *Toward the Decolonization of the African Literature*. African “intellectuals” soon recognized the faulty and impaired perception of the “mono-criterion methodology of Europe” and they have since started the crusade that will free African literature from the bastardizing grip of Eurocentric criticism which has shredded the criticism of African literature into “Larsonist,” “African Eurocentric,” “Bolekaja” and “Ogunnist”. The crusade which seeks poetic sovereignty for African literature may not succeed except, of course, we take a middle ground between both Afrocentric and Eurocentric contributions to the development of the literature. The result of this is the “pragma-critical” position which we have labeled Afriurocentricism, a product of contextualist poetics.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua (1975) *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Anadolu-Okur, Nilgun (1999) *Contemporary African American Theatre: Afrocentricity in the Works of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Charles Fuller*. New York: Garland.

Armah, A.K (1979) "Larsony of Fiction as Criticism of Fiction" *New Classic*, No 4.

Chinweizu, Jemie, O. and Madubuike, I.(1980) *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature Vol I* Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.

Coyle, Martin (et al) (eds) (1990) *Encyclopedia of Encyclopedia and Criticism* London: Macmillan.

Eliot, T.S(1972) "Tradition and Individual Talent" in Lodge, David (ed) *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* London: Longman.

Fashina, Nelson O (1993) *Textual, Linguistic and Mental Dissonance: An Alienation Theory of African Dramaturgy*. An Unpublished Ph D Thesis. University of Ibadan.

Frye, Northrop (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. London: Penguin Books.

Gates, Henry Louis (1985) *Black Literary Theory* New York: Methuen and Co Ltd.

Hirsch Jr, E.D (1993) "Faulty Perspective" in David Lodge (ed) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* Essex: Longman (pp253-263).

Izevbaye, Dan (1971) "Criticism of Literature in Africa" in Heywood Christopher (ed) *Perspectives of African Literature* Ibadan: Heinemann (pp25-30).

James, Adeola (1975) "Eustace Palmer: An Introduction to the African Novel" in Jones, Eldred D. (ed) *African Literature Today No 7: A Focus On Criticism* New York: Africana Publishing Company (pp147-152).

Kehinde, Ayo (2003) "Intertextuality and the Contemporary African Novel" in Ogundele, Wole and Adeoti, Gbemisola (eds) *IBA Essays on African Literature in Honour of Oyin Ogunba Ile Ife*: Obafemi Awolowo University Press (pp161-177).

Larson, Charles (1972) *The Emergence of the African Fiction* London: Indiana University Press.

Lindfors, Bernth "The Blind Men and the Elephant" in Jones, Eldred D. (ed) (1975) *African Literature Today No 7: A Focus on Criticism* New York: Africana Publishing Company (pp53-64).

Ngara, Emmanuel (1982) *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel* London: Heinemann.

Ngara, Emmanuel (1987) *Literature and the Sociology of the African Novel* London: Heinemann.

Nnolim, Charles R. (1986) "The Critic of African Literature: the Challenge of the 80's" in Emenyonu, Ernest (ed) *Literature and Society: Selected Essays on African Literature* Oguta: Zim Pan-African Publishers (pp20-35).

Oyegoke, Lekan (2003)" Re – Locating African literature in Theory: A Centenary Prognosis in Oyegoke, Lekan (ed) *OYE: Ogun Journal of Arts* Vol IX June, (pp 1-13).

Palmer, Eustace (1982) *The Growth of the African Novel* London: Heinemann.

_____ (1981) *An Introduction to the African Novel* London: Heinemann.

_____ (1981) "The Critic and the Society: Bartes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies" *Black America Literature Forum* Vol. 15 No.4 *Black Textual Strategy* Vol. 1: Theory, pp.133-146.

Taine, Hyppolyte (1971) "The History of English Literature" in Hazard Adams (ed) *Critical Theory Since Plato* Harcourt Brace: Jovanovich pp602-613.

Wright, Edgar (1973) *The Critical Education of African Literature* London: Heinemann Educational Books.