

# The Bedford Anthology of World Literature

The Twentieth Century, 1900–The Present

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It's a wonder anybody knows who anybody is." "You've helped me a lot, Miss Byrd. I'm grateful." He thought then about asking her if she had a photo album. He wanted to see Sing, Crowell, even Heddy. But he decided against it. She might start asking him questions, and he didn't want to trouble her with a new-found relative who was as black as Jake.

"Now, that's not the woman you're looking for, is it? Pilate?"

"No," he said. "Couldn't be." He made motions of departure and then remembered his watch.

"By the way, did I leave my watch here? I'd like it back."

"Watch?"

"Yes. Your friend wanted to see it. Miss Long. I handed it to her but I forgot —"

Milkman stopped. Susan Byrd was laughing out loud.

"Well, you can say goodbye to it, Mr. Macon. Grace will go to dinner all over the county telling people about the watch you gave her."

"What?"

"Well, you know. She doesn't mean any real harm, but it's a quiet place. We don't have many visitors, especially young men who wear gold watches and have northern accents. I'll get it back for you."



CHINWEIZU

B. NIGERIA, 1943

ONWUCHEKWA JEMIE

IHECHUKWU MADUBUIKE

In their sometimes controversial book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (1980), Nigerian scholars and critics Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike articulate an African perspective on Africa and its literature. Since earlier writing on these topics was done by Western critics and blacks in the diaspora, these three native authors set out to challenge the existing scholarship, in which they saw both white imperialism and black romanticism. In the excerpt that follows, they call for "critical realism" in the treatment of Africa and its literature.

All notes are the editors'.



## The African Writer and the African Past

In contemporary African literature and criticism there have been three dominant attitudes towards the African past: shamefaced rejection; romantic embrace; and realistic appraisal. Those who reject the African past and would have as little to do with it as possible are those who, shamed by imperialist propaganda and misrepresentation, would wish to forget it entirely and to hurry off into a euromodernist African future. Prominent among them are those champions of tigrity, those African neo-Tarzanists who dismiss African literature that deals with the African past as a "literature of self-worship," a literature of narcissism. Against this school of thought headed by Wole Soyinka,<sup>1</sup> it must be emphasized that since our past has been vilified by imperialism, and since an imperialist education has tried to equip us with all manner of absurd views and reactions to our past, we do need to reclaim and rehabilitate our genuine past, to repossess our true and entire history in order to acquire a secure launching pad into our future. Thus, a concern with our past will never be out of place.

Those African writers and critics who understand the need for us to repossess and rehabilitate our past have approached it with either romanticism or critical realism. In our view, there are excellent grounds for avoiding a romanticization of our past and for according it a critical and realistic appraisal. Most important is the fact that we cannot afford to build on misinformation, and romanticism has a tendency to put misleading glosses upon whatever it gazes upon. In this regard, the romanticism of the negritude school is notorious. But before proceeding to examine this, we should first disentangle three important aspects of negritude and state our attitudes to them.

First, there is its African nationalist consciousness which revolts against European cultural imperialism. As we argued earlier, an active African nationalist consciousness is indispensable to the task of African liberation. For its stand and contributions in this department, African nationalism is indebted to negritude. To its champions we offer our salute!

The second important aspect of negritude is its concern with recapturing for modern literature the technical repertory of traditional African orature. This again is a crucial project in cultural retrieval. Without it, the task of ensuring continuity between traditional and modern African culture would be practically impossible. For its pioneering efforts in this department, African nationalism is again indebted to negritude. To its champions, we also offer our salute!

The third important aspect of negritude is the image of traditional Africa which it has held up to view. This is highly questionable. In reaction to colonial insults the



negritude poets generally salve their wounds with extravagant nostalgia for a vaguely conceived past. But ought we to persist in this disservice to our past, and even to our present? Was our past one uninterrupted orgy of sensuality? One boring canvas of idyllic goodness, fraternity, and harmony? Were our ancestors a parade of plaster saints who never, among themselves, struck a blow, or hurt a fly, and who suffered all psychic and physical pain gladly and cheerfully, or never suffered at all?

No doubt, at its inception, even this romanticism filled a historic need. It was an understandably extreme reaction, offering blanket praise in retort to Europe's blanket condemnation of Africa. But that mythical portrait of traditional Africa can prove to be a new prison. In the task of decolonization we cannot afford an uncritical glorification of the past. We may brandish our memories of empires of ages ago as shields against Western disparagement, but we also know that before colonialism came there was slavery. Who hunted the slaves? And who sold them for guns, trinkets, and gin? And the African attitudes and roles which made that slave trade possible, are they not part of that nostalgic past? Are those attitudes not still with us, poisoning our present? How much of this illusion of purity and sanctity can survive the events of the past two decades? After all, "When a nigger kicks a nigger / Where is the negritude?" (Madubuike). Even though other parts of the blame belong elsewhere, we cannot deny our own share of the responsibility.

As regards the arts, romanticism of the negritude kind, because it venerates what it considers a gold past, could discourage our use of exemplars from that past as points of contemporary departure. By encouraging the minting of facsimiles, it could imprison the contemporary imagination in a bygone era. As has happened in the plastic arts, especially in the lamentable case of airport art, the romantic minting of facsimiles from a golden past could saddle us with anachronistic imagery, and prevent the evolution of new literary forms out of the old, resulting in a fossilization of forms and a literary stasis.

In contrast, critical realism, because it does not spread a gloss of sanctity on the past, does not extol every aspect of it. It is content to praise what it sees as praiseworthy, and to dispraise what it sees as not praiseworthy. It thereby treats our past like any other valid era of culture. This enables us to see welcome as well as objectionable similarities between our present and our past, and such discrimination and selectivity enables us to adopt desirable features from the arts of our past as we endeavor to anchor our modern culture in our tradition. Because critical realism prevents us from treating exemplars as sacrosanct, it allows for the evolution of new forms through adaptations from the old. When, as in Okigbo's "Path of Thunder,"<sup>2</sup> contemporary events and objects are put into the traditional image matrix and described with traditional terms of rhetoric, the effect is refreshing. We thereby obtain a modernism that has emerged from a clearly African poetic tradition.

Other examples in which aspects of our modern literature have been successfully

<sup>2</sup> "Path of Thunder" is written by Nigerian novelist Christopher Okigbo (1932–1967), who died fighting



grafted onto traditional trunks include the following: Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*,<sup>3</sup> *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and other novels, which are embedded in the Yoruba mythic imagination; Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*<sup>4</sup> and *Arrow of God* which capture, in English, Igbo speech patterns, proverbs, and idiom; and Okot p'Bitek's<sup>5</sup> *Song of Lawino*, *Song of Ocol*, *Song of a Prisoner*, and *Song of Malaya*, each of which uses authentic African imagery and Acholi rhetorical devices to examine an aspect of the contemporary African condition.

<sup>3</sup> *Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952): Authored by Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola (1920–1997), this work draws on Yoruba mythology.

<sup>4</sup> *Things Fall Apart* (1958; see p. 1023): Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) penned this work as well as *Arrow of God* (1964); both are novels about the impact of colonialism on tribal societies in Nigeria.

<sup>5</sup> *Okot p'Bitek* (1931–1982): Ugandan novelist and poet who wrote a series of poems in the style of traditional Acholi song: *Song of Lawino* (1969; see p. 894), *Song of Ocol* (1969; see p. 897), *Song of a Prisoner* (1971), and *Song of Malaya* (1971).