

Celebrating the Power of Literature in African Development

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Abstract

The late South African author Lewis Nkosi described history as a hero in African literature in his critical text *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1981). In this paper I argue for the reverse: that African literature is not only a hero in Africa but also a powerful proactive force in the continent's development. This function of literature is rarely acknowledged yet the subject constitutes the academic arm of the continent's struggles against various forces. Colonialists recognised the essence of literature as a tool for deconstructing African culture and identity. African writers and political leaders from various vantage points also recognised its centrality in the decolonisation process. Therefore a comprehensive history of Africa, particularly in the last half century, must take cognisance of the contribution made by literary artists and texts.

Keywords: African literature, postcolonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

We writers and critics of African Literature should form an essential intellectual part of the anti-imperialist cultural army of African peoples for total economic and political liberation from imperialism and foreign domination.

– Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1981: 31

Nigeria's many cultural treasures stretch back to the Benin Empire—and your literature, poetry and arts guide us to this day. We read it in the words of literary giants like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. We see it in the drama and excitement of products from Nollywood. We hear it in rhythms from juju to afrobeat to Dbanj, Davido and Wizkid!

– UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon, Abuja, Nigeria, 24 August, 2015 (emphasis added)

We aspire that by 2063: Pan-African ideals will be fully embedded in all school curricula and Pan-African cultural assets (heritage, folklore, language, film, music, theatre, literature, festivals, religions and spirituality) will be enhanced. The African creative arts ... will be celebrated throughout the continent, as well as in the diaspora and contribute significantly to self-awareness, well-being and prosperity, and to world culture and heritage. African languages will be the basis for administration and integration. African values of family, community, hard work, merit, mutual respect and social cohesion will be firmly entrenched.

– African Union Agenda 2063, Articles 41–42

In his critical text *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1981), Lewis Nkosi described history as a hero in African literature. In this paper I argue for the reverse: that African literature is not only an unsung hero in African history but also a powerful proactive force in the continent's development. After many years of being in a thankless position it is gratifying to note that the African Union now acknowledges the essence of literary and other arts as forming Africa's entire cultural heritage in national and global development. The contribution made by African literary arts in particular constitutes the academic arm of the continent's multifaceted struggles from time immemorial. As the outgoing UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon notes in the comment above, literary arts have guided humanity for centuries. In traditional Africa the literary artist was the custodian of cultural knowledge and was trusted to impart it to many generations. His/her relationship with society was generally harmonious. The society rewarded his/her service by catering for his/her basic needs. The status of the literary artist-connoisseur has not changed. What seems to have changed is the relationship with society. In contemporary Africa writers bear many pet names that signify their essence and power in the society, such as "artist the ruler", "oracle of the people", "self-ordained priest", "novelist the teacher" and "voice of conscience". A comprehensive history of African development in the last half century in particular must of necessity take cognisance of the contribution made by creative artists and texts.

Since the 1950s many African counties have had political leaders who doubled as poets, such as Leopold Sedar Senghor and Agostino Neto, and essayists and autobiographers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Oginga Odinga and Nelson Mandela. There have been political writers and lovers of literature such as Julius Nyerere, to cite just one example. Senghor, the first president of Senegal, retained his poet-cum-politician identity throughout his life. He viewed both fields as expressions of the same African protest against politico-cultural imperialism. His ideology of negritude was realised through both fields. Agostinho Neto, the first president of independent Angola, was also a poet-cum-politician. He started writing poetry in the 1940s and continued in the fifties and sixties during the difficult years, along with his activism against

Portuguese colonialism in his country. In his foreword to Neto's *Sacred Hope* (1974), Basil Davidson summarises Neto's poetry thus:

Chants of sorrow, these are also songs of joy. Poems of departure, they are also poems of arrival. They are highly political writings but their message has nothing to do with the machinery of politics, and even less, if that were possible, with the empty political propaganda. If they are political poems, then they are political in the sense that Shelley wrote political poems, in the sense that Brecht wrote political poems. (Neto, 1974: xiii)

Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, was an essayist with a keen eye on the function of the arts and literature in particular within the process of colonisation and consequently within decolonisation. Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru* (1967) and Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk To Freedom* (1965) speak of different levels of oppression but also demonstrate deep hope for complete freedom.

Among the first generation of political leaders of independent Africa, Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, ranks high among those who understood the philosophy and potential power of literature. He knew when to exploit and contain its power. As a believer in Marxism he presumed the function of literature as being a strong tool for influencing people. His deep understanding of the discipline is exemplified in his translation of three of William Shakespeare's plays into Kiswahili, the local/national language in his country. Nyerere encouraged the arts in many ways. Unlike Nyerere, the political leaders around him appreciated literature only when it served an overt propagandist function in their favour, opposing it when it became critical of their actions.

Not all independent African countries had leaders who supported the arts. Some leaders were indeed threatened by the power of the text. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was detained by Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president. It is ironic that the Jomo Kenyatta Foundation established an annual prize for literature in 1974, and even more so the fact that wa Thiong'o met Uhuru Kenyatta, Jomo's son, when wa Thiong'o came to Kenya from exile to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his first book *Weep Not Child* (1965). Wa Thiong'o started writing during his undergraduate programme at Makerere University in neighbouring Uganda. Since then he has written extensively, his works including novels, short stories, plays, essays, autobiography, literary criticism and other critical texts. After detention he was forced into exile, where he has lived and continues to write to the present. A number of Kenyan writers such as the late Wahome Mutahi were to follow, particularly during the reign of the second president, Daniel Arap Moi, which ran from 1978 to 2002. Micere Mugo, the leading Kenyan female writer, for example, was forced to go into exile and even lost her Kenyan citizenship.

From the 1950s to the present Africa has produced a long list of literary artists who have engaged the African experience through prose fiction, poetry, drama and theatre, film, and practical criticism. In many cases the artists have challenged the power of some of the post-independence political rulers who became dictators or advanced neo-colonialism and paid heavily for their audacity with imprisonment, exile and even death. Their crime is often summarised euphemistically as treason. In retrospect such 'treason' can now be viewed as valid knowledge and truth rooted in critical thinking with the ultimate aim of structural social transformation. As Terry Eagleton concludes, literature is "deeply subversive" mainly because artists are "trained to imagine alternatives to the actual" (2008: 833). The censoring political rulers understand the potential of literature and exploit or punish it in equal measure. Interestingly, few African scholars in other disciplines, particularly the sciences, have been subjected to similar victimisation. That notwithstanding, literature is generally undervalued and relegated to the margins of verifiable knowledge since it is neither scientific nor technological. At the surface level its entertainment function tends to subsume the didactic. In modern Africa, unlike traditional Africa, literary artists are either victimised or abandoned to a pauper's

existence. Fortunately their creations are timeless and enrich readers' understanding of many aspects of human experience including the concept of development.

In contemporary discourse in Africa, development is generally perceived in economic terms as the process of material production and creation of commensurate ideas, policies, structures and institutions, with the ultimate aim of solving practical problems of poverty, ignorance and disease in order to change a country from developing (read under-developing) to developed status. The developed world that prescribes development strategies emphasises science and technology, starting from the education system and subsequently spreading into other areas of daily experience. Educational institutions are established on this basis. Hence the multiplication of institutes of technology-something-or-other, rarely institutes of literature and literary studies, history, anthropology, philosophy or sociology. Even though such courses are included in the school curricula, they are generally viewed as subsidiary. Before the 1970s, many of the literature courses taught in school systems in many African countries excluded African literature. Little research was done in this discipline. In developmental language, research denotes investigative activities that yield solutions to practical problems. Research in the humanities is generally not given priority in the development agenda. There are many other signifiers of this deification of science versus reification of the arts. Yet everyday experiences are shaped by both discipline categories as sources of knowledge.

Although there is no explicit dismissal of the knowledge in the humanities, especially literature, in Africa, there is equally no explicit acclamation of the non-material contribution it makes to socio-economic development by providing the necessary moral guidance, critique, caution, and evaluation. Reading any developmental documents one would think that the sciences and the arts are mutually exclusive in our lives. Terry Eagleton argues that artists “raise questions of quality of life in a world where experience itself seems brittle and degraded” and that “those who deal with art speak the language of values rather than price. They deal with work whose depth and intensity shows up the meagerness of everyday life in a market-obsessed society” (Lodge and Wood 2008: 833). The market is the final phase of technology. In this sense literature seems to be antithetical to scientific technological development aimed at poverty eradication. This is subversive indeed! Yet, paradoxically, literature enhances development by providing the vital antidote to value-free capitalist tendencies that drive humanity to obsessions. Moderation is humane but obsession is savage. To serve humanity constructively, capital, machines and markets need the humanities, and literature in particular. It is therefore a great relief to encounter the African Union's recognition of the essential complementarity of the arts and sciences in development in its *Agenda 2063*, quoted above. Ngugi wa Thiong'o delineates the complementarity between the sciences and the arts in colonialism succinctly in *Writers and Politics*:

to make economic and political control the more complete, the colonizing power tries to control the cultural environment: education, religion, language, theatre, songs, forms of dances, every form of expression, hoping in this way to control a people's values and ultimately world look, their image and definition of self. (1981: 12)

The same complementarity underpins contemporary non-residential imperialism because it is basically cultural. It is characterised by entertainment excesses in music, film, pornography, and non-scientific sporting activities circulated on the internet, which was hitherto the highest stage of technology, second only to the traversing of outer space. Some of the rich and famous of the developed world thrive on the arts that are first created imaginatively then scientifically commoditised and technologically disseminated. The developed world rewards its artists alongside scientific inventors. The many awards and prizes, among which the Nobel Prize for literature ranks highest, exemplify the great significance attached to the discipline. Thankfully the award committees abroad have awarded some African artists—some of whom are

victimised at home. In Kenya, for example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the leading artist, is yet to be awarded for his larger-than-life literary contribution.

Considering the broad function of literature, it is understandable that it is literary artists—most of whom are products of an imperialist education system—who have effectively scrutinised and deconstructed imperialist ideologies and survival strategies. While many Africans were still mesmerised by European merchandise and convinced of the noble motives of European civilising missions purportedly aimed at developing the dark continent, African writers saw social disintegration culminating in retrogressive development. Subsequent struggles and mobilisation for independence were punctuated with various genres of literary art: work songs, war songs, negritude poetry, fighting poetry like *Bullets Begin to Flower*, *Sacred Hope*, the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and similar travails all over the continent. There were also predictions of the impending demise of resident colonialism in *The Conservationist*, and the end of racism in *In the Fog of the Season's End*—to name just a few. And as Africans began to celebrate decolonisation, it did not take long before artistic rulers saw through the façade that clouded their political counterparts and christened the process neo-colonialism. This is what created conflict between some of the authors and post-independence political leaders.

The first generation of writers who have outlived victimisation and survived into the twenty-first century have been joined by younger generations and are still at it—scrutinising issues, interrogating concepts, subverting wrongheaded policies, analysing structures of development versus the quality of life of the ordinary citizen. In effect, they are employing literary stylistics to expose political gimmicks and re-examine an Africanisation of capitalist oppression that retards Africa's genuine development, which should entail raising the quality of life of “the wretched of the earth”. If such discourses are not integral to development or even developmental in their own right, what is?

The nature of literature facilitates its broad function, which combines the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and values. It can achieve a form of change that is not scientifically verifiable, but change nonetheless because literary art is forged in a language that prompts the audience to critical thought, emotion and feeling. Wellek and Warren describe literature thus: “Poetic language organizes, tightens, the resources of everyday language and sometimes does even violence to them, in an effort to force us into awareness and attention” (1949/1986: 24). They also specify the characteristics and intended effect of this use of language as contrasted with literal use of language:

Compared to scientific language, literary language will appear in some ways deficient. It abounds in ambiguities; ... it is permeated with historical accidents, memories, and associations. In a word, it is highly ‘connotative’. Moreover, literary language is far from merely referential. It has its expressive side; it conveys the tone and attitude of the speaker or writer. And it does not merely state and express what it says; it also wants to influence the attitude of the reader, persuade him, and ultimately change him. (ibid: 23)

It is in this creative use of language that artistic insight resides. Artists are not always obliged to create new knowledge but rather may prompt their audience to rethink what they know but fail to examine critically.

This is what makes literature pervasive, this constant reminder: the awakening and prompting of minds that have become acquainted and acquiescent with perceived fate. In his unique way of pointing out the familiar anew, the artist defamiliarises and disrupts. It would appear that the author is indeed creating new ideas because she expresses them in new words that recapture attention. According to Charles Davis, “An author, if he is big enough, can do much for his fellow men. He can put words in their mouths and reason in their heads; he can fill their sleep with dreams so potent that when they awake they will continue living them” (qtd. in p'Bitek, 1980: 39). In the post-independence African context this didactic function of

literature has often been perceived as treasonable because it constructs antidotes to official propaganda. Literature must do this or risk degenerating into cheap court poetry. Didacticism is propagandist in a finer sense of the word.

In society official views emanating from political rulers are often misrepresented not only as the wish of the majority but also erroneously as the ‘truth’. And literature—mere imagination—should by inference be the “mother of all lies” as Plato said. In which case, literature should not have bothered Plato or any other ruler. But it did, and still does, precisely because it has the potential to be the expression of the ‘real truth’ as distinct from an alternative view of truth manipulated through political stylistics. The artist scrutinises the first truth-cum-lies, and presents it together with other perspectives in verse and imagery so that the readers can see and judge for themselves. In a sense, all the ‘truths’ are given an evidential base in reality which leads to verification of both the lies and truth, and the latter eventually emerges because

[t]ruth in literature is the same as truth outside of literature, i.e. systematic and publicly verifiable knowledge. The novelist has no magic short cut to present state of knowledge in the social sciences which constitutes the ‘truth against which his ‘world truth’, his fictional reality, is to be checked. (Wellek and Warren 1949/1986: 33)

For example, if there is development on River Road in the city of Nairobi, Kenya, it may be evaluated by enumerating the tall buildings there, but since ‘development’ is humanistic it should also be seen in the lifestyle of the people who live there. In Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*, it transpires that the people who labour to construct the buildings have no access to the benefits they generate. The first meaning/truth of development is immediately disrupted by the second truth. Each is a truth in context but one must supersede the other because humanity is the ultimate development index. When the latter resonates with the majority of humanity, political rulers have a lot to fear, particularly because the method of purveyance of the latter is sweetly alluring, as p’Bitek observes:

The artist proclaims the laws but expresses them in the most indirect language: through metaphor and symbol, in image and fable. He sings and dances his laws. It is taught, not in the school of law, not at the inns of court, but around the evening fire, where elephants and hares act as men. The body movement, the painting, the sculptures are his law books. The drums, the flutes, the horns, the strumming and plucking on the strings of the musical instruments, are the proclamations of his decrees. He lures his subjects by the sweetness of his song, and the beauty of his works. He punishes the culprits with laughter, and awards the good mannered with praises. (1986: 36)

I now turn to the contribution of Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o among the many African writers who have contributed to African development in terms of their deconstruction and reconstruction of various African experiences. From the 1950s to the present African writers have focused on many topics and themes including missionary factors, the impact and aftermath of colonialism, the question of African identity, the debate over oratory and literature, political and economic conflicts, social changes, the link between history and literature, nationalism and contemporary issues, and Afrocentric literary theory. Ngugiwa Thiong’o’s fictional and non-fictional texts cover all these topics, and five of his critical texts—namely, *Homecoming* (1972), *Writers in Politics* (1981), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), and *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing* (2012)—sufficiently represent the power of literature in African experience. In these five critical texts wa Thiong’o delineates the role of the African writer and his literary creation from the vantage point of the larger-than-life author, critic, academic, social activist, political detainee, and post-colonial theorist that he is. His critical texts provide the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that

underpin his enormous creative oeuvre, including novels, plays, short stories, children's literature and memoirs, some of which are written in his vernacular Gikuyu. His literary works capture everything that seems to summarise Kenya's journey through the last sixty years. In all his texts, this author writes for a wider continental, even international, rather than local national space. In Afro-centric terms his context includes the African diaspora and the entire Third World. For this reason wa Thiong'o, his literature, critical texts, and his travails at the behest of the powers that be in Kenya, all constitute the quintessential power of literature in the African context. Any study of wa Thiong'o can be superabundant in terms of research problems and questions (of which he raises very many), objectives and significance, theoretical/conceptual framework and the methodology he offers.

The titles of wa Thiong'o's critical texts listed above are self-explanatory—they all emphasise the function and power of literary artist and text in various contexts from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial. As mentioned earlier, there are many other writers in Africa who double as literary critics, but wa Thiong'o surpasses them in many ways. He has written more than forty books of fiction and non-fiction, some of which have been translated into thirty languages.

His first critical text, *Homecoming* (1972), is a recognition of Africa's loss of identity and the need to return, not to the 'ideal' traditional culture, but to a space from where the African writer and reader can re-examine and critique their colonial status quo. The text included papers that were presented at the first African writers' conference at Makerere University in Uganda, where he was an undergraduate student at the time. In *Writers in Politics* (1981), he discusses the power of literature vis-à-vis as well as versus politics. He explains how colonialism exploited the power of literature to destroy the image of the colonised and therefore the inevitability of reversing the same in the attempt to regain lost identity.

In *Decolonising the Mind* (1981), wa Thiong'o engages the politics of language in African literature. In order for African literature to play the role expected of it, the author argues that the question of language cannot be ignored. For him much of the power of the text resides in the language in which it is written:

The choice of language and the use to which it is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century. (1981: 4)

In this text wa Thiong'o discusses the many strategies that were used by colonialists to kill African languages, but which refused to die. Yet refusal to write in the languages is what may eventually kill them. Regarding his choice to write in vernacular, he envisages the problem of a limited audience, but the value of the text far outweighs that limitation. In fact, his first book in Gikuyu was well received, judging from the sales. He was also the first African writer to be detained by his tribesman president for producing a play in vernacular which attracted crowds. For wa Thiong'o, therefore:

The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In our struggle is our history, our language and our being. That struggle begins wherever we are; in whatever we do: then we become part of those millions whom Martin Carter once saw sleeping not to dream but dreaming to change the world. (ibid: 108)

This debate on the language of African literature continues, with many writers taking either side. However, African literature has developed and had a strong impact on development despite the language issue. The power of wa Thiong'o's works is exemplified by the

translations into many languages. There are many other African writers whose books have been multiply translated globally. Whereas wa Thiong'o's view remains that part of the power of the text lies in its original language in relation to the reader, it is also true that its appeal nationally and internationally emanates from its content, which has universal meanings and implications. This is what is meant by a text having power across numerous contexts. Although the choice of a text's language implies the choice of immediate target audience, it does not restrict an extended audience who can access it through translation. Ironically this issue that is raised about writing in African languages is a non-issue to writers in other languages besides English and French. No Afrikaans, Arabic, Mexican, Korean or any other minority-language community writer need agonise over this issue. wa Thiong'o need not do so either. His concern in a nation with an illiterate majority should be literacy rather than English. One need not write in a dominant international language in order to communicate with the international community. He would definitely not want to believe that his earlier fiction written in English targeted first and foremost an international audience. Interestingly the articles of the African Union Agenda 2063 cited above support wa Thiong'o's view on African languages. So wa Thiong'o's other contribution is the development of his vernacular Gikuyu, which is timely. In order to meet the AU target, some language communities in Kenya will have to start from the introduction of lexicography and lexicology.

wa Thiong'o's fourth book-length critical text *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993) deconstructs Eurocentrism, racism, classism, and sexism as forms of constriction from which literature and literary criticism needs to be liberated. This argument is based on his view that the world is inhabited by different peoples with different worldviews located in different centres. The centres relate or should relate to one another on equal terms. The various forms of marginalisations created by the isms above are manifested in language, literature and cultural studies. Therefore, to reconstruct the situation, the process of moving the centre must take place in "nationalism, class, race and gender" (wa Thiong'o 2012: 50). Literature has the capacity to move centres in this way and achieve cultural freedoms. But this is not possible unless there is a change in the method of interpreting a given text. The latter is the subject of wa Thiong'o's latest critical text: *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2012).

The meaning we tease out of a text "depends on how we read it and what baggage we bring to it" (ibid: 50). This premise underpins the subject of the critical text above. In this text the author defines globalectic reading as

a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its content and themes form [sic] a free conversation with other texts of one's time and place, the better to make it yield its maximum to the human. It is to allow it to speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present. It is to read a text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text. (2012: 51)

While much of African literature achieves the decentring of knowledge from Eurocentrism to Afrocentrism, globalectics decentres theories of reading and knowing from the same monocentrism because "Globalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectness.... It is a way of reading and relating to the world particularly in this era of globalism and globalization" (ibid: 7).

On the whole there are no specific criteria by which the power and impact that African writers and their works have made on African development can be quantified and qualified, but the reverse argument negating such an impact would be impossible to construct considering the large number of literary titles that have come out of Heinemann and other publishers. Some writers like the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah wish they would have contributed directly to solving social problems (Wästberg 1988). Other writers such as the Nigerian Christopher

Okigbo participated directly and even died; in his case in the Biafran civil war. Armah's frustration is shared by many African writers, who know that their wisdom is rarely accepted by the target audience, particularly those in power. But Armah's compatriot, the late Senegalese author Sembene Ousmane, argued that he was making an impact through serving his people, who had given him a task about which politicians did not want to hear. He insisted that it was the responsibility of a writer to be "the voice of the less-privileged" (ibid: 22). This mission of the writer is a signifier of his power. As stated earlier, the censorship that has been experienced at different times all over the continent is yet another signifier of the same. And now, thankfully, the African Union has acknowledged that literary among other arts constitute sustainable-development goals. In Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's name may not appear on every other building, street or school signpost, but the power of his pen remains unsurpassed.

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