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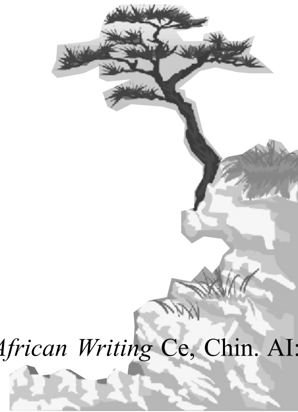

# ‘Happily After’
## *Re-visioning African Writing*

[Culled from *Bards and Tyrants: Essays in African Writing* Ce, Chin. AI: Handel, 2008.]

THERE are times that we are constrained to admit to ourselves that, sparing the bright chap literatures of Southern Africa's liberation writings in a fictional or life writing sense to 'tell the truth' about the experiences of real people or situations (Coullie 7), the best of our writing are pale products of African art because they struggle as facsimiles of real or imagined hegemonic Western traditions. It remains uncertain, however, how many living authors and critics would concede some praise to a new poetics that must discard this aging school that foisted imitative craft and visioning on African writing as some bold critics and revisionists of the canons had tried to show.

It is now a long time ago when this seed of handicap was laid in African writing, probably unwittingly, in the overtures of our 'first' writers and critics. These were Africa’s Western educated men and women who, faced with the singular evidence of purposive aesthetics in the hierarchy of communal values, turned to vaunted Grecian celebrities and celebrators of human

moral disfigurement. Probably this was because they were obligated, in Palmer's terms, to convince readers of the realism of the world being presented (4) or amuse them with the sterile voyeurism of imperial cultures. But a few have preferred that we chart an alternate, clearer vision for African writing–with the impetus of its historical cultural specifics–which requires that one must needs recover some flickering remnants of arcane light (ancestral wisdom) for a further enlightened posterity.

The supposition for a reassessment of cultural direction from a firmly rooted indigenous structure took strong roots long before projects such as "the independent propagation of African thought and aesthetics"[1] and the famous decolonisation treatises by some Afrocentric scholars[2] along with the work of poets, statesmen and visionaries began to turn their backs at the formations of theory, philosophy and education along frequently racial- and language-dominant paradigms. At the close of his autobiographical series in *A Dream of Africa*, Camara Laye had inserted an injunction to fellow African writers:

> Never forget the enemy is not a race… but a gang of profiteers. Fight against that gang; entrust your country to reliable men, to men who have already shown their mettle: then you will open the gates of your country to the entire world, to all the intelligence and expertise that may be found among all the peoples of the world, to all those qualities that urge people to conquer everything in the domains of the intellect, of art, of technology.[3]

Here Laye's idea of conquest does not quite imply the Darwinian evolutionist survival of the fittest but in the light of conquest as a transcending of human limitations and a

recognition of one's role in the spiritual, material and teleological order of a more expansive universe–an excellent premise of most African and Asian cultural traditions.

In advanced cultures, the simple ending of many story telling, 'to live happily ever after', has been perceived by a learned and sophisticated literati not in the context of that persistence that is seen in smaller parts reaching to merge with their whole and highest ideals, or that which drives people in forward-moving aspiration beyond their various limitations, but as products of artistic and visionary naiveté. But if chauvinists of modern literature would look deeper into tradition and culture, and, as Clement supposes, into such stories as those that taught “the history of man” and showed “exactly what is meant by the word 'history'”(13), they will find in them an ancient premise where the finest thread of evil is altered, although never absolutely voided, by the greater, yet never simplistic or exclusively traditional, good. Such undying motifs of a wholistic order in the universe suppose the need for conquest in the unifying sense of parts reaching for their whole. These are partly embedded in African oral narratives, films and visual arts, although only as a constant motif within some confused and mutant variants.

Why was it that in cultures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, modern African writing came to be calcified in the so called realism or realistic fiction, and still remains the winning mind-set for many a creative literary and critical endeavour? Was it rather to conceive an appropriate predicament of inexhaustible malevolence, and the scientific reduction of humans as self seeking material entities who must conquer the known and unknown before them, that the modern order had

proffered a reality of failure, disorder and turbulence within the parts of the greater whole? A reality which thus created, finds a vent in eternal paradoxes befitting of a people's fragmented existence. Was this supposed to vindicate men's paucity of moral strength or feebleness in the face of definitive evil, a tragic reality finding evidence in slavery, feudalism, imperialism, the World Wars and their similar replications among pockets of lesser nation states? If probably true, how then do we extract the sickness of the human condition from literary creativity and serious imaginative fiction?

In a healthy criticism of emerging canons, Achebe in 'Africa and her Writers' passed off Armah's novel, *The Beautyful ones are not yet born*, as “sick with the sickness of the *human condition*” (25). His *Arrow of God* was similarly deprecated for its “dogged secularisation of the profoundly mystical” (91) by his fellow national, Soyinka, who took a critical step further in *Myth, Literature and the African World* to spell an alternate compass for navigating Africa's mythological heritage. But now that disapprobation of Armah's 'existentialism' by Achebe will sound very much like the proverbial pot calling the kettle black especially when the latter's quixotic attachment to his tragedies is seen in the context of most, if not all, of his novels as Obi enthuses in *No Longer at Ease*:

> Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly for ever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot, to quote W. H. Auden. The rest of the world is unaware of it. Like that man in *A Handful Dusts* who reads Dickens to Mr. Todd. There is no release for him. When the story ends he is still reading. There is no purging of the

emotions for us because we are not there. (36)

Some vestiges of Aristotelian foundation in Western aesthetics coming into our world should have witnessed a few permutations, if not straight redundancy, or worse, each time we recall a more ancient, ethically rooted, and pre-Socratic tradition that is scrupulous about *substance* of stories upheld by society (Griffith 360). For truly conscious writers and their readers, since Ancient Egypt and Greece, did often interrogate the value and merit of that which is unleashed on the local communion. Though the creative literary exercise in modern Africa, especially poetry, is deemed a "ritual communion in which the expression of oneness is self-evident and out of which a new awareness is inevitable" (Vincent 'Intro'), the welter of expression has lacked original theoretical compass by which they are anchored. The tendency which has been the replication of European and American paradigms overlooks an overarching and preponderant traditional or oral heritage. Traditional aesthetic, an intrinsic part of African communal and artistic heritage, should act on recent creative expressions more as an influence, a characteristic of expression that lends a stamp of cultural identity to the literary genre in which it subsists, and which is Platonian in the sense of its inscription of "the worth of ultimate reality as spiritual" (Bressler 12). Its linking of literature and life (politics) in a "moral and reasoned worldview" is the concern, nay, the "value, nature and worth of the artist and of literature itself" (13).

Today, despite that the two greats of African writing namely, Achebe and Soyinka, had in their respective ways, doctored the indulgence of younger writers and propagated some beneficent artistic alternatives from many possible theoretical points of

view, we are often spurred by the gift of hindsight to reassess the argument in the light of knowledge regarding our universe and our relationships within our heritage.

In our literary circle a revision is overdue; it hardly needs to be argued again that even *No Longer at Ease* had betrayed the same self-defeating surrender to inexorable moral and ethical corruption–and ultimate death of an ideal–as *The Beautyful Ones are not yet born*. Perhaps that song in Achebe's novel: “he that has a brother must hold him to heart” (117) artistically backgrounds the determined clamour of Umuofia town union to bail their kinsman, and brings that tragic repast closer to native wisdom of transcendent kindred compassion as a beholden ideal. But we might argue that this was also demonstrated by the nameless man of Armah's story who helps his corrupt neighbour to flee political vendetta during a wave of some suspect revolutionary insurgence. The difference, as always, is in the writer’s purpose and vision of his art.

Inclusive of the African writer’s tendency to pessimism was Ngugi's own disenchantment with Capitalist civilisation, his absorption of modernist Marxist ideology and the presumption of its replication in our present world sense. Further still, most all of Munonye's, Amadi's and Emecheta's novels were afflicted, to varying degrees of notoriety, by Western materialistic perceptions of social and personal tragic fortunes, and other values of creative and literary execution not readily reconciled with a counter-balancing African spiritual landscape for which Achebe himself had championed gruesomely against the 'colonialist criticism' that trailed his early novels. It probably explains why Amadi’s *Concubine*, by characterisation and execution, lost the configuration of African womanhood in

Ihuoma but capitulated to the pedantry of tragic fate: the idea of man "caught in webs and mysteries he cannot understand, (or) explain" or from which he may never "disentangle" (Eko 34), and by this slippery fall blinded a rather exhilarating development of character and personality in one of our cerebral African heroines.

Having to toe in Occidental greatness also included Munonye's perfect Grecian inspirational: the 'Oil man'[3] whose existence, suspended in tragic destiny, had repulsed every attempt to triumph over a Sisyphean curse that must dog his life. For had not the realism of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* given rise, or at least consolidated, ideas of tragic degeneracy and foggy visions of a 'wasted breed' overwhelmed by the conspiracy and powerful consort of devilry such as had merited a poetry book dedication in our mid nineties to "many others wallowing in the futility of existence" (iv) – this by no less a product of the old school than Chris Nwamuo.

Carried away by the reconstruction of our so-called colonial and neo-colonial experience, African writing may have lost the pantheon of spirits which imbued order and balance to life, rallied round men and women to affirm their mettle because they always said, and acted, in some purposive spiritual direction. This is in spite of its pragmatic universe that endows a man the maker of his own fortune and guides him in the recognition of the positive presence of his gods; a world view which corollary can be seen in tenets of the diligence to seek those "acres of diamonds"(58) which Conwell had told his fellow Americans was within their reach if only they could learn to look deep enough around their various domiciles. Ours was also an ontology that Achebe reminded us would so spurn

fatalism and absolutism to the extent that the created would talk and bargain with its creator at those nebulous processes of evolution to arrive at a reasonable compromise prior to its earthly incarnation ("Chi" 103).

Somehow the moral virtue that had endeared men and women to their ancient earthly bond, and their communal responsibilities in extension, were hardly found on a generous scale in the literary imagination of what we may now call the writings of the moderns. It had appeared that the dominant questions of complex modern conditions had stampeded a man's *chi* to continue to say *nay* in spite of his high and lofty affirmations. And having chosen the dictum of veridictory art (with perhaps but little interrogation of reality shifts) which would often find expression in the hardly-reconciled oppositions of modern existence, the ultimate mastery that is presumed beyond all human attainments is bound in negligent or vicious abuse. Thus did we inherit a Pandora's Box of social or moral burden, one in which the elements and that great sin are in a grand conspiracy to foist failure upon humankind, keeping them eternally blinded in their aspirations, a step beyond their ken. It sounds in line with that Achebean mystery that loses its fanciful attractiveness or "familiar sense of wonder" once "innocence departs and knowledge settles in" ("Tangayinka" 77). How so true of our political and economic predicaments.

We have been rather fortunate that the old fox of African literature was later to attend to a few helpful insights regarding the dissatisfactory execution of some of his writing, although he had earlier chosen to spurn 'colonial housewives' and critics who felt that he ought to have conceded a nobler ending for his Clara and Obi romances. So in *Anthills of the Savannah*, coming

in the beautiful eighties of our literary revisions, we are gratuitously offered Beatrice and Elewa as symbols of a maternal redemption, a modern implantation of the genetic code that will confront tyranny and the corruptive degeneracy of society in their entire ramifications. In spite of this distinction, our foray in those Anthills still leaves the lachrymal aftertaste of an eternal tragedian's recipe.

The frustration of heroes in their bid to carry through an ideal and, in extension, seize the opportunities of their age, was for African writers a mad run to some centuries of European literary traditions or, for Rotimi and Osofisan, the mythological interpolation of an original past that must still be juxtaposed with its Orphic or Sophoclean parallels. It has also seemed that Nwapa, Emecheta and even our wonderful sister Aidoo have been too much of pessimists in undoing the real heroes of their societies. For there were, and still are, men and women in real life, who, much like Moremi in Osofisan's *Morotoudon*, successfully defied our social conspiracies–the useless *osu* system of the Igbo race for instance–and still lived out their positive destinies as great heroes in their own right. Arguably the otherwise gloomy resolutions of the old school did not help, and thus were truly not on the side of, the many other dispossessed and disinherited of our African earth in spite of every claim to commitment or progress on their part. For what modern society truly required in the blank white days of colonial treachery with their succeeding aftermaths were more of the stories of a few good men (great stories that rear to inspire all generations) who challenge the negativity (emphasised in our routine thoughts and fashions) to dare any listener to those eternal values and conditions that we strive to resolve.

Unfortunately scarcely interrogated influences dig into Africa because of an elitist education that persists in a wholesale adoption of foreign traditions and other intellectual and theological affiliations of the Western world that are presently set to implode in their own gross materiality and false constructions. Only from a bohemian approach to his characters which we see realised in a Jero or Sanda[4] and his redeployment of tribal history and mythology such as the horseman and his progeny's fulfilment of an ancient ritual does Soyinka leave us with some of his most imaginative literary creations, thus offering a glimmer for a generation benumbed by primitive modernist contempt for the beleaguered of society. Olunde[5] becomes a parable for the subjection of the separate selfish existence toward the moral and ethical elevation of both recipient society and those self-sacrificing beings of light. But while truly an act that cannot yield its full and entire significance from the Western taxonomy of suicide, and even as a protestation for the mystical experience, or the articulation of an indigenous alternative via primitive mythologising, Soyinka's *Ogunism* sooner grew inadequate for the interpretation of an African existence as its proponents readily wore the fad along popular Freudian and Jungian archetypes, and other vertiginous theories intended to illumine art round and round in more of a cul-de-sac. Which meant finding ourselves in want of further vision.

So intensely are the conditions of realist cynicism ingrained in Africa's westernised elites that current academic reading of African fictions might readily bow to its frenzied commutations. With the proposition to mark the beginnings of modernism in African literature with *The Palm Wine Drinkard*

(Nnolim 64), the sorry prospect to this second-fiddle academics is that younger researchers are tempted to start a reading of literary modernist theories in narratives which do not fit eighteenth century storytelling traditions of Europe. Even the exploration of the supernatural worlds, resplendent and majestic in African fictional memory, may then become instances of modernist cum magical-realism which have seen a few young African writers as adherents. Thus the originality of the story telling tradition in Africa with its blend of contemporary experience, its latitude for great artistic individuality, as against mere imitative repetitions, its pristine motifs, fluidity, spirituality and aesthetic experimentations, is subsumed in the meantime.

If our writing so continues to incline in the direction of frenzied taxonomies, it will be forcing itself into an ever blurring compartment that always has Europe's and America's closed guess-works as exemplars of literary, cultural or philosophical directions. But somehow, a state must be the product of individual citizens whose characters can trace back to the state's own sense of history and progress. Which makes an abiding literary ideal behove of the need to interrogate actions and thoughts of the few men, women, children, and even animals or situations, whose purport to be the object of collective values and individual aspirations meets ingenious artistic executions. A few decades ago, the world of Laye Camara or Senghor was deemed rather "too sweet"[5] for our moderns. But a future generation, worried by an absence on the part of her writers of ideal insights and plausible imaginative constructs of our expanding universe may well look to the sweet world and craft of *The Radiance of the King* and *The Dark Child*

for some helpful liberation from the vice grip of absolute pessimism. And they may concede to Camara that appellation of probably the most visionary artiste to come out of Africa. For *The Radiance of the King* is not just about a disreputable European or *The Dark Child* and *A Dream of Africa* some whims of Negritude romanticism but affiliates of the imaginative re-validation of past and future directions by which African peoples and, by extension, other beleaguered members of the world's wastelands may plod their course.

We should be glad that some writers of the eighties are not quite like the fifties and sixties generation (or older members of their own generation if we align with Hermetic thought to concede at least forty years for generational shifts). Those little-sung writings of the eighties such as witnessed in some works of Okoye, Ba, Okpewho and Ezeigbo[6] were marks of positive revisionism in the sense that they sought an end to the fleeting palliatives of methodically Westernised influences through avid arguments directed against their symptoms wherever they foisted themselves in the remote reaches of our thought. With practice, millennial writing may still shed remnant notions of progress and history borrowed from imperial worlds blighted by greed and prejudice. This has come in light of other interpretations of reality breaking upon sleeping intellectual and cosmological traditions. In this process all hemispheres, Eastern and Western, would have brought some light to bear on centuries of medieval cosmology impacting its backwardness on scientific, historical, religious and literary engagements.

Many centuries after Darwinian and Newtonian popular traditions the world should be glad in the knowledge that some of the Judeo-Christian theologies and their myths which grafted

ages of darkness upon the world are being upstaged by more plausible constructs of human development and interaction through countless millennia of history. Hopefully other hypotheses than Velikovsky's[7] are set to further convulse our world in the years ahead; original theories suppressed by theological prejudices have been collaborated in our age and understood as going beyond speculation to enliven human knowledge and bring mis-interpreted mysteries of so-called primitive peoples away from the contempt and prejudice of clandestine religious interests.

Here then is the challenge of foresight for African literary or linguistic enquiries and future creative experimentations. It is the illumination of ancestral wisdom by the imaginative revelation of the greater unity in the diversities that are embedded in our external and subjective realities. This was something which our arcane forebears knew then to be apparent in the universe to wit their proverbial "wisdom like a goatskin bag,"[8] unique in individualised perceptions, but yet central in the very complex and challenging nature of expanding reality. We can grant that the beginning of new fictional *belle letters* and the allowing for its appreciation by a bold and courageous literati will result in even more fascinating interpretations of some truths and aesthetics of our existence.

A clearer vision for African writing demands that we play down the larger and vocal coterie of voices bemused and magnetised, like our political leaders, by the commercialism, internationalism and abject materialism of Europe and America if only to pay heed to our own bold original voice directed by a purpose to grant individual and audience respite from replications of viral failures, not to talk of worn fads that

concede endemic malaise as the ultimate undertaking in realism and its “magical” equivalents.

The new literatures should come to accept the possibility of an order in which concepts of space and existence are seen for their varying and changing dimensions which can readily be negotiated by random application of the mind's eye to thought, and by deeper enquiries that change and shape social conditions, thereby holding out pleasant surprises in the discovery of an amazing residue of possibilities. It may not be the amazing kind of street side literatures exemplified in Ngugi's latest experiment with bulk. For *Wizard of the Crow* as interpreted from Gikuyu to English is still a successive muzzling of the promise of earlier work and smacks of that crude overkill of an idea that has Osofisan’s Reore gloating that “there is no other gods but our muscles” (85). Such ideological coliseum that has tyranny and conquest in confrontation with resistance and subversion – all in that chaotic Manichaean order – seems much now like a tame lion, an idiosyncrasy that must be seen as distinct from fidelity of artistic visioning, the soul of craft.

In Southern African writing, for a change, it is good that in spite of the seemingly endless answering or talking backs, the women's voice-throwing (“Shades” 13) is moving on to anchor on the truly original individual and collective experience. This African progress consists in looking inwards, attuning to, and employing the benefits of the environment in understanding the function of the greater whole and our continental role within its constructs. For the literary *tour de force* that will gloss over our plausible history within the progression of individual and collective existence, being the discovery of what we truly are, and where we are headed in a positively expanding sense, may

well concede its lack of purpose in any African or universal scheme of letters.

Ours have been ancient works of dynamic and meaningful universal affiliations within original and wholistic individualities. This is in spite of all the loud and fashionable opinions that emphasise the converse. It speaks very little now of our generation that for several decades after our colonisation and exploitation, we still await clear, fresh and inward looking, community-relevant expressions which ought to have sustained our early modern literary and critical schema. That there have to include truly original perspectives which pride in knowing the past, interpreting the present and exploring the future from fidelity to our cultural endowments, rational vigour and sense of positive destiny indicates that when this finally becomes a constancy in the literary engagement of art with community, we would have entered an era of enlightenment of which any previous renaissance was only a shadowy precursor and in which the future is its welcome harbinger.

## NOTES

[1]As in the mission statement of the International Research Confederacy on African Literature and Culture, IRCALC, <http://www.africaresearch.org>

[2]The triad of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike had published in *Transition* series of treatises that instigated a major revision of the literary canons when they

culminated in a stunning polemical but visionary compendium published 1980 as *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*.

[3]Taken from Camara Laye's biographical novel: *A Dream of Africa,* an idea consistent with Laye's central African vision which his critics had often and unfairly taken to mean a servitude to French colonial imperialism.

[4]Many scholars will agree, of course, that the tragedy or series of unremitting disaster in *Oil Man of Obange* told by John Munonye belongs more in classical Greek tradition than African or Igbo traditions where men are seen to dialogue with the gods in order to change or ameliorate their destinies for the better.

[5]Soyinka's dramas around Brother Jero, the cavalier character that triumphs rather than meets his doom in *The Jero Plays* and Sanda, a 'resurrection' of Jero in the eighties *Beatification of Area Boy*, are not so much satires of religious charlatanism or military autocracy as they are a triumph of the bohemian drama of social redemption via nonconformist but truly visionary realism.

[6]A further example of Soyinka's African vision comes with the Western educated son of the Elesin Oba in *Death and the King's Horseman*, who returns from England to perform traditional rites in honour of his father the Elesin Oba, but is constrained to carry out the sacred duty of accompanying his dead king to the great beyond when his father fails in this duty. It installs, in the opinion of this treatise, a quality lacking in the self-seeking modernism of post colonial African societies being the deeper sense of allegiance to a spiritual bond, an instinct always in readiness to let go of lower self interest for the survival of the whole and greater continuum.

[7]This is Achebe's own opinion of Camara's African world in the autobiographical work translated *The African Child* in English, which is opposed to the more balanced Africa of Okonkwo's tragic destiny in *Things Fall Apart*.

[8]For Nigerian writing, we tend to consider Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Potter's Wheel* and *Sunset at Dawn*, Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* and Akachi Ezeigbo's *Children of the Eagle*, among many other later works of this period, as revisions of the trend in modern pessimist and cynic realist writing to that of emerging hopeful transcendence that has yet to be fully and creatively explored by present generation of

Nigerian writers.

[9]Predictably Immanuel Velikovsky's theory in *Worlds in Collision* (1956) that the events recorded in Exodus were not God's vengeance on Egypt for persecuting His 'chosen' people, but parts of series of a worldwide upheaval involving collisions between the planets which were felt and recorded in still extant annals of human history, convulsed, till the present, the Christian world of Europe and America to unimaginable proportions of blackmail and vilification of the lifelong research of that great physicist.

[10]Achebe's famous proverb in *Arrow of God* popularised by the Nigerian literary critic Ernest Emenyonu in a publication on new critical perspectives on African literature entitled *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom*.

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