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## African Writers and Social Transformation

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## African Writers and Social Transformation

### Abstract

The title of this talk is 'African Writers and Social Transformation', and I should begin by saying that it was only when I sat down to gather my thoughts that I realised the enormity of the undertaking, and wondered whether I shouldn't have chosen something more innocuous. Such a title requires a book, not a lecture, so that what follows is hardly a sustained argument, merely a few thoughts with which I'm becoming increasingly obsessed as I survey the chaos that is contemporary Africa. With that proviso in mind, here goes:

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

## African Writers and Social Transformation

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On the wall above my desk there is a newspaper cutting from the *Independent on Sunday* newspaper of 31 March, 1991. The article in question, 'A continent on the edge of madness', was written by the Africa specialist of a French national daily. The thrust of his argument was that Africa, 'racked by civil war and famine', was teetering on the edge of disaster; and if I tell you that it was written following a visit to Liberia, which was then in the middle of one of the bloodiest civil wars of our time (Yugoslavia notwithstanding), you will understand the reason for his pessimism. Indeed, the accompanying photograph was even more telling in this regard. In the middle of an otherwise empty highway on the outskirts of Monrovia, the capital, a 'rebel' soldier was pointing an AK-47 at a corpse sprawled across the tarmac.

Such a sight is hardly peculiar to Africa, of course. The world is full of young men – and not-so-young men – waving Russian and American and Chinese weaponry at their fellow human beings; what is unusual is the soldier's uniform, which consists of a woman's wig, a face mask of the kind favoured by anti-nuclear demonstrators here in Europe, and a jacket that might have once belonged to the supporter of an American baseball team. Obviously, I use the description 'uniform' advisedly. The man's rig-out wasn't simply an expression of his individuated personality, however bizarre – not to say chilling – one might judge that personality to be. Women's wigs, along with shower caps, bathrobes, welding goggles and wedding dresses were – and are – much in favour amongst his colleagues, which leads us to the conclusion that an entire society, represented by those soldiers, was – and is – suffering from what one can only call a

species of collective madness. It's one thing to run around killing people, it's quite another to do so in fancy dress. And at the risk of reading too much into it, I would go further and say that the kind of fancy dress one chooses is itself significant in terms of understanding the nature of that madness.

I'll return to this in a moment; in the meantime, anyone familiar with Liberia under ex-President Samuel Kanyon Doe, the ultimate target of those rebels, was hardly surprised by the savagery of the exercise. It happened that I was in the country two or three months prior to the invasion of disaffected exiles from the neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, and I knew at once that the semi-literate Master Sergeant-turned-General (but this is Africa), was in deep trouble. Doe himself was quick to reassure anybody who would listen that the rebels were merely a tiresome inconvenience who would be quickly routed, but even he, it seems, was unaware of the deep hatred he had engendered in the course of his ten years in power, which was evident enough to the casual visitor who took the trouble to listen to those who had cause to celebrate his eventual downfall. I remember, for instance, bumping into Rufus Darpoh, the country's most distinguished journalist, as I was leaving my hotel early one morning. I already knew about Rufus by reputation. In my capacity as Africa editor of *Index on Censorship* magazine, I had covered his case in 1985 when he had been arrested and imprisoned for an editorial which suggested that Doe had rigged the elections. He was held for six months without charge or trial, and beaten every day with a fan belt. The newspaper he edited was closed down, and he himself remained unemployed for eighteen months after his release. If I say that Africa is wasteful of its assets, you will understand what I mean.

Anyway, on this particular morning I stepped out of my hotel, and there was Rufus, walking towards me. He was drenched in sweat and visibly shaking. I soon discovered why. After we had settled down for breakfast – but he confined himself to coffee and cigarettes – he told me that some security people had collected him from his house the previous night, and that Doe had spent the intervening period between then and now screaming at him, telling him that he was careless with his life on account of the nasty things he wrote about him, and boasting that he, Doe, couldn't be killed by ordinary bullets because he was protected by powerful medicine. We needn't concern ourselves here with the apparent lack of any logical connection between these two statements, between Rufus's carelessness and Doe's invulnerability, which was only typical of Doe's own disconnected consciousness. What does concern us was his misplaced faith in the efficacy of his so-called medicine, a fact that was demonstrated graphically enough in an unforgettable video sequence taken by his captors as he attempted to flee the country when even he could see that the American marines stationed off the Liberian coast weren't about to charge to his rescue.

Let us be quite clear about this. Doe himself practised human sacrifice. The medicine he boasted about to Rufus consisted of the heart and the private parts of children, preferably female, preferably virgins. Compared to this, a wig and a wedding dress – to say nothing of shower caps, bathrobes, masks and welding goggles – are perfectly unremarkable, and even – dare one say? – understandable, at least in terms of a universe which is yet to wake up to the imperatives of the modern world. The point about the rebels' fancy dress on the one hand, and Doe's cannibalism on the other, is that either can only be understood in terms of the magical properties associated with each. The tragedy of Liberia, in other words, was not merely the everyday brutality of military regimes which deliberately set about destroying democratic institutions in order to guarantee their power, but the continued stranglehold of outdated beliefs which ensure the emergence – and survival – of such regimes in the first place. And what is true of Liberia is true of the continent as a whole.

I'm perfectly well aware, of course, that Africans, along with their European apologists, have spent the last thirty years or so making a great song and dance about the inherent worth of indigenous value systems, but the very notion of cultural relativism is at best mischievous and at worst dangerous, and this because the real world, the world that we are required to negotiate as best we can, is not – and never was – polarised between the West and the Other. To quote W.B. Yeats, a writer who certainly knew something about the colonial experience, 'Every man, every where, is more of his age than his nation.' In other words, what we are pleased to term the West is not a conspiracy of history, bad luck and/or white men in dark suits, but an inaccurate synonym for the modern world, the world that abides by the rule of law and sends spacecraft to explore the far reaches of the universe. The inability of an entire continent to enter into a modern relationship with the times we live in is tragic indeed, beginning with the sacrificial victims of President Doe's lust for power, but the solution to what is an apparently intractable dilemma is hardly to be found in conspiracy theories, however seductive. Worse yet, such theories only serve to give intellectual respectability to the dictatorships that are the cause of the anguish, and in this regard I'm bound to say that the overwhelming majority of African writers have themselves contributed to the continent's failure thirty years after independence.

The most obvious culprits were the members of what we might call the Dignity School of African writing of the late fifties and early sixties, the writers who set their sights on the pre-colonial past in order, they claimed, to rescue the African sensibility from the distortions of the colonial experience. The most celebrated practitioner was, of course, Chinua Achebe, whose first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, became the standard for all such novels published over the next ten years. He himself stated his intentions clearly enough in an essay he published after the event:

This theme – put quite simply – is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain.

This is hardly the place to embark on a detailed critique of the novel, nor would I subscribe to Wole Soyinka's objection that the writers of this school 'mistook [their] own personal and cultural predicament for the predicament of [their] entire society' in their attempt to 'give the society something that the society had never lost'. The very popularity of Achebe's novel underscores the perceived extent of the damage to the African psyche after a century of colonial rule, and this despite the author's failure to resolve the problems he poses. Consider, for instance, Achebe's claim to reveal 'a philosophy of great depth and beauty'. In fact, the only evidence that the society possessed anything approaching a philosophy, properly defined, is limited to one short paragraph following the judgment of an oracle – magic again! – to banish a man who accidentally kills a fellow-clansman, as follows:

Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his [hut] and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities.

Obierika must pass for the local intellectual, the Socrates of the village, as it were, and yet this is the closest we ever come to any deeper reflection on the nature of divine law. The fact that the dignity of the society is posited on the reality of the gods in the life of the community; and, further, that their reality is promoted in the novel as a viable alternative to the European world which scoffed at such beliefs as evidence of a degraded fetishism, renders Achebe's failure as disturbing as the apparent ignorance of the novel's 3 million plus readers, to say nothing of its 3 million plus commentators, of the related fact that Achebe had actually proved the very thing he was claiming to have disproved.

In the meantime, of course, independent Africa was beginning to fall apart at the seams as military regimes and one-party dictatorships replaced elected governments, and a foretaste of what was to happen in Liberia broke out in Nigeria, Achebe's own country. This certainly lent some credence to Soyinka's charge that the African writer had been content 'to turn his eyes backwards in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract from the present,' but even those novels – Achebe's included – which sought to delve into 'the niggling, warning, predictable present' were hardly an improvement in terms of revealing the true nature of the modern African predicament.

Ironically enough, the sheer scale of the problems confronting the continent in the wake of independence has hindered, not helped, the move towards a more accurate analysis of the dilemma. The public drama – political instability, economic collapse, social chaos – is so immediate and so overwhelming that it appears to have rendered superfluous the need for any profounder examination of the internal landscape of the African psyche. Worse yet, writers who refuse to engage directly with politics are seen as somehow frivolous, un-African, tainted with decadent European notions of art-for art's sake which, according to Achebe, 'is just another piece of deodorised dog-shit'. Their work, in short, is not relevant. The most obvious example of such an un-African African writer is Dambudzo Marechera, the Zimbabwean novelist and poet; and we can see how keenly he felt the weight of general disapproval by his need to answer the criticism in his own work, as follows:

After a time I just couldn't understand my people and they couldn't understand me. They were talking in terms of the cosmologies of a special creation as in Achebe's *Arrow of God* and I was talking in terms of genes and chromosomes, and calculus and relativity and the new astronomy. At first they tried to beat me into submission but I fucked off out of there ...

Or, again:

My father's mysterious death when I was eleven taught me – like nothing ever would have done – that everything, including people, is unreal. That, like Carlos Castenada's Don Juan, I had to weave my own descriptions of reality into the available fantasy we call the world. I describe and live my descriptions.... My people could never again see me as anything but 'strange'. It hurt, for the strangeness was not of my own making; I was desperately cynical for the descriptions were the only weird 'things' I cared to name 'truth'. They were the heart of my writing and I did not want to explain my descriptions because they had become my soul, fluid and flowing with the phantom universe in which our planet is but a speck among gigantic galaxies. This then perhaps is what 'they' too easily dub 'alienation' when they are thinking within the mould of the theory of *A Child Of Two Worlds*, explaining the bitter angst with simple African/European disjunctions. I am what I am not because I am an African or whatever but because it is the basic nature of a maker of descriptions, a writer.

To understand what Marechera was talking about one need only turn to the critics on both sides of the political debate. Here is Biodun Jeyifo, the self-styled Marxist, rehearsing a familiar argument:

For the greater number of our contemporary African playwrights, the individual is almost wholly self-determined, even when they pay lip-service to the force of African communalist custom and tradition. Soyinka is the greatest exemplar of this tendency and his enormous talent apart, this is the main reason why he is so beloved by the Western Liberal critics... They see in Soyinka's plays, with eminent justification, Western bourgeois individualism incarnate.

And here is the infamous troika in their celebrated and supposedly 'radical' study, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*:

When [Eurocentric] critics denounce what they consider didacticism, propaganda, or inconsistency of moral attitude, they usually do so only when these things criticise or militate against European bourgeois values. In their concern with promoting the Western brand of individualism, they denounce as 'situational' those presentations in which some individual does not dominate or wilfully tower over his social environment. And of course they do not want to hear or read 'protest literature' since the protest is, or has to be, overwhelmingly against what the bourgeois order ... is doing to the African.

Elsewhere in their book, they promote 'Humpty Dumpty' as 'great poetry' on account of its 'linguistic clarity and simplicity', which gives some idea of their own understanding of literature. But let us leave that to one side, and ask instead how it is that a Marxist should find himself arguing out of the same corner as the self-styled 'Afrocentrists', except that both subscribe to a vision of society which is itself the product of the very same 'bourgeois order' they affect to despise. Both, at any rate, would be perfectly well understood by their bourgeois liberal Western counterparts, who themselves continually agonize over the modern bourgeois condition. European literature for the last century-and-a-half at least is replete with books written 'against what the bourgeois order...is doing to' those who find themselves trapped within its own contradictions, i.e. the bourgeois order itself. And contradictory because it is this same bourgeois order – rational, sceptical, secular; in a word, enlightened – which has set the pace of the modern world; which is, indeed, the modern world.

Both Jeyifo and the troika are dead wrong. It isn't the generalised African who needs 'protest literature' in order to re-discover an identity which, alas, they are yet to lose, if only because the modern world, including literacy, has yet to arrive on their scene, and which goes some way towards explaining why they sacrifice children and run around in fancy dress. On the contrary, it is bourgeois Africans who are only too well aware that the bits and pieces of wood – à la Achebe – aren't really gods at all, and who are then driven to fashion a substitute mythology to assuage their troubled souls. Those of a more political persuasion find a resolution of sorts in Marxism, and then proceed – à la Soyinka – to 'cover reams of paper with unceasing lament on the failure of this or that writer to write for the masses of the people, when he himself assiduously engages, with a remorseless exclusivity, only the incestuous productivity of his own academic – that is, bourgeois-situated – literature'; those of a more sentimental – or more romantic – disposition cast their eye backwards in time and pretend that the modern world is simply a figment of someone else's imagination (proof to the contrary notwithstanding, including word processors and printed books), and that the modern world will go away if only they can somehow manage to ignore it for long enough.



Unfortunately for both sides, the game is up; and, no, the marines are not about to come to anybody's rescue, this need for the marines, otherwise known as the Western World, being every bit as necessary as they were for Doe in the scheme of things. Bearing in mind those rebel soldiers with whom I began, there's little doubt that Africa is in desperate need of social transformation; unfortunately, until African writers can begin to suggest what makes possible their fancy dress, the social transformation that we all desire, and desire urgently, today, now, this minute, will remain as elusive as the medicine that protects African dictators from the assassin's bullet. Thank you.