

# UNIVERSITY TAKES LEAD IN REFORMING TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN SCHOOLS

## Education Notebook by William Ndege

WRITERS and students of literature define literature as a reflection of a people's life and culture.

Motivated by this definition, the University of Nairobi's Department of Literature and the Ministry of Education are organising a two-day conference for secondary school teachers throughout the country.

The theme will be: The Place and Teaching of African Literature in Secondary Schools.

According to chairman of the steering committee for the conference, Mrs. Eddah Gachukia of the University, "although African Literature has been introduced in secondary schools, it has not been given the significance it deserves.

"Students in secondary schools have continued to study alien literature that has little relevance to their own way of life and experience, in spite of the prominence African literature has assumed at University level these days," she said.

Literature from East Africa, Black America, the Caribbean, and the Black and Third World form the core of literature studies

at the university.

"This is because we feel strongly that any meaningful study of literature here can only be that which is anchored or deeply rooted in the Black experience," Mrs. Gachukia said.

She felt the Black experience was relevant to African students. "We also feel that here in the (university) is where it should start. It is the beginning of what we hope will be a revolutionary change in school Syllabi, so that African literature features prominently in our primary and secondary schools too."

Apart from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels like *The River Between* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, little African literature is taught in secondary schools. African literature has, therefore, to be taken seriously as a body of work that is worth studying, she said.

Mrs. Gachukia, however, did not advocate doing away with such long-standing works in secondary schools as Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the *Merchant of Venice*, but felt they should form

only the periphery and not the core of the syllabus.

She said the slow progress of African literature in schools was due to ignorance of its existence, fear to teach African literature by teachers who never read it at school, predominance of non-African teachers and little background material and notes to African literature.

A well-known African critic, Mr. Chris Wanjala of the university, who will also be participating in the conference from September 2-4, told me that the conference might create a dialogue between literature teachers and the Ministry of Education. This, in turn, will help in formulating a meaningful and realistic syllabus for secondary schools.

"As well as teachers talking about their own problems as far as the teaching of literature is concerned, the conference might be the beginning of a debate on literature teaching policies in the country," Mr. Wanjala said.

"We need to begin from the known to the unknown. Therefore, the literature portraying the

African experience is what should begin with first," he said.

Mr. Wanjala felt that having been colonised and taught to that African culture is inferior to the White man's, African literature can help us now to liberate our minds.

A sample reading list of writers from the Black world would include such literary giants as Edward Braithwaite, Aimé Césaire, Le Roi Jones, Richard Wright and James Baldwin among others, not to mention our own African writers.

At the conference, which will be held at Nairobi School, teachers and a host of observers from the Makerere and Makerere Salama Universities, will attend.

Fifteen papers on various aspects of African literature will be presented. It is also hoped that a journal of African literature will be one of the results of the conference.

It is also hoped that the Ministry of Education's participation will help reinforce and defend African philosophy of education with particular regard to the teaching of African literature.