

## BOOKS

Interview: Kenya's top critic talks about his journey in literary world and state of criticism in today and in yesteryears

# Prof Wanjala: I have been there, and done that

Prof Chris L Wanjala is one of East Africa's foremost literary critics. An author of fiction as well, Prof. Wanjala will also be celebrating his 70th birthday next Saturday. He narrated his literary journey to ABENEA NDAGO

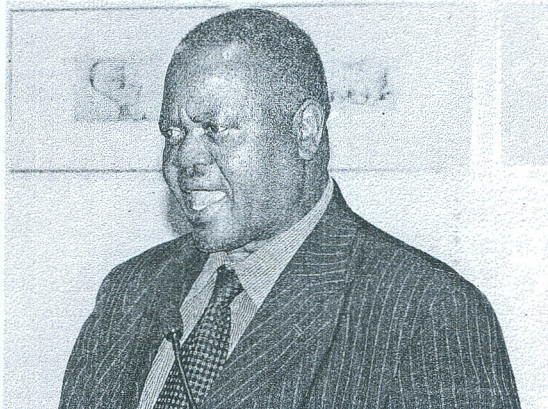
Sometime in September, 1968, I joined the English Department at the University of Nairobi as a post-graduate student. There were only three of us then: the late Dr Jane Nandwa, Dr Eddah Gachukia and I. I stayed there till 1971, when the three of us graduated, and I rejoined the department as a part-time lecturer that same year.

"The dichotomy between "literary creativity" and "literary criticism" had always remained hazy in my mind during my undergraduate days. If I were to thank my postgraduate studies for anything, then it would be for curing the disease. Dr Angus Calder, Dr Adrian Roscoe, Dr James Stewart, and many others in the department whetted my appetite for literary criticism.

I learnt at their feet, washed my hands, and later ate with them. I still remember how I felt happy when I saw my first book review published in *Busara Magazine* in 1969.

"What really hastened my learn-

“Kenyan scholars from the other disciplines had begun belittling us literary critics right from the start.” — Prof Chris Wanjala, critic.



ing of criticism were the Writers' Workshops at Paa ya Paa on Koinange Street. Aloo Ojuka, veteran journalist Philip Ochieng, Terry Hirst, and I vigorously participated in these. Gacheche Waruinge was often the Chairman of Paa ya Paa, and also editor of *Busara*.

When I later replaced Gacheche, and Elimo Njau was director, we moved Paa ya Paa to Ridgeways.

"Already, in 1971, Dr Calder and I had become the new editors of the Students Book Writing Scheme, a book which was published by the Kenya Literature Bureau. Bahadur Tejani helped us. I would soon work with Dr James Stewart, with whom we presented the programme "Books and Bookmen" at the then *Voice of Kenya* radio.

"Looking at the whole of East Africa, it may be right to say that Kenya was always ahead, partly due to historical reasons. The University of Nairobi then resembled a flower with very rich nectar, on whose petals scholars from all over Africa perched, to satiate their appetite for intellectual honey.

## Varsity to honour scholar

Next Saturday, Masinde Muliro University hosts literature scholars and enthusiasts in reviewing "The State of Criticism in East Africa in the Past 40 Years".

Prof Egara Kabaji says there are three main reasons for the event: to 'de-evolve' intellectualism away from Nairobi; to remember the ideals for which the late Masinde Muliro stood for; and to celebrate Prof Chris L. Wanjala for his achievement as one of East Africa's foremost literary critics.

In a letter to all invitees, Masinde University Director of Public Communications and Publishing Dr Bob Mbori notes that the conference will examine the journey of creative literature and literary criticism in East Africa.

The other people who also preceded me included Ezekiel Mphahlele, Ulli Beier, Gerald Moore, Andrew Gurr, David Cook, Tom Gorman, David Rubadiri, Peter Nazareth, Taban Lo Liyong, Okot p'Bitek, Grant Kamenju, Pio Zirimu, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

The last three were graduates of Leeds, and they wrote a lot in *Transition* and *The East African Journal*. These were the pioneers in whose hands Micere Mugo, Kimani Gechau, and Leonard Kibera got trained.

## Busybodies

"Literary critics in Tanzania then included Robert Green (he had come from Scotland), Arnold Kettle, and Dr Farouk Topan from Zanzibar.

"Kenyan scholars from the other disciplines had begun belittling us literary critics right from the start. Of all their comments, none were more arrogant and caustic than the historians', specifically from Prof William Ochieng, Prof Bethwell Ogot, and Prof Atieno Odhiambo.

They simply thought that literary criticism was not a worthy venture — we were busybodies.

"That was why in 1979 I challenged Francis Imbuga, Wachira Waigwa, Oluoch Obura, John Ruganda, and David Mulwa to pursue PhD

studies in Literature, and things have never been the same. It remains my biggest happiness to this day: that literary criticism is now a discipline, and Kenyan scholars pursue it in their droves. There is no literary barrenness in our literary criticism.

"Yet that is not to say I do not have a few disappointments with my work as a critic. When I once attended a conference in Nigeria, I discovered that even Ruth Finnegan is still acknowledged and celebrated as an Oral Literature scholar. Nigerians celebrate their pioneers whether they were black or white, and whether they were good or bad.

We never do that in Kenya. Our pioneers such as Calder, Gurr, Cook, Moore and many others are almost totally forgotten. We consequently have a few striking cases where even PhDs keep "parrotting and mouthing" theories whose origins they barely understand. I do think we need more depth, as well as situate our literary theories within existing realities.

## Unity of purpose

"Time was when literary critics were thoroughly steely characters (and I'm happy that most still are). Today, though, when Chimamanda Adichie happens to perch on Kenya for a few minutes, on her way to Nigeria from South Africa, it resembles a catwalk for specific Kenyan critics. They tend to stand in front of her, and vie with one another on who will gyrate his behind the best, for her to see. That's a completely new phenomenon in Kenyan literary criticism.

"The same message goes to our writers. Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka, Farah, Gordimer, and every other African writers of note, could engage you for hours about what they write. Well-grounded authors never engage critics in war of words.

"But most importantly: let there be unity of purpose. If Prof Monica Mweseli is an authority on the writings of p'Bitek, then it is easy to consult her on the same. I cannot understand if you claim that you are a 'Cultural Analyst.' Such a feat is impossible to accomplish even if God granted you another full life. Let us choose our shamba and cultivate it very well..."

# 'For Love' is celebration of passion brewed in African pot

By JUMA KWAYERA

When the final touches of the Pan Paper Mills in Western were done, before what at the time was the largest factory in East and Central Africa began production of paper, there were too many rumours about human sacrifices. Locals talked of engineers asking for 30 human heads for the factory to begin operations.

The construction of the textile factories in Central, Nyanza and Rift Valley was dominated by similar tales. Even for small businesses such as posho mills, there were tales of human sacrifice.

The ensuing "curfew" prevented people, especially men, from venturing outdoors in the evening lest they became fodder for the imaginary gods demanding sacrifices. So within the factory's 100 kilometres radius, the Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo and Teso who lived within the range would hardly venture outdoors lest they be

sacrificed. The belief in human sacrifices persist to this day and form the basis of themes Dr Nene Mburu sets out to tackle in his new novel, *For Love*. The overriding theme of the novel is true love that is tested to the hilt by cultural biases that are steeped in superstition and greed for material wealth.

The main character in the novel, Kiki, is forced out of his country, possibly Tanzania, to Sirimoni in the north (read Kenya) when his uncle arranges to give him away to fortune seekers for sacrifice. The boy is an albino, much sought after as it believed their body parts are a key ingredient in witchcraft potions for earthly riches. Kiki's widowed mother gets wind of the plot and spirits out him of the country into a foreign land where he lives as a refugee. Even in his country of refuge, Kiki still faces discrimination because of albinism, which is viewed as a curse. There is no doubt the novel was in-

spired by the brutal murder of albinos in Tanzania for witchcraft.

Despite the discrimination, a daughter of one of the richest men in his adopted country falls in love with him to the chagrin of her father. When would-be father-in-law hears of the development, he hires mercenaries to eliminate him. Just as the plot was about to be executed, his lover, Hawa (African version of biblical Eve) spirits him away from his tormentors. Instead, it is Hawa's parents, Katakona and his wife Ina, who coincidentally are killed by cattle-raiders on the night he would have been murdered. It takes the guile and wit of Katakona's junior wife Tamara to "disable" the raiders' leader to halt what would have been decimation of a community. Against this backdrop, Mburu celebrates the strength a woman while at the same time castigating the follies and foibles of a paternalistic society.

Like Hawa, her step mother, Ta-

mara, realising her life was in danger, dupes her husband's killer — cloud-piercer. Cloud-piercer parallels Luo legend Luanda Magere, Swahili legend Fumo Liyongo or biblical legend Samson. Three were duped by women into revealing the secrets of their strength. As the time-tested adage goes, if you want to get to the heart of a man, give him wine and women — he bears it all. The community heroes in the novel fall prey to these primordial human wants!

The book is told in simple narrative style in third person. However, five times, he resorts to the more interactive first person "we" to jerk the reader into realising that he the one being addressed. The author makes use of parables and proverbs to pass his message.

The novel is also available in Kiswahili, titled *Kwa Ajili ya Upendo*.

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