

IN THEIR OWN WORDS | Authors speak

My fight with prejudiced writer will not end soon

Dr Green was the kind of literary critic who looked down upon African intellectuals

BY CHRIS WANJALA
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Looking back on my literary career, I feel that the great literature debate we are having in *Saturday Nation* started in the 19th Century when European nations scrambled for Africa.

When I joined the University of Nairobi in September 1968, I found a debate going on with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, Henry Owuor Anyumba and Philip Ochieng as the major players.

I had studied the works of William Shakespeare, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Graham Greene and Thomas Hardy for my A-levels. But these scholars kept drawing my attention to pioneer white settler writers who defended the grabbing of African lands by European settlers who had just returned from the two Imperialist wars. Writers like Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen insisted that settlers like Lord Delamere found no Africans interested in land tenure. They cleared the bush, dug the soil, treated it of germs, and then planted the seed. To them, the whole of Kenya was bush land, except for wild animals.

Different generations of writers and literary critics have answered to these claims that Africa did not have any history before the white man came.

The task of the African writer over the last century has been to correct this impression created by Western adventurers. Even in North America and the Caribbean, where the African eventually settled as a forced migrant, this prejudice against the African persisted. They wanted to place Africans into categories, depending on how they responded to the presence of the white man in their lives.

In America, they talked of the Nigger who worked in the master's house and the Nigger who worked in the fields. The house Nigger sought to please the master, while the field Nigger sought to turn tables on the master.

In Kenya, we had Africans who collaborated with the white man against their own people, and the Africans who saw through the lie of the white man's superiority, and worked to liberate their people.

The field of literary criticism has also suffered from the question of prejudice. A case in point was a lecturer called Robert Green, who once taught media specialist Dr Magayu K. Magayu literature at Kenyatta University.

Dr Green ranted about the lack of critical adventurousness and the absence of theoretical sophistication that were common features of African literary criticism. Yet by 1978, and even at the time he revised his paper to be published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in March 1984, my books — *Standpoints On African Literature* (1973), *The Season of Harvest* (1978), and *For Home and Freedom* (1980) — had already been published. Critical essays in numerous journals were common on university book shelves with debates on Marxism, existentialism, and even New Criticism.

The contents of these books, however, fell on Robert Green's deaf ears as he chose to quote Western literary critics. He went around the country as a teacher of literature proclaiming that 'plot' and 'characterisation' were the only critical terms deployed in the majority of criticism.

The quarrel between Dr Green and I started when he delivered a paper entitled 'Some Reflections on the Place of European Literature,' at a staff seminar at the literature department of Kenyatta University. Present were most of our African colleagues in the academic fraternity.

He was later to say: "The paper was received with unconcealed hostility by its audience of Kenyan academics and post-graduates, one of whom aired his disagreements in the columns of Nairobi's *Sunday Nation*."

Before the seminar paper was published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Robert Green recounted his experiences to his Western colleagues at a seminar at the University of Sterling, Scotland, and at the Australian National University.

He said it was not out of "our rancor and vengeance but because of the hostile reception of its argument (it) has a real bearing on what I was trying to investigate, and it was made only too clear to me in 1978 that some Kenyan intellectuals — Ngugi was not present on the occasion, being incarcerated — were not receptive to the

view that neo-African literatures have a continuing importance to the African student or critic."

Dr Green faced Augustine Lwanga Bukenyu, a colleague of many years, and complained about the way we had handled his presentation. Bukenyu was later to recall to me: "Yes, I remember Bob Green's paper. He gave me a copy when we met in the 1970s, and he told me how the 'appatchiks' had attacked him when he delivered it."

"You know," Austin Bukenyu added, "he was my undergraduate teacher in Dar, and I was always vigorously engaging/challenging him on his rather smug and overstated (opinionated) positions. I think he had a serious confidence problem, and finding himself in our Africa of early post-independence years, when we were ready and willing to question everything, did not help his (bloated) colonial hang-ups."

We seem to have hit Dr Green below the belt. But I mentioned Magayu K. Magayu here because as a student, Magayu could have been one of Green's gullible students. Green canvassed his students, young ones like Magayu, and old ones like Austin Bukenyu, against us. "My arguments," Green said later, "were subsequently endorsed by an undergraduate contributor to the same paper: Magayu K. Magayu."

I am yet to confirm with Dr Magayu, who teaches journalism at the University of Nairobi, whether he was a literary mercenary sent by his lecturer to finish me. These things happen up to this day.

Dr Magayu and I became great friends when he joined the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi. As my post-graduate student, he wanted to write his Master's thesis in the Gikuyu language instead of in English. When his project was turned down, he veered into media scholarship. But his is a story for another day.

Dr Green listed many Western European literary critics in his paper in question — about 11 of them in a paper of 13 pages — and only three African literary scholars (two of them from Nigeria and only one from Kenya), and one politician, Julius K Nyerere, who had translated Shakespeare's plays into Kiswahili.

Green contradicted himself by arguing that Africa was not interested in great books of the Western world. He

only hailed Wole Soyinka, not for writing his drama, fiction, poetry and the essay, but for reworking Euripede's *Bacchae*. From Green's case, I argue that the white man does not only want the land, the minerals, and other material resources of the African continent, he is happy when he controls the African mind, too.

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MY FAVOURITE BOOK

Relishing the book whose title I never knew

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The year was 1995 and I was a primary school pupil in the city. It was a cold and drizzly evening (I can vividly recall these minute details) and I had just arrived home, school bag on my back when my father handed me a small, tattered but interesting (as I later found out) book.

I glanced at it and was instantly mesmerised, knowing that the book would captivate my interest. I was not wrong because by Saturday of that week, I had already finished reading it in spite of the then broad school curriculum comprising GHC, home science and so on.

Let me, dear reader, digress a little onto other titles that I have read: From West Africa, I have read Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* and I do recall the cook Blackluc's laughter about "Madame and Toundi quarrelling about 'little bags'". I have also read Chinua Achebe's *A Man of The People*, and I read with relish Odili Samal's political activities and as the book comes to an end, the coup staged by the young army officers that swept Chief Nanga and company out of the (political) scene. (I sat *A Man of The People* by Chinua Achebe as well as Imbuga's *Aminata* for my KCSE). From North America, I have read *Black Boy*, a personal autobiography by Richard Wright.

Many years were to pass from that time in 1995 before I learnt from one of my maternal uncles that the book I had been given by my father was known as *The Burning Star of Ndotu*, and that it had been a set book that had been done in Kenya at one time by people of his generation.

The book itself is about a son of a powerful chief somewhere in East Africa. This son of the chief is known as Hodari and his father, the chief, is known as Kacheka.

Now, I must say that I have been described by many (my uncles, my alma mater at both high school and university and even my cousins) as having an eclectic taste of music and books. I seem to have a preference for books that are unknown by many people. This is because I have asked many people (even on Facebook) umpteen times whether they have ever read or even seen *The Burning Star of Ndotu*, but I have not received any feedback.

The story begins at a point in which Hodari, the chief's son, is sitting outside his father's hut one morning looking at the hill country which is his father's realm. All his brothers had been slain in battle with the people of the west who lived on a flat, plain country and Hodari was heir apparent of the chieftaincy of the Ndotu Mountains. Hodari then reflects on the enormous task of defending this hilly country from invaders once he takes over leadership from his father.

The book talks of Hodari's travels to the neighbouring Ndotu Mountains, a realm ruled by an old, weak, senile and ineffectual chief Mfulenzi and, interestingly, the reins of power are in actual fact firmly in the grip of a wicked, sadistic and cruel witch-doctor by the name Sumu. Sumu demands absolute loyalty and kow-towing from his subjects, over whom he exercises a reign of terror. Sumu moves from place to place by walk-dancing over a kudu horn over which his legs straddle and every time his whole body dances to the tune played by one of the members of his entourage.

Sumu executes criminals and suspected dissidents by burning them alive using a 'star' in a ceremony which he claims is a sacrifice to their 'god'; the star. Sumu refers to himself as the servant of the 'star' and once he finishes using it for his cruel ceremonies; he covers it up using mats woven together. The 'star' which Sumu refers to as a 'god' is a very humongous rock upon which Sumu climbs and on the eastern side is a pole on which the criminal (often a resident of the Ndotu Mountains who has antagonised Sumu, mostly on some flimsy offence). The criminal is horrendously scorched as the sun sets. Later on, Hodari talks of a god beyond the stars who did not want him to be wrongfully executed by Sumu the (now dead) witchdoctor.

Now, has anybody ever heard of this book? Is it currently on sale in Kenyan bookshops? Is anyone willing to direct me to where I can find this book?

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