The critic as an artist

Times are changing fast, placing new demands on the men and women of letters. This calls for critics who look beyond their brown notes

BY GODWIN SIUNDU

Last week, Masinde Muliro University in Kakamega hosted a literary conference on “The State of Criticism in East Africa”, where critics reflected on the trajectory that literary criticism in the country has taken over the years. It was also an occasion to acknowledge the creative and critical contribution of Prof Chris Wanjala, who turned 70 in April, having committed the strength of his youth and his intellectual genius to the calling of literary scholarship.

The conference was well-organised, with academic papers presented by scholars from Moi, Kabangi, Masinde Muliro itself and the University of Nairobi.

That the conference was held at all was significant for two reasons. First, honouring a Kenyan scholar whose over 40-year career has been pursued in Kenya, defying the allure of more lucrative appointments that could have been Wanjala’s had he chosen to teach in the West. In this regard, Wanjala stands alongside his contemporary, Paulin Houtondji, a world renowned philosopher who insisted on living and researching in his native Benin. In fact, Paulin Houtondji against what has recently been established role models and the systemic critics to weigh the works of such luminaries. It is not just in literary scholarship that such an anomaly is visible. Our historians like Bethwel Ogot and Godfrey Muruli remain largely unacknowledged by way of discursive research and publishing.

Academic discourses

Such critics are often unaware of the conditions under which their earlier counterparts worked. The lack of autonomous spaces of critical knowledge production, the ever-present surveillance of draconian regimes, the sheer absence of established role models and the systemic material crippling of scholars that rendered the whole presence in the academy a labour of love.

All these make Wanjala’s academic sojourn much longer than what it actually is. Such people as Wanjala and his contemporaries embarked on an academic career by dint of personal striving, with little motivation to pursue higher education when they could have taken up opportunities that did not demand a high scale of intellectual exertion.

The second reason the conference was important is because it was hosted by one of the youngest universities in Kenya, but one which has clearly expressed its intention to be home to vibrant academic discourses. In a sense, the fact that colleagues in Masinde Muliro thought of honouring Prof Wanjala was a mild indictment of the so-called big universities, which have done more to draw the sweat and blood of the workers that are university dons of Wanjala’s generation.

In fact, I sense a whiff of a scandal in the fact that Prof Wanjala, who has taught at the University of Nairobi for his entire career with a 10-year interlude at Egerton, could only be honoured with such an event by a university that has never directly benefited from his genius. For how long then, shall we all sit by silently and watch as such committed intellectuals become progressively wretched by the drudgery of old age, only to be politely ignored by the same academic structures that they helped prop up?

Isn’t it time our universities established a culture of recognising the contributions of their lending thinkers? In literary criticism, this country has been blessed with the citizenship of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, whose work has made an inestimable contribution to the advancement of literary scholarship.

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In African Literatures, while other events: as are political scientists Ali Mazrui and Michael Chigo, besides linguists like Ochola Ooko and Kembo Sure.

What I am suggesting is that universities in Kenya should establish a tradition of honouring the contributions of outstanding individuals as a way of motivating younger scholars who seek to build up on what knowledge already exists. Such recognition should, in my view, go beyond celebrating age.

On its own, hitting 70 is an achievement in other aspects of life, and one still deserves congratulatory messages for reaching this milestone as Prof Wanjala did. But much more important would be a situation where we celebrate particular intellectual achievements that one earns even when they are relatively young. This has been done elsewhere, as happened in 2008 when some universities around the world organised symposia to celebrate 70 years since Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart was published.

In 2012, Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome organised a conference to acknowledge the intellectual influence that Karin Barber’s 1987 essay, Popular Arts in Africa: The Episteme of the Eve”, had had on the directions that literary criticism has taken in Africa generally. Some of the papers presented at this conference would later be edited by Newell and Okome, and published in the 2014 special issue of Research in African Literatures, while other...
Achebe's place in literary history is secure

BY BARRACK MULUKA

I discovered Chinua Achebe in high school at age 15. I was in my sixth grade at Nairobi's Olaifa Jericho Primary School. In 1970, we had two classes of African writers before. We thought that book was written by Europeans. We had been fed on Grimm's Fairy Tales and sundry European folk tales.

We had read all about The Brave Little Tailor, Snow White and the Dwarf, Sleeping Beauty, The Elves and the Shoemaker and the like. My sister and I were in love with a book in two volumes, titled Read Me A Story. They were forever singing about the "mirror on the wall" and the "feariest of women," Snow White.

Beauty was defined as whiteness and whiteness as beauty. African women still wrestle with this absurd conflation.

Years later, I came across an address that Achebe made at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair's Indaba in 1986. He described my formative literary mentor as "intuitively pacifist." But I ran ahead of myself.

Our first encounter with African books was heavily West African. The European publishers behind them heavily marketed African and Ghanaian canvases. This was both in the editors' and of the English Language course books. Before the advent of Kenya's Safari Children's English, we read the African New Oxford English Course by French and a source titled Learning by Reading.

The closest thing to East Africa was Roland Hindmarsh's Understand and Write. The background was, however, heavily Ugandan and Tanzanian. So, too, was Oxford English. And so we read about Mallam Ishaya the blind storyteller, the handlooms of Oxfords English Course by French, and a source titled Learning by Reading.

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I was a young editor, recently found us reading these books in the middle of other lessons.

The virtuous of Achebe, the founding editor of the African Writers Series (AWS), was simply pulchering. Alan Hill, his publisher, has told the story of how he first got to publish Achebe in 1958 and how the AWS was launched. It was a journey of faith. For, nobody believed that an African could tell a story, let alone write one.

So, was Achebe, who died last year, a great writer?

This question is frivolous. He was a prodigy, completing Things Fall Apart at age 21. Yet, we must grapple with the doubt.

Achebe's visit

Last week, Prof Henry Indangasi of the University of Nairobi described Achebe as an inconsequential writer who lost the opportunity to become great. In a cringingly homens ass calculated to be pruriently interracialized, Indangasi painted the portrait of a febrile attention-hungry individual. He cast Achebe as a finicky eater and, above all, an intellectual dwarf: Why was Achebe feeling bad (about Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize for Literature)?

It revealed a side of the faired writer that still makes me cringe. Arrogance, vanity, lack of modesty... he read sections of his newly published novel with a somewhat heavily Nigerian accent. He wasn't a particularly good reader... he was very careful about what he drank or ate... he did not touch alcohol, even as he watched us getting drunk...

The Nigerian novelist had the potential to be great: but great he was not.

Indangasi describes Achebe's visit to Kenya in 1988. I was part of the activities around this visit. I was a young editor, recently retained by Henry Chakava as the English Language Teaching (ELT) editor at Heinemann. As the ELT editor, part of my brief was to develop children's literature. I launched the series with Achebe's The Drum, The Rain and How the Leopard Got His Claw. The latter was a combined effort between Achebe and John Iregaganchi. The great raconteur could descend to co-authorship.

I was dismayed to witness a publisher of literature who had not read Andillis attempting to

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suffered by post-independence East African elites that Wanjala and Olmotitheke dealt with in their different works would illuminate the African writer's struggles with different forms of colour consciousness and how such is determined our interactions with each other.

These are ideas that have not just preoccupied local scholars; they are the hallmarks of the stirring intelligentsia. They are seminal test for those who wish to understand the plight of blacks in the current world of Caucasian hegemony.

In fact, the idea of home as the only possible haven of freedom, captured in Wanjala's For Home and Freedom has been extensively dealt with by post-colonial critics including Iain Chambers, Myra Jodice and Robin Kelley. It may well be that these scholars have never heard of Wanjala, so I am not suggesting that he necessarily influenced them. My point is that these scholars are now dealing with issues that Wanjala confronted three decades ago, which places him among his peers globally.

On the African literary scene, his criticism is unique because it is not as potential as that of Chinua Achebe's Anatomy of Female Power or the more cited" Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature. Nor is Wanjala your run of the mill African literary who would accurately document literatures of 'dying' cultures. Over the years, he has churned out densely theorised critical works that demonstrate the interconnectedness of critical thought across the post-colonial world as we know it today.

Minority groups

Having said all these, I think it is still possible for Prof Wanjala to relook at some of the ideas in these works so as to recast and make them more responsive to emerging patterns of contemporary thought. Particularly, I think the silences in his works regarding the experimentalizations of marginalised racial women and minorities at the time, inadvertently contributed to the suppression of voices that debated from the pan-Africanist logic of the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s.

In all fairness, though, Wanjala included Mahad Garuhula, Robert Tejani's and Peter Nazareh's essays in his edited Standpoints on African Literature as 'representatives' of minority groups, but one can immediately see that the selected essays were those on African or black writers and, for Garuhula, on a female writer.

Further, Wanjala's now infamous dismissal of popular writings and cultures at the time somehow attracted more attention than the expense of other more acceptable pronouncements that he made.

In recent years, I should add, he has been an enthusiastic and avid reader of literatures created on the peripheries. But I wish he repackaged his range of ideas and disseminated them via more established publishers whose circulation reaches a wider world of scholarship.

Above all, I believe that Prof Wanjala and his contemporaries have the intellectual pedigree and physical strength, even at such advanced ages, to give us more critical works condensed from many years of lived experiences and intensive readings.

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