

LITERATURE AS “SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT”: READING MADUBUIKE

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Abstract

Societies are not *tabula rasa*. “Our historical differences actually make a difference. This happens because no human society is a *tabula rasa*. . . .” (Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* xii). This holds true of every country and civilization. Histories, social practices, and political milieu play predominant roles in highlighting these diverse narratives, through literature. They bring forth the differences among civilizations, as well as challenge the distortion which histories of cultures and communities are subjected to. Taking into consideration the eminent African critic Ihechukwu Madubuike, and his arguments in *Literature, Culture and Development: The African Experience*, this article argues how literature involves a strong commitment and engagement with society, and is not written merely as “art for art’s sake.”

“There is no rigid barrier between makers of culture and its consumers.
Art belongs to all, and is a ‘function’ of society.”

- Chinua Achebe (“Africa and her Writers” 22)

Writing as an art, is a “social engagement,” which entails “a commitment on the side of the society” (Madubuike 1). Taking into consideration Ihechukwu Madubuike’s contention in his book *Literature, Culture and Development: The African Experience*, this article argues how literature involves a strong commitment and engagement with society, and is not written merely as “art for art’s sake.” Histories, social practices, political milieu play predominant roles in the writing of literature. They bring forth the differences among civilizations, as well as challenge the distortion which histories of cultures and communities are subjected to.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has drawn one’s attention to the fact that: “Our historical differences actually make a difference. This happens because no human society is a *tabula rasa*. The universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently” (xii). He raises a rhetorical question: “Can thought transcend places of their origin?” (xiii) hinting at how

place plays a significant role in determining thoughts. Histories related to each place define and redefine thoughts, stories, cultures. It holds true of any place, “including, of course, Europe or, broadly, the West,” (Chakrabarty xii) as well as of the once colonized countries of the world. Madubuike looks at certain aspects of Anglophone as well as Francophone African literature in the essays of his book *Literature, Culture and Development: The African Experience*, which upholds the significance of re-thinking histories, cultures and ethnic differences in Africa, with an aim to bring about a positive change in the continent. These essays have been published as journal articles, and have been put together here to trace a line of argument. This book also consists of the critic’s deep insights in the form of “Book Reviews,” “Opinion Articles,” and “Speeches,” which are not discussed within the limits of this article. The essays uphold a perceptive understanding of the situations in different societies in Africa, taking into consideration works not only by creative writers but also philosophers and social activists. It is significant to look at what Stanley M. Macebuh comments on the eminent critic’s book:

All of them [the writers, Madubuike takes into account in the book], I dare say, are deeply committed to explorations of what, according to Dr. Madubuike, Wole Soyinka describes as ‘the problem of self-apprehension.’ All are, each presumably in their own way, cultural nationalists, determined to explore the limits and necessities of freedom and self-determination, all only different in the methods and instruments they choose. (4)

African literature, in dealing with the specificities of African cultures, people and communities, engages critically with them, bringing out perspectives which not only make a positive contribution to studies based on Africa but also to the wide arena of postcolonial studies, unraveling concerns which pertain to African countries as well as to other colonized countries as well. However, African works of literature have been questioned by eurocentric critics on the ground of universality. The question arises: What is this notion of “universality”? According to Achebe, it is nothing but “a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe” (“Colonialist Criticism” 9). He denounces the notion of universality in literature, and writes how “the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it” (“Colonialist Criticism” 9). Literature engages with the particularities of each society, entering into a dialogue with the afflictions and grief underlying communities and cultures. It need not be a work of art which focuses on itself more as being a work of art, rather than taking a deep look inside the lives of people. Madubuike, in engaging dexterously with the literature of Africa, has made a deep analysis of this aspect of literature. He writes that:

The needs of contemporary Africa are many, and definitely include cultural assertion and nationalism; it also includes cultural relativism, the appreciation that not all cultural values have universal relevance or application, that *values are culture-induced and it is the responsibility of a sensitive critic to assess these legitimizing paradigms constructively while judging a work of art.* (emphasis added) (5)

Questioning the “colonial mentality” (6) and the “hegemony of the dominant class” (7) in Africa, Madubuike strongly upholds African literature as a “work of art [which] has to be relevant to the milieu that nurtured it” (10). He takes into account certain novels, like Ferdinand Oyono’s *Boy*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure*, Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child*, Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, to highlight the fact that

African literature is a “sort of theatre,” which engages with the theme of “tradition versus modernity, one of resistance and change” (11). Even today, Africa continues its struggle against Western supremacy as well as corruption within; for globalization is nothing but “a disguise for pervasive imperialism . . . It is all a matter of pervasive of continued historical interest in favor of the imperial power” (18).

The importance and necessity of African literature in bringing about a change in society, is deeply dealt with by Madubiike in his essays. Highlighting the importance of Onitsha Market Literature, he talks about its deep engagement with “human dilemma” by making use of “literature as a tool” (37). Its engagement has remained mostly on a superficial level. It is Chinua Achebe, who, in a brilliant manner has used “writing for the African . . . [as] a serious enterprise” (37). Madubiike explicates how Achebe’s writings have indulged in dealing with three major concerns: “. . . the interpretation of the African past from within; the problem of interpreting this past in a foreign language; the responsibilities and obligations of the writer to his own people” (38). According to Achebe, though English language carries “the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire,” but one must not, “in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it” (58). He sees the emergence of a “new voice” in Africa, and puts forth his view that:

He [the African writer] should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. . . . I [Achebe] feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (“The African Writer and the English Language” 62)

It is a “great linguistic phenomenon,” (45) points out Madubiike. He brings out the significant contribution of Achebe as “a conscious artist and master craftsman,” (44) also highlighting the contribution to society by other authors like John Munonye, Gabriel Okara and Nkem Nwankwo, in adapting English language to suit diverse African cultures.

Madubiike critically examines the label “African literature” ascribed by Europeans, as a “romantic way of portraying pre-colonial Africa, and the use of colonial languages,” (50) in the essay “The African Novel in the 1970s: Basic Identity and Categorization,” which was first published in *Issue* (4.4). He points out that the usage of the term “African literature” has always been “a misnomer” (51). Bringing into context the use of European languages in the writing of literature in Africa, he argues that: “The problem, as I see it does not lie with the fact that African writers express themselves in non-African languages. The crucial problem is that they do not express themselves in their mother tongue!” (51). He questions the use of the term “African literature” not only on the basis of the language problem but also hints at the geographical disparity in the entire African continent. The tag of “African literature” rejects the diversity in the continent in geography, histories, cultures, religions. The unique identities of each culture need to be upheld in literatures, and every ethnic group in every country of Africa must find expression in the diverse writings by African writers, which cannot be put together under the rubric of “African literature.” Emphasizing the contribution of African writers in giving expression to the divergent cultures and practices in different parts of the African continent, Madubiike writes that: “. . . what is important is that each writer is responding to the pull of his own tradition, and it is the tradition that provides the local color and unique quality in each individual creative work” (54). He takes into account the novels of Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Sembene Ousmane, and points out a markedly increasingly trend in the use of oral traditions, of

traditional sources, and the recovery of vernacular literatures. Madubuike's in-depth analysis and his critical re-viewing and re-thinking of concerns disturbing the African literary scenario prove to be of profound relevance to be explored and further researched. He extends his study further, concentrating also on the role the national intelligentsia in the countries in Africa, questioning its practices in independent Africa, which push the entire continent into a mire of corruption and misrule.

In the essay "The Role of the National Intelligentsia in Societal Development—The Example of African Writers," Madubuike talks about the "national elite" and the "intellectual elite" in any society, and further sub-divides the latter into "the establishment intellectuals and the anti-establishment intellectuals," (59) bringing to prominence the fact that the national intelligentsia of any country is not a homogenous group. Labeling African writers like Achebe as "anti-establishment intellectuals," he profoundly highlights the fissure among the "national elite" and the "intellectual class," which "has been to the advantage of the political elite, which usually forms the government . . ." (62). The intellectual class suffers from a dilemma of "ideological impotence" (63) being tied down by inhibitions, but an African writer succeeds "to rise above some of the inhibitions and circumscriptions imposed on him by the society," (64) very well-evident in the writings of Achebe, Soyinka, Thiong'o and Armah. Madubuike also upholds the pioneering works by Nnamdi-Azikiwe, Dennis Osadebey, Micael Dei-Annang, Leopold Sedar Senghor, R.E.G. Armattoe, Gladys-Casely Hayford, J.P. Clark, Lenrie Peters, and George Awoonor-Williams. Works by diasporic black intellectuals have also made significant contributions, giving rise to the Negro Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance. But difference in opinions among intellectuals has led to an ever-widening class struggle. Madubuike, in talking about all these movements and ground-breaking works—also taking into context, "Indigeneism," "Negritude," "Nativism"—uses the term "Black literature," and highlights that: "Black literature has to do with our past and our present realities; it is a cultural continuum, an experience which has become part of our being" (71). The critic acknowledges the "burden of the intellectuals" in writing about issues which are perplexing and disappointing, acting as detrimental to the progress of society; and makes a deeper study to "show why the intelligentsia in Africa has not been able to discharge its historic responsibility towards her people satisfactorily due to leadership problems," (79) also underlining the significance of the role of a writer in a society to make use of his "talents and superior intelligence to propel our country to greatness" (80). Writing as a deep engagement with society includes not only novels but poetry also plays a profound role in transforming society.

Madubuike argues that African poetry constitutes a predominant function in society, in bringing about the African Revolution, which aims at "the complete and total emancipation of all peoples of African descent, be they in America, in the West Indies or in the mother continent itself" (83). In the essay "Poetry and the African Revolution," he upholds how Negritude poetry did act as a challenge to colonial imposition, singing about human dilemmas in Africa under the siege of colonial rule, re-claiming cultural customs and traditions. In talking about the contribution of Negritude poetry in society, the celebrated critic takes into account poems by eminent poets such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Leon G. Damas, David Diop, Dennis Osadebay, Michael Dei-Anang, to emphasize how "African revolutionary poetry acclaims and affirms African values; it denounces colonialism, oppression, exploitation and slavery; it encourages resistance and holds high the achievements and successes of the oppressed" (92). The Portuguese colonialism in some parts of Africa had given rise to a new voice of poetry, whereby powerful poets such as Amilcar Cabral, Edward Mondlane, Marcelino

Dos Santos and Agostino Neto had come to the fore. They called for “total commitment. This people’s poetry rejected the bourgeois theory of ‘art for art’s sake’ and replaced it with a more pragmatic theory of ‘art for life’s sake.’ ” (95). African poetry, even today, continues to raise voice against injustice, domination and corruption, thereby bringing about a sense of awareness among people to question and challenge the wrong practices of their countries.

Madubuike also comments about the various practices involved in the act of poetry-writing itself, questioning certain practices and emphasizing the need to seek inspiration from one’s traditions rather than from foreign cultures and Western poems. In the essay “Neophytism and African Traditional Poetry,” he writes that: “. . . before he imitates any modern poet the neophyte poet should study our traditional poetry” (102). The tendency among poets to imitate British forms and styles of poetry leads to a denial of native cultures and histories, and an indifference towards the dilemmas of people belonging to their indigenous societies. Even poets like Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark had initially borrowed from Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas. Madubuike deftly makes a study of poetry-writing in Africa, and highlights the fact that: “I am not saying that Okigbo and Clark are all garbed in borrowed robes only. . . . There are elements of traditionalism in their poetry, but a healthy traditionalism was not attained by either poet until the late in their careers . . .” (103). Poetry is deeply linked with society, and human conditions can best be given a new dimension through poetry. The poet’s own perception, through inspiration, “verbal excitement,” dedication, makes every poem a unique entity: “Whatever disturbs your feelings, whatever arouses your emotion, is a good subject for poetry. . . . But whatever you write about make sure it communicates a uniqueness of perception and reflection” (104). The use of language, the expression of cultures, become more important concerns for a neophyte poet; and therefore it is very important for such a poet to learn how traditional poetry have incorporated native cultures and have adapted a foreign language to suit their needs. The young poet has an important task to fulfill for his society, and therefore needs to dedicate himself to look into his own culture in order to write about the predicaments of his own people; as Madubuike writes: “The poet and the novelists are both artists and I share the view that they are, to a certain degree, representatives and spokesmen of their people” (108).

Having given quite a thorough idea about poetry-writing in certain parts of Africa, the literary critic and scholar drives one’s attention towards the origin of the Senegalese novel in Africa, also focusing on the French colonial impact in Senegal and the writers then, in his essay “The Politics of Assimilation and the Evolution of the Novel in Senegal.” The essay was first published in *African Studies Review* (18.2). He points out the three stages in the evolution of the novel in Senegal, and the influence of the French policy of assimilation on the novelists; and highlights that: “The politics of assimilation was rigorously and systematically applied in Senegal” (112). Marking the first phase as the “pro-assimilationist era,” when novelists were thoroughly influenced by the French assimilation, Madubuike goes into a discussion of certain novels by Amadou Mapathe Daigne, Bakary Diallo, and Massyla Diop, upholding the idea that despite the imposition of the policy of assimilation, these novelists have showed their deep concern with social problems and conflicts in society. The next phase results from the rejection of the assimilation policy and a renewal of native culture and writing traditions, called the “Negritude era.” Francophone black intellectuals like Leopold Sedar Senghor, Birago Diop, Ousmane Socé Diop, Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas were the exponents of the Negritude movement, protesting “against the cultural alienation, racism and discrimination . . .” (117). Madubuike makes a reading of novels by Ousmane Socé Diop, Abdoulaye Sadj, Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Malick Fall, and talks about the cultural consciousness in their novels. The

third phase, “the period of political nationalism,” (126) begins with the novels of Sembene Ousmane, who “committed himself politically in his writing in a way that none of his predecessors had done. His heroes are drawn from the lower segment of society. Moreover, for the first time, political independence emerges as a central theme” (122-123).

Thus tracing an ancestry of novel-writing in Senegal, Madubuike proceeds to comment on contemporary concerns among Senegalese novelists now, in his essay “Language and Style in the Works of Senegalese Writers.” This essay was first published in the *Journal of Black Studies* (5.1). Language is one of the major concerns in writing literature. Madubuike argues that: “A language does not only express culture; it transmits its values and thoughts, and by so doing, establishes a national and group identity” (128). Pointing out the drawback of the policy of assimilation, he writes how the French “failed to take into account the linguistic environment of the Senegalese child before his arrival into the French school” (129). Although Senghor had proposed the idea of calling Senegal a bilingual country, taking into account the dominance of the French language and an erasure of native languages, yet Madubuike raises very pertinent questions here: “. . . how does one define bilingualism in a country where more than two languages are spoken? Does one refer to Serere-French bilingualism or to French-Wolof bilingualism, or again to Diola-French bilingualism? And what does one do with the local bilingualism that is common in the country?” (131). In making an intense reading of Senegal novels, the erudite critic highlights that novelists have given expression to the rich tradition of oral proverbs and folk-tales, traditions and customs in their novels despite being influenced by the policy of assimilation, and contends that: “. . . the insertion of traditional elements into the novel is an attempt by the writers to remain authentic, to resist literary assimilation” (133). Even in poetry, native accents and rhythms have been preserved in order to retain the traditional taste; as is found in the poetry of Senghor. Taking into concern certain Senegalese novels—of the novelists mentioned above—Madubuike makes an extremely significant point here: “. . . the use of language at this level by a writer is not only an act of choice, a desire for freedom, but a challenge against linguistic orthodoxy” (141). He also argues that in West Africa, “some Nigerian writers have gone beyond inherent colonial mentality in their handling of the English language,” (141) such as Amos Tutuola, Nkem Nwankwo, Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali.

The imposition of English and French in Africa has led to a marginalization of African languages; and therefore Madubuike propounds the idea that: “. . . one of the most important battles ahead for national integration and development is the cultural battle. In this context the integration of our language at the focal point of our development agenda is paramount” (146). He argues that the novel in Senegal “remains a distinctive piece of work, reflecting a specific world view and embodying literary artefacts drawn from a specific cultural background,” (149) and upholds the “principal traditional esthetic elements” (149) in Senegalese novels, in his essay “Form, Structure, and Esthetics of the Senegalese Novel.”

Madubuike also talks about the traditional elements in their novels, which include the use of the supernatural, use of folk-tales, of songs. The “linear progression” of stories “eliminates detours and digressions [which] is similar to the same technique employed by the traditional storyteller” (155). The Senegalese writer acts both as an artist as well as a moralist, teaching “through the medium of literature” as a “conscious effort to continue the literary tradition of the Griot” (157). One finds “an authentic echo of the cultural universe . . . [giving expression to] the norms, myths, and superstitions . . . in that society. . . it is the African world which is uniquely and constantly recreated” (157-158). Religion also plays a prominent role in Senegalese novels.

Madubuike highlights the diverse religious and traditional aspects related to society, which find expression in Senegalese novels, in his essay “Aspects of Religion in the Senegalese Novel.” Novelists open up a space for various beliefs and forces which abound in native traditions: “It is a world in which devils, sorcerers, and wizards haunt big inhospitable forests, a world in which certain men and women . . . heal or inflict pain on others [through necromancy]” (166). These men or women are known as “feticheurs.” Another important element which forms a part of the societies and the novels of Senegal is sorcery, where the sorcerers are depicted as not to bring destruction on others, but “sometimes infuse life into the sick or the physically handicapped” (167). Novels by Ousmane and Sadj, among others, very well highlight this aspect of society. However, in some novels, a “sorcerer is [also] an object of public hatred. A suspect has to establish his or her innocence. . . .;” (168) and Sadj and Fall upholds, how, in certain instances, “the individual is constantly fighting against forces that are oppressive and unhealthy. . . . [against] the evil effects of ‘dijnns’ . . . [and] consults diviners and healers . . .” (169). The aspect of “divination” is a “part of the ritual aspect of traditional Senegalese religion” (170). Also, one finds the existence of traditional African medicines and traditional doctors employing diverse means of treatment; side by side with Moslem and Christian priests. Madubuike here significantly upholds that although Senegal is replete with men and women who have taken up Islam and Christian religions, yet they have not completely lost ties with traditional religions, and have attained a balance between both the religions in their lives. He raises an intriguing question here: “How can one explain this double religious comportment of the christianised and Islamised Senegalese? . . .” (177). The ability to infuse both the religions in their lives, have not detached Senegalese men and women from their traditional roots. Religion occupies such an important place in society because—as Madubuike writes—it is “an attempt to find an answer to existential problems . . . the traditional Senegalese possesses, without any doubt, a religion a coherent philosophical system through which he tries to give a meaning to life and to situate himself in the universe” (178). Writing, being always involved with its function of upholding the different aspects which influence society, therefore, very actively engage with religion in highlighting how “[e]very social activity in Africa is invested with a religious flavor” (165).

The importance of Negritude in African societies, is another important area of concern which Madubuike has highlighted in several of his essays. Yet, in another essay entitled “What Negritude is Not A Comment,” he takes into consideration the mis-readings Negritude is subjected to, and questions the wrong notions associated with the movement. The essay was first published in *Renaissance* (11.2). Talking about the two divergent opinions nurtured about Negritude, Madubuike writes:

The ambivalent nature of Négritude, its imprecise and numerous definitions expose it, on the one hand, to the virulent attack of its opponents, those who don’t seem to understand what it is all about, and on the other hand elicit the passionate defense and detailed explication of its aims and objectives from its partisans those who, think they know what Négritude is all about. (160)

Taking a critical look into the movement, its merits and de-merits, the critic questions the tendency among scholars either to reject it on the ground of denying its importance as a political movement or to romanticize the ideals which Negritude highlights. He very clearly emphasizes that Negritude is “a hydra headed movement. It is not only a literary movement; it is also political, economic and philosophical” (160). Challenging Dr. Okam’s notion that Negritude is not capable of bringing about a political upheaval, denying its political importance since it has

been mainly a literary movement, Madubuike upholds the fact that: “. . . from its inception the founders of Négritude movement believed in the ability of literature to effect a social change, to yield, as it were, a new political order” (163). Negritude as a movement has failed because it “has remained static,” and has therefore could not “achieve desired social and economic changes,” due to its “alienated leadership” (164). The intentions of Negritude movement and its political and social commitment in questioning the practice of racism cannot be put to doubt. Its significance in the history of Africa remains unquestioned.

Madubuike takes into concern two major African authors, and speaks about their “cultural virtuosity,” in his essay “Achebe and Senghor: A Study in Cultural Virtuosity.” Apart from being Africans and blacks, there is a “literary virtuosity [which] binds them together . . . Senghor, an apostle of negritude is the father of the movement . . . [and] Achebe has produced his own adherents” (181). Madubuike also highlights that “Achebe and Senghor are both humanists. . . . [They are] apologists for the black race and its values;” (181) and their contribution to the field of African literature by adapting European languages to speak of native predicaments, remain unparalleled. Their writings, through novels and poetry have touched the chords of not only the hearts of African men and women but also that of people from every culture, every civilization. Madubuike, in the concluding essay of his book, makes an urge to the politicians and leaders of different countries of Africa: “. . . to study . . . the works of these two great philosophers, [and] distill from them the message of accommodation, of tolerance, of understanding of the inescapable bond of unity of destiny and the futility of ethnic confrontation and arrogance . . .” (183).

The writer is inextricably intertwined with the societal milieu native to him, and therefore, he has a prominent role to play in its development. Achebe, in one of his essays, writes that: “. . . the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration must be done” (“The Novelist” 45). A writer has to be engaged deeply with his society in order to speak about the dilemmas of his people, and aim to bring about a positive change in his societies. Madubuike in his brilliant analysis of Francophone and Anglophone literature of Africa—in his essays—has very effectively emphasized the role a writer plays in society. “If an artist is anything he is a human being with heightened sensitivities,” writes Achebe; and therefore “he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer” (“The African Writer and the Biafran Cause” 79). Art and life need to complement each other in order to make a difference in the lives of people in every civilization, across the world.

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