CRITICISM, IDEOLOGY AND SOCIETY: THE INSTANCE OF NIGERIAN LITERATURE

By

Chidi Amuta

Literary and art criticism is one of the principal methods of struggle in the world of literature and art.

Mao Tse-Tung[1]

All criticism must include in its discourse...an implicit reflection on itself; every criticism is a criticism of the works and a criticism of itself. In other words, criticism is not a table of results or a body of judgements, it is essentially an activity, i.e., a series of intellectual acts profoundly committed to the historical and subjective existence ...of the man who performs them.

Roland Barthes[2]

The primary impulses that generated this paper are remotely traceable to Wole Soyinka's 1980 Inaugural Lecture at the University of Ife: "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies." The spectacle was at once familiar and bizarre; the lone actor, in ill-fitting academic costume worn over his habitual Mbari shirt, was playing to a full theatre. The language was characteristically opaque and obfuscatory even though the author of *Myth, Literature and the African World*[3] was arguing a case for a demystified and more accessible language of criticism. The targets of his verbal onslaught were understandably the new crop of Ibadan and Ife-based radical (often Marxist) critics in whose hands Soyinka's works have provided the readiest illustration of the ideological contradiction inherent in the use of myth as a vehicle for artistically objectifying social experience and vision. Here, it ought to be pointed out that Soyinka has in recent years spent an appreciable amount of his polemical energy in acrimonious (and often virulent) verbal combats with some of these critics.[4]

The present exercise is not an attempt to wade into the combat zone of the writer-critic controversy in Nigerian literature. Nor do we seek to respond to Soyinka's obviously hypersensitive and unjustifiably vitriolic assault on his critics. On the contrary, when divested of its ideological allergies, Soyinka's lecture raised a very fundamental but often overlooked question

in African literary scholarship. This has to do with the relationship between the critic and his society as well as the ideological implications of that relationship. Soyinka posed the problem quite succinctly in the following terms:

> *Very little...has been attempted in studies of the critic as a socially situated producer, and therefore as a creature of social conditioning, a conditioning which in fact offers no certitudes about the nature of his commitment to the subject which engages him, his motivations, indeed, about the very nature of his social existence.*[5]

Here was a germane task waiting to be performed especially in the context of Nigerian literature and, by implication, of all African literature.

This essay is primarily concerned with the indubitable relationship between society, literary culture and the interrogation and perception of both in the contemporary Nigerian setting. We perceive literature as both a product and a process in the creation and recreation of social consciousness. And for the purpose of this discussion, society is conceived as a determinate and specific association of living men in active interaction with one another for the purpose of producing material and non-material effects for the satisfaction of their proximate and incidental needs.

Our specific task is to identify, revise and critique the discernible ideological standpoints that have come to characterise critical discourse on and evaluations of Nigerian literature to date for the following reasons: a) to highlight the dangers inherent in the growing and unrestrained constrictive professionalism and academicism in the criticism of Nigerian literature especially by Nigerian critics; b) to attempt an analytical exposition of the motivating social principles behind the different ideological positions which different critics on the literature in question have assumed with a view to indicating the direction of critical consciousness and c) to underline the place and role of the critical intelligence in our contemporary national discourse and praxis.

First, some random prefatory notes on the theory and history of culture criticism in general.

I. Criticism and Social Ideology

Criticism as a product and process of active interrogation of the essence of being human and its cultural manifestations is hardly detachable from the rest of social discourse. Because it is indubitably integral to the social evolutionary process, the

fates and fortunes of criticism trace nearly the same trajectory as social history. The issues that form the object of criticism, its forms and functions as well as its specific ideological predilections are contingent upon the current preoccupations of society itself. In other words, the series of critical acts in a society across time are in themselves structurally analysable along a diachronic paradigm. Thus, criticism does have a history; specific fashions and tends in social and cultural criticism come into being, become dominant and fade away as a result of specific and determinate historically identifiable causes.[6] This is the social-historical axis of criticism as a constitutive social practice.

More importantly, the class position of the critic, his self-perception in and mode of insertion into the prevailing class formations of his society influences and even determines the ideological colouring of his critical products. In this context, we conceive of ideology simply as "a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a 'world-view' or a class outlook."[7] Consequently, if we examine the range of critical reflections on the art of a society across time or even in a specific epoch, it becomes possible to make discriminations among them in terms of ideological slant. Precisely, as members of the cultural academy preoccupied with literature, we are critics just as architects, engineers, doctors,etcetera are professionals each practising his specialised calling from a definite ideological position, and attitude to society. It is, therefore, possible in fact imperative that the notations 'liberal', 'conservative', 'radical', 'leftist', etcetera...should also be applied to positions which critics and their products assume. This is the class-ideological axis of criticism.

In the global history of ideas, an understanding of the interrelationships between the two axes of criticism (the socio-historical and the class-ideological) is crucial to a comprehension of the role of criticism in the cultural front of the larger struggles that define social existence in different societies and at different times.

In most traditional or pre-colonial African societies in which the production and consumption of literature were part and parcel of communal self-assertion and self-projection, the critic was hardly distinguishable in the arena from the rest of the audience or the performer. In fact, the three functions could be (and were often) played out simulanteously by one and the same person. An example that we can readily call to mind is the very dramatic annual Ekpe festival dance in Ngwaland which features masquerade displays, choral processions and widespread audience participation in the form of dancing and chanting.[8] At the height of this euphoric display of communal self-fulfillment at the bounty

of harvest, it is usual for an individual dancer to step aside, admire a fellow dancer of outstanding ability and join others in carrying the distinguished performer shoulder-high amidst hilarious applause and approving comments. Days and weeks after the festival, domestic and public gossip in farms and other places of gathering are enlivened by critical reflections on outstanding and unsatisfactory performances at the recent festival. Performers derive their fame and acclaim from a cross-section of such informal evaluations. This is criticism at its most organic and instinctive profundity, for here, it derives from and is part of the ritual of communal living. Solomon Iyasere makes a similar observation in respect of oral performance culture among the Edos of Nigeria and generalizes as follows:

> *Thus, the role of the critic in the African oral tradition was a complex one. He was not a literary technician in search of ossified precision and foreign patters and designs, but a spontaneous entertainer, a historian and a wordmaster -- in short an artist. Criticism was not divorced from the creative process but an essential part of and adjunct to it. Creativity and criticism enjoyed a symbolic relationship. Critical evaluation and the composition of a work of art were regarded as facts of the same process and, in most cases, aspects of the same moment.*[9]

Similarly, the wave of anti-feudalist and anti-establishment strikes and student unrests in China earlier in the twentieth century culminated in, among other things, the Cultural Revolution. The basic tenets of this revolution questioned accepted literary traditions, fashions and aesthetic values. Most young writers were agreed that "literature must stop being esoteric and start serving the whole society."[10] The attendant literature eschewed the traditional penchant for idolising the philosopher-king and celebrating events around the court. Instead, the new literature dwelt on the experiences of individual commoners within the emergent post-revolutionary society with its heavy emphasis on egalitarianism. Examples of this trend can be found in such works as Lao Xiang's story "A Village Lad Drops Out of School" and Jiang-Chi's "On the Yalu River."[11] The thinking behind this radical development in Chinese literary consciousness is articulated into a coherent artistic manifesto in Mao Tse Tung's "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and the Arts."[12] The theoretical positions and critical canons articulated in this document acquire meaning and significance mainly within a framework that defined for literature a pragmatic functionalism in China's revolutionary struggles against her aggressors, especially the Japanese.

In pre-Athenian and Athenian Greece, respectively, critical response to the Homeric epics and the great tragedies was a heightened aspect of audience participation in the literary event.

Professor Bowra writes:

> *Much of their art was popular in the sense that it was performed before large crowds in the open air. But even so they never made the mistake of judging the intelligence of an audience by that of its lowest members. Poetry, being a serious affair, demanded attention and concentration, and the Greek audience responded to the claims on them, becoming good listeners and intelligent critics.*[13]

Consequently, even Plato's poetics and metaphysics of static universals spared a thought for literary art in relation to society. Compelled by the need to safeguard the moral health of his imaginary polis from the possible corrupting influence of the poet as an artificer of illusions, Plato jettisoned the poet from his ideal republic and thereby inadvertently inaugurated the form and content dichotomy in Western critical discourse.

Similarly, the reality of Medieval Western society was the primacy of the Christian God in the order of things. This state of affairs was dramatised by the supremacy of the catholic church in Rome and the prevalent conception of man exclusively as a candidate for salvation whose life on earth has to be spent in pious and miserable self-immolation. Scholasticism, the dominant intellectual tradition of the period, although it had little time for sustained and orchestrated poetic enunciations, produced in St. Augustine and Aquinas the outlines of a poetics that emphasized the subliminal immanence of the divine in all natural objects and therefore in all imitations of nature. At best, scholastic aesthetics was both formalistic and emphasised Christian morality. Further on in the line of Western history, the Romantic period was characterised by revolt against the ossifying rationalism of the preceding neo-classical intellectual tradition and the unsettling ecological and moral repercussions of the Industrial Revolution. The response of literature to these pressures took the form of a revolutionary celebration of the natural, the rural, the youthful and innocent so characteristic of the poetry of Blake ("Songs of Innocence"), Coleridge and Wordsworth as opposed to the rigid argumentative poetry of Dryden, Pope and Samuel Johnson before them. Critical response to this poetry was polarised between the extreme aestheticism of the "art-for-art" school of Shaftsbury, Hutcheson, Diderot, Sulzer, etcetera, on one hand and the emphasis on the realistic and the didactic of the post-Hegelians, Compte, Proudhon and Shelley.[14]

In all the foregoing instances, we find that criticism and critical theory are ways of dialoguing both with the specific literary works as well as the issues that define life processes in the ambient social world. It is against this general theoretical background that we shall proceed to examine the forms which critical attention on Nigerian literature have assumed over the years.

II. Mutations of Ideology In The Criticism of Nigerian Literature

Like much of African literature, Nigerian literature, by virtue of its socio-historical determinants is heavily predicated on problems of a socio-political nature. For us, literature has always been a way of self-assertion, self-definition and self-interrogation in the course of national evolution. Consequently, successive generations of Nigerian writers from Tutuola to Achebe, from Soyinka to Okigbo, Rotimi to Osofisan, to name only a few, have on several different platforms consistently defined themselves and their art in terms of an unconditional commitment to the vicissitudes of life in a neo-colonial society.

Ironically, however, the response of critics of Nigerian literature to the social consciousness of our writers has not been nearly as concerted. Consequently, the arena of critical discourse on Nigerian literature is littered with debris of idealist/formalist equivocations, unsubstantiated and unfelt cultural nationalism as well as 'unscientific' sociologism. We need to add that this inadequacy has not been restricted to Nigerian literature alone but has become a dominant feature of much of African literary criticism. In conference after conference, seminar after seminar, we hear of milestones on the road to an endless search for a "traditional African aesthetics" of our literature. But once the socio-political bias of much of African literature is recognised, what is perhaps urgently called for is greater and more concentrated insight into possibilities within specific African national literatures. In the Nigerian instance, it is necessary to review the major standpoints in the criticism of its literature to date.

A. Art-For-Art Criticism

Art-for-Art criticism of Nigerian literature is an extension of imperialist assimilationist rhetoric on the part of modern Western critics. On the part of their Nigerian/African counterparts, this critical posture stems from a hangover of the colonial heritage which presumes that cultural values are good if they are remotely traceable to the supremacist assumptions of the erstwhile colonialists. The main thrust of this critical posture is the assumption that the object of art is the creation of beauty irrespective of the social context of the individual artist. At the back of this assumption is a certain universal conception of humanity whose reference point is usually Western man. Whether they are Africans or Euro-Americans, advocates of this position draw from the same spring of idealist/formalist poetics in which literary creations are reducible to formalistic equations. Omafume Onoge has identified Dan Izevbaye and Eustace Palmer as the principal pontiffs of this school.[15] In his

essay, "Criticism and Literature in West Africa," Izevbaye conceives of the maturation of African literature in terms of greater jettisoning of socio-political preoccupations.

> *As the literature becomes less preoccupied with social or national problems and more concerned with the problems of men as individuals in an African society, the critical reference will be human beings rather than society, and the considerations which influence critical judgement social ones.*[16]

Although this excerpt speaks for itself, Onoge's diatribe on Izevbaye's brand of idealism deserves reproducing:

> *Izevbaye's art-for-art advocacy is really for a depoliticised literary universe inhabited by abstract human beings with abstract moral values of an abstract religious deitism. A literary universe, which our prosaic logic compels us to add, must be created by astral writers and equally astral critics.*[17]

Eustace Palmer's pronouncements on aspects of Nigerian literature, especially the Nigerian novel, have borne the same stamp of historical de-contextualisation and liberal universal humanism. As recently as in his mistitled book, *The Growth of the African Novel*, his comments on the Nigerian novels of his choice dramatise Palmer's art-for-art obsessions. About Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*, a novel on the last moments of the Nigerian Civil War, Palmer is worried more by whether Ekwensi adheres to his Western conceptions of novelistic form.

> *...Ekwensi shows no sense of plot and structure, the novel consisting of isolated episodes only tenuously held together by the overriding theme. As far as characterisation goes, Ekwensi shows little psychological insight....*[18]

The one and a half page discussion of this novel of over two hundred pages does not try to find out whether there is anything in the nature of the experience being depicted that necessitates the loose episodic structure of the novel or whether, in fact, the debilitating psycho-social effects of the Nigerian Civil War gave room for psychological depth on the part of individuals. It is our contention that such generalisations, by neglecting the social experiences that condition the literary works being discussed, also fail to do justice to the very literary forms generated by those experiences. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely in the series of amputated reviews that constitute Palmer's enormous book.

A further trait of the art-for-art school of critics of the literature in question is the usual search for the ancestry, equivalents, affinities and precedents of stylistic trends in Nigerian literature in the Euro-American literary tradition. It becomes easy for instance, for Bernth Lindfors to see Ekwensi's art as deriving essentially from "third-rate American movies and fourth-rate British and American paperback novels."[19]

Because the main practitioners of this critical fashion operate from a liberal framework, their critical perceptions are usually subjective to a point of near absolute relativism. Consequently, they also represent the most widely published critics of Nigerian literature in terms of sheer output.

B. Bourgeois Cultural Anthropological Criticism

The transitional realm from cultural nationalism to the faintest recognition of the sociological imperative by critics of Nigerian literature takes the form of an unmediated obsession with cultural anthropology. The dominant traits of this trend in Nigerian (and African) cultural scholarship has been aptly characterised as the "Festac consciousness"[20] which manifests itself in the numerous revivalisms of calabash-and-raffia traditionalia. Culture in the parlance of the critics in this school is conceived in the sense of static aspects of a society's material and spiritual attributes at a particular stage in the process of social development. Thus conceived, the physical symbols of culture are seen exclusively in terms of museum pieces, chipped porcelain and survivals of animistic social norms.

The critical efforts of this school take one of two forms: it either laments the rupture of traditional Nigerian cultures as evidenced in the increasing Westernisation of aesthetic consciousness in the works of leading Nigerian writers, or tries to establish the presence and continuities of varying traditionalia -- folklore, "tribal" customs, etcetera -- in contemporary Nigerian literature in English. In the former category belongs much of Romanus Egudu's readings of Okigbo's poetry in his book *Four Modern West African Poets*.[21] Bernth Lindfor's *Folklore in Nigerian Literature* and Oladele Taiwo's *Culture in the Nigerian Novel* also belong in the second category. About the notion of culture that informs his book, for instance, Taiwo writes inter-alia: "The culture of the title is the culture of traditional society."[22*] However, in the exegesis of the Nigerian novels of his choice, Taiwo dabbles into issues in contemporary

*The correct quotation reads: "The 'culture' of the title refers to indigenous culture." K.M., Ed.

culture thereby reaffirming the dynamism of culture and dangerously compromising the cardinal premise of his book.

A further offshoot of this critical tradition is what Biodun Jeyifo has described as "ethno-criticism" which, in addition to seeing Nigerian literary works in terms of the ethnicity of their authors, also resurrects decadent ethnic myths and traditionalia and tries to project these onto the screen of contemporary literary works. In the writings of critics in this formation, one discovers the disquieting tendency in Nigerian national life to see national achievements exclusively in terms of the ethnicity of individual contributors. It becomes convenient for a critic like Ernest Emenyonu, in his otherwise beneficial book, *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, to conceive of the works of writers like Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi (both writing in English) as belonging to Igbo literature.

In the history of the criticism of Nigerian literature in English, the enduring significance of this school lies in its attempt to underscore the debt which the majority of first generation Nigerian writers like Achebe and Soyinka owe to the oral traditions of their respective ethno-national cultures. Its basic deficiency lies in its predominantly unhistorical conception of culture.

C. Bourgeois Sociological Criticism

Bourgeois sociological criticism of Nigerian literature owes its rise to the rather reluctant realisation on the part of some critics that the literature which forms the object of their enquiry is made peculiar by the fact that it is concerned with problems in Nigerian society at various points in its development. Abiola Irele was perhaps the earliest to come to this realisation when he confessed:

> *We have a duty not only to make our modern African literature accessible to our people in terms which they can understand, but also in the process, to promote an understanding of literature, to widen the creative (as well as responsive) capabilities of our people....*[23]

Irele wraps up his critical stance in what he refers to as the "soiological imagination" whose essential method is to

> *correlate the work to the social background to see how the author's intention and attitude issue out of the wider social context of his art...and to get to an understanding of the way each writer or groups of writers captures a moment in the historical consciousness of his society.*[24]

There is a certain ambiguity in Irele's "sociological imagination" option. This arises from the fact that he insists on subjectivity as the definitive attribute of the critical intelligence, while recognising the social problems and processes which preoccupy the writer as aspects of objective reality.

> *Despite the technical requirement of critical judgements, they are, in the last resort, of a subjective character-relying on the personal responses of the critic as a reader.... A good part of criticism depends, therefore, on the intuition which is later corrected and given an intellectual formulation.*[25] (Emphasis added)

The unconscious apostles of Irele's critical option display understandable timidity when confronted with the relationship between immediate social reality and the literary works they choose to explicate. Oyin Ogunba's efforts in *The Movement of Transition* (a study of Soyinka's plays) provide a ready example. Ogunba focuses prime attention on the degree of faithfulness of the plays he studies to the Aristotelian unities and other technicalities of Western dramaturgy. Even in those of Soyinka's plays inspired by obvious and recent events in Nigerian history, Ogunba fails to confidently establish the relationship between these plays and their socio-political referents. What we get is a superfluity of equivocal statements like this one on *Madmen and Specialists*:

> *Madmen and Specialists was produced after the Nigerian Civil War...and was probably first conceived when the playwright was in detention during the war. This particular war appears to be the focus of Soyinka's comments in this play...*[26]

The most annoying instance of this trend is again Romanus Egudu in his recent but relatively unheard of book, *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament*. Wearing the façade of a critic with a sociological bent of mind, Egundu however fails to tell us what exactly constitutes the "African predicament." In order to get a glimpse of his conception of the contradictions in contemporary African society, one has to retreat to his earlier book, *Four Modern West African Poets*, where he declars:

> *Modern West African poetry deals essentially with the African predicament, which is an aspect of the tragedy of man's existence. It is the crisis of the past, the present, the future -- the past being hideous, the present, confused and harassing, and the future uncertain and in-*

> *triguing. The poetry is therefore born of anarchy, an anarchy of the mind and the spirit which is projected into the somewhat ordered chaos of poetic artistry....*[27]

This obsession with the apocalypse manifests itself in the more recent book in the form of vague generalisations about the inadequacies of the status quo etc. In the specific instance of his treatment of poetry on the Nigerian Civil War, for instance, Egudu's conceptual lapses become more evident. Whatever else it may have been, the Nigerian Civil War was a specific experience in the historical process of a specific society. Its causes were specific and determinate and it evoked definable and structurally analysable psychic and ideological responses in different Nigerians, including writers. But Egudu envelops all these in equivocal statements like this;

> *The Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), which was the culminating point of the series of political crises in that country since 1962, has provided some of the Nigerian poets with the opportunity of manifesting through art the nature of their feelings about life and human values.*[28]

Since the poets in question are Soyinka, Clark and Achebe, one may ask what these poets had been dwelling on before the war!

Egudu and his fellow bourgeois pseudo-sociological critics substantiate Jeyifo's charge that

> *the state of African literary criticism is directly commensurate to the "publish-or-perish" rubric and the academic pecking order which consitute the peculiar form of the individual and class entrenchment of the African professional intelligentsia in the national neo-capitalist economy.*[29]

The common shortcoming in the foregoing versions of bourgeois sociological criticism of Nigerian literature has to do with the fact that the pronouncements of its chief practitioners is usually not predicated on solid empirical information on the social phenomena they see objectified in the literary works they analyse. Nor do they operate from any known tradition in sociological theory.

For a more profound and more rigorous version of this critical position, we are compelled to turn to the work of Emmanuel Obiechina. In this connection, his contributions

to date find expression in his extensive researches into Onitsha Market Literature as well as in his important book, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel.*

In addition to drawing attention to the important linguistic and formal feature, of the phenomenal Onitsha market pamphlet literature, Obiechina's substantive theoretical position with regard to this literature reveals his clear understanding of the vital place of class configurations in any meaningful discussion of culture and society. He contends that

> *the different segments of society have different tastes, especially in the matter of what each reads. The middle classes determine their own literary interests just as working people seek their own level of literary enjoyment. It is one function of the literary historian to recognise and record and analyse existing cultural tastes without prejudice, establishing the connectedness and underlying unity in the cultural situation.*[30]

Obiechina goes further to provide an analytical and reasoned explanation for the emergence of this popular literature at the time and place it did. Among other factors, he ascribes the rise of popular pamphleteering in Onitsha to the absence of a black intellectual elite in the hinterland, the rise of popular journalism as well as the cultural and psychological outlook of the inhabitants of Onitsha, especially the Igbo people with their "mobile consciousness."[31]

In *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* Obiechina's exegesis of the inter-relationship between culture, tradition, society and the novelistic mode in the Nigerian texts of his choice is particularly illuminating. His conception of the categories of culture, tradition and society is unambiguous and dialectical: "The essential reality of contemporary West African culture is that within it oral tradition continues to exist side by side with encroaching literary traditions."[32] While appreciating the functionality of the essentially oral and, therefore, animistic and superstitious culture of Africa before colonial incursion, Obiechina, unlike the cultural anthropological critics, is at pains to confess that "belief in magic, witchcraft and the gods tends to be in inverse proportion to scientific progress and control of the environment.[33]

However, Obiechina does lapse occasionally into the cultural nationalist penchant for seeing much of the contradictions in contemporary Nigerian, nay African, society in terms of the much advertised "culture conflict" at the ex-

pense of the very determinants of culture contact which we contend were inherent in the larger design of colonial economic arithmetic. By and large, Obiechina's contribution to Nigerian cultural discourse could, to a lesser degree, be equated to those of Ian Watt, and Raymond Williams respectively in English literary scholarship.

D. The Radical Imperative

The rise of what may be termed the radical approach to Nigerian cultural scholarship can be traced to the realisation on the part of the progressive arm of the Nigerian national intelligentsia that their pursuits, in order to be meaningful, must form part of the larger struggles toward national self-assertion. Thus, if Obiechina has provided the sociology of Nigerian literature with an analytical outlook, the troika of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike added an uncompromisingly radical militancy to it in the late 1970s. The novelty of their stance on Nigerian, nay African, literature derives not only from their bravura in calling to question some of the most glorified names and positions in Nigerian (and African) literary creativity and criticism. More crucially, their ultimate importance resides in the sense of adventure in their sure-footed search for the ingredients of an authentic African poetics. Against the leading voices in modern Nigerian poetry, for instance, their charge is that of deliberate mystification of language, the adoption of obfuscatory alien myths and metaphor, and a pretension to erudition in the Western tradition. Cumulatively, they contend that these features deprive much of their poetry of accessibility and meaning.

> *There is a failure of craft in Nigerian poetry in English. Despite the high praise heaped upon it from all sides, most of the practitioners display glaring faults, e.g., old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language; obscure and inaccessible diction; a plethora of imported imagery; a divorce from African oral poetic tradition, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism.*[34]

Against the critics, they are equally unsparing:

> *And as for the Nigerian critics who have served as encouragers and mentors to those poets, the pressupositions of their criticism, and their actual practice, instead of clarifying texts have worked further to further obfuscate them, and instead of educating taste have led readers into a wilderness of insipidity, thus serving as a maleficient influence on whatever taste there was to begin with.*[35]

In the face of this state of "Babylonian captivity" of Nigerian literature, the troika assign to themselves the role of intellectual freedom fighters whose primary preoccupation is the decolonisation of African literature: "The cultural task in hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture."[36] Their agenda for action in this direction is perhaps the boldest attempt to date to redirect the mind of the African away from the hegemony of alien myths and literatures. It proposes a new poetics which stresses the communality of literary art, the need for social commitment, the virtue of linguistic accessibility in literature and, most importantly, the transposition of the important features of traditional African literary aesthetics into a modern potential. These features, along with a de-emphasis of jargonistic intellectualism in African literary matters, become the prerequisities for fostering truly Afrocentric values in both the creators and the audience of African literature.

Like all reactive movements in the history of ideas, however, the Chinweizu and Co. formation displays certain traits which are inevitable in their brand of hypersensitivity. Their polarisation of Afrocentric values as opposed to Eurocentric and other values neglects the reality of internal differences within each of these cultural formations or value systems. Furthermore, their populist conception of literary taste and aesthetics neglects the fact that in class society (which is what most African societies are), the coexistence of popular and high cultures is inevitable because each social class chooses its own art or rather has it chosen for them by the dominant class. They also seem to neglect the fact that by the nature of social division of labour, literary criticism is also a profession with its own standards of acceptable performance.

On the question of extending the features of traditional African literary aesthetics into modern African literature, it seems Chinweizu and Co. see tradition as static while in actual fact "any tradition...is an aspect of contemporary social and cultural organisation."[37]

On the other hand the importance of the Marxist alternative in contemporary Nigerian literary discourse is summarised in Lukacs' general statement that

> *in class society, literary movements are the inevitable, if not automatic, outgrowth of class struggles, of conflicts among social and political directions.... Understandably, there is no less intensity in these struggles and no less vehemence in the antagonisms in literature than in politics itself.*[38]

Marxist criticism of Nigerian literature as an orchestrated and concerted exercise became significant in the mid and late 1970s. At its best and most classical, Marxist criticism is necessarily sociological[39] and, therefore, banishes the dichotomy between the formal attributes and social resonances of literary works.

> *By stressing the dialectical relationship of form and content within a reality that is again comprehensible, Marxist aesthetics safeguards are against a twofold danger: that of a naturalism in which content is shorn of form, and that of a formalism which gives up all concern for content in pure form, which then developes completely independently.*[40]

Since "criticism comes into existence and passes out of it again, on the basis of certain determinate conditions," the emergence of Marxist criticism on the Nigerian literary scene when it did must owe to specific conditions in Nigerian society since the 1970s. We want to suggest that the radicalisation of critical attention on Nigerian literature along ideological lines is the logical outcome of the post-war period of unexpected oil wealth and its accompanying social irresponsibility. The characteristic realities of Nigerian national life have since taken the form of an ever-expanding unproductive bourgeoisie, frightening economic disparities between the affluent and the abjectly poor coupled with an unworkable infrastructure and a near total absence of ethical and moral values. Wole Soyinka aptly summarises these features in the preface to the production script of his play "Opera Wonyosi":

> *The post civil war years, after an initial period of uncertainty -- two or three years at the most -- has witnessed Nigeria's self-engorgement at the banquet of highway robberies, public executions, public floggings and other institutionalised sadisms, arsons, individual and mass megalomania, racketeering, hoarding epidemics, road abuse and reckless slaughter, exhibitionism, state and individual callousness and contemptuous casual cruelties, wanton destruction, slummification, Naira mania and its attendant atavism (ritual murder for wealth), an orgy of physical filth, champagne, gadgetry, blood...the near total collapse of human communication.*[41]

Therefore, the decisive ideological radicalism of the more profound Nigerian Marxist critics must be understood within this context as an act of titanic defiance and a re-

jection of the existing unjust order. It flows from a feeling of moral outrage.

The real problem that has confronted Nigerian Marxist criticism has been that of domesticating classical conceptions of Marxism to the specific demands of the literature and society of a Third World country. Consequently, we find two dominant modes in Marxist criticism of Nigerian literature to date: firstly, we have an extremely prescriptive and reductionist criticism which insists on the reflection theory of art and society. Critics in his school are quick to regurgitate the more doctrinaire axioms of Marx and Engels and proceed to castigate the writers of their choice for not reflecting all the momentous events of the day in their works. This brand of criticism issues from a vulgar and orthodox Marxism whose implications Rowland Barthes restates in the following terms:

> *We know how sterile orthodox Marxism has proved to be in criticism, proposing a purely mechanical explanation of works or promulgating slogans rather than criteria of values.*[42]

On the other hand, we have a more profound version in which the critic recognises that his art, like the literature he takes as his subject, is a constitutive social practice with a definite history and which is, therefore, socially determined. The most audible and strident voices in this formation are those of Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan and Omafume Onoge. These critics are concerned in a more profound sense with how individual Nigerian writers objectify, advance and/or detract from progressive social values in whatever facets of our national social life they choose to recreate. It is therefore not surprising that some of the works they have recognised as classics in our national literature correspond to those which conventional bourgeois critics have also chosen as standards of literary excellence. These are works whose authors (Achebe, Soyinka, etcetera) may not necessarily belong in the radical tradition.

Not surprising, because of its socio-political implications and the "red scare" among Nigerian privileged classes, Marxist scholarship (including literary criticism) in Nigeria has attracted undue hostility from representatives of the ruling class within the national academy as well from liberal idealist scholars and creative writers.

But although the Nigerian Marxist critic in terms of the source of his livelihood belongs to the petit bourgeois class he has a singular advantage over his non-committed counterpoints: he carries out his critical task within a

conceptual framework in which criticism transcends the confines of limited academicism and becomes an integral part of social praxis. Thus conceived, the Nigerian Marxist critic is not merely a literary technician engaged in the survivalist "publish or perish" hustle which has become the bane of the Nigerian academy in general and our literary scholarship in particular. On the contrary, he is, truly defined, a concerned, involved and socially committed patriot. In fairness to the more clear-headed members of this growing critical formation, it must be restated that they are not red-eyed Zdanovian thugs brandishing copies of the *Communist Manifesto.*

But it is this writer's contention that the crucial issue in the search for an authentic radical alternative in Nigerian literary scholarship is not just Marxism defined in pure orthodox terms. A strict adherence to the fundamental assumptions of Marxism would reveal certain contradictions in that thought system which may hinder the emergence of an authentic alternative to the present hegemony of Western-oriented bourgeois critical approaches to Nigerian literature.

Marx and Engels, in their all too conscious dichotomising between material reality and the reality of ideas and culture as well as their racist insistence on a lineal schema of history with Western man blazing the trail for all other races to follow, display what Soyinka has characterised as the Western cast of mind with its penchant for rigid compartmentalisation and categorisation. This teleological fallacy seriously militates against the applicability of orthodox Marxism to cultural problems of societies whose world view eschew polarisations. Ayi Kwei Armah, in his very informative essay, "Masks and Marx", illuminates the contradiction in question in the following terms:

> *In the writings of Marx and Engels there is a discernible tendency to polarise material reality away from the reality of ideas and culture. In addition, the reality of material factors is affirmed as actual, while the reality of ideational and cultural factors is denigrated as ephemeral....*[43]

If we adopt a slightly modified attitude, namely, one that recognises "both material and ideational factors as real-different, interacting aspects of reality,"[44] then the way toward an authentically radical perspective of Nigerian (or indeed any other African) literature is further illuminated. The crucial question that then arises, therefore, has to do with whether it is possible to identify the connections be-

tween cultural manifestations and the dynamics of the Nigerian society. It is our contention that only a critical consciousness that sees itself as actively engaged in the overall struggles in the Nigerian society can adequately conceptualise the relationship between literature and the society in question in its dialectical totality.

Once literary criticism is conceived of as integral to social discourse and the critic's identity as a socially determined professional firmly established, the important positions in Nigerian polity would seem to be applicable and discernible in much of our truly significant literary discourse and creative literary practice. The signs are already clear in recent literary criticism. For instance, Chinweizu et al have identified government control of the mass media in Nigeria as one of the most important factors militating against the popularisation of our literary culture.[45] Similarly, Biodun Jeyifo has highlighted the mediation of the anarchic ethical and moral values of the post-war military dictatorships in such works as Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* and Sowande's *Farewell to Babylon* respectively.[46] It is doubtful that any critic will be able to make a meaningful evaluation of works like Ola Rotimi's "If" (when it gets published) or, for that matter, Soyinka's "Opera Wonyosi" without a sympathetic awareness of the socio-political questions raised in those works.

It is an internationally advertised fact that the reality of contemporary Nigerian social life consists of the existence of a scandalous disparity between the overly rich and the abjectly poor, rampant authorised stealing of public funds, congenital inefficiency in public utilities and an extreme marginalisation of the lower classes which has reduced them to hawking rats and snakes at the roadside. Consequently, a certain level of partisanship has become imperative in both Nigerian public discourse and political action. The partisanship is precisely that of class. Herbert Read found himself in an identical situation in pre-World War II England and underlined the inevitability of class partisanship in the following terms:

> *No one in his senses can contemplate the existing contrasts with complacency. No one can measure the disparity between poverty and riches, between plan and performance, between chaos and order, between ugliness and beauty, between all the sin and savagery of the existing system and any decent code of social existence -- no man can measure these disparities and remain indifferent.*[47]

The type of partisanship which confronts the literary critic, and in fact every other Nigerian scholar of the humanities especially is more subtle and yet more fundamental: it has to do with the crucial question of whose humanity to espouse or whose values to place at the center of his rationalisations of national social problems. The choice is between espousing the humanism of the vast majority of our marginalised and badly exploited masses and that of the emergency contractors, retired military millionaires, affluent customs officers and powerful party stalwarts.

It seems to this writer that for the genuine radical critic, the germane ideological cause to espouse, the social values worth extolling and defending are those which, by transcending the narrow confines of "bread and butter" and unambiguously assaulting the true agencies of our social malaise, are necessarily antithetical to the present order. To that extent, the radical critic of Nigerian literature (if he is a Nigerian) cannot but be a leftist intellectual.

This is not,however, to anticipate that conventional bourgeois criticism of Nigerian literature will pale into oblivion with the increasing radicalisation of critical practice on the literature in question. For a long time, this brand of criticism will remain predominant but will become increasingly irrelevant.

In the context of the inevitable realignment of positions in critical discourse which this writer foresees, the foreign critic will increasingly find less significance except in the more academic preoccupation of narrow professionalism in literary criticism

In the final analysis, the way to seeking answers to the myriad questions raised in this essay is illuminated by the seminal question which Femi Osofisan, the young Nigerian playwright/scholar, posed at a recent faculty lecture at the University of Ibadan. Put simply, the enduring question is: "Do the humanities humanize (in Nigeria)?"[51]

NOTES

[1] Mao Tse-Tung, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art" in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. III, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1967, p. 88.

[2] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, Richard Howard trans. and ed., Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1972, p. 257.

[3] Anyone who is familiar with Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976, will agree that it is written in one of the world's most tedious prose styles.

[4] Soyinka's defensive arsenal against his 'hostile' critics include the following diatribes: "Who Is Afraid of Elesin Oba?" (unpublished); and "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition," *Transition* 48, 1975, pp. 38-44.

[5] Wole Soyinka, "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies," Inaugural Lecture, University of Ife, 30 October 1980, p. 2.

[6] Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, Verso, London, 1978, p. 17.

[7] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, O.U.P., Oxford, 1977, p. 109.

[8] The Ekpe festival drama has its origins among the Ibibios of Nigeria's Cross River State with whom the Ngwas of Imo State share a common border to the southeast.

[9] Solomon Iyasere, "African Oral Tradition-Criticism As Performance: A Ritual," *African Literature Today* II, 1980, p.173.

[10] Kai-Yu Hsu, *The Chinese Literary Scene*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 12-13.

[11] Hsu, *The Chinese Literary Scene*, p. 14.

[12] Mao Tse-Tung, refer to Note 1.

[13] C.M. Bowra, *Ancient Greek Literature*, O.U.P., London, 1967, p. x.

[14] William Wimsatt and C. Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1957.

[15] Omafume Onoge, "Toward a Marxist Sociology of African Literature," unpublished seminar paper, University of Dar es Salam, 1977.

[16] Dan Izevbaye, "Criticism and Literature in Africa" in *Perspectives on African Literature*, Christopher Heywood, ed., Heinemann, London, 1971, p. 30.

[17] Onoge, refer to Note 15.

[18] Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, Heinemann, London, 1980, p. 60.

[19] Bernth Lindfors, "Cyprian Ekwensi: An African Popular Novelist," *African Literature Today* 3, 1979, pp. 2-4.

[20] Onoge, refer to Note 15.

[21] Romanus Egudu, *Four Modern West African Poets*, NOK Publishers, New York, 1977.

[22] Oladele Taiwo, *Culture and the Nigerian Novel*, Macmillan, London, 1976, p. 28.

[23] Abiola Irele, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature" in *Perspectives on African Literature*, Chrisopher Heywood, ed., Heinemann, London, 1971, p. 30.

[24] Irele, "The Criticism of Modern African Literature," p.25.

[25] Ibid., pp. 11-12.

[26] Oyin Ogunba, *The Movement of Transition*, University of Ibadan Press, Ibadan, 1975, pp. 203-204.

[27] Egudu, *Four Modern West African Poets*, p. i.

[28] Egudu, *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament*, Macmillan, London, 1978, p. 104.

[29] Biodun Jeyifo, "Literalism and Reductionism in African Literary Criticism: Further Notes on Literature and Ideology," paper presented at Conference of Association of African Literary Critics, University of Ife, 1975.

[30] Emmanuel Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973, p. 1; see also *Literature for the Masses*, Nwamife, Enugu, 1971.

[31] Obiechina, *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets*, pp. 7-8.

[32] Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West Africa Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, p. 26.

[33] Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West Africa Novel*, p. 33.

[34] Chinweizu et al, "Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature," *Transition* 48, 1975, p. 29.

[35] Chinweizu et al, "Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature," p. 30.

[36] Chinweizu et al, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, Fourth Dimension, Enugu, 1980, p. 1.

[37] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 116.

[38] George Lukacs, *Writer and Critic*, D. Khan, trans. and ed., Grosset and Dunlap, New York, 1971, p. 225.

[39] Anatoly Lunarcharsky, *On Literature and Art*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965, pp. 12-13.

[40] Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, Helen Lane, trans., Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London, 1973, pp. 42-43.

[41] Wole Soyinka, "Opera Wonyosi," preface to the production script.

[42] Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. 255.

[43] Ayi Kwei Armah, "Masks and Marx: The Marxist Ethos vis-a-vis African Revolutionary theory and Praxis," unpublished manuscript, April 1980, p. 28.

[44] Armah, ibid., p. 28.

[45] Chinweizu et al, *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature*, p. 293.

[45] Biodun Jeyifo, "Ethics, Politics and Literature in Contemporary Nigeria," seminar paper, Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ife, 1980.

[47] Herbert Read, *Poetry and Anarchism*, Freedom Press, London, 1941, p. 61.

Mother and Child