



## AFROCENTRICITY AND UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN LITERATURE: TOWARDS RE-STATING AND RE-IGNITION OF AFRICAN THINKING IN THE CRITICISM OF ZIMBABWEAN LITERATURE

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### Abstract:

For a long time, indigenous African systems, experiences, knowledge, skills, philosophy, psychology, history and social experiences have been based on other people's views, values and historical experiences. They have been questioned, under-stated, re-interpreted and even doubted by many scholars of African literature using Eurocentric views and values. Thus, it cannot be denied that today there are so many literary scholars of African literature who have unreservedly used Eurocentric views and methodologies on African and Zimbabwean literature, creating a mismatch between our general understanding of African artistic and literary creations and their aesthetic values (Chinweizu et al., 1980; Achebe, 1990; Ngugi, 1986). This presentation believes that literary values that can be said to be suitable in evaluating African literature and African literary thinking should be based on our understanding of African people's natural reaction and interaction with their habitat, making African culture in the form of language, material and spiritual resources the exquisite bedrock of our understanding of African people and all their life and historical experiences. As Okpaku (1970) and Achebe (1990, 2000) would say, critical standards should derive from culture as the basis of sustainable criticism and development of African literature and in order to avoid dislocated and inappropriate knowledge applications. This paper uses a typically African oriented approach to evaluate some of the literary forms of criticisms by selected Zimbabwean critics. It argues that there is need to re-connect, re-ignite and re-claim African aesthetic values in the criticism of African literature in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, African literature, criticism, Zimbabwean literature

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## Introduction

While generally speaking, it can be argued that most of Zimbabwean literature in Shona is based on the traditional forms of literature that have basically been originally transmitted to many generations through oral means, criticism of this literature has not been based on the same. Zimbabwean traditional oral literary forms include the song, dance, folktale, proverb, idioms, riddles, games, institutions and other forms of life. This oral history is the very bedrock of Zimbabwean people's life, history and experiences which has now been captured as poetry, novels, short story and plays (Kahari, 1990; Gondo, 2014). The methodologies that have sometimes been used on the evaluation and analysis of this literature have basically been based on Western and European ways of understanding literature. This has had the effect of creating a rather dislocated and inappropriate understanding of Shona literature in Zimbabwe. This has helped to shape the conception of literature using properties, values and experiences which delineate the very people it seeks to serve. It is a well-known fact that traditional literary forms in Zimbabwe originate from the Zimbabwean people's everyday practical engagement with nature. It is not merely art for art's sake (Kahari, 1990) since the utilization of art is part of the people's everyday survival strategies. Thus, Zimbabwean traditional artistic forms can best be understood as generating African people's intelligent interactions and reactions to nature and nurture until much later on when other literary critics arrived on the literary scene and introduced other different ways of relating and interpreting African history, social experiences and social values. This development resulted in the same people re-interpreting, re-evaluating and re-engineering of the African people's cosmos and being in literature. However, it should not be forgotten that in the traditional Zimbabwean sense, literary artistic creations have been used as part of man's shared and rigorous test of his own survival ideas, experiences and values.

The daily existence of mankind in Africa has ever depended on man's adaptation and mastery of the dictates of using different traditional literary artistic creative forms to achieve expected social, religious, political and economic ends in life. A young Shona man would find it difficult to marry someone unless he had mastered the witticism of the genre of traditional love poetry which instructed the suitor to describe the physical and spiritual being and beauty of the girl of his dreams through traditional poetry recitation. Failure to know and use such poetic forms was therefore seen as socially catastrophic and suicidal. Equally true, a traditional dancer who did not impress his or her audience lost an opportunity to find a serious suitor for marriage. Thus, as Achebe (1990) would observe, literature in Africa and its subsequent evaluation was ever based on the African people's existential experiences, making it reach, at its best, symbolic and ritualistic proportions for the ordinary people. African traditional literary creations formed the codified norms and values that instructed man on how to interact with their artistic creative forms in their physical and spiritual spaces. This is the context in which Zimbabwean and African creative experiences should best be understood.

This paper uses the colonialist and Africanist perspectives of literature to take stoke of some of the criticism that has emerged from Zimbabwean literature, especially Shona

literature. It relies on emotive critical literary anecdotes that have emerged as responses to African physical and spiritual domination by other people of other races, histories and experiences as a strategy to entice African people to abandon the very core of their cosmos. It tries to set out an agenda for the critical evaluation, analyses and understanding of Zimbabwean and African literature in post-colonial spaces of our time.

### **The concept of Afrocentricity**

Afrocentricity pushes for the advancement of African people's spiritual and physical worthiness and beauty in everything, especially in the context of humiliation and dehumanization of the African people at the hands of European and Western races, that has resulted in loss of African self-esteem and personhood during the period of the violent contact of African people with Western people in the times of slavery and colonization of Africa. Afrocentricity tries to refocus the African people so that they can regain everything that they have lost as their history, values, experiences and, above all, their pride in their cultural and historical experience. It accepts the view and thinking that there is absolutely nothing wrong in being an African person, and that one does not need to feel ashamed of it. This approach is necessary because some of the African people's historical experiences have become cases of self-hate and self-pity, with many Africans feeling greatly humiliated that they are, in fact, products of that history. Hence, there are a lot of Africans who grew up mesmerised with anything that is unAfrican: values, experiences and history. Such people have unselectively and uncritically accepted other people's values, experiences and history. Afrocentricity, therefore, seeks to emphasize the importance and value of using typically African thinking and orientation in everything that African people do and live in for the general good of all African people. It rejects the unselective use of foreign, especially Western and European traditions, thinking and approaches, on African people and their life. It offers a new hope for the total liberation of African people everywhere where they are.

### **A chequered history of African experiences**

The colonization of Africa and many other Third World countries is a well-documented phenomenon. There is no debate on the fact that colonization of Africa and other countries generally a very violent and disruptive activity that brought new and foreign political, religious, economic and social systems. It resulted in the importation of European and other Western values, experiences and histories that permeated into African systems. This is how European literary traditions, values and experiences among the African societies and people, leading to the total domination of the African people and all their systems, knowledge bases, values, experiences and also their psyche by European and Western people. This was not by chance, but was a well calculated history by Western nations who chose to be the definers of the whole relationship between Africa and Europe, with the mighty Western countries viciously violating and desecrating all African systems in the process: spiritual, political, religious and social. This has had profound direct and indirect consequences on Africa and

its people as Europe and the West forced their way on African and other weaker people. This has resulted in European and Western symptomatic experiences on the African people, their history, experiences, values and culture. Colonial experiences in Africa produced, at its worst, psychotic results and effects on the African person, his whole being and his personality, resulting in most African people unequivocally accepting without shame or regret, white domination and supremacy. This is also evident in African literature and its criticism. Colonialism has brought European and Western literary traditions, tastes, views and values that have been liberally applied to African literature by the critics of African literature (Chinweizu et al., 1980; Achebe, 1990; Ngugi, 1986). Among such scholars who utilize European and Western literary thinking are Eustace Palmer (1979), Benith Lindfors (1973) and George Payne Kahari (1990). They use literary critical models which suggest that literature in Africa should be taken as universal and having a homogeneous appeal that is traceable to the European and Western literary roots. Thus, African oral and written forms of literature have been subjected to this kind of criticism, using similar critical standards and understanding as in Western and European literary forms. This is in spite of the evident cultural differences of African and other people from other continents.

Chiwome (1996) says that all literary understanding and evaluation must always take note of the history of colonialism on and to the African people. It is on public record that the colonization of African people by people of other races was based on principles of inequality, supremacy and slavery. It enforced and instilled the slave mentality among some of our African people who accepted their own persons as inferior and interacted with the white people with meekness that has to date legitimated their domination by the white colonizers. The contact of African people with Western people has been recorded in history as one of the worst contact of human species, which was based on both physical and spiritual violence of the vanquished by the victors. Colonial experiences created relationships that saw the white race systematically working to prove to the colonized races that it was a special and God-given race when compared to the African and all other races. It produced a stereotyped African race. As a result, that contact has, over the years, resulted in untold and continued humiliation, brutalisation and even total annihilation of African people without any sense of shame or remorse. This has permeated into critical literary thinking and produced literary critical thinking that specialized in seeing the African people and their arts as second rate and inferior.

This is why Ngugi (1981, 1986), Achebe (1975, 1990, P' Bitek; 1986) and Chinweizu et al.; (1980) have advocated for the re-definition of African literature and its criticism that must start by recognizing fully the history and value of the African people and their literary arts. They argue that Africans are sufficiently different from other races and people and that their artistic creations should be treated as unique. African literary scholars have emphasized the need to treat African artistic creations as different from European art and people. Only then can we begin to meaningfully respect African people. It means that our understanding African literature must always start with an unqualified rejection of the inferiority complex of the African people who have been seen as the "junior brother" to other people and forms of literature, with Europeans and Western people wishing to see and perpetuate the whole

relationship between whites and African people as one of the rider and his horse, in which the Europeans and Westerners see themselves as the riders while the African people are viewed as the ridden horses. Achebe (1988) has argued that it is a fallacy to view all African literature as based on European or Western traditions of literature. Rather, it must be emphasized that they be based on the unquestionable and uncompromised acceptance of the African people and their physical and spiritual cosmos and beliefs. African people, as literary scholars, need to evolve their own ways of conceiving and understanding their own realities of life and artistic creations. This should not be based on the continued and systematic denial of the historical role of the African people, their languages and their cultures as an expression of their physical and spiritual being. Achebe (1975), Chinweizu et al. (1980) and Ngugi (1981, 1986) note that the whole conception of African literature has now legitimized Western forms and perceptions of literature, making it seem unreasonable, unenviable and untenable to accept or recognize African history and literary works as based on typically African values and experiences.

### **Identifying Zimbabwean literature**

According Gondo (2011), whenever people in Zimbabwe generally talk of “literature”, they are more likely to be referring to literature in English, more than other forms of literature. Kahari (1990) sees English literature as the most legitimate forms of literature in Zimbabwe. It is “the literature” in Zimbabwe. African oral art forms of literature, as well as the literature that is written in indigenous languages, is very rarely seen as literature that is comparable to the literature that is written in English, even when the literary works has been written by the same writer. Thus, it seems that all literature in indigenous languages and oral artistic forms that mostly appear in indigenous languages, are generally viewed as inferior, unequal and undeserving of serious academic literary study and analysis, as one would find out about the literature in English. This is because literature in Zimbabwe is mostly identified by the language medium in which it is produced (Gondo, 2011). Thus, it is only literature in English that is studied as a full subject in Zimbabwe, while all the literature in indigenous languages is studied as an appendage of language studies from primary school level to secondary school level (Gondo, 2011). Literature in indigenous languages is only studied as full courses at university level, at which level all English courses are based on literary criticism and analysis of texts written in English. Few universities in Zimbabwe fuse this with language studies as is the case with literature in indigenous languages.

We note that Kahari (1990) has classified Zimbabwean literature according to the language medium in which it appears. Hence, English literature refers to the literature that is written in English while Shona or Ndebele literature refers to the literature that is only produced in Shona and Ndebele respectively. This means that Solomon’s Mutswairo’s *Feso* (1956), literary texts that are written in Shona and in English with the same title, are classified separately as English and Shona literary art respectively. Written by the same author and sharing the same title, the two titles of texts are taught in two different Departments as Shona and English respectively in schools, colleges and universities. Nobody wants to consider

their content and commitment to Zimbabwean historical values and experiences. Similarly, Ngugi waThiongo's Shona translations of *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, translated by Charles Mungoshi, are basically taught, and therefore considered as Shona literature using titles *Tsanga yembeu* and *Kutongwa kwaDedan Kimathi*. What these works talk about is not considered important in classifying them. The history, people values and experiences are not considered. Equally true are some of the texts that are written in English by Charles Mungoshi and Chenjerai Hove which are never considered as belonging to Shona literature. Such an approach to literature shows that conception of literature in Zimbabwe is mostly based on the language medium that is used to produce them. Kahari (1990) includes a religious play called *Mutambo Wepanyika* (1957) as Shona literature play, even though the play is a religious play that was originally written by Father Pedro Calderon de la Barca in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was later reproduced by Gokomere Catholic priests using the Shona title (Gondo, 2014). Again, content and commitment to history is not considered in the conception of drama in Zimbabwe. This perception of literature can be problematic because it limits our perception of literature (Gondo, 2014). It seems inadequate to only use the language medium in which the literature appears rather than the content and their commitment to African historical, values and experiences. Language medium alone cannot be used to identify and classify our literature in Zimbabwe.

Mungoshi (1989) warns us that typically Zimbabwean literature must always derive from the content of this country and use typically Zimbabwean artistic materials. Chinweizu et al. (1980), Ngugi (1986), Achebe (1990) and P' Bitek (1986) also emphasize the same view that African literature must be constituted by their use of African people's history, values and socio-cultural experiences. From this kind of argument, it is clear that language medium alone cannot adequately delineate literature in Zimbabwe (Gondo, 2011). It allows literature that is not written by Zimbabwean people, that does not focus on Zimbabwean people's life and historical experiences to be accepted as Zimbabwean art. This might mean that a lot of texts that are being studied as English literature might not qualify as such. To classify pioneer column writers like Badden Powell, Native Commissioner writers like Charles Bullock, colonialist writers like Gertrude Page and Doris Lessing, missionary writers like Father Arthur Shirley Cripps together with nationalist and culturalist writers like Lawrence Vambe, Stanlake Samkange, Charles Mungoshi, Dambudzo Marechera and Shimmer Chinodya may be problematic in creating shared experiences and historical commitment as English literature. This becomes even murky when we add British writers like D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, Hemmingway, Ian Wright, Charles Dickens, John Keats, Wordsworths and William Shakespeare and others (Gondo, 2014). It creates an amorphous class of English literature works that is difficult to justify as English literature in Zimbabwe (Gondo, 2014). We know that all literature is known to mirror the social and productive processes and experiences of their time at a given period of time. Such experiences relate to the historical values and experiences of the people at a given time.

While Kahari (1990) sees Zimbabwean literature having been greatly influenced by the British and European tradition of literature, he forgets that sometimes literary influences create new and original literary pathways. He cites many Shona writers as having been

influenced in their writing by European and Western models of literature. Kahari (1990; 2) (in Gondo, 2014) says,

*“Zimbabwean literature has adopted and adapted as well as assimilated creative energy from disparate sources and models... it is born and is growing while exhibiting resemblances to its mother- the English literature.”*

It creates a feeling that Zimbabwean literature cannot easily disengage itself from the European literary traditions, values and experiences. It is similar to McLoughlin’s (1990) view (in Wild, 1993) that literature in English in Zimbabwe is not *“sue generis”*. It means that Zimbabwean literature is not original or unique or different from the European forms. In this argument, it then follows that that kind of literature should use the same critical standards that are commonly used in European and Western forms of literary criticism. This will mean that Zimbabwean Shona literature must only be conceived as an appendage of European or Western literary forms. If we use that kind of argument and thinking, then, it would also follow that Zimbabwean literature can never out-grow its source of influence, with the European and Western form of literature working as the *“mother figure”* of Zimbabwean literature while Zimbabwean literature itself will function as the *“child”* form of the same literature. This is similar to Roscoe’s (in Chinweizu et al., 1980, 8) that,

*“If an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole, and can be scrutinized accordingly.”*

Gondo (2014) believes that universalizing literary content and critical canons of evaluating it is but a ploy to subordinate African literature to Western forms of it. It is important to listen to Chinweizu et al.’s (1980) thinking that whatever language a writer chooses to use; the emphasis should be on using appropriately African values. This must be the sense that African literature must find new meaning and re-constitution. It must use Afrocentric values, experiences and history.

### **Zimbabwean Oral literature**

Oral forms of literature in Zimbabwe among the Shona people include riddles, proverbs, idioms, folktales, games, songs, dances and social institutions. Over the years these oral forms of literature were transmitted by word through oral means. Today, some of them have been frozen into written forms, something that has had limited success because they are all meant to be versatile literary forms without definitive forms and functional value (Gondo, 2014). The problem with teaching of these oral forms of history is that they are not taken seriously by learners and educators. Rarely do we find teachers teaching them as separate courses. Rather, the emphasis in schools has been on their linguistic value and their structural forms. Many scholars of Shona traditional forms have concentrated on the linguistic value: Fortune, Pongweni, Chiwome, Mberi, Hamutyinei and Plagger, Magwa,

Chigidi, Kahari, Chakamba and Masocha. No English Department in schools, colleges and universities teaches Zimbabwean oral literary forms because scholars believe that the literature is inferior, unprogressive and backward. This is evident even in the use of past tense when talking about these oral forms, as if to suggest that they no longer usable today as they are not dynamic and adapting to changing times.

According McLoughlin (1990), oral literary forms should not be used in English written literature because they have the effect of weakening the works. He says,

*“Early stories in English by African writers reflect much influence from oral art and confirm the myths that blacks are like children. Likewise, these stories bore close resemblances to the animal stories of the Aesop kind which the Europeans read to their children.”*

It is clear that for scholars like McLoughlin (1990), oral forms of literature in Zimbabwe become poorer and inferior and therefore unsuitable content for the writing of Zimbabwean literature. This is why Gondo (2014) says McLoughlin (1990) racially abuses African writers when he equates them to children. This kind of criticism of literature uses unprofitable perceptions of literature in Zimbabwe. It is warped and steeped in Western ideological thinking of literature as art and its values are alien to African people’s thinking. For, in the traditional set, the stories that were created and circulated to young minds were not looked at as just for leisure. They constituted the first African classroom.

When most people in Zimbabwe want to refer to the African folktale, proverb, idioms and riddles, they want to use the past tense as if to say these are ideas that no longer fit modern African societies. Traditional literature has been seen as having a pejorative value and incapable of being used dynamically in the modern sense. This obviously seems to see African traditional oral forms as inferior, backward and unprogressive (Gondo, 2014). This is to suggest that African oral literature is not capable of modernising itself. This kind of feeling further suggests that modernisation is a preserve of Western people. African people can only be part of it if they agree to renounce their historical identity and imitate Western values, experiences and history. It is not surprising that African traditional art forms have not been studied in the English Departments. Songs, dances and traditional games have been selectively taught in Departments of African Languages and Literature.

### **Re-stating and re-igniting African thinking in literature**

In the light of the above observations about the conceptions of Zimbabwean literature and its subsequent classification, there is need to re-state and emphasize the need to search for relevant African thinking. We need to link our literature in Zimbabwe to typically African literary thinking and traditions that will serve the literary scholarship better. That process must start with the recognition that African art forms are best meant to be served by African people. They can best be understood through the use Afrocentric views and values. As Furusa (in Chivaura and Mararike, 1998) would say, we must avoid using Western-oriented intellectualism that is based on European and American literary models because they are not



relevant when they are in the service of African art forms. The identification, recognition and development of Zimbabwean literature's critical forms must be based on the true identity of the Zimbabwean people (Gondo, 2014). We need to guard against any subtle lure by Western literary values. (Gondo, 2014). No African people have ever succeeded to become an English person, no matter how hard they try. They remain poor imitations of the same. The task lying ahead of us all is to encourage each other to go back to methods of understanding literature that best serve us, something Achebe calls "returning to where the rain began to beat us" or what Amilcar Cabral calls "returning to the source". Ngugi (1981) and Chinweizu et al. (1980) talk of the need to decolonize our minds as a way of opening up our thinking to the appropriate orientation. All this only means that we must use Afrocentricity as a major approach to our critical evaluation of literature which makes it possible for us to connect well with our literature and our people's philosophy of life. This is our only way and hope.

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