

CHIDI AMUTA
"A DIALECTICAL THEORY OF AFRICAN LITERATURE:
CATEGORIES AND SPRINGBOARDS" (1989)

Neil Griffith, Diana Louis, and Eva Marshall

Amuta begins by critiquing traditionalist and formalistic theories of literature by saying they polarize literature, separating it from socio-historical processes. He says the attraction to the dialectical has to do with its ability to unite "literary theory" and "creative practice." This serves as the grounds for his claim that literary theory becomes more than abstractions about abstractions, "but an all embracing area of social discourse." He claims that African Literature is particularly attracted to the dialectical alternative because of the incontrovertible socio-historical determination of African Literature in general. He says from oral chants to artistic limits, African Literature has been set by problems of a socio-historic nature.

Amuta says that in this chapter he will be addressing a theoretical confrontation that draws attention to cultural implications of dialectical thought. He says he will be looking particularly at the potential of the dialectical at the level of epistemological and hermeneutical categories. He also says that he will give attention to three Africanist thinkers such as Fanon, Cabral, and Ngugi because from them an anti-imperialist poetics of African Literature can be derived.

Amuta then critiques Hegel's talk of self-actualization and spirit. He goes on to say that when these aspects of Hegelian thought are discarded, what is left is Marxist and Engelist thought. But therein lay various binaries. Despite these binaries, however, he says the dialectic is essentially an epistemological proposition, or more plainly a way of knowing reality. The dialectic he adds, renders the "reciprocal connection of opposites."

Amuta says that the most striking aspect of the dialectic when applied is "its holistic and totalizing nature." He says this makes it comprehensive and rigorous. For Amuta, a theory of culture must be sociological in a radical sense. It is an active producer of meanings, values, and aesthetic effects which have great implications for the historical development of society. Then he takes an explicitly Marxist turn by claiming that society manifests itself in terms of classes, groups, and formations for substance of life. Thus, literary values are not very "literary" but derive from class configurations of social values in general. He discusses the interconnectedness of literature by explaining how the writer needs to be fed and producers are involved and so on, because the production of literature is a commercial industry.

In the section "categories for a Dialectical Theory of African Literature" he says he is going to approach dialectical understanding of thought identifying specific categories which encapsulate the ramified interrelationships between works and their determinants. He says a challenge to and responsibility for a dialectical of a modern African literature is to insist on the rootedness of literary art in the very processes and social experiences which constitute African history and from which we can correctly categorize the African "reality." He says the nature of reality between literature and history needs to be confronted at the level of rigorous theoretical practices. He proposes to take on this task by looking at three categories: history, a mediating subject, and the literary event.

In the history section he makes the point that it's through African history that African literature can be understood. Amuta makes a very important claim that you can plot a trajectory in development of African literature by looking at definite stages in history and by the challenges presented in African literature. He points out three historical demarcations; evolution in consciousness from anti-slavery, anti-colonialism, and the contemporary neo-

colonial. He also offers geo-political demarcations; South Africa, North Africa, East Africa, and West Africa (with emphasis on destinations within).

Right away Amuta establishes that this has been a reactive stance toward major historical experiences (or misfortunes) such as slavery, colonialism, cultural emancipation, political corruption, apartheid, class antagonism, and imperialism. He says the occurrence of this resistance should not be a surprise at all. He explains further that "literature and art have a primary commitment to freedom." Further he claims that literature can only thrive in a free state. And most powerful perhaps, is his claim that "the primary responsibility of art is to enlist in the service of freedom and aspire to profundity within the context of this active process."

In the section "the mediating subject" Amuta argues that the process by which socio-historical experiences enter a work of art is essentially one of "mediation." He defines mediation as the active and purposive transportation of the empirically real into a fictive reality. He says "the author is the mediating subject and his mode of representing socio-historical experience is a function of objective factors such as facts of biography, class orientation, ideology, and political alignment." He also says that the author is engaged in a process of mediation and following "the laws of imaginative projection" in which he/she is recycling socio-historical experience.

Amuta claims that the African writer is the producer of his/her socio-economic context. The African writer is in the upper echelon of society because education is still a privilege. He goes on to describe an almost magical power that the writer has to change reality. Literary creativity, he says, is a historical act so as to create it as an "epiphenomenon" is to dehumanize it. He defines a literary event as a product of an attempt by mediating subject to derive form from the socio-historic experience which manifests itself as a text (novel, play, poem, etc) or event (performance, recitation, chant etc.).

Amuta says this text is ontologically formal and aesthetic because it appeals to our sense of beauty/ugliness. History informs the literary artifact and this influence can be observed in and through it. He gives a diagram that explains the cyclical relationship between history, the literary artifact/event, and the mediating subject. He says his logic is that the writer (serving as a mediating subject) derives experience especially from history so he/she then makes history through creativity. This creativity allows him/her to both change him/herself and others. He also claims that this process is active.

Amuta then says this relationship between history and culture is universal, but content of such a relationship is historically variable. This variability allows one to group works and writers into specific periods, milieu, or regions. Thus, historical challenges are expressed in the literature of the period. He says this fact is what "literary history" is based on.

Amuta criticizes Marxist ideas because the possibilities open to dialectical theory of literature are not limited by a consideration of the dialectical relationship between content and form alone. He goes on to say that a dialectical theory of literature (and art) cannot ignore the relationship between *context* (the realm of determinations) on the one hand and the *content* and *form* (the realm of ontology of the art work) on the other. He then synthesizes these ideas by saying that this book explores the range of relationships among the two realms. Context, which Amuta says is content and form emerge as a second category for a total understanding of specific literary works and therefore require further elaborations.

Context.

The context of a literary work involves stepping away and looking at the work in its entirety and or totality, which includes history. It includes factors such as the level of development of productive forces which in turn determine the mode of literary production and the amount of leisure available to members of society for the creation and consumption of literature.

More importantly it involves elements such as the philosophical and aesthetic traditions within which the work is created as well as its paradigmatic relationship with other works in the same tradition or in preceding traditions. Amuta gives the example using African Literature (Pepetela's Mayombe), where the information that is set in the "context" of the liberation war in Angola provides a launching pad for the reader's understanding of it which in turn Amuta says sets him thinking about its relationship to the tradition of neo-realism which is the Portuguese African equivalent of socialist realism.

Amuta continues that the context of a work of literature in the African instance will include its situation within the political and ideological framework of Africa's colonial and neo-colonial experiences.

He says that a contextual perception of a literary work therefore discourages a monolithic and monographic interpretation of the work or the individual writer, for in the dialectical framework; no literary work is "born alone"

Amuta is saying even if an individual and specific writer is studied astutely, this will bring an inevitable falsification through its very structure. He says it will really be an optical illusion of the total or entire picture projected by what in reality is just an artificial isolation of a writer.

Amuta gives an example and suggests reading Achebe's Things Fall Apart to be intensely aware of the broad range of works, even of diverse genres and nationalities, which belong in the anti-colonial tradition of cultural nationalism, a mode of perception which makes it impossible for Things Fall Apart to exist "alone".

To insist on the importance of "context" in a dialectical theory of literature is to insist actively that critical practice, especially in relation to African literature, must abandon its predominantly isolationist approach (the study of individual works and writers) and move towards a wider perception in which criticism is informed by the issues in the history of society. Only by doing so can our criticism shed its prodigal Western modernist heritage and re-integrate with political discourse, which is where it rightly belongs.

In neo-colonial Africa for instance, what furnishes the decisive "context" of all cultural practice is capitalist imperialism. And by virtue of the extent of its economic motivation and institutional entrenchment, it is inextricably implicated in both the politics and the culture of its client societies. In the neo-colonial period, imperialism permeates every facet of life in Africa even if in more subtle ways than in the colonial era. Instead of outright denigration and patronizing stereotypes, it offers endless doses of cinema mainly from Hollywood in which Western supremacist attitudes towards Africa are elevated to the status of cosmic truths.

In place of the iconoclastic missionary who burnt down the shrines of ancestral Africa, we now have a moral and spiritual justification of capitalism perfumed and packaged as Christian theology and disseminated via sponsored television slots. In place of Shakespeare and Milton, we now have millions of Hadley Chase, Harold Robbins, Nick Carter and allied pulp and juvenilia to sharpen the appetite of tomorrow's consumers of Western goods and Amuta gives other examples.

Amuta says that in concrete terms the implications of this spectacle are that the contexts of works in contemporary African literature are varied and sometimes contradictory. Essentially the situation is one of conflicts and polarizations, of options and choices between two sets of antagonistic propositions: between imperialism and the forces of anti-imperialism. In terms of aesthetic traditions, the choice is between an art-for-art's sake conception of literature and a utilitarian realistic and engaged poetics. In terms of

ideology - both textual and authorial - the option is between liberal bourgeois individualism and an anti-imperialist consciousness with its attendant solidarity with the masses of African peasants and workers.

For the writer, while the theoretical challenge in contemporary African literature logically suggests the dialectical option, the ideological imperative of the moment is the unambiguous, anti-imperialist and leftist commitment. This ideological imperative defines for African literature an essentially socio-political challenge in the context of which specific contents and forms can take root and be evaluated.

Content and Form

Amuta argues that there is a dialectical relationship between content and form but that the "former determines the latter". He argues for the precedence not primacy or superiority of content over form.

From the outset, it needs to be understood that while "context" caters for the external relationship of a literary work to its informing socio-historical totality, a consideration of the dialectics of "content and form" is concerned with a more intensive entity. In this regard, a dialectical conception of the relationship between the two categories must be rooted in the fundamental relationship which historical materialism makes between base and superstructure. Literature is an aspect of superstructure. Yet within the internal materialism of a given literary object it is possible that "content", as an approximation of social experience or the reflection of the conflicts and contradictions in social experience, finds correspondence in the concept of base, while "form" as the totality of images, symbols, structures or other significations constitutes an attempt to provide this base (content) with a legitimizing superstructure.

The content and form discrimination is a product of the contemplative and analytical gaze of the critic and theorist. He says we begin to distinguish between what a work of art tells us and HOW it tells us. We see both the psychology and philosophy of a work and the devices, means and techniques used in creating an image. Thus conceived, the form and content dichotomy is an epistemological proposition, a way of approaching knowledge of the ontology of art works. Therefore while realizing they are theoretically "separate areas of rationalization", they are in practice inseparable.

Content in literature, then, is a semantic appropriation of a slice of the external reality furnished by context (history) into the microcosmic totality of a literary work, an attempt by the creative imagination as a mediating subject to intensify the social experiences that constitute the conditionalities of literature in a sensible graspable reality. Content must reveal itself externally, or take form (novel, poem etc), in order to become accessible to those who read the literary work.

As a result, Amuta says that to insist on content at the expense of form is to succumb to a narrow sociologism which belongs in the realm of adolescent Marxism of the vulgarized variety. By the opposite token, to project an absolutized form devoid of content is to bane all idealogists of different formalist schools.

Amuta stresses that content and form are not undifferentiated entities in themselves but it is a whole complex of interrelationships between two sets of variables. A proper understanding of the interplay between content and form demonstrates that art is "essentially content becomes form". Once one understands that, one can attain to the "historical substratum of the work" and to understand the work "not only in relation to history but also in relation to other works in its time and place as well as its place in the overall ideological struggle" in which literature is involved.

Context, content and form share what Amuta describes as a "dialectic relationship". The first term denotes the "external relationship of a literary work to its informing socio-

historical totality". The other two are intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic, to the text per se. To understand the later is necessary if one wants to grasp the integrity of the work itself but it is also vital not to ignore the former which deals with questions such as "who crafted the masterpiece, for what purpose, when and why and so on". The literary work is the "mediation of context into content and form".

Springboards for a Dialectical Theory of African Literature

The foregoing discussion reveals the cornerstone of a dialectical approach to the study of African literature that consists of a need to historicize that literature, to re-establish the organic link between literature and its informing and sustaining historical milieu which bourgeois criticism in its purely formalistic manifestations constantly obfuscates.

African literature is predicated on the challenge posed by the imperialist assault on Africa and the reality of neo-colonialism. Awareness of the impact of colonialism and the contradictions of neo-colonialism and commitment to their negation has informed the utterances of key African nationalists and men of culture over the years.

This is why Amuta terms his dialectical approach to the criticism of African literature a "poetics of the oppressed". He concludes that a "truly decolonized and anti-imperialist theory of African literature can only be derived from an anti-imperialist ideological framework, not from a perennial feeling of nostalgia about forgotten pasts and romantic re-creations of village life.

Examination of two African Writers

Amuta lists specific features of written and oral literature that set the African writer apart from his/her international colleagues.

Written Literature:

1. Features and clarifies themes which are typically nationalistic, deriving from national experiences.
2. Assumes a combative stance and tone by calling on the people to fight and defend their existence as a nation and thereby widening their political horizon and intensifying their consciousness.
3. Literature creates a new style and generates a new home-grown audience; the writer turns his back on the oppressor and addresses his own people.
4. The writer is committed in a manifest, overt sense.

Oral Literature:

1. The nationalistic struggle leads to an invigoration of previously inert themes and a modernization of the struggles and conflicts enacted in the oral fables.
2. The remoteness of the experience in oral tradition is imbued with greater immediacy.
3. Methods of delivery and rendition acquire greater stridency, immediacy and innovativeness.
4. Characters become contemporaneous and are drawn from among "the wretched of the earth" – highway robbers, anti-social vagabonds etc. – converting them into subject (rather than objects) of history.
5. Comedy and farce lose their appeal or disappear completely, for the grim historical struggle for liberation is not a laughing matter.
6. Drama loses a sense of the tragic and of despair and assumes a revolutionary optimistic dimension. (92)

Throughout the chapter Amuta references two African writers whom he feels exemplify his dialectic of African literature – Amílcar Cabral, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and discusses the merits of each.

Cabral, in Amuta's opinion, forms a relationship between literature as an act of culture, and literature as a means for national liberation. In 1962 Cabral led a military conflict against the Portuguese imperial forces aiming to gain independence for Portuguese Guinea and Cape Verde. In that campaign the party won land gains. Ten years later he began to form a People's Assembly in preparation for an independent African nation, but a disgruntled former associate assassinated him. With that in mind it is easy to see why Amuta idealized Cabral as he was not only writer but also a very instrumental political activist and in Amuta's dialectic the two ought to be one in the same. Amuta clearly holds Cabral in very high regard as he states, "Cabral's convictions and political actions were solidly predicated on a clear perception of the true meaning of both imperialism and national liberation as its logical antithesis" (93).

Amuta also recognizes Cabral's important discrimination in the "different levels of cultural expression among the colonized people" (94), a very Marxist idea. He differentiates between the classes of the African society, just as Marx would differentiate between the proletariat and the bourgeois. Cabral calls the culture of the rural peasantry the "authentic culture of African peoples" (94) because it represents the culture of the masses, the greatest majority of citizens.

Amuta distinctly points out that Cabral's exaltation of the African peasantry culture ought not to be associated with the "unbridled Pan-Negro romanticism... associate(d) with traditionalist aesthetics" (95). Rather than he sees it necessary to recognize both the pros and the cons of the society before making any changes, "He warned against indiscriminate compliments, the systematic exaltation of virtues without a corresponding condemnation of faults as well as blind acceptance of the positive values in African culture without considering its regressive elements" (95).

The other author Amuta holds in high regard is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; born James Ngugi but who later in his life renounced the name as colonialist. Ngũgĩ is a Kenyan author who writes in his native Gĩkũyũ and Swahili. The uncensored political message of his play, I Will Marry When I Want caused him to be jailed in 1977. After his release he could not get a job and his family was systematically harassed, he is now in self-imposed exile from Kenya. Ngũgĩ has an "intense sense of progressive social commitment" (96) which is reflected in all of his works and which over the years has transformed into a clear, strong anti-imperialist message. Amuta exalts Ngũgĩ for his inseparable link between literature and the anti-imperialist struggle.

Amuta states that Ngũgĩ's link between the anti-imperialist struggle and literature is so important because it "is born of his recognition of the instrumentality of colonialist writers in the denigration of Kenyan national identity" (97). Amuta claims that Ngũgĩ's message has an echo of Cabral and of Frantz Fanon (The Wretched of the Earth) and the viewpoint of all three is so similar because it all stems from the "very nature of the colonial experience" (97) by which merit we in the Caribbean ought also to have a similar viewpoint towards literature and the Nationalist struggle.