

CHIDI AMUTA

A DIALECTICAL THEORY OF AFRICAN LITERATURE: CATEGORIES AND SPRINGBOARDS

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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 dialectic has to do with its ability to unite "literary theory" and "creative practice." (78) 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 dialectic alternative because from oral chants to artistic limits, African Literature has been set by problems of a socio-historic nature.

Amuta says that the most striking aspect of the dialectic when applied is "its holistic and totalizing nature." (78) 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.

Amuta states that a challenge to, and responsibility for, a dialectic of 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 as the African reality. He makes the point that it's through African history that African literature can be understood. Amuta establishes that this has been a reactive stance toward major historical experiences such as slavery, colonialism, cultural emancipation, political corruption, apartheid, class antagonism, and imperialism. He explains further that "literature and art have a primary commitment to freedom" (81) and that literature can only thrive in a free state.

Amuta argues that the process by which socio-historical experiences enter a work of art is essentially one of "mediation" (81). He defines mediation as "the active and purposive transportation of the empirically real into a fictive reality" (81). 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." (81)

He defines a "literary event" (82) as a product of an attempt by mediating subject to derive form from the socio-historic experience which "manifests itself variously as text (novel, play, poem, etc) or event (performance, recitation, chant etc.)" (82). Amuta says this text is ontologically formal and aesthetic because it appeals to our sense of beauty/ugliness. 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 variety allows one to group works, thus, historical challenges are expressed in the literature of the period. He says this is what "literary history" is based on.

Amuta states 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 claiming that his book explores the range of relationships among the two realms. Context, which Amuta says is content and form emerges as a second category for a total understanding of specific literary works and therefore requires further elaborations.

The context of a literary work involves stepping away and looking at the work in its entirety/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 argues, sets him thinking about its relationship to the tradition of neo-realism which is the Portuguese African equivalent of socialist realism. 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.

Amuta says that in concrete terms the implications are that the contexts of works in contemporary African literature are varied and sometimes contradictory. Essentially the situation is one of conflicts and polarizations 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 the option is between liberal bourgeois individualism and an anti-imperialist consciousness with its attendant solidarity with the masses of African peasants and workers.

Amuta also argues that there is a dialectical relationship between content and form but that the "former determines the latter" (86). 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. The content and form discrimination is a product of the analytical gaze of the critic. He says we begin to distinguish between what a work of art tells us and HOW it tells us. The form and content dichotomy is a way of approaching knowledge of the ontology of art works. Therefore while realizing they are theoretically "separate areas of rationalization" (88), they are in practice inseparable.

Content in literature, then, is a semantic appropriation of an aspect of the external reality grounded in context (history), into the created reality of a literary work - an attempt by the creative imagination as a mediating subject to highlight the social experiences that constitute the conditions of literature into a sensible reality. Content must reveal itself externally (as a 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 sociology which belongs to vulgar Marxism. 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. Context, content and form share what Amuta describes as a "dialectic relationship".

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" (89). 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" (89).

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 –Amilcar 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. Amuta idealized Cabral because 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 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. 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 that 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 mentions is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. 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 this link 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.