

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

Amuta, Chidi. The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism. London: Zed, 1989.

Amuta begins by arguing that "traditionalist and formalist" (77) theories of literature have polarised literature "away from socio-historical processes" (77). He offers in their place a "dialectical alternative" (77) which "dissolves the apparent dissonance between literature and society, between literary theory and creative practice" (77). In the "African instance" (77), there is no alternative to the dialectical approach "because of the incontrovertible socio-historical determination of African literature in general" (77):

From the oral chants and narratives of ancient Africa to the most contemporary literary expressions of our modern writers, the challenges and artistic limits of African literature have always been set by experiences and problems of a fundamentally socio-historical nature. (77)

It is for this reason that Amuta offers in what follows what he terms an "anti-imperialist poetics of African literature" (77).

Amuta points out that a dialectical approach to the study of literature is rooted in "Hegelian dialectics" (78) which is, however, idealist in outlook. Through Marx and Engels "dialectics acquires not only a materialist basis but also becomes systematised into a philosophy of history, a scientific political theory and a sociological aesthetic" (78). From this point of view, "culture is the crystallisation of social consciousness in different areas of historically conditioned material and ideational practices" (78) as a result of which a "dialectical theory of culture must have society as its starting point" (79): it must be organically rooted in the historical circumstances and forces which provide the conditionalities of human consciousness in that setting. In essence, then, a dialectical theory of culture must be sociological in a radical sense. It would provide insight not only into the relationship between society and its cultural productions but more crucially into the series of relationships that provide the ontological integrity of the cultural productions themselves. (79)

Amuta formulates these relationships as follows:

the artist is a member of society and incarnates its structural and ideological inflections; the artist's individuality and the society's values are mediated in the work of art; the work of art recreates both the artist and the society and in itself is not a passive object but a restless concourse of images, actions, movements, experiences, statements. (79)

A dialectical theory of literature "primarily underlines the inexorable socio-historical predication of literature" (79) which is both a "product of social experience" (79) and "in turn an active producer of meanings, values and aesthetic effects" (79).

Amuta contends that as a "refraction of social experience through the prism of the human imagination" (70), literature "recycles social experience and transforms it into an aesthetic experience" (79). The "values, criteria and standards by which literature is measured" (79) are "matrixed in the system of values of a given society" (79). Because society takes the form of "definite classes, groups and formations in the process of the production and reproduction of the means and ends for the sustenance of life" (79), literary values are in fact "not after all very *literary* but derive from the class configuration of social values in general" (79). Moreover, the production of literature is organically linked to the various processes of production that constitute society in a variety of ways: precisely because

the writer "must be fed, must be free to write, must have the means and education to write; his work will need publishers who in turn will weigh its profitability" (79), etc, "agriculture, politics, education, commerce and industry" (79) all enter into "what began as a [seemingly purely] literary proposition" (80). However, Amuta stresses, the literary event (his term for the literary work) "possesses an ontological integrity which is contingent on but not directly derivable from its determinants" (80) and, as such, needs to be examined in its own right, albeit not entirely independently of these determinants.

Amuta then proceeds to identify a number of "specific categories which encapsulate the ramified interrelationships between works . . . and their determinants" (80). Such a categorisation must, from the point of view of a dialectical theory of literature, capture the "rootedness of literary art, as a constitutive social practice, in the very processes and social experiences which constitute African history and from which we can correctly characterise the African reality" (80). However, as he makes clear below, the "precise nature of the relationship between history and . . . [African] literature is problematic" (80).

Primary Categories of Analysis

Amuta identifies three "tentative *primary* categories" (80) by means of which to conceptualise African literature:

History:

From the materialist perspective, history is the "complex of material forces and objective conditions which shape social experience and . . . furnish the raw material for literature" (80). Because it consists in the "activities of real people in active roles in equally real situations, history is not only knowable but also a process resulting from human activity" (81). African history is the "primary condition for the existence and understanding of modern African literature especially since the contact with the West" (81) as a result of which it is possible to "plot a trajectory in the development" (81) of African literature "either in terms of definite stages in the historical transformation of Africa or in terms of local variations of the historical challenges which African literature has had to grapple with" (81). African literature must never be divorced from African history which must be grasped in relation to the "evolution of consciousness from the anti-slavery, anti-colonialism, to the contemporary neo-colonial stages" (81). It can also be grasped in terms of "situational or geo-political variations--South Africa, North Africa, East Africa, West Africa with emphasis on the specific experiences that distinguish each of these areas" (81). All in all, African literature is a "historically determined and complex admixture of artforms marked by a *reactive* stance towards major historical experiences (or misfortunes) such as slavery, colonialism, cultural emasculation, political corruption, apartheid, class antagonism and imperialism" (81).

The Mediating Subject:

The "mediating subject" (81) is Amuta's term for the "artist / writer" (81). He thinks it is necessary to conceptualise the author in this way because to do so is a form of "rejection of a mimetic conception of the relationship between the world of art and that of reality" (81). He argues that the "process by which socio-historical experiences enter a work of art is essentially one of *mediation*, the active and purposive transposition of the empirically real into a fictive reality" (81). The "human agency by means of which this process is realised is the author, the narrator, chanter or performer depending on the stage in the development of the mode of literary production" (81). In the case of literature, 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). The author is "engaged in an active process of mediation, i.e. recycling socio-historical experience according to the laws of imaginative projection" (81). S/he "tries to change reality by compelling an *imaginative* understanding of it" (82). Literary creativity is essentially "human practice at the level of consciousness" (82).

The Literary Event:

The "literary event" (82) is Amuta's terms for the literary work that is the "product of the attempt by the mediating subject to derive form from socio-historical experience" (82). It takes the form of "text" (82) (e.g. novel, poem) and "event" (82) ("performance, recitation, chant" [82]). Its "ontological essence is formal and aesthetic" (82) because it appeals to "our sense of beauty / ugliness" (82). There is a profound relationship between the literary work and history but it is of an indirect nature. When we correctly interpret the form of the literary work, "we are able to retrieve the prime condition of its existence, which is history" (82). History "informs the literary artifact and is revealed *in and through* it" (82):

the individual as mediating subject derives experience from history and is in turn making history through creativity; by imaginatively mediating experiences into a given artistic form, s/he changes her- or himself and others; the artistic form which s/he creates is not passive, it is an active producer of meanings, values and aesthetic effects from which we can *know* both history and the mediating subject's participation in it. (82)

This indirect "relationship between history and literature" (83) has "universal applicability" (83) but the "precise content of this relationship in different societies would be historically variable" (83). Different historical experiences "produce different formations of writers / performers who will in turn produce different kinds of literary artifacts" (83). It is for this reason that one can "designate a group of works or writers according to periods, milieux or regions" (83). The "basis of literary history" (83) lies in the fact that the "historical challenges of a specific epoch and locality find expression in the literature of that period" (83).

Secondary Categories of Analysis

Amuta identifies three "secondary categories" (83) necessary for a "total understanding" (83) of literary works:

Context:

Amuta defines "context" (83) as the "realm of determinations" (83) within which the work "derives meaning" (83). Context involves the "totality" (84) of the work's "historical ambience" (84), including "such factors as the level or 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" (84). It involves, too, the "philosophical and aesthetic traditions within which the work is created" (84) as well as "its paradigmatic relationship with other works in the same tradition or in preceding traditions" (84). In the "dialectical framework, no literary work is 'born alone'" (84) as a result of which to read Achebe in Things Fall Apart is to be intensely aware of the broad range of works, even of diverse genres and nationalities, that belong in the anti-colonial tradition of cultural nationalism, a mode of perception which makes it impossible for Things Fall Apart to 'exist' alone. (84)

This is why, Amuta advocates, African criticism must "shed its prodigal Western modernist heritage" (84), that is, abandon its "current predominantly isolationist approach--the study of individual works and writers--and move towards a wider perception" (84) of African

literature and its relation to "political discourse" (84).

With regard to African literature, 'context' implies the work's location "within the political and ideological framework of Africa's colonial and neo-colonial experiences" (84). In modern "neo-colonial Africa, . . . what furnishes the decisive *context* of all cultural practice is capitalist imperialism" (84) which is "inextricably implicated in both the politics and the culture of its client societies" (84). In the neo-colonialist period, imperialism "permeates every facet of life in Africa even in more subtle ways than in the colonial era" (84): in place of "outright denigration and patronising stereotypes, . . . the iconoclastic missionary who burnt down the shrines of ancestral Africa, . . . Shakespeare and Milton, . . . slave-trading factors and middlemen" (85) Africa now has endless doses of cinema mainly from Hollywood in which Western supremacist attitudes towards Africa are elevated to the status of cosmic truths. . . . [M]oral and spiritual justification of capitalism perfumed and packaged as Christian theology. . . . Pulp and juvenalia to sharpen the appetite of tomorrow's consumers of Western goods. . . . comprador bourgeoisie (local directors of multinationals, politician-businessmen, distributors, manufacturers' representatives, papal delegates, liberal professors. (85) The context in which contemporary African literature is produced is essentially "one of conflicts and polarisations, . . . between two sets of antagonistic propositions: between imperialism and the forces of anti-imperialism" (85). Aesthetically, it consists in the "choice between an art-for-art's-sake conception and a utilitarian realistic and engaged poetics" (85). Ideologically, the choice is between "liberal bourgeois individualism and an anti-imperialist consciousness" (85) the main thrust of which is to fight for "economic and cultural independence defined in terms of the total transfer of the means of production and distribution of resources and cultural communication into the hands of the masses of Africans" (85). Context is the "ever-present halo around the literary work as a self-contained entity, which, as the epiphany of history, constantly enters the literary work in rays of inspirational illumination but resists total appropriation by the literary work" (88). Context is the "repository of referential values" (88) upon which the literary work draws.

Content and Form:

Amuta 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" (88). He compares the former to the base and the latter to the superstructure:

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 legitimising *superstructure*. (86)

From this perspective, "content determines form as base determines superstructure" (86), not in some unidirectional way but "along a line of reversible determinations and over determinations" (86).

Amuta points out that the distinction between content and form is an artificial one but necessitated for analytical purposes, an "epistemological proposition, a way of approaching knowledge of the ontology of art works" (87). While realising that they are theoretically "separate areas of rationalisation" (87), they are in practice inseparable.

Content is what Amuta describes as a semantic appropriation of a slice of the external reality furnished by *context* (as history) into the microcosmic totality of the literary work, an attempt by the creative imagination as a mediating subject to intensify the social experiences that constitute the conditionalities of literature into a sensually graspable

reality. (87)

It is not reducible to the context. It is not reducible to what bourgeois critics call 'themes.' This is because the "concrete realisation of the art object consists in content assuming a precise form which we can perceive through our senses" (87). Content must take a form for it to be perceivable by those who read the literary work. As a result, to "insist on content at the expense of form is to succumb to a narrow sociology which belongs in the realm of adolescent Marxism of the vulgarised variety" (88). By the opposite token, however, to "project an absolutised form devoid of content is the bane of all ideologists of different formalist schools" (88).

Amuta stresses that both content and form are not "undifferentiated entities in themselves" (88):

the socio-historical reality (or even the world of nature) which is appropriated in the content is a structured whole with parts--experiences, incidents, people as individuals and in groups relating with another in definable ways. Consequently, its realisation in form will bear the stamp of its inherent structuration. . Therefore, the dialectics of content and form is in addition a systemic dialectics, one based on a whole complex of interrelationships between two sets of variables. (88)

A proper understanding of the "interplay" (88) between content and form demonstrates that art is "essentially content-become-form" (88). Once one understands that, one can attain to the "historical substratum of the work" (88) 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" (88-89) in which literature is involved.

Context, content and form share what Amuta describes as a "dialectical relationship" (83). The first term denotes the "external relationship of a literary work to its informing socio-historical totality" (86). 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" (83). The literary work is the "mediation of context into content and form" (89).

In short, the basic ingredient of a dialectical approach to the study of African literature consists in the "need to historicise that literature, to re-establish that organic link between literature and its informing and sustaining historical milieu which bourgeois criticism in its purely formalistic manifestations [e.g. New Criticism] constantly obfuscates" (89). 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. (89)

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 decolonised 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).