THE Critical Imagination IN African Literature

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF Michael J. C. Echeruo

EDITED BY
Maik Nwosu AND Obiwu

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THE CRITICAL IMAGINATION IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Preface

MAIK NWOSU

In 2010, Professor Michael Joseph Chukwudalu Echeruo, the William Safire Professor of Modern Letters in the Department of English and Textual Studies at Syracuse University, retired from the academy. His career had spanned forty-five years, beginning in 1965 when he earned his doctoral degree from Cornell University. He taught at various universities (including the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the University of Ibadan) and served as the pioneer vice-chancellor at Abia State University, Uturu (formerly Imo State University). Echeruo defined himself through his work as a creative writer and a literary critic committed to the varied exploration and interrogation of diverse kinds of experience or systems of thought. The core of his concern remained the African experience and imagination, but its entire circumference included a spectrum of global imaginaries. The range of his writings encompassed poetry collections, particularly *Mortality* (1968); an interrogation of colonial literature in such works as *Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa* (1973) and *The Conditioned Imagination from Shakespeare to Conrad* (1978); a study of nineteenth-century Lagos, *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Lagos Life* (1977); practical lexicography, the *Igbo-English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language* (1998); *A Concordance to the Poems of Christopher Okigbo* (2008); a key lecture on identity and continuity; a disputation on Jacques Derrida, language games, and theory; a treatise on diasporic ontology; a discourse on modernism, blackface, and the postcolonial condition; and much more. As important as it obviously was, it was not so much a concentration on an area of scholarship that defined Echeruo as it was the

sort of rigorous intellectualism that he applied to different focal concerns. In African studies, where he is particularly celebrated, the "Echeruoan ideal" is understood as an intervention or intellectual engagement characterized by a broadness of vision as well as a depth of analysis. It is this ideal—this mode of thoughtful, Africa-centered scholarship—that this critical anthology projectively celebrates.

The essays collected here contextually honor Echeruo's scholarship and contributions to the African intellectual tradition. Most of the essays are not about Echeruo or his work. The range of interest evident in *The Critical Imagination in African Literature* is extensive. The critical anthology is divided into four parts. Although this division points up different aspects of African literature or its associated critical imagination (including interpretive possibilities), it is applied more for organizational convenience than as an inflexible lense for the apprehension of African literature. The first, African Literature and Global Imaginaries, looks at some significant aspects of African literature in relation to international dis/connections of people and ideas. My essay, "The Figuration of the *Un*: Between African and World Literature," examines the figuration of the *un* (the generative transformation or presential application of the *un*seen, the *un*done, the *un*known, and other pertinent *un*s) that luminously explains both African and world literature. I argue that an examination of the multidimensionality of African literature translates into (or can be translated into) a further appreciation of "world literature." In "The Vortex of the Expulsion: The Search for an Asian African Imaginary," Rashna Singh focuses on the 1972 expulsion of Asians who were not Ugandan citizens and the effect of that "historical moment" on Ugandan writers of Indian descent since then. The texts that she connectively examines include Peter Nazareth's *The General Is Up*, Jameela Siddiqi's *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, and Mira Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* (scripted by Sooni Taraporevala).

The second part of the anthology, African Literature and Consciousness, interprets instances of (as well as trends in) African literature from different perspectives as manifestations of human consciousness grounded in particular sociohistorical or psychoanalytical contexts. Obiwu's essay, "Jacques Lacan in Africa: Travel, Moroccan Cemetery, Egyptian Hieroglyphics, and Other Passions of Theory," references Lacan's

essays, seminars, interviews, and correspondences as it explores Lacan's African visitations as well as how the continent possibly and actually contributed to the shaping of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. "(Re)Defining the Self through Trauma in West African Postcolonial Short Fiction" by Bojana Coulibaly demonstrates that West African short fiction evidences signs of traumas attributable to dynamic existential realities. Coulibaly's analysis of short narratives by Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Chris Abani, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie instantiates her thesis. In "African Postcolonial Imagination and the Moral Challenges of Our Times," Chielozona Eze interrogates the tendency in African literature and literary criticism toward counter-discourse. New generation African writers, he contends, have moved away from the earlier generations' "anti-imperialist rhetoric" and turned instead to "introspectionism," which he describes as "the simple act of self-observation, or the cultural act of looking inward with the goal of critiquing oneself in order to better relate to others."

African Literature and Feminist Perspectives, the third segment of the anthology, is constituted by three essays that particularly project the feminine/feminist point of view. Glen Bush's "Survivalist Autobiographies: The Struggles of African Muslim Women" discusses autobiographies by African Muslim women, which he describes as "narratives of escape and re-invention" that highlight "the daily abuses common in the African Muslim world." The autobiographies that he scrutinizes include *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad* (1998) by Waris Dirie, *Slave* (2003) by Mende Nazer, *Infidel* (2007) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and *Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur* (2008) by Halima Bashir. In Kanchana Ugbabe's "Rebellion as a Narrative Strategy in Southern African Women's Writing," she discusses the creative ways in which Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali, and Tsitsi Dangarembga use rebellion and protest in their novels and short stories. She argues that the "feminine text" is not only "subversive in its narrative point of view [but also] undermines and demystifies patriarchal ideologies. The writer ventures into uncharted territories with a newness of vision and a zeal to tell a story. She is a metaphoric exile looking from the outside and trying to make sense of an inside world." Heather Hewett's "Rewriting Human Rights: Gender,

Violence, and Freedom in the Fiction of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie" points out that much Anglophone African diasporic literature has been pro-human rights from its origins and has remained so. "Rather than jettisoning the system of human rights altogether," she remarks, "many feminists and women's rights activists have claimed human rights ideals for women at the same time that they have critiqued the human rights regime for its inattention to gender as well as other intersectional components of identity." She contextualizes contemporary African Anglophone "witness literature" in her analysis of Adichie's fiction.

The fourth section of the anthology, African Literature and Cultural Aesthetics, includes readings of African literature that centralize cultural or cross-cultural characteristics, concerns, and correspondences (especially with reference to narratives of power and redemption). Sule Egya's "Dialogism, African Poetics, and Contemporary Nigerian Poetry in English," utilizes both Mikhail M. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and African oral performance theory in its study of Nigerian poetry under repressive military regimes between the 1980s and the 1990s. His exploration leads to the conclusion that "the contemporary poets, following the interventionist role of the oral artist, still see themselves as oracles that must speak up in the face of socio-political difficulties, and in doing so they *intentionally* set out to address characters and issues." Dul Johnson connects African and African American literature in "Confronting Politics Through History: A Reading of the Historical Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah and John Edgar Wideman." Arguing that history and politics are inseparable and that the invocation of history has always been an important part of African and African American life and literature, he demonstrates the validity of his argument by an arterial examination of the works of Ayi Kwei Armah and John Edgar Wideman.

Besides the ten essays in the four sections, there is also a special focus essay and a report. The essay, "Cultural Icon: Michael J. C. Echeruo and the African Academy" by Obiwu, discusses Professor Echeruo as an African intellectual and a humanist by analyzing some of his major works and other contributions. The report is a pertinent account of the Michael J. C. Echeruo Valedictory Symposium, which was held at Syracuse University,

New York, on October 15, 2010. The event convoked scholars (mostly Africanists) and provided an opportunity for responses to old questions and the articulation of new ones.

The concerns in *The Critical Imagination in African Literature* are indeed varied, as are the modes of inquiry, but a common quality is that many of the essays point up new theoretical directions in the continuing debate or discourse that has characterized modern African literature. These essays do not constitute the beginning of African literary history or theory, but many of them further a fuller text/context appreciation of modern African literature and criticism from both a distinctive and a relational perspective. Many of them belong to—and extend—the sphere of African intellectual thought pioneered by scholars such as Echeruo. It is this *extension*, in terms of insightfully contributing to an ongoing discourse and significantly highlighting or initiating new analytical possibilities, that constitutes the thrust of this critical anthology.

Our aim is a dual singularity, as paradoxical as this might seem—to further the culture of vigorous discourse on African literature and to salute an iconic figure that has incarnated that culture in the past fifty years, approximately. The breadth of Echeruo's scholarship is almost staggering—important contributions to intellectual debates on Igbo, African, African diaspora, European, and American literatures and literary theories; on nations and narratives; on global modernism; on structuralism and meaning; et cetera. A major aspect of that scholarship is methodological rigor. Echeruo's reputation mainly lies not in the fact that he has a subject or a list of subjects that he regularly returns to, as many scholars do, but that after he initiates or enters a conversation the intellectual tone is remarkably elevated. Not one to flounder in foggy or pseudo-intellectual atmospherics, Echeruo's scholarship is marked by the necessary historicization of relatable significancies in philosophical and literary thought. In part, that is why he matters, so much so that we feel it is only proper to honor him by producing a volume of essays that have been inspired by this sort of scholarship, essays that could collectively impact the discourse on African literature in the way that Echeruo has done over the years. These reflective essays may therefore be said to belong to an Echeruoan tradition

of Africa-focused scholarship, intellectual curiosity, global imagination, and critical rigor. And, in a manner characteristic of this tradition, the essays do more than just invoke or gesture toward an ethos that is part of a global or human cognitive map. They often tend toward the expansion or reinvention of that tradition.

Denver, Colorado, 2014

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Special Focus

Cultural Icon: Michael J. C. Echeruo and the African Academy

OBIWU

In 1979, Adiele Afigbo placed Echeruo in the front rank of the small group of professors whom Bertrand Russell identified as "whole-heartedly and enthusiastically" admired by inquiring minds (Afigbo 1979, 5). In his fiftieth birthday essay tribute to Echeruo in 1994, "The Dignity of Intellectual Labor," Isidore Okpewho positioned Echeruo as "the undisputed guru" of Africa's critical pantheon. According to Okpewho, "In any roll call of literary scholars today in Nigeria (if not Africa), his name is usually the first" (1994, 192). During his lecture visit to Syracuse University in 2000, the eminent critic Ben Obumselu spoke of Echeruo's unrivaled devotion to scholarship and his painstaking pursuit of critical excellence exemplified in his close attention to textual analysis and the archival excavation of background material.[1] Above all, noted Obumselu, Echeruo demonstrates a superior understanding of discourse and control of language that are not only the envy of his peers but have also set too high a standard for generations of Nigerian English scholars after him.

The foregoing encomiums on Echeruo beg the question: When his colleagues hail him in spite of his habitual defiance of the pomp of vanity

1. Conversations with Professor Obumselu during his month-long lecture visit on the invitation of the Syracuse University Student Union, the African Student Union, and the Center for International Services. His lecture was entitled "African Myths: Beyond the Killing Field."

and recognition (what Afigbo describes as "his unboastful character"), what exactly are they talking about? What is the substance of Echeruo's intellectual authority? The answer, though complex, would be traced partly to his stellar student antecedents and partly to his equally illustrious career. Echeruo graduated at the top of his class at the reputable Stella Maris High School, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He was College Scholar and best graduating student at the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, where he was a classmate of the respected African critic Abiola Irele. He completed his graduate studies at Cornell University with prestigious laurels, including Hoyt Scholar of the university, Phi Kappa Phi (social sciences), and Phi Beta Kappa (humanities). Today, the *Igbo-English Dictionary* is one of the select faculty texts in prominent display on the third floor of the Hall of Languages at Syracuse University, where Echeruo was the distinguished William Safire Professor of Modern Letters and now serves as professor emeritus.

As "a trained academic," Echeruo is not only concerned with the "intellectual history" of Africa, but even more with the "cosmopolitan black ethos" (Killam 1981, 126–29). As a public intellectual, Echeruo is committed to the epical quality of the regenerative human spirit. That is why he speaks of love as "no longer love in the young sense of the word, but love as a different and adult reality," terrible and filled with suffering. The pangs of love may be ecstatic, but the elation is of a higher order (Lindfors 1974, 7). This is the sensibility that is captured in the haunting imagery of the poem "Debut" in his first poetry collection, *Mortality* (1968): "A thing of beauty/ is a thing of sorrow, for ever" (3). For Echeruo, the "gladness" of beauty will "not pass away" and "catharsis is the prelude to a birth."

The postcolonial vision of Echeruo's poet-speaker is consciously juxtaposed against the untrammeled romanticism of John Keats's persona in "Endymion." Echeruo counteracts the mediated opening of Keats's song of innocence with the unpretentious harsh lights of his own song of experience because, he insists, "Things do not begin as they end." For Echeruo, therefore, the scholar is necessarily an intellectual who is always in the service of the community and whose experience is his or her inalienable inheritance. For the Echeruoan scholar, knowledge is uncircumscribed and service is without borders. The second stanza of "Debut" offers an

eternal truth that the world is a marble canvas and language is the agency for the search, the discovery, and the redemption: "till we saw the palmnuts again/ by which we were to live?"

It is natural that poetry would foreground a discussion of Echeruo's writing and his love of language, since poetry marked his early advent into the African continental literary landscape. Echeruo won first prize at the 1963 All Africa Poetry Competition, beating out Dennis Brutus and K. A. Nortje to second and third places, respectively ("South African, Nigerian Win" 1963, 4). That event was the pioneer literary contest for African writers in English organized by the Mbari Club and the International Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the judges were Langston Hughes, Ulli Beier, and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Five years later, Echeruo published *Mortality*, a collection of thirty poems arranged in five sections. Section 1, "Debut," contains eleven poems; section 2, "Mortal Songs," and section 3, "Defections," each have seven poems; the final sections 4, "Poems to God and O'Brien," and 5, "Daedalus," are comprised of four poems and one poem, respectively. The themes of *Mortality* range from spiritual quest and the spring of life to stultifying rainstorms that represent the 1966 Nigerian military coups and subsequent genocide against the Igbo ethnic group in Northern Nigeria and other parts of the country. Echeruo draws on the grim "specters of songs" ("Rain," 33), "wiser buds" of "June" ("Come, Come Spring," 34), and the "inheritance" of "June" ("Fanfare for June," 36) to explore the failure, perversion, and ruination of memory.

The appearance and success of *Mortality* in the middle of the Biafran War was followed by the publication of *Distanced* (1975), a collection of eighteen poems. Echeruo takes time to note in its three-sentence "Preface" that only one poem, "Their Finest Hour," was written in Biafra in June 1968. "All the other poems were written in Nigeria in the six months following the end of the War" (4). The haunting specter of June, which is encountered in the morbidity of *Mortality*, pervades the lyricism of the three sections of *Distanced* like a bestial, macabre dance. The first section ("Requiem") comprises six poems, and the second ("Prospect") and third ("My Fatherland!") comprise one and eleven poems, respectively. In five brief lines, the first poem of the collection eschews all pretensions to

literary aesthetics in its stark and incisive depiction of the poet's path into a postmodern and postcolonial wasteland.

"Requiem"

They shot him down
His first night out;
We buried him
The very next day

A morning sun, proud, over him. (7)

In like manner the persona of the last poem of the collection, "Their Finest Hour," recoils from the tragic image of the "ravaged land" (33). In the metaphor of the "little ewes and the small kids," which are recognized by the bulging udders, the poet portrays bounties of the "known" past ("I have known"), in contrast with the devastation of kwashiorkor in the "unknown" present ("Now, I do not know").

Do I now know
the hearth from the fires that consume,
with this roaring wind in the air
and the fires still, still coming
the wind fanning the embers to death?

Unfortunately, Echeruo's poetic intensity suffered a hiatus after the publication of *Distanced*. He had famously informed the scholar-critic Bernth Lindfors in 1974 that he considered himself more of a critic than a poet. The sudden appearance of the poem "Dedication (After Chris Okigbo, friend)," as an epigraphic tribute to his landmark Okigbo *Concordance* in 2008 was therefore a surprise. Originally written in 2007, "Dedication" seeks to accentuate the interview with Lindfors by, on the one hand, mourning the demise of the late poet Christopher Okigbo in Biafra and, on the other hand, signing the epitaph heralding both the end of poetry and his own symbolic exit from the praxis of the genre. Broken into four stanzas of eleven, ten, six, and one line, the poem's second stanza suggests that the tragedy that inspires poetic invention also marks its impotency.

Too late now to be a poet
Too late now to learn
To say nothing that hastens a sunrise
When the southwesterly winds fan the waters
Into eddies of triumphant orgy
And the heart bleeds blood
And the eyes shed salt in pail-loads
And mourn the never-heaving,
never urging ardor
of a tired yard.

These poems prove what Okechukwu Umeh describes as Echeruo's "unique and unorthodox" perception as a religiously conscious poet far beyond the gaze of his Nigerian peers Pol Ndu, Okigbo, Okogbule Wonodi, and Wole Soyinka (1988, 204). They also clearly situate Adrian Roscoe's conjecture that Echeruo "did not seem as anxious as Gabriel Okara and Wole Soyinka to fashion" his art from traditional African material (1971, 63). Yet the perceptive observations on his craft have not endeared Echeruo to some critics whose shafts have latched onto the classical-cum-modernist pedigrees and Latinate phraseology of such early poems of *Mortality* as "Sophia" (4), "They . . ." (5), "Cross-roads" (6), and "Easter Penitence" (12) to assault the depth and language of his creative practice.

In such books as *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 1985) and *The West and the Rest of Us* (Chinweizu 1975), Echeruo's poetry has been assailed for its obscurantism. I suspect, however, that much of Echeruo's earlier writing (particularly those published in the seventeen years between 1962 and 1979) could have drawn the ire of his intemperate critics.[2] Given his academic background, it is understandable that aesthetic consideration should rank high in his literary taste. Having come from the generation after Echeruo, the self-proclaimed "bolekaja" troika neither shared his orientation nor understood

2. I have provided a chronological list of Echeruo's primary texts below, including other titles I have not mentioned or fully discussed in the essay.