

Essay Review

The Study of the Shona Novel

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There has not really been any serious literary assessment, in depth or on a comparative basis, of modern Shona narrative writing in particular, or of Shona creative writing in general. All that we have are the collection of essays edited by E. W. Krog,¹ which deals with problems and principles of modern creative writing in both prose and poetry as well as containing some analyses of Shona and Ndebele narratives and poems, and some review articles or essays in journals by Kahari and other scholars such as Fortune, Albert Gérard and Beat Inauen.²

The publication of Kahari's study of Chakaipa's novels* is then to be welcomed as the first detailed study of modern Shona literature, from the point of view of one particular author and his work; indeed, it may well be the first detailed study of any African writer of one of the indigenous languages of Africa. It is therefore doubly unfortunate that this work under review is not very good.

Although the collection of essays by Krog had the merit of making Shona writers and students of the language aware of some of the theories and principles of modern European fiction and some of the problems of the modern

publishing business, the critical analyses of the Shona narratives, that had been published by 1966 and were there examined, left much to be desired for the serious student of Shona creative writing. These analyses followed the plot-character-theme-setting approach demanded by school children and their public examiners, so well exemplified in the countless slim study-series on chosen English texts found on the shelves of booksellers all over examination-conscious Africa.

As far as the authors of review articles are concerned, it is significant that excepting for Kahari, who is a native speaker of Shona, and Gérard, who is a critic of vernacular writing in Africa but presumably with hardly any knowledge of the writings in the original languages,³ both reviewers mentioned above are not primarily professional literary scholars or critics, although they do have a profound scholarly knowledge of Shona.

This is significant because it means that Kahari as a literary critic has not an authentic African literary pedigree or tradition to draw upon, in the academic sense. Nevertheless had he at least followed the form of criticism being established by Gérard and other critics of African creative writing, he might have done much better in this study. Instead he looks (pp.

* G. P. Kahari, *The Novels of Patrick Chakaipa*, Salisbury, Longman, 1972, 110 pp. Rb\$1,75.

108-10) for the genealogy of his literary scholarship mostly to such dubious or culturally distant ancestors as Henry James, Allot, Forster, Lever and van Ghent. James and Forster, we all know, were practitioners as well as theoretical giants in the tradition of that very specialised, relatively new(and perhaps very Western) type of prose fiction called the 'novel' that emerged in England, first tentatively with Bunyan, and then more assuredly with Defoe, Richardson and Fielding in the eighteenth century. This novelty that became the 'pure' novel of Henry James and Forster is not an African form and so far has shown all the signs of rejection in transplants. On the other hand, the story or tale, a very ancient genre found in all pre-technological, heroic cultures, all over the world, pre-eminently is an African form.

The two genres are very different and must not be confused. The present reviewer has written elsewhere that story-telling is not novel-telling. Nowhere in Kahari's study is this idea elucidated although it could have been a most fruitful organising principle for an explanatory approach to these writings. Rather there is a confusion of classification and terminology. Although there are many interesting snippets of information on the oral residues of the tale to be found in Chakaipa's writing, we never get a clear picture of what Patrick Chakaipa's oral literary antecedents really mean in the context of the new medium, writing — a medium that must necessarily draw him towards a more novelistic type of expression even against the strong pull of the oral narrative type of telling. Kahari consistently uses the word 'novel' for what this reviewer considers essentially to be short written narratives or written stories; and he insists that Chakaipa is a novelist: 'Chakaipa, as a novelist, is a "real wizard" (*muroyi chaiye*, as the expression goes in Shona)' (p.62). Then, in the last chapter, which seems to have been tacked on after new information and a new interpretation have been considered, he concedes that in view of the shortness of the stories, they might be called 'novellas', or 'written *rungano*' in view of their oral origin. Yet on the same page (p. 106) Kahari still insists that, 'Chakaipa's novels are novels in every sense of the word'.

He then gives his definition of what purports to be a 'Shona novel':

The Shona novel may thus be defined as a piece of written prose narrative of some considerable length, which involves the reader in an imagined real world which the author has created. It bears some resemblance to oral tradition in tone and in style. It is used in school as a teaching tool. Missionary influence, which has found support in the existing African traditional conservatism, is profoundly felt.

This epitomises the great weakness of the book: it is inconsistent, contradictory, and completely lacking in coherent theory.

There is generally also a complete lack of logical development, sometimes even from sentence to sentence. Each section, not to mention paragraph, seems to add new ideas or information that is not logically related to what has been said before or even flatly contradicts previous statements. Here is just one glaring example:

When it comes to characterization, Chakaipa is at his best. His characters' actions are strongly motivated by human feelings and intentions and not by strings remotely controlled by him (p. 60).

Then, on the very next page he makes this remarkable statement:

Most of Chakaipa's characters tend to be vehicles of moral themes because they seem to belong to the realm of super-natural or poetic justice (p. 61).

Thus according to Kahari, Chakaipa's characters are of the realistic psychological type of the novel, but he then immediately contradicts this by saying that Chakaipa uses the character typology of allegory where the author is, in fact, the puppet master who pulls the strings.

In addition to the foreign literary heritage mentioned above, there is also another pernicious influence or inheritance at work in this study: modern linguistic analysis. Literary criticism, ever since the time of Aristotle perhaps, has at various times toyed with the ideas and methods of the exact or natural sciences and, especially, in the last decade or so, with the structural methods of linguistic science. The quantitative methods of statistics and charts have long been used when dealing with certain forms of textual criticism like prosody. This

can have great explanatory value but we must not lose sight of the fact that literary scholarship has its own valid methods that can be equally intellectual, systematic and illuminating — and what is more, these usually stress comprehension more than explanation, response more than analysis.⁵

Every now and then, and completely out of the context of literary appreciation and assessment, Kahari makes his bow to the august linguistic doyens and mentors of his University department by giving us, for instance, proverb structure (p. 40), ideophonic structure (pp. 40-1), registers (p.44), substantive structure (p. 74) and so on. These linguistic intrusions and the jargon in which they are couched are quite incompatible with his overall literary approach.

Anthropology and sociology are also often brought in as interesting snippets of background information. But, again, there is no *literary* interpretation or assessment of this in the light of Chakaipa's writing. For instance, Kahari tells us in detail (p. 37) about traditional naming in Shona, the *mazita madunhurirwa* (eponyms, nicknames, praisenames). All very interesting, but the far-reaching literary implications of this for characterisation are not discussed or evaluated with reference to any of the characters.

In a public lecture on these writings, I once said:

There are two main schools of African writing, as I see it. The one is African orientated and bound to memories of an indigenous oral tradition. The other is European orientated and bound to an engrafted written tradition. The first I would like to call the thank-God-for-anything-written-in-Shona school. This school tends to patronise the African writer not because he is a good writer but because he is an African launching out in the new prestige medium, script. The idea is that writing, any writing, is helping the progress of Shona as a literary medium so critical standards may be lowered in order not to discourage it . . . Now we come to the second school of criticism. This school I would like to term the we-must-apply-European-standards school, otherwise, it is implied, there may be a literary lowering of standards, there

may be a desecration of the sacred cow of novel writing that is worshipped with formalistic ritual in the West.⁶

Kahari clearly does not consistently adhere to either approach. His emotional response and sympathies are with the first (and he admits it in the book), but as professional literary critic he feels under obligations to the new order. Is this not the dilemma of the divided man in Africa who wants to have his cake (the old Africa) and eat it (the material rewards of the new)? He then has no overall or consistent theory or framework of literary criticism and hence the confusion and contradictions throughout the book.

These criticisms of mine raise the question of what can one properly expect of a monograph like this. Firstly, I believe the reader needs something of a comparative and historical assessment as to where Chakaipa, and his fellow Shona creative writers, stands in an overall framework of fictional theory which could also be relevant to the whole continent of Africa and so bring the continuities and discontinuities of African literature in a new medium into clearer perspective.

Then the reader would like to have the themes of this writer clearly expounded and laid bare — the sinews or muscles, as it were. For example, how does Chakaipa handle the major theme of the cultural clash with its many subsidiary themes like the corroding effects of city life, the theme of the dismissal of parental authority and/or parents' permissiveness, the theme of economic necessity or the lust for money, the theme of magic, sorcery and witchcraft, the theme of an African identity and many others.

Also, one would want to know whether Chakaipa's attitude is one of unquestioning acceptance of Western innovation and values, especially Christian values. What concessions does he make to the older order, to the old traditions and dignity of his people? In a word, the evidence of syncretism, if there is any; otherwise his dichotomy of values. For this reviewer, Chakaipa, on the one hand, does not want to compromise with the grosser materialistic aspects of Western culture but, on the other hand, because of his Christian commitment as a priest, he cannot compromise with the spirituality of traditional Shona

culture. Lastly, one would also like to have an assessment of the literary implications for an African author like Chakaipa creating in a foreign medium for a society that is largely illiterate in the double sense of the word. It has been said that Chakaipa writes for school children books that will be acceptable to the educational and administrative authorities of this country. How far is this true?

There are many other literary questions left unanswered. Does Chakaipa, for instance, ever imply that characters who try to fit themselves to European ways are making fools of themselves and in the end suffer (i.e. the theme

of an African identity)? Is the reader ever made to feel that the European or urban culture is deprivation rather than acquisition? Are the "New World Novels" popular precisely because they do reflect the life and predicament of the majority of Shona people and in spite of their many defects?

These and many similar questions are of paramount importance to the literary critic looking at an emerging vernacular literature which is trying to cope with or make sense out of nascent and syncretic culture (or is it largely *anomie* this literature is depicting?).

REFERENCES

¹*African Literature in Rhodesia*, Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1966.

²See G. Fortune, '75 years of writing in Shona', *Zambezia*, 1969, 1, i, 55-67; A. S. Gérard, 'African literature in Rhodesia', *Africa Report*, 1968, 13, v, 41-2; B. Inauen, 'Ten Years of Shona literature', *Bethlehem*, 1967, 7, 224-6; G. P. Kahari, 'Bernard Chidzero's *Nzengamutsuwauro*', *Teachers in New Africa*, 1969, 6, x, 14-16; xi, 1920; (Kahari's 'Tradition and innovation in Shona literature', *Zambezia*, 1972, 2, ii, 47-54, is largely reproduced in his book under review); J. Haasbroek review article: 'Ndakambokuyambira' by Paul Chidya-usiku', *Teachers in New Africa*, 1969, 6, iv, 20-1.

³Albert S. Gérard is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Liège, Belgium. He formerly held a similar position at the then University of Elizabethville, Congo.

⁴'Some aspects of Shona literary writing', unpublished paper presented to the Shona Language Committee, Salisbury, November, 1970.

⁵For a fuller discussion of these ideas, see R. Welck and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, London, Cape, 1954.

⁶'The Shona Novels — A Tentative Framework for Literary Criticism', unpublished paper presented in the Department of African Languages, University of Rhodesia, 1970.

⁷Compare this with the syncretism found, for example, in Mofolo's *Moeti oa bochabela*, where according to P. D. Beuchat, Sotho beliefs and Christian thought merge, *Do the Bantu have a Literature?*, Johannesburg, Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, [1962] Paper No. 1, p.19.