

Book Reviews

Editor: Kirsten Holst Petersen

Title: *Criticism and Ideology*

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Reviewer: H.M. Njozi

Criticism and Ideology is a collection of 16 papers and highlights of the discussions at the second Stockholm Conference for African Writers, held in 1986. Writers who presented their papers include Wole Soyinka, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986, Miriam Tlali, Taban lo Liyong, Ama Ata Aidoo, Eldred Jones, Buchi Emecheta and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Thematically, the papers published in this volume have little in common. The writers discuss a wide range of issues related to literature, criticism and society. It is also clear from the discussions that in most cases, they hold different or even conflicting views on a number of issues like feminism and the problem of language.

Literature is all too frequently discussed and evaluated from the critic's point of view. Despite its advantage such a bias is not free from limitations. Significantly, this volume is a modest attempt to counter balance that trend. In it, issues pertaining to literature, criticism and society are discussed by, and from a decidedly standpoint of the writers themselves.

In his paper, "Ethics, Ideology and the Critic" Wole Soyinka voices his dissatisfaction with the quality of criticism flowing from critics of African literature. In his derision, Soyinka arranges those critics in a descending order beginning with the 'bad' whose only qualification is being 'lovers of literature' and ending with the 'worst' — "the *chichidodo* school of critics. In between, he places the Marxists and the neo-Tarzanist critics. Most Marxists he says regard literature as 'a means of opening up the material relations of the world. The work which illuminates this process is already on its way to being a masterpiece'. Such critics consider clichés as substitutes for analytical vigour. Soyinka seems to argue that ideology is destructive of criticism.

On the language question, Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are at loggerheads. Soyinka argues that the choice of language will vary from one situation to another. Therefore no one should prescribe for the others. The change of language, he says, could threaten the political stability of Nigeria. Kole Omotoso supports Soyinka's position in his paper "The Languages of our dreams or the dreams of our languages". They both however, support the furtherance and mastery of indigenous languages.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's paper "Writing against Neo-Colonialism" links the growth of African literature to the continent's political development. He argues that the political situation in Africa today demands that a writer make a choice; either to crusade for justice and risk jail or exile or acquiesce to the *status quo* or embrace self-censorship — the culture of silence and fear.

Taban lo Liyong's paper, "Reverend Doctor John S. Mbiti is a Thief of Gods" is an attempt to defend traditional religion. This he does by writing a critique of Rev. J.S. Mbiti's book; *African Religions and Philosophy*. He concludes by urging African writers to champion their traditional religions and advocating their case.

In her paper, "African Motherhood — Myth and Reality", Lauretta Ngcobo argues that most African traditions fetter the development of women. Unfortunately, the images of women in African literature seem to perpetuate the oppression of women. Women characters are often punished severely for any mistakes they commit while male characters suffer no severe chastisement. Ngcobo says that all these crimes against women

emanate from one basic principle — ‘the social and sexual subordination of women — Writers have a responsibility to society, and in this instance, to women in particular. We are looking for a changed portrayal of women in our books.’

In her paper, “To be an African Woman Writer — an Overview and a Detail” Ama Ata Aidoo laments the denial of serious critical attention to women writers. From Gerald Moore onwards almost all critics have ignored women writers. Such critics include Neil McEwan, *Africa and the Novel* (1975), Charles Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1972), Eustace Palmer, *Introduction to the African Novel* (1979), Chinweizu, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Gerald Moore *Twelve African Writers*, (1980) and Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* (1985).

Olada Taiwo’s book, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* is severely criticized by Aidoo because the author treat the women writers ‘as if they were a bunch of precocious six-year olds who had demonstrated some special abilities to the headteacher.’ She demands a serious literary criticism based on the text and the writer’s intention and not on speculations about sideline issues.

It is unfortunate that the conference missed the contributions of other literary giants like Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, Nurudin Farah and Sembene Ousmane. Nevertheless, for all those who are interested in African literature, *Criticism and Ideology* remains a rare book that at once delights and educates. It is a book worth reading.