

# POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE: THE END OF THE SINGLE STORY?

Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah

*Kwara State University*

Harry Garuba

*University of Cape Town*

Uzoma Esonwanne

*University of Toronto*

199

In this second volume of the special edition of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* on Literature and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora, we bring together six more essays that thematize the relationship between postcolonial African and African diasporic literary and cultural production, history, and the dominant/resistant discourses within the nation and the wider, globalized world that have framed and shaped them. In our introduction to the first volume, we attempted to map a trajectory of these various forces—historical and discursive—that went into the making of the narrative forms and media of African literary and cultural expression and the aesthetic ideologies and discursive practices they enacted. Deploying the title of Okwui Enwezor's 2001 Munich exhibition of African art entitled "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994" in modified form, we interrogated the ways in which African literatures and cultures have responded to the challenges brought forth by the restructuring of the post-1945 global world order by the massive changes—economic, political, technological, etc.—that defined the period from the end of the war to the present moment. One of the questions we asked was: "What generic, formal, and aesthetic innovations have these political, economic, technological, and cultural challenges and shifts inspired in African cultural practices, and what contributions have literary and cultural criticism made to our understanding of these innovations" (267-8). The essays selected for that volume and the introduction that framed them set out to answer that question by highlighting

these generic, formal and aesthetic innovations in literary and cultural texts and the tradition of literary and cultural criticism that developed alongside them.

In this introductory note to the second volume, we ask a simpler but somewhat more intractable question: Does the spate of African and diasporic literary and cultural production since the short century and after mean that the erasure and silencing of African subjects and voices from the dominant narratives of our times have been reversed? Has the dominance of a single, hegemonic story of Africa been overcome? In the essay “Today, the Balance of Stories” collected in the volume *Home and Exile*, Chinua Achebe says, “my hope for the twenty-first century is that it will see the first fruits of the balance of stories among the world’s peoples.” He continues:

The twentieth century for all its many faults did witness a significant beginning, in Africa, and elsewhere in the so-called Third world, of the process of “re-storying” peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of dispossession. I was lucky to be present at one theater of that reclamation. (79)

**200**

Is there now—to appropriate Chinua Achebe’s memorable words—a balance of stories in the world? Let us begin by putting this question in context.

About a year or so ago, the young Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a short twenty-minute talk entitled “The Danger of a Single Story.” Posted on the Ted Talks website, her talk became an instant hit; the link was posted on many African listserves, copied unto YouTube, reproduced on several blogs, and even sent as attachment to individual email accounts of teachers and students of Africa the world over. Obviously the talk had touched upon something that echoed or resonated with the experiences of lots of people. This “something” was the dominance of a single story in the world we live in today and the consequent marginalisation or erasure of all other stories.

In her brief talk, Adichie drew upon a wide range of anecdotes, personal stories and sources to underscore the limitations that we face when all we have to rely upon in our understanding of an event, a person, a people, or a continent is a single story, especially when that story is repeated with slight variations of detail over and over again. In fact, the purveyors of single stories rely on the power of repetition and continual citation to consolidate their stories and blind us to the possibility of other stories. The single story becomes the authoritative story.

Adichie refers to the single story she had of Mexicans as a bunch of no-good-immigrants who illegally enter into the US to live off the American welfare, medicare and social security systems. She held onto that story until she visited Mexico and found a proud, hardworking people rather than a dependent population of lazy people waiting for handouts. She speaks of the single story she had of her family house help in Nigeria, Fidelis, whose people, she was told, were poor and had to depend on the used clothes and food items her parents regularly sent them. Then she pays this supposedly poor, passive and dependent family a visit only to discover that they were also highly creative folk whose skills were evidently displayed in the artistry that went into the

designs of the baskets they made.

However, the overwhelming thrust of her narrative was about Africa and the reduction of the vast continent into a country of Aids-infested, starving people, who periodically—no—regularly descend into an orgy of senseless wars and genocide. This single story of Africa, whose genealogy goes right back to the age of “Discovery,” runs right through the period of colonialism and apartheid to the contemporary moment. Indeed, African literature in English and French as they emerged in the 20th century took as their primary objective the need to create other stories beyond the single story of the discovery of a continent of savages and the civilizing mission that followed upon colonial conquest. From Leopold Sedar Senghor through Chinua Achebe to J.M. Coetzee, the underlying connection between their narratives was the urge to tell other stories or to interrogate the authoritative, authorized version of the African story. Much has been written about this earlier generation of writers and the tasks they set themselves in the light of their location in place and history—interrogating and/or rewriting canonical European narratives, recovering or trying to recover lost stories, giving voice and agency to the silenced and marginalized, in short, challenging the authority of the single story by providing us with other stories. In the present postcolonial and post-apartheid world of the 21st century, we need to ask if Achebe’s hope for a balance of stories is any closer to being realised.

201

That question provides the rhetorical opening for the essays collected in this second volume. As Achebe’s own writing career so aptly demonstrates, the struggle against the single story and the struggle for narrative authority first staged against colonialism and its discourses of Africa was later to be waged against the postcolonial African state and its political and discursive apparatus. Most of the essays in this volume deal with this political and discursive contestation. These essays—each in its own way—deal with the struggle against the tyranny of dominant narratives. Modupe Olaogun’s “Surreptitious Spaces of Citizenship through a Canadian Prism” examines the place of Blackness and Africanness in the narrative of Canadian citizenship. In her analysis of Esi Edugyan’s novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, Olaogun opens up questions of race and disability and other “surreptitious spaces” through which nation and citizenship are imagined and performed beyond the formal. The immigrant experience articulated with disability within a family sets the ground in the fictional small town of Aster for the interrogation of the Canadian narrative of nation and belonging, especially in relation to its African diasporic peoples.

In a similar manner, Sam Raditlhalo’s “Family Fictions: All *Thirteen Cents* and *Bitter, Too*” also focuses on the “surreptitious spaces” where the grand post-apartheid national narrative of reconciliation and the rainbow nation breaks down. Exploring questions of violence, betrayal and family disintegration through two novels, Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* and K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents*, Raditlhalo argues that, rather than fitting into the narrative of post-apartheid reconciliation, these novels expose the unresolved issues of apartheid social and political identities. In this sense, these issues bring post-apartheid South Africa closer to Achille Mbembe’s charac-

terisation of the postcolony than to the narrative of the rainbow nation. Raditlhalo uses Mbembe's conceptual template of the postcolony to examine the novels.

Gichingiri Ndigirigi's "Spectacle and Subversive Laughter in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*" continues in this vein, contesting the official narratives of the postcolonial state. Deploying Mbembe's "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," Ndigirigi constructs a methodological reading kit that also draws on the works of Michel Foucault (on the spectacle of punishment in *Discipline and Punish*) and Mikhail Bakhtin (on the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*) to examine the performance of power and resistance in an African postcolonial state as depicted in Ngũgĩ's novel. Ndigirigi's essay shows that in Ngũgĩ's novel of the subaltern struggle against the official narratives of the postcolonial state, spectacle and subversive laughter are deployed to deconstruct and destabilize the official mythology of power.

As its title makes clear, Austin Tam-George's "Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni Struggle and the Aesthetics of Spectacle" also examines the use of spectacle, carnivalesque laughter and performance linked to the construction of counter-narratives and counter-discourses to undermine the authority of the state in the Ogoni struggle. The struggle in this instance is not only pitched against the postcolonial state, but is also directed at a multi-national oil company indicted for environmental degradation and for bringing ecological disaster to the Nigerian Niger Delta. In his examination of the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni struggle, Tam-George's essay also shows that the struggle against power is not waged from some pure, uncontaminated space, outside of history and discourse. This is a significant critical manoeuvre because the power of the single story ultimately lies in its ability to render the world intelligible only in binary, Manichean terms.

Ben Halm's article "Religion, Science and Sex: Faith, Hope and Transcendental Love in Four African Novels" revisits this Manichean framing of the world by examining a dominant story of a somewhat different kind. In the post-industrial, post-Enlightenment world where science and reason have supposedly displaced religion and faith, sex, Halm argues, is aestheticized in literary, high culture as the new source of salvation and transcendence. The author examines this dominant narrative of the apotheosis and faith in the therapeutic power of erotic-carnal love in four African novels focussing on the ways in which these novels are either implicated in or contest this narrative.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the story of African literatures and cultures and their struggle against the single story from the short century to the present, it is this: that the danger of the single story and its dominance is not about to go away but neither are the voices raised in its contestation.

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