



Response

A response to “arrogant Western” criticism

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The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe once said that “arrogant Westerners” should not review African literature. His objection was to the Western criticism labeling African literature “universal”, and, he felt, denying its African identity.

I do not agree with this rather radical view, and I am certain a now much older and mellower Achebe might have altered his stance. However, I do agree that Western or white criticism has largely missed the point of African literature, or, more generally, Black Literature.

The best example of this is the criticism Toni Morrison frequently faced from white critics in America. In the late seventies, an article in the venerable *New York Times Book Review*, unbelievably, published a typical comment saying that Morrison was “too talented” to write “only” about black people.

Morrison responded with characteristic grace, saying:

Being a black female writer does not mean that my world became smaller. It became bigger. When I say I write about people, that’s exactly what I mean, black people. The range of emotions I’ve had access to as a black woman writer is greater than someone who is neither.

She went on to say, rightly, that the implication being made was that writing about black people was somehow less important. And: why should she, a black woman, tell white readers and critics about their world? William Faulkner had written a “provincial literature” that achieved international acclaim and success. James Joyce’s work was not con-

sidered inferior because he wrote to non-Catholics about a Catholic community.

Sadly, today black writers still have to work under this immense pressure of what Morrison once referred to as the "white gaze". A while ago, I read a column in an Afrikaans newspaper in which the columnist discussed the role of publishers and editors in the development of manuscripts – the details are relevant to the point of this article.

What is relevant, though, is a remark made by some high-ranking individual with an Afrikaans publishing house. According to this person, "brown" (a term in itself infuriating – why can't white Afrikaners see its absurdity? As if all of us bruin mense are one shade. In fact, some of us are jet black while others might be mistaken for one of this person's ethnicity) writers do not write "mature", or some such pejorative, literature since we were not brought up on the "right" models. I tell you, it was all I could do to write this article. As Alice Walker once said: "Writing saved me from the sin and inconvenience of violence."

This comment is wrong and narrow-minded on so many points. First, it implies that there is one, set, "right" way of writing – which I do not believe is the case. What contribution can a writer, young writers especially, make if they merely follow the "right model"? And if he or she does not tell his or her own story, with its unique perspectives and nuances? Or if only one type of work is published and receives critical attention? How can literature move forward? Second, the implication is that all white writers follow the right models. Because, surely, it is not only black or bruin writers who write, if you will, flawed literature. I could go on, but these points are the most important and the ones I can express most articulately, without flying off the handle.

Personally, I have also experienced this lack of understanding. I recently pitched a script to a theatre, unrefined though it was. I had no illusions about becoming a great playwright; realistically, I did not even anticipate a response. I am a writer who had an idea that manifested itself as a play of sorts. What I hoped to accomplish by sending it off was for someone with the necessary expertise to help refine my script or to totally reject it if it was not fit for the stage.

What I experienced was not as harsh as the criticism suffered by Morrison and many others. It was extremely disappointing, however. When I met a producer from the theatre, whom I respect since he was obviously knowledgeable and highly competent, I listened patiently while he pointed out the flaws of my script. Having not seen the script since I submitted it, I was unable to defend it adequately.

He started off saying that my play was too “political”, in his words, castigating “us terrible whites”. Furthermore, he dismissed it on the basis that it was too pedantic and was still “bottom-drawer stuff”. A point with which I fully agreed. However, when I looked at the script again and had time to reflect, I came to realise that he had missed some of what I thought were the positive points of my play – the clear vision with which I had mapped it out, scene by scene. My biggest mistake had been not to give a complete script and including a lengthy diatribe, what he called a “station of the nation address”.

Also, this kind gentleman had totally missed the point of my play, as clearly as I had spelled it out in my convoluted treatise. He had been blinded by my criticism of white people. I remember once reading a comment by a South African woman writer, who said it was impossible to be a white South African and not feel guilt.

If I could expand on this statement, it could also be said it is impossible for white South Africans to understand the proverbial black experience. In the same way, this producer had failed to see that my play was not about white people – it was about black people. Throughout our meeting, he also insisted that I read plays by playwrights like Athol Fugard. And that young black South Africans could not “imagine” their future, that it was possible for us to become the next great South African playwright.

Well, once again, he failed to understand that, as I believe, black people have always had different artistic needs. Historically, our literature, especially, has not had the luxury of meandering abstractly and idly.

When Alice Walker once told a white acquaintance that she wanted to be a poet, he remarked that what she wrote was not poetry because it was not written in, the queen’s English, I think it was. She responded by saying that she was not writing for the queen!

The late poet Gwendolyn Brooks once wrote of a new group of emerging black poets who did not care whether their work was called “art or peanuts”. A prominent South African critic once observed that during the liberation struggle, black poets abandoned artistry in favour of poetry that was, generally, “apocalyptic”, as in the famous line in Mongane Wally Serote’s poem: “It is a dry white season/But seasons too shall come to pass.”

Once again, this lack of understanding that black literature has had to work like no other. Black writers have, for centuries, had to serve a range of life-or-death needs – healing, inspiring by means of a song, a prayer or poem to endure the harshness of an inescapable racist reality.

One of my favourite and most telling quotes comes from the fiery black American writer, the late Toni Cade Bambara:

Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge – the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter.

And I know during the struggle the throngs of South African writers, playwrights, singers, poets did not care whether you called their work art or peanuts – they simply did not have that luxury. For myself, I did not care about that either – nor did I care about becoming the next great South African playwright! I cared that whatever I wrote should be meaningful.

In the light of all this, Chinua Achebe's frustration and anger is understandable. Although, once again, I do not agree that Westerners or whites should not review our work. For one, this would be tantamount to a form of censure; second, even the most wayward, stupidest criticism, I believe, can prove instructive. At the very least, it shows the progress, or lack of progress, of "white" thinking. Moreover, the spectacularly blind stupidity of these "pundits" can be quite amusing, after the initial indignation has subsided.