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# ABIOLA IRELE: A CRITIC'S VIEWS AND REVIEWS OF NEGRITUDE, AFRICAN LITERARY AND CULTURAL DEBATE

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## INTRODUCTION

Africans, before the arrival of the colonizers, had their ways of life and their established cultural traditions and literatures. A majority of African literary critics such as Valentin Mudimbe, Ambroise Kom, Pius Ngandu Nkashama and Abiola Irele among others argue that literature long existed in Africa in the form of oral tradition before it was swept under the carpet by the European invaders. Colonialism is generally viewed as an agent of destruction and retardation of the African continent. There is no doubt, however, that the colonization of Africa by the Whites, introduced written literature to Africa on a mass scale. This rather new literary development in Africa, foregrounded by the colonizer himself through his language, continued until Africans were equipped with Western education. After being armed with the colonizers' language, the African writer appeared on the modern African literary scene to tell his own stories and obviously to attack erroneous colonial writings, combat arrogant views of the superiority of European culture, and expose the colonizer's misdeeds on the continent. Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney and Chinweizu among others, believe that colonialism undermined African development. They affirm that the imperial mission destroyed many African traditions and disrupted the once peaceful continent. Similarly, critics are conscious of the asymmetrical power relationship that arose from colonialism as Europe set out to establish its hegemony in Africa (Sanusi, 2010).

Francophone African literature, right from its inception in the ambience of *Parisian Négritude*, it should be recalled, has been marked by a revolutionary cachet. It took its provenance from the Guyanese novelist and poet René Maran's protest novel, *Batouala* (1921). The French colonial power, having planted seeds of discontentment in its former colonies, machinated a *rapport de force* between the colonizers and the colonized. Francophone African literature of urgency and agency was born in this context; so also were critics of international repute, such as Abiola Irele. As such, Francophone African literature has had to redefine its terms of thematic and aesthetic engagement in the Négritude, colonial, post-Négritude and Post-colonial frames. Francophone African writing has, in the main, been a combative *oeuvre*. Despite the thematic and aesthetic mutations that have characterized the evolution of this body of work, especially in the so-called colonial and postcolonial dispensations, the idea of the writer as *écrivain engagé* remains prevalent (Sanusi, 2009). As Abiola Irele asserts, "African works are closer to a reality and to an experience of which [he] feels a part and therefore engages [his] responses in a way that is both direct and immediately real" (3).

This paper engages Abiola Irele's work, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. It examines critically Irele's literary posture with particular reference to "French Narrative Prose and the Colonial Experience." In this essay, I have decided not to limit my assessment of Irele's work to only the above



stated. I have also drawn some substance for criticism from related works.

### ABIOLA IRELE AND THE FRENCH AFRICAN NARRATIVE PROSE

Abiola Irele is a cast scholar, a critic of international repute and a distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature. Even though Africa (with reference to Francophone Africa) has produced great Africanist scholars, critics and political theorists, such as Valentin Mudimbe, Pius Ngandu Nkashama, Ambroise Kom, Achille Mbembe, Comi Toulabor and Elikia M'bokolo, among others, Abiola Irele remains, without doubt, one of the strongest voices of African literature. His brilliance of observation, staunch literary criticism and versatility in English and French, distinguish him among his comrades in literary circles. A critic such as Abiola Irele is preoccupied with not only the delegitimization of discourses of imperialism, colonialism and post-colonialism, but also with the reconstruction of Africa's history, culture and traditions. Such tendencies, as Pius Adesanmi rightly observes, "evolved from the discourses of Négritude and cultural nationalism" (11). Abiola Irele, like writers whose texts he critically examined, are mostly products of *école coloniale* and their texts are marked by their experience. It could be said that when the first African thinkers (Abiola Irele and others) came back from the Sorbonne (and other universities in France), Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale (if you will permit me to include Anglophone universities), they attacked the Western monologue on African discourse, thus interrogating existing Western paradigms of African studies (Adesanmi, 2002: 22). Abiola Irele and J.P. Clark (the African guard), who were determined African literati, for instance, interestingly co-edited the *Black Orpheus* where Clark published an essay entitled "The Legacy of Caliban." In the said essay, Clark frowns at the idea of Westerners setting standards for African literature.

Irele's "French African Narrative Prose and the Colonial Experience," from his work entitled *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, enriches scholars and literary critics (who are perhaps ignorant) of René Maran's *Le Livre de la brousse* (1934) and *Un Homme pareil aux autres* (1947). The literary richness of Irele's works cannot be measured and there is no gainsaying the fact that Maran's texts nourished Francophone African literature – theme wise, in philosophical range and iconoclastic distinction. As Irele notes elsewhere, Maran was not only important to the Negritude movement; his write-ups, like those of Senghor and Césaire, established links between African and Caribbean literatures of French expression. The critic argues further that,

Not only had [Maran] created in Batouala, the principal character of his first novel, and Kossi, the hero of *Le Livre de la brousse*, African characters whose destinies are central to the narrative plot, but his integration of the African scene into the narrative and symbolic structure of his novels as essential elements of their total scheme was a departure from the decorative role it had played in the exotic novels of previous French writers who had used Africa as a setting. Pierre Loti, André Demaison, Paul Adam are some of those writers. [My emphasis] (147).

Maran's work, one would agree with Irele, has played a great role in works published in the thirties, for Maran was the first to make a living presence in an imaginative work in the French language (Irele, 1981). It is perhaps telling that before Maran's *Batouala*, European writers of French expression (Pierre Loti, Paul Adam, Paul Vigné d'Octon) among others) presented an exotic image of Africa, an ingredient they sold to their brothers and sisters back home, who were very much thirsty for this exotic literature.



## ABIOLA IRELE AND THE NEGRITUDE MOVEMENT

Abiola Irele was born in 1936, few years after the Negritude movement saw the light of day in the Parisian ambience. Negritude, however, has been defined variously since its creation. Among the various definitions, we retain Irele's in the following excerpt:

*In considering Negritude itself, we need to distinguish between two acceptations of the term. In its first and general sense, the term refers to the phenomenon of Black awakening, as a global response to the collective situation. Associated with this sense is Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of Negritude as "an affective attitude to the world," that is, a subjective disposition expressive of the Black man's total apprehension of his peculiar situation. Sartre not only related the Black man's apprehension to the historical conditions of his existence as a member of an oppressed race, but, basing his analysis on the character of the Black poetry in French which was the immediate occasion of his definition. Sartre went on to give an active significance to the Black *prise de conscience*, seeing in this passage from an unreflected experience to a reflexive consciousness. It indicates, therefore, a collective revolutionary project destined to transform the conditions of the Black man's existence and thus, ironically, to eliminate the need for a self-directed consciousness on the part of the Black subject himself. We might say that Sartre's definition situates Negritude in a relative perspective while intending to accord it a universalizing purpose and significance.*

The other sense of the term emerges from Senghor's formulation of Negritude as a concept and can be considered a special case – a restricted sense within the general

one. In effect, for Senghor, the term in its proper reference designates an attribute of the Black man, specific to the race in its timeless constitution as a distinct branch of humanity. Senghor insists on the distinction between "subjective Negritude," which corresponds to Sartre's definition, and "objective Negritude," which denotes an African mode of life and values and the fundamental adherence of the Blackman's basic personality to this reality. Negritude in this sense seeks to grasp the singular wholeness of the varied patterns of culture that characterize African societies as well as their derivations in the New World [...] Senghor's Negritude rests upon a theory of culture and is grounded in a firm correlation between race and culture. This is not to say that Negritude is a racial theory in the sense that it is an exclusive vision of a race and the way of life associated with it (Irele, 128).

By the above definitions, one is not sweeping Césaire's definition of Negritude under the carpet. As one of the foundational fathers of Negritude, Césaire lived for this movement till his last breath and his poetry reflects this, as seen in the following:

ma négritude n'est pas une taie  
d'eau morte sur l'œil

mort de la terre

ma négritude n'est ni une tour ni  
une cathédrale

elle plonge dans la chair rouge du  
sol

elle plonge dans la chair ardente du  
ciel (I, 23)

[my Negritude is not a speck of  
dead water



on the dead eye of the earth  
my Negritude is neither a tower nor  
a cathedral

it plunges into the red flesh of the  
earth

it plunges into the burning flesh of  
the sky.] (I, 179-180)

In Césaire's poems and other works, attack on centuries of slavery, aggression, humiliation and denigration is so well documented. Césaire's brand on Negritude, according to Irele,

involves no elaborate theory of Blackness. The intense symbolism of aggression which is the hallmark of Césaire's poetry not only gives expression to affirmation in an extraordinary burst of poetic energy, but it also offers a peculiar complexity of imagery stemming from a deep structure of consciousness. (138)

As I said elsewhere, definitions of Negritude are as varied as one could imagine. One thing though remains very clear, right from the outset: Negritude has never ceased to play its corrective role, that is, to militate against the oppression of the black race, redefine the black's image portrayed as savage in French colonial writings, (such as in Pierre Loti and Paul Adams among others), and show the richness of the African culture and tradition so as to chant its beauty. Senghor's polemical statement, *Le zèbre est fier de ses zébrures* and Soyinka's interrogation, *The tiger does not proclaim his tigritude; he catches his prey and eats it*, aptly sum these up. Even despite these views, the message is clear: the Black man should be proud of his color, culture, tradition and identity. Negritude continues to generate debates till date and, as Irele avers,

The re-emergence of race as an issue in French life and politics has, as it

were, lent a new lease of life to Negritude as an idea and as an attitude on

the part of a younger generation of Francophone Blacks. It explains the

renewed attention to the French colonial legacy that has been the object of

debate in France for a time, and has continued to haunt Francophone literature

and artistic production. (xii)

Irele's work on Negritude and its application to African and Caribbean literary texts helps in understanding the Black race and, especially, the question of identity, cultural values and the poetic and aesthetic of Black diasporic literature. Negritude continues to nourish African-American, Caribbean and African writers' creativity, especially those of Francophone Black Africans. Irele reminds us of this fact,

The re-emergence of race as an issue in French life and politics has, as it were, lent a new lease of life to Negritude as an idea and as an attitude on the part of a younger generation of Francophone Blacks. It explains the renewed attention to the French colonial legacy that has been the object of debate in France for a time, and has continued to haunt Francophone literature and artistic production. This imaginative reconstruction of the immigrant experience in works such as Daniel Biyaoula's *L'Impasse*, and Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu-blanc-rouge* has drawn attention to the climate of social tension and racial apprehension with which the Blacks have had to contend



as a condition of their French sojourn.  
(xii)

Irele, a scholar with eagle eyes, draws not only his substance from Negritude to analyze texts, but also to make us understand and appreciate the Blackman's problems universally.

### **ABIOLA IRELE AS A LITERARY COMPARATIST**

Abiola Irele, it is worthy of note, has gone beyond the borders of African literature, for in this critic are embedded French, African, Caribbean and African-American literatures among others. He has intensely read many authors and critics which makes him a seminal literary comparatist. On the French literary scene, Irele is an authority on writers such as Rabelais, Molière, Racine, Corneille, Jean de la Fontaine, Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Zola, Maupassant, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Henri Troya among others. On the Caribbean literary terrain, although Irele's work largely covers Césaire, Damas, Fanon, Jacques Roumain and Maran, he has also devoted his time in the reading and literary appreciation of the works of contemporary writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Edouard Glissant, Raphael Confiant, Maryse Condé and Schwarz-Bart. His corpus on African-American literature is enormous as his knowledge of it. Langston Huges, W.E.B. Dubois, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison figure prominently in his writing.

A critic such as Irele, so committed to postcolonial literary reflections, is without doubt a rarity. His immense reading of different genres of African literature and literary figures such as Senghor, David Diop, Birago Diop, Khane, Hampate Ba, Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Sembène Humane, Aké Loba, Olympe Bhêly Quénou, Alain Mabanckou and Daniel Biyaoula prepared and made him the literary guru of our time and the generation to come. His being very comfortable with drawing

parallelism in various literatures is not therefore an accident of history but a product of hard work.

Besides great and hidden writers that Abiola Irele has read and continues to read, works of literary critics of his generation as well as those of the generation before him, shaped and continue to shape his thoughts, enrich his criticism and literary analysis. Abiola Irele has quickly learned early in life that threading the path he has chosen requires hard work, perseverance, huge reading and commitment. No wonder that today he carved a niche for himself in the literary body and world literary history.

### **THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY: WHERE ARE FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS?**

It is a well-known fact that after René Maran, Negritude poets occupied the African literary scene. Some of those Negritude poets include Léopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop and Camara Laye. Actually, these poets were the ones to effect a textual conquest of African women. Negritude poetry was born in *Quartier Latin* (Paris) in the 1930s-1940s, where some young African intellectuals and their Caribbean brothers who suffered from nostalgia, discrimination and trauma of deracination decided to reconnect themselves culturally and spiritually with Africa – their ancestral home. A write-up like that of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, (1939), which was an imaginary return to their motherland, was personified and feminized as *Mother Africa*. It is worthy to note that the first set of African writers (male writers) created by the West, dominated the African literary scene for long. This however, did not go without consequences: when African women writers appeared on the African literary stage, they were made invisible by the male critical establishment. No male critic was



interested in their (women's) works. It is, therefore, not a surprise that Irele's *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* did not deal with any of the African women's writings.

In the early stage of Francophone African novel, almost everywhere in Africa, male critics created a subordinating image of African woman or did not mention any work written by her. Many critical anthologies written in the same period failed to highlight Francophone African women writers in their textual analysis: The only female writer that Ambroise Kom mentions in his *Dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires de langue française en Afrique au sud du Sahara* is Mariama Bâ. Similarly, John Erickson, like Irele, fails to consider the female writer worthy of critical evaluation in his *Nommo: African Fiction in French South of Sahara* (1979). The same argument can be made of many critics who published in the 1980s and 1990s and who voluntarily or involuntarily maintained the tradition of subordination of women's works. Irele's *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1981) exhausts the list of Francophone African male writers who appeared on the African literary scene before its publication. None of Irele's chapters in his *ouvrage* deals with Francophone African women writers, irrespective of the title assigned to chapters in his book. The question still remains: why has Irele done a critical evaluation of only male writers in the chapter entitled "French Narrative Prose and the Colonial Experience" at the time he published his work? During that period, or even before then, an array of Francophone African Women writers had already seized their pen to tear the veil of invisibility.

Before Abiola Irele published *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, female writers such as Thérèse Kuouh-Moukoury, Aoua kéita, Nafissatou Diallo, Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Bâ, to mention but a few,

had already published their works and impacted on the African literary terrain. One wonders, therefore, why Irele paraded in his *ouvrage* only the likes of Paul Hazoumé, Ousmane Socé, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye, Sembène Ousmane, Birago Diop, Nāzi Boni, Bernard Dadié and Bakary Diallo among others, who are all male writers. Has Irele too fallen into the same trap as Negritude poets who relegated women to the background, to the extent of not even featuring any woman writer in that wonderful work of his? To be specific, the chapter in Irele's book entitled "French Narrative Prose and the Colonial Experience" is silent on African women writers. Why dealing only with the "Colonial Experience" when women had already written on issues that bother them before Irele's book appeared on the African literary field? Were the African women writers I mentioned above excluded simply because their texts did not touch boiling colonial issues? If that is the reason, what about Carama Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953)? Laye depicts his *royaume d'enfance* in his debut novel. On the issue of the subordination of African women's texts, Pius Adesanmi (2002) observes that,

Papa Samba Diop's essay, "Au coeur de la littérature negro-africaine d'écriture française: problèmes littéraires et sociologiques," [...] appeared in a 1985 issue of Bayreuth African Studies, alongside essays by influential French specialists in Francophone African literatures like Jean Derive and Bernard Mouralis. We must bear in mind the considerable importance of Bayreuth as a "centre" of African(ist) discursive production. By 1985, Mariama Bâ had become one of Africa's most celebrated writers and Une si longue lettre had already won the prestigious Noma Award. [...] Samba Diop, expressing weighty opinions in an African Studies forum as important as



Bayreuth, arrogantly lumps Bâ among his curious category of "not exactly writers," before summarily dismissing *Lettre* as an autobiographical tract. [...] It is impossible here to establish an exhaustive list of works by both African and Africanist critics in which the conspiracy of silence on women's writing seems to be the operative principle. (69-71)

To buttress Adesanmi's point, one could add Richard Bjornson's *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience* (1991), a work that maps the topography of Cameroonian literatures to that list. The book parades male writers such as Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Guillaume Oyono-Mbia, Francis Bebey among others, whereas no chapter is devoted to any Cameroonian female writer. Works, such as Pius Ngandu Nkashama's *Écritures et discours littéraires : études sur le roman africain* (1989), Georges Ngal's *Création et rupture en littérature africaine* (1994), Séwanou Dabla's *Nouvelles écritures africaines* (1986), and André-Patient Bokiba's *Écriture et identité dans la littérature africaine* (1988) are not spared from this criticism. In these works, women writers and related issues attract occasional paragraphs within. In Ngate's work, only Mariama Bâ and Ama Ata Aidoo are mentioned in passing. All the above Africanist critics and works are cited with a view to stating that Abiola Irele, like these critics, fell into the same trap by not paying attention to female writers in their works.

## CONCLUSION

Abiola Irele has journeyed literarily throughout the world. Like Francophone African writers, Irele's criticism touches various themes and aspects treated in African literature: from Negritude to colonialism passing through autobiographies and short stories. Irele made an exploration of African literary texts born after Negritude, before

venturing into post-colonial writings (dictatorship, exile and question of identity, among others). The versatility of Abiola Irele is not limited to literature or literary criticism; his written English and French is fluid, easily accessible and devoid of pedantic expressions. Any reader of Irele's works comprehends them easily and derives pleasure in them. Besides, the reader enriches himself/herself critically, culturally and linguistically. Abiola Irele's mission is to make the world discover the richness embedded in African literature, in particular, and in black diasporic literature, in general. His relentless effort in this body of knowledge will be surely remembered for long by present and future generations. Irele is, indeed, a cast scholar, a great critic and a defender of African values and freedom. Like Amadou Hampaté Ba, Irele will live behind him a great heritage for the next generation.

In sum, African writers are fighters. A majority of them, like Irele, even though a critic, wage war against oppression and freedom of the Black race through their literary expression. All seem to be saying with Wole Soyinka that the oppressive boot is the same irrespective of the color of the foot that wears it.

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