

**A REVIEW OF *THE POSTCOLONIAL LAMP: ESSAYS IN HONOUR
OF DAN IZEVBAYE* (Edited by Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and
Oyeniyi Okunoye)**

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Here, at last, is the culmination of years of association and liaison between the editors of *The Postcolonial Lamp-Essays in Honour of Dan Izevbaye*, contributing scholars to this important book project and Bookcraft, the publisher. Thanks to the irrepressible optimism of the two editors (Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and Oyeniya Okunoye). It is indeed a thing of immense joy to us that the publication of the book has now been achieved in spite of the tremendous difficulties (both financial and logistic), which at times seemed insurmountable. Therefore, all those who were involved in the book project have good reasons to be proud of their achievements. One is very much delighted that the book is a tribute to, unarguably, one of Africa's best literary scholars of all time, a legendary critic. This is an important book whose arguments are persuasive. It is dazzling in its range of subjects and exhilarating in its immediacy and power of style and expression. It is one of the most comprehensive selections of key essays in Postcolonial African Literature yet compiled. In fact, it is a welcome addition to the growing body of critical works on postcolonial African literature.

The contributions of Dan Izevbaye to the criticism of modern African literature cannot be gainsaid. His name has resonated deafeningly in the study of African literature for roughly four decades now. The motif of his critical theory and practice is that the central document of literary analysis is the work itself. It is in the light of his insightful critical comments on the state, features, architectonics, rudiments and dynamics of the criticism of African literature that I negotiate my review of Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and Oyeniya Okunoye's *The Postcolonial Lamp*. It is essential, however, to quote some of Izevbaye's critical credos for the benefit of those who are not familiar with them.

1. The functions of criticism to literature, audience and society are legion. In all cases, some consideration for the text is essential, but no single critical orientation can be adequate. The best we can do is to discourage the complacency of simple attitudes and the tyranny of uniformity" (*African Literature Today*, No 7, 1975:17).
2. With this new emphasis in criticism, that is the suppression of the social reference of literature as a significant influence in criticism, it may be easier for critics to pay attention to the literary work itself. But the influence of the referential element in African criticism has not really been an intrusion. The social factor was important only because the literature itself was largely sociological. As the literature becomes less preoccupied with social or national problems and more concerned with the problems of men as individuals in an African society, the critical reference will be human beings rather than society, and the considerations which influence critical judgement will be human and literary, rather than social ones ("Criticism and Literature in Africa", In: Christopher Heywood (ed), *Perspectives on African Literature*, 1971:30).

With the foregoing quotations and other critical statements offered by Dan Izevbaye in mind, I started reading *The Postcolonial Lamp* with a great deal of enthusiasm, for it is one of the major criticisms of postcolonial African literature

in recent times. Going back to Izevbaye's statements for which I have utmost sympathy, the book has succeeded in realizing most of the critical manifestoes of Izevbaye to a great extent. This is not an idle or unempirical claim. In the main, most, if not all of the studies, pay critical attention to the need for a peaceful interplay of the intrinsic and extrinsic features of the examined literary texts. Therefore, the book makes a great departure from many previous works of criticism on African literature that concentrate on the latter features. Like the icon being celebrated through the book, the authors and editors have contributed immensely to the development of the criticism of postcolonial African literature. The collection covers a huge range of topics, featuring 23 critical essays about the field of postcolonial literature, and an engaging/informative interview with our truly beloved and admired African literary historian, scholar-critic, and theorist, Professor Daniel Sunday Izevbaye.

The kind of very serious studies and attention that go into editing and producing the book confirms the significance that the critical icon (Dan Izevbaye), the editors (Raji Oyelade and Oyeniyi Okunoye) and the contributors attach to postcolonial African literature. The authors do not allow themselves to be blinkered by ideological preoccupations; rather, they have tried to make postcolonial African literature more accessible to a larger audience and establish literary standards in the field. I, therefore, perceive the book as a forum for critics of all shades to provide signposts to sound critical evaluations of postcolonial literary texts. What are foregrounded in the articles are different but critically related opinions. One observes an unbelievable array of critical essays which illuminate the uniqueness and vitality of postcolonial African literature which most precursor critics have ignored. The dedication of the book to Dan Izevbaye is not simply for decoration. The book has merits and deserves accolades, and any person interested in the study of postcolonial African literature will find it useful. This is because it offers both a critical overview of the growing field of postcolonial African literature and an admirable/illuminating guide to its well-informed reading.

It is time to stop and take stock of postcolonial African writings, though only, I think, in terms of anticipation of what is to come. The enduring brilliance of the selected essays lies in sound scholarship and measured and perceptive comments on literary texts across the continent. The essays reflect the urgency to present the bustling state of activities in postcolonial African literature. Happily, the book brings together many of Izevbaye's obsessions:

- African literature, in colonial and postcolonial contexts
- Literary history and theory
- Literary transformations – aesthetic responses to changes in the material medium of literature.
- Literacy and the development of the book culture
- The literary adaptations of African oral forms
- Literature and the internet.

Most of the contributors, being Izevbaye's former students (directly and indirectly) adhere to his critical agenda that topicality and socio-political realities in literature should be transmogrified into art. So diverse are the deeply felt essays

that one comes away amazed that a single book has brilliantly conjured up all of them! One commendable advantage of this endeavour is that they have furthered public awareness of postcolonial African literature, most especially works of literary merit. The critics heed the anti-monologic stance of Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabba.

It is gratifying to state that some of the basic themes that give prominence to the field of postcolonial African literature (oral traditions and aesthetics, literature and commitment, counter (re)inscriptions, gender discourse, etc) have been incorporated in the book. The essays are placed in four interactive phases of meta-critical and exegetical evaluations of postcolonial African literature. Most of the essays centre on Izevbaye's research priorities; that is, the issues that characterize the enormous body of his own critical oeuvre find expressions in the book.

The first part of the book contains two essays which are tributes to the critical icon/legend (Dan Izevbaye). Here, another critical icon in the Diaspora (Professor Biodun Jeyifo) and a critical/cultural critic, Professor J.O.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada pay glowing tributes to Professor Izevbaye in their respective well-researched and aptly presented essays. The two introductory essays and the FOREWORD by the renowned playwright and poet, Professor Femi Osofisan, which eulogize the legend of African literary criticism (Professor Dan Izevbaye), are illuminating without being obtrusive.

In the second part of the book, we have three significant entries by the trio of Pius Adesanmi, Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and Oyeniya Okunoye. The three critical essays are vivifying shots of the current landscape of postcolonial African literature and the socio-aesthetic conditions of its existence. After an excellent introduction that serves as a tribute to Professor Izevbaye, the reader encounters an array of thoughtful and critical essays that prove invaluable for anyone wanting to get a better understanding of the dynamics of postcolonial African literature.

Five additional insights on the appraisal of postcolonial literature come in the third segment of the book. Here, the authors dwell on different but thematically related issues in postcolonial literature. These include: Ezeliora's "Elegy for the Mystery Cocks: Modern African Literature and the Making of its Classics"; Wole Ogundele's "An Appraisal of the Critical Legacies of the 1980s Revolution in Nigerian Poetry in English"; Wale Oyedele's "Reflections on the Nature of Canonical Activity and its Black Paradigm"; Dele Layiwola's "The Hero in Yeatsian Dramaturgy", and Sola Olorunyomi's "Orality as Text in Mutation". These scholar critics offer groundbreaking critiques of postcolonial African literature in their wide-ranging, intellectually vigorous studies.

It should be stated that the ten essays that constitute the first three parts of the book fall into what Biodun Jeyifo (2006) tags "Metacritical essays". That is, essays that deal with no particular authors or isolated individual texts. Rather, they dwell on the institution of criticism in its relation to literature.

Moving from the first three sections of the book to the fourth section, we enter a different terrain of Izevbayan scholarly and research repertoire. That is, the fourth (and the concluding part of the book) privileges the second aspect of

Izevbaye's research interest – exegetical essays. According to Biodun Jeyifo, in such essays, the reader encounters “a critic and a scholar who is operating at the same level with even the most challenging, the most difficult of authors” (13). The thirteen essays in this part of the book embrace formerly uncharted and undersubscribed currents and authors in the imaginative literature of Africa. This is consistent with Izevbaye's vision and critical agenda of imaginatively ‘reconstructing’ Africa in a way that departs from old critical attitudes, thereby crystallizing in a vaster dimension of appreciation of our literary and cultural heritage. They offer excellent assessments of the writers' place in postcolonial writings. While some of the essays dwell on the works of some foundation figures of postcolonial African literature (Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J.P Clark, and Christopher Okigbo), others analyse works by second-generation African writers (Femi Osofisan, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Andre Brink, and the like).

Commendably, a majority of the exegetical essays centre on the new generation of African writers, including Maik Nwosu, Amma Darko, and May Ifeoma Nwoye. The roll call of the scholars who appear in this segment of the book is amazing. The contributors include Harry Garuba, Wumi Raji, Mohammed Bhadmus, Laura Moss, Gbemisola Adeoti, Chima Anyadike, Akachi Ezeigbo, Lekan Oyegoke, Jane Bryce, Jude Agho, Isidore Diala, Ismail Garba and Ademola Dasylyva. Some of the subjects treated are “Urban Dislocation and Postcolonial Transformation in the Plays of Femi Osofisan”; “Displacement, Hybridity, and Wole Soyinka's *The Beautification of Area Boy*”; “Gynocentric Aesthetics and Democratic Politics in Nigerian Drama”; “Language and Power in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*”; “Gender and the Metanarrative of Nigerian Identity Construction” and “Identity and Memory in Omoboyode Arowa's Oriṣiki Performance in (Yoruṣeba) E kiṣiti Dialect”.

My reading of these essays reveals that postcolonial African literature is increasingly engaging, and interest in its criticism is rapidly growing. In the articles, the authors analyse the major issues that the field of postcolonial literature presents, such as identity, memory, exilic consciousness, gender and racial dissonance, counter-discourse, canonization, hybridity, displacement, and the like. Undoubtedly, Remi Raji-Oyelade and Oyeniyi Okunoye have edited a book that is both constructive and committed. The contributing authors are neither tedious nor mystifying. They have endeavoured to present their topics as clearly as possible.

Another merit of the book is that it introduces a number of new critical voices in the field of postcolonial African literature. This clearly demonstrates that, despite the prevailing economic hardships and socio-political woes across the continent, literature is not only alive and well, but it is a vigorous force pushing for a revitalized continent.

The Postcolonial Lamp is an indispensable book for writers, scholars, students and readers, and for anyone who wants to be acquainted with postcolonial African literature at its yet most intimate and most compelling engagement. No previous book has attempted to bring together the new critical voices that have started to make an impact on postcolonial African literature. The essays contained in the book will definitely challenge the readers with the truth of the aliveness of postcolonial African literature to the political and social concerns of the century.

The essays corroborate the insistence of Izevbaye that if our literature is to 'mature', it must move from the 'public' to the 'private' domain of the artist. This aesthetic mode, which is neatly articulated by Dan Izevbaye in the second quotation above, seems to have provided the theoretical framework for most of the essays in the book. The whole range of ideas covered in it reveals remarkable scholarship around the evolving consciousness of postcolonial African literature and its practitioners.

My critical encounter with the book has also revealed that postcolonial African literature, as a movement, is a shifting one whose boundaries change according to the perspectives of the critic categorizing. Postcolonial African literature is like a gothic mansion filled with trap doors, secret drawers, irresponsible phantoms and unnameable monstrosities. Its foundations sit on top of mass burial grounds, as it were, in an atmosphere heavy with the burden of history. The term "postcolonial" has at least two meanings inherent in it as reflected in the essays. In the first instance, it connotes the time or literature after colonialism. Secondly, it connotes the tug-of-war between the memories of the colonial past and the utopian dream of the postcolonial future that is held in the uneasy present of postcoloniality. Postcolonial literature, in the book, is more than simply those texts produced after Empire; rather, it is more accurately the literary-political production that resists political points of view.

Furthermore, the collection of essays promises to contribute to the restructuring of postcolonial criticism which hitherto privileged the history of colonialism to the analysis of the postcolonial world order. Ania Loomba (1998) registers this preoccupation with autocritique when she notes that much of the 'energy' of postcolonial studies dwells on "anti-colonial and progressive political movements" (256). To her, postcolonial studies will be enhanced when there is a shift towards expansion of neo-colonial imbalances in the contemporary world order. Therefore, laudably, the essays in *The Postcolonial Lamp* are conceived as a continuation of that dialogue. They thereby excavate the supranational longing for form that lies buried deep in postcolonial African literature.

The essays are well written and carefully argued. The width of their references is notable, and their presentations are excellent. Devoid of obfuscating jargon, they constitute a balanced and well-documented (re)appraisal of the current debates that affect postcolonial African literature. As such, the book will be of great value to researchers looking for more than a superficial survey of the field of postcolonial African literature. As I praise the doggedness and enterprise of the two young, dynamic, ebullient and committed literary historians, critics and theorists, Associate Professors Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and Oyeniya Okunoye, for the appearance of the book, I equally recommend this critical *tour de force*, *The Postcolonial Lamp*, to the reading public. It is a treasure house of postcolonial African literature. The twenty-three critical essays, tributes and an engaging interview with our own Professor Dan Izevbaye are just too superb and highly intellectually refreshing. The wealth and variety of the issues discussed in the book constitute invaluable critical data for literary scholars, and it can simply be enjoyed by those wishing to have a cursory knowledge of the dynamics of the field of postcolonial African literature. The analyses and reminiscences collected in this book testify to the lasting and continuing fruits of Professor Izevbaye's

scholarly endeavours. And they are true and palpable reflections of the extent of his impact on African literary studies across the globe. In conclusion, this large assembly of critical essays on postcolonial literature – wide in range, rich in diversity and eloquently expressed – is a fitting tribute to the long, unwavering service Professor Daniel Sunday Izevbaye has given to African literature. Truly, *The Postcolonial Lamp* will prove an authoritative compilation representing an invaluable contribution to the study of Postcolonial African Literature.

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