
Literature in Africa and the Caribbean

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Introduction

Literature is a major art form through which people exhibit their culture. It often expresses the multifarious experiences and living realities of the people through the artist's viewpoint. In modern times, literature has become one of the black world's major contributions to the intellectual world. Africa and the Caribbean have produced literatures that reflect the realities of black peoples in their respective areas in socio-cultural, economic, political, and individual spheres. Oral or written, African and Caribbean literatures have gained recognition worldwide. Africa boasts of such literary classics as the Mandingo epic *Sundiata*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Similarly, the black Caribbean has enriched humanity with such literary contributions as Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (1941), Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1973), and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). The winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature by Nigeria's Wole Soyinka in 1986, Egypt's Naguib Mahfouz in 1988, and both Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee of South Africa in 1991 and 2003, respectively, and Derek Walcott from Saint Lucia in 2002, has drawn further attention to the nature and the role of literature on the continent of Africa and in the Caribbean. In recent times, Brathwaite's *Born to Slow Horses* (2005) won the International Griffin Poetry Prize (2006). Both Brathwaite and Edwidge Danticat have won the prestigious Neustadt Literature Prize (1994 and 2017 respectively), as Nigeria's Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* also won the prestigious British Orange Prize for Fiction (2007).

In Africa, two types of literature have flourished simultaneously: traditional oral literature and modern written literature. Traditional African literature is as old as the African people themselves. From the

beginning of their history, Africans have always tried to understand their environment and interpret natural phenomena through myths. They sing about their experiences and teach the younger generations about morality, ethics, culture, and history with tales, myths, and legends, all of which have become part of a literary repertoire. With the general acceptance of oral literature as valid by Western scholars during the 1950s, the field of African literature has recently become so vast and complex that the following discussion is designed to provide the beginning student with only a general understanding of the nature of African literature—the genres, major developments over the past decades, uses, themes, and future prospects.

Major terms and concepts: written and oral literature, orality, folklore, myth, legend, didactic, fairy tale, epic, proverb, riddle, improvisation, poetry, prose, Negritude, literature, Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean, patois, Creole, black consciousness, anthology, novel, poem, expatriate.

Definition

The literary scholar Abiola Irele once said that there was “no satisfactory definition” of African literature. He noted that:

The term ‘Africa’ appears to correspond to a geographical notion but we know that, in practical terms, it also takes in those other areas of collective awareness that have been determined by ethnic, historical and sociological factors, all these factors, as they affect and express themselves in our literature, marking off for it a broad area of reference. Within this area of reference then, and related to certain aspects that are intrinsic to the literature, the problem of definition involves as well a consideration of *aesthetic modes in their intimate correlation to the cultural and social structures which determine and define the expressive schemes of African peoples and societies*. [author's emphasis]

This definition of literature takes note of place and people with their “aesthetic modes” and “cultural and social structures.” Language, Irele adds, is not the prime focus in his definition of literature, whose “essential force” is its “reference to the historical and the experiential.” One other attempt at defining African literature is made by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. It is quite clear to them that:

Works done for African audiences, by Africans, and in African languages, whether these works are oral or written, constitute the historically indisputable core of African literature. Works done by Africans but in non-African languages, and works done by non-Africans in African languages, would be among those for which some legitimate doubt might be raised about their inclusion or exclusion from the canon of works of African literature.

Their definition recognizes the primary audience of a literature as defining that literature. Thus, if African countries adopt English, French, Portuguese, or Arabic as official languages, Africans writing in these alien languages primarily for Africans are African writers and their works are part of African literature. Whatever definition one adopts, however, there is agreement that African literature is that which is written by Africans for Africans who share the same sensibility, consciousness, worldview, and other aspects of cultural experience. In short, the writer must share in the values and experiences of African people for the writing to be classified as African.

The body of African literature written in indigenous African and non-African languages is rapidly growing. For example, there is a relatively large body of Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo, Swahili, Kikuyu, and Zulu literary works. Writers such as Mazisi Kunene, Ngugi wa Thiongo, and the late Okot p'Bitek have produced poems, plays, and novels in African languages before they were translated into English. At the same time, most modern African writers have used primarily English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic to express their ideas and feelings. While the attempt to express one's inner feelings and thoughts in a foreign language will remain a perennial problem for African writers, writing in a vernacular, which most readers are not trained to read, will equally continue to hinder their effectiveness. In addition, writing in African languages does cause the writer to lose not only other African readers but also Western audiences and readership entirely, and precludes financial reward for those authors who write for profit and to make a living, as many do.

Traditional Oral and Written Literature in Africa

Prior to colonialism, traditional Africa was predominantly made up of non-literate societies among which orality was the major means of expression and communication. Songs were sung and tales told and were orally passed from one generation to another. Because of its orality, therefore, traditional African literature depended heavily on memory for its transmission from person to person, from place to place, and from generation to generation. Yet, such literature always had an important function to perform in society. Indeed, African literature has, by and large, remained didactic over the centuries, and is used by the elders in teaching social mores and ethics and in the community's transmission of its most important traditions. In the days when there were no schools of the Western type, parents gathered their children by the fireside after the day's hard work, in the evening, and told them different types of tales: folktales, fairy tales, myths, legends, and epics. For instance, tales of the greedy tortoise are meant to teach children about selflessness, while those of the trickster Anansi (spider, in West Africa) and the rabbit (in East Africa) are designed to tell youngsters

that cleverness is not a substitute for honesty and caring for others. Though many African tales have animal characters, their experiences are human, and everyone learns from them how to live and behave in a communal society.

The forest or grassland setting is the world in which many Africans live, and tales are meant to teach how one must treat others and the environment. The tales, especially the myths and epics, likewise inculcate the values and mores of the group into young ones, who imbibe the consciousness and sensibility of the race. Myths, for instance, explain natural phenomena. In African folklore, there are tales explaining why pigs always look downward, why the sky is so high from the earth, why man and woman cause each other problems but cannot do without one another, and why people must die. While legends and epics are told to inspire youngsters into heroic deeds, proverbs, riddles, and other rhetorical forms are learned to enhance verbal communication, sometimes to make one an orator, and to sharpen one's thinking skills.

Music is also an important part of African traditional literature. There is music or song for almost all daily activities and rites of passage, from birth to adulthood, and from marriage to death. There are lullabies to put children to sleep, work songs, play songs, initiation songs, and religious songs. Within each category, such as in work songs, there are some that are sung when men clear the farm and some that are sung by women weeding the field. In addition, some songs are for planting and harvesting, for paddling the canoe to fish, grazing cattle, and others for shelling groundnuts, grating cassava, and pounding yams. In short, song permeates the entire life of the African.

In contrast to Western tradition, African oral literature is a live art. It is performed, and each moment of performance is a "text" of its own. The narrator or the poet must simultaneously be an expert performer, which is not always the case in the West. In oral literature, memory is the most important medium of transmission of messages. However, because memory wears out with the passing of time, there is an inherent problem with oral literature. Thus, the same oral tale or song might have different versions or variants, as each performer tries to embellish or fill up the work to suit a particular audience and his own talent. Consequently, improvisation is very important in oral literature, as the performer introduces new elements and stamps his or her own mark on the tale. As a live art, oral literature maintains a symbiotic relationship between the performer and the audience. The audience participates in the songs in a tale, sings the refrain, and claps hands as an accompaniment, elements that are not always present in Western tradition, as when the poet is on the stage reading his work to the sitting audience.

Equally significant in oral literature is the very thin line in genre differentiation. A folktale may have songs (which are poems) at vari-

ous sections; it also has narration and description, and much drama, as the performer mimics the action of animals or any other characters in the tale. Poetry and prose, on the one hand, are almost inseparable in the proverbs, axioms, riddles, and other rhetorical figures. Oratory, on the other hand, is highly cherished by the audience in Africa. The syncretic nature of traditional African oral literature is best expressed by festivals, which are theatrical, dramatic, ritualistic, and poetic re-enactments of the people's myths and legends, accompanied by music, artistic expressions and use of artifacts, and dance. One may say, therefore, that traditional African literature is genre inclusive, unlike Western literature, which is compartmentalized.

There are other important, often denied, qualities of traditional African literature in the poets and the singers of tales. For example, contrary to common misinformed impressions, the traditional artist in literature (or art) has an identity, and his or her work is not anonymous in the community. People are able to identify, for example, the person who produced a song. Thus, in the African oral tradition, individual oral artists exist with their unique compositions, which may have been edited in a communal "workshop," as in the case of *udje* dance songs among the Urhobo people of Nigeria's Delta State. It is not true, therefore, as Ruth Finnegan notes, that "the poetry of non-literate peoples" in Africa arises "directly and communally from the undifferentiated folk." The author's experience confirms the fact that each song bears the signature of its poet not only in its formulas and themes but also in the role and mission of its creator.

As Janheinz Jahn observed, the history of African literature corresponds with the history of the continent, a claim that has been reinforced by studies done by scholars such as Romanus Egudu on the writers' reflection of the historical reality of their people. Modern African literature started with the introduction of the script and the adoption of European languages by Africans in colonial times, notably during the nineteenth century. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789, can be considered the first work of written African literature. It describes the traditional life and customs of the Igbo people and Equiano's capture, sale into slavery in Barbados, and subsequent travels to the United States, Britain, and Africa, among other places. However, since it was written by an expatriate, in some circles it may not earn the honor of having been the first.

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) is one of the early works of fiction to come out of Africa. It tells the story of a palm-wine drinker who searches for his dead palm-wine tapster in the "Deads' Town," where he finds him but cannot bring him back to life because the dead are dead. It is with the publication of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, however, that written African literature became recognized worldwide. In the novel, Achebe tells, in a masterly way, the

tragic story of how the distinguished Okwonko and his Ibo village of Umuofia were destroyed by the arrival of the Europeans into the village. Like many educated Africans of the 1950s, Achebe had been bothered by such European writers as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson* (1939), who, as a result of their deep-rooted prejudices, distorted the true African cultural image, and justified European colonialism as an agent of enlightenment rather than the economic exploitation that it was. Achebe thus wrote *Things Fall Apart* to show that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty; that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (Achebe). Achebe realistically exposes African culture to Europeans and to those who are ignorant of it and asserts the dignity of the African past.

Although most of the examples provided above refer to Anglophone Africa, French-speaking Africa was no less prolific, beyond the Negritude writers discussed below. Among the early most-known works are Camara Laye's novel *The African Child*, published as early as 1952, which tells of Laye's life as a son of a goldsmith in his Muslim village and society, and Cheik Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962), an account of the dilemma of a young Muslim student who faces the secular temptations of Western education and culture in Paris. There were others in South Africa and North Africa, and lesser-known writers in Lusophone Africa during the 1950s that should be counted among the pioneers of modern written African literature.

Within the context of exposing and restoring the dignity of African culture was Negritude, a literary movement started by Francophone African and Caribbean students, including Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Leon Damas of French Guyana, and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, in Paris in 1934. Sustained by its journal *L'Étudiant Noir*, Negritude was a popular movement in Francophone Africa and the West Indies during the 1940s and 1950s. Abiola Irele describes Negritude as "the literary and ideological movement of French-speaking black intellectuals, which took form as a distinctive and significant aspect of the comprehensive reaction of the black man to the colonial situation, a situation that was felt and perceived by black people in Africa and in the New World as a state of global subjection to the political, social, and moral domination of the West." Though Negritude has been defined in different ways, essentially it means "the expression of blackness." In this sense, it is similar to the expression of the African personality in Anglophone Africa. It is generally acknowledged, furthermore, that Negritude was a move away from the themes of colonial oppression common among English-speaking African writers of the time.

In fact, Negritude brought forth African traditional culture vividly, exposed colonial exploitation and oppression, especially on the cul-

tural level, and celebrated black dignity. Leopold Sedar Senghor (former president of Senegal), in particular, expounded the concept in various collections of poems and essays. While many Anglophone Africans, including South African Ezekiel Mphahlele, Malawian David Rubadiri, and Nigerian Wole Soyinka, have condemned Negritude (“a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude; it pounces,” Soyinka once wrote sarcastically), it has historical validity as it afforded Africans in colonial times the opportunity to assert their Africanness. Indeed, in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa, literature was a vehicle of cultural nationalism in the colonial period and the years following independence.

To the extent that modern African literature is defined as the written literature started during colonial times, when Africans who had gone to Western schools began writing poems, novels, short stories, and plays, it is expressed in two important forms: one in foreign European languages and the other in indigenous languages. The latter is not well-exposed yet, and appears in languages such as Yoruba, Zulu, Hausa, and Ibo, which are almost unknown outside their geographical frontiers. In any case, the written literature of Africa is new compared to the indigenous oral literary tradition, which has always been on the continent, and is still very much alive today. Although modern African literature started as derivative and imitative of European forms, it has, over the past several decades, grown to be, in a true sense, very African.

The nature of the origin of modern African literature has often succumbed to the Eurocentric temptation of seeing the literature from the continent as a part of European literature. However, as this author has had a chance to observe, in the aftermath of

modern imperialism, language alone cannot be the definer of a literature. A people must share common cultural and historical experiences, a value system, and aspirations, which condition their responses to reality. These considerations bear a distinctive imprint on their literature.

In many ways, however, modern African literature is a blending of traditional African “literary” techniques and borrowed European writing styles. Thus, the works of most of the best-known African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiongo, have effectively combined the two worlds to bring out something that is simultaneously distinctively new and reflective of modern Africa.

Most African countries became independent between 1957 and 1963. Following the euphoria of independence, however, Africans realized that most of their rulers were politically corrupt and incompetent, and generally failed to meet the expectations of their people. Embezzlement of government funds, ethnic favoritism, nepotism, and the rulers' dictatorial tendencies led to the African writers' preoccupation with expressing their views through biting satire. Ayi Kwei Armah's

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968), Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) reflect this period of promise, on the one hand, and disappointment, on the other.

The 1970s and later years witnessed a shift from cultural and political issues to socio-economic concerns among most African writers. With African economies on the downturn since the global oil crisis of 1973, a new breed of African writers, more radical in perspective, began writing about the conditions of the common people. Thus, the poor, the underprivileged, and the socially marginalized became the focus of poetry, fiction, and drama. As Ojaide noted (1990), what is said of the new poetry is true of all the genres in contemporary African literature, for:

Contemporary African poetry is marked by a shift from culture, nature, individualism and lyricism of the late 1950s and the early 1960s to the national socio-economic, political and class awareness of the 1970s and 1980s.... There is movement away from Western modernist influences of fragmentation, allusiveness and difficulty to the traditional African oratorical clarity and simplicity. The poetry is gradually "decolonized" in the shedding of the poetical in diction and syntax. There is also movement from the private self, the individualistic and the universal to the public and socially relevant. This by itself is movement from a non-political conservative stance to a radical ideological posture. There is a new nation-oriented, audience-conscious rhetorical and didactic poetry.

The best-known works that represent the new direction of African literature include Festus Iyayi's novel *Violence* (1979), Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun and Other Plays* (1982), Jared Angira's poems in *Cascades* (1979), Niyi Osundare's poems in *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), and Tanure Ojaide's *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* (1990). It is clear, therefore, that, as elsewhere, African literary writing reflects the period of history and the stage of development in which people find themselves. Within such a context, although modern African literature is written in foreign languages, it strongly mirrors traditional indigenous culture and is "marked by teaching and satire." Since the writer in Africa has been nurtured in a communalistic society (one which gives prominence to the community rather than the individual, where sharing is more cherished than owning and enjoying property privately), African literature is socialized.

Since the mid-1990s, there appears to be a resurgence of African literary creativity across the continent. Many prize-winning and other great works have raised the profile of the African novel. South African Zakes Mda has two of his novels—*Ways of Dying* (1995) and *The Heart of Redness* (2002)—highly praised. Similarly, the Ethiopian Nega Mezlekia's

The God Who Begat a Jackal (2002) is a novel of epic proportion. Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000) received high commendations. In West Africa, the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) have raised the profile of the African female writer. Yvonne Vera of Zimbabwe produced fine works before her untimely death in 2005.

Though fiction appears to have overshadowed both poetry and drama, the latter two genres are still vibrant. In the poetry, there is diversification of themes as never before. The times of racial/cultural conflicts have passed. The ideological edge of the 1980s seems to have waned and poets express an array of themes as seen in diverse works by Uche Nduka, Reesom Haile, Lupenga Mphande, Chimalum Nwankwo, and Ogaga Ifowodo. There is emphasis on performance techniques and a balanced attention paid to form and content. There is a combination of public and private/individual experiences, taken from different perspectives that reflect the complexity of modern African experience.

This discussion could not be complete without mention of the expanding role of African women writers in modern literature. Long disadvantaged by European colonial preference for the education of males as well as the tendency of African societies to promote boys over girls, African women's writing is promising and will likely go beyond the current brand of feminism and focus on family problems such as male marital infidelity, wife-abuse, and male-female relationships, and forcefully embrace other themes based on women's rich experience and the woes and positive qualities of their societies.

Indeed, at present, most women's writing seems generally caught up with domestic themes. Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, Flora Nwapa, Zainab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta, and Ama Ata Aidoo, in one way or another fall in this category, of course, with degrees of treatment of this major theme, which ranges from the more vitriolic Emecheta and Mariama Ba to the more subtle but equally critical and poignant Fall and Nwapa. However, there is already a slow movement away from this penchant, exemplified by Kenyan writers Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (in *Street Life*, 1978) and Grace Ogot (in *Land Without Thunder*, 1988), whose works in the short story and other forms reflect more general themes based on Kenyan society. Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and Abena Busia's *Testimonies of Exile* (1990), for example, are moving in this new direction.

The future of African women's writing is bright in output and quality. However, worsening economies will affect publication outlets in scaled-down magazine and book media. The African world realizes more than ever before that women's and men's contributions are equally essential, and that women writers are rapidly occupying and will continue to occupy their due place in African written (and oral) literature.

Undoubtedly, African literature, both oral and written, has come a long way, to use a common expression. Nonetheless, African writers have yet to overcome several obstacles, from the constraints of the medium of expression (European languages) to denial of the freedom of expression by African rulers (several writers have been incarcerated), and from the paucity of publishing houses on the continent and their lack of adequate resources to the continued control of the field of literature by Western scholars.

Literary Trends in the English-Speaking Caribbean

Afro-Caribbean writers have, in modern times, produced some of the best literary works in English. Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Michael Anthony, Derek Walcott, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, among others, have established themselves internationally as classic writers in their respective fields. Yet, what Bruce King said of Caribbean literature as a whole is true of Afro-Caribbean literature in English: “not until the early part of this century [did] authors of real ability began to appear.” Thus, Caribbean literature is relatively young and is basically “the product of a society descended from European landlords ... African slaves, and indentured Indians.” Unlike African literature, which has individual national characteristics—one speaks of Nigerian, Ghanaian, Malawian, and South African literature, for example—Caribbean literature is regional, the reason being that the island-states, generally tiny, have not been able to forge a literary identity of their own. The small output of each of the islands has also reinforced regional rather than national identity.

This section intends to bring out only the major features of Afro-Caribbean literature in English, especially those related to history, place, and people, and briefly outline its evolution from an imitative literature to one that has found its own regional identity. The history of the Caribbean is a complex one, but the experiences of the Afro-Caribbean islands are essentially the same, reflected vividly in their literature. As G. R. Coulthard observes, they have all experienced European conquest and colonialism, exploitation, poverty, racism, and cultural subjugation, coupled with the extermination of Indians whose labor on sugar plantations and estates was replaced with that of Africans, before emancipation and independence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively.

From the time of the so-called discovery by Columbus, toward the end of the fifteenth century, through slavery and the arrival of East Indians, to the present “post-colonial” state, the Caribbean region has had a painful history. The multicultural nature of the place and the white-black relations, in particular have caused what Wilson Harris (quoted

in William Walsh, *Commonwealth Literature*) has described as a “victor-victim stasis.”

Bruce King in *West Indian Literature* notes that in the 1950s and 1960s, Caribbean literature reflected “growing nationalism, hopes of a regional federation, feelings of anti-colonialism, and interest in local culture.” Roger Mais and Martin Carter were examples. However, by the early 1970s, King tells us once again:

Many writers had become involved in the debates concerning ideology, neo-colonialism, black consciousness, folk traditions and an African heritage which resulted from the failure of independence to bring into being social justice and authentic national culture.

The physical environment has been a strong factor in the literature of the Caribbean. The sense of place, which the island condition affirms, gives its literature a spatial setting that is uniquely concrete. Living in tiny islands in the Atlantic, and as heirs to the slave past, Afro-Caribbean people look to Africa for their roots, to their erstwhile European colonial metropolis for education, and to the United States for better economic opportunities. While they also look to themselves, especially to Cuba and Brazil for pride and inspiration, Afro-Caribbeans generally look outward for their identity.

Perched on volcanoes and coral reefs rising from the Atlantic, life on these islands is closely related to the sea. Whether it is in his poetry, as in *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965), *The Gulf* (1970), *Sea Grapes* (1976), *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979), *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), and *Omeros*, or his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), sea imagery constantly recurs in Derek Walcott's writings. Similarly, in Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), the physical environment is an important factor. Images of islands, the sea and water, fish, plants, and occupations such as fishing and sailing are common. Fiction, in particular, has a picturesque quality, as characters move from place to place.

As elsewhere in the world, Afro-Caribbean literature is a reflection of the people and their lifestyles. The small size of each of the island-nations provides few resources. Tourism brings in some capital, but the people here are generally poor. Thus, emigration, necessarily a common phenomenon, is also reflected in the literature. Whether working in the building of the Panama Canal or in North America and Europe, Afro-Caribbeans have expatriated themselves considerably. With Claude McKay, George Lamming, Edward Brathwaite, Paule Marshall, and John Berry, among many others, one can understand why the theme of exile is common in local literature. As Walsh puts it, “in many ways the literature of the West Indies is, with notable exceptions, an expatriate literature.” In Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, the young boys look

to America. In *The Arrivants*, Brathwaite writes of blacks of the region leaving for the United States, Canada, Britain, and Switzerland, where they face racism and hostility. Though Samuel Selvon is of Indian origin, his black characters in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) have migrated to London in search of economic opportunities.

The migration of men for economic reasons has compelled Afro-Caribbean women to stay at home and take care of the children. This condition, together with the resilient practices of the slave days, has created a matriarchal social structure in the region. In recent years, women writers, in particular Grace Nichols, Michelle Cliff, and Lorna Goodison, have been addressing this issue in their poems. In Laming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Michael Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando* (1965), mothers are more visible and dominant in the upbringing of children than fathers, who tend to travel abroad and make money to send home to their families. This persistent absence of men from home explains in part the abundance of novels with themes of childhood. *In the Castle of My Skin* and *The Year in San Fernando* are good examples of novels expounding this theme. Indeed, the black people of the Caribbean and their lifestyle have always formed the core material for the regional literature. History and environment, therefore, act themselves out in the people's way of life. Walsh appropriately comments that:

The crackling life of the people, their nimbleness of wit, their great and disillusioned tolerance, their response to rhythm, their riddling uncertainties, and the one splendid instrument they developed for ordering a sad, comic, muddled universe, the language, all inform and shape the fiction of such West Indian novelists as George Laming himself, Andrew Salkey, and Samuel Selvon.

In general, writers have attempted to capture the Afro-Caribbean reality in their works by portraying, for example, the folk-peasant life with its poverty, superstitions, love of cricket, and color discrimination. Brathwaite encompasses the tourism, calypso music, rum, emigrants, and the patois, which are significant features of Afro-Caribbean life. Walcott treats the poor folk theme in his *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, where the sick and poor are exploited by Makak's men; George Laming, Michael Anthony, and Samuel Selvon also depict the poor peasants in their novels.

Closely related to the folk theme in Afro-Caribbean literature in English is the use of the Creole dialect. Arising from the multiplicity of peoples from different parts of the world with their own cultures and languages, the masses of the Caribbean have tried to survive in this cultural melee by developing a dialect in English and French that is a conglomeration of their ethnic origins in Africa, together with absorptions from languages of their new neighbors. With their indigenous African

languages suppressed by the white masters in slave times, Africans had to use English, but, in Ashcroft's words, "found that psychic survival depended on their facility for a kind of double entendre." Creole is a product of a mixture of African languages, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. Brathwaite, Walcott, Lamming, Selvon, and others use Creole or patois in their literary work to reflect the true conditions of the peasants, the poor, and the common people.

Two major cultural trends that have caused much debate are also reflected in Afro-Caribbean literature and are linked to the compulsive quest for identity among the Afro-Caribbeans. One trend affirms African culture, as in the works of Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and the other, expounded by both Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, portrays a hybrid Caribbean culture. The common themes of alienation and deracination arise from the slave origins of Afro-Caribbeans, who were forcibly brought to a new environment. Along with assuming an identity that gives meaning to their lives, many Afro-Caribbeans also wish to live an African cultural lifestyle.

Thus, Brathwaite of Barbados, who lived among the Akan/Ashanti people in Ghana, West Africa, for some eight years, preaches immersion in traditional African ways. Like most Africans, he attempts to forge a relationship between the individual and the spiritual world of the community through African symbols and images of masks and drums. He likewise uses African myths, legends, music, language, and ritualistic patterns. It is for his acceptance of Africa that he is identified with the mother continent and, in King's view, he "is perhaps the finest poet in English to express the 'black consciousness' of the sixties and seventies through sophisticated literary techniques."

Taking a different position is the poet and dramatist Derek Walcott, who, perhaps because he is a mulatto, expounds a Caribbean identity, a multicultural potpourri made up of the different races and cultures of the region. In Walcott's poetry, the African and the European are brought together. As Bill Ashcroft and others in their study of the post-colonial era put it,

The present-day population of the West Indies consists of a variety of racial groups all more or less in ancestral exile, and all still subject to the hegemonic pressures of their former European owners, and, more recently, to that exercised in the region by the USA.

The reality of this "cultural heterogeneity," as Ashcroft adds, has made black writers like Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott to accept "cross-culturality, Creolization, hybridization, and catalysis" as the Caribbean historical reality.

No matter the writer's individual choice, the "African theme" appears frequently in the literature. Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* deals

copiously with the identity issue which involves, in its exaggerated way, a return to Africa. In the play, the protagonist Makak looks toward going back to Africa, but since he cannot cross the ocean on his own, he goes home. Home in Afro-Caribbean literature is both Africa and the Caribbean.

Summary

With the writer in modern-day Africa assuming the role of the conscience of his or her society, many works of African literature satirize the corruption and incompetence of modern governments, reminding readers and the entire society of the high cultural ethos that must be upheld. Because the literature is functional, modern African literature is the repository of the cultural life of the people and is a major source of education for the young everywhere, as well as many urban people who have lost touch with their roots. Consequently, African writers consider themselves to be the cultural standard bearers of their people and use the medium of literature to assert and preserve "cultural independence."

Oral and written African literatures have flourished simultaneously on the continent. Despite the fact that the modern literature is written, the contemporary writer is carrying out the timeless mission of the oral artist of defending the cultural ethos of the people. Within this context, therefore, modern African literature informed by African culture is utilitarian, more socialized than based on individual psychology; it is community-oriented, didactic, and ethically and morally instructive; it is mystical, land-based, and rich in folkloric forms and rhythms; and it is peculiar as a linguistic mode. On another important level, modern African literature is a reflection of the profound reality of the African people. Even when written in foreign-derived languages which are now extra-territorial, as is the case with English, African literature is richer for its cultural uniqueness.

Unfortunately, the problems facing African writers are still many. Although African writers have excelled in their fields and have mastered the former colonial languages, both the European and the indigenous African languages limit their ability to express themselves comfortably or to reach the widest audience possible, respectively. The restraints on the freedom of expression and the press in most African countries, on the one hand, present a dilemma for them: they are constantly threatened if they bring out the truth in whatever genre they might be writing. This dilemma is compounded, on the other hand, by the fact that the field of literature is still controlled by Western scholars who also exercise control over the publishing houses.

Afro-Caribbean literature in English, meanwhile, is relatively young. Recently, moreover, new significant voices like Andrew Salkey, Tony

McNeil, Grace Nichols, and Lorna Goodison have appeared. Women writers, including Michelle Cliff, Audre Lorde, Grace Nichols, and Lorna Goodison, are also becoming more visible. New anthologies and individual works of poetry and fiction in the West Indies itself, the United States, and Britain, put out by such publishers as Heinemann and Longman, presage a vigorous literary future that will continue to reflect the history, the place, and the people of the Caribbean. Expatriation, loneliness, longing for home, the quest for self-identity, the attention by mainly middle-class writers to the poor, and the attempt to capture African roots to enhance the Caribbean reality will continue to appear as common themes, making Caribbean literature unique. Writers such as Harris, Brathwaite, and Walcott have achieved worldwide renown in their field. Walcott won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992. However, their pan-African links become clear when their work is compared with that of Africans and African Americans. In short, Afro-Caribbean literature in English, which is a part of the black literary heritage, is deeply rooted in and passionately expresses the condition of black Caribbeans in vivid, concrete images, and in diversified artistic forms.

Study Questions and Activities

1. How has the African writer reflected the realities of the community over the centuries?
2. Compare and contrast African oral literature and written literature on the continent.
3. Do research on three African writers who write in English and French, and outline their major themes from the 1960s to the present.
4. Do further reading on Negritude, define it, and determine the major reason why it has been downplayed by some scholars.
5. Discuss one Afro-Caribbean writer whose work has dealt with the African origin of the Caribbean people.
6. What factors have influenced Afro-Caribbean literature to date?
7. How has Afro-Caribbean literature reflected the Caribbean experience?

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