

LARSONY  
OR  
FICTION AS CRITICISM OF FICTION  
*\*AYI KWEI ARMAH*

Has the Western critic a role in the development of African Literature? Of course. The Western critic interprets African Literature for Western readers. A simple proposition. Only there's a catch. Interpretation has never been simple work.

The key to the skilful interpreter's role lies in his relationship with his audience. The skilful interpreter functions in close tune with the allergies, aspirations, ideals, manias, phobias, phobias and prejudices—above all the prejudices—of his audience. The skilful interpreter knows how to respect and protect his audience's prejudices. Operating almost by instinct, he censors information before he transmits it.

If any of this information threatens to clash too pointedly with his audience's sensibilities, he prudently blunts its point and turns it harmlessly aside, if he cannot bury it altogether. And if any particular item of information flatters his audience's sensibilities, he strengthens its impact. If any item reinforces his audience's prejudices, he sharpens its point. If there is a shortage of flattering information, the really skilful interpreter creates useable items of surrogate information. The skilful interpreter, in short, does not allow information to ruffle his audience's sensibilities. He uses information to reinforce his audience's prejudices.

Now as far as prejudices go, Western assumptions about Africa are well known. There's no need here for an exhaustive listing. It's enough to point out one key Western idea, and the way to all the other pet assumptions of Western racism lies open: Africa is inferior; the West is superior. The Western critic of African Literature, if he is conscientious in his identity as a Westerner, and if he is skilled in his work of interpreting African Literature to his Western audience, takes good care not to violate this key assumption or any of the other notions related to it.

Among these attendant ideas is the assumption that human intelligence happens to be native-born in the West, but that in

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Africa it is a rarity, a total stranger in a hostile environment bound to reject it—naturally and necessarily.

It so happens that creativity is the highest instance of human intelligence at work. African creative activity is the highest instance of human intelligence at work and at home in Africa. This is plain and logical. But for the Western critic of African Literature it constitutes a problem.

It constitutes a problem because the Western critic of African Literature does not operate from a plain and logical framework. He operates from a received framework of Western values and prejudices.

What, confronted with the dilemma of having to interpret African creativity—high intelligence at work—to an audience nurtured in the belief that intelligence itself is alien to Africa, what can the conscientious and skilful Western critic of African Literature do?

The skilful Western critic of African Literature can deny the Africanness or the creativity of it—or both. If it proves impossible to deny creativity, a Western source must be found for it, against the evidence if the evidence insists on being uncooperative.

Obviously, this requires considerable sleight of mind. But that need not discourage the conscientious and skilful Western critic of African Literature. At difficult moments he can remind himself that the work of an interpreter requires not a slavish adherence to outlandish truths but the kind of judicious distortion that protects hallowed prejudices from the terrible violence of uncouth truths.

If, at this point, any reader is tired of my hypothetical Western critic of African Literature and challenges me to get specific, I won't blame him. Instead, I'll name names.

I propose to examine some of the expert pronouncements of one of the more famous Western critics of African Literature, Charles Larson. Professor Larson, to give him his due, Larson professes expertly in the fertile and profitable field of African Literature. He has written innumerable articles on his specialty, African Literature. He has edited books of short stories written by African writers, the field hands of African Literature. More to the point, Larson is the author of a widely acclaimed book, *The Emergence of African Fiction*, (Indiana, 1971 & 1972), an

expert's critical appraisal of part of African Literature. I propose to appraise this appraiser.

In my appraisal I shall restrict myself to those of Larson's expert pronouncements about which I also happen to be particularly knowledgeable. I'm referring to Larson's expert pronouncements on my work and my person.

In 1971, the year Larson's book *The Emergence of African Fiction* was first published, I was living and writing in Lindi and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. According to Larson, however, Armah had exiled himself from his native land, and has since continued his writing in the United States and in Europe. (276)

I shall disregard, for the moment, the exile issue—the assumption that my travelling outside Ghana meant I was in exile—in order to set the record straight as to where I've lived and where I've done my writing. The following is a straightforward list:

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Oct. 1939–Sept. 1959  | Ghana  |
| 1959–1963             | U.S.A. Studying at Groton & Harvard  |
| June 1963–Dec. 1963   | Mexico, Algeria.   |
| Jan. 1964–May 1964    | U.S.A. In hospital.  |
| June 1964–Sept. 1967  | Ghana. Wrote <i>The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born</i> . Began <i>Fragments</i> and <i>Why Are We So Blest?</i> but couldn't finish them. |
| Sept. 1967–Sept. 1968 | France.  |
| Sept. 1968–June 1970  | U.S.A. Columbia Univ. Wrote <i>Fragments</i> , taught at Univ. of Mass.  |
| June 1970–Aug. 1970   | Kenya.   |
| Aug. 1970–May 1976    | Tanzania. Wrote <i>Why Are We So Blest?</i> , <i>Two Thousand Seasons</i> , and <i>The Healers</i> .                                       |
| May 1976–July 1976    | Ghana.   |
| Aug. 1976–            | Lesotho.   |

I had travelled—by choice, and following a long-standing plan whose realization depended mainly on my having enough money to travel and survive on—to live and work in Tanzania. In placing me physically in the West, while I was in fact at home in Africa, Larson might have been making a genuine, pardonable mistake, maybe because of publishing delays. But let us look intelligently at the evidence. Had the error been genuine, Larson would have corrected it in the revised edition, published in 1972. He didn't.

The possible explanations therefore dwindle to two. Either Larson didn't know empirically where I was, but was subjectively certain I had to be in the West; or he knew I was in Africa, but was under an inner compulsion to transport me to the West. What the nature of this inner compulsion might be should become clearer as we move through the evidence.

For a start, let us examine one of the clichés favoured by Western critics of African Literature, and sanctified by Larson: the peculiar concept of exile. In the glossary of the Western critic of African Literature an exile, it seems, is any African artist who does not squat resolutely in his native country—preferably in his native village, and ideally in the very native hut where he was born—but ventures into the world.

Mere mortals are free to travel to countries different from their own, to hustle for higher wages or sweeter working conditions, to seek their fortunes or to flee unreasonable spouses, to study for degrees or to savor the status of expatriate experts, to enjoy a change of environment or even merely to see what the rest of the world is like. The African writer is not allowed such undramatic motives. Mere mortals may travel. The African writer must be exiled.

It sometimes chances, regrettably, that the political and military and police and security rulers of Africa, unaware of the imperatives of Western criticism of African Literature, do not bother to hound an African writer into exile. In such tragic cases possibly all that happens is that a particular writer finds it hard to get a job commensurate with his aspirations or his appetites. In other words, he is in the same situation as the vast majority of humanity. Does the African writer in such a situation do what millions of other Africans do who leave their countries for reasons of work and pleasure, love and hate? Does the African writer also travel? No. That would be an affront to the canons of Western criticism of African Literature. The African writer, if no one will do him the favour of exiling him, can't just travel like another mere mortal. He must exile himself.

In 1967, after I'd finished writing *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, I was faced with a small problem. I had to decide whether to remain in Ghana and thus gain precious insights into the effects of joblessness, moneylessness and starvation on an artist's imaginative powers, or to travel outside Ghana and miss those precious insights. I was in debt, having borrowed

money from an Egyptian friend to write the book. The friend was in no hurry to get her money back, but I was in a hurry to repay the debt. Besides, I'd started writing my second and third novels—they were coming concurrently in those days—and I needed money if I was to continue writing them.

An adequate advance from a publisher for *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* would have enabled me to remain in Ghana or even to go directly elsewhere in Africa, something I'd long dreamed of doing. For a while there's seemed, in fact, to be a possibility of such an advance. Heinemann of London (Editorial Adviser: Chinua Achebe) were the first publishers to see the typescript. Having seen it, they decided they wanted to publish it; but they refused to pay more than £50 (fifty pounds sterling) advance. Their argument was that they never paid more than that amount to any author, "be he Ghanaian, British or Cantonese". This was of course a lie; Heinemann later paid five hundred pounds, ten times their supposed limit for world rights, to secure Commonwealth rights from Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. At any rate, fifty pounds would not have helped me do anything I wanted to do, so I withdrew the book from Heinemann.

I tried to get a job as a journalist. There aren't too many newspapers in Ghana, but I applied to three of the busiest. Since I want to keep the tone of this article relatively serious, I won't detail here the responses of the three Ghanaian Editors I had to confront. Let me just say that in my attempts to meet the very high standards demanded of Ghanaian journalists, I proved a total failure. So dripping with the sweat and shame of failure, I applied for a job with the French-language magazine *JEUNE AFRIQUE*, got it, and travelled to Paris to do it.

Perhaps I should repeat, for those hard of hearing, that I did not go to Paris to write. I went there because I'd got a job there. The work was plentiful, the pay was low. I had little free time, and when, instead of using it for rest, I tried to use it for creative writing, I worked myself into a state of exhaustion, and was obliged to forget my notebooks for a long while.

I spent a year in Paris, then went to America, where for fifteen months I studied for a Master's degree in Fine Arts at Columbia University. For another five months I taught African Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

I had had a long-standing plan to travel to Eastern and Southern Africa. In 1970 I found myself with enough money to act on that plan, so I went to East Africa in June that year. I lived in Nairobi and Mombasa for short periods, then in Lindi, Southern Tanzania, for a longer time. Finally I settled down in Dar es Salaam for over five years, first writing and learning Kiswahili, later combining writing with the teaching of African Literature and Creative Writing at the College of National Education at Chang'ombe. In 1976 I returned to Ghana to see friends and relatives, then travelled again, this time to Lesotho in Southern Africa, to teach African Literature and Creative Writing.

I've travelled to several countries, but never have I been an exile anywhere. Wherever I've gone I've gone voluntarily; the reasons for travelling have always been clear to me. I've travelled to foreign countries like America and France to study and to earn a living. As for travelling to countries in Africa, I do not even think I'm in a foreign country as long as I'm here in Africa. Such an attitude may strike tribalists and Western experts on Africa as odd. That is their business. My movements tell the truth about me plainly enough.

Larson, however, offers his own expert interpretation of my movements. First, he falsifies them by making me move from Africa in an apparently irreversible direction, West. Secondly, he injects a spurious element of compulsion—the exile issue—into the already falsified movements. So much for my travels. How does Larson interpret my texts?

Most intriguingly. To begin with, according to Larson the structure of my second novel, *Fragments*, which seems to him complex, shows I'm indebted to James Joyce.

Now this language of indebtedness and borrowing and influence is usually a none too subtle way Western commentators have of saying Africa lacks original creativity. Whatever in Africa shows complexity of organization, that is to say, intelligence of a high order, cannot be original, African. It must have been borrowed from elsewhere, preferably from the West. A normal Western racist assumption.

But in choosing me in particular to saddle with a debt to James Joyce, Larson leapt beyond the bounds of normal racist thinking and into pure, undisguised superstition. Because the plain truth is I have never read even a single work by Joyce.

Nothing at all, not even a fragment. For the benefit of anyone curious to know where I did get the organizing idea for *Fragments* from, it grew out of a conversation with my elder brother concerning the quality of life at home.

So a question arises: by what occult means does Larson say I have absorbed the influence of Joyce when I've never even once placed myself in contact with his work? Does Larson offer any textual evidence to back up his assertion?

He does. Larson offers textual evidence, and it's breathtakingly bold. It consists of what must have been an exhaustingly close reading of the entire dedication page of *Fragments*, a grand total of five words and one ampersand:

#### FOR AMA ATA & ANA LIVIA

Five words, one ampersand. That's all there is on the page. Now I risk destroying my own credibility with what I have to say next, so let me pause to give the reader time to check Larson's reading of my dedication, as it appears on page 268 of his book.

Larson misreads my dedication page. But perhaps I should say he interprets it, since he uses his misreading for an immediate purpose—to prove that I write under Joyce's influence.

I find the idea of any expert reading my dedication pages to find literary influences engagingly imbecilic. Imbecilic, because I've always dedicated my books to living human beings I've known and loved, not to literary characters. Ana Livia Cordero, to whom (together with Ama Ata Aidoo) I dedicated *Fragments*, is among the best and most vibrantly alive of human beings. How does Larson manage to change her into a figment of Joyce's imagination?

By changing my Ana to "Anna". Simply by adding one little. This isn't carelessness. It's deliberate. Larson needs to kill my *n.* living Ana Livia and substitute Joyce's counterfeit Anna Livia for her, why? Because the substitution enables him to say "Anna Livia is a character in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*," which leads into the statement: "The (novel's) structure will show an indebtedness to Joyce." Larson goes to all this risky trouble solely to find a way of proving that my organizing inspiration and intelligence come not from Africa but from a Western source.

So Larson, after transporting me physically to the West, also endows me with a Western source for my creativity. But he isn't satisfied. He must take care to block off any remnant possibility

of my having access to African sources, even through my own mother tongue. Such a task would discourage cowards, but Larson is very brave. He accomplishes it in one bold stroke: by asserting that I don't know my mother tongue.

A few more truths should help clear the air here. My mother tongue is Fantse, the Southern variant of Akan. I've spoken it from birth. Since the Akan people in general take a positive, intelligent attitude to travel, no matter where I've travelled I've found people to speak Akan with.

If he stated, on his own authority, that I did not know my mother tongue, Larson would be asking his readers to make a number of strange assumptions: first, that having spoken my own language in Ghana for the first nineteen years of my life, I forgot it completely when I went to America in 1959; secondly, that on my return to Ghana in 1964 I was unable to pick up my mother tongue again before I travelled out again in 1967 to work in France, the U.S.A. and Tanzania; and thirdly, that outside Ghana I found no one to speak my language, Akan, with.

Plainly, the statement that I don't speak my mother tongue would look obviously stupid if Larson presented it on his own authority. So Larson does a clever little thing. He puts the statement he wants to make into my own mouth. How? Simply by saying Armah has himself said so: "He has said he no longer remembers his African language." (270)

Ordinarily, a scholar indicates the source of this type of information as precisely as he can. But Larson does the opposite. He takes great care not to indicate in any way the source of his expert information about me.

Is the reader then to assume that I myself told Larson all of this? That assumption would of course be helpful to Larson. But Larson doesn't actually say plainly that he knows me or has talked to me. Instead, through an accumulation of calculatedly vague verbal tricks he creates an impression not only of knowing me personally but also of having the kind of intimate and sustained relationship with me that would enable him to talk of my work and my person with a privileged insider's authority:

"Armah has said. . ."

"Armah tends to regard himself. . ."

"On occasion Armah has gone to rather great pains to make clear. . ."

And all the time the truth he is so careful to hide is that Larson does not know me, has never talked to me, never obtained any sort of access to me, no matter how pathetically hard he's tried, never met me, Larson has never even seen me. Never once.

The uninformed might think the fact that Larson has never even seen me personally need not, under ordinary circumstances, preclude his having come by the opinions and statements he says are mine by other, vicarious means such as through television interviews, newspaper interviews, magazine articles and the rest. But my circumstances are unequivocally different.

Many African writers discuss their work and themselves quite willingly, sometimes even eagerly, with Western critics, newspapermen, magazine pundits, radio commentators, television hosts and just plain dilettantes. That is their choice. I don't. I have had no personal contact whatsoever with any Western critic of African Literature. I have never granted any interview about my person or my work, no matter how prestigious the publication asking for it. That is my choice. I have never gone on lecture tours. I have never accepted invitations to go to Writers' Conferences. And I have never, till now, found it necessary to write any article about my writing. Because I've found it far more pleasurable and sensible to use my time actually writing new books.

Such being the circumstances under which I operate, where on earth does Larson get the statement that I don't remember my mother tongue? From his own obsessive, blind need to annihilate whatever is African in me and my work.

In the service of this need Larson takes some spectacular risks. For instance, to strengthen his assertion that I don't remember my mother tongue he has to explain away the chapter headings I use in *Fragments*. All these headings are Akan words whose meanings contain the key organizing ideas in their respective chapters, except one, EDIN. That exception is a playful bilingual pun (Ga and Akan) whose meaning has everything to do with identity, Africanness and blackness. How does Larson explain all this away?

Larson simply asserts that the chapter headings are not genuinely African. They are, says Larson, "apparently corruptions of Akan." To prove this illuminating assertion he first takes one of my titles, GYEFO, misspells it so it becomes GEYFO, then explains expertly that it's "seemingly a corrup-

tion of" OSAGYEFO. This is as brilliantly intelligent as saying MARSHAL is a corruption of FIELD MARSHAL.

The distortion is a foolish trick for a scholar to make, since any reasonably careful researcher could expose it easily enough. But Larson risks it because without it he can't make the point he's straining to make: that Armah is so un-African, so Western, he doesn't even speak his own mother tongue.

Having removed me forcibly from Africa, and having endowed me with a Western master to imitate in my work, and having conjured me to forget my African language, Larson moves on to prove that I do not have—in fact cannot have—an African readership.

One idea in Larson's critical arsenal has it that African readers naturally reject the work of their most profound, complex and skilled writers. Since, in a review written for *AFRICA REPORT*, Spring 1974, Larson claims to see proof of this notion in the publication history of my fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons*, it might be instructive to look at that history.

*Two Thousand Seasons* was published in 1973 by the East African Publishing House, Nairobi. Before it came out in book form I'd tried to make it available to a large African audience by getting it serialized in newspapers. This was part of an experiment—unsuccessful so far—to see if I could effectively break out of the colonialist stranglehold of Western publishers such as the Heinemann African Writers' Series. I tried two newspapers, the Tanzanian *Daily News* and the Ghanaian *Daily Graphic*.

The Editor of the Tanzanian *Daily News* told me, after some delay, that though he personally was impressed with the quality of the manuscript, he feared he could be accused of using the Government newspaper to foment anti-white hostility if he serialized my novel. Quite unsurprised, I took back my manuscript.

The Editor of the Ghanaian *Daily Graphic* was more courageous. He agreed to serialize the text, after he'd read it, uncensored, in its entirety. He signed a contract to that effect, and the serialization got under way. But then abruptly, after the first few instalments, it was stopped. The only explanation I got at that time was indirect, since the Editor, prudently no doubt, never answered any of my direct enquiries. I was informed, through a friend acting as my agent, that the serialization

could be resumed if only I'd empower the *Daily Graphic* to cut out some portions of the novel. Pointing out, first, that my novel was an artistic whole which would be destroyed if dismembered; and secondly, that the *Daily Graphic* had signed a legal contract binding it to respect the novel's integrity, I refused. Needless to say, despite the artistic and legal cogency of my arguments, the order to stop printing the novel stood.

This report of my attempts to get *Two Thousand Seasons* serialized for the African readership is brief, but it's enough to make it clear that the decisions against making the book available to a wide African readership were taken not at the level of the readership itself, but at the level of the Editors and those few men of power in a position to appoint Editors. That's the African truth.

Let's see how Larson, the Western critic of African Literature, interprets this truth. In his review for *AFRICA REPORT*, Larson states bluntly that African readers "rejected" my novel. The serialization was stopped, he says with the refreshing confidence of an insider, "because of lack of reader interest." That established, Larson then ambles to a by now predictable conclusion:

Ayi Kwei Armah is now trapped . . . His intellectual growth has thrown him into a state worse than that of his characters. He has become a literary askari, writing for the *colons*.

My attempts to reach my optimum audience failed. But a secondary attempt, to find an African publisher as opposed to a neocolonial writers' coffle owned by Europeans but slyly misnamed "African", resulted in the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons* by the East African Publishing House. The book Larson reviewed was put out by EAPH. To date there's no other edition.

The East African Publishing House is an African outfit based in Nairobi. Its editorial and other staff are African. Its readership is African. Yet, according to Larson, the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons* by EAPH shows that I've been rejected by my African readers, and am now reduced to writing "for the *colons*." Exquisite logic.

Possibly, in pointing out how at several points in his work Larson has abolished obvious truths and invented falsehoods or strained facts past breaking point, I may have created the

impression that Larson's methods are wholly irrational. If that be the case I have done the esteemed expert Western critic of African Literature an injustice, and I now hasten to make amends.

Larson is quite rational. His mind works. At times it even works overtime. Whence then this disturbing sense of irrationality in the way he treats truths, machinegunning one here, stabbing another there, strangling a little one here, tripping up one elsewhere, and karate-chopping all of them whenever they stand in his way? The answer lies in Larson's specific position as an interpreter, as a Western critic of African Literature, as a Westerner determined to interpret African creativity—skilfully, conscientiously, satisfyingly—for other Westerners. Larson stands between, on the one hand, African truths, those threateningly hairy, uncouth truths, and, on the other hand, Western prejudices those nice, familiar comforting notions which constitute the staple diet of any white Westerner growing up in his racist society. It is within the framework of white Western racist prejudices about Africa that Larson's assertions make sense.

Within the framework of white racist assumptions about Africa certain suppositions are self-evident, axiomatic: for example, African Literature, by virtue of being African, has to be of low quality. When a Western critic confronts African Literature, no matter how mediocre he himself is, he slips naturally into a magisterial attitude. The writers are metamorphosed into so many school-boys, to be graded by the Western critic. Serious attempts to elucidate the texts themselves are out of place. Instead, the Western critic of African Literature liberally dispenses judgments and promotions; he awards merits and demerits. And at the end, if he feels particularly kind, the Western critic of African Literature arrogates to himself the power to award his brightest pupils one way tickets—perhaps we should call them scholarships—into the mainstream of Western Literature.

Naturally. Because Africa is inferior; the West is superior. As African Literature develops, the best of it must become less African; more Western. The very best of it won't even be African at all. Africa, because it is inherently inferior and therefore accepts inferior values naturally and rejects superior values just as naturally, will of course reject the work of the best African writers. The writers themselves, just as naturally,

will both reciprocate and reinforce this rejection of themselves. They will realize it's impossible for any genuine artist, any creator of genius, in fact, to live in Africa, with Africans, as an African. They will therefore, quite naturally, go into exile in Europe and America, in the West, where their genius will find its natural home swimming in the mainstream of Western values.

This is the framework within which Larson evaluates African Literature. This is the framework within which his treatment of African truths—the way he machineguns one here, stabs one there, strangles a little one here, trips up another elsewhere, and karate-chops all of them whenever they stand in his way—this is the framework within which all of that makes sense.

Sometimes African voices are raised in protest against Western critics of African Literature such as Larson:

- Western critics should not distort African evidence. . . .
- Western critics should get to know their subject before they pose as experts on African realities. . . .
- Western critics shouldn't impose Western standards on. . . .
- Western critics should stop using the word UNIVERSAL until their own outlook becomes truly universal. . . .
- Western critics shouldn't. . . .
- Western critics should . . . .

I find this litany of protest most touching. I also find it futile. Futile, because it's based on a simple-minded assumption proved unintelligent innumerable times in the history of the African connection with the West, the dependent assumption that Westerners should or can act in the African interest. Against that jejune assumption, the facts speak clearly enough: Western interests have long been and continue to be anti-African. Western scholars, critics of African Literature included, are nothing if not Westerners working in the interests of the West. Their ideas and theories are meant to reinforce these interests, not to undercut them.

Larson, the critic of African Literature, is a Westerner. From the evidence of his work he is plainly committed to the values and prejudices of his own society, just as much as any other Western expert hustling Africa, be he a businessman, an economic advisor or a mercenary wardog.

Personally, I do not feel like appealing to him or protesting against him and his work. I have taken his measure from his work, and seen his qualities: his integrity is low; his intelligence

is average; what he has in high degree is ambition. I suspect, in fact, that Larson would like to rise high above the generality of Western critics of African Literature, to become not just one Western critic among many, but *the* Western critic of African Literature, his name a household word, at least in academic households.

Animated by a desire to do something to help Larson achieve this noble ambition, I hereby make a modest suggestion in the hope that scholars, critics, experts and even mere creative writers in the field of African Literature might some day adopt it and thus quicken their ongoing intellectual discourse. It would only be a fitting tribute to this bold, resourceful and enterprising Western critic of African Literature if his name became synonymous with the style of scholarly criticism of which he is such an inimitably brilliant exponent, that style which consists of the judicious distortion of African truths to fit Western prejudices, the art of using fiction as criticism of fiction. I suggest we call it LARSONY.