

***AFRICAN LITERATURE IN DEFENCE OF HISTORY.* EKWE-EKWE  
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*African Literature in Defence of History* by Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe is an elaborate interdisciplinary study and a critical appraisal of African history illustrated and validated by Chinua Achebe's African-centered literary contributions to African literature, history and politics. His book is divided in five parts. Each chapter's title reflects the cyclical nature of African history.

In the first chapter entitled "Retrieval," Ekwe-Ekwe recalls 500 years of African history that were characterized by disinheritance as well as cultural, social and economic exploitation by western and Arab countries. According to the author, some of the major cataclysms orchestrated by European and Arab conquests and invasions of Africa are the erasure of African history and the genocide against its people. The former is meant to deny African humanity while the latter depleted the African continent of its human resources in order to serve imperial interests. To illustrate his study of these salient and critical issues, Ekwe-Ekwe uses specific examples such as the 1963 proclamation of British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper that denied the African presence (18). However, the author does not limit himself to using such examples; he also explains the motivations that are at the core of the "Deny-the-African Presence litany." (18). Specifically, he refers to Achebe who, in his 1990 essay "African Literature as Restoration of Celebration" presents the European conquest of Africa as follows:

You do not walk in, seize the land, the person, the history of another, and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honor. To do that would amount to calling yourself a bandit...So what do you do? You construct very elaborate excuses for your actions. You say, for instance that the man in question is worthless and quite unfit to manage himself or his affairs . . . you may even be prepared to question whether such as he can be, like you, fully human. From denying the presence of a man standing there before you, you end up questioning his very hu-

manity” (4).

On the other hand, one way to retrieve African history and acknowledge its value and existence is to denounce and expose the European world’s rationalizing scholarship of conquest that the author calls “Africophobia.” Ekwe-Ekwe is particularly critical of the negative impact the “European World academy” had on African Studies. He calls it “the contorted and debilitating caverns of the European world academy” (2). He vehemently criticizes its refusal to acknowledge African historicity. According to him, it studies Africa as “marginal” to the European historical experience instead of generating research placed on the “centrality” of Africa. It refused to “do penance for Europe’s 500 year-long crimes in Africa” (3). Also, Ekwe-Ekwe explains that it “exploited the unresolved problematic historical and strategic underpinnings of the African freedom movement...it was therefore able to trap African scholarship and institutions of varying hues to partake in the broad “ahistoricity” of its ‘African Studies’ discourses (3). For the author, therefore, one best way to retrieve African history is by highlighting the importance of African-centered scholarship that stresses the importance of Africans as subjects and as the center of the academic discourse.

Chapter two, “Transition,” illustrates the distorted European literary constructions of Africa that rationalize the African holocaust perpetrated by Europe during the slave trade and subsequent conquest of the continent. Ekwe-Ekwe denounces the literature of “European genocidist scholars” (59) who according to him “obliterate the scientific authentication of Africanness in human history” (59) by downplaying the impact and importance of the African holocaust and African humanity. Therefore, one way to make an African Renaissance possible is that Africans demand justice and reparations for the crimes committed against their humanity. Basing his analysis on the central role of Achebe’s novels in this transitional process in history, the author reaffirms the need for Africa to be reconstructed after the devastating and debilitating holocaust of its people.

Chapter three, “Exposition” stands out with the analysis of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as the example of African retrieval of history and the decolonization of African literature. The author explains how Achebe has been able to portray the imperial arrogance and deceit of the British colonizers when they invaded Igboland, the people’s resistance to the invasion and the loss of Igbo national sovereignty. Ekwe-Ekwe’s analysis shows that Achebe’s work contains in itself the seeds for African renaissance.

The following chapter “Involution” illustratively refers to the restoration of Africa’s former state. Ekwe-Ekwe explains that Africa can have a promising fu-

ture if the self-governing ability of its people is developed. It can be achieved if there is a total dismantlement of the “European-created state on the continent . . . the future of Africa should revert to extensive socio-political decentralisation where communities . . . have the right to control and develop their human and natural resources” (133). Based on this premise, the author illustrates his point by analyzing the Biafra war and its subsequent spate of massacres that triggered killings in other African countries.

The last chapter “Reconfiguration” is about the challenges that Africans face in the new millennium. The path towards African renaissance is to dismantle the African nation-state and to create new state forms based on a reconnection with Africa’s rich heritage. Ekwe-Ekwe advocates an African-centered discourse and a strategy of redevelopment (137). Some of the main goals of these new states should be to empower grass-root communities, to give African women an active role in the state institutions, to demilitarize, to improve health, to increase its agricultural productivity in order to be able to feed its population and be self-sufficient. According to Ekwe-Ekwe; “It will embark on this journey of regeneration by emphasizing a fundamental assumption of its being - namely, an inward-looking confidence of its ability to carry out this transformation itself” (145).

Though the book is focused on the contribution of Chinua Achebe’s literary works to African literary, historical and political life, it is also a study of African history that examines an impressive number of scholarly works from multidisciplinary backgrounds and contrasting ideologies. While he criticizes Darwin’s theories about the inevitability of African genocide, he praises the literary, artistic or historical careers of people such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, James Baldwin, Cheikh Anta Diop, Frantz Fanon, Duke Ellington and John Coltrane, among others, for being the vanguard of African peoples’ liberation.

In the last chapter of the book, Ekwe-Ekwe analyzes the spread of AIDS in Africa. He concludes that the rate of infected people is relatively lower in several West African states than in southern Africa. He advocates the use of statistics to further scientific inquiry into the internal factors to societies that could explain these rate variations. However, his search for solutions based on “scientific inquiry” does not take into account the role played by deeply engrained traditions such as polygamy or levirate marriages in the propagation of AIDS. Specifically, a closer look at the situation of some women in Burkina Faso would have revealed their predicament and the high risk they run of catching the disease more quickly because of their husbands’ sexual promiscuity. Ekwe-Ekwe raises questions about what factors account for the differences in prevalence rates between the west and east/southern regions of Africa, and about the lessons to be learnt to

keep this rate lower. Maybe it would have been more beneficial to suggest solutions that have to take into account the complex traditional background of the aforementioned areas.

*African Literature in Defence of History* addresses critical cultural, political, academic and health issues in this new millennium. It calls for the transformation and regeneration of African people and it is an indispensable discourse for African renaissance. Its interdisciplinary range of scholarly materials and its focus on Chinua Achebe's contribution to African history make it a celebration of African historicity by engaging with its rich cultural heritage.