

## From the 'Great Tradition' of English Literature to Literatures in English: A Case Study of Undergraduate Long Essays in Two Ghanaian Universities

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### Abstract

In the past, undergraduate long essays in Ghanaian universities tended to be inspired by works from the so-called 'Great Tradition' of English literature, such as works by Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Hardy, Wordsworth, Blake, Dickens, etc. This appears to be changing. No longer are students of English at the Departments of English in Ghanaian universities interested in these writers and their works. On the contrary, there is a general trend of functioning within a 'domestic' tradition of literatures in English, including translated works from African folklore and orature. This paper examines the factors responsible for the shift, mainly the rise of African literature, cultural re-orientation on the part of students and faculty, the multiplicity of 'centres' in the syllabuses of the Departments of English, as well as the impact of the Heinemann African Writers Series (AWS). It establishes clearly that, indeed, there is a shift in axis towards the study of African literature in English and comes to the conclusion that the trend, as reflected in the two universities, might be quite representative of the larger picture in other Ghanaian universities and universities in the so-called Third World. The significance of the findings of this research is its attempt to provoke further debate with regard to the study of literatures in English in contemporary times.

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**Keywords:** great tradition', afrocentric, eurocentric, shift, centre, multiplicity.

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### INTRODUCTION

Based on a ten-year observation that, in Ghanaian universities, there is a major shift in the study of literature from 'English Literature' to 'Literatures in English', this research was designed to test the assumption, by analysing undergraduate long essays in two of Ghana's public universities—the University of Ghana (Legon) and the University of Cape Coast (Cape Coast)—with the aim of drawing attention to an emerging trend in the study of literature in English in academies outside England.

From a theoretical perspective, the study was premised on Afrocentric ideas espoused by two leading Pan-African writers, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah, as well as propositions by Chinweizu et al. (1980). Ngugi's theses, with regard to the subject-matter of this study, are captured in four seminal documents: *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1987), "Writing Against Colonialism" (1988), *Moving the Centre: Towards a Pluralism of Cultures* (1993) and *Globaletics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2010). In *Moving the Centre*, in particular, he documents the many ways in which Europe and Eurocentric scholarship continue to dominate and impose themselves on African/Third World academia, hence the need to free culture and scholarship from Eurocentrism. His main concern is the study of literature in universities outside England and how it is designed mainly as the study of English

literature rather than an all-encompassing literature in English, irrespective of the emergence of a growing body of literary works in the former colonies of Britain. Ngugi regards this phenomenon as neo-colonialism, arguing that the modern world is "a product of both European imperialism and of the resistance waged against it by Africa, Asian, and South American peoples" and seeing the world through the lenses of the likes of Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad or Joyce Cary, in terms of themes or location or attitude only reinforces the reality and experience of European imperialism (4). He emphasizes that, from his own personal experience, and as an African, there is nothing comparable to reading the world from a centre other than Europe:

The great tradition of European literature had invented and even defined the world view of the Calibans, the Fridays and the reclaimed Africans of their imaginations. Now the Calibans and the Fridays of the new literature were telling the story which was also my story. Even the titles, like Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom*, seemed to speak of a world that I knew and a hope that I shared. (4)

Thus, for Ngugi, it is imperative to shift from Europe to a multiplicity of centres with regard to the new literatures from Asia, Africa and South America which are in no way reflected in the critical and academic institutions in the newly independent

countries, or Europe itself. According to Ngugi, in the Euro-Western academia,

The study of the humanities meant literally the humanity contained in the canonized tradition of European literature and, further, confined within the linguistic boundaries of each of the colonizing nations. The English department of Makerere...was probably typical of all English departments in Europe or Africa at the time. It studied English writing from the times of Chaucer, Spenser and Shakespeare up to the twentieth century of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wilfred Owen. (6)

In Armah's *Osiris Rising* (1995) and *KMT: in the house of life* (2002), there are conscious attempts by intellectuals/thinkers/visionaries to dismantle mental slavery through a systematic decolonization of education and scholarship in Africa on three fronts: History, African Studies and Literature. Their argument for a curriculum revision is predicated upon their rejection of the existing colonial curriculum which, for all intents and purposes, is tied and tailored to the grand colonial and neo-colonial designs which are "a post-conquest European strategy for keeping Africans usably underdeveloped and dependent" (*Osiris*, 213). They argue that:

Reflexes designed long ago to achieve the subjugation of Africans cannot serve to free us. Training systems designed to inculcate servile reflexes cannot work to teach habits of freedom. Instruments designed to keep our economies and societies underdeveloped and dependent cannot serve to develop our continent and to liberate our productive intelligence (214).

On literature in particular, the revolutionaries are of the view that the old literature syllabus is designed to push four main assumptions:

First, the serious study of literature was essentially the study of Western literature; second, that African literature was a recent, 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon; third, that oral traditions formed an inchoate background for the emergence of African literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; fourth, that ancient Egyptian literature had nothing to do with the continent of Africa (219).

Again, the revolutionaries and visionaries propose, among other things, that for Africans, the study of literature be "inclusively centered on African Literature" which includes "the whole verbal record, written and unwritten, of all the African people throughout time" (220).

In *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*," Chinwiezu et al. make a number of observations, and proceed from a basic assumption that "contemporary African culture is under foreign domination" (239). Based on this assumption, they proffer the following redemptive measures:

[...] on the one hand, our culture has to destroy all encrustations of colonial mentality, and on the other hand, has to map out new foundations for African modernity. This cultural task demands a deliberate and calculated process of syncretism: one which, above all, emphasizes valuable continuities with our precolonial culture, welcomes vitalizing contributions from other cultures, and exercises inventive genius in making a healthy and distinguished synthesis from them all(239).

In all, in terms of thematic thrust, whereas Ngugi and Chinweizu advocate a cross-cultural framework for the production and study of literature outside Europe, Armah pushes for an African centre, and makes very little room for any other centre. These positions are tested in this study.

#### SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is based on a ten-year period, from 2002 to 2011. This period was selected because: (a) the shift in focus started manifesting towards the last quarter of the 1990s; (b) documentation of undergraduate long essays in both universities was erratic and unreliable until around 2000, 2001 and 2002. In terms of methodology, a frequency distribution method was used to determine, cumulatively, how many times over the ten-year period a particular author featured. Note that, where there was a comparative study, each author was treated by the researcher as an independent entry.

#### Case Study One: Undergraduate Long Essays, Department of English, University of Cape Coast

The study was limited to the top ten authors, according to students' preferences. In all, 19 authors were represented during the period under investigation. In terms of frequency distribution, the authors ranked first (1<sup>st</sup>) to fifth (5<sup>th</sup>) are as follows:

Name of Author	Frequency	Rank	Identity
Ama Ata Aidoo	22	(1 <sup>st</sup> )	African
Ngugi wa Thing'o	17	(2 <sup>nd</sup> )	African
Ayi Kwei Armah	14	(3 <sup>rd</sup> )	African
Amma Darko	13	(4 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Buchi Emecheta	11	(5 <sup>th</sup> )	African

It is clear from the above table that, with regard to the top-ranked author preferences, not a single English author is represented. What is also captured in the table is the fact that West African writers are the most popular choices for undergraduate students—out of the top five, only Ngugi is East African.

The authors ranked sixth (6<sup>th</sup>) to tenth (10<sup>th</sup>) are as follows:

Author	Frequency	Rank	Identity
Wole Soyinka	10	(6 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Toni Morrison	06	(7 <sup>th</sup> )	Af. Diaspora
W. Shakespeare	06	(7 <sup>th</sup> )	English
Sembene Ousmane	05	(8 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Chinua Achebe	05	(8 <sup>th</sup> )	African
August Wilson	05	(8 <sup>th</sup> )	Af. Diaspora
Ola Rotimi	04	(9 <sup>th</sup> )	African
E. Sutherland	04	(9 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Zora Hurston	04	(9 <sup>th</sup> )	Af. Diaspora
Kodzo Mawugbe	04	(9 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Kobina Sekyi	03	(10 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Aliya Rifaat	03	(10 <sup>th</sup> )	African
K. Opoku-Agyemang	03	(10 <sup>th</sup> )	African
Alan Paton	03	(10 <sup>th</sup> )	African

There were 14 authors in this category. The entries in the rankings above reveal a number of things. Out of a total of 14 authors, only one (1) (Shakespeare), is English, representing 7.0 %; three (3) are from the African Diaspora (Morrison, Wilson and Hurston), representing 21 % and ten (10) are African (mainly West Africans), representing 72 %.

In all, the 19 authors are spread as follows: African, 15, representing 78.8 %; African Diaspora, three (3), representing 15.7 % and English, one (1), representing 5.5 %.

From the statistics above, it is clear that there is a massive leaning towards African writers, followed by writers from the African Diaspora and, very marginally, English authors—in this case, only one (1) English author.

**Case Study Two: Undergraduate Long Essays, Department of English, University of Ghana**

In all, there were 23 author representations for the period under investigation. The analysis is limited to authors with two (2) or more entries. There are only seven (7) authors in this category, and are ranked first (1<sup>st</sup>) to third (3<sup>rd</sup>). The rest, in fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) place (not captured in table), who number 21, have a single (1) entry each:

Author	Frequency	Rank	Identity
Ama Ata Aidoo	9	1 <sup>st</sup>	African
Amma Darko	4	2 <sup>nd</sup>	African
E. Sutherland	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African
Chinua Achebe	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African
Kwakuvi Azasu	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African
Bessie Head	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African
A.K. Armah	2	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African

The table above shows a limited distribution of entries. First of all, from a cumulative record of 23, there is a 100 % African representation since not a single English author is represented (0%). Secondly, apart from the two leading authors (Aidoo and Darko), as many as five (5) authors are tied in third (3<sup>rd</sup>) place, with two (2) entries each.

In terms of gender, there is a good balance between female and male writers in the ratio of 4:3.

Of the 21 authors who are tied in fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) place, with one (1) entry each, 15 are African, representing 71.4%; three (3) are English/American (Shelley, Charlotte Bronte and Kate Chopin), representing 14.3% and three (3) African Diaspora (Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Michelle Cliff), representing 14.3%. Reduced to African, as opposed to non-African authors, the ratio is 18:3, or 85.7% as against 14.3%.

**Top Five Authors**

Between the two universities, the top five authors, on the basis of frequency, rank and identity, are indicated below:

Author	Frequency	Rank	Identity
Aidoo	31	1 <sup>st</sup>	African
Ngugi	17	2 <sup>nd</sup>	African
Darko	17	2 <sup>nd</sup>	African
Armah	16	3 <sup>rd</sup>	African
Emecheta	11	4 <sup>th</sup>	African
Soyinka	10	5 <sup>th</sup>	African

The table points in one direction—preference for African writers, as there is not a single English author represented. Thus, there is a clear pattern of a shift from the ‘Great Tradition.’

**Factors Responsible for the Shift**

The gradual actualization of the propositions by Ngugi, Armah and Chinweizu et al. flows from a number of factors which are identified and explored in the ensuing pages. These are:

- a) The rise of African literature in English;
- b) The role of the Heinemann African Writers Series (AWS);
- c) Curriculum revision, teaching and emphasis on African literature and
- d) Students’ cultural re-orientation and sensibilities.

**The Rise of African Literature in English**

African writers and their works have captured the history, society, culture and politics of the African experience. From the 1960s, following the massive success of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (first published by Heinemann in 1958), African literature has attracted wide readership and criticism across the world. In the same measure, Soyinka, Ngugi, Armah, Sutherland, Aidoo, Awoonor, Anyidoho, Emecheta, Ba, Laye, Lessing, Head, Beti, Oyono, Ousmane and others have enjoyed international acclaim as some of the finest writers in the world. Their works have featured on undergraduate and graduate courses especially in African universities and in universities in the United States of America, Britain and Canada where African Studies, Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature are taught. Similarly, many undergraduate long essays as well as graduate dissertations have featured the works of these writers.

A further boost to the appreciation of African literature is the recognition of African writers at the

highest level. To date, Africa boasts of three Nobel laureates in literature namely: Soyinka (1986), Mafouz (1988) and Gordimer (1991). However, for some critics, the African Nobel laureates are mere literary puppets (“The Noble Prize Syndicate”) pandering to Euro-Western tastes, “a bewitching instrument for Euro-imperialist intellectual hegemony” (Chinweizu, 1987:175).

African literature continues to feature prominently on the West African Examinations Council’s Literature in English syllabus for many years. And it must be emphasized that works by African writers are better appreciated by (West) African students of Literature in English due to the fact that they draw essentially on African culture, history and artistic forms which the students can easily identify with. Thus, no longer is Literature in English mystified beyond the grasp of the students on account of its production from cultures alien to them.

### **The Role of Heinemann African Writers Series (AWS)**

The Heinemann’s African Writers Series (AWS) began in 1962 through the instrumentality of Heinemann executive Alan Hill, with Chinua Achebe as the first advisory editor. The collection, which first featured Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (AWS No.1), covers the whole historical range of modern African fiction, from early pioneering novels by black African authors such as René Maran’s *Batouala* (1921; AWS 1973), to Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (AWS 1974), and Dambudzo Marechera’s *The House of Hunger* (AWS 1978) and beyond.

The most remarkable thing about the AWS is that the collection covered a wide geographic range, representing the best works not only from English-speaking countries in Western, Southern and Eastern Africa, but also a number of works translated from French, Portuguese, Zulu, Swahili, Acoli, Sesotho, Afrikaans, Luganda and Arabic.

In its attempt to construct an African canon for academic study, the AWS’ collections were not limited to only standard literary forms, but also traditional African folk materials and non-fictional accounts of African culture and history, including Ulli Beier’s popular collection *The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths* (1966).

The net impact of the AWS in projecting African literature cannot be over-stated. Achebe (2012: 112) recalls: “Alan and I, with James Curry and a few others, developed a vision of gathering much of Africa’s literary talent under [the AWS] rubric in order to showcase the best of postcolonial African literature.”

The series succeeded in creating “a forum for many post-independence African writers and provided texts that African universities could use to address the colonial bias then prominent in the teaching of African literature” ([www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_Writers\\_Series](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Writers_Series)).

### **Curriculum Revision and Emphasis on African Literature**

Ngugi recalls that at the University of Nairobi in 1968, when they pushed for the abolition of the English Department as then constituted:

The department was to be replaced by one which put Third World literatures, available either directly in English or through translations into English, at the centre of the syllabus without of course excluding the European tradition. Such a department would emphasize the literateness of literature rather than the Englishness of that literature. The department would thus be recognizing the obvious fact: that knowing oneself and one’s environment was the correct basis of absorbing the world; that there could never be only one centre from which to view the world but that different people in the world had their culture and the environment as the centre. The relevant question was therefore one of how one centre related to other centres (*Moving the Centre*, 9).

To test the multiplicity of centres, as suggested in the quote above, the researcher looked at the course listings of the two departments. In the case of the Department of English, University of Ghana, any suggestion that the syllabus has diminished the space for the study of the ‘Great Tradition’ of English Literature is not supported by the evidence. In the *Handbook for the Bachelor’s Degree Course Descriptions for the Humanities* for the 2011/2012 academic year, the following ‘traditional’ English Literature courses were listed: ENGL. 213: Survey of English Literature I and ENGL. 214: Survey of English Literature II (core courses, which are basically surveys of the literature of the ‘Great Tradition’; indeed, the course traces “representative texts of the development of English letters from the Anglo-Saxon beginnings through Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the Elizabethan age to Milton and the restoration century” for the first part, while the second part traces literature “from the Augustans...to the Age of Sensibility...to the romantic Movement...and the Victorians, p.53), ENGL. 355: The Early Novel (Defoe, Richardson etc.), ENGL. 356: Shakespeare and His Age, ENGL. 457: Nineteenth Century Fiction, ENGL 459: Renaissance Drama, ENGL 463: Satire and the Enlightenment, ENGL. 467: English Literature from Milton to Blake

and ENGL. 478: English Literature from Wordsworth to Hardy.

The Department of English, University of Cape Coast, on the other hand, lists the following English Literature courses for the 2011/2012 academic year: ENG.431: Major European Writers (elective), ENG.314: Studies in Shakespeare (core), ENG.319: Canonical American Writing (elective)—which might include African-American writers such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston etc. These are matched against the following African Literature courses: ENG.315: Contemporary African Writing (core), ENG.317: Aspects of Post Colonial Literature (elective), ENG.412: Oral Literature in Africa (elective), ENG.415: Ghanaian Literature (core). In the entire syllabus, therefore, as far as “core” courses are concerned, the ratio is 2:1 in favour of African Literature. On the basis of this, one may hazard a guess that the syllabus has somehow influenced students’ interest in and preference for African over non-African literature.

#### **5Students’ Cultural Orientation and Sensibilities**

Outside the course listings above, there appears to be a massive propensity towards the appreciation of works in the Ghanaian oral tradition and folklore. In both universities, many undergraduate long essays are in the areas of Ghanaian/African orature dealing with diverse fields including panegyrics (praise appellations, libation, invocations etc.), occupational songs (war songs, harvest songs, hunters songs etc.), popular genres such as hip-life/high-life, *Ghallywood* (Ghanaian home video films), iconography (inscriptions on commercial vehicles, fishing boats, shops etc.) and proverbs, myths, legends etc. It must be emphasized that these are invariably field studies that bring students closer to their familiar terrains and cultural sensibilities.

#### **Canon Formation, or Canon Revision?**

Canon formation and canon revision have been contentious issues anywhere there is an established culture of literary production over time, particularly where literature is the defining symbol of the relationship between colonizers and the colonized. It is undergirded by considerations pertaining to culture and nationalism (Gates 1989, Kubayanda 1992, Said 1989, Guillory 1993, van Djik 1999, Corse 1997). Guillory contests the pedestrian premises on which the canon debate rests. He posits that a better understanding of canon formation hinges less on the issue of the representation of social groups than the issue of distribution of what he terms “cultural capital” in schools and the practices of reading and writing. In Gates’ article, “Whose Canon Is It, Anyway?” he asserts that the teaching of literature is the teaching of values, but in imperialist discourse, it has become a literary and political tool which denies colonized people their cultural image. Also,

the so-called Western masterpieces represent nothing but the reinforcement and perpetuation of the culture of subjugation, denial of voice, visibility and representation of, particularly, people of colour and women. In “On Colonial/Discourse and Contemporary Critical Theory,” Kubayanda observes that from the 70s and beyond, there has been massive “interrogation of canonical thinking...canon reformation, or de-canonical thinking” (Kubayanda 3). Like Ngugi, Kubayanda states that there are “countless literary traditions and experiences in Latin America, Africa and Asia...that are virtually out of the reach of European and American theorists, especially those of the belle-lettres streak” (5).

Often, a canon defines itself on the basis of practice in terms of patronage, readership and teaching. In gradually and systematically moving away from the so-called ‘Great Tradition,’ are Ghanaian undergraduate students of English unconsciously forming a new canon of literature or revising the old one? It does appear that, far from any conscious attempt at canon formation, revision, or de-canonical thinking, as this study has shown, on the basis of patronage and readership, a new canonical configuration is emerging and it wears not the garb of the multiplicity of centres advocated by Ngugi but an almost monolithic and Afrocentric identity. It is assumed that this might be the trend in other Ghanaian universities. However, in the long run, this tendency has the potential of turning the study of literature in Ghanaian universities into a parochial study of African literature.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the statistics from the two universities over the ten-year period strongly supports the view that, indeed, there is a clear pattern of a shift in axis from the old/colonial centre of English literature to a focus on studies in African literature. African literature in this regard refers to written works produced on the African continent and those produced in the African Diaspora, as well as works in the African oral tradition. It is conceded that there may be other factors beside the ones identified in this study, and further investigation in this regard will aid in tracking the study of literature in academic centres outside of England.

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