

THE Critical
Imagination
IN African
Literature

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
Michael J. C. Echeruo

Edited by Maik Nwosu
and Obiwu



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Confronting Politics through History

*A Reading of the Historical Novels of
Ayi Kwei Armah and John Edgar Wideman*

DUL JOHNSON

Politics can be defined not only as that profession devoted to governing affairs or opinions about politics but also as the understanding of the prevailing social order that regulates or shapes the writer's world, and his conscious efforts to positively influence it. We define history in the traditional sense, as a record of events of the past, whether the records are written or oral, although we do not see it as something locked in the past. The interplay between politics and history is what determines social structures of every society, and what gives direction to its future. History, then, is a growing, unending chain that is created from present social activities taking their roots in those of the past and defining those of the future. By these definitions we submit that politics is both a by-product and the driving force of history and vice versa. Therefore, the terms "history," "politics," and "social order" will be used interchangeably in this essay.

Literature, history, and politics can hardly be separated. But not all writers commix them in the same way and the same degree. There are different reasons for this. Some histories are quiet. Some are turbulent and some are triumphant. Some are an admixture of all of these characteristics. Africa's history has been a turbulent and painful one, and this history, with all its turbulence and pains, has dogged people of African descent wherever they are. It is the history of slavery, of the exploitation of

its wealth and people by Western and the Arab world. It is also the history of colonization by the same forces, but more effectively by the West. The African American is still struggling to gain the acceptance and respect that the civil rights movement of the late nineteenth century fought for, although certain gains have been made. For as long as imperialism, new forms of slavery, and racial segregation continue to exist, committed writers will use their works to try to bring about change.

What is the function of literature? This is a well-worn debate that bears invoking here. It is an important question for all committed writers, but one that Ernst Fischer resolved for us when he submitted that art, by which he meant literature also, "is necessary in order that man should be able to change the world" (1970, 14). Literature, by this declaration, then, is a lesson—a lesson in the sense in which history or stories told by fathers and grandfathers to their children and grandchildren are lessons. And if all literary works are lessons, then the historical novel is more than a lesson; it is (or can be) a manual for political action. For Ayi Kwei Armah and John Edgar Wideman, as it is for many—even if not all—African and African American writers, literature would be no use if it did not seek to change the society in a positive way.

Armah and Wideman

For these two writers it is history itself that brought them to the decision to write what they write. Look at the coincidences of period and circumstances: Armah was born in 1939, Wideman in 1941. Ghana's struggle for independence was in the late 1950s, which coincided with the youthful period of Armah's life when events easily make a lasting impression on the mind. This was also roughly the period when the civil rights movement in America that led to the beginning of the emancipation of America's blacks—another form of independence—was attaining feverish levels of activism, and Wideman was growing up in a predominantly black neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Armah had left for America at the same time, and so he and Wideman, probably unknown to each other, had their minds shaped by the same experiences.

For Armah, these struggles for basic civil rights in America were the motivation for his revolutionary ideas and dreams of emancipation for