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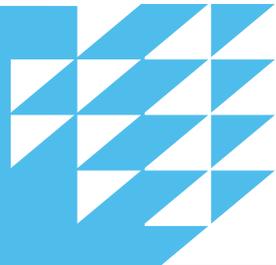
The Quest

INAUGURAL LECTURE

BY

Professor Moteane John Melamu

13 April 2011



Centre for Continuing Education, University of Botswana

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Gaborone, Centre for Continuing Education, University of Botswana.

Keywords: Quest, ego trip, communication, metaphorical journey, identity, search, discovery, teaching, literature, challenges, educator, literary pilgrim, literary odyssey, resolution life, infinity, treasures, eternally potential

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Preface to the Professorial Inaugural Lecture Series

Professorial inaugural lectures are part of our engagement strategy and outreach service as they afford the University through its professors an opportunity to share the knowledge and experience cultivated over time with the general public. They also serve as an inspiration to our younger colleagues who are still working their way up the academic ladder.

It is my conviction that the inaugural lectures series will continue to cater for our multiple needs and purposes as an institution and a nation. They act as a resource for students, lecturers and other practitioners. They also provide critical information for planning the institutional operations and the shape and scope that the academic discourse must take across the institution.

The University of Botswana is proud that its Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) has taken over the initiative started in 1985 by the then National Institute for Research and continues to organise the lectures with untiring zeal. The purpose of this general introduction, therefore, is to attempt to invigorate this vibrant initiative and help to spur it to greater heights in an academic setting that is changing in line with the changing demands of the present day Botswana society which is making various demands on the University of Botswana. The professorial inaugural lecture series is therefore a unique response to the cry of our society whose members desire to be effective stakeholders and partners with the University of Botswana going forward.

Professor Isaac Ncube Mazonde

Director, Office of Research and Development

ABSTRACT

The lecture charts the development of the speaker as a student and teacher of English Literature. This development is conceived in terms of a metaphorical ‘journey’, beginning from early childhood, with all the difficulties attendant upon the attempt to learn English in unconducive, non-English-speaking conditions in an African ghetto. The *journey* proceeds from the speaker’s progression from primary school, through to secondary school, to university, with all the impediments to learn a foreign language and to come to grips with its literature. The *journey* continues with the speaker’s confrontation with the challenges of teaching literature at tertiary level. This *journey* is seen as motivated by the *travel motif* in selected classical, traditional English and African literature texts, in which the protagonists are, like the speaker, involved in “journeys” of discovery and self-realisation. But whereas the *quests* of these protagonists end with a kind of “resolution”, the speaker concludes that his particular *quest*, being a literary venture, must of necessity be infinite.

Key words: *Quest, ego trip, communication, metaphorical journey, identity, search, discovery, teaching, literature, challenges, educator, literary pilgrim, literary odyssey, resolution life, infinity, treasures, eternally potential*

The Quest

I have been in the business of teaching for more years than I care to remember. But quite often I tell my incredulous students that I have “stage-fright” at the beginning of every lecture, to make them realise that I too am a mere mortal. This is particularly so today, filled as I am with great trepidation, because I am only too painfully conscious of the fact that my lecture comes after Fred Morton’s erudite “The Future of History”, and the veteran physician, Dr Seligman’s lecture. Both are hard acts to follow. As the Vice-Chancellor was uttering those flattering introductory words, I was silently asking myself how I had crassly got myself into this situation, and I had to take recourse to a silent prayer for divine guidance.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, permit me to suggest that most of us may be tempted to deny that the “inaugural lecture” is an opportunity for the academic to go on an intellectual ego trip. I suppose this is what the great Syracusean mathematician, scientist and inventor, Archimedes must have had in mind when he said:

*“Give me but one firm spot on which to stand,
and I will move the earth”.*

(Archimedes is renowned, among others, for solving king Hieron’s concern about whether a crown made for him was pure gold or a mixture of gold and silver. His discovery, which resulted in what has come to be known as “Archimedes’ principle”, was made while he was having a bath in the city public baths: this led to the now famous or infamous streak by

the genius down the streets of Syracuse, crying “Eureka! Eureka! – ‘I have found it! I have found it!’”)

The “Inaugural Lecture” offers the academic the opportunity of the Archimedean “firm spot” to move the academic world, without, mercifully, having to run naked in public.

Let me confess that I was sorely tempted to launch into a deeply recondite disquisition on nothing in particular except to try to flaunt my learning by confounding and mystifying my audience. But then I remembered that, as a teacher of literature, I am a communicator. And if I succumbed to this temptation, I would certainly not be communicating. My intention, this evening, is not only to communicate, but also to carry you along with me on my literary adventure.

This reminds me of Alan Sillitoe’s novel, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner. (The novel, of course, has nothing to do with athletics, but is rather about political rebellion). Mine, without you, would be “the loneliness of the long distance traveller”. That is why I must take you through a metaphorical journey which has spanned more than four decades.

It is for this reason that I have decided to entitle my address, “The Quest”. I am asking you to walk with me, as together, we probe the nature of the “quest”, as I seek to discover my identity and the role I had in preparing myself for and practising my chosen vocation, the teaching of literature.

For this “quest”, I take my cue from four literary classics: first, Sophocles’ King Oedipus, whose ill-fated protagonist is in search of his true identity:

he has to find answers to two crucial questions – “Who am I?” And “What am I?” And after a period of denial, he finally unravels the mystery of his identity in tragic circumstances: he discovers that he is both a father- killer and mother-defiler, that he is the polluter of the city of Thebes.

Secondly, in John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, the novel relates the story of Christian, saddled with the ponderous burden of sin, searching for ultimate relief and salvation. The journey to the realisation of his important goal is bedevilled by all manner of perils and setbacks which are intended as a test of his faith.

Thirdly, Wole Soyinka’s The Road, recounting Professor’s strenuous, though futile effort to fathom the essence of death. The sense of a journey runs through the play, with the image of the “road” urging itself upon our minds as spectators. Professor finally discovers that he can only reach an understanding of death by actually experiencing it: but then he would have gone, in Shakespeare’s Hamlet’s words, to “that country from whose bourne no traveller returns.”

Finally, Gabriel Okara’s The Voice, written in Okara’s rather quaint English. Okara’s intention is to capture the Ijaw idiom, as he traces Okolo’s search for “it”, as he says, “with all his inside and with all his shadow”. “It” is not precisely defined, because Okolo himself is not quite clear in his mind what exactly it is that he is looking for. But vaguely “it” seems to be intrinsically subjective and arises from the “inside”, from his soul.

Two factors are common to these four texts: first, they all have running through them the “quest motif”, and secondly, all four protagonists find themselves, at one time or the other, in denial, before their “quests” are

fulfilled: they seek to repudiate the truth about themselves, vindicating Oscar Wilde's words, in his tortured "De Profundis":

*To deny one's own experiences, is to put a lie
into the lips of one's own mouth, it is no less
than a denial of the soul.*

["De Profundis" was Wilde's apologia written during his imprisonment for sodomy]

In much the same way as Oedipus, Christian, Professor and Okolo, I was faced, in my "search", with enormous challenges. But my particular "quest" knew no denial. It was, rather, the most stirring of my experiences which gave me a new knowledge of and outlook on life.

I am taking you on a "voyage" of discovery. My journey is divided into three phases: first, "The journey begun", secondly, "The mid-point", and, thirdly, "Journey's end".

I. “THE JOURNEY BEGUN”

Let us begin our “journey”:

This is the story of one boy, born and nurtured in the cosmopolitan ghetto of Sophiatown in Johannesburg. A boy who grew up in the veritable linguistic “babel” that was Sophiatown who, in addition to the three languages he had to learn at school – English, Afrikaans and the vernacular - had to cope with the township patois called “tsotsi-taal”, a curious mixture of all the languages spoken in Johannesburg, and in unrecognisably distorted form most of the time. “Tsotsi taal” distinguished the street-wise guy from the uninspired house-bound mummy’s boy. I am speaking of a lad who came from a home whose parents had never been to school, whose spoken English was known patronisingly as “kitchen English”. The purpose of “kitchen English” was to enable the black servant to communicate with his or her white master or mistress at the most basic level. Is it small wonder, therefore, that for the boy, learning English was an extraordinarily painful experience? He started learning the language at absolutely zero level.

One of the methods our teachers used to get us into the habit of speaking English was through the weekly “oral” sessions, which happened every Monday morning. We were required to report on our week-end experiences. It was a veritable Herculean task trying to articulate one’s limited experiences in severely halting English.

There were other hurdles at the beginning of my journey, as I took the first unsteady steps in the quest. It was, indeed, a bumpy road. I remember that we were regularly told that one of the ways in which we could learn English was to read as voraciously as possible. But the

school had no library. The only library (the Winifred Holtby Memorial Library), which was located at the adjacent Western Native Township, served Western, Sophiatown and New Clare, – an extremely vast geographical area. And we could only borrow one book at a time, and that, for only one week, due to the pressure of the demand. The chances of supplementing the “class readers” provided by the school were, therefore, severely constricted.

The situation was not different when I graduated to secondary school. The “journey” was still fraught with the same problems. Our school had reserved one poky little room to serve as a “library”, and to cater for a student population of nearly one thousand. The room was full of outdated, irrelevant magazines, hand-outs from some “liberal” white schools in Johannesburg. But there were no books. I do not recall seeing any fiction, drama or poetry in that apology for a library. For reading to buttress our prescribed texts, we had to make do with one small library which served the whole of Soweto. Once more, borrowing was restricted to only one thoroughly thumbed-through, dog-eared book at a time, for one week. But the difference was that the library was relatively adequately stocked in most areas of English Literature.

It was certainly during this period that I made my first contact with serious literature in a meaningful way. I was, for the first time, able to make contact with authors who subsequently shaped my attitude to English Literature: my first serious contact with Shakespeare, for instance, was through Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare, which laid the foundations for my abiding love affair with Shakespeare. I was, in this way, gently eased into the riches of Shakespearean drama, –long before I had the guts to venture into the plays themselves, and to struggle with Elizabethan English. This only started in the second Form,

with one of Shakespeare's "great" tragedies, Othello - irony of ironies, considering that this was the time in apartheid South Africa, when the law forbade inter-racial marriages.

I also had my first acquaintance with the novels of adventure such as Anthony Hope's The Prisoner of Zenda and Rupert of Hentzau; H.Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines, Allan Quartermain, She and Montezuma's Daughter; Baroness Orczy's The Scarlet Pimpernel; and of course, I had been introduced to Charles Dickens by a young uncle who had developed a strong passion for Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities. This uncle arranged dramatic evening readings from the novel for me. I became hooked, as they say. It was inevitable that, with this kind of encouragement and inspiration, I would find myself looking for other Dickens novels – Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Barnaby Rudge, Our Mutual Friend, Hard Times. These novels struck an immediate accord with one who had been born and brought up in Sophiatown which bore a bizarre resemblance to the nineteenth century London of Dickens' boys, and their infelicitous conditions of upbringing.

It was at this point, also, that I chanced upon the Arab world through the Arabian Nights – "The Thief of Baghdad", "Sinbad the sailor", "Alibaba and the Forty Thieves", "The Magic Carpet", "Aladdin". Let me admit, at once, that at this stage, I wasn't reading for meaning. The things I read made damn good stories. That was all that mattered. It was only much later, for instance, when I re-visited Rider Haggard and read him more critically, that I realised that some of his views on Africa were outrageous in the extreme. But then, I read avidly for enjoyment.

The emergence of Drum and Zonk magazines in the 1950s was yet another positive influence on the genesis and development of my

interest in literature. The two magazines, particularly Drum, published short stories, not only by black South Africans such as Can Themba, Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi and Arthur Maimane, but also from East and West Africa. For the first time, I became conscious that there were Africans writing in English, to whose works the education system did not accord us access.

It is significant that, even while Mphahlele, who was one of the English masters in our school, had as far back as 1949, published his first volume of short stories, Man Must Live, we were not encouraged to read his book. What is more, it was not easy buying the book from any of the main bookshops in the country. My recollection is that the book was available in only one left-wing bookshop, called "Vanguard," in Johannesburg. The situation was, of course, exacerbated by his falling foul of the government of the day for holding so-called subversive, anti-government views on education.

One other potent influence on my love of Literature was the comic book. I grew up in an environment which had a violent aversion to comic literature. The mission schools we attended, forbade us to read comics because they were regarded as the "devil's literature", which was unhealthy for the moral development of us young people. Possession of a comic book on the school premises led to severe disciplinary measures. But it was precisely because of this prohibition that our curiosity was aroused. We sought out and read comic literature clandestinely and ravenously. I accumulated quite a sizeable collection of comics, including Captain Marvel, Superman and Popeye. And my grandmother, who had never attended formal school, was an active accomplice in my calculated subversion of my school's injunctions by providing me with a generous allowance of sixpence a week. And I

must confess that, having “devoured” so many comic books, I had found no evidence of the demoralising influence of such literature.

In time I graduated from Superman and Captain Marvel, to classical comic literature, which had the double advantage of providing me with a good story and helping me in my attempt at improving my language skills. Therefore, in spite of my Headmaster’s reactionary views, the comics went a long way, not only towards fostering my passion for reading, but also in cultivating and refining my love of Literature. I was able to gain access to such things as A Tale of Two Cities, The Scarlet Pimpernel and the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in pictorial comic form, which greatly deepened my understanding of these classics.

II. THE MID-POINT

The mid-point in my literary evolution was virtually a “rite of passage”, the exit from secondary school. It was at this point that I had one of my most traumatic experiences which jolted me out of my self-complacency. When I was in Form V, there were three possible university entrance examinations open to us: i) the Joint Matriculation Board (J.M.B) of the University of South Africa; ii) the Transvaal Provincial School Leaving Certificate, and iii) the National School Leaving Certificate. My school had opted for the J.M.B., which had the reputation of being most exacting. But the advantage with it was that a pass guaranteed you admission to university, whereas the other two required a certificate of exemption from J.M.B. for admission to university, and J.M.B. was niggardly in granting such exemption.

Ours was reputedly the best graduating class the school had had in a long time, and great things were expected of us. Needless to say, we had developed airs to go with our reputation of high flyers. But you see, J.M.B. had a way of clipping people’s wings. We had foolishly forgotten that it was an examination that was geared to the needs of white South Africa. One of the main requirements to gain matriculation exemption, was that one should pass Paper I in English (the Essay and Comprehension), especially the essay. What could a Sophiatown-bred lad, growing up in the sprawling ghetto called Soweto, do with essay topics like “A Night at a Symphony Concert” or “Of Carpets and Curtains”? I did not know what a symphony was; the only music I knew then was “pennywhistle” music, “mbaqanga” and “township” jazz. The only concerts I had ever attended were choral music concerts in the township music halls. I knew nothing about Beethoven or Mozart or

Tchaikovsky. How then could I possibly write anything intelligible about a symphony concert?

As for “Of Carpets and Curtains”, the only carpets I knew of were those woven by my grand-mother from strips of old rags; while curtains were also ingenious improvisations from any materials that were available at any one time. How was I to know that carpets were supposed to match the curtains, and vice-versa?

The sum total of what I am saying is that all twenty-nine of us in our Form V class, failed the essay, failed English and failed J.M.B. of course. There was universal consternation in the school. We had been suitably humbled. This was a serious set-back for all of us, as we had toyed with the ambition of entering university. For me, embarked upon a voyage of discovering the essence of Literature, this was a challenging road-block in my way. But once set on my journey, I was not going to allow any obstacle to deter me. I drew inspiration from Bunyan’s hymn, quoted in The Pilgrim’s Progress, intended to boost Christian’s morale in moments of despair, especially the following lines:

*There’s no discouragement shall make him
once relent His first avowed intent to be a
pilgrim.*

I had to emulate Herodotus’ fabulous bird, the phoenix and rise from my ashes. I learned that when a big boy stumbled and fell, he picked himself up from the ground, dusted his pants and, chin up, moved on. My school demonstrated its faith in me by both paying for the re-examination of my English Paper 1 as well as facilitating supplementary examinations for all twenty-nine of us. I do not know whether someone

had talked sense into our examiners. Yes, while some of the essay topics were still esoteric, one of the topics was “A Bantu Wedding”, ostensibly meant for the benefit of the black candidates. I shunned this topic as I would the plague, because I saw in it a serious snare. It was obvious to me that the examiners would be looking for an informed account of a traditional African wedding, with all the details preceding such a wedding. What did I know about a traditional African wedding? All I knew were typical township weddings which were veritable hybrid affairs. I chose the less threatening and innocuous, Reforms I would introduce if I was Headmaster of my School”. A judicious choice, because I ended up with a double-redemption, success in both the re-examination and the supplementary. I learned from this experience that I should not take anything for granted in my “quest” after self-realisation. I learned that attaining what I set my mind on will not come easily, that I have to gear myself for unexpected reverses in the process of trying to reach my goals. This was the rude awakening which the J.M.B. English examination gave me.

III. JOURNEY'S END

The quest continued. Sooner or later, I had to learn that Literature was not only about enjoyment and entertainment, but was also about cultivating critical analytical skills. I learned the art of literary criticism. Might I note here that two of the great British men of letters, Dr Samuel Johnson and George Bernard Shaw, at different times, expressed negative views about literary critics: for Johnson they “murder to dissect”, while for Shaw they are “demolition experts”.

I suppose the student of Literature must, at some stage in his development, learn how to “murder” literature or be a “demolition expert”, in order to appreciate it:

That was what the final stage of my quest entailed.

This was the third and final leg of the “quest”. As I advanced, I got to learn that literature was not only about story-telling: in any case, it is not all literature that tells a story. What story, for instance, would you find in T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets? I realised, as I reached maturity, that Literature was, among other things, a profound exploration of human experience, that it probed human behaviour in a given set of social circumstances, and that it explored the motivation to human action.

I had to get over the childhood phase of what happens in a novel or short story or play or poem; I had to go beyond the bare plot, and ask myself crucial questions such as, “Why do certain things happen?” “What motivates a particular character to behave in a certain way? If, for instance, in Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov doesn't seem to be making much progress in his university studies, what is it that impedes his progress? What is it that accounts for Leo Tolstoy's'

Anna Karenina's shenanigans in the novel of that title? Why does Dickens' Oliver Twist find himself in the circumstances in which we see him in the novel? What is it that makes Achebe's Okonkwo find it so extremely difficult to adapt to the changing circumstances in his native Igboland? What is the motivation behind Philip Mokone's rape of a defenceless white woman in a lonely dark alley in Arthur Maimane's Hate No More? Or what accounts for Professor's behaviour in Wole Soyinka's The Road?

In the words of St Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians, 13:11:

*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I
thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.
When I became a man, I put childish ways
Behind me.*

As an undergraduate agonising over T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets (to which I referred earlier), and driven to near-despair by Eliot's extremely concentrated poem, I had to go to my English tutor (Gertrude Darroll, of blessed memory) to solicit her assistance; and having unravelled Eliot's profound philosophical wanderings, the grand old lady would say to me: "Don't worry, son, T.S. Eliot comes with age. The time will come when you'll enjoy his poetry".

Yes, indeed, when I was younger, my pursuit of Literature was for the excitement of the story. But when I became a "big boy", I got to know that there was more to Literature than just the story. I got to know that reading a novel, a story, a play or a poem, meant pitting my intellect against the challenges which Literature posed. Let me say that in the politically fraught atmosphere of apartheid South Africa, we were

constantly warned against what they called politicising literature. But how did one read Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness without referring to white South African attitudes to blacks? How did one read Othello without reference to the legislation against mixed marriages in apartheid South Africa? How was one expected to react to white South African police authorities who would confiscate Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice as subversive Literature? If interrogating Literature for its meaning, political or otherwise, meant politicising it, then we saw nothing wrong with doing exactly that. All that mattered was that we got to know that the study of Literature entailed emulating the gold miner, who had to dig deep down into the bowels of the earth, to retrieve the precious metal: in a similar manner, the student of Literature has to probe the depths of the texts with which he is faced for meaning. It is the effort that one puts into the task that makes the Literature valuable.

It is this kind of probing that gets one to ponder precisely what Literature really means, and what the writer's intention is. It is in the course of this quest that I came to grips with the nature of my vocation. And what was it? It was a variety of things, and meant different things to different people. What has Literature meant to me?

Let me begin with what I believe to be the role or function of the writer. In his address to the English Parliament in 1644, entitled, *Areopagitica* – a defence of freedom of expression – the 17th century poet, John Milton uttered these words:

“Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life” (p. 384)

This means that good literature is the legacy a writer leaves to posterity, which defies time and place. The writer is a man of sensibility and sensitivity; he quickly captures the atmosphere of the society in which he moves; he captures its flaws. The writer reveals a mind rich in the knowledge of his fellow-creatures, warts and all. He understands them and the motives that lie behind their actions. It is my grasp of what the writer does that stirs in me a new knowledge of and outlook on life. What the writer does is bring to us a wide store of knowledge about his world, he helps us to broaden our conception of the societies in which we move and have our being.

The authors we read speak directly to us, and we must listen. There are certain object lessons which we are expected to learn about our human frailties. But in order to do so, we should first accept the fact that as human beings, we are prone to wrong-doing, and must have the will to change. It is this that T. S. Eliot aptly catches in "East Coker" ("Four Quartets"):

*In order to arrive where you are, to get from where you
are not*

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not

And what you do not know is the only thing you know

And what you own is what you do not own

And where you are is where you are not.

The travel motif is evident here; the journey described here is a spiritual journey. This thought is conveyed in cleverly crafted language designed to bring out the kind of double meanings which only the meticulous reader can discern. It is only through coming to terms with the self and accepting our humanness and weaknesses, that, we can arrive at self-realisation. The resultant reconciliation with the self and with others prevents us from coming to inevitable grief, as evidenced in a number of literary examples.

One has come across characters, in works one has read, who have to wrestle with odious monsters within, as they invariably try to cope with the problem of human relationships, that is, the difficulty of co-existence with others.

A major cause of this internal conflict is our inability at times to take the right decisions. It is this kind of situation that Brutus in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, has in mind when he speaks the following words to Cassius, as he urges him to launch an immediate attack on the forces led by Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar against the conspirators, after the assassination of Caesar:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune:
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries. [IV, III, 217-20]*

Of course, Cassius the more practical-minded of the two, cautions against precipitate action, but is over-ruled by Brutus, who takes the wrong decision, which leads to defeat by Antony and Octavius.

The second example is Robert Frost's poem "The Road not Taken", [which I should like to quote in full]:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Frost is concerned here with the irreversibility of the choices we have to make.

Writing at two different historical periods, both Shakespeare and Frost suggest that, at a certain point in our lives, we are all faced with crucial choices. If we make the wrong choice or make no choice at all, then we condemn ourselves to inevitable destruction.

A brief look at a few examples would be instructive here. I should like to refer to some of the works of Shakespeare and Soyinka. First, we have Shakespeare's Hamlet. The protagonist has had his father murdered and his mother seduced by his unscrupulous uncle. He is faced with the task of avenging his father's death; but in addition to his own procrastinating, possibilities of his taking appropriate action are severely constricted by his dead father's ghost's injunctions about his not doing anything to hurt his mother, and not thinking evil in the process of revenge. Hamlet does not suffer from indecisiveness, (as some people would suggest) but rather, is just unable to make a decision as a result of his father's instructions. Therefore, rather than make a decisive choice regarding his cuckolded and murdered father, Hamlet temporises and inadvertently allows "the royal bed of Denmark (to) be/turned into a couch for luxury and damned incest," (I, V, 82-3), with tragic consequences for all of Denmark.

In Othello, you have an African general of the Venetian army, faced with the choice of remaining loyal to his beautiful young Italian wife, Desdemona, and yielding to the generally semi-credulous half-truths of the wily and scheming Iago who, in cahoots with the racist Brabantio, Desdemona's father and the love-lorn fool Roderigo, works relentlessly at destroying both Othello and his initially idyllic marriage. The two characteristics of Othello which Iago exploits to the full are his gullibility and uxorious nature. He makes the wrong choice in accepting Iago's

lies about Desdemona's alleged infidelity; a choice which has dire consequences.

Soyinka too is concerned with the business of choice in his works. In his play entitled Death and the King's Horseman, the protagonist, Elesin Oba, the horseman, succumbs to the bewitching allure of ephemeral, fleshly comforts. In the play, Soyinka portrays a society uneasily poised between traditional practices and Western influence. Elesin Oba has been chosen to perform the role of the "king's horseman", meaning that when the king dies, he must take his own life and precede the king, to pave the way for him to the land of the dead. Apart from his love of comfort and luxury, he allows himself to be confused by Simon Pilkings, the colonial district officer who, because of his abysmal incomprehension of the customs and traditions of the people among whom he works, completely misconstrues the Elesin's role, and has him incarcerated to protect him against himself. For choosing worldly things in preference over his traditional responsibilities, he renders himself vulnerable to the forces of destruction.

Finally, in The Road, Professor is engaged in a pointless pursuit of the meaning of death. In this regard, he becomes the instrument of road deaths, whose purpose he alone understands. But in truth, he is as corrupt as the layabouts who hang around him. His is a choice that is no choice at all. The "road" he takes leads nowhere in particular.

What we see in the texts just referred to, are the perils inherent in taking the wrong "road" or no "road" at all. It is this message, among others, which my preparation in this long "quest", enjoins me to convey to those who are my charges, as an educator. But there are enormous challenges with which I had to deal, as I sought to discharge my task as a literary "pilgrim", - challenges and obstacles similar to those with which

Oedipus, Christian, Soyinka's Professor and Okara's Okolo had to contend in their various "quests". But these are challenges and obstacles which only served to strengthen my resolve, in Archimedes' words, "to move the earth".

What were these challenges?

In my first year as a university teacher at Fort Hare, I came face to face with the extremely negative attitude of students who were sceptical about being taught English by a very young black man freshly graduated from university. The fact that I was the first black in apartheid South Africa to teach English at that level didn't help the situation. The students had been socialised to believe that only whites could teach them English. I had to live with snide remarks from students such as "Are you going to teach us African-English?" (whatever that meant). It really did not seem to matter to those students that, with the exception of one person, the rest of the members of the Department, including the Head, were non-native speakers of English – Afrikaners, in fact, who spoke English with a pronounced Afrikaans accent. No one ever asked them whether they were going to teach "Afrikaans-English". They were white, you see, and therefore more readily acceptable to the students than I was.

I had a similar experience at the University of Basutoland, Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland, in Lesotho where, once more, I was the first African in a thoroughly "English" Department, three years later. I inherited a particularly hostile first-year group, which had been the bane of a white lady lecturer, who had apparently been literally reduced to tears by the largely Social Sciences and Law students. She was relieved to be salvaged from an obviously untenable situation.

My first encounter with the “terrors” was a memorable experience. Two characters in particular, a chap called Nqosa and another, Malinga. I walked into near-pandemonium, and positioned myself at the lecturer’s podium. There was instant silence –an uneasy, eerie sort of silence, as the class took stock of the young black man who had the gall to go and stand where only a white person should stand. I think I muttered a neuresthenic “good morning”, to which Nqosa responded rather snootily;

“Are you here to attend a lecture or to give one?”

“To give one”, I obliged, resolved not to be intimidated.

My interlocutor derisively shook his head, turned to the rest of the class as if to say: “Listen to this fool”.

Then Malinga, who had arrogantly sauntered in during my exchange with Nqosa, superciliously asked: “Where’s the woman who’s supposed to teach us, has she run away?” Although I was under no obligation to respond to such insolence, I did: “Mrs.??? will no longer be teaching you. I’m taking over”. And he retorted: “Strange”. (I learned afterwards that he was the leader of the pack of hounds who had harassed my hapless predecessor).

I decided, at that moment, to pick up the gauntlet they had thrown at me, but not in the manner they had anticipated. For it was clear that they were baiting me. I resolved that I was going to teach Othello as I had never done before. I knew that I had to have them spell-bound from the moment I opened my mouth. I held forth on the subject of irrational prejudice against the Moor Othello, the “outsider” and “unknown”, finding himself in inimical circumstances in white Venice. I was obviously motivated by the class’s initial rather inhospitable reception of

me, the black “outsider” and “unknown” in their midst, presuming to teach them Shakespeare.

After my hour’s inspired peroration, I packed my papers and strode out to my office next-door. Hard on my heels was a mortified Nqosa, full of remorse, who apologised profusely for his and Malinga’s bizarre behaviour. I wish he had stopped there. No. He proceeded to compliment me, equally profusely – and condescendingly, I thought – on my mastery of Shakespeare and the English Language. I still blush, as I recount this.

These two anecdotes serve to indicate the innumerable hazards around which I had to negotiate my way, in pursuit of instilling in my charges, the love of Literature. Because of my youth, trying to elicit positive responses from students was an enormously challenging task. What, for instance, do you do with a student who has been your junior at high school, who suddenly finds himself/herself sitting in one of your classes as an under-graduate? I had one such student in my second-year Chaucer class at Fort Hare. In the middle of our consideration of the rather delicate relationship between Chaunticleer, the supercilious cock and Pertelote his timid wife, especially Chaunticleer’s patronising attitude to his wife, who did not know Latin, when he quotes “Mulier est hominis confusio”, which translates into “Woman is man’s confusion”; but which he translates, for Pertelote’s edification, as “Woman is man’s joy and all his bliss”. I asked this particular girl with whom I had grown up, and who had been my high school contemporary, to tell the class what she made of Chaunticleer’s attitude. Instead of addressing herself to the issue of Chaunticleer’s chauvinism, she petulantly said to me: “Ag, man John, ha keitse! In any case, this Middle English of yours makes no sense to me”. I knew then that, that was a challenge I had to

accept and confront head-on. I had a serious job of conversion on my hands.

In talking about students' reactions to me as a black man teaching English Literature, I touched on another kind of challenge I had to face. Today, at the University of Botswana one marvels at the reluctance or blunt refusal of some colleagues to teach courses which they have not studied at undergraduate level. As what Americans would call a rookie lecturer, both in South Africa and in Lesotho, I had to teach whatever it was that the Head of Department decided I should teach. There was no negotiation. Some of you may think that my views are weirdly antediluvian, but for me, this was the kind of initiation into the trade that I needed. Yes, it took blood, sweat and tears, but that was the mill through which I had to go as a novice, if I hoped to reach the "promised land". I could not pick and choose what I wanted to teach.

My second big challenge in Lesotho, after the hostile reception I had from Nqosa and Malinga, was to be assigned the teaching of African Literature. I have already indicated that up to the time of my first teaching assignment at Fort Hare, I had had no contact with African Literature. I had been steeped in English, European and some American literature, as an undergraduate, but no African writing. My first acquaintance with African Literature was when my senior colleague and former tutor at Fort Hare, presented me with a copy of Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests, with the following exhortation: "See what you can make of this. I've read the play over and over again, but I just don't follow what this man is saying". Her assumption was that since I was African, I would find Soyinka easy. That was my initiation into African writing. But I gladly accepted this teaching assignment, and read avidly,

until I came to regard African writers as my constant companions on my literary odyssey.

If the students were sceptical about an African's ability to teach them English, my colleagues, especially at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (the Botswana campus) particularly those who, like me, had come from the restrictive, apartheid-ridden environment in which everything black was played down and in which, as I have already pointed out, we were exposed only to European Literature, posed quite a different challenge. Inspired by the liberal atmosphere on the campus, which allowed for experimentation, colleagues in the department went to the other extreme by insisting on what they called the "decolonisation" of our literature courses. We ended up with a purely "African literature" syllabus, which was touted as "bold and innovative". It looked quite impressive at the time. But it was fraught with serious disadvantages in the long run, as we later discovered. We had become, unhappily, oblivious of the fact that we needed to send our staff development fellows to institutions abroad for post-graduate study. Inadvertently, we subjected our graduates to avoidable hardships in their M.A. and PhD. Studies, as the host universities assumed that they had had exposure to traditional English literature courses. We had to beat a hasty retreat and strike a healthy balance between traditional English and African literature courses.

We have recently heard similar noises about our syllabuses, by those who seem obsessed with change at all cost. Having once burnt one's fingers with a misguided experiment, one would be wary of fads masquerading as innovative, progressive thinking. What do Americans say? "If it ain't broke, don't try to mend it". I would be the first to agree that our courses must recognise the emergence of literatures other than

the traditional European, but a complete overhaul for the wrong, emotive reasons, is unacceptable and must be stubbornly resisted. It is the kind of temptation to which I would not, in my “search”, succumb, for it has disastrous consequences.

CONCLUSION

Our journey, you will recall, began in ancient Greece, with Sophocles' Oedipus' "search" for his "identity"; and continued with John Bunyan's Christian's "spiritual pilgrimage", through Wole Soyinka's Professor's mad exploration of the "essence of death", to Gabriel Okara's Okolo's "esoteric search for 'it'". Oedipus finally discovers "who" he is in tragic circumstances, after a long period of denial: he is the son of Laius, cursed from birth by Apollo as destined to kill his own father; he is the son of Jocasta, the widow of Laius, to whom he is given in marriage by the people of Thebes, in gratitude for saving them from the curse of the Sphinx. He vilifies Tereias, the blind Theban prophet when he initially tells him that he is the "polluter" of Thebes, and mocks his "blindness". Paradoxically, it is only when he himself is "blind", that he "sees", that he comes to terms with the fact that he is, indeed, the "filthy thing" that is responsible for fouling the moral atmosphere in Thebes. Redemption only comes when Oedipus comes to this "self-realisation", when he gets to "see" in his blindness. He might well have cried, with Shakespeare's Gloucester in King Lear, "I stumbled when I saw", as a declaration of his humble submission after his "hubristic" behaviour throughout the play.

Christian finally has his metaphorical burden of sin, lifted from off his back, after being subjected to a series of excruciating trials to test his faith, and to effect in him the appropriate spiritual cleansing and expiation. It is only after this, that he is deemed ready for redemption, for salvation.

What about Soyinka's Professor in The Road? Here is a man haunted by a painful fear of death and its inevitability, who seeks refuge in pointless linguistic bombast, when he talks to the uneducated layabouts

with whom he has surrounded himself, and who do not begin to comprehend his prolix pseudo-philosophical ramblings. He is ostensibly engaged in a “search” for the understanding of death, but is, in fact, behind the innumerable fatal road accidents, from which he “harvests” the spare parts from the vehicles whose wreck he has caused, to enrich himself – he runs a car parts shop described as the “Ak-sident Store”.

Professor’s “quest” is one full of many dangers. In following the “road” as it were, he is following Macbeth’s “road to dusty death”. He is portrayed as the personification of the worst aspects of a demoralised, sick society. His moral turpitude is significantly unrelieved by the grandiloquent speech he makes at the moment of his death. His “search”, in the end, turns out to be a study in futility.

Finally, the “search” of Gabriel Okara’s Okolo is conceived as a “spiritual exploration” into the consciousness of man. Okolo’s expedition is, at times, most harrowing, as he looks to find “it”. As his “journey” progresses, he becomes the “moral conscience” of his society. But he hits against a granite wall as the depravity that surrounds him is impervious to reason. To a world that is so deeply embedded in corruption, abstractions such as the “truth” which Okolo tries to preach are a forlorn, meaningless cry. In the end, the “it” that he finds, becomes a personal fulfilment which does not benefit others.

The four “journeys” just dealt with all end with a resolution – positive or negative. The “explorers” all reach their destinations.

What of my “journey”? I have referred to “Journey’s End” which should, like our four “frame-journeys”, culminate in “discovery” and/or “self-discovery”, be it “fulfilment” or ultimate “self-disgust”. The authors I

confronted throughout my protracted “search”, “spoke” to me directly, and I listened. But since literature is “life”, there is no way in which I could claim to have reached the end of my “pilgrimage”. The fascinating thing about literature is that it is, as it were, self-perpetuating and has a way of insisting on its “infinity”. And how does one impose finality on what is intrinsically infinite? I can, therefore, not define the exact parameters of the “quest” in which I am involved. I can only speak of the end of a particular phase of an on-going “journey”/ “search”. Even as there has been obvious progression, there is still a vast expanse of treasures and knowledge to unearth, which makes my “quest” a lifetime proposition.

Lord Tennyson encapsulates the real nature of my “quest” in his poem “Ulysses”, when he puts the following words into the mouth of Homer’s hero:

*Yet all experience is an arch where thro’
Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use!
As tho’ to breathe were life.*

Ulysses concludes his statement:

*And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought*

The “road” ahead of me is still long and challenging. As I head towards the horizon, it keeps receding, while beckoning to me with prospects of more treasures to be unearthed, new discoveries to be made: my “quest”, in other words, is unending. The task of the student of Literature and the teacher of Literature is timeless: the “search” is infinite, and the truth and beauty still to be discovered are eternally potential.

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