The assertions that the appraisal of African literature lacks theoretical rigour are not valid. The reading of literature cannot be theory-free. Every discourse written or spoken about literature is grounded in theory(ies). Steve Ogunpitan claims that “all forms of literary criticism, all kinds of reading of literature are informed by theory, whether or not the reader is conscious of it” (1999:101). The application of theories, X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia observe, enables the reader “to analyse imaginative literature more perceptively” (2007:1507). If the reading of literature cannot be divorced from theoretical rigour, then the appraisal of African literature cannot be an exception.

The reading of African literature has been enriched by the application of methods drawn from contemporary literary theories. The appraisal of African literature, borrowing the words of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989:155), “intersect in several ways” with contemporary literary theories such as postmodernism, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, ecocriticism and so on. Even though African literature is “utilitarian” (Tanure Ojaide, 1995:4), scholars and critics of African literature have attempted to apply intrinsic or text-base theories such as formalism, New-Criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism to the study of African literature for proper elucidation. Prominent is the effort of the African critic, Sunday Anozie, to apply the structuralist poetics to African literature. Amaechi Akwanya (2000:68) posits that “there are no theories which apply exclusively to African literature.” This implies that the study of African literature is placed on the pedestal of contemporary critical traditions. The “appropriation” of contemporary literary theories “offer perspectives which illuminate some critical issues addressed” by African literary texts, although African literary discourse “itself is constituted in texts prior to and independent of” these theories (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 155). Contemporary theories of literature are “viable for the discussion of African literature but they need constantly to be interrogated and rethought” (Akwanya, 68).

This paper makes a case for the practicability of African New Criticism, which is a sort of hybrid of the textual and the contextual as opposed to the Anglo-American New Criticism, which is extremely textual; it is a formalistic explication of text with focus on the intrinsic; however it strives to resist the temptation of ignoring the extrinsic since both are modes of signification of meaning. Attempts would be made to examine how New Critical theory is “interrogated” and “rethought” in African context. For the purpose of this study, two poems (see the appendix) selected from Remi Raji’s *Gather my Blood Rivers of Songs* (2009) would be engaged for critical analysis in order to justify the relevance of New Criticism in the explication of the multiple layers of meaning in African poetic discourse irrespective of the fact that the majority of African poets have always been considered free-versers.

The New Criticism is an Anglo-American literary tradition that emerges in the early twentieth century. It is, according to Gregory Castle (2007:122), an Anglo-American form of formalism.
The New Critics, just like the Russian formalists “pay close and careful attention to the language, form and structure of the literary texts while regarding individual texts as the principal object of critical investigation” (Ogunpitan, 127). New Criticism is a reaction to the traditional approaches to the study of literature, which subject a work of art to extrinsic details such as history, biography, socio-economic conditions, etc. The New Critics simply ignore the life outside the text. At first, it is associated with the “Fugitives”, an informal group that engages in the discussion of literature. This group published The Fugitive, a literary magazine, in Nashville from 1922 to 1925 (Wilfred Guerin, Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeanne Reesman & John Willingham, 1992:71). The New Critics, in the words of Kennedy and Gioia (1508), regard literature as a unique form of human knowledge that needs to be examined on its own terms. This brings the statement of Rene Wellek and Austin Warren to mind:

The natural and sensible starting-point for working literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves. After all, only the works themselves justify all our interest in the life of an author, in his social environment and the whole process of literature (1977:139).

This implies that literature maintains an “autonomous and autolectic” (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 77) existence; it is not a biographical, social, economic or historical document (Kennedy & Gioia,1508). Hence, the New Critics give credence to the textual details a work of art. New Criticism has “a thoroughly symbiotic relationship with literary modernism, finding its premises borne out in such works [of modernists] and using this as its model text for analysis. To put over simply, perhaps: this new critical movement was ‘modernist’ criticism” (Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson & Peter Brooker, 2005:17). New criticism is simply referred to as ‘modernist’ criticism because its direction and development is influenced by the great modernist critic and artist, T.S. Eliot, who carries the sensibilities of the British nineteenth century poet and critic, Matthew Arnold, and other proponents such as I. A. Richards, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, W. K. Wimsatt, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Monroe Beardsley, etc.

In the words of Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, New Criticism “establish[es] basic tenets for close reading of poetry” (17). Jeremy Hawthorn (2001:135) and Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman and Willingham (72) also acknowledge the New Critics’ fascination with poetry, especially lyrical forms because of their special stylistic features and form. They adopt the method of close reading, that is paying attention to a small section of poetry and “analyzing this in exhaustive detail” (Hawthorn, 135) in order to enhance “our understanding of the complexity and subtlety of great works. Criticism, to the New Critics, should emulate the precision of science… [and] articulate the special character of literary language” (Richards, 1926, cited in Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 17). Hence, New Criticism encourages:

attentive close reading of texts and, in its intellectual and historical abstraction, a kind of democratization of literary study in the classroom, in which nearly everyone was placed on an equal footing in the face of a ‘blind’ text (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 18).
By paying close attention to the text, New Criticism traces the relationship in the parts of the text. It examines how the text “achieves its ‘order’ and ‘harmony’, how it contains and resolves ‘irony’, ‘paradox’, ‘tension’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘ambiguity’; and it is concerned essentially with articulating… the formal quintessence” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 19) of the text itself. The New Critics also pay attention to the “external form,” that is the stanzaic and metrical pattern of a work of art because the unity and meaning of the work are embedded in these formal and rhetorical features (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 74; Castle, 122). The New Critics also engage in the treatment of aestheticism by focusing on “the effects of connotation and poetic imagery” in order to “show the contribution of each element to poetic form to a unified structure” (Jonathan Culler, 1997:122). This reveals the idea of “organic form,” which is important in New Criticism. Ransom (1938:347 cited in Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 76) also projects the idea of “local texture” and “logical structure.” The logical structure refers to “the argument or the concept within the work; local texture comprises the particular details and devices of the work (for example, specific metaphors, and images and symbols)” (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 76. Emphasis is added).

However, approaching a literary work in such a dualistic perspective has the danger of leading to what Brooks (1947) calls “heresy of paraphrase”, which is “the reduction of logical structure to precise or summary” (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 76). This is because a work of art is an organic thing and like a well-wrought urn (a phrase adapted from John Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn”) contains within itself “a unity of rhetorical effects...is entirely self-contained and irreducible to any meaning not located in the poem’s structure” (Castle, 124). The principle of unity implies that the connotations, meanings and attitudes in a work should be balanced and harmonized in order to create a total effect (Castle 124; Guerin et al., 76).

Elements in the text reflect opposition and conflict. The integral unity of a work of art, which is achieved through the resolution of opposites, often in paradox and irony, is what is termed “tension” in New Criticism (Robert Di Yanni, 2000: 381; Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 82). Besides the New Critics “expose two fundamental errors in contemporary theory: the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy” (Castle, 127). Since criticism must maintain the objectivity of science, Wimsatt and Beardsley warn against intentional fallacy, in which the meaning of the work is reduced to intention of the author and affective fallacy, which is committed by judging a work based on the emotional effect or impression it has on the reader. The notion of intentional fallacy coincide with the post-structuralists’ notion of the “death of the author” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 21; Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman & Willingham, 78-79).

Moreover, the New Critics hold the notion that “the greatest literary works are “universal,” there wholeness and aesthetic harmony transcending the specific particularities they describe” (Di Yanni, 381). Donald Hall puts it thus:

A key belief underlying New Critical analysis (one that remains a powerful, and often unquestioned, assumption of many readers and critics today) is that literature expresses “universal” meanings beyond its own time period and cultural context. The New Critics asserted that the sole task of the critic is to explore precisely how, through language
and form, those meanings are expressed and powerfully impressed upon readers (2001:14).

This notion, with its Arnoldian and Eliotian undertone, influences Leavis is his moral formalistic approach to criticism. He incorporates what Selden, Widdowson and Brooker call “moral fervor” (25) in his New Critical approach since “his close address to the text is only ever to establish the vitality of its ‘felt life’, its closeness to ‘experience’, to prove its moral force, and to demonstrate (by close scrutiny) its excellence” (24-25). His emphasis on cultural values directs his discrimination between the “great work” and “the dross” like ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ literature. This practice is influenced by his belief that the ‘great works’ should be taught in institution of learning “as part of the process of cultural filtering, refining and revitalizing which such courses undertake on behalf of the nation’s cultural health” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 25).

This Leavisite approach to New Criticism has appeared relevant to the context of African literature because of its moral utility, which distinguishes it “from the more abstract or aesthetic formalism of the New Critics, so too does [its] emphatically sociological and historical sense. Literature is a weapon in the battle of cultural politics” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 25). The “ethico-sociological cultural politics” of Leavisite criticism is embrace by the critics of African literature. African literature, Chinua Achebe avers, is an “applied art as distinct from pure” (1989:45). In the Leavisite spirit, Olakunle George (2007:450) proclaims that “literary texts encode, or can be made so to do, the reality of cultures or peoples.” George announces: “I bring up the old story of Leavisite criticism and new-critical “objectivity” because the criticism of African literature… owes much to both” (451). In a bid to interrogate and rethink the New Critical emphasis on aestheticism, George posits that “this aestheticism is then appropriated, not simply as a means to the refinement and acculturation of the reader, but rather as a strategic tool for socio-cultural and political cause” (George, 452). African New Critics also hold the notion like Leavis, that ‘great’ African art captures the spirit of African milieu and therefore disseminate African cultural value. This implies that African New Criticism has been able to manage the inherent contradiction in New Criticism by blending ‘tradition’ with aestheticism. Commenting on Leavisite criticism in the study of African literature, Abiola Irele declares that even though it is:

really not ‘sociological’ in any methodological or technical sense, [it] implies a strong awareness of the social implications of literature…[Leavisite criticism] is based on a strongly articulated social theory – of an elite in touch through the best literature with a vital current of feeling and of values, and having responsibility for maintaining, in the practice of criticism, health of the society… it is a position which has the eminent merit of making us take literature seriously enough to commit one’s total intelligence to making explicit what in it takes the forms of nuance and symbol, in other words, of applying its insights to the actual business of living (1981:23).

Irele’s view suggests that New Criticism in African context permits the intellectual explication intrinsic details of literary text - paradox, ambiguity, irony, metaphor, image and symbols - and also the humanistic or utilitarian tendencies inherent in ‘great’ African art.
Chidi Maduka (1988), in the same vein, tries to reconcile the assumptions of New Criticism with the political impetus of African literary criticism. Maduka rejects three assumptions he associates with the New Criticism; (i) the idea of “self-containment” in the literary text, (ii) the tendency to “turn literature into a discipline of extreme specialization for competent readers” and (iii) the claim of “uniqueness” in true works of art. But he maintains that the New Critical rubric “can help in sharpening the critic’s sensitivity to the mechanics of language (and structure).” “Consequently,” he concludes, “if modified to recognize the importance of seeing forms as an instrument of revealing meaning, it [New Criticism] can contribute to the current search for the essence of African aesthetics” (198-199 qtd in George, 453).

Maduka’s contribution shows that African New Criticism appropriates the critical tool of textual explication of New Criticism but rejects its notion of autonomous status of art. This informs the unusual marriage between form and meaning in African aesthetic code. In his quest to confirm the application of New Criticism to African literature, George (453) remarks that African New Critics “simply did for African Literature what Leavis sought to do for English Literature…[they] bring their Leavisite/New-critical inheritance down to earth by concretely (that is, in their use of it) deconstructing its self-reification.” Therefore, African New Critics, he concludes:

took key new-critical categories (e.g. value as an intrinsic quality that gives great art its greatness, and value as an ethnical/cultural category that art encodes, and that the critic’s objective labor recovers and disseminates), with some unease at its high-cultural learning’s, but with a basic adoption of its substantive premises.

At this juncture, let us shift our critical focus to the practical analysis of the selected poems in Remi Raji’s *Gather My Blood Rivers of Song* using the tool of African New Criticism. In the prologue poem, titled “I am the million selves…” (17; see the appendix), metaphor runs through from the beginning to the end. The poet persona metaphorically refers to him/herself as the “million selves.” The first personal pronoun “I,” which serves as the tenor of the metaphor is compared with such vehicles as “the cactus tree,” “the meaning of your survival,” “the rough sweet tongue of the city scoundrel,” “the desires of the hungry fly and the owner of sores,” “the piecemeal of deaths,” and “the competence and hypocrisy of guile.” These vehicles are imagic manifestations of the “million selves” of the poet persona.

The poem opens: “I am the million selves speaking silently to the strange winds / my country of urgent memoirs,…” The persona reveals his/her preoccupation in this couplet to recount the memory of “the strange winds,” that is the harsh realities of his or her country. There is a tone of urgency in the persona’s quest to reveal the “memoirs.” This informs the use of ellipsis at the end of the first stanza; it suggests that the persona has skipped so many other issues in order to pay close attention to the urgent issues in his/her country. This reveals that the voice of the persona is a committed one.

It is observed that the persona’s million selves are represented all through the poem with the image of cosmic elements such as cactus tree, hurricane, snake, “the drowning man, “the
swelting air,” “the rapid rain,” “the sizzling sun,” etc. This implies that the persona is a metaphor of the spirit or essence of his/her country.

The use of the deixis of person “I,” which means many things in the poem contribute to its ambiguity. “I” which is “the sudden breath of the hurricane,” that connotes violence, is also “the meaning of your survival.” This is paradoxical. It is also paradoxical that “the drowning man” uses “the Snake” as a “redemptive rope.” The tension here is that life in the country of the persona (Nigeria) is a mixture of violence and survival, pain and joy. It is ironic that “I am the desires of the hungry fly and the owner of sores / civil cannibals both, they will eat each other before a quarrel.” The use of contrast or oxymoron - “civil cannibals” - is significant. The contradiction in these lines is a reflection of the dialectical nature of the persona’s country. Of course, the “hungry fly” and “the owner of sores” will always engage in struggle. Here is a reflection of the class struggle between the upper class and the lower class in postcolonial Nigeria.

In a nutshell, the poem is a sweeping satire that leaves an institution untouched - the religious, political, social institutions. Perhaps, this informs the poet’s repetition of the sibilant /s/ in order to achieve “violent syllables” and “Sorrow’s symphony.” All these institutions contribute to “the bruise and blood from this stone of a country.” The sharp metaphor of the tension is also significant. The country, which the persona loves to death, is compare to a stone. This connotes the harsh realities the stunt the growth and development of the persona’s country. The external form of the poem is characterized by series of repetitions. Notable is the repetition of the word “death,” which reinforces “the bruise and the blood from this stone of a country.” The use of couplet all through the stanzas, except for line 3 that appears in triplet, also reflect the oppositional nature of that stone country, where violence is a “daily meal.”

“Not a word” (see the appendix), another poem in the collection, continues the violent structure of the prologue poem. The poem opens:

    perhaps we are all prisoners of the times,  
    triumphant fools without redemption.  
    jamming the way to hell;  
    talk to me  
    not about  
    the peace

The poet here uses the deixis of person “we,” which gives the prisoner’s experience a sense of generality/universality. The poem’s structure is tight because of the dense use of metaphor. The tenor “we” is compared with the vehicle “prisoners of the times.” If “prisoners” connote “sufferers” and “the times” connote “history,” then the metaphor connotes that “we” have all suffered a lot from historical circumstances. But the use of “perhaps” as the first word in the first line gives the metaphor a sense of uncertainty – maybe it is not all of “us,” who have suffered from historical conditions; perhaps some have not really suffered. Perhaps those are the people, who inhabit the upper stratum because the poet persona informs us that there is “the hands of inequity, / and inequality” in his country. This informs the persona’s loss of faith in “peace” because it “will soon expire.” Of course, peace is very fragile; it cannot exist, where “the hands of
iniquity, / and inequality” operate. It implies that the stratified nature of the society into the upper class, who are spared from suffering, and the lower class, who are the sufferers, will always lead to class struggle. It should be noted that the abstract noun “peace” is likened to a product that can expire. What this connotes is that peace is determined by the material condition of the society.

The image of the sufferers is further processed in lines 2 and 3; they are “triumphant fools without redemption / jamming the way to hell.” “Hell” is a place of eternal suffering and it is the end of the journey of those who are not redeemed. This religious imagery bears a journey motif, which corroborates the historical sense of the poem. The masses are “triumphant fools.” This metaphor is burdened with contradictions or oxymoron. It is a paradox that fools are triumphant. This is ambiguous. The tension of the poem surfaces in the last stanza: “These again are starving days, / death returned to our familiar places, but not a word.” These lines connote that even though the masses are starving to death, they could not raise their tongues against oppression. The last line of the couplet, which is imbued with the image of “Death” that is returning “to our familiar places” as if from a journey, brings Wole Soyinka’s popular maxim to mind: “The man died in him that is silent in the face of tyranny.” As expressed in the poem, that masses are silent sufferers and their silence in the face of oppression brings them death.

The poet persona reveals the level of the masses suffering thus: “I hear the cry too, of men and women / through the years, and of children lost / or drowned in their own bleats…” The masses are cast into the metaphor of a goat that only bleats in the face of oppression. They only rumble without revolting; that is why we could only hear their bleats. In fact, “they are drowned in their own bleats…” This statement is hyperbolic though it is significant. The use of ellipsis at the end of that line implies that the masses have left what they should do “in the fog of injustice” undone – revolt - but their complaints only continue. This accounts for the reason they are seen, in their contradictory nature, as “triumphant fools.”

It is ironic when the persona says in the second stanza (which appears in quatrain) that:

But not a word shall fall from my lips.
Scarred as the roads, gutted by the harmattan winds
And when bruised by the memory of tears
Bile takes over the sense of salt, and dust.

The persona means exactly the opposite of what s/he has said. Of course, the persona is irritated and embittered by the masses’ inaction. The memory of the suffering of the masses has always been an ache in the persona’s heart; s/he is always “bruised” but s/he maintains that s/he will not speak against oppression after s/he has already rendered the rhetorics that could push the masses into revolution against the “baldhead buffaloes” (the bourgeoisie), who game with their humanity. The shift in perspective from “we” to “I” is significant. At first, the persona maintains an “affective distance” and speaks as a commentator about the experiences of his/her people in the whims of injustice. The persona states:

don’t tell me
about your circus
of baldhead buffaloes…
don’t preach to me about
unity in the fog of injustice
It implies that the persona refuses to be deceived, though the “triumphant fools” are, by the ideology put up by the “baldhead buffaloes” to make the masses think their state of being is normal and natural. The use of the word “preach” suggests a form of brainwashing; this ideological mechanism oppresses the oppressed the more and empowers the oppressor the more. The refutation is intensified by the repetition of the word “don’t.” However, in the last stanza the shift in perspective to “our” re-identifies the persona with his/her class -- the masses.

This paper has been able to examine the nomenclature of New Criticism in the context of African literature. The Afrocentric New Critical explication of the textual details of the poem reveals the stifling state of the Nigerian postcolony, which informs the Marxist/revolutionary aesthetics of the poem. Remi Raji is a Nigerian poet, who teaches Literature at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His experience in his society bears on the direction of his art; his art is engaged for socio-political causes in order to maintain the health of his society. It is crystal clear that the practice of African New Criticism deviates from that of the Anglo-American New Criticism. African New Criticism, like the Anglo-American New Criticism, applies the textual strategies of close reading for the purpose of exhuming the ‘sense’ in the text’s intrinsic details, but it deviates from the Anglo-American New Criticism in the sense that it does not totally ignore the context that informs the creation of the text. The reason is that African literature does not subscribe to the notion of Art-for-Art-Sake, which is dominant in Western literature. African literature is founded on the ethos of Art-for-Society-Sake; hence there is a strong bond between African text and context. The nature of African literature no doubt influences the nature of its theorizing and criticism.

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