Rethinking Literature: My Personal Essays on a Troubled Discipline.
Henry Indangasi.

Henry Indangasi’s *Rethinking Literature: My Personal Essays on a Troubled Discipline* (2018) underscores his penchant for intellectual controversies, marking him as a resolute gadfly in East Africa’s literary scholarship. Domiciled in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi from the 1970s, a department renowned for postcolonial activism, Indangasi’s stance against postcolonial thought is troubling. The 1970s decolonal luminaries at the department, Henry Owuor Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o championed for the delinking of the study of literature from the nationalist history of England, as was the case in the largely white professoriate department in 1968. By advocating for the centring of African letters and thought in the curricular, the troika was charting a different way of visualising the world—from the perspectives of the minoritised people. This was a departure from the dominant perspective entrenched through literary and cultural productions of the Global North. But in *Rethinking Literature*, Indangasi provocatively challenges his readers to think beyond the postcolonial box that has gained traction among African literary scholars.

Unlike Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and other scholars who revise their lectures before publishing them as books, Indangasi did not incorporate the conversations his essays stimulated when they first appeared in Kenyan dailies, an exercise that would have exploited hindsight and further enriched the essays. The essay that stood out for me in the book is “Fifty Years of Reading Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Weep Not, Child” (16–26). In this essay, Indangasi narrates his experiences in Kenya in relation to the ideas he was exposed to. He argues that creation myths “are not innocent, harmless compositions. They sanctify the mistaken view that we are exceptional; they buttress our ethnic jingoism” (26). Readings of Ngũgĩ usually take for granted the use of Gikuyu myths of creation and Mau Mau oaths in his works. Yet, there are Kenyans who have witnessed deadly consequences of the myths: “people were made to actualize a fabricated creation myth to the detriment of their fellow human beings” (24) in 1969 when Mau Mau War methods were employed to ensure political power is restricted to the ‘chosen’ community, the Gikuyu. It is on this account that Indangasi’s contention against nationalist literatures is unleashed: “And yet I believe, and I will go to my grave believing, that as an institution literature affirms our humane values; literature speaks to our common humanity” (26).

There is no doubt that Indangasi’s *Rethinking Literature* carves, with regards to the idea of writing differently, an alternative way of writing where scholars humanise research by producing knowledge imaginatively, inspirationally, and emotionally. This style, which resonates through the sharing of everyday experiences, shatters the normalised domains of objective, restrictive, impersonal academic writing. Here, Indangasi explores the self; immerses himself in memories as he uniquely makes research personal. He refers to his approach as public writing. He is present on the pages—the same unpretentious, controversial Indangasi. Instead of heavily relying on what other scholars have written on Achebe, for instance, to augment his writing, he centralises his personal experiences with Achebe. Even when it comes to his idol William Shakespeare, Indangasi treats readers to his journey to Shakespeare’s hometown, Shakespeare’s wife’s cottage, Shakespeare’s grave—what most postcolonial enthusiasts can interpret as the nostalgic hallmarks of colonial tutelage.

Indeed, *Rethinking Literature* underscores Indangasi’s reverence for William Shakespeare who, it appears, epitomises the profundity of thought as well as the aesthetics of literature. For instance, in his polemical essay (“Saturday Nation on 2 Dec 2017”), Indangasi asserts that to postmodernists and postcolonialists, “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* can be bracketed together with some cheap script at the Kenya National Drama Festival” (n. p.). Also, in reflections on his schooling at Friends School Kamusinga in the mid-1960s, Indangasi remarks that Shakespeare was taught by Quakers missionaries in “more or less the same way they talked about Jesus—that he had come to save us all” (57–8); that he was a “writer who belonged to all humanity” (57). This would appear a critique of colonial knowledge impartation to the African child, except that In-
Hopes and Impediments

at University of Nairobi’s Taifa Hall in
lucidly demonstrating
English, fluently and effortlessly. In a country where
glorifies English: “Waigwa Wachira spoke idiomatic
Wachira, Indangasi courts trouble as he unnecessarily
cement complicity to oppressive powers of the world.
not be entertained at the expense of ideologies that
oppressed. Thus, Shakespeare’s artistic prowess would
and subversive nature of the arts produced by/for the
postcolonial state’s anxieties against the decolonial
Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams
of the African child raises fundamental issues that
Shakespeare occupies the central place in the education
were being incarcerated. Thus, Britain’s insistence that
condemning neocolonialism in East Africa and West
will always fail? Notably, African writers who were
with ideas that impostors to power, fake nobilities,
celebrated playwright’s return. Why are dictators safe
curriculum, rather, he rejoices at the prospects of the
colonial forces are bent on having Shakespeare in the
curriculum” (61). Indangasi doesn’t question why neo-
that the British playwright be brought back into our
Shakespeare: “Moi talks about it publicly and decrees
the power of his offering” (29).

Above all, a Marxist reading of Shakespeare
reveals his unreserved complicity to and advocacy
for monarchical rule. In King Lear, for instance, Edmund is depicted as an impostor to nobility and
is eventually supplanted by ‘true nobles’. Indangasi
recalls that when postcolonial literary gurus had
expelled Shakespeare from Kenyan schools, the
British Foreign Minister urged President Daniel
Moi (Kenya’s president from 1978 to 2002) to recall
Shakespeare: “Moi talks about it publicly and decrees
that the British playwright be brought back into our
curriculum” (61). Indangasi doesn’t question why neo-
colonial forces are bent on having Shakespeare in the
curriculum, rather, he rejoices at the prospects of the
celebrated playwright’s return. Why are dictators safe
with ideas that impostors to power, fake nobilities,
will always fail? Notably, African writers who were
condemning neocolonialism in East Africa and West
Africa and imperial oppression in Southern Africa
were being incarcerated. Thus, Britain’s insistence that
Shakespeare occupies the central place in the education
of the African child raises fundamental issues that
writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have highlighted in
Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams, lucidly demonstrating the postcolonial state’s anxieties against the decolonial
and subservive nature of the arts produced by/for the
oppressed. Thus, Shakespeare’s artistic prowess would
not be entertained at the expense of ideologies that
cement complicity to oppressive powers of the world.

The Queen’s language also played a significant
role in colonialism. In a tribute to dramatist Waigwa
Wachira, Indangasi courts trouble as he unnecessarily glorifies English: “Waigwa Wachira spoke idiomatic
English, fluently and effortlessly. In a country where
had pronouncements have proliferated, our late friend
and colleague was in a class of his own” (64). In an essay on Chinua Achebe, Indangasi expresses similar
views when he recalls Achebe reading from Anthills
of the Savannah at University of Nairobi’s Taifa Hall in
1988: “With a somewhat noticeable Nigerian accent,
he wasn’t a particularly good reader” (4). Indangasi's views here lack depth as they are enslaved to mimicry.
Postcolonial thought contests colonial powers’
hierarchisation and control over language, which is
part of the endeavour to monopolise ‘truth’, ‘order’
and ‘reality’. Indangasi must be familiar with Achebe’s
politics on the English language; assertions that an
African writer who uses English should use it in a way
that carries “his peculiar experience” (“English and the
African Writer” 29). Achebe contends: A lesser writer
is “like a man offering a small, nondescript routine
sacrifice for which a chick or less will do. A serious
writer must look for an animal whose blood can match
the power of his offering” (29).

The literati were marking the first anniversary
since Achebe’s death when Indangasi (8) made the
claim: “Achebe wasn’t great, but he was the finest
writer in Anglophone Africa”. Structurally, Indangasi’s
claim resonates with Bernth Lindfors’s (65): Soyinka
“may be Africa’s greatest playwright but one suspects
he could be even greater if he were more nakedly
African.” It is very tempting to see Lindfors as an
exemplar of what Wole Soyinka (27) calls the “neo-
Tarzanist” critics hunting for exotic Africa. Yet, while
Lindfors provides detailed readings of Soyinka’s
oeuvre to the point that he almost convinces readers
that Soyinka’s drama is unnecessarily complex and
un-African, Indangasi judges Achebe’s ‘greatness’
in terms of minor encounters, including Achebe’s
disgruntlement about Soyinka being awarded the 1986
Nobel Prize in Literature. After all, the desire to outdo
peers is human. Also, Indangasi’s claim that Achebe’s
There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra is a “poorly
written book” engaging with a “historically tired
theme of Biafran secessionism” (7–8) is lamely pegged
on Indangasi’s wish that Achebe should have written
on disability following the writer’s car accident in
1989. But Achebe (Hopes and Impediments 42) was no
stranger to such criticism, he reveals he usually made
vague noises “whenever a wise critic comes along to
tell me I should have written a different book to the
one I wrote”. While the ‘Great Tradition’ is Indangasi’s
yardstick for measuring postcolonial literatures, seeing
his insinuations that Achebe can match neither Leo
Tolstoy’s nor Joseph Conrad’s literary prowess, Simon
Gikandi (6) writes that Achebe “invented African
literature as an institutional practice” through the
monumentality of his works—the publication of Things
Fall Apart represents “the inaugural moment of African
literary history.”

Through Rethinking Literature, Indangasi (60)
aspires to salvage literature from what he refers to as
‘literary nationalists’ who have, over time, reduced texts
into mere political missiles. The literary nationalists
are no different to the ones Soyinka (28) flags: “And the
issue is that something is being promoted for which
literature, like any other available commodity, provides
mere fodder.” While this is a problem that plagues
African literary scholarship, literary works speak to
myriads of human situations. It is my contestation that
Indangasi’s book reveals his refusal to see the power of
postcolonial thought and the promiscuous nature of
literature as a discipline that is impossible to restrict
to disciplinary closets where form reigns supreme. The
current generation of literary scholars are stretching
the boundaries of literature to speak to emergent global
issues. Therefore, Indangasi’s lamentations that the
institution of literature in East Africa is troubled largely
reveal his discomfort with (Marxist) postcolonialism.

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Wafula Yenjela
dwafula16@gmail.com
South Eastern Kenya University
Kitui, Kenya
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8586-9212

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v58i1.9531