This is the pre-publication submitted version of the following piece: Review of M.S.C. Okolo. African Literature as Political Philosophy. *African Affairs* (2010), 109(436), 503-505.

African Literature as Political Philosophy, by M.S.C. Okolo. Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA Books; and London & New York: Zed Books, 2007. vii + 164pp. ISBN 978-2-86978-204-4 (CODRESRIA) and 978-1-84277-985-1 (Zed Books) (paperback).

The last two decades have seen a burgeoning of interest in developing distinctively African perspectives in philosophy, as evidenced by edited collections on postcolonial African philosophy and African political thought, and given impetus by populist interventions such as Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance initiative. While the academic literature on the renewal of African philosophy often draws on and reconstructs a canon of decidedly literary flavour for its inspiration, building on a tradition that goes back to the Negritude movement and passes through Senghor, Fanon and Césaire, there is nonetheless an important insight in M. S. C. Okolo's starting point in *African Literature as Political Philosophy* that the attempt to develop an African orientation in philosophy has often neglected the resources offered by modern canons of African literature. Her book seeks to redress this neglect by providing a close reading of two of the most well-known writers of this literary canon, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe and Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Achebe and Ngugi are, of course, hardly neglected writers, being the focus of extensive secondary commentaries in literary studies, and foundational figures in contemporary African literature curricula. Okolo's aim is, however, to make the case for them as political thinkers. The book's structure displays its origins as a PhD thesis in its stylistic and organisational structure. The first substantive chapter lays out a theoretical framework in which various criteria as to what counts as political philosophy are identified – dealing with universal themes, clarifying arguments, formulating a worldview. Plato, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and other central figures of the Western philosophical tradition of political reflection are all referenced to support this framework. The next chapter then sets out to establish that both Achebe and Ngugi 'qualify', as the author puts it, to be considered as political thinkers in this philosophical vein. This way of proceeding has the perhaps unfortunate effect of setting up a single model of what is properly considered political philosophy, one which does not depart from or critically challenge the conventions of the Western tradition, as the universal standard against which non-Western writers will be judged. So, while Achebe and Ngugi pass the test and 'qualify', something important is lost in the analysis of their writings as a result. This something is the very 'literariness' of their writings. In complimentary chapters, Okolo compares and contrasts the political content of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* as representing the former's 'reformist' political perspective and the latter's 'revolutionary' viewpoint respectively. And in two concluding chapters, these two viewpoints are then subjected to critical evaluation with reference to how well they address the grubby, fallen realities of contemporary African politics and geopolitics. Along the way, the question of what difference it makes to our view of what political

philosophy is good for that, as political thinkers, Achebe and Ngugi tell stories, write poems, invent characters on the page and on the stage, remains unasked.

Okolo's chosen approach is not without its own insights, but it does tend to lead to the assumption that novels are best read as if they were political treatises, philosophical tracts, or manifestoes, rather than as *novels*. The reduction of the imaginatively literary to the coldly political in the evaluation of African literature is a recurrent feature of the reception of histories of African and black writing over two centuries or more, critically analysed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. amongst others. It is a manoeuvre that imposes a distinctive and ambivalent 'burden of representation' through which African literary writing has been circulated and institutionalised by being reduced to political allegory. The point of this observation is not to suggest their might be a pure 'aesthetic' content set apart from a more worldly political meaning to these sorts of novels. It is, rather, to suggest that Okolo's approach, while effective in elaborating some of the more apparently 'big-P political' resonances of these texts, ends up neglecting the more elusive political implications of literary form and genre that literary scholars focus upon in their critical analyses of African literature. The obvious example in this case is Ngugi's well-known decision to stop using English as his chosen language of literary composition and develop from scratch a literary vocabulary in Kikuyu, a decision noted in passing by Okolo but given no sustained consideration as an important dimension of the political resonance of his work. Ngugi's perspective on the language question is just the most dramatic example of how the central questions of post-colonial African literary writing and criticism – questions of orality, literacy, and genre for example – bear on political questions because they are highly attuned to the problematic quality of finding audiences and forming publics for African cultural products. While not adequately acknowledging the treatment of these key issues in literary theory and postcolonial cultural criticism, Okolo's treatment of these two central figures in the canon of postcolonial literary writing in English is important and timely for elaborating the relationship that her book hypothesises between literary expression and political ideology.

The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK **CLIVE BARNETT**