

Periods in African Literature: A Survey of Evolution

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Abstract

African literature is characterized by different historical events which have ended up creating a kind of seams on its polity, thus leading to its categorization by periods, factors and times. The features of each period are uniform and peculiar which are reflected in the theme and style of the writers. This paper aims at defining different periods in African literature and the factors that influence the writers of each period. This is achieved by looking at various events in history and studying the works of different authors including articles. Among other things, the paper reaffirms that there are three distinct periods in African literature: the colonial, the post-colonial, the contemporary time and that each of them is based on the realities of its time.

Keywords: African literature, historical events, writers, realities

Introduction

One thing unique to African literature is the fact that it is sustained by the empirical relationship of cause and effect. What this means is that a careful study of African literature shows that its origins are always tied to historical events that characterize the African race. Unfortunately, these events in question follow a particular pattern of occurrence that constitutes the bedrock of African writing, possessing at large negative values and attributes. In other words, the factors that led to the debut of African literature are Africa's sufferings and humiliation in the hand of other races, especially the mighty Europe. Given this scenario, literature becomes a vital instrument and weapon of war in the hand of the African elite trained by the colonial masters. It becomes as a result, the machinery of combat as Africans react to the ugly consequences of racial relations such as slavery and colonization. Hence, African literature is fond of complaining and begrudging the ills done to the race by seemingly superior Western powers and so it becomes in the process a literature of tears. Njoku and Eke (22) paraphrases Charles Nnolim's description of this type of literature:

It is quite intriguing how Charles Nnolim, one of the foremost African

literary critics of the twentieth century, came about his famous phrase of African literature being a lachrymal literature. In an attempt to describe the foundational experiences of African literature in *Issues in African Literature*, he writes as follows: "From its beginnings written African literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century, from Phyllis Wheatley and Gustav Vassa, down to Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, was an unhappy one.

At inception, African literature was a quarrelsome literature, complaining against Africa's predicament, maltreatments and subjugation by other races and climes. It has also moved from one stage to another devoting its theme to the challenges facing the continent and its peoples as well as indicating the causes of its retarded development and evolution into an advanced world. Chinweizu et al defines African literature in the following manner:

Works done for African audiences, by Africans and in African languages, whether these works are oral or written, constitute the historically

indisputable core of African literature (quoted in Nnolim's *Issues In African Literature*, p.11).

This definition is contextual in the sense that the group we call troika, is more interested in removing Europe and its influences especially language from African literature by avoiding the inclusion of works written in European languages and judged by European standard and matrices. One wonders then if the Slave narratives of Gustav Wassa also known as Ulaudah Equiano in the eighteenth century and published in England and English language does not qualify as African literature.

The Colonial Period in African Literature

It could be proper to assert that the journey of African literature to date began with pre-colonial and colonial writing in which African elite display their experience of colonialism. Africa's colonization is perceived by the authors of these works as a rude shock on the sensibilities of the African people. In their novels, dramas and poetry's, colonization is portrayed as a misnomer and an imposition of foreign culture, language and civilization as well as government of the western world, especially Europe on separate and independent race meant to dehumanize and belittle them. Colonial writing in essence is a kind of protest literature against colonialism. Achebe (124) in *Things Fall Apart* writes about the activities of the colonial government and its religious arm, which was Christianity:

But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary,

The colonial government and the missionaries desecrated the African society and introduced strange things that annoyed the indigenes who considered such acts as an aberration. In the same page of the novel the narrator had made innuendoes of aggression of the colons and their missionaries with the aid of their new overzealous converts as he states:

But on one occasion the missionaries had tried to overstep their bounds. Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines. 'Go and burn your mother's genitals,' said one of the priests. The men were seized and beaten until they streamed with blood (Achebe 124).

Others novelists such as T. M. Aluko in *One Man, One Wife*, present the same scenario of the protest of the autochthones against the invading new and strange religion. The people of Isolo because of one wife to one man protested and abandoned the new religion and returned to their old ancestral religion. This instance justifies the claim in high quarters that colonial African literature is also that of cultural reaffirmation. In other words, this period of literature tries to show the colonialists that Africa has culture, history and tradition. This is against the backdrop of Western narratives that Africa is a primitive race. One such theorist being Hegel (93) who writes in his *Philosophy of History* that:

The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantive's objective existence—as for example, God or Law in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being.

One thing that is outstanding about the colonial enterprise is its dual structure in which the Whites live in modern and urban quarters separating themselves from the natives who were forced to dwell in dingy slumps. This dichotomy is not only a physical manipulation but a mental and psychological demarcation that spoke volumes about the mission and ideology of colonialism—

racial segregation, domination and exploitation rather than civilization of uncouth specie of humanity. Colonial literature not only African was awash with such discrimination. C. L. Innes (11), writes on the views of Fanon, a great colonial writer:

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes the psychological structure with which colonialism is rationalized as a Manichean world. Two spheres are established, physically and mentally. Segregation, apartheid, the creation of ghettos is justified and reinforced by this dual vision opposing the idealized society of the colonizer to the demonic state of the 'native'. The settler lives in a clean, well-lit and well-ordered town; the native is inherently barbarous, irrational, the enemy of morality, superstitious, living in a state of darkness.

Almost all African writers harped on this incident such as Mongo Beti, Chinua Achebe, Ahmadou Kourouma, Ferdinand Oyono, Wole Soyinka and others. In short, colonial literature can simply go for a literature of opposition and cultural reaffirmation meant to expose the ills of colonialism in Africa.

Postcolonial Literature

At a stage African literature had to change her audience from Europe and the West to Africans and their leaders and it also became logical to operate under the proverb of first chase away the predatory hawk and come back to blame the hen for exposing its chicks to danger. This means dealing first and foremost with the aggressor before reproaching the victim for one's mistakes. After independence of most African countries, African writers considered it unnecessary and illogical to continue attacking the colonizers instead of focusing on Africans, society and leaders for assessment of the gains and management of independence. Africans had thought that after independence they will live in paradise when the affairs of their nations are managed by their own people. It turned out to be

mere daydream as things went awry and worse than when the White men were in charge. Eventually the reaction of the African literary world was outcry against massive corruption, injustices, incompetence, kleptomania, looting, violence, civil wars and unrests and the independence became a total failure and huge wastage of a golden opportunity to rewrite history. The literary scene was awash with titles depicting the anomy and dominated by themes of disillusionment or disenchantment. Ayi Kwei Armah came with *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; Robert Serumaga with *Return to the Shadows*; Ngugu Wa Thiong'o with *The Devil on the Cross*; Achebe with *A Man of the People*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and Wole Soyinka with *The Interpreters*. The trend continued on the side of Francophone African writers. Great artists such as Ahmadou Kourouma published astonishing works such as *the suns of independence*, *Allah n'est pas obligé* and *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, while Ahmadou Kone published *Les Coupeurs de Têtes*. Mongo Beti published *Trop du Soleil tue l'amour*, Henri Lopes, *Le Pleurer-Rire*, while Sony Labou Tansi's *Half-Life* also found its way into the literary domain. Both old and younger poets have also contributed to this peculiar literary genre in Africa. We can count on a number of them like Martin Bestman's *Textures of Dawn* and *Longing for Another Dawn*; Niyi Osundare's poetry of the earth, Obari Gomba's environmental poetry, Anthony Njoku's philosophical and humanist poetry. Other poets who have made inroads into the poetry of disillusionment are Nduka Otiono, Obi Nwakanma, Odia Ofeimun, Olu Obafemi Ogaga Ifowode just to mention but a few. In *A Kind of Fool*, Munonye (213) captures the scene of hunger, disease and death Africans of post-independence era which represents the angst that characterize disillusionment literature in Africa:

There were tales about paper money buying very little in future; frayed and torn clothes over weary bodies; adults incapable of sweat by reason of hunger and starvation; dead ones that must lie unburied, there being no energy to dig grave or money for coffins; children withering to death

right before their parents' eyes because of a food-deficiency disease. Those same hidden terrorists, no other than agents of the rival Democratic Party, ever so iniquitous in both their thoughts and their actions!

It is this kind of abject poverty, impoverishment and dehumanization that Africans of the twenty first century are facing for no cogent reason other than mismanagement and corruption that annoys African writers as to be moved to show the world what our self-rule amounts to. Serumaga (43) exposes the frustration facing job seekers in independent Africa, no industries no serious economic planning, and he writes about Joe, one of his characters:

By the time Joe belatedly returned from England Matthew was high up in Customs and Exercise, where Joe met him again when he went to claim his unaccompanied luggage. Joe began to shop around for a job but he had not known how to keep his mouth shut about his country's 'teething troubles' (as the liberals called them), and it appeared that luck was running out. It was then that he bumped into Stephen, economist at the Planning Unit. They talked at length. 'To hell with their jobs,' Joe said finally and he decided to strike out on his own.

This is how writers reacted to the wasteful management of African independence and they questioned the leaders of the people on whose shoulders lies the responsibility of the continent's salvation after the wreckage called colonization. Ahmadou Kourouma (28) in *Les Soleils des indépendances* described independence with the metaphor of swarm of locusts that descended on Africa and the reader is meant to understand the level of destruction that could be caused by locusts on farm crops. That is the most appropriate way of showing the recklessness, lack of patriotism and incompetence with which African affairs were handled by these leaders. Most critics have given reasons why it happened and among these the most credible and logical was the fact that these leaders

did not take their time to restructure the administrative machinery of their individual countries before the take-off of the new regimes. Unfortunately, they were in a hurry to replace the colonial masters and administrators in order to lord it over their people. With that mistakes and ill-tailored policies came on board. And the next step meant to silence opposition and criticism was to introduce dictatorial tendencies and, instead of the troubles getting lesser, they become multiple and Africa remains today a stagnant economy and an impoverished people with a bleak future. One way of this restructuring is to take a second look at African nations which were the products of colonial enterprise that brought peoples of divergent languages and cultures together without their political will to stay together. Ekpo is one critic who describes these nations as empire states or dinosaur nations where things will never work. Some of the postcolonial writings were situated in the distant past to cover both pre-colonial, the colonial and the postcolonial periods. We have seen such writings in the works of both Ayi Kwei Armah and Ahmadou Kourouma. The former has to his credit wonderful novels that dig deep into the Africa's past, such as *The healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons*. The author has tried to use these works to trace the relationship between Africa's past and present in the form of synthesis whose aim it is to pinpoint the root of the continent's social and political problems. To prove to the West that Africa has rich cultural heritage and has not learnt civilization from other races, Armah (1) in *Two Thousand Seasons* writes:

We are not a people of yesterday. Do they ask how many single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now? We shall point them to the proper beginning of their counting. On a clear night when the light of the moon has blighted the ancient woman and her seven children, on such a night tell them to go into the world. There, have them count first the one, then the seven and after the seven all the other stars visible to their eyes alone. After that beginning they will be ready for the sand Let them seek the sealine. They will not

have to ponder where to start. Have them count the sand. Let them count it grain from single grain.night tell them to go alone into world.

The Contemporary Period

For African literature to be dynamic it must be changing its preoccupation and it means that African literature will not spend eternity on one subject matter of disillusionment after independence. Many a critic has stated that it is time to face other contemporary and existential challenges facing the African people. This brand of thinking brought about the contemporary period in our literary production during which literature devotes attention to personal dilemma of its characters, realism of existence and at times imperialism. Attention therefore is relatively shifting from politics and being directed toward the ordinary societal happenings, like epidemics, religious intolerance and queer theories and practices like homosexuality, lesbianism and minority interests. Wale Okediran's *After the Floods* is a novel of natural disaster which captures the wreckages of the perennial flooding of Ogunpa River in Ibadan. It is the story of Stanley Lala and Sade Lala whose baby and maid were swept away by the raging flood at night in their apartment while they were away—the husband on travel while the wife enjoys herself in a birthday party of her friend. The maid Beauty died in the flood while the baby survived and was picked by childless an old couple. Okediran (42) narrates the horror that gripped the poor unfortunate maid as water surged into the flat and she and the baby were helpless: 'My mama! my papa!...Oh I'm dead today!'

Nwagwu and Utah (148-162) in a study titled 'Les réalités sociopolitiques au Nigéria à travers *Ainsi va la vie* de Femi Osofisan' opined that :

Il existe tant d'écrivains en Afrique contemporaine qui utilisent leurs écritures pour toucher et influencer la vie quotidienne. La plupart du temps, ils exposent les maux et les vices qui détruisent le continent (...). Il montre les vices et les problèmes qui affrontent le Nigéria, voire l'Afrique dans son intégralité. Il expose ces problèmes sur la forme des réalités sociopolitiques et économiques. Ces problèmes incluent la

corruption chez les dirigeants, le coup et le contre-coup d'Etat, l'infidélité, l'injustice, la crise économique, la souffrance chez les citoyens, la fraude, l'escroquerie, la trahison l'emprisonnement des innocents, la tricherie électorale et beaucoup d'autres vices (148-149)

They studied the literary classic of Femi Osofisan who is among the contemporary African writers in the Anglophone world. His works among other writers of this generation criticises the current ills that ravage the 21st century society and the quest for migration to European countries for greener pasture.

Similarly, Nnolim (21-22) is another critic who advocates that in the new dispensation of African literature, our authors should stop bemoaning the fate of Africans but they should rather introduce Utopian literature to soothe the pains of the people and offer them through fiction imaginary hope where their sorrow will be forgotten for a while. He describes the nature of this genre of literature and the mechanisms that propel it: "Man's longing for a perfect society, a society where all his problems have been solved, a paradise on earth, has bred a sub-genre of works popularly known as "Utopian Literature"." The contemporary period in African literature is meant to be break from monotony and boredom and a way of sustaining the life of African literature by making it dynamic and responsive to situations and contexts. It is at this stage that African literature remains at the moment.

Conclusion

In this short essay the authors have been able to lay open the stages African literature has been subjected to in the course of history. The study also shown the factors that influence each of these phases, so to say which are not far from historical and contemporary events that have marked Africa's evolution. One thing very noticeable in all is that African literature has always played the role of keeping society and its members abreast of the social, economic and political realities that shape the destiny of the continent and its peoples. These events are somewhat imposed on the people by external and overwhelming forces of imperialism and racial

domination, others are the products of self-inflicted sufferings the African people have had to confront as a result of poor leadership and lack of patriotism. It is pertinent to state here that from experience none of these periods is an end in itself. What this implies is that no period is sacrosanct because we have noticed a resurgence of preceding periods as it is in the literary history of other parts of the world, for instance Europe. Succinctly put, it is not surprising to see works that are still harping on disillusionment in the contemporary time of African literature. Thus, there is no fast and

hard rule that authors will not exercise their imaginative freedom by going back to the archives to dig up forgotten themes if that is where their literary energy directs them. The reader of African literature is a witness to the fact that during the disenchantment period, some African authors resorted to writing historical novels that deal with Africa's ancient empires. Any scholar working on classification of African literature and its periods should bear in mind that there is no fixity in literary production, it is all about dynamism.

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