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Nigerian Literature: Issues Then and Now*

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ABSTRACT

The sheer volume of texts, prose, poetry and drama, which constitutes Nigerian literature today is enough to intimidate and dissuade the faint-hearted from the historical necessity and critical responsibility of coming to grips with the major issues that have agitated the minds of Nigerian creative writers in the last five decades and more. Judging by the number of novels published since Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) caught the eye of the reading public, it could be inferred that Nigerian Literature (in English) deals with a myriad of concerns too hydra-headed to fathom. This paper argues, however, that the multi-faceted concerns in Nigerian literature revolve around some major issues whose recurrence brings to the fore the "progressive-regressive" cycle of banalities that has so far defined the nation's experience in statehood. It posits further that until this cycle is broken, deliberately by forces within, the journey of Nigeria from "a mere geographical expression" to a solid nation-state may be a mirage on the horizon.

KEYWORDS: Nigeria, literature, issues, reminder, recorder, prophet

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I. Introduction

Chinua Achebe fired the first salvo at the bastion of "art for art's sake" when he legislates that it is the duty of the African writer to re-educate his people that their past did not begin when the first white man intruded into their communal space (*Hopes and Impediments* 30). It is with this educative function in mind that his prescription that the novelist (writers, in short) must be a teacher makes a lot of sense. He declares: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them" (30). Niyi Osundare advances Achebe's thesis on the pedagogical role of art in society when he says: "For in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder" (xiii). In other words, the African creative writer is not just a recorder ("rememberer") of historical moments in verse, prose, and drama, but also a reminder of the consequences of past actions or inactions on the present moment and a prophet of his people's future based on his knowledge of the events gone and those on-going. Achebe and Osundare are just a few examples of Nigerian writers and critics who have insisted that African writers must engage with the big socio-political issues of their day if they are to be relevant to their immediate societies and generations to come. In other words, by fictionalising the major issues of their day, writers build a bridge between them and their readers and set in motion a public debate which could lead to the resolution of such problems. It is in this spirit that this paper examines the relevance of Nigerian literature to the reading public in its primary responsibility as "recorder," "reminder" and "prophet" although the three sections will not be equally weighted. The reason for such an imbalance is not unconnected with the Nigerian writers' postcolonial project of writing back to the metropolitan centre through their recuperation of historical/ cultural artefacts that proof to the ex-colonial masters that they have a past and a culture predating the colonial intervention in Nigerian history. Also given the influence of the oral tradition on Nigerian literature, Nigerian writers intuitively serve as "recorders" of their historical moments in literary form like the ancient griots in African cultures who preserve the history of their peoples through storytelling, poetry, and music. It should also be noted from the outset that the three sections are in reality not separable because in

the texts under consideration, a writer could operate as "recorder," "reminder" and "prophet" all in the same text without erecting any marker to signal his movement from one role to another. Thus, it is only for the purpose of analysis that these concepts are separated in this paper; in the literary works, they are not mutually exclusive. It is also important to state that our primary focus in this paper will be on creative works written in English because these are the texts that have wider/international accessibility and, therefore, serve our purpose which is to examine the major issues in Nigerian literature for the benefit of those at home and abroad. And to accomplish this task realism will serve as the analytical tool, considering its demands that the writer must observe certain fidelities pertaining to characterisation, subject, setting, and language.

Realism has been adopted in this study because of its insistence that the writer must display fidelity in his fictional world to the workaday experiences of ordinary people in society in terms of its particularities of experiential focus, character, setting, and language. Ian Watt expounds that:

> Formal realism . . . is the narrative embodiment of a premise . . . or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned the particularities of the times and the places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. (32)

This means that the author of a realistic work must clearly individuate his characters to a degree that the reader perceives them as flesh-and-blood "persons." The actions must also take place in a particularised historical context instead of the temporally indeterminate period in fables, myths, and legends. The actions should as well take place in specific geographical locations (town, street, sitting-room, etc.) to which the average reader can relate. All these must be executed in a language that is close to the kind spoken by the average man or the man in the street who does not speak in rhymes or in iambic pentameter.

Although the works analysed in this paper are not confined to the novel genre, the issues that have engaged Nigerian writers over the years are no

doubt peculiar to the Nigerian experience, even if not exclusive to them; the characters in these fictional works are mimetic of ordinary Nigerians whose names, manner of dressing, actions, inactions, hopes, and disappointments bear an unmistakable Nigerian temper; the setting, both the temporal and the geographical coordinates, relate to the peoples and cultures of the political entity called Nigeria; and even though the language of the works analysed in this study is English, the language of the former colonisers, it has sojourned in the Nigerian nation for more than a century and, in our opinion, might as well be regarded as the "step-mother tongue" of most educated Nigerians today. With specific reference to the object of this study, realism is appropriate because of its demand that the issues fictionalised by a realistic writer must reflect the experiences of the average man in the society the work is set in: issues relating to power, politics, love, economics, religion, etc. This buttresses the observation of M. H. Abrams that:

> The realist . . . is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the commonplace, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene. His characters, therefore, are usually of the middle class or (less frequently) the working class—people without highly exceptional endowments, who live through ordinary experiences of childhood, adolescence, love, marriage, parenthood, infidelity, and death; who find life rather dull and often unhappy, though it may be brightened by touches of beauty and joy; but who may, under special circumstances, display something akin to heroism. (153)

In "Transformations of the Hero Archetype in Nigerian Literature" (2016), Abiodun Adeniji demonstrates that many of the heroes in Nigerian literature-in-English belong to "the middle class or (less frequently) the working class" in line with the observations of Abrams above. In sum, realism is appropriate as an analytical tool in this paper because the major issues discussed concern the average Nigerian, issues relating to power, dictatorship, colonialism, corruption, etc.

II. Nigerian Literature as "Rememberer" or Recorder

Any good national literature must be a recorder in verse, prose, and poetry of the historical moments in the nation's history, events that stand out as the defining moments in the people's peregrinations towards statehood and being. Colonialism is one such factor that has defined and is still defining the history of Nigeria. Even though Nigeria got her independence from Britain in 1960, all her national institutions—the legal system, the political system, the police, the educational system, Christianity, the use of English as one of the official languages of the country, the commercial and banking sectors, etc.—were all built upon the models established by the former colonial masters. Hence the partial truism in the assertion that Nigerian literature is still fixated on the colonial engagement. The biggest issue that has dominated Nigerian literature from inception, therefore, is the issue of colonialism, most especially anti-colonial sentiments.

Direct or subtle condemnation of colonialism is evident in the works of Dennis Osadebe, Gabriel Okara, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, and Ola Rotimi just to name a few. Anti-colonial sentiment is directly expressed in Osadebe's poem, "Who Buys My Thought?" (1967), in which he concludes that the "restless youth" of Africa are "sorting," "questioning" and "watching" (15) with a fire smouldering in their hearts which will one day burn all over the earth, "Destroying, chastening, cleansing" (16). It does not take any leap of the imagination to know that the colonial masters are the potential objects of destruction when the fire of independence bursts out of the hearts of the African youth. Gabriel Okara, like Osadebe, subtly expresses his anti-colonialism sentiment in "The Snowflakes Sail Gently Down" (1967) through the images of winter and blackbirds in his poem. Winter is symbolised as sterility/death while blackbirds are symbolised as life/fecundity. Winter is peculiar to the temperate region inhabited by the erstwhile colonial masters. Consequently, the death of colonialism is being prophesied in this poem. Birds are symbols of freedom/independence; a bird on the wing is free to go anywhere and do whatever it likes. Black resonates with the Blackman or African, and the compounding of black with birds in "blackbirds" is a subtle reminder to the colonisers that Africans, including Nigerians, cannot be held in bondage forever. Like birds, they are born to be free. Furthermore, the association of the Blackman with life and fertility is a subtle derision of the colonialists as death-dealers in contrast to the Blackman depicted as

life-givers. This connotation comes to the fore in the image of the blackbirds hatching suns and bearing fruits which the spade of the uprooters could not destroy. In other words, no matter how aggressive the colonisers are to Nigerians, they will not succeed in their quest to destroy the traditions and cultures of the people. Their gargantuan effort is nothing but a marvellous waste of time and energy!

Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* with its cornucopia of monsters, ghosts, fairies, gnomes, and fantastic men and women does not immediately strike the average reader as an anti-colonialism prose narrative. But when analysed against the backdrop of the full-blown colonial enterprise in place when the book was published (Nigeria did not gain independence until October 1, 1960) the author's use of myths, legends, and folktales drawn from his native Yoruba (Nigerian) culture emerges as a form of cultural assertion and a subtle reminder to the (then) colonial masters that Nigeria had a worthwhile culture and a stable system of governance before the Whiteman came. And by asserting that the Yoruba had a metaphysics which welds the living, the dead, the unborn, and the innumerable spirits in animals, vegetation, water, earth, rock, and air into an unbroken cycle of existence Tutuola's work challenges the orthodoxy of Christianity, the official religion of the colonisers, as the one and only true religion for all men irrespective of colour and race. In essence, Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* exposes the demagoguery of the Whiteman's civilising mission in Africa by showing that Africans were already civilised before the advent of the West into the continent. This fact is vividly demonstrated in the drinkard's peregrinations which takes him to towns and villages governed by *Oba*s (kings) or *baale*s (village heads), each settlement with its own administrative system as well as peculiar customs and traditions.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has been given various interpretations by as many critics: the Marxists, the feminists, the psychoanalysts, the sociologists, the culture critics, etc. But stripped down to its essentials, the novel is an anti-colonialism work. It is an indictment of the way colonialism destroyed the fabric of pre-colonial African society symbolised by the Igbo community, Umuofia, a cultured, egalitarian social organism with its own institutions of governance, law, inter-communal relations, religion, interpersonal relationships etc. Achebe accentuates his anti-colonialism stance in his assertion that the Whiteman has put a knife to the things that held us

together and we have fallen apart (127). The same anti-colonialism sentiment runs through Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974) which dramatizes the physical resistance of a Bini king to colonial subjugation. Even though King Ovonramwen is eventually defeated by the superior fire power of the colonialists, Ola Rotimi's historical play records for posterity his courageous anti-colonialism effort.

Culture-clash and alienation are twin issues that are direct consequences of colonialism. Both issues are graphically depicted and recorded in Nigerian literature. Culture-clash refers to a situation where one culture comes in contact with another through their adherents leading to a crisis, most especially where one culture attempts to dominate or obliterate the other. In the days of direct colonialism, the metropolitan centre represented by the colonialists made spirited efforts to obliterate the culture of the empire, the marginalised colonial subjects, by imposing their own political, legal, educational, economic, and linguistic institutions on them. The ensuing conflict of wills between the home culture and the invading culture often culminated in the partial domination of the more powerful of the two cultures (in this case, the metropolitan culture), and the tragic demise of those at the vanguard of defending the culture of the marginalised or colonised. This explains the tragic end of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in his *Arrow of God* (1964). Neither character could come to terms with the changes introduced into their culture by the invading white culture. Okonkwo, for instance, could not ingest the superimposition of another authority higher than the *ndiche*, the council of rulers in his Umuofia community, while Ezeulu regards as an insult Winterbottom's well-meaning appointment of the chief priest as a warrant chief. To the chief priest of Ulu, Winterbottom's offer degrades him to the status of a mere errand boy to the Whiteman. Unfortunately, Ezeulu's refusal to obey the colonial order symbolised by Winterbottom sets in motion the contest of cultures and powers, traditional culture and power versus colonial culture and power, the empire versus the metropolitan centre. Predictably, the invading culture wins and both heroes end up tragically; Okonkwo commits suicide and Ezeulu goes mad.

The unfortunate consequence of the clash of cultures in the Nigerian milieu is the production of alienated subjects, colonial subjects who have been widely exposed to the culture of the colonialists but still operate in a society whose dominated culture refuses to die out. They are, therefore, pulled

centrifugally and centripetally by these two contrary forces and are unwelcome as well as uncomfortable in either. In Nigerian/African literatures, the "been-to" or educated elite returning from a stint of study abroad is the quintessential symbol of alienation. Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1963) is a good example of an alienated character torn between tradition, the Igbo custom that a freeborn should not marry an *osu*, the descendant of slaves, and modernity, the Christian religious credo that all men and women are born free. Oduche in Achebe's *Arrow of God* is another example of alienation. Christopher Okigbo's prodigal in his poem, "Idoto" (1967), is also a good example of such an alienated character in Nigerian literature. Here is a Blackman standing penitent before the river goddess, Mother Idoto, begging for re-immersion/admittance into his traditional roots. The mere suggestion that Okigbo's prodigal stands knocking like a stranger at the door of a house, supposedly his, vividly evidences the degree of his alienation from his cultural roots. His state of alienation is buttressed by the line "SILENT FACES at crossroads" (Okigbo, "The Passage" 5). The bombastic Lakunle in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1964) whose ill-fitting toga of modernity discourages him from paying Sidi's bride price to secure her hand in marriage as tradition demands is another symbol of alienation. He loses the jewel, Sidi, to the crafty old lion, Baroka, because of the characteristic undecidedness of the alienated who, like the young bird in Okigbo's poem, stands on one leg.

Post-Independence angst is another major issue prevalent in Nigerian literature after 1960. This refers to the myriad of worries, torments, troubles, and disappointments which independence foisted on the peoples of Nigeria. In the days of direct colonialism, it was so facetious to heap on the colonialists the woes of the Nigerian polity. Perhaps the peoples of Nigeria got so carried away by the histrionics of the political actors then fighting for independence that they could not sift through their plethora of Utopian promises to bare the vacuity of their souls. Or the desire to expel the Whiteman from the shores of the nation overrode the people's natural scepticism and sense of caution. No matter the reason, the end result is the same; the governments that ruled the nation after independence have been largely disappointing at all fronts. That is why the fifth largest producer of crude oil in the world is today one of the poorest countries in the world. Chief Nanga in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) represents the failure of the political class from inception till now.

Chief Nanga and his cohorts loot the nation with reckless abandon and would not baulk at intimidation and murder of political opponents to retain their offices. The politicians of today do virtually the same thing. The various unsolved politically motivated assassinations of many prominent politicians including Chief Bola Ige, then sitting minister of Justice, and the on-going investigation into the sharing of US$ 2.1 billion meant for the procurement of arms and ammunition for soldiers to fight the Boko Haram insurgents in the northeast of the country by prominent politicians across the political divide instantiate the continued existence of Chief Nanga in Nigeria. Madame Koto, the Blind Old Man and the politicians of the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor in Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), Lejoka-Brown in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977) are also satiric reincarnations of Chief Nanga. The young men in Soyinka's *Interpreters* (1965) whose idealism to serve their motherland was turned into baleful frustration by the endemic corruption of the Nigerian establishment are the epitome of the debilitating impact of bad governance on the future of the country.

Two other issues associated with post-independence angst are military dictatorship and war. Nigeria has been ruled by more military governments than civilian in her fifty odd years of independence. Unlike in other climes, for example, Taiwan, where prolonged military rule has led to a rapid economic development of the nation, the many military rulers in Nigeria have only succeeded in driving the populace further down the road of unmitigated pauperisation. Consequently, Nigerian literature is rife with a condemnation of military dictatorship. Sam the murderous sit-tight military president in Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is representative of all military regimes in Nigeria, and his fatal end is also symbolic of the artist's consignation of military dictatorship to the dunghill of history. General Basha Bash in Soyinka's play *King Baabu* (2002) is Sam's kindred spirit, his name evocative of late General Sani Abacha whose reign of terror from 1993 to 1998 is unparalleled in the history of military dictatorship in Nigeria. Helon Habila's novel *Waiting for an Angel* (2003) is another record of the suffering of ordinary Nigerians under the military. Like Lomba in the novel, Nigerians lived under a cloud of fear especially under Abacha, waiting daily for the angel of death to strike.

Historically, the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967-70) happened when the

military government of General Yakubu Gowon was in power. Thus, it could be safely averred that war is one of the bitter fruits of Nigeria's military dictatorships. Nigerian literature documents the privations and deaths which the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War engendered in prose, poetry, and drama. In poetry, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's "The Casualties" (1976) forcefully brings to mind the national impact of the civil war on the psyche of combatants and non-combatants, Biafrans and Nigerians alike. According to the poet, all Nigerians are casualties of the war in one form or the other, noting that those who died may be luckier than those who survived the war. Festus Iyayi's novel, *Heroes* (1986), records the killings, lootings, and sexual assaults that characterised the civil war at the Benin Front, but concludes that in spite of it all, the common soldiers are the heroes of the civil war not the generals who only fed fat on the death of their subordinates. Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1986), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2011; to mention just a few) vividly depict the ruinous impact of war on human relationships, hopes, and achievements, while Soyinka's play *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) graphically depicts the mental/psychological disequilibrium that the civil war foisted on Nigerians.

Another type of war which Nigerian literature records has to do with the militancy of the Niger Delta as a result of the massive ecological damage which has attended exploration activities of multi-nationals in the oil-rich region. The extensive destruction of the flora, fauna, and aquatic life of the Niger Delta region by the blow-outs and oil slicks of the oil exploring companies such as Shell British Petroleum, Chevron, and Agip is a shameful part of Nigeria's history. *The Activist* (2006), a novel by Tanure Ojaide, condemns the ecological damage of the region by the oil giants, although the panacea offered by the author is, at best, a dubious one. The decision of the Activist, a university professor, to join forces with the militant leader, Pere, in illegal bunkering of petroleum products in order to have enough money to fight the multinationals makes him a part of the Niger Delta problems; the decision to fight evil with evil makes the Activist wander away from the moral highway he traversed at the beginning of the novel. The poet Obari Gomba also laments the environmental disaster caused by oil exploration in the same region in his collection *Pearls of the Mangrove* (1999). In "Confession of an Oil-Thief" one of the poems in the book, Gomba decries

the unholy alliance of the government and the irresponsible oil giants in the following words: "The Oil-Thief swears to his henchmen. / They must learn that the theft of oil—by the law / Of the gun—is the glory of every chief of state. / The President swears to his henchmen" (13). Tanure Ojaide is also noted for his poems condemning the ecological disaster in the Niger Delta region consequent upon the fact of oil exploration. Kaine Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* (2006), too, explores the impact of oil activities in the neglected region but focuses on the moral degeneracy that has become the lot of "born troways" (74), the half-cast children of the Niger Delta abandoned by their white fathers and brought up by their Nigerian mothers alone in the penury of the region. Ahmed Yerima's play *Hard Ground* (1998) documents the destructive effect of militancy on familial/communal relationships.

Three other post-independence issues recorded by Nigerian literature are religious hypocrisy, the rising profile of the female in Nigeria, and the influence of Marxist ideology on Nigerian literature. The misuse of religion as recorded in Nigerian literature almost always comes in the form of satire on the hypocrisy of the priests of such religions. These are portrayed as Janus-faced characters who preach holiness, righteousness, and contentment with little to their congregation but exhibit worldliness, rapacity, and duplicity in their off-the-pulpit dealings with their fellow men and women. The most emblematic of such Rasputins is Prophet Jero in Soyinka's plays, *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis* (*The Jero Plays*, 1964), who is not averse to using seductively dressed women, political manipulation, and unjust incarceration of his enemies to increase his affluence and ecclesiastical authority. Afa in Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1991) is Jero's soul-mate in terms of misusing his spiritual powers. Afa, a cleric, gave a powerful charm to a group of armed robbers thereby empowering them to rob with ease. The charm when correctly applied hypnotises their would-be victims and makes them dance insensibly until the robbery is over. The satire on the men of God is that in each instance, they use their religious authority to advance the devil's cause and not the kingdom of God. Christianity preaches that a man should die to self that the life of God may be exhibited in him. But Jero uses his concocted prophecies for self-aggrandisement and not to the glory of God, while Afa who is supposed to convert the robbers from Satan to God more or less becomes their spiritual bulwark. It is noteworthy that the two plays accentuate the need for urgent reformation of the utilitarian essence

of religion in human society.

At inception, Nigerian literature was not very kind to the females in society in its portrayal of women as the devalued other. In the works of the first generation of Nigerian writers, Achebe, Soyinka, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, et al., women are portrayed as subservient and inferior to men, to be seen, but not to be heard. Feminists have been quick to decry the reification of the "junior" role that patriarchy assigns to women by literary portrayals. Referring to the women in Achebe's works, Rose Ure Mezu, for example, observes that Achebe's women are sandwiched between yam-barns and titles, thereby confirming their subordinate status in the Nigerian society. However, women writers and later male writers have undertaken a counter-portrayal of the female character in such a way as to refurbish the image of women in Nigerian literature. This reformative effort begins with Flora Nwapa's eponymous Efuru and Idu who are portrayed as strong female characters that overshadow their under-achieving male counterparts. Efuru, for instance, helped to pay her own bride price from the profit of her trading ventures with Adizua, her impecunious first husband. Beatrice in Achebe's last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ifeoma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Olaana and Kainene in her war novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Enitan in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), and the adulterous wives of Baba Segi in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) are strong female characters who are the opposite of the subjugated and silent female characters in early Nigerian literature: Okonkwo's mother, the wives of Okonkwo, and other women in Achebe's early works; Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1994) and Akunna in her *The Bride Price* (1975), to mention just a few. The point being made here is that just as the profile of females has risen in the Nigerian polity due to their salutary exposure to education, the profile of females as represented in literature has likewise received appreciable uplift. This is not to say that Nigerian women have achieved equality with Nigerian men in life and in fiction, but progress has been and is being made at all fronts.

The last issue to be discussed in this section of the paper is the emergence of works influenced by the Marxist ideology in Nigerian literature. Lois Tyson observes that:

> From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than do

> differences in religion, race, ethnicity and gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the "haves" and "have-nots," between the bourgeoisie—those who control the world's natural, economic and human resources—and the proletariat, the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work, the ditch-digging, the rail-road building—that fills the coffers of the rich. (50)

Marxist criticism, therefore, endeavours to unravel the capitalist ideology that undergirds literary productions, while celebrating works which espouse the Marxist ethos of conscientising the proletariat on the need to revolt against bourgeois oppressions. Omale Austen-Peters affirms that, "The writers [Marxist writers] . . . consider their literature as a potent weapon in their people's struggle against the oppressive ruling class" (54). In Nigerian literature, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, and Olu Obafemi are some of the writers whose works manifest Marxist ideology. For instance, in his play *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan makes his robbers rob the market women and men who represent the bourgeois class which exploits the masses through unjust prices. In fact, Alhaji, the founder of the robbery gang envisions their group as Nigerian Robin Hoods, robbing the rich to feed the poor, thereby expropriating the expropriators. Essentially, therefore, the play is a battle between the haves and the have-nots in line with the classical Marxist conceptualisation. Even the agents of the capitalist Law and Order, the soldiers, are portrayed as robbers who rob robbers. Hence the moral conundrum at the end of the play which the audience is called to resolve: should the soldiers kill the robbers or should they free them?

A. Nigerian Literature as "Reminder"

A reminder is something or someone who makes it his duty to remind others not to forget certain historical moments which represent milestones in the history of the people. The traditional chanter or griot is not only the memory of his tribe, he is also a jogger of memory, reminding the living about the feats of achievements of their progenitors, their failures as well. In that way, the traditional chanter inspires the living to surpass the achievements of

the dead and avoid the pitfalls which caused their downfall. Nigerian literature does virtually the same. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* fall into this category. Both are set in a period in Nigerian history when the white man was just intruding into Nigerian society and when he had just established colonial rule. Both vividly counter the hegemonic narrative of the colonisers which portrayed Africans as savages, cannibals without any civilisation or culture by portraying a pre-colonial Nigerian society with a stable egalitarian system of government, its own laws, mores, and judicial systems, its own religious structure and reward system. As Achebe asserts, he would be satisfied if his novels only taught the upcoming generation that their story in time did not begin with the advent of the white man. Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) also reminds the coming generation that the patriarchal subjugation of women as depicted in male-authored texts has not always been so culturally and historically. As a strong female character, Efuru reminds Nigerian girls and women that their destiny is, ultimately, not in any man's hands but their own. It also inspires them to redefine their lives beyond matrimony and motherhood. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only reminds us of the horrors of the Nigerian-Biafra Civil War but subtly warns against the recrudescence of the social conditions that led to the war. Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971), his *Overamwen Nogbaisi* (1974) and Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru* (1998) are reminders of those glorious moments in our history when we ruled ourselves and even dared the white man's awesome might. The use of features taken from the Nigerian oral tradition also reminds contemporary citizens of the country that there is a rich tradition of orature in Africa which can serve as a worthwhile alternative to the suffocating racialist universe which the Western master-servant narratives project. Examples of such features include the use of translated or transliterated Nigerian proverbs and idioms, especially by Achebe and his numerous literary descendants, the use of myths of the gods, legends, and folktales.

B. Nigerian Literature as "Prophet"

As we bring this paper to a close, it is important to highlight the prophetic role of Nigerian literature in predicting future occurrences in the polity. In general, three such "prophecies" easily come to mind. The first occurs at the end of Achebe's *A Man of the People* where the literary sage

foretells that a coup would end the profligacy of the political class represented by Chief Nanga in the novel. Surprisingly, the first coup in Nigeria, the Major Kaduna Nzeogwu coup (January 1966), took place shortly after the novel's publication, fuelling the suspicion that Achebe had prior knowledge of the coup. The late poet, Christopher Okigbo also predicts the Nigerian Civil War in "Path of Thunder," one of the poems in his book *Labyrinths* (1971). And Soyinka's "Half-Child" in his independence play, *A Dance of the Forest* (1963), accurately predicts the arrested development of the emerging nation-state. The ending of Achebe's 1987 novel *Anthills of the Savannah* in another military coup is a prophetic sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of Nigerians. In a way, it foretells the emergence of another military coup that may truncate the democratic governments that we have been enjoying since 1999. Let us hope that it will end up as an aborted prophecy. Nevertheless, it is a warning to our amnesiac politicians not to sow bad seeds and then begin to pray for crop failure!

C. Progressive-regressive Cycle of Banalities

A careful study of the issues discussed above indicates the recurrence of certain major issues in different forms across genres and historical epochs in Nigerian literature. For example, political irresponsibility which Achebe satirises in *A Man of the People* recurs in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road.* Dictatorship (military or civilian) which Soyinka pillories in *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) recurs in, for example, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. As for the theme of corruption, its ubiquity in many Nigerian literary works is a testimony of its pervasiveness in the Nigerian polity. The obvious cyclic resurgence of these issues mimics the faltering steps of the nation towards social cohesion, unity, and enduring progress. Sometimes the nation moves forward rapidly at political and economic fronts. Shortly after, it seems to regress into an earlier atavistic stage.

At the political front, Nigeria started out with a democratic government in 1960 as well as a fairly robust economy based on agriculture. But two coups in 1966, one in January and another in July, truncated the democratic experiment. The peaceful co-existence of many ethnic groups making up the

nation was further shattered by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) during the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon. After restoration of peace, two other coups in 1975 and 1976 brought a new set of military dictators until 1979 when the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari brought in the second democratic experiment. Unfortunately, General Muhammadu Buhari's coup terminated the experiment in 1983, while another coup in 1986 ousted Buhari and brought in the self-styled military president, General Ibrahim Babangida, who was in power till 1993. After the June 12 debacle of 1993 which saw the annulment of one of Nigeria's freest presidential elections by the Babandida regime, the Interim government of Chief Earnest Shonekan ruled for a short while until it was toppled by General Sani Abacha in December of 1993. Abacha's death in 1997 enabled General Abdusalam Abubakar to take over the mantle of government and conduct a general election which was won by his former military boss, General Olusegun Obasanjo (rtd.). Since 1999 till now, Nigeria has had uninterrupted successive democratic governments. From the foregoing, it should be obvious that Nigeria has had a chequered political history, a form of regressive-progressive cycle given its instability.

The instability that plagues Nigeria's political terrain also afflicts the economic landscapes of the country. First, each government jettisons the policies and programmes of its predecessor with the effect that continuity is never guaranteed. Secondly, the kleptomania and unbridled corruption of the ruling classes (civilian or military) turned the country's oil-boom into its oil-doom. General Yakubu Gowon (1966-75) once boasted that money was not Nigeria's problem but how to spend it. But by 1983, the Shagari regime had to declare austerity measures due to the parlous state of the Nigerian economy. The military regime of General Buhari (1983-86) instilled some sanity into the system, but the gains of that regime were frittered away by his successor, General Babangida (1986-93). The economic woes of Nigeria were compounded by the reckless looting of the treasury which characterised the Abacha regime. These losses were reversed somewhat by the Obasanjo regime (1999-2007) who ensured that the country got debt-forgiveness from some of its international creditors and left a good reserve for his successor, Alhaji Musa Yar'adua. But as of today, Nigeria is back in debt, and in August 2016, the present government of General Muhammadu Buhari (rtd.) officially declared that the nation has slipped into economic recession, the first in

twenty years.

The scenario above is what is referred to as the "progressive-recessive cycle of banalities" in the abstract as one era of progress seems to usher in a counter-era of regression and vice versa ad infinitum. This is why Ben Okri uses the abiku myth to describe the nation in his works *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. His child narrator in the two novels, Azaro, is an abiku, a child believed to be fated to be born and to die young and be reborn by the same mother only to die young and be reborn again by the same mother in an endless cycle of joyless parturition and subsequent burials. Talking about Nigeria, Azaro declares:

> In his journeys Dad finds that all nations are children. It shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals . . . . (Okri, *The Famished Road* 494)

Azaro then concludes that: "Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong" (478). Felicia Oka Moh, commenting on Okri's *The Famished Road*, observes:

> In this satire against society, Okri describes the ineptitude of the predatory rulers who exploit the masses leaving them famished. He is no less angry with the masses who complacently refuse to do anything about their exploitation. So long as the rulers display their insatiable appetite for wealth and so long as the masses are complacent, the original dream of making Nigeria a land of unity (in spite of tribe and tongue) where there will be equitable distribution of resources will never be achieved. (78-79)

In contrast to the somewhat pessimistic tone in the extract above, Okri believes that stability at the political front will inaugurate stability at the economic and social fronts in the Nigerian state. He advises the peoples of Nigeria, rulers and followers alike, to: "Return to the old ways of our ancestors! Take what is good from our way and adapt it to the new times!" (Okri, *Songs of Enchantment* 172). Through his fiction, therefore, Okri suggests that the way out of Nigeria's cycle of banalities is a stable and

focused leadership which is able to creatively combine the best of the old (traditional) way with the best of the new (modern) way. When such a feat is achieved, then Nigerians can finally prove wrong the statement often credited to the late Yoruba political sage, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-87) that Nigeria is a mere geographical expression.

III. Conclusion

In the preceding pages, an attempt has been made to give a panoramic picture of the major issues in Nigerian literature. One of the shortcomings of such a wide-ranging perspective is that a lot of worthy authors and books are not mentioned. This is regrettable but unavoidable. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this approach has been able to give a trenchant summary of the themes of Nigerian literature in the English expression in the last five decades. The recurrence of these issues in different novels across timelines shows that Nigeria has been going round in a cycle of banalities. This calls for a purposeful leadership able to sever the link between the nation and the endemic maladies of corruption and allied evils that have prevented Nigeria from coming into its own. As Achebe observes, the trouble with Nigeria is neither in its climate nor soil, but a failure in its leadership.

Nevertheless, Nigerian literature has the potential to be great if it continues to interrogate its immediate locale and mediates its experiences with the global insights afforded by the diasporic experiences of the new generation of writers. Like Azaro, the spirit-child participant-narrator of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, the future of Nigerian literature lies in its willing adaptability to diverse and, sometimes, contradictory experiences. In the light of the preceding sentiment, it is fitting to end this piece with Dennis Osadebe's words in "Young Africa's Plea" (1967):

> Let me play with the Whiteman's ways
> Let me work with the Blackman's brains
> Let my affairs themselves sort out
> Then in sweet rebirth
> I'll rise a better man
> Not ashamed to face the world. (17)

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