

Literature, a Reflector of Society: A Study of African Literature

Awa, Jacinta Onyekachi, Ph.D, Igiri, ThankGod Ogba , Ph.D and Ogayi,
Martin Chukwuemeka, Ph.D

Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies (English & Literature Unit)
Ebonyi State University,
Abakaliki,
Nigeria.

Abstract: Like sociology, Literature is concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it and his desire to improve it. Literature is a social institution, which uses Language as its medium. Literature represents life and to a large extent, a social reality. An ideal literature therefore reflects the happenings in its society. It mirrors the economy, politics, religion and culture of its society. It consequently reflects the diverse mood and tempers of its society. Specifically, African Literature is a vital tool in the hands of African literary artists, used to criticize the social, economic and political situations in their African society with the aim of challenging and proffering solutions to the unpleasant and oppressive practices by its leaders and the led. This particular inquiry examines how Otagburuagu's "Echoes of violence" and Osofisan's "Colours Makes the Thunder King" have revealed the political situations in Nigeria. This exploration is anchored on the sociological theory of literature. This theory studies the correlation between Literature and society as the different norms of behavior in different societies and they are reflected in their respective literature; descriptive data analysis technique, primary and secondary data collection methods. This study reveals that African literary writers have taken the position of judges, Umpires, national reformers, civil right activists and cultural revivalists all for the emancipation of Africa and Africans.

Key Word: Literature, Society, African literature, African society and Reflection.

Date of Submission: 06-06-2020

Date of Acceptance: 22-06-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects the economy, relationship, climate, attitude, morals, social class, political issues, religion, emotion, expectations, suffering, hope and aspirations of people of a society. Literature therefore presents the yearnings and repugnance of society. It gives impetus, shapes the political, religious and economic forces in a particular society. This is why Literature relates to social, economic and political system of any given society. In essence, Literature therefore becomes a vital tool used by literary writers to criticize the social and political situations to unpleasant oppressive practices by its leaders and the good values and the ills of its society. Subsequently, in the words of Duhan (2015) Literature is a corrective agent as it mirrors the society with a view to making society realize its mistakes and making amends. It projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate.

A literary artist therefore is a product of his society since his writing is a reaction to the life of his people both negatively and positively. In tandem with this, the literary artist brings to focus the oddities and crude aspects of life of his society. This is because to know life fully, not only the bright side but also the seamy and dark side of life is to be known. This is why the central occupation of literature is to teach and delight. Literature therefore is educative, informative, entertaining and reformative as people can look at themselves and make modifications where needed. Therefore, literary works have changed the thinking of human beings and their way of life as witnessed in the following examples: Miss Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was directly responsible for a movement against slavery in USA for those days. The novel of Dickens had indirect influence in creating in society a feeling of regulating and removing social wrongs, calling for necessary reforms. Sarat Chandra's novels have gone a long way in breaking conservatism as regards women in her society. This particular exploration intends to reveal the effects of African literary works, particularly, Emeka Otagburuagu's *Echoes of violence* and Osofisan's "Colours makes the thunder king."

African Literature on African Society

The literary artist and African literature have contributed in no small measure in African transformational process. This is why African Literature mirrors aspects of life of the continent. African literature therefore tells the story of African cultural milieu and her experiences. Awa (2019, p.43) observes that African literary artists have become noble warriors who fight against slavery, injustices, tyranny and other forms of belligerence on African continents. So, African Literature has brought about super-colossal changes in African societies. Therefore, Awa (2019, p.49) asserts that:

African writers are usually seen as the emancipators of the African masses.
they offer critical appraisal of existing political situations in their societies
so as to mould and redirect their actions towards the betterment of their continent.

This is why Ken Saro wiwa cited in Awa (2019, p. 50) claims that “literature must serve its society and writers must play interventionist roles.” Visakhaptman cited in Awa (2019, p.51) puts it more straight forward thus:

To the African poets, Poetry becomes a powerful medium through which they
convey to the world audience, not only their despairs and hopes, enthusiasm
and empathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain, but also their nations history

as it moved from freedom to slavery from slavery to revolution from revolution
to independence and from independence to tasks of reconstruction which
further involved situations of failure and disillusion.

Thus, Awa (2019, P.52) concludes that truthful and fruitful African human experience forms the basis of African literature. For instance, the Kenyan Joseph kareyaku discusses the unforgettable African colonial past, Richard Nturu discusses the much – brutalized African continent, Ame Casaire of Senegal deliberated on the glorified African continent while David Diop depicts anger and regrets as a result of the effects of colonization on the African continent thus:

Africa My Africa
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
Is this you, this back is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun...
That grows again patiently obstinately
And its fruit gradually acquires
The bitter taste of liberty.

African literature reflects African culture as could be seen in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which catalogues the cultural practices of the Igbo people in the pre-colonial times and which still stand today. Wole Soyinka’s poems reflect some aspects of Yoruba culture. Onukaogu(2019) exemplifies this with Soyinka’s “Abiku” which reveals the ‘spiritual child’ who dies a few years after he or she is born to return again to the family and this torments the family. This spirited child is also witnessed in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, Ben Okri’s ‘The Femished Road’. J.P. Clark’s ‘Abiku’. Similarly, Flora Nwakpa’s novels talk about “Mammy water” as practiced by the Oguta people of Anambra State Of Nigeria. Not only the above, Achebe admires the democratic government, efficient system of government, Igbo religion, dignity and respect for life, marriage and love, beauty of arts, music and poetry in the Igbo Culture, Awa (2018, p.18). Again, in Adimora-Ezigbo’s *The Last Of The Strong Ones* and Adiche’s *Purple Hibiscus*, the authors celebrate African Items of adornment, African Cuisines, masquerade, African oral tradition such as their exquisite proverbs (Awa, 2018, p. 35-39). The beauty in African culture was what the imperialist thwarted as a result of slavery and colonialism. Subsequently, the modern African literature according to Nnolim (2009, p.19) arose to write literature with strong sense of loss:

Loss of our dignity,
Loss of culture and tradition
Loss of our religion
Loss of our land
Loss of our very humanity.

All these are reflected vehemently in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and others. Ngugu wa Thiongo’s *Weep Not Child*, Alan paton’s “Cry the Beloved Country”. Most of the Apartheid literature irrigated African tears as a result of Man’s inhumanity to man. Thus, Alan Paton in Nnolim (2009,p.19) regrets thus:

Sadness falls upon them all. Sadness and fear and hate, how they well up in the heart and mind, whenever one opens the pages of these messengers of doom. Cry, the beloved County these things are not yet an end: The sun pours down on the earth; on the lovely land that man cannot enjoy. He only knows the fear of his heart.

Otagburuagu (2016) opines that some African writers have used their literary works to celebrate the national identity of their countries. Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* for instance, establishes that Africa and Africans were not intellectually backwards as some Europeans had imagined. Consequently, “most of the pioneer African literary works were protest literature against colonialism, denigration and occupation. Nnolim cited in Otagburuagu (2016, p. 12) substantiates the sterling achievements of African literary artists thus:

Nigerian most valued export especially today, is not petroleum product but her literary works, which have won every imaginable and unimaginable prize, which include the Nobel prize in literature. Nigerian literature was cut a deep niche in the world culture because through translation into various(world) languages, Nigeria exports her culture and tradition into every nook and cranny of the world. Achebe’s “*Things Fall Apart* has been reportedly translated into about fifty languages outside Africa.

The award of the Nobel Prize for literature to Soyinka in 1986 confirmed the eminence of African literature and had motivated African writers to write better and more.(Ayodabo and Ayodaso 2016) . Paramount is the contribution of the new generation African writers. Their novels are described as “genre- in-the –making or “ the genre of becoming” These writers include, Adichie, Ndibe, Seffi Ata,Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, Chika Unigwe, Helon Habila and the rest. Most of these writers experienced the military regime and the oil boom of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Their writings therefore reflect the struggle of a people who are undergoing the painful process of transformation from colonial to neocolonial to self-determining nation. As a result, Nigerian literature and indeed African literature situates on the realities of the continent’s social political process. In other words, African literature has a utilitarian function as it provides a link towards African transformation, unity, emancipation, economic and social power directed towards achieving betterment for the African people.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the sociological theory of literature. Sociological theories are propositions about society. They aim at examining society, social structures and systems of power in order to foster democratic social change. Awa (2019) itemizes some prominent sociological theorists, their theories and claims thus: George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, proponents of the symbolic interaction theory, which assumes that members of society learn to understand through their language. Karl Marx who conceived the conflict theory, which claims that society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources and that society order is maintained by domination and power, rather than consensus and conformity; Emily Durkheim, Talcott Parson and Robert Merton, suggested the functionalist theory, which proposes that society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole; Anna Lenngren and Lucretia Mott are advocates of the feminist theory, which observes gender in its relation to power; Herbert Marcus, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin and Erich Fromn are advocates of the critical theory which views domination as a problem, Harward Becker developed the labeling theory known also as symbolic interactionism. This theory posits that our identities and behavior are shaped by how others label us. The defender of the social learning theory is Albert Bandura who proposes that new behaviours can be acquired by observing and imitating others, observation of rewards and punishment. The exponent of Socio Strain Theory is Robert K Merton. He believes that social structures may pressure citizens to commit crimes. Adam Smith, Mathematicians John Von Neumann and John Nash uphold the Rational Choice Theory known as choice theory or rational action theory. Others include Socio Exchange Theory, Chaos Theory, Sociological Theory of Crime, Sociological Theory of Law, Entrepreneurship, Book, Religion, Gender, Deviance and Sociological Theory of Literature.

Sociological theory of literature is the anchor of this inquiry because it looks at the work of arts and its impact on society. This theory enables a literary analyst to examine the cultural, economic and political context of a literary work on the society of the writer. The analyst is interested in “the standard of behavior, etiquette, relationship between parents and children, the rich and the poor, men and women, religious beliefs, taboo and moral values”. (Awa, 2019, P.55). The analyst may decide to study the economy and politics of the society, the system of government, the rights of the citizens, wealth and power distribution and how they affect the citizenry. Therefore, the literary critic is in search of the admirable traits of his society. Aptly, the sociological

theory of literature captures this study since the literary works under study captures the feelings of African society and her citizens both negatively and positively.

III. ANALYSIS

Emeka Otagburuagu, the Novelist as An Activist, a Judge and an Umpire

Orabueze (2016) presents Emeka Otagburuagu in his *Echoes of Violence* as an activist and a judge of the International Criminal Court in order to draw the attention of the readers to the end result of the disparagement of the people's right and freedoms. Otagburuagu has used this literary piece as an interventionist to preach peace and restoration of human values and to stitch the broken ties of humanities and to promote internal and global peace. Otagburuagu's *Echoes of violence* is set in an imaginary land, Alaoma, "the land of the rising sun". Alaoma goes into war with her neighbour because they were humiliated, provoked, killed in a pogrom by their neighbours with whom they had shared common interest and so they decided to break away by declaring war on their neighbours to have independence. They sacrificed all they had in the fight to liberate their country and themselves from oppression. No doubt, the writer presents the Nigerian-Biafran civil war of 1967-1970 in a fiction form. So, the novel is an exposé of history. In the war, Gowon led Nigeria while Ojukwu led Biafra. The leaders met and signed the Akuri accord while in history they met and signed the Aburi accord in Ghana. The land of the rising sun or Alaoma is Biafra or Eastern Nigeria. There was wreckage of war on life and property. Young men were killed in their numbers as they were drafted into the army to fight with bare hands while the Nigeria group was powerful and well coordinated firepower. As a result, about 8,000-10,000 deaths were recorded daily in the Biafran enclave while about 6,000 people died a day from malnutrition and starvation. There was a lot of sabotage and framings on the part of Alaoma even against their own brothers. Morality is thrown to the winds. Raiding, sleaze, fraud and violence became a way of life. The philosophy of social equality as enshrined in "the Ahiara declaration", was thrown to the dogs as "bestiality, man's inhumanity to man, violence, terrorism, dehumanization, bribery and corruption took the centre stage. (Agwu, 2016). The end of the war saw devastation and bothered spirits, the people's economy was nauseatingly reticent, physical and psychological trauma on the survivors and the witness of war. Consequent upon the derogations of the people's rights and freedom, Otagburuagu in his *Echoes of Violence* assumes, the rule of human right activist and a judge of the international criminal court to examine critically the thirty month Nigerian civil war which an eye-witness described as *Orgy of Blood* (Orabueze, 2016). The writer looks at the international humanitarian principles in warfare established by the Rome Statute of international criminal court. This principle was instituted so that a violator cannot justify his actions. To avoid jungle justice in any war, it spelt out what constitute crime of genocide, crime against humanity and war crimes of aggression.

Orabueze (2016) x-rays war crimes committed against Alaoma citizenry.

1. In the first place, the civilian violated Article 8(2) (c) (i) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court because they murdered millions of their Alaoma neighbours in a pogrom where pregnant women and children were brutally massacred, the young and the aged maimed. Their crime was that they lived among their neighbours.

Orabueze (2016, p. 325) captures the feeling of the narrator as he recounts the trauma of the survivors thus:

The widows and orphans among them were weeping because
the pogrom had deprived them of the breadwinner and loved
ones. The hospitals were filled with the maimed and wounded.

The railway stations teemed with haggard and worn out returnees with piles of luggage that appeared as shriveled as their owners panic stricken and expectant relatives surged to the stations in search of their kit and kin. Many waited in vain for such returnees. The pogrom had taken its toll on them. It resulted in a wonton destruction of lives and property and the survivors fearful. This led Alaoma to go to war for self-succession from the federation. The war becomes a price for freedom but for their enemies, it was a holy war (Jihad) on the infidels. But the war was not a war between equals. This is because Alaoma is constituted by volunteers inspired by patriots who are ill-trained, ill-equipped as a result went to war with clubs and baton, ill-clothed with tattered army uniforms and going from house to house begging for alms while the United Republic (the enemy) had state of the art military armament and mercenary and they enjoyed the support of the international community. Consequently, went to war with armored cars and heavy artillery bombardment. Unfortunately, the federal government closes the borders of the Alaoma territory and unleashes mayhem on both the freedom fighters and the civilian populace of Alaoma. Again, an enemy jet bomber appeared midair throwing mortal bombs everywhere and caused the death of Omerenma and Azuka in Chief Alaoma's compound. Thus, innocent civilians were attacked and killed (Orabueze, 2016)

2. All these violate Article of Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. This is a war crime.

3. Article 8 of the Statute was also violated when an enemy jet destroyed hospitals, churches and relief centers. This is a form of war crime. The jet bombers also raided the refugee camp where Omerenma was trying to remove some relief materials one of the bombs which had been targeted at the church building missed its way and struck Chikezie dead as he was trying to remove a bale of stockfish from the store (p. 104)

Looking at the reports of the International humanitarian agencies on the war, Orabueze(2016) maintains that starvation takes a huge toll on the Alaoma citizens. There was severe scarcity of commodities; and resulted in the survival of the fittest. The soldiers scuttled for anything within their reach to eat. Even human flesh was served as meat. p. 58. Diseases, hunger and insecurity became the order of the day. The United Republic committed a shameful war crime as provided in Article 8(2)(c)(vi) of the statute. Being victorious, they took Alaoma maidens as booties of war, they raped them and subjugated them to sexual slavery and prostitution and forced pregnancy. Orabueze(2016) argues that the writer as a judge of the International criminal court does not spare the culprits-both Alaoma people, their volunteers soldiers and the enemy troops from the United Republic. In the first place, there was nepotism and impunity as the sons of the rich among the Alaomas were not conscripted into the army. Rather, they were sent overseas as posited in text thus:

The new sovereign state had plenty of job opportunities especially for those who had big brothers and godfathers. Those who did not have Abraham for a godfather got enlisted in the army where they had slim chances of survival in the face of sophisticated artillery weapons. (p.5)

Orabueze continues that it is the son of the poor that are drafted “to fight with sticks against heavy artillery weapons of the enemy”. Not just this, the leaders of Alaoma are deceitful and they betray the nation and their people. As a result of this treasonable felony, the writer with his judge’s lens described them as “murderers”. This is because they are answerable to the death of soldiers and civilians-young and old through artillery bombardments and starvation as enshrined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. It is unfortunate that the Alaoma volunteer fighters spend more time committing war crimes against their fellow citizens than they spend on planning and execution of the war against the Federal troop as emphasized in the novel:

Onyekwere wondered how many innocent citizens had been arrested, tortured, dehumanized and sent to their untimely death through the recklessness of people who called themselves freedom fighters. (p. 133)

The personae describes all the perpetrators of crimes. The Alaoma freedom fighters were described as “dastardly villains” because they deceived the Alaoma citizens. The war itself was described as “holocaust” while the war crimes and abominations were described as “symptoms of a disintegrating universe” (Orabueze,2016).

The novel reveals the ills of society; and creative writers always struggle to protect the rights and freedom of the citizens of his society. Consequently, the writer in this particular novel, wears the lens of a judge in the Criminal court and pronounces judgment on the civil crimes committed by the Alaoma and the United Republic. So, the *Echoes of Violence* warns the people against violence and unnecessary wars.

Osofisan, the playwright as a Democrat

A democrat is a supporter of democracy and an Advocate of democratic politics and policies. Fosudo, (2001) opines that the artist is a conscious political element whose products make pungent remarks on life and on the affairs in society. He provides a means of indirect participation in governance and in the making of decision in that society. As a result of the impact of the artists in our society, some notable artists have been given important positions in government. Such artists especially in Nigeria according to Fosudo(2001) include among others Moses Okiya (Baba Sala), Chika Okpala (Zebrudaya), who were conferred with National Merit Honours of Commander of Federal Republic and Member of the Order of the Niger (MON) while some others were offered political appointments – Prof. Femi Osofisan (Playwright), the General Manager of National Theatre and recently, Richard Mofe Damijo was the Commissioner for Culture and Tourism in Delta State. The aim of this inquiry is to examine the extent to which an artist embraces or practices democratic ideals in his works. Osofisan’s works show a deep-seated revolutionary perspective on contemporary socio-political issues. They propose thorough polite alternatives for the present social order. So, Osofisan maintains that he and his contemporaries use the weapon they have – zeal and eloquence to awaken in the people the song of liberation thus:

Our works will be a weapon on the struggle to bring our country to the foremost ranks of modern nations our songs would call for radical political alternatives.

So Osofisan aims at creating a theatre that should lead to change in society – a theatre that would confront the inadequacies of his society. His theatre therefore should reveal the injustices and the corruption, the spreading misery of the majority of the populace, self destructive violence and aggression, the contaminating vulgarity of the elite, reckless squandaminia and the repeated failure of our leadership and the general

deterioration in the value accorded human life. Thus, his ideological persuasions are determined by the warp ravaging our society. Therefore, he shuns labels, like socialism, radicalism, marxism or revolutionary in that he believes they are mere propaganda, an act of playing to the gallery and dangerous juvenility. This is why the overriding philosophy in his plays is revolutionary which make for a new egalitarian society. Osofisan therefore creates the awareness of responsible leadership in society through his writings. This he believes will curb societal vices such as corruption, no accountability and dictatorship. These themes are clearly spelt out in his “Many Colours Make the Thunder king.” Osofisan does not promote the idea of sole heroism. This indicates democracy, which requires collective participation in the struggle for emancipation and human survival. His “Morontondum”, “Chattering and the Song” and “Many Colours Make the Thunder King” highlight the need for men to attain democratic freedom.

Many Colours Make the Thunder king”

Literary works are vital works which sometimes deployed by African writers for criticizing the social and political situations in their countries with the aim of challenging and proffering solutions to unpleasant and oppressive practices by its leaders. “Many Colours Make the Thunder King” demonstrates this state of affairs. Osofisan has attacked despotic governments, and this has given him the title-“ Nigeria’s most purposeful writer and social critic and activist” because he has constantly used his literary works to defend the marginalized members of his society. His works therefore are tools for social and political changes; as he challenges tyrannies of all sorts. In line with his philosophy, “Many Colours Make the Thunder King” dwells on the tall dream nursed and embarked upon by King Sango, son of Oranmiyan, who wishes at all cost to outshine his father. Alagemo informs Sango that for his yearning to come to fruition, he must marry a river, wed a forest, and take a mountain for a third wife – an impossible feat. All to beat his father. He succeeded in marrying a river and wedding a forest symbolized by Oya and Osun respectively. Oya and Osun are important gods in Yoruba mythology. His wives, as a result of jealousy made him to make mistakes. These lead to betrayal, conspiracy crisis, self-destruction and suicide. Sango epitomizes despotism. This condition goes against the principles of democracy. It is beautiful to be ambitious, but inordinate ambition is prohibited. This is why tyrants in world history such as the Russian Adolf Hitler, the Liberian Samuel Doe and Nigerian Sanni Abacha crashed. Just as these oppressors Sango practically ignored his advisers and took decisions all alone. But the basis of democratic governance is liberty, equality, justice, fairness, equity, freedom, collective will or joint responsibilities, peace and dignity of the individual. Sango regrets his high-handedness thus:

Now I know how much smaller than my father I am. He could never have done this, to banish his wife unjustly, condemn a faithful servant and then accuse without proof, his own generals. Ah! How much more I need to learn.

The play discusses the central theme of the disproportionate ambition of Sango but recommends caution, compassion and humanity in the distribution and use of power. The crumple of authoritarianism and yearn for power shift by the citizens is revealed in scene 17. Having defeated Timi for the second time in a fight ordered by Sango between Timi and Gbonka, Gbonka now challenges Sango and demands a total change in order of things as he charges:

There Sango. I challenge you now. I Gbonka have freed myself of your spells. Bring out the fire in your mouth now and see if I won’t quench it. I Gbonka, I dare you in the open! I declare your reign ended today! You must leave the throne from now on. I give you seven days to surrender your crown or I, Gbonka will come for you. I, Gbonka, I am second to none.

In the end, Sango turns a fugitive. He leaves the throne and the palace of Igbeti in shame, as it happened to renowned dictators such as Ugandan Idi Amin and Zairian Mobutu Sesesekou.(Fosudo, 2001)

IV. CONCLUSION

The literary artist in his literary creations serves as a watch dog, a gadfly with rolling eyes monitoring the happenings in his society. His literary text is therefore a spot of conflicts and a domain for the violation of rights and freedoms of the citizens of his society who inhabit the world of his text. He earnestly brings to the limelight the conflicts and derogations of the rights and freedoms and to point the way for the resolution of the conflict and the protection of the rights and freedom of the citizens to create an egalitarian society. Thus, literature reflects the happenings in society as evidently portrayed in the words of Senator Ihenyen “Perhaps , I would have ended up being one of the eaters of the living if I had not received Dr. Musa Okpanachi ‘s colletion of poems “The Eaters of the Living”.

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Awa, Jacinta Onyekachi, et. al. “Literature, the Reflector of Society: A Study of African Literature.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(6), 2020, pp. 35-41.