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EXPOSING THE DYNAMISM AND INNOVATION OF LITERATURE VIA A DIACHRONIC APPRAISAL OF THE THEMATIC CONCERNS OF SOME AFRICAN PROSE – FICTION WRITERS

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Abstract

African writers are purposeful, thoughtful and philosophical. They don't just write or sing to perform; they carry out their acts for specific and definite purposes. The first and second generation writers in Africa believed they have a duty for their climes and so they involved their arts either to extol or celebrate their Africaness, to combat their colonizers and inform them that Africa has a culture she can be proud of. They also write to exhibit their disenchantment and disappointment in the African leaders who performed and are still performing more worrisomely long after the colonizers had left the shores of Africa. This paper, therefore, is set to carry out a diachronic appraisal of the thematic concerns of a number of African (Pedantic) prose-fiction writers. For the pre-colonial era, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) was selected for analysis. For the colonial, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was selected for scrutiny while for post-colonial writings, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) was also examined as the representative of writers' critical mind of that era. After a careful analysis, the paper found out and concluded that in the novel analyzed for the pre-colonial period, African writers only extol, praise and exhibit African beauty and her comeliness. Writers in that era also wrote to exhibit African believes in general. In the novel (work) which was critically reviewed for the colonial period, writers write to show-case culture conflicts and clash of interests and lastly in the post-colonial period, African writers wrote and are still writing to exhibit their lack of expectation in the African self-rule, that is worse than when the white man was here.

Keywords:
Dynamism,
Innovation,
Diachronic, Appraisal,
Thematic Concerns,
African Prose-Fiction.

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Introduction

Nobody dare contests the fact that writing culture is an asset bequeathed by Westerners to the Africans when they were bidding farewell to the shores of Africa. In fact, the act/culture of scribbling on papers came from the West but observers, readers and critics, the world over usually acknowledge that African writings (most especially literal works) are never a work at face value but directional, purposeful and functional. The word and wordings might be foreign but the thoughts and themes are natives. The reasons for these might not be far-fetched from the fact that African writers write from their economic, social and political experiences. This could be the reason why Ngugi(1972:1) asserts that 'Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society.'

Emenyonu(1988:v) seems to share the foregoing when he writes:

> *African Literature is a very serious intellectual and cultural activity. It has served African homes as a tool for the acculturation and socialization of the young. It has been used always as an organ of instilling social awareness, creating national consciousness and projecting the African reactions to those in humanities and injustices which date back to the effronteries unleashed on the black man by the inimical forces of slave trade. Colonialism and neo colonialism, alien forces which have re-drawn the African landscape and topography, distorted African values and stagnated African human and technological developments.*

As we could see, African writing is a work of circumstance, the bulk of it is situation-induced. It is a work which aspires to publish and bring out the stories of Africa from the Africans themselves. The writers try to put into writing the joy, the pleasure, the desires, the sorrows, the distresses, and troubles of their people. At the beginning of the writing, the work appears to be celebrating and praisingAfricaness, later it metamorphoses into social protest.

Literature in Africa is not only entertaining but potently functional. It offers a manifestation of both intrinsic aesthetics and extrinsic didacticism. (Emenyonu 1988:vi)

As we can see, literature is usually used for the good and betterment of the African society, the writers as the spokespersons of their society usually write on the attractiveness of their environment, atmospheric conditions of their people's hopes and aspirations, the achievements and disasters of their people.

Justification for the study

There are quite a number of write-ups and works, even critical appraisals, on African/Nigerian literatures but few examine the African literary cultural history. At a

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cursory look , they fail to review the three phases of African literary experience at a glance, which are necessary to enable Africans to see where they were coming from, during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Ngugi (1972:4)seems to argue in favour of this when he states that:

> *We need to see Africa's cultural history in three broad phases: Africa before white conquest, Africa under colonial domination, and today's Africa striving to find its true self image.*

Briefs about the Writers whose Works Are Under this Study

Amos Tutuola

One of the earliest Nigerian prose-fiction writers-Amos Tutuola was born in 1920 in Abeokuta, Ogun state, Nigeria to a Yoruba father –Charles Tutuola and a Yoruba mother – Esther AinaTutuola who were cocoa farmers. The *Palm-Wine Drinkard* was his first publication which he wrote in 1952. Due to his father's sudden death, he could not continue his education. He took to farming, he failed, he later learnt a trade which was blacksmithing and in 1944, "he joined the West African Air Corps of the Royal Air Force as a copper-smith based in the British colony". In 1947, he married a woman called Alake Victoria. According to Oyekan Owomoyela, (1997:865). Tutuola became a published author by mere chance.

Chinua Achebe

Chinua Achebe was born on 16 November, 1930 in Ogidi, in Eastern Nigeria. His father's name was Isaiah Okafor Achebe who was a pioneer Igbo Christian Catchiest, His mother was Madam Janet Ileogunam. He had his primary education at Ogidi and Nekede, Owerri where he won the Owerri Province scholarship to study at Government College Umuahia. In 1948, Achebe proceeded to University College, Ibadan which is now known as University of Ibadan. He wrote: *Things Fall Apart* in 1958*, No longer at Ease* in 1960, *Arrow of God* in 1964, *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1986, and *A Man of the People* in 1966.

Ayi Kwei Armah

Ayi Kwei Armah was born in Takoradi, Ghana in 1939, he was educated at Achimota School outside Accra. He attended Harvard University and studied Sociology. Armah's first novel was *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* which he wrote in 1968.

Theoretical Framework

Old Historicism is adopted for this paper, because history is believed to be the antecedents of Literature. Historicism is of two facets: Old Historicism and New Historicism. In Old Historicism as a methodology of analysing literary work, history serves

as a background to literature. The primary importance is the text, the art object itself. (Bressier 2003:180)

As we could deduce from the above, the history and experience of the Africans form the basis of various prose-fictions works that emanated and are still emanating from this continent. The artists engaged and still engaging their works to exhibit the dynamism, diversity and the innovations of the writers to cope with the prevailing issues of the tide and time. Cultural poetics is otherwise called New Historicism in America and Cultural materialism in the Great Britain. New Historicism declares or believes that all histories are subjective, and that they are written by individuals whose personal biases affect their interpretations of the past disavowing the Old Historicism's autonomous view of history. Cultural poetics declares that history is one of the discourses, or methods of seeing and thinking about the world (Bressier 2003:181).

Barry (1995:162) seems to be on the same page with Bressier when he affirmed that:

> *The New Historicists, like Tillyard try to establish the interconnections between the Literature and the general culture of a period. However, in every other respect they depart from Tillyard's approach. The post culturalists intellectual revolution of the 1960's and 1970's challenges the older historicism on several grounds and establishes a new set of assumptions.*

Since Old Historicism affirms that history and the prevailing things at the time of writing are the basis of literature. The present work therefore embraces Old historicism for its analysis. Old Historicism is an historical work concerning literature before the coming of New Historicism in the1980s. It justifies how the influence of history is transferred to the works of literature. This influence can take the form of social and cultural changes. Even though the two of them prioritized the cultural situation at the period of writing, the major difference is that the old one sees history as the bedrock of literature while the new one sees it at primary.

Thematic Concerns during Pre-Colonial Era

Palm Wine Drinkard

It is a known fact that if somebody desires to know what transpired in a particular literary era such individual should read the works of the artists that wrote during such epoch. Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and many others are the interpreters of what happened during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. As it could be harvested in Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drinkard*, there are themes of Adventure, Heroism and Magical Realism All these are condensed in the work. We could see how the Palm-Wine Drinkard went on an adventurous journey into the Dead's Town in search of his beloved

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tapster who experienced an untimely death. The young drinkard, to the chagrin of the readers happens to be the eldest of his father's eighteen children. The audience is also surprised to see that the drinkard had been an incurable drunkard from the age of ten and that his father encouraged him by engaging the service of a tapster to ensure adequate supply of palm-wine to his son and his friends. After the death of the tapster, he tried to find another tapster which proved abortive.

One day, he took his native Juju and also his father's Juju with him to the Dead's town in search of his tapsters' whereabouts. In his adventure, among other things, he was able to capture death. According to Owomoyela (1997:867), the drinkard, his wife and child all went to the Dead's Town.

He wrote: "they eventually arrive at Dead's Town after ten years and numerous other adventures and there they find the tapster."

It should be noted that all the happenings above are stupendous! The writers during pre-colonial era wrote either to pride in their colour, to show the love, the peace and the tranquility that exist among them or to exhibit their adventurous prowess or spirit of heroism. We would discover that there are a lot of happenings that are larger than life in the storyline. All these are part of Yoruba oral tradition which form the basis of Yoruba/African oral Literature, and the basis of African written literature. Stories that are told are meant to shape African children's cognitive maturity and to instill in them native intelligence, wisdom and knowledge capable of seeing them through life's journey. The difficulties encountered are meant to reveal probable problems Yoruba/African children are likely to encounter as they grow into adulthood and in their life's journey.

As we can see from the above, the work is an awe inspiring bundle of adventurous stories aimed at empowering and instilling boldness and enculturating the younger ones. Apart from this, Literature at pre-colonial time was also to exhibit the African prowess and magical power, intrepidness, fortitude, valour and ability to solve riddles of life.

We would discover that when the white men have not come, African writers were just writing to showcase beauties obtainable in Africa.

Despite the fact that some critics believed that Tutuola writes with substandard English, some readers and critics are of the opinion that the work is impactful, written with appalling imagination. 'Tutuola enjoys considerable following among students of African Literature in Europe and the United States, and increasingly even in Nigeria, where his writing initially has generated considerable hostility' (Owomoyela 1997:867)

Furthermore, among others, there is the theme of dedication to duties as we see in the tapster. The readers especially the American and European audience would be taken aback about this manner of dedication that exists in Africa. There is also the theme of unspeakable power of African Juju (Magic power) as the drinkard says "One fine morning, I took all my native juju with me and also my father's juju with me and I left my father's hometown to find out whereabouts of my tapster who had died" (Page 9)

Tutuola, via his work, has made readers to believe that there is relationship between the living and the dead as he writes "The first person I approaches for directions to Deads Town is an old Man …" (Page 10). There are a lot of incidents in the work that suggest that supernatural beings can be of help to human beings, or the living, and that after death there could still be intercourse between them, naturally and supernaturally. The presentation of 'Magic egg' (Page 101) by Baity (the dead tapster) to the Drinkard also corroborates the above.

In all, the novel, (125 page work) as representative of writer's critical mind, reveals that the writers of the era had no issues of protest to engage in. They wrote to showcase African appalling and awesome cultural heritage. They also wrote to show transition of orature to written one as we read on page 9 of the novel:

> *…old people were saying that the whole people who had died in this world, did not go to heaven directly, but they were living in one place somewhere in this world…*

Thematic Concerns during Colonial Era.

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe could be described both as colonial and precolonial writing. This is because it was written during the time when the colonizers were first surfacing in the 19th Century in the Eastern Nigeria. It could be seen as a colonial writing because of the culture conflict that emanated or ensued in the novel.

According to Peadmin in https//www.peabodylibrary.org. on colonial literature:

> *Typically,"colonial literature" refers to work written during a period of time when one country was actively participating in the colonization or imperialistic exploitation of another geographic area.*

Oladapo and Adejumo(1973:5) described the coming of the colonizers as destructive as things never remained the same when they came. The conditions of the hitherto peaceful clan or society never remained as they were.

They assert:

> *When we say things fall apart what do we mean? We can hardly give any other meaning than the very obvious one- i.e., there is a disintegration; the breaking into pieces of a thing hitherto intact. …We see the true, correct picture of village life in a typical West African or Nigerian town or village. In this typical village, Umuofia, there is order, peace and good government and justice is practised as much as the people think adequate. But the arrival of the Europeans with their Christian religion, different social values different attitudes comes to have a disintegration effect, on the stable society of the Ibos.*

As we could see, *Things Fall Apart* is a story about a culture which is on the precipice of becoming something different from what it used to be. Going by Achebe in https://www.sparknotes.com:

> *Things Fall Apart deals with how the prospect and reality of change affect various characters. The tension about whether change should be privileged over tradition often involves questions of personal status.*

The novel narrates the tragic story of the rise and falls of the man called Okonkwo and equally tragic narrative of the Igbo culture represented by the agrarian society of Umuofia under the encroachments of British Christian imperialism. (Killiam 1997:19) In the novel, when a python, the symbol and the physical entity typifying a scared spirit in the land is killed by a Christian convert, the villagers burn the Christian church in reprisal. The readers continue to encounter one sacrilege or the other as a boy by the name Enoch unmasked an Egwugwu, thereby causing more chaos in the land:

> *… Enoch fell on him and tore off his mask. The other Egwugwu immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion (Page 149)*

All these signify that the coming of the white man has brought anarchy to the Igbo land and of course the African land. Therefore, the centre could no longer hold in a land that was unique and autonomous at the outset.

These are things the writers were reacting to during the colonial period. *Things Fall Apart* is just picked as representative work, others by Achebe *Arrows of God*, *No longer at Ease* and several other ones from African writers are protest works which are seen as veritable tools in fighting imperialism.

There is a theme of disintegration. When the new ideas and new ways of life came into Igbo society, the old traditional pattern of society began to scatter. Things began to fall apart, traditional beliefs, old practices, reliance on earth goddesses and the ancestral spirit began to receive embarrassment from the Christian converts from the same society, and the society began to break into pieces!

Post-Colonial Era

The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born by Ayi Kwei Armah. The writings during this era are that of disillusionment, of disenchantment and of disappointment on the natives that take leadership batons from the white leaders of just yesterday.

According to Baldick et al in https://en.m.wikipedia.org, on postcolonial literature:

> "post-colonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially questions

> relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people and themes such as racialism and colonialism".

Palmer (1972:1) seems to be on the same page with the above submission when he lavishly states that:

> *THE DECOLONIZATION of African Literature is already in progress. Novelists are becoming less preoccupied with cultural and sociological matters, and more concerned about exposing the corruption and incompetence which are so widespread in African political and governmental circles. Ayi Kwei Armah'sfirst novel, The Beautyful Ones Are Yet Not Born* – is one of the most successful results of this exercise.

Just like every other post-colonial fiction writers, Armah displays his hatred to the act of ignominy displayed by the African leaders. This writer is taken aback in no small measure by the level of corruption of all the stake-holders of his day which is ubiquitous and ravaging the land.

According to Colmer (1997:49), this novel "diagnoses the sickness of society and offers a prognosis that is not entirely pessimistic … *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a moral fable, but the moral is a political one…"

Set in Ghana, published in 1968, the central theme of the work is corruption which has made the society sick. The title actually means better leaders "the beautiful ones" are yet to be seen or yet to be born.

We can clearly see from the above that writers in this era are "less preoccupied with cultural and sociological matters. Armah can be referred to as a didactic novelist or writer. This could be the reason why Colmer (1997:49) says "Armah's novel focus on the question of how one should live purely in an impure society"

The story is all about an unnamed railway worker who is emotionally bothered and troubled that his righteous posture and refusal to saying 'Yes' to corruption that has pervaded the entire land is affecting his family negatively. The man noticed with awe that bribery, loss of integrity and virtue, and even moral principle has become the order of the day in this society. Every individual including the government officials are not left out in the act, making the readers to know that the entire land is sick and in dire need of healing. The man and his wife (Oyo) are later justified when they see their corrupt old friend (Koomson) who is now wealthy via corruption, begging them to assist him to get out of the country because of a coup d'etait.

Fear gripped the entire politicians and corrupt leaders when there is change in government… "They say they have seized power… Koomson was sitting on the bed…

he looked like a man afraid that the utterance of a single word would be the end of him. The fear coming out every piece of him… (Page 161)

This could be the reason why Palmer (1982:129) enshrines that "*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a symbolic moral fable. What strikes one most forcefully, is the strength of the author's moral earnestness. On almost every page, in unusually vigorous and realistic language, Armah expresses his nausea at the corruption he sees everywhere…"

Armah aspires to make readers, through this 183 page novel, realize that the new crop of leaders (the new elite class) who are black men are incapable of proving their colonial masters wrong.

Conclusion

This paper has pointed to the fact that economic and socio-political issues in African societies usually spur African writers to write and that such writers often wrote to exhibit African self-esteem and to x-ray activities in their surroundings. In addition, they sometimes write to examine African pride and her predicament from the pre-colonial era. In this write-up three relevant literary texts are examined to establish the above facts. The texts are: Amos Tutuola's – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* Chinua Achebe's - *Things Falls Apart* and Armah's - *The Beautyful Onces Are Not Yet Born.* In Tutuola's fiction (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard)* which is picked upon as an agent and proxy of pre-colonial writing, the writer wrote to project not only the aesthetics, serenity, candour, equanimity and African magic power, but also to show the acculturation and enculturation of African young ones. During colonial period, Achebe as the envoy of the writers in that era wrote to display culture conflict, showing the white intruders that Africa has an heroic culture it would ever be boastful of. And, lastly, during post colonial era, Armah, as the delegate of the writers in the period, wrote to show African disillusionment in their elected leaders.

It is therefore, the burden of this paper that solemn assembly or conference is convened by African opinion leaders on the above identified matters. It is heart-ailing that since Ayi Kwei Armah wrote this work (*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*). In (1968, (56 years ago), the story of Africans and their leaders have not changed. Their political histories are replete of corruption, avarice, covetousness, blood shed, rigging, nepotism, manipulation and lots more.

This paper will therefore be relevant to the current societal plights if cues and cautions are taken by the political class to mitigate the ills identified by the critics and writer who are political commentators and watchdogs of the society.

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