Nigerian Fiction as A Protest and Anti-Colonial Literature

By

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Introduction

Literature cannot be viewed in isolation of the hetro sociopolitical matrix, since it is universally acknowledged as a social phenomenon in contemporary Nigeria and Africa by extension, all aspects of life, including history, politics and philosophy. Reminiscence and ideology comingle in one manner or another to form the woof of literature. This book considers how literature protests against colonialism, vices and other misnomers in Nigeria and by so doing engenders Pan African integration, peace, cohesion and national development in contemporary Nigeria. Literature is therefore, a veritable weapon that will help us grapple with our problems and help to lead us to that "no man's land" called national development. Literature is capable of extricating us from the shackles of neo- colonialism, dictatorship, corruption and economic irregularity which have been the bane of development in Nigeria. There is no better way of articulating national development in Nigeria than literature. In a country where every other category of development has failed, this has been and is still the only alternative.

It became necessary in various facets of human endeavour to take a backward glance as to have new directions in Nigerian literature toward, building on the legacies of the 21st century. Nigerian and African literature are at the inception of the 21st century has served as a forum for addressing and redressing issues of education and miseducation, the evil of effect of colonialisim in and around Nigeria. A formal for: dismantling myths and distractions about Nigeria and Africa by the whites; ascension of cultural affirmative and reaffirmations, and for linguistic experimentations. With all these processes, Nigerian (African) writers set a pace for development of Nigeria and other African countries through their writings. Against this backdrop, literature cannot be viewed in isolation from the

complexity of the society that birthed it. Literature produces a positive moral effect on human kind and should therefore be explored as a tool to unmask it, attack ethnic prejudices and create in us strides for the development of Nigeria.

Nigerian Protest Fiction

From its beginning, Nigerian literature (fiction) in the 19th and 20th Centuries in Nigeria (Africa), for instance in the era Chinua Achebe, Isidore Okpewho, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, T. M. Aluko, Chukwuemeka Ike, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa in Nigeria for instance and other writers across African continent such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Alex la Guma, Peter Abrahams, Camara laye, Mongo Beti; Mariama Ba was an unhappy one. It was lachrymal and a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation, following Nigeria's (Africa's) unhappy experience of underdevelopment with slavery and colonialism. The sociologist, Taive (1952) has remarked that the distinguishing mark between the early literatures of Great Britain and those of France was that the former was the literature of a conquering people while the later was a literature of a defeated people. The same is likened to African literature of enslaved people.

Nigerians (Africans), having lost pride through slavery and colonialism and being underdeveloped, created a modern literature from the ashes of these past experiences. To the Nigerians, it became a literature with a sense of loss: loss of dignity, culture and tradition, religion, land and the loss of our very humanity through colonialism and neo-colonialism. And in South Africa, protest literature over apartheid further irritated Africa's tears because of man's inhumanity, to a people dubbed the wretched of the earth. Little wonder the titles of our most celebrated literary works in Nigeria and Africa generally highlighted these loss: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart, No Longer At Ease, Arrow of God, The Trouble With Nigeria;* Peter Abrahams' Tale Freedom, La Guma's A Walk In The Night, Wa Thiongo's Weep Not Child, Alan Paton's Cry The Beloved Country and many other works of Nigeria and African writers that thematise the negative impact of colonialism and neocolonialism on the African environment. Outside Africa, the works of most prominent male and female Black-African American writers respond positively to the reality of black revolution – a protest against inhuman treatment meted to the blacks in America. They embody what Richard Gilman called "The art of creation of the self in the face of the self's historic denial by our

(the America) society" quoted from the Norton Anthology (1970). The afro American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, W.E.B Dubois, James Welden Johnson, Alain Locke, Rudolph Fish (Men); Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Tonni Morrison, Alice Walker (women), etc. echo the dehumanization of their black personality by their white colleagues; their works are steeped in black aesthetics and consciousness, though with ideological differences. Hence they variously protest against racism. This book attempts to compare the level of protest of the afro American with that of their Nigerian counterparts, bringing to the fore the degree of protestation in their works. The comparison will dwell on Richard Wright's protest in *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* for the black American writers. On the other hand this book will interrogate the protest in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* for Nigerian and East African writers.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the ideology of protest as an aspect of the Nigerian prison is aptly harnessed by the author. The unavoidable influence of western ideas on African culture based on Europeans misconception of Africa and Africans as people who had no culture, no identity, no education and in fact no literature that Achebe reacted to correct in response to these misconceptions about Africans. Most African writers reacted sharply against this aspect. For instance, Chinua Achebe affirms the cultural heritage of Nigeria (Africa) prior to the coming of the white man in his novel *Things Fall Apart.* Joseph Conrad, a colonial writer, saw the African in his *Heart of Darkness* as "a caricature, primitive, unable to think and read."

The Blackman as a result lost his values and identity. It is this impression that Chinua Achebe tends to correct in *Things Fall Apart.* The Nigerian writers strive to redefine, reappraise and regain the lost identity through their literary (fictional) works, hence the concept of protest in Nigeria literature. The contend that before the advent of the coming of the Europeans to Africa, Africa had existed with rice cultural activities, some of activities include masquerade dances, sacrifices to the gods, ceremonies such as New yam festivals, and so on. "Masquerade in Nigeria dates back to the 13th Century. In the true sense of it, it cannot be separated from the ideas of the African art,… its formal context derives from the total culture of their time and space" (Ohia, 2021, p38). In these occasions, songs, incantations ec

cetera are rendered which are essentially oral and portend the essence of African literature.

The title of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* is very revealing and a protest. When we say things fall apart, we mean that there is disintegration - the breaking into pieces of a thing hitherto intact. The setting of *Things Fall Apart* relays the first negative impact of European invasion upon the old society of Umuofia in Onitsha province of then Eastern Nigeria. The novel creates the way of life of an Ibo village community when white missionaries and officials were firsts penetrating Nigeria. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe protests the incursion of the white missionaries and officials when he describes in the novel, the life, customs and social values of the clan of Umuofia before the coming of the white man. The new system and values ushered in by the white through their religion: Christianity was irksome intolerable to great patriots like Okonkwo. Hence his tragic end. Actually, in this village there was order, peace, good government and justice. But the arrival of the white man with Christian religion, different social values, attitudes come to have a disintegrating effect on the stable society.

Achebe protests through the novel that with the coming of these Europeans and their alien ideas, the Ibo society with its old traditional patterns begins to falter, things begin to "fall apart", traditional beliefs, old practices, beliefs in earth goddess (ani, ana, ala, ale) an ancestral spirits, all these begin to receive assault in the hands of the Christian religion and so society begins to break into pieces with opposing views and thus "the falcon cannot hear the falconer" and the "things fall apart" and the centre cannot hold. The protest in the novel resonates in the two major tragedies of the novel – the personal tragedy of Okonkwo "one the greatest men in Umuofia" and the public tragedy of the eclipse or extermination of one culture by another.

The protest against extermination of the African culture by the western culture becomes more pronounced with the activities of the natives in the novel to buttress their anger and condemnation. The two tragedies may form the major themes of the novel thus: theme culture conflict, theme of fall of a hero (Okonkwo) and the theme of disillusionment or disappointment. The two themes are fused at the and when Okonkwo's tragic death is shown to the part of a greater fracture: the once

integrated, oraganised society of Umuofia now shattered, its gods blasphemed, its customs desecrated, the clan divided, a British District Commissioner in control. In other words, though Achebe's presentation of life in Umuofia is extremely sympathetic, it is not totally idealised. The protest continues in Achebe's two other novels: No *Longer At Ease* and *The Arrow of God* which alongside *Things Fall Apart* form a trilogy. From these expositions, the African fiction has been useful in re-affirming the African's confidence in his own ability to express himself and to put across to the world his point of view and that of the African society.

African Protest Tradition In Literature

There are groups of writers which gave rise to the need for a new poetics (protest) in African societies. "The first group can be classified as autobiographers, those writers who through the novel record their childhood memories of African beauty" (Taiwo, 1967, p.147). Among this group are Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Prince Modupe's *I was a Savage*, Wellesey Cole's *Kosoh Town Boy*, William Conton's *The African*. None of these books is a mere record of the author's life but a portrayal of the African way of life through childhood experience or event. The some way they show their admiration for the simplicity of the African rural life.

Another group of African writers are the anthropological writers who are conscious of Europe/African contact and the disruptive effect of the western culture on African traditions as it affects the social life and religious beliefs of Africans. This group is also aware of the influence of colonialism and or the neo-colonialism in Africa, that is, the imperialists. Members of this group include Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, Peter Abrahams, Onuora Nzekwu, Gabriel Okara, Timothy Aluko and others. Literature is used as a weapon of social change and it transcends the narrow confines of cultural barriers.

The third group African writers were quite satirical in their works. Prominent among in this group are the Franco phone writers whose approach to literature evolved the philosophy of negritude that is another level of protest against racism. Among them are Mongo Beti. Ferdinand Oyono, Leopold Senghor, Simbene Ousmane, Briago Diop, David Diop, Camara Laye and others. This philosophy has made a great impression on transatlantic Negroes and many French- speaking African writers draw inspiration from the philosophy. It is judged not only in its

intrinsic value but its contribution towards the restoration of the dignity of the African. In fact, African literature was used as one weapon against colonialism.

> It is unthinkable that a writer should not be politically committed like morality literature needs to be universal, so the writer must put himself on the side of the majority of the two billion starving, if he wishes to be able to speak to all and be read by all. Failing that he is of the service of a privileged class and, like it, an exploiter.... (Nkosi, 1965, P.101).

Nkosi is saying that living in a world which demands action, a writer is irrelevant should he devote himself to luxury rather if it is necessary to throw bombs in a bid to change society, he should throw as many bombs as possible to prove his dedication and obligation to such society.

Again, the writer cannot excuse himself from the task of re-education and re-generation hence he should march right in front. Mphalele (1971) says that "literature is as important as education". Another author says this of the writer's intention to write in relation to his society that:

> When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience he must recognise that him choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of a chronicle and post-mortem surgeon…. The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself (Nwoga, 1978, Pp.7-8).

The concept of protest or commitment in literature is not peculiar to Nigeria (Africa) but a dilemma of every intellectual who finds himself in a situation which demands practical solutions or physical confrontations. For instance, in Ireland, there is a protest writer like William Butler Yeats. In this perspective, Idowu (1992) says that: "World literary history indeed that of art and culture in their entirety, pulses with creative landmarks famed for being graphic commentaries of the social ferment of the artist's own time". Alexandre and Solzhen's monumental epic, *The Gulug Archipelago* is a protest of the 20th century which expounds on the

theme of the ills of the world war. It explains the bestial ingenuinety of the state in defunct communist Soviet's prison camps; the thrust had been to expose societal ill, the passive hope that such exposure, somehow, would inspire for a change.

My choice of instances outside Nigeria (Africa) is neither exhaustive nor comprehensively representative of the Marxian protest tradition. It serves to illustrate the epoch's thematic thrust against the definition of western critics in trying to preculiarise and Africanise protest in literature. However, the Marxian idea as a common denomination of the epoch nonetheless, it can be argued that the writers vary in degree of tenacity of their vision of ultimate freedom from class oppression. Kole Omotoso, for instance in his exquisite play *The Curse*, dramatises an unending cycle of liberty and oppression in a manner that bears a striking similarity to George Orwell's parable in *Animal Farm.*

Protest literature seeks to precipitate change by rallying its audience to action, using theme and language as vehicles. Its dominant objective being at torpedo or at least, alter the statuesque by inciting the down-trodden who, for all time, are in the majority to revolt. Protest literature is inevitably, to varying degrees of an author's ideological commitment, proletarian in inclination. The penchant of most authors is to induce and commit to the struggle. Prototype of this tradition in East Africa is Ngugi Wa Thaiog'o whose work *A Grain of Wheat* is chosen in this book as a case study. Protest is chosen in this book as a case study. Protest is perhaps explicable on the early and latter writers' historical circumstances. The protest writers are the torchbearers of then emergent African identity in social and political spheres of life. It seems only plausible that they were more concerned with having this ideality in its sharpest features in their works, they with intellectual indulgence of intra-cultural insurrection. This, at least, would explain Ngugi's preoccupation with the mau-mau uprising against British strong hold in Kenya in *Weep Not Child, The River Between* and the Uhuru Political Movement for independence in *A Grain Of Wheat*; Chinua Achebe's anti-colonial passion, in *Things Fall Apart*; Peter Abrahams' anti apartheid rage in *Mine Boy*, *Tell Freedom* and Athol Fugard's anti-apartheid stance in *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*. When, however, the dream of racial prosperity fostered on political independence became stillborn in the miama of visionless self leadership, it is to be expected that these pioner

writers would re-orientate their art to the exigency of upsetting the treacherous socio political equation.

There are criticisms against protest and negritude concepts in literature. Such critics claim that African writers should be influenced mostly by the uniqueness of their own experience, their desire to be integrated with their environment and propagate their culture rather than by any philosophy originating elsewhere. Notable among the critics is Professor Wole Soyinka who rather advocates that the protest by shouting and crying about: "inhumanity, colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism to be stopped. He propounded the tigritudiste approach of marching force to force as a means of solving the problem. According to Taiwo, (1967), Cyprian Ekwensi in reply to Soyinka's assertion wrote that:

> A tiger does not shout his tigritude, this may be true when it is not necessary for the tiger to shout. He justifies tigritudism (protest) as a fight of blackness and an affirmation of African personality, the assertion of human dignity of Blackman.

The African friction in a way is a mirror of the Africa society which is used to view the goings-on in the society which is at the verge of collapse. The African fiction adopts the philosophical approach to investigate and protest against the vices in the African society in term of literary expressions. Literary scholars who subscribed to this approach have actually seen for instance, existentialism which presents man as a lonely being who moves from nothingness to nothingness. This quality or attributes as man, they tried to cancel and correct in their various works. Professor Ola Rotimi and others subscribe to this believe and have written the absurdity of literature without a limit.

In protest, Nigerian (African) literature has addressed itself to politics, history, religion and philosophy through many perspectives of its development and presentation. Ken Saro-Wiwa using literature to protest against the dehumanisation, exploitation, intimidation and marginalisation of the minorities in the Delta Area of Nigeria writes that: "I have indicated how oil of the Ogoni and other minorities in the Delta provided part of the hidden agenda of the Nigerian civil war (Saro-Wiwa, 1967, p.70).

Forms of Protest In Nigerian Literature

There are other forms of protest in Nigerian literature in which women fight for their liberation. This quest has given rise to the "concept of literature and women liberation". This is simply known in literary quartres as the feminist movement. The use of satire as a literary style has been most useful. It is important to say that certain prevailing circumstances have necessitated the protest in Nigerian fiction. For instance, Nigeria is a dependent territory still fighting for her full liberation from colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism. Contemporary Nigeria is Balkanized, her societies vertically stratified, the effects of colonialism still rule. These are glaring factors which influence and challenge every Nigerian (African) writer. Indeed, no serious Nigerian adult can claim ignorance of these features since he is constantly challenged and taxed literarily by them.

The development of the Nigerian protest tradition in writing has its historical origin in the anti-slavery movement and shares in fervour and flavour - a common outlook with modern Nigerian protest writing, especially the anti-colonialist and culture affirmation Nigerian literatures of the fifties and sixties. That indeed is not a surprising thing since the processes of decolonization in the twentieth century are reminiscent of the enthusiasm, responsible doubts and misplaced moral earnestness that characterized the abolition movement. Writing about African protest writing in English as essentially historical phenomenon Ogude (1983) asserts that:

> In English, at least, there is no evidence of a body of literature that has authentic African ring. Rather what we have is a development of a literary tradition based on eighteenth century English literary tradition but significantly different in its basic concern. In other words, although retaining the peculiar forms of the main literary genres of the eighteenth century, the early black writers nonetheless evolved a tradition now fashionably regarded as protest.

It is obvious that all serious Nigerian (African) writers are committed to this tradition and at some point almost committed to explanation, if not for anything, to inform for the sake of the struggle for the freedom of the black race. In other work, the Nigerian (African) writer has been cajoled to attend to the medium, not

at exclusively literary level in a community where a certain reliability of a response on the part of the reader can be expected. But at the pre-literary level of adaptation and establishment of criteria previous to response and criticism, a lot is expected of the writer.

It is clear that in *A Grain Of Wheat* as it is in Nigerian novels, there were non-conformists to the independence movement in Kenya. These people are the natives who sit on the fence in matters that affect the welfare of the black race. The supporters to Uhuru movement in Kenya suffered many untold hardships is the quest for freedom. That in not to say that a grain of wheat is without a saviour, in fact, the novel has two characters through which the pattern is still present. Kihika is the most examples and Mugo is a variation on the theme; but the author's attitude to the saviour theme has altered considerably. The centre of interest is the living with cowardice among average villagers. The overall structure of the novel follows more closely the pattern explored in *Weep Not Child* by the same author.

The same pattern is followed in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease.* Okonkwo and Obi Okonkwo played similar saviour roles in the two novels. However, response to role of self justification is found wanting in the novels, they are about those who need salvation, not saviours; as their titles indicate, those who will bear fruit are those who have truly died to the old world. In *A Grain Of Wheat*, for instance, Numbi and other villagers give value judgement on Mugo's methods of self-reconciliation. "Perhaps I could have saved him. Perhaps I could if I had gone into his hut that night". Numbi lamented… "There was nothing to save". Yambui said slowly. "Hear Me? Nobody could have saved him... Because… there was nothing to save" (Ngugi, 1967, P.209).

Things Fall Apart and *A Grain Of Wheat* are a radiation of the Nigerian/Kenyan (African) experiences polarized in the development of the plots and themes in the literary, polemical and pure historical narrative of the Nigerian and Kenyan experiences as they affect other African Countries with similar experiences, in a bid to revolutionise Blackmans's relationship with the Whiteman. In Achebe's and Ngugi's works are identifiable, consistent motifs and themes that underlie their fictional world, and all of which are traceable to various stages of African experiences. The Nigerian and Kenyan (African) experiences they have broken

down into three principal stages of: the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods. Their works have consistently explored themes arising mostly from the colonial experience and its aftermath. These are very much illuminated in *Things Fall Apart* and *A Grain of Wheat.*

Aside Nigeria and other African countries protest literature presents a new vista of hope to Black/African American countries. The works of most prominent male and female Black/African American writers respond positively to the reality of the black revolution – a protest against inhuman treatment mated to the blacks in America. They embody what Richard Gilman called "The act of creation of the self in the face of the self's historic denial by our (the American) Society" quoted in the Norton anthology (1970). The Afro-America waiters such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, W.E.B Dubois, James Welden Johnson, Alain Locke, Rudolph Fish (Men), Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Tonni Morrison, Alice Walker, Margaret walker (Women), etc. echo the dehumanization of their black personality by their white colleagues, their works are steeped in black aesthetics and consciousness, though with ideological differences.

Hence they variously protest against racism in their works. Wrights *Native Son* and Baldwin *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are apt examples of the level of protest in Black/African American fictions. Both Richard Wright and James Baldwin having joined the communist parties in their constituencies as youth, apply the communist theory in their novels. Their literary commitment includes their relation to their socio-economic milieu. Their social situation placed them in very much the same social class, in relation to the modes in economic production in American society. As workers and proletarians, they were subject to the economic imbalance that characterises their productive relation to their employee.

Protest is the significant moral basis in the Nigerian (African) and Black/African American protest fictions. The significant moral basis of protest is clear. The latter protests against the monsters (whites) who arise in the American society against the blacks, protest against a society that destroys the integrity of the pathetic citizens and finally protest against racism. On the other hand, the former protests against colonialism, neo-colonialism and against the annihilation of the African culture by Western culture.

It is clear the authors of the various protest fiction in Nigeria (Africa) and the Black/African American Countries used the dehumanisation of citizens in the novels to protest against racism which was seen in every facet of public and private life in America and other countries. Similarly, Richard Wright himself gives us an insight into the nature of the environment that determined the nature of the environment that produced the character Bigger Thomas. Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o protest against colonisation and neo-colonisation, the subjugation of Africans and extinction of the African culture in their protest fictions. A work of protest - fiction rejects the authors' own perception of life around them, but their social worldviews are determined by their material social circumstances.

In very many cases, metaphorical plots resonate in Nigerian protest fictions as the characters protest against crimes perpetrated by the whites in Nigeria (Africa) in the period of colonisation when the fictions were created. The characters are archetypal outcasts, aliens of the culture and tradition. They are an emblem of the confused Nigerians (Africans) maltreated, manhandled unjustifiably marginalised, either through the white Lords (colonialists) or through their fellow Nigerians (Africans) neo-colonialists who are elevated higher in the status-quo by the recognition by the white Lords or the position they occupy. Enoch who unmasked an egwugwu masquerade in *Things Fall Apart* and Oduche, Ezeulu's son who locked up the royal python in a box in *Arrow of God* respectively as extremists and fanatics of the western culture. They clearly demonstrate the white mechanism. Achebe uses Okonkwo and Ezeulu to demonstrate the natives lost of identity in their land.

Conclusion

In this work, the Nigerian protest - fiction has been harnessed to show Nigerian literary writers' contempt for colonialism, neocolonialism and the neglect of the African culture and tradition during the colonial period. The brutality and degradation of the African personality are properly touched in these literary works. The Nigerian writers explore all the facets of colonialism, neocolonialism and other imperial forces that ravaged the Nigerian administrative governance at a period in history. They are rendered more complex by elements of conscious racial segregation, exploitation, dispossession and alienation; all perpetuated by

legal, physical, cultural and mental suppression. The Nigerian society was wrecked by the same tension that characterized a contact of extremely polarised socio-economic interest. All these elements have a significant bearing upon the author's relation to the dominant ideology of the Nigerian (African) Society and its overbearing weight on the Nigeria's Population.

As far as their work is concerned, the only immediate reality for the Nigerian consists of racial discrimination, exploitation, oppression and frustration all of which contributed to negative manifestations of underdevelopment in Nigeria. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the conversions of the natives: Enoch and Oduche to the Whiteman's religion was an escape from native attack. However, it results in a protest against a social and cultural injustice determined by the White's social class. It is against this background, that the Nigerian protest - fiction writer's subsequently ventured into. The protest - literary works are a reflection on Nigerians (Africans) revolution on colonialism and all its allied forces. This also resonates in Nigerian (African) artists of the aesthetics in their writings.

This work so far exposes certain facts that cannot be overlooked so far as the protest tradition prevails in Nigerian fiction and African fiction generally. It unveils the circumstances of the Nigerian societal setting in contact with the European culture. It is this development that gave rise to the quest for self-determination and freedom. Thus, it can be said that Nigerian protest-fiction writers, particularly Chinua Achebe focus extensively on such issues as socio-political conflicts and protests as well as cultural matters.

The Nigerian fiction contributes splendidly to world fiction, particularly in the African continent by infusing this consciousness of protest against inhumanity. This enlightenment unites the writer and his audience because of the cultural values and heritage, most importantly the African interest which overrides other interests. The role of the Nigerian writer in the context of these social problems is very significant. He has constantly played the role of "Patron-Saint" for the oppressed people. In fact, the writers have portrayed their characters sympathetically with a view to alert their audience to the real sociology of revolutionary struggles in Nigeria and Africa in general.

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