

Literature And Politics In Nigeria: Writers' Perception

Eziechine Augustine Obiajulu

Ph.D Department of Languages (English Unit) University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria
augustine.eziechine@unidel.edu.ng

Abstract

Literature and politics are aspects of a people's culture. The culture of a people or a particular society, their traditions and world views provide the context and locale for literature. Thus, literature is a reflection of the society that produces it. In other words, literature does not exist in a vacuum or in isolation of its society. It mirrors the current social situation of any given society at any given time. Although literature is an imaginative expression, it relies heavily on real life situations as materials from which it is produced. Writers reflect the prevailing social, cultural, economic and political situations of a people in their works which naturally belong to definite classes. This paper therefore examines the relationship between literature and politics. The study is an exploration of the bulk of the growing Nigerian literary creative works. Critical analysis of the works reveal the writers' perception and feelings towards Nigerian political leadership vis-à-vis the current state of affairs in the nation and the way forward.

Keywords: Literature, politics, society, culture, tradition.

Introduction

Literature has been defined as a branch of creative art which includes all imaginative or fictional writings, especially prose, drama and poetry that deploy the use of aesthetic language. According to Wellek and Warren (1956), "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. Egudu (1979) also defines literature as "a method of expression." He further argues that literature is not just a subject that expresses something, rather, it is the manner and method in which something is expressed. Literature therefore, is primarily concerned with the ability to express our thoughts and feelings imaginatively and aesthetically so as to entertain, inform and educate the members of the public. In addition, literature "expands the concept of reality; it enlarges the vocabulary of politics ...it provides the occasion for reflection or meditation" (Whitebrook,1995,p.60).

Politics on the other hand, refers to the activities associated with the governance of a country or area. It includes the activities of the government, members of law-making organizations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed. Nnolim's study (as cited in Asika, 2010) also defines politics as "all activities that are directly or indirectly associated with the emergence, consolidation

and use of state power." Some political scientists have also defined politics as "the process by which scarce resources are allocated within a social unit (be it a city, a state, a nation, or an organization) for the purpose of providing for human needs" (Modebadze, 2010, P.4)

Literature and politics are aspects of a people's culture. But to discuss the politics of Nigeria naturally takes the discussion into a modern perspective; modern not necessarily in terms of time but mainly in terms of those expressions of mind and behavior that depict the prevailing qualities of life of Nigerians. The modernity of Nigerian society is traceable chiefly to foreign influences, the dominant factor being the colonial experience during British rule. The outcome of British colonial administration of African nations in the words of Angmor (1984), was that it transformed the politics of the separate indigenous tribes and brought them under one flag which in the case of Nigeria, eventually became the sovereign political entity called Nigeria in 1960. The new state adopted a political framework patterned on British parliamentary tradition.

In literature, a new written culture has grown alongside the traditional oral arts. Certainly, much of this is expressed in English with stylistic features that take after British and European literary traditions. This also is a direct outcome of the colonial experience. So to talk

about literature and politics together within the Nigerian context enforces still more the modern perspective of the subject. Thus, in this paper we shall be discussing the Nigerian literature written in English along with politics.

Relationship between Literature and Politics

The fact that literature is closely related to politics has been widely acknowledged. The social situation from which literature springs is very much determined and controlled by political forces. Thus, to discuss any writer, we must situate him in his social and political setting. It is pertinent also to know what have been the concerns of the writers and the extent to which the writers have been aware of, or affected by the political currents of the national life .

Literature does not exist in a vacuum. It relies heavily on real life situations as material from which it is produced. Indeed, literature has become a vital medium for articulating and interpreting the realities of the society. Creative writers use their works to evaluate the social, political and economic situations of a country. The more political the situation of a country, the more political the literary works become as they are used as veritable tools to protest against any form of injustice or misuse of power. Thus, a society's ideology and thoughts or expectations are often reflected in various genres of creative works such as prose, drama and poetry. This is why literature is often described as a mirror of the society. Creative writers are seen as vanguards of the society. They keep watchful eyes on the society and make critical comments on issues that affect the people generally.

Almost half a decade after the first African nation became independent, issues of politics and questions as to the role of the writer in the political realm are still obvious. In post-colonial writing especially, the role of the writer has continued to be almost inseparable from politics and related questions of power and representation. According to Bayer(2001), "it is a defining characteristic of post-colonial writing that it accompanies, comments on, and criticize colonial hegemony and the process of decolonization." Similarly, Ngugi's study (as cited in Ngumoha, 2009) submits that "every writer is a writer in politics." Mao (1967) corroborating this position notes that:

In the world today all cultures, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics.

There are many different ways to reveal one's perception of life and its reflection by a person. In arts for instance, the reflection may be revealed in the form of a sculpture, a song or a picture .People's perception of life could also be revealed through writing. One of George Orwell's best known books, *Animal Farm*, a modern beast-fable attacking Russian Revolution, Stalinism and totalitarianism for instance, reflect his long distrust of dictatorial government, whether of the left or right (Pelpuo, Bakuuro & Tuurosong,2018).

The primary focus of this discourse is to explore the relationship between literature and politics. The exploration will centre on the perspective of Nigerian creative writers and how they have deployed literature at every given historical period to evaluate, condemn and correct unhealthy socio-political developments in Nigeria.

Writers' Perception

Pre-independence Echoes

Over the years, Nigerian literature has reflected in diverse ways the political currents of its history. This started with a brand of verse referred to as "pioneer poetry." This brand of verse was part of the project of cultural nationalism which complemented political nationalism in the struggle for independence. Nnamdi Azikiwe's "renascent Africa" (1937), Dennis Osadebe's "Africa Sings" and "Young Africa's Plea," were among the pioneer verses of the time. These poets according to Tijan , (1995)

Focused their artistry on themes of race and racial pride, on the virtues of Christianity over traditional African religion which they

referred to as heathen or pagan ways; on extolling the values of heroism and patriotism; and on challenging European motives aimed at vilifying the African.

The pioneer poets “resurrected the heroes of the nation, they enjoined brotherhood. Assimilated into the white man’s ways, they spurned his motives. They were completely Europeanized themselves, but continuously aspired to be African,” (Dathorne, 1975, P.151).

The dawn of Independence

With the attainment of independence in 1960, a new socio-political reality which also engendered a new literature emerged. The political realities of the early years of independence showed that the path of self-rule was not going to take the people to their promised land. It soon became obvious that political independence was not going to guarantee the hopeful expectation of the masses. There were obvious demonstration of flagrant abuse of human rights in Nigeria. Observant Nigerians soon saw clearly in the black ruler the image of the past white master who arrogated to himself all wisdom and power to do what so ever that pleases him. Indeed, the new order was fraught with several malaise ranging from political crises to ethnic friction, and corruption among other ills which have come to define postcolonial Africa.

During this period, writers perceive of the politicians as corrupt, insensitive, unjust and evil. The writers therefore confronted the politicians with caustic indictment and scathing satire against the socio-political ills which bedeviled Nigeria and also led to the collapse of the first republic. Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*(1916), Wole Soyinka’s *Interpreters* and *A Dance of the Forest* (1965), and Christopher Okigbo’s “*Path of Thunder.*” capture the spirit of that unfortunate era of corruption, political crises and ethnic friction. Indeed, what we find in these works is an indictment and a scathing attack against the political class. The works are both satirical and prophetic as the events in them parallel the social reality of the Nigerian experiences in 1966. Wole Soyinka’s *A Shuttle in the Crypt*

and Christopher Okigbo’s “*Path of Thunder*” also captured the chaotic experiences of the time. They also portrayed dark prophecies on the fate of the independent Nigeria.

Wole Soyinka’s resentment of the inability of post independence rulers of Nigeria to improve the social conditions of the people, in the words of Bamidele (2000), “reached its turning point during the Yakubu Gowon era... an era that witnessed the emergence of Nigeria as a major oil exporting country.” Bamidele further notes that during the era, Gowon publicly proclaimed that Nigeria had plenty of money but that the problem really was how to spend it. Amidst this declaration however, what Nigerians saw was a contradictory picture of mass discontentment, the product of which was the brazen display of violence by men of the under-world. These socio-political realities have become the subject of Soyinka’s satiric venom in such plays as *The Jero Plays*, *The Road*, *Kongi’s Harvest*, and *A Play of Giants*.

In *A Play of Giants*, Wole Soyinka x-rays and condemns the acts of corruption that is within the corridors of power. This ugly trend called corruption is demonstrated by the actions of three ridiculous African leaders spearheaded by Kamini who travels out of his country with the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank. Kamini’s ignorance, selfishness and destructive pride is revealed the following statement: When I travel, I take the Bank of Bugara with me, and then nobody can steal money behind Kamini’s back (*A play of Giants*, p.4).

This same Kamini orders the chairman to mint more money for him to waste. Commenting on the corrupt practices of African leaders, Ogundokun (2014), states unequivocally thus:

These irrational leaders squander their countries treasuries on food and other irrelevant things. They are indeed a pack of gluttons!

The Insensitivity of the African leaders is further demonstrated by Kamini who orders his chairman to accept whatever condition offered by the World Bank in his attempt to secure a loan of two hundred million dollars, without any plan of a meaningful project that could be done such a huge loan. Of course, such

money will finally enter their private accounts. This has always been the case.

Christopher Okigbo's "path of thunder" comprises six poems under the title path of thunder. The poems project Okigbo's prophetic voice. The poet who assumed the responsibility of a "town crier with an iron bell" employs the incantatory style to admonish and warm the society of the impending doom which awaits the society that seems to be drifting towards the path of thunder. The Nigeria civil war of 1966-1970 claimed the life of Okigbo, the country's most celebrated poet. The war however provided inspiration for many writers, particularly those who were directly involved. These writers poured out their anger and frustration as testimonies to the madness of the civil war experience in such works as Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (1972) Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* (1993), Ken Saro-wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985). Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976). Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1976), Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) among others.

The Post Civil War Period

In 1974, General Gowon saw a return to civilian rule as unrealistic." He postponed it and continued with his reckless and extravagant spending of oil money while it lasted (Ngumoha, 2009 P.405). From 1979 to date Nigeria has witnessed a new development both in politics and in literature. Unlike the Gowon regime, the Murtala-Obasanjo administration was definite and consistent in its programmes of handover to civilian government. It instituted a constitution drafting committee (CDC). A Federal Electoral Commission was set up which registered five parties that contested the 1979 elections, ushering in Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the first civilian Executive President of Nigeria on October 1, 1979. Although, the Shehu Shagari's regime was once again terminated in 1983, the subsequent military regimes, became more conscious of Nigeria's yearning for civil rule and the implication of attempting to derail or delay the transition programme. The transition programme was finally completed when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo assumed office as the democratically elected president of Nigeria on May 29, 1999. It is on record that this regime also handed over power to another civil regime under the leadership of Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua on 27th May 2007. Since then Nigeria

has been enjoying democratic rule. However, it is important to note here that even though Nigeria is currently running a democratic government, there is nothing to show for it. The nation is still suffering from lack of social amenities such as good roads, medical care, good schools, good housing and employment opportunities.

Faced with these present problems in Nigeria, there emerged a new generation of writers such as Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Festus Iyayi, among others whose works do not only expose the hypocritical tendencies of Nigerian leadership, but also adopt possible means of resolving the long standing tension and battle between the haves and the have nots. The writers adopt the Marxist ideology in their literary composition. Gbilekaa conceptualizes Marxism,

As a philosophy of praxis which aims at radical transformation of human reality based on dialectical interpretation of history. The aim is to destroy capitalism in order to establish a society in which humanity can give free rein to its essential powers, frustrated, denied, postponed and emasculated for so long (Gbilekaa, 1997 p.40)

Femi Osofisan and his contemporaries held politics and African leaders to ransom with their missiles of attack. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*(1980), Osofisan castigates Nigerian society, especially the ruling class for manufacturing armed robbers. In his opinion, armed robbers are not totally to blame for their nefarious activities. Rather he indicts society for manufacturing them. He believes that it is societal inequality, the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities and the competitive nature of capitalism that is responsible for the production of the hoodlums. Osofisan sees the armed robbers as products of an unjust society. They are being oppressed and dehumanized. It is their oppression and dehumanization that is responsible for their violent acts against their oppressors.

Similarly, in *Violence* (1997), Festus Iyayi also traces the causes of violence in Nigerian to the problem of unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities in post-independence Nigeria. In the novel, it is the ill treatment of the poor by the rich that constitutes the violence of the novel's title. This radical definition is presented to us through the counsel for defense in the mock drama performance in the government hospital, ironically watched by the Health commissioner to the counsel. He declares:

Acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the opportunity of being educated, of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly. We often do not realize that it is the society, the type of economic and hence the political system, which we are operating in our country today that brutalizes the individuals, rapes his manhood. We often do not realize that when such men of poor and limited opportunities react, they are only in certain measures, answering violence for violence... I feel and I think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence (*Violence*, p. 193)

The tone and attitude of the writers towards politics and politicians seemed to have taken a new turn in the 21st century. The satiric tone of the new voices becomes very harsh and sarcastic as the political system in Nigeria gets worse by the day leading to brazen corruption and other vices. Among the new crop of the emergent 21st century writers are Emeka Nwabueze, Ahmed Yerima, Tanure Ojaide, Ezenwa Ohaetor and others.

Emeka Nwabueze is one of the eloquent voices of the 21st century Nigerian drama. His creative prowess is made manifest in his highly appraised works such as *A Parliament of Vultures* (2000), *Echoes of Madness* (2001), *Fate of a Maiden* (2003), *When the Arrow Rebounds* (2005), *The Dragons Funeral* (2005), *Lachrymose* (2014), *Rainstorm in the Desert* (2018), among others. *A Parliament of Vultures* is a hilarious political satire against the corrupt performance of the legislature in Nigeria. The playwright in this play paints unapologetically a picture of irresponsible and unpatriotic Nigerian parliamentarians whom he describes as vultures. Like vultures, the parliamentarians are greedy, voracious and insatiable.

Tanure Ojaide is a poet who comes nearer to capturing the soul of the modern West African in their struggle against the predatory African state, particularly as it concerns the wholesale betrayal of public trust and incessant violation of human rights. In his "Cannons for the Brave," Tanure Ojaide paints an unpleasant picture of the incestuous savagery of some African leaders in their aversion of the redemptive truths of public criticisms. As he puts it:

Shreds of
intellectuals hang
from branches of
baobabs, bones
dissolve into the
lagoon to assault us
with bad breath. We
have dug up arms
from distant farms
and wonder if the
whole republic were
a bone yard.

In the work of another poet, Ezenwa Ohaetor, titled "I wanbi president", Ohaetor catalogues all the worries of the less privileged and juxtaposes it with all the excessive luxuries and

abuses of the privileged. In the end of the poem, the poet notes the excessive craze for ego-massaging which characterizes most African presidents. He sings:

I wanbi president
 Make I get plenty titles
 Dem go call me di Excellency
 I go bi commander-in-chief
 I fit bi field –marshal and
 Admiral
 I go answer grand commander
 of di nation
 Dem go address me as snake
 wey get forest.
 My broda
 I wanbi president
 Even for my papa house
 But na dream I dey dream.

This poem is a political exploratory device into the privileges and status exaggeration of the Nigerian presidency, but in the end, the poet squeezes his idealism to a realistic position by confessing that it is only a dream.

Indeed, Nigerian writers from the pre-independence era to the present have ever remained committed to their responsibility as watch dogs of the society. The writers' have used their works to fight the course of dictatorship and tyranny in Nigeria even at their own personal risk. They were and are still determined to use literature to effect positive changes in society. This is one of the major functions of literature. Unfortunately, some of the writers suffered greatly for speaking the truth through the use of their writings. Wole Soyinka for instance, spent over four years in prison. Christopher Okigbo, the great poet died in the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) which he had prophetically foreseen. Ken Sarowiwa, a writer and political activist extended his boundaries. "He did not only write but acted and was hanged by General Sani Abacha alongside other eight Ogonis on 10th November 1995", (Asika, 2010, P. 156).

In conclusion, this paper has been able to establish the relation between literature and politics, especially from writers' perspective. Literature and politics cannot be separated. They are symbiotically related. Literature is a very powerful means of expressing the political climate of any nation. In Nigeria, literary artists use their works to expose the inadequacies of political leaders and applaud good and hardworking ones. From 1960 to date, literature

has been used in various forms to check the activities of politicians with the aim of making Nigeria a better society. This ongoing warfare between literature and politics in Nigeria will continue until the politicians begin to apply real democratic principles based on equal rights, justice and fair play. Writers will continue to use literature as a weapon of attack until politicians realize the need for the provision of food, shelter and gainful employment for the people. Until corruption, exploitation and marginalization is put to rest in Nigeria, fierce literary battle will not cease. The greatest expectation of Nigerian writers is that the citizens of the country should be given good governance. Until this is done, the battle between literature and politics will continue to rage.

References

1. Achebe, C. (1966). *A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann.
2. Angmor, C. (1984). "Literature and Politics in Ghana." A paper Presented at the fourth International Conference on African Literature and the English Language, University of Calabar, Calabar.
3. Asika, I.E (2010). "Literature and Politics in Nigeria: The Writers' Perspective." *Multi-disciplinary Journal for Advancement of Scholarship* 5 (1), 148 -157.
4. Bamidele, L.O (2000). *Literature and Society*. Ibadan: Stirling. Horden Publishers (Nig) Ltd.
5. Bayer, G. (2001). "Representations of Political Powers in African Writing." *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3(1), 138-151
6. Dathorne, O.R (1975). *African Literature in The Twentieth Century*. London: Heinmann Educational Book Ltd.
7. Egndu R.N. (1979). *Modern African Poetry and African Prediction*. London: Macmillan Press.

8. Gbilekaa, S. (1997). *Radical Theatre in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nig)Ltd.
9. Iyayi, F. (1997). *Violence* London: Longman.
10. Mao, T.T (1967). " Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Arts," Peking: Foreign Languages Press, P.25.
11. Modebadze, V. (2010). "The Term Politics Reconsidered in the light of Recent Theoretical Developments, International Black Sea University (IBSU) Scientific Journal, 1 (4), 39 – 44.
12. Ngumoha, E. (2009) "Literature and Politics in Nigeria (1965-1975 and Russia after 1917." In E.C Emesealu, E. Onyerionwu & C.N. Nkoro (Eds), *A Mine of thoughts and letters, Essays in African theatre and Literature in Honour of Onuora Ossie Enekwe*, A Publication of the Association of Nigerian Authors Abia State. Chapter, pp.401-410.
13. Nwabueze, E (2000). *A Parliament of Vultures*: Enugu: ABIC Publisher.
14. Ogundokun, S.A (2014). " Literature as a Reflection on Socio-political Realities: An Examination of three Nigerian Writers" *Journal of Arts and Humanities(JAH)*3(1),167-172.
15. Okigbo, C. (1971) *Labyrinths*. London: Heinemann.
16. Osofisan, F. (1980). *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Ibadan: Bio Publications.
17. Pelpuo, R.H., Bukuuro, J. & Tuurosong, D. (2018) *Literature and politics--A Review of George Orwell's Animal Farm and Chinua Achebe's A man of the People*. *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*.6(2),1-26.
18. Soyinka, W. (1977) *A shuttle in the Crypt*. London: Rex Collins and Eyre Methuen.
- a. (1984). *A play of Giants* Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.
19. Tijan, S. (1995) *New Poets of West Africa*. Lagos: Malt House Press Limited.
20. Wallek, R. & Warren, A (1956). *A Theory of Literature*. England: Penguin Books Ltd
21. Whitebrook, M. (1995). *Politics and Literature? State of the Art*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 15(1), pp.55-62.

PROFILE: DR. AUGUSTINE OBIAJULU EZIECHINE

Dr. Augustine Obiajulu Eziechine is a senior lecturer in the department of languages (English), University of Delta, Agbor Delta State, Nigeria. He was born on the 2nd of August, 1960, at Ossissa in Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State. He attended Mater Dei Grammar School, Ashaka between 1975-1980 and College of Education, Agbor from 1981-1984. Dr. Augustine also attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, (1989-1993); Delta State University, Abraka, (2000-2006) and Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma (2007/2014). He holds the Nigerian Certificate in Education (N.C.E); Bachelor of Arts in Education, B.A. (Ed.) English; Master of Education in Curriculum Studies, M.Ed., (Language Education); Master of Arts, M.A. (English); and Doctor of Philosophy, Ph.D in English (African Literature).

Dr. Augustine was a two term Head of the Department of English in the defunct College of Education, Agbor. He was also a Dean of the School of Languages; Co-ordinator, Arts Education, Delsu Degree Programme and Director, Post-Graduate Programmes under the defunct College. Dr. Augustine Eziechine was also an appointed member of several committees including the College Management committee. He is an external Examiner to the Department of English, College of Education, Warri, Delta State. He is currently an elected congregation representative in the Governing Council of the University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State.

Dr. Augustine has written and published several journal articles in local, national and international journals. He has also published several books including creative works. He was the Editor-in-chief, Agbor Journal of Languages and Literature, 2018. Eziechine is a member of several professional bodies

including the Nigerian English Studies Association, International Research and Development Network, International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa (ISOLA), Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria and Academic Staff Union of Universities. Dr. Eziechine is happily married to Charity Eziechine and the Marriage is blessed with children.

This research paper was not sponsored by any individual or organization.