NIGERIA'S NEW WRITING AND THE SHRINKING IMAGINATIVE AFFLATUS: SOME THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL RESPONSES

Chijioke Uwasomba
Obafemi Awolowo University

Abstract

Nigerian literature in English, in spite of its relatively newness, has established itself as a force to reckon with within the comity of the literati world-wide. It is not surprising that in the last fifteen years or so, Nigeria has witnessed an upsurge of ‘new’ writers who have continued to tell the Nigerian story. These new voices have added a lot to the corpus of Nigerian literature and have been labeled by some critics as the ‘Third-Generation’ of Nigerian writing. This essay attempts a short historical survey of the Nigerian novel which is its concern and argues that in spite of the quantum of these creative eruptions that has been thrown up; the writings lack serious imaginative power and symbolism. This is because for literature to be successful it must be done in a way that creates the illusion of reality. These new writings appear to be steeped in factual realities at the expense of imagination. A random but representative works of these new voices are used to demonstrate the claim that these writings are more within the sub-genre of faction than serious literature. A plausible explanation is also given for the prevalence of this kind of writing in today’s Nigerian fiction.

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, New Writers, Fiction, Faction, Imagination, Illusion.

Introduction

In the last fifteen years or so, Nigeria has witnessed an upsurge of “new” writers who have continued to tell and retell the Nigerian story pioneered by the like of Pita Nwana, Cyprian Ekwensi, Daniel Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Abubakar Iman, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and others too numerous to mention. No doubt, these new voices have added a lot to the corpus of Nigerian literature and have been labeled as the “Third-Generation” of Nigerian writing. This essay argues that in spite of the quantum of creative eruptions that has been thrown up by this generation of writers, the writings lack deep imagination and symbolism. This is because, for literature to be successful, it must be done in a way that accords with what Coleridge calls “a suspension of disbelief”. Without being legislative in our conceptualization of what constitutes good literature, there is every reason to assert that most of these new writings appear to be steeped in ‘factional’ realities at the expense of imagination. We shall come back to this presently.

Jean Paul Sarte (1948) has grappled with this question and raised a lot of issues in an attempt to explain what constitutes literature. According to Welleck and Warren (1956:213):

...imaginative literature is ‘fiction’, a lie. The reality of a work of fiction –i.e. its illusion of reality; its effect on the reader as a convincing reading of life –is not necessarily or primarily a reality of circumstance or detail or common place routine... Verisimilitude in detail is a means to illusion, but often used, as in Gulliver’s Travels, as a decoy to entice the reader into some impossible or incredible situation which has ‘truth to reality’ in some deeper than a circumstantial sense.

The above definition accords with Nnolim’s (1988:6) view. Nnolim in his inaugural lecture defines Literature as:

that writing which is more emotionally moving than intellectually instructive; that writing which primarily deals with a make-believe world, whose language is highly connotative rather than denotative, symbolic rather than literal; figurative rather than plain; and whose ultimate aim is to produce a satisfying aesthetic effect and find anchor as a work of art.

What crystallizes from the above is that literature is characterized by ‘a poetic’ quality which ordinary language does not possess. The creation of the illusion of reality has been the preoccupation of every literary artist since ancient times. This power of imagination and the illusion of reality to create and re-create human experiences and human condition act as a mirror image of the society. Ezeigbo (2008:4) also notes that what distinguishes literature from other disciplines is the use of creativity. She defines creativity as “a mental process involving the generation of new ideas or
concepts or new associations between existing ideas or concepts”. When the gods of creativity possess their worshippers (artists) the latter is provoked into a creative motion which imbues them in the process with the powering of the catalytic impulse to create.

Literature is therefore an important means of understanding and interpreting aspects of society such as “politics, religion, social conflict, class struggle and human condition” (Ezeigbo 2008:10). Literature has both the creative and re-creative powers. To paraphrase Blake, literature is that art which rouses the faculties to act. Literature possesses all these qualities because of its nature in which it is seen as an idea, philosophy wrapped up in a symbol with its inherent capacity to pass a body of knowledge on to the reader.

In the course of understanding the role of the writer, the essence of literature becomes clearer. According to Satre (1961:14) “the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about”. The writer has an uncanny ability to invoke, to recreate events of his or her time with such arresting adroitness that also captures the imagination of the reader who is thrilled by the manner of and inventiveness of the writer. It is in the recognition of the above that Ososfisan (2006:63-64) opines that: ... literature, at any age is essentially the mirror of the society in which the literature is produced. It is a mirror, but not inert. In the fiction of literature therefore is always a distillation of the actual ordeals of the citizenry of the age in question. Properly decoded, the refracted material can yield the true identity of that age and its people, knowing truthfully in fact than the bald record of historians.

The implication is that a writer of literature is not only gripped but also grabbed by the muse in its votaries which ultimately sends the writer to another realm with somewhat magical possibilities and trajectories.

**Older Generations of Nigerian Writers**

To understand the current generation of Nigerian writers, it is necessary to briefly explain the place of the older generations that have left a literature that is worth its name within the comity of the literati. Nigerian literature in English began with the publication of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, The African; Written by Himself* (1789). According to Ogude (1988:3), this work “seeks to alter completely the contemporary image of the African in England and the colonies and enthrone the new African man who continued a romantic tone of his native land with a critical admiration of European civilization”. Obiwu (2006) has argued that Equiano’s work was a major influence on the African American Fredrick Douglass and also “contributed greatly to the explosion of the slave narrative as a literary tradition in Europe and America” (39).

Adesanmi and Dunton (2005, 2008) have described the emerging generation of Nigerian writers as Third- Generation writers. This characterization to say the least is misleading and wrong-headed. A true mapping of Nigerian literature puts a lie to this characterization. Obiwu (2006) and Adeeko (2007) have tried to sketch the movements or generations of Nigerian literature, indicating that the latest generation is the fifth in the evolution of Nigerian writing. The first stage or generation is associated with Equaino and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1772-1899) and this age is seen as the age of slavery, migration or war. The second phase or generation (1900-1947) is the age of colonization proper. This is the generation that has been called “the Victorian Lagos” (Echeruo), “The Palm and Lagoon School” (J. P. Clark- Bekederemo), and “The Literature of Tutelage” (Wauthier). Obiwu goes further to name the following as belonging to this generation: Nnamdi Azikwe, Dennis Osadegbey, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Pita Nwana, Daniel Fagunwa, Aminu Kano, Abubakar Imam, Aliyu dan Sidi, Cyprian Ekwenisi, Ekong Ita, etc.

The Third-Generation is the described as the age of independence (1948-1966). This generation is signified by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark- Bekederemo, Elechi Amadi, I. N. C. Aniebo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Adaora Ulasi, Flora Nwapa, John Munonye, Buchi Emecheta, Eddie Iroh, Kole Omotoso, etc.

The Fourth-Generation of Nigerian Literature (1967-1987) is characterized by Obiwu as “the Oil Boom Generation” with Catherine Acholonu, Ben Okri, Zaynab Alkali, Festus Iyaiy, Adebayo Williams, Tanure Ojaide, Femi Osofisan, etc, as very important members.
The Fifth-Generation (1988 to the present) has witnessed many literary eruptions. Obiwu has dubbed it a post-Biafran, post-Marxist and post-Feminist literature. The list which includes but not limited to the following is very intimidating: Akin Adesokan, Helon Habila, Chimamanda Adichie, Helen Oyeyemi, Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, Okey Ndibe, Ike Okonta, Wale Okediran, Uzor Maxim Uzoatu, J. O. Nwachukwu-Agbada, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Akachi Ezeigbo, Jerry Agada, Sefi Attah, Lola Shoneyin, Promise Okeke, Bina Nengi-Ilagha, Maik Nwosu, Unoma Azuah, Jude Dibia, Sam Omaseye, etc. Nwakanma (2008) describes the writings of this current generation of writers as encompassing “the new attitudes, desires, values, and anxieties of the post-colonial nation” (1). The writers are concerned with issues that are contemporaneous and topical. Our contention in this essay is that apparently because of the way these new writers feel or are impacted by the new Nigerian reality or that of the entire world, they write in a manner that banalises literature and reduces it to a naturalist gamble.

The New Generation of Nigerian Writers - The Nature and Concerns

A cursory look at the literary culture of Nigeria shows that Nigerian writers have from the beginning of Nigeria's writing responded to issues of the moment. They could be accused of being sociological. In fact, the charge by critics of early African writing of manifesting a preponderance of sociological minutiae can be understood in view of the fact that African literature started as a response to the brigandage epitomized by colonialism. In the words of Ogude, “to put it in another way, African Literature is one sad song of painful experiences” (7).

It is because of the literary merit of the works of the Achebes, the Soyinkas and the Okris that Nigeria’s literature is respected globally. This legacy should not be allowed to die. No doubt, the new writers are also winning awards both locally and internationally, but a survey of the works of these writers shows that they are more of faction than fiction. The questions that then arise are: What is faction? How much liberty should the creative artist take with historical reality?

Faction is an artistic practice involving the melding or inter-weaving of both the product of imagination and real-life events and situations. In a faction, there is preponderance of real characters, factual events and in fact, real history. In Nigeria, Kole Omotoso is associated with this kind of writing. Emenyonu (1991) writes that the first appearance of faction as a dominant feature in contemporary Nigerian fiction can be attributed to Kole Omotoso with his publication of Just Before Dawn in 1988. He also states that “Ken Saro-Wiwa's Prisoners of Jobs also published in 1988 has helped to popularize it as a growing trend among creative writers in Nigeria” (133). It is found in Soyinka’s Isara (1989) and even in Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah (1988). Omotoso’s Just Before Dawn is an account of the failure of Nigeria to realise itself as a country. It goes further to ascribe the failure of Nigeria to the way the British constructed it along the North-South divide.

In Festus Iyayi’s Heroes (1986), his third novel, the writer allows more of factional realities to dominate and determine the direction of the story which is about the Nigerian/Biafran war which took place in 1967-1970. Iyayi's account is based on the events of a few weeks before the end of the war. It is the account of Osime Iyere, the political correspondent of the city's Daily News. Osime has reported on the war, revealing from a distance, its grim horrors. But all this while, his sympathy is with the federal troops who appear to him as humane and set to dislodge the Biafran troops. But three specific incidents seem to challenge his former views of the war - the killing of Ade’s (the features editor of his paper) landlord and the Biafran soldiers who have taken refuge in his house by the Federal troops; the merciless beating he receives from the Federal soldiers during a cultural display and the brutal and senseless killing of his landlord, Mr. Ohiali by the Federal troops.

Writing about Helon Habila, one of the leading voices of the new Nigerian writing, Anyokwu (2004:5) argues thus:

... Therefore, for Helon Habila and his ilk, the conventional tactics of impersonality, indirection and suggestiveness which are the props of the fabulist or/and parabolic modes will not suffice. Matters are not helped by the postmodernist celebration of the principles of transgressivity, flux, fluidity, indeterminacy, instability, play, fantasy and decentred consciousness.

Anyokwu is complaining here about Habila's first novel, Waiting for an Angel (2003). The novel is about a journalist, named Lomba and his grueling encounter with Nigeria’s military
dictatorship in the 1990’s. The narrator, obviously, Habila introduces Lomba and what the latter starts to do in July 1997. Lomba is in prison and decides to keep a diary of events in his life. Through Lomba the reader is also told of the decision of the University students to boycott lectures until Ibrahim Babaginda and his clique hand over power to the civilians after a transition to-civil-rule programme that spanned seven years leading to the annulment of a presidential election result won by a business mogul, Chief M. K. O. Abiola.

The last entry in Lomba’s diary ends with Janice, the prison Superintendent’s mistress who has pleaded with the former to release Lomba. A week after the meeting, General Abacha is toppled and Abdulsalami, another General opens the gates of freedom for Lomba and other political prisoners. Again, this is a historical account. In fact, the story of Nigeria cannot be complete without an inclusion of General Abacha’s activities as the Head of State, between 1993-1998, when he died under mysterious circumstances. Abacha had jailed a lot of patriots including Habila, Ogaga Ifowodu and Akin Adesokan for their alleged roles in the fight against military dictatorship in Nigeria. It is this account that Habila brings into his novel. The killing of Dele Giwa, the crusading Editor-in-Chief of the News Watch Magazine is also given a space in the novel. These issues are real Nigerian history but they find accommodation in Habila’s Waiting for an Angel.

In Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun, a novel that tries to refresh our memories on the Nigerian/Biafran war of 1967-1970, too many factual realities compete with the imaginative story that the writer is constructing. It is true that the characters are fictitious creations, but most of the events being narrated are historical accounts of the war. Madiebo (1980), Fredrick Forsyth (1969), Elechi Amadi (1973), Ezeigbo (1991), Amadi (1973), Nwankwo and Ijejika (1969), Ademoyega (1981), Alumona (2011), Achebe (2012) and tons of writings and commentaries exist on the war. There is no doubt that from the narrative texture of the novel, Adichie must have done some research in addition to stories she must have been told about the war. The Sovereign state of Biafra was declared at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka by the then Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu after he had been urged to do so by both students of the University and traditional rulers. It is not surprising that Adichie uses the University of Nigeria, Nsukka as the starting point of her narration. Many historical accounts about the war found their way into the novel.

Even the first coup of 1966 led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu finds an important place and space in Adichie’s novel. The same is also of the counter coup led by Northern soldiers which occasioned the killing of Igbo officers and civilians. Colonel Madu, a character in the novel is made to say thus: “Igbo soldiers and Northern soldiers can never live in the same barracks after this. It is impossible, impossible”, Colonel Madu said … and Gowon cannot be the head of state. They cannot impose Gowon on us as head of state. It is not how things are done. There are others who are senior to him. (Half of a Yellow Sun, 140).

It is important to recall that when the Sovereign state of Biafra was declared, General Gowon, the Nigerian Head of State responded that it would take a mere “police action” to bring the rebels to order. The “police action” turned out to be ineffective as the war lasted for three years making Biafra a reality. The people’s resolve was very strong and unimaginable as can be seen in their song: “Biafra win the war/Armoured car, shelling machine, fighter and bomber/ Ha enweghi ike imeri Biafra!” (Half of a Yellow Sun, 275). The above song is followed by the Biafran Anthem:

Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish,
Beloved homeland of our brave heroes;
We must defend our lives or we shall perish,
We shall protect our hearts from all our foes;
But if the price is death for all we hold dear,
Then let us die without a shred of fear.
(Half of a Yellow Sun, 277)

Alexander Madiebo devoted quite an extensive section of his book, The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War to the advent of sabotage and how it contributed to the loss of the war by the Biafran side. Adichie also dwells so much on this as can be seen in the encounter Richard and Kainene experienced in their movement to Kainene’s family house in Orlu. As they are on their way back, they notice too many checkpoints. Everybody is suspected to be a saboteur. A non-Igbo like Dr. Inyang who is by every definition a Biafran to boot is harassed by a pregnant woman who calls him a saboteur: “It is you non-Igbo who are showing the enemy the way! Hapu m! It is you people that showed them the
Those who did not witness the war with all its brutalities and or those who have not read some of the accounts of the war may read this “novel” as a truly fictional work. But the evidence shows that what Adichie has done is to novelize real facts about the war. There are many other fictional works on the Nigerian/Biafran war especially the novels of I. N. C. Aniebo – The Anonymity of Sacrifice (1974) and The Journey Within (1978) which dwell on the war without reducing it to another factional activity.

The most worrisome and the most banal of the fictional works under discussion is Tanure Ojaide’s The Activist which is an attempt at fictionalizing the crisis of the Niger Delta. The novel is not only badly written but also a bad brew of facts and fiction. The name of Ojaide’s hero is the Activist. After twenty-five years of his sojourn in the United States of America to which he had fled on asylum as a youth arising from the oil conflicts that caused the brutalization of his people in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the Activist returns amidst taunts and ridicule from his academic colleagues as well as his Niger Delta compatriots. As a lecturer in the Niger Delta State University he joins forces with some groups in many activities including oil bunkering leading to his winning an election to become the governor of the Niger Delta State. He does everything with the Egba boys to fight the Bell Oil Company which is exploiting the people and their God-given resources.

The story is set during the period of military dictatorship in Nigeria. It is obvious from the way the novel is written that the General being talked about is General Abacha whose criminal activities as Nigeria’s Head of State knew no bounds. The narrator says thus about the Head of State:

... the Head of State of the military junta was himself a bunkering chieftain. He had associates who did the job for him to enjoy the huge profits...To be a favoured general in the Nigerian Army was to be a bunkering chief and a multimillionaire! With the Commander-in-Chief and his officers involved in bunkering, it had become a semi-official lucrative business despite the many decrees (The Activist, 136-137)

In his novel, the group’s activities are reported the way they were in the era in question. According to the narrator, “the oil companies had their spies in the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUNU) and got a feedback on government policies...” (The Activist, 206). The Bell Oil Company is obviously Shell Oil Company which Okonta and Douglas (2001) have wonderfully characterised as vultures in their book on the Niger Delta and the destructive activities of the oil multinationals.

The facts about Niger Delta are narrated the way they are without any attempt to transpose them into imaginative creations. The only difference between actual realities of the region and the novel is just the fictional characters that participate in the affairs of the novel. The novel reads like the historical and political discourses on the region. The writer succeeded in documenting the exploitative activities of the Oil Companies in the Niger Delta Region especially Shell and not a serious fictional work. The plot of the novel to say at least is simplistic and juvenilely journalistic.

The Missing Link

As can be seen from the foregoing, it is obvious that there is a missing link between previous Nigerian writers (novelists) and the current generation of Nigerian novelists. This generation of writers appears to be copycats of history who are not able to rigorously and imaginatively transform history with an imaginative art. A writer seriously speaking transposes the factual realities of his/her society into an art with all the edifying qualities and possibilities. Literature is a make-believe and in fact, ‘a truthful lie’ with all its defamiliarising antics and characteristics. For Batson (1972), in the novel we have the spectacle of “the untrue masquerading as the true while illusion trembles in it on the edge of delusion” (244). There is no doubt that the novel as a genre of literature offers some kinds of experience but instead of manipulating these experiences to achieve artistic excellence, most of Nigeria’s current novelists reproduce them in a “factional” and almost bland manner.

This type of writing may serve young readers and the uninitiated into the world of belle lettres and those who have not had the opportunity of reading Nigerian history but it amounts to a big disservice to literature as an engaging artistic exercise. A novelist may not be obliged to write directly...
about contemporary history but if he/she must write it, it must be done in a symbolic and true artistic manner. The distinction between the historian and the creative writer is that one describes a story that has been, and the other a kind of story that might be. Althusser (1971) expresses it thus: “… I believe that the peculiarity of art is to 'make us see'; 'make us perceive’, 'make us feel' something which alludes to reality” (204). How much of Althusser’s fine postulation in the works of our current novelists is anybody’s guess.

While the earlier generations of Nigerian writers tried as much as possible to create serious literature using Nigerian history as the compelling raw material, the current generation appears too bland and imaginatively low in their novelisation of Nigerian history. It is important to recall that few novelists of the earlier generations especially Kole Omot oso and Festus Iyayi (the latter in Heroes) had tried to “factionalise” Nigerian literature, but this was not successful. The missing link between the older generations of Nigerian writing and the current generation is the inability of the latter to follow the true steps of their masters.

Conclusion

In this essay we have tried to look at some of the texts of the current Nigerian novelists. The texts were randomly selected but they are representative works of the current generation of Nigerian novelists. These works are concerned with contemporary issues of the day. Events of various magnitudes unfold with such rapidity and bizarreness that one cannot but marvel at the malaise that has gripped contemporary Nigeria. The people's psyche is assaulted everyday with unbelievable but real stories of billions and trillions of Naira stolen or missing alongside humongous contract sums for projects that do not have meaning in the lives of the citizens. The country is a vast killing field, kidnappings and killings are a daily occurrence, banditries of all stripes and shapes take place against harmless victims, the roads are abandoned by the government in spite of the weekly contracts announcements by the government agents and such other mindless activities of government and its agents including ill-digested and punitive neo-liberal policies imposed on Nigerians. All these have made Nigeria a post-colonial hell-hole.

It is likely that the imagination of the current generation of writers has been heavily and significantly assaulted and affronted by the Nigerian reality to the point that fiction has become less effective than reality. In fact, factual realities have become more fictitious than fiction in contemporary Nigeria with the way things are unraveling. Writers who are confronted with such a dire situation must rise above it by sharpening their imaginative power. After all, as Walton (1973) has explained, a writer pretends when he/she is presenting a fictional discourse by imagining and creating a make-believe and engaging in a “game of pretence”

Novelists are not historians or ethnographers or documenters but creative artists. What they do is to represent, portray and enact the emotions, actions and reactions of their characters in different human situations at different times and perhaps in different social settings. This view supports John Lye's (2003, quoted in Coker 2012:32) opinion to the effect that:

Literature is mimetic, that is to say, represents reality, nature, and the way things are. It portrays moral and other experiences in a compelling concrete immediately felt way in its aesthetic devices and powers, yet allows as well for reflection, for theorizing or reconsiderations of the experiences evoked, as we are both experiencing the word 'evoked' and are separated from it.

References


**Author Notes**

Chijioke Uwasomba
Department of English
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

cjsomba@yahoo.co.uk