

# Thematic Preoccupation of Nigerian Literature: A Critical Approach

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## Abstract

Nigerian literature takes "matter" from the realities of Nigerian living conditions and value systems in the past and present. In the Nigerian society the writer, be it a novelist, dramatist or poet is a sensitive "questioner" and reformer; as all literature in a way is criticism of the human condition obtainable in the society it mirrors. The writer often cannot help exposing the bad and the ugly in man and society. Thus much of Nigerian literature is a deploration of the harsh and inhuman condition in which the majority of Nigerians live in i.e. poverty, misery, political oppression, economic exploitation, excesses of the affluent, liquidation of humane Nigerian traditional values, and all forms of injustices which seem to be the lot of a large majority in most Nigerian societies.

In drama, novel, poetry or short - story, the writer's dialogue with his physical and human environment comes out as a mirror in which his people and society can see what they look like. Every image painted by a skillful artist is expressed or put into writing / print, becomes public property and leaves itself open for evaluation by those who read and understand the language and expression. There is therefore a need to identify the thematic preoccupation of Nigeria literature which is the focus of this paper with a view to identifying their peculiarities with textual references.

**Keywords:** Deploration, Language, Thematic, Preoccupation, Nigerian, Literature

## 1. Introduction

In most Nigerian literature social issues and the way people relate are some of the major subjects, be it in drama, fiction or poetry. How individuals interact in love, friendship, and their relationships with the larger society are the sine qua non of literature. People's interaction in society develop the ethics and morality of a society. Politics is usually integrated into a people's culture and everybody is in one way or the other affected by politics. Political practices are part of a people's culture. Thus politics forms an important thematic preoccupation for Nigerian writers.

In literature it is important who is writing and in what context the writer is writing. Time and space, history and place set the context of a literary creation. The history of a society is also essential, as many themes stem from a society's historical background. Nigerian writers are greatly influenced by their rich oral literature which is essentially didactic. Most writers make use of the functional didacticism of oral literature, to reflect the culture, history, politics and society as a whole in their writings. Social issues and the way people relate are also some of the major subjects of literature be it in drama, fiction or poetry.

Chijoke Uwasomba (2014) in an essay entitled "Helon Habila. Narrating the Dysfunctional Baggade of post-colony", argue that "the writer irrespective of his or her ideological persuasion has a duty to discharge to the society and to self". The rationale for this, Uwasomba submits, is "because the writer is saddled with social responsibility to communicate certain social and personal experiences to an audience" (196)

The need to expose the important themes of Nigeria literature written by notable literary grants with Nigerian consciousness and sympathy (colonial and contemporary era) inform the choice of works at the three genres by the chosen writers in this paper.

## 2. Thematic Preoccupations of Nigerian Literature

The major themes in Nigerian literary works and how they affect the people and the society are varied and vast. The major themes include Reincarnation, Anti-Colonialism, Religion, Tradition, Gender, Feminism, Marriage, Love,

Morality, After-life (Mortality) and Politics among others.

### 2.1 Reincarnation

J. P. Clark and Soyinka treat the theme of re-incarnation of the wanderer child in their poem with a similar title *Abiku*. In his poem Soyinka treats the theme according to the Yoruba tradition, while Clark treats it as Ogbanje according to the Igbo belief. Both poets express the traditional African belief in the cyclic nature of life and the things that affect the space and time of African tradition. The poem "Abiku" is about a child born to die soon who keeps "coming and going this several seasons". This re-echoes Nigerian belief in reappearance after death.

"Coming and going these several seasons,  
Do stay out on the baobab tree  
Follow where you please your kindred spirits  
If indoors is not enough for you." (Line 1-4)

In Clark's *Abiku*, Abiku is being asked to stay away out there 'on the baobab tree' (L.2) or go wherever he pleases, 'if indoors is not enough' for him (L.4), rather than the unhealthy practice of coming and going from year to year. The 'baobab tree' (L.2) is acknowledged habitat of trees. This belief in re-incarnation and the transmigration of souls by which a human soul passes into another state or another body at death and returns again into the world is a major theme of Nigeria Literature. Within the Nigerian context, the relationship between the worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn is a cyclical one, involving a lot of mutual interaction. The Abiku child seems to move freely between one plane of existence and another as represented by these metaphysical worlds.

### 2.2 Morality

Morality is another major thematic preoccupation in Nigerian Literature, In Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart', and Morality is seen as having various frameworks. This thematic notion is highlighted in several recapitulations relating to Okonkwo particularly, to the Igbo people more generally and to the Western colonialists at the end of the novel.

Nowhere is this idea dealt with more directly than in the scene following Okonkwo's death. While burial is necessary, Okonkwo's own tribesmen cannot bury his body. The code of conduct for the tribe (essentially a moral code) will not allow it. They are forced to ask the Commissioner and his men to bury the body.

"Why can't you take him down yourselves?' he asked.

'It is against our custom,' said one of the men. [...] His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers.'"

The moral code that prohibits the tribe from touching Okonkwo's body allows others to touch the body. Morality, clearly, is determined according to specific contexts. What is wrong for some is acceptable for others (Kannan, 2015).

In Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*, the concept of moral decadence is presented in the ritual/money-making episode where a victim claimed his genital had been collected by the Accused for rituals, in the quest for wealth. Though, this episode equally x-rays the level of superstition in the society but it is a common place phenomenon in the present day society. Sanda also identifies these foul politics. This is a form of satire where Ola Rotimi ridicules the effort of men because women have taken over.

### 2.3 Politics

In Wole Soyinka's *Trial of Brother Jero*, politics appears at an official level, such as the supposed low salary granted to chume as the local government's messenger and the Member of the House's desire for a position of more power, between the local village and the central government. But it also exists at a more informal level, between each character attempting to figure out her/his role in a country still negotiating its new independence from Britain. Jero's very rise to power was a result of what he called a successful "campaign" against other prophets and their followings, and as the self-elected leader, or tyrant, of the Brotherhood of Jero, his every action is political, serving to consolidate his own power.

One of the major themes in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi is the issue of women in politics. With the little information and instruction from Lekoja-Brown's American wife, Sikira an illiterate wife of Lekoja abandons her husband and takes to politics, which she feels, will loosen her from the grips of oppression and get her the dividends of democracy and popularity. Surprisingly enough, towards the end of the play she is seen as the party's gubernatorial candidate campaigning and canvassing for votes. That men and women are created equal, in

contemporary Africa, women are gradually finding their feet more and more in politics and this is a welcome development in world of politics. This is a form of satire where Ola Rotimi ridicules the effort of men because women have taken over.

Thematically, Wole Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* is an example of political oppression, an extended exposition of alienated and plaintive existence in a postcolonial and post traditional world. In such a world, modern conditions co-exist with pre-modern, ethnic, and traditional ones.

It is the acquisition of the "Area Boy" traits by the military on the play that first makes the title relevant to the play. In other words, the "Area Boy" concept has been 'elevated' through the military who themselves are "Area Boys" in uniform controlling the affairs of a state. The military become a kind of honored and glorified "Area Boys". They are "Area Boys" in practice, the only difference is that they wear uniforms. The lawlessness of the military is presented through the words of the military officer to his ADC};

"I ought to have you court-martialed. I ordered you to stay and handle it personally! And you want to take him to a police station where he will intimidate them and regain his freedom? The fool interfered with my uniforms. He touched it—do you understand that? He pulled my sleeve; he placed his bloody civilian hands on my uniform. And all you want to do is take him to the police station? Didn't you hear me say he was to be given the special treatment?" (Asante-Darko 2000)

#### 2.4 Mortality/After-Life

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman's* main theme is Mortality focuses on a ritual suicide, therefore death plays a big role. Soyinka himself has argued that spiritual struggles—including Elesin's attempts to carry out his duty by dying—are at the heart of the play, and judging from what characters like Olunde and Jane Pilkings have to say, death is a very different animal in British and Yoruba cultures. For the British inhabitants of Oyo, death is to be feared and avoided, whereas for the Yoruba, it seems like death is less scary and more something to be embraced as right at certain times. This difference in opinion drives the whole plot.

JANE: Your calm acceptance for instance, can you explain that? It was so unnatural. I don't understand that at all. I feel a need to understand all I can.

OLUNDE: But you explained it yourself. My medical training perhaps. I have seen death too often. And the soldiers who returned from the front, hands all the time. (4.147-148) they died on our

When Olunde is calm about the notion that his father has died, Jane can't handle it—his reaction is way too foreign for her, and she asks him how he could possibly feel this way. He claims it is because he is been working as a doctor in England during the war, but Jane is cautious about buying that explanation (Adeniran 1994)

#### 2.5 Marriage, Custom & Tradition

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Zulu Sofola exploits themes of marriage, custom and tradition.

She upholds the view that marriage is supreme. Thus, Ogwoma is unjustly treated by the male folk by being forced to marry a man she does not love. Sofola sees this as male chauvinism and Ogwoma vows to break free, not really out of the cultural inhibition to her marrying the man she loves, but of the world dominated by the male folk. Ogwoma defies tradition and custom by getting pregnant during a period when she is supposed to be mourning her late husband. Uloko and Ogwoma's defiance of tradition and custom is the basis for conflict in the play. On the economic front, it is a rebellion against the tradition of a daughter being the source of wealth. Why is she forced to marry a man she does not love? Why is it that Uloko could not pay the sum of Four Hundred Pounds demanded as bride price? These are all economic problems. Sofola decries the high cost of marriage which is determined by the male folk without the consent of the female folk who are most affected by such actions. The play establishes Uloko and Ogwoma as rebels against culture and tradition. "The two rebels are dogged, headstrong, and unwavering in their conviction" (Eni 2009). The characterisation of Uloko and Ogwoma is better identified with modern educated youths. Their stubbornness is almost too strong for the Ibo communities that spurn them. This stresses the play towards Romeo and Juliet type of tragedy. These are characters created by Sofola to fight her cause and defend her female rights. Sofola's writing support enlightened traditional society. She believes in and affirms the value and spirituality of African traditional life above western conventions. She writes specifically from the point of view of an educated woman in a male dominated society. She is individualistic in her writings. She neither sides the Marxist, the feminist, nor the traditionalists. To her, traditionalists are simply reactionary.

## 2.6 Religion

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo gods are mostly manifestations of nature and its elements, which makes sense because they are an agricultural society that depends on the regularity of seasons and natural phenomena to survive. They worship fear of vengeance that might wipe out an entire generation. The Igbo ancestors also take on a divine nature to some extent. Family plays such a central role in Igbo life that the spirits of their ancestors are consulted for almost every decision and even serve as judges associated with nature and also on ancestors and somewhat divine contrasts sharply with the single God of Christianity which seems far less directly relevant to the Igbo lifestyle.

"And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle - the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded agadi-nwayi would never fight what the Ibo call a fight of blame'. (Martin 2015)

The Umuofia are so superstitious that they will not make any big political moves without first consulting the gods via the Oracle. The implication is that only the gods can judge whether war is appropriate and justified.

Soyinka's *Trial of Brother Jero* is widely considered a satire of proselytizing faith. Brother Jero's success rests entirely on the blind faith of his followers, whom he is able to win over easily by offering false and fantastic prophecies. Thus the virtue in faith alone is called into question, and Christianity—at least in the form found with characters like Brother Jero—scrutinized. Although Brother Jero loses one follower in Chume at the end of the play, he is able to win over another, the Member of Parliament, just as quickly, speaking to the power of faith in its aim to fulfill personal hope and desire. Soyinka's play forces the reader to question when belief is and is not justified, and to consider who has the power to claim and impart knowledge.

## 2.7 Anti-Colonialism

Thematically, Nigerian poets took it upon themselves to challenge the deliberate misconceptions of Africans by Europeans. They deliberately took the opposite stance in their poetry and this manifested in poems such Gabriel Okara's *Piano and drums* and Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation*. The contrast between African and Western cultures are also expressed in Okigbo's *Heavensgate*, wherein all negative images are used to describe alien culture and positive ones to describe the African way of life.

Okara's *Piano and Drums* looks at the conflict between the cultures of Africans and Europeans. 'Piano' symbolizes the European culture which the persona sharply contrasts with the first two stanzas. After hearing the captivating and nostalgic sound of the drums, he hear(s) a washing piano". "Washing piano" suggest the persona's dislike for the European culture. He casts the European culture in a melancholic or sorrowful light.

"..... a washing piano  
Solo peaks of complex ways in  
Tear-furrowed concerto" (Line 17-19)

This suggests that the foreign culture is boring and unattractive as well as complex and meaningless.

## 2.8 Gender

The characters Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* are bound to their gender roles, with many personality traits explicitly attributed to a character's sex. Men constantly struggle to steer clear of the temptation of sin posed by women: Brother Jero himself admits that he has "one weakness—women," the basis of the central conflict between his desired self-image and reality. Chume, too, fights the urge to beat Amope for her constant pestering. Women are described as "fickle," "the plague," and "daughters of discord." This characterization by Brother Jero and Chume places blame on women for the burden they place on men and their sinful nature. The women of the play, on the other hand, feel tied to the will of men and therefore similarly limited. Amope complains that "it is a tough life for a woman" as she must depend on Chume and what he provides, which she deems insufficient for her needs. This barrier between men and women causes lapses in understanding and strained relationships. In this way, the theme of gender drives much of the plot in the play.

"From the moment I looked out of my window this morning, I have been tormented one way or another by the daughters of discord." (Adedayo 2001)

This quotation reflects the play's central characterization of women as vexing and malevolent figures. Jero's statement places blame on the female sex for his personal failures and condemns women to the realm of permanent sin.

### 3. Conclusion

Nigerian literature has deep and solid roots in culture and tradition of the African people. The culture provides literary works with allusions, images, symbols, and a moral ethical imperative. The ethically rich culture has enhanced the works of the creative writers who see themselves as having the social role of cleansing the society. New novels, plays, and poems are modeled on folklore forms and techniques. Most writers make use of the functional didacticism of oral literature, to reflect the culture, history, politics and society as a whole in their writings. These works demonstrate the affirmation of faith by different generations of Nigerian writers in their cultural heritage. Nigerian oral tradition of literature has greatly influenced the three genres - drama, prose and poetry. Nigeria literature, in its real sense has been projected in this paper as a literary work (in three genres) done by Nigerian writers or Nigerians in diaspora for Nigerian audiences or readers, written or oral and with Nigerian sympathy or consciousness. The discussed themes are therefore the picture of the real life and manner of time which it was written.

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