
EVOLUTION OF WEST AFRICAN WRITINGS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: Post-colonial literature is a high current that rides through the waves of third world countries. Studying Africa and African literature is considered to be a part of understanding post colonial discourses since Africa was a major colony of whites. Literary development in West Africa is quintessential as it is the seat of literary developments with strong background of oral tradition and missionary education. Imported western education and values resulted in African 'enlightenment' and emergence of African writings in English replacing their regional languages like Igbo, Yoruba and Hausas. Though many writers from Africa blame colonizers for the loss of cultural and societal values, colonialism synthesized African consciousness and introduced a new venture to sketch their emotions and perceptions rich in *Africanness* and to make their voices audible globally. Thus, this paper explores the evolution of West African writings in English and focus on the works of novelists as Amos Tutola, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Timothy M. Aluko, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Camara Layce, Elechi Amadi and Ayi Kwei Armah.

Keywords: African literature, post colonialism, women writers of Africa, Flora Nwapa's works.

Introduction: African literature has emerged as a new identity and a new literature shaped by colonial experience. The spread of imperialism has created areas of political influence and domination which naturally produced a far-reaching influence in the growth of African literature. For many decades Africans were in the grip of colonial power and made to live under the laws imposed by them. The traditional value structure of the society was shaken to the very foundation. The relation between the individual, society and government underwent a radical transformation resulting a severe maladjustments appeared between the individuals and groups. Africans confronted new values and habits which always did not fit into their cultural background. They were judged on the basis of European norms and values. Yet this encounter opened new avenues for the expression of the African spirit to the contemporary world. Many writers have mastered the literary techniques and are producing fiction and poetry of highest order. Modern African writing reflects the impact of colonial experience on the native consciousness and the writer's increasing awareness of the problems confronting the individuals, society and the nation. The creative writers of Africa have clear vision of the ideal society and they have adopted an enlightened outlook for a possible synthesis of the two cultures – indigenous and western. Particularly, West Africa became the seat of literary development as Nigeria was the major colony of whites and began 'enlightening' people with missionary education. *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) by Amos Tutola marked the start of contemporary African literature in English. A combination of literary, educational and political developments enabled Tutola's novels to be followed Chinua Achebe with *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Cyprian Ekwesi with

People of the city (1954) and Timothy M. Aluko with *One Man, One Wife* (1959). In the few years that followed Nigerian independence, several other novelists such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Camara Layce, Elechi Amadi and Ayi Kwei Armah emerged from the Continent. By mid-sixties Nigeria had reached a level of English literary achievement unsurpassed in Black Africa. Nigeria's huge multi-national population with its two hundred different languages and its three main ethnic groups, the yorubas in the west, the Igbos in the east and Hausas in the north, enriched Nigerian culture. The first Igbo to publish fiction in Igbo language was Pita Nwana. His novel *Omenuko* was published in 1933 after it had won a literary contest in indigenous African languages. *Omenuko* is a classic in Igbo literature and has been reprinted several times yet the author is unknown. A large part of the novel illustrates a point of transition from one age to the other. The hero, *Omenuko*, moves from one age to the other and through his actions and attitudes the author reflects something of the particular society of the time. Apart from few Igbo novels, the first Yoruba novel entitled *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* by Olorunfemi Fagunwa was published in 1938. *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (The Forest of a Thousand Demons) is important because it sets the standard for future novels and also was a president for creativeness in West African writing. It contains the picaresque tales of a Yoruba hunter encountering folklore elements, such as magic, monsters, spirits, and gods. Though these works of fiction in vernacular acclaimed widespread recognition in Nigeria, a stronger emphasis on English language in schools was epoch-making a new era of transition. This weaning period from writing fiction in Yoruba language to writing in English, initially, enhanced the publication of non-

fiction as pamphlets and their length ranged from ten to hundred pages, later, came to be called as Onitsha Market Literature. Onitsha, a town in Nigeria, was the seat of pamphlet literature as it was the chief commercial and educational centre of the Igbo. Onitsha Market Literature acts as an intermediary between the intellectuals and the illiterates. Amos Tutola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) was the first English novel to be published in West Africa. Tutola documented traditional Yoruba mythology composed from recollections of old people re-telling Yoruba legends. His unique language consisting of words drawn from Yoruba and English gave a different flavor for his works and earned worldwide recognition and criticism simultaneously. Cyprian Ekwensi is a popular novelist from West Africa. He has the credit of being West Africa's first novelist to produce social realistic novels based on urban life. It was he who registered the changing times and the new social morality in his works. His Onitsha pamphlets drew attention to the radical changing way of life in the urban centers and its consequences for Nigerian youth who remains unconvincing stereotypes. *People of the city* was the first major novel to be published in modern English and thus truly called the Father of the Modern Nigerian novel. The picture is of Lagos, its squalor, bribery and corruption. These are presented from the point of view of hero, Amusa Sango, a young and eligible bachelor. The characters are cheerfully irresponsible go for sex rather than 'love' and always follow their inclinations with a complete disregard of consequences. This is Lagos seen from inside with its moral depreciation as an epidemic that lures its inhabitants, indeed, ruins the nation economically. But the sad irony of the situation is that these evil factors do not deter people from rushing to the cities. On the contrary, the city has a formidable influence, a pulling force which lures people to either destruction or downfall. Ekwensi's later works about city like *Jagua Nana* (1961), *Beautiful Feathers* (1963), and *Isaka* (1966) are further indictments on the city and its negative influences on youth.

Chinua Achebe surpassed Ekwensi's regional fame, due to his international readership for mastering the skill of presenting emotionally charged themes of wide interest as cultural conflict, historical progression, colonial encounter, Igbo tradition, identity crisis, Biafran war and social changes. Chinua Achebe introduced anthropological and psychological crisis into Nigerian literature. He delved deep into African tradition to write about Igbo life and culture. He is the first African writer who has dealt with all the above mentioned themes in a progressive order. The first four novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the*

People (1966), are set in a historical perspective and reflect the process of changes in the society from mid- nineteenth century to post-independence decade. His novels capture the hostile confrontation of missionaries with the natives, a first step in experimenting with the European norms and values. Through his later novels like *Beware Soul Brothers* (1971), *Girls At War* (1972) Achebe sketches the society in the process of socio-economic, political and cultural transformation.

Wole Soyinka, a recipient of the noble prize in 1986, was associated with theatre movement in Nigeria. He has played an important part in the development of Nigerian theatre and revival of African drama. He had successfully used the theatre to communicate the African spirit and tradition to the world. *The Lion and the Jewel*, a light comedy, was performed at Ibadan in 1958 and 1959 and was published in 1963. Later, satirical comedies are *The Trial of Brother Jero* (1963) with its sequel, *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). Among Soyinka's serious philosophic plays are *The Strong Breed* (1963), *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Soyinka's latest dramatic works are *A Play of Giants* (1984) and *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985). He has written two novels, *The Interpreters* (1965), a complicated work in which six Nigerian intellectuals discuss and interpret their African experiences, and *Season of Anomy* (1973) which is based on the writer's thoughts during his imprisonment.

Overwhelming participation of African male writers in the literary arena who were historicizing and romanticizing the indigenous culture and oral tradition, later, gradually shifted to the next phase of spiriting for colonial indictment and independence struggle. The third phase, from 1960 to 1980 saw the focus of African writers turn inwards with the emergence of national literature portraying the complex relationship of the individual with his family, the individual against the society and the individual against himself shaping the literature of introspect. Hence, the existence of black women was not considered too serious issue until the impact of third wave feminism was felt here. Till then African writers were not gender sensitive but created a literary framework for themselves seeking unconditional subjugation from the opposite gender. Circumstances during the colonial period did not favour female participation in the educational system. As a result there is a conspicuous lack of participation by women as published writer. Thus, Africa continent suffered acute lack of women writers to voice their depreciation, exploitation, repression, marginalization in a culturally constrained society.

Fortunately missionaries active operation in educating people opened a new venture for Africans especially, women to examine their socio-economic position with respect to race, ethnicity, class, and status. Unfortunately black women were assessed by the acquired norms of western patriarchal hegemony that tethered them to fit in the framework dictated by their counterparts. But Mother Africa had rich mythology giving prominence to women as *Asase (goddess of Creation)*, *Ala (Earth goddess)*, *Ison (goddess of fertility of Earth)*, *Mawu (supreme goddess)*, *Nzambi (Goddess of Justice)*, *Oddudua (primary mother goddess)*, *Ymoja (river goddess)*, *Uhamiri (Lake Goddess)*. Societal norms were matrifocal giving them considerable freedom in a gender neutral society where women were strong mothers, wives and daughters working in farming, marketing, feeding, rearing etc. Power of delivering children, a seed for the family line, the healing power of mother's milk, the number of children they produce, unity in polygamy, make them more authoritative and functional.

Scrutinizing the socio-economic position of women in pre-colonial and colonial period reveal a drastic transmuted gender ideology acquired from colonial hegemony, disturbing the fundamental hierarchy of gender in Africa. Now, it has become the task of women writers to re-examine their social roles and enlighten people against the established framework. Women writers attempts to produce canonical works of literature not for romanticizing womanhood but to articulate their valour, potential, needs and deeds which are misconstrued by male writers in their texts as victims and sex objects. So, women writers penned fivefold issue as follows: to defy the univocal theory of global feminism that does not address the "special" condition in which African women find themselves in, to retrospect the uncorrupt pre-colonial society, to articulate women's world of challenges, struggles, assertion for redefining their gender roles, to re-examine African culture and tradition with an eye of cynicism and aestheticism. Hence, female writers are deeply committed to re-educate and rejuvenate the biased community, thereby rerouting the stream of African literature towards gender specific issues. African feminism gained momentum with the women writer's evolution that became revolution later.

First generation writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariamma Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo and Bessie Head are major figures in African women literature. Propelled by these writers African feminism explored the untrodden path to contour a niche for native women. When Flora Nwapa (1930-93) started writing in 1966, she was the first Nigerian female writer. Her writing interest was women and her motive for

writing was to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels. She started from the grass-roots and situated her women characters in the village environment with its masculine supremacy and dominance where gender roles and relationships were strictly circumscribed by norms and tradition. Buchi Emecheta's contribution is immense with more than a dozen of fiction for varied needs of women. As a rebellious writer she highlights problems and prejudices encountered by Nigerian women. Feminist perspective novels do not fail to capture cultural and diasporic dilemma of dislocated Africans. *The Bride Price (1976)*, *The Slave Girl (1977)*, *The Joys Of Motherhood (1979)*, *Destination Biafra (1982)*, *Naira Power (1982)* and *Double Yoke (1982)* are much acclaimed works worldwide for capturing the injustice done to her sisters who were drifted in the culturally constructed and instructed masculine society. Feminist discourse of another well-known writer from Ghana is Ama Ata Aidoo, a dramatist, whose inspiring works as *Anowa (1970)*, *Our Sister Killjoy (1977)*, *Changes: A Love Story (1991)* thrashed the idealized images of women as daughter, wife and mother. Her *Anowa* can be experimented theoretically for it offers new way of "creative theorizing" which is a central aspect of Black women's writing. The play offers an important approach to the politics of exclusion, domination, migration and subjectivity, yet it received little critical attention. Her first novel *Our Sister Killjoy (1977)* is a work of art that depicts the impact of African encounter with Europe on the protagonist Sissie who is unable to fit herself in either proclivity of culture. In her second novel *Changes*, she has experimented polygamy in the modern context of westernized, educated and employed world of women.

Mariamma Ba, a Senegal writer records the entrapment of women in muslim community. Her only novel *So Long a Letter (1981)* is a slim volume novel packed with furious illustrations and shocking practices of the community. The book is written in the form of a letter, or a diary, from a widow, Ramatoulaye, a strong-minded character, to her childhood girlfriend, Aissatou, who lives in the United States. Because Ramatoulaye is a woman living in Africa, she seemingly has no right determining her destiny. Aissatou rejects this notion and chooses her own life without being denied a life of her own by her husband Mawdo. Bessie Head, a Botswana writer, traverses to travel deep into the psyche of her characters dealing with the issues of discrimination, refugees, racialism, African history, poverty, and interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal psychological traumas of the author are reflected in most of her works as *When Rain Clouds*

Gather (1968), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973). Her autobiographical writing *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (1990) is a series of short articles and essays that highlights her living without a family and country, interracial conflict and mental breakdown which confined her to mental Hospital for some period. Intertextual evidences prove to be a call for gender awakening to position the third world women in the global lineage of female progression. Thus, twentieth century witnessed shades of feministic writing by African women and has advanced the women's cause of recognition and relevance. Flora Nwapa's contributions in theorizing African feminism has to be scrutinized carefully as it left a trail for her successors to build upon the concept, enhancing women in Africa to join with women in other nations in their quest for rights, for opportunity, relevance and recognition. She was contrapuntal with her contemporaneous in envisaging an egalitarian community where there would be a cordial existence of both the genders. When Flora Nwapa (1930-93) started writing in 1966, she was the first published Nigerian and African female writer. Her writing interest was women and her motive for writing was to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels. Her first two novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970) are bold ventures on the part of the young author seeking to strike out into a new, untrodden path of projecting highly heroic and elegant protagonists who wills her way with indomitable courage and stands on her ground firmly when confronted with vitriolic social opposition. She has featured her protagonists with masculine supremacy and autonomous existence. *Efuru* is imbued with beauty, intelligence, industry and economic power. She was successful in life but not fecund. Her feminism shines forth in that she is able to marry her first husband without the requisite dowry. She is able to live down the shame and abasement of two failed marriages and exercises her right of choice of staying married or returning to her father's house. *Efuru* is identified as Lake Goddess, Uhamiri/mammy water incarnation who is elegant, wealthy, potential and husbandless goddess to protect her women devotees. So, *Efuru* is still admired and respected at the end of the novel. A close study of Nwapa's plots reveal that the central

theme is her preoccupation on the issue of childlessness and misery of infertility. 'What we are all praying for is children? What else do we want if we have children?' These two sentences from *Idu* contain the basic theme of the book. In contrast to *Idu*, Amaka in *One Is Enough* (1981) is an invincible woman by forceful execution of her choices in life, from deserting her first deceitful husband, establishing a new business in a new place Lagos, seducing a priest, Izu, for children, to decide a life of single parent family to ensure no male dominance in future. In *Never Again* (1975) Nwapa looks at her society at the time of Nigerian Civil war and concentrates on the importance of black women in sustaining their fighting men and the society in general. She depicts the extreme demands war makes on people and their survival. This novel elevates Nwapa from being a feminist to activist since she has captured war struck Nigeria lively with its people of uncertainty. *Women are Different* (1986) is a moving story of a group of Nigerian women, from their schooldays together through the trials and tribulations of their adult lives. Four female protagonists of the story struggle for financial independence and a rewarding career, combined with the need to bring up a family, often without a man. All this is set against the background of developing Nigeria, from colonial times, through the Nigerian Civil war to the present day. Flora Nwapa, as a writer, publisher and social activist, involved herself in services like tending the wounded and uniting the orphaned children in the civil war with their families. Different shades of her feministic writing deals with the politics of exclusion of women and women writers, and has advanced the cause of recognition and relevance.

West African writings in English flourished with many male writers and few female writers. This unbalanced contributions from both the sexes, unexplored world of black women and what hindered them from writing formed another branch of study under *Third world feminism*. However, 20th century documented prolific growth of African literary tradition in English which has current themes of gender agitation, socio-economic condition, political upheaval, cultural revamp and various societal issues.

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