NIGERIAN LITERATURE OF THE 21ST CENTURY: NEW VOICES, NEW CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to fears that Achebe's generation may not have worthy successors, the new millennium has revealed a resurgence of vibrant literary voices from all over Africa and especially Nigeria. Prominent among them are Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila, and Chris Abani: all young, award winning, sharply perceptive of their milieu and mostly living in Diaspora; yet like their forebears Achebe, Emecheta, Amadi, Soyinka and others, they are firmly rooted in dynamic African aesthetic values. These young writers interpret their growing-up experiences under the Babangida and Abacha military regimes in a society reflecting complex foreign influences and myriad socio-economic forces at work. The challenges of the 21st century are both for the writers and also for their Nigerian readership, since they are faced with the age-old problems of accessibility to local readers, foreign versus local reception and the economic dynamics of full time authorship as well as maintaining a balancing act while exploring a very fast changing world with their unique and varied fascinating artistic talents. Their works, taken collectively, provide great hopes for greater expectations from African literature.

INTRODUCTION

The new millennium has witnessed the emergence of quite an impressive number of African writers, who have won outstanding awards and prizes, both national and international. Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2001) won the Commonwealth prize. In 2003, an older writer, J. M. Coetzee became the third African to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story* (2001) was the winner of the M-Net Book prize. Of particular interest are the young Nigerian writers, whose first novels have received prestigious awards and brought them into immediate prominence. In 2003, Helon Habila from Northern Nigeria won the Commonwealth prize for best first book with his novel, *Waiting for an Angel*. Chimamanda Adichie's *The Purple Hibiscus* was first short-listed for the prestigious Orange Award in 2004, and in 2005, it won the Commonwealth prize for the best first book in African Region. Chris Abani's novel, *Graceland* (2004) won the 2005 PFN Hemingway prize for fiction. This paper is looking at the "New Voices" in terms of the socio-historical setting of their novels, their attitude to culture elements, and their social commitment and concern for the survival of the artist within the society.

Every successful artist must have a solid base from which to operate. As Chinua Achebe contends in *Home and Exile:* "to redress the inequalities of global oppression, writers must focus on where they come from, insisting that their value systems are as legitimate as any other". (Jacket, *Home and Exile*, 2000). Since in literature stories and words are sources of immense power, and since this power definitely resides in every culture, Achebe concludes that: "to imitate the literature of another culture is to give that power away".

In a recent online interview, one of Nigeria's 21st century writers, Chris Abani, echoes Achebe's tested stand. In his own words: "art is always about understanding an aesthetic tradition (and) subverting expectations of that tradition through innovation". (2004). In essence, the worth or purpose of any literature lies first in its fidelity to creativity, to aesthetics, to craftsmanship and to innovation. The second purpose of art is in the interaction and questioning of milieu and in provoking people to think beyond their comfort zones. The ideal situation for the craftsman, according to Chris Abani, is an aesthetic field that is not limited by political, social or economic contrary forces, nor by fears of societal shame at the exposure of its dark corners (interview). After fifty years of African Literature in Nigeria, it is of great interest to know what has changed, what has remained intact, and how the artist is fairing in present day society.

INTRODUCING THE NEW VOICES

Helon Habila was a little boy in Gombe, Northern Nigeria, during the civil war. From an interview with Frank Bures, we learn that his two loves from childhood are reading and story telling. After dropping out of Engineering, he read English at the University of Jos, and taught for two years before becoming a journalist with Vanguard Newspapers in Lagos. According to him, his encounter with E. M. Foster's *Aspects of the Novel* was a turning point in his life, setting him on the road to a writing career and multiple awards: the Musical Society of Nigeria Poetry Festival prize; Liberty Bank Prize for short story, the Caine Prize for the first chapter of his novel *Waiting for an Angel*, which in turn won the 2003 Commonwealth prize for the best first book, Africa Region. Habila's sudden rise to literary fame earned him a two-year writer's fellowship in England and opened doors to a bright future in the Diaspora.

Helon Habila and Chris Abani claim Achebe as their mentor and so does Chimamanda Adichie, the author of Purple Hibiscus. However, she is linked to Achebe in more ways than one. She is the daughter of Achebe's colleague at the University of Nsukka. The Adichies lived in the very university staff quarters once occupied by the Achebes. Unlike Achebe who started in Medicine and changed to English, she completed her medical studies in Nsukka before decamping to Communication and Politics in the United States. She published her first work at 16 years of age.

Chris Abani's father is Ibo and his mother English. Like Chimamanda Adichie, he was also first published at age 16. Since 1991, he has been on voluntary exile, first in England and now in the United States. Like Adichie and Habila, Abani is a recipient of many awards. He too is positively influenced by Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, especially in the area of culture and the significance of the kola nut.

BACKGROUND SETTING: OLD AND NEW A major differentiation between the Old and New Voices of Nigerian literature is in the background focus of their first works. First generation writings were set in pre-colonial or colonial Africa rather

than the actual socio-historical milieu of the writers. The New Voices on the other hand, are actually describing the world around them, the events of their growing-up years. In other words, the novels are historical in parts, fictional in parts and to some extent, autobiographical. Habila for instance, explains the content of his novel thus: “I created this character who is a journalist like me, and an aspiring writer like me

- young like me” (Online interview). This is in sharp contrast with the first generation writers, who were describing a world they never really lived in.

Things Fall Apart was set in much older colonial days than Achebe. Soyinka's plays reflect historical and mythical long ago times. Amadi's trilogy are all in pre-colonial Ikwereland, so are Nwapa's Efuru and Idu or Buchi Emecheta's world in Bride Price and Joys of Motherhood. The Old Voices were in fact recreating the past, and rehabilitating the culture for the express purpose of answering back foreign detractors of African culture by establishing its integrity and raison d'etre. A comparison of the backgrounds of the three novels, however confirms this definite shift in setting.

Waiting for an Angel is set in Lagos under the regimes of IBB and Abacha, who are severally mentioned by name. It opens with Lomba the protagonist journalist, who is serving his second year of a brutal prison life. The novel reflects the precarious life in Lagos, a city called the most dangerous in the world on the novel's jacket. The novel reflects the menacing and overbearing presence of a highly corrupt military regime everywhere. In the words of the narrator: “It was a terrible time to be alive, especially

if you were young, talented and ambitious… the weight on the psyche could be enormous, all Nigerians became stigmatized by their rulers' misdeeds” (223-4). Life is dangerous for Lomba, for the university students who rioted to force out the hated regime, and for his friends in Poverty street who demonstrated. For Alice, James, Bola and other major characters, the army domineers and stifles normal life around them. The novel ends with an Afterward where Lomba recounts the actual raw facts of Nigerian politics since independence: “But there was nothing to believe in, the only mission the military rulers had was systematically to loot the national treasury; their only morality was a vicious survivalist agenda in which any hint of disloyalty was ruthlessly crushed” (224).

The immediacy of the socio-historical background is evidenced by the very familiar sights and sounds of the city and of campus life. Lomba's roommate is brutally beaten by soldiers: Alice's room is shown full of American influences. Fatal accidents very naturally occur on the Lagos-Ibadan road. Bola's family relaxes to watch CNN. A robbery suspect is doused with petrol and set ablaze:

"Ole!" "Thief! Catch am O!" A mob wielding cudgels and cutlasses is hot on the heels of a youth... I hear his wailing ululating scream finally turn into a whimper. They pour petrol on him and set

him ablaze. I watch the fiery figure dancing and falling until it finally subsides onto the pavement as a black, faintly glowing, twitching mass (49).

Habila's details equally the miserable situation in present day Nigeria prison. He notes anti-military slogans like “IBB MUST GO! NO MORE SOJA! (58). There are references to Sunday Guardian, and other media houses. He records a change from Marian Babangida Women Centre to Marian Abacha Women Centre and reports Dele Giwa's death by a letter bomb among the myriad other current affairs details. Towards the end of the novel, a life weary Lomba laments in a taxi, very much like the average Nigerian student would:

Now imagine yourself, young, talented and ambitious, living in such a dystopia: half the world has slammed all sort of sanctions on your country; you cannot listen to the radio without hearing your country vilified (224).

Adichie's Purple Hibiscus on the other hand is set mainly in the quiet city of Enugu and the sleepy university town of Nsukka. The village, where papa Nnukwu lives features occasionally. Although the focus is the growing-up experiences of the young narrator and the dramas of family relationships, at the backdrop is the same

military regime, but its presence is not as obvious as in Habila's novel. However, the negative effects of the military regime abound in the tense atmosphere, the dangers surrounding media houses, and fears of arrest, culminating in the shocking letter bomb that finished Ade Coker (Dele Giwa).

Kambili, the fourteen-year-old narrator and her brother Jaja, are growing up in a very wealthy but religiously stifling family atmosphere. Her father, who heads the media house in Enugu, is a fanatical catholic fundamentalist. He rules his household regimentally including his wife, who he thoroughly intimidates and batters occasionally. Kambili and Jaja are like the present generation youths from wealthy families, surrounded by servants, insulated from housework, and more importantly, cut off from their cultural roots including their native languages. The saving grace for these two comes in the form of a vacation with aunt Ifeoma, their father's sister and a lecturer at the University of Nsukka. The vacation experience at the Staff Quarters of UNN provides the reader with the detailed sound and sights of a typical Nigerian university campus.

REALISM AND NATURALISM

The autor's fidelity to setting is remarkable. Kambili's home in Enugu is typical of present day Nigeria's wealthy suburbs: "The compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires were so high... and the frangipani trees planted next to the walls already filled the yard with sticky-sweet scent of their flowers ... (9). The writer captures vividly the natural interactions between Kambili and her cousins as they picked rice, played Whot and discussed issues in Nsukka. Very many aspects of the Catholic faith are depicted from life experiences, including pilgrimage to the recent apparition of the Blessed Virgin in Benue State. She provides vivid details of the students riot that closes down the university and leads to Aunty Ifeoma losing her job and leaving for the United States.

Kambili's father suddenly dies and the children are shocked to hear a confession from their mother that she had slowly poisoned her husband to death. Tension mounts and Jaja, in order to save his mother, claims that he poisoned his father. The novel ends with Jaja in prison still awaiting trial three years after his arrest. The description of prison life is a direct echo of the opening scenes in Helon Habila's novel.

Graceland by Chris Abani is a type of bridge between Purple Hibiscus and Waiting for an Angel in terms of setting. It swings between Lagos and its notorious ghetto, Maroko and through flashbacks, to Afikpo, a sleepy village in far away Ebonyi State. In both milieus, the observation of the narrator is sharp and very realistic. Afikpo in 1976 is typical with its cacophony of market place noises of "women screaming conversations above the badlam of the engine, squabbling Chickens, snorting goats and barking dogs in cages" (83). His description of the wooden lorries with elaborate

motifs of flowers, and vividly colorful tailboards with hilarious murals of supermen pulling lion's jaws or mermaids with coiling snakes are all present day sights. Their slogans are familiar and brilliant: “SLOW AND STEADY; HE WHO LIVES BY THE SWORD SHALL DIE; TO BE A MAN IS NOT A DAY'S JOB; SUFFERING AND SMILING; THE WICKED SHALL NOT PROSPER; THE YOUNG SHALL GROW” (83).

Abani is equally deft at capturing the sounds and sights of Lagos, where everyday and everywhere is full of violent drama. Like a true journalist he give us snapshots of this city of wickedness and the seedy underground criminal life in chaotic Maroko. The growing-up experiences of Elvis, and his reluctant but steady descent from innocence to a life of crime in Maroko parallels the steady sinking of Lagos and the nation under the weight of corruption. At the background of this high tension life of crime are vivid descriptions of rape, incest, homosexuality, hired assassination, drugs, violence, riots, robbery, prostitution and drunkenness. Abani's Lagos is under the same military terrorism of Babangida and Abacha regimes as in the other two novels under consideration.

Dangers surrounding journalists and media men are dramatized in *Graceland* by vivid descriptions. The Colonel is described as “behind the disappearances of famous dissident writers, journalists, lawyers, musicians, teachers and thousands of nameless, faceless Nigerians” (163). In the tradition of his military mentor, Idi Amin, this Colonel is rumored to have personally supervised tortures, taking pictures for his own pleasure. So corrupt is he and the regime he represents, that rumors abound of children and youths kidnapped and butchered for the military regime to obtain human parts to sell to Americans for transplants.

To further buttress the immediacy and accuracy of the social background, there are references to charlatans, who draw large followings because in the words of one of them, “only prophet fit help us now. We be like de Israelites in the desert. No hope, no chance, no Moses” (245). Other recognizable features include mass demonstrations and student riots, which are all brutally crushed with teargas and guns. Finally, the real Maroko, the home of poverty-stricken masses of Lagos, is

heartlessly bulldozed as in real life. The protagonists, Elvis, drifts like thousands of other Maroko displaced people, into the jungle of the bridge city, where young and lost children sleep standing when it rains, and where young girls are raped at will. The novel ends with a disillusioned Elvis escaping to the US with a fake passport.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

An important aspect of background realism in the first works of Nigeria's New Voices is recording the growing influence of American popular culture and the impact of

television, movie houses and the Internet on the lifestyle of the Nigerian youth: “If it is on television, it must be good”, is the basic but wrong assumption. Imitating life as seen on television becomes the order of the day in all its ramification.

In Habila's Waiting for an Angel, for example, the room of Alice, a university of student, is full of American records and stacks of soul music her father had acquired in America. In her own words, her father “was just crazy about soul music”. She, like her fellow students are imitators of the dressing and lifestyle of American youths. Even the lady painter is named Mahalia, because her parents hoped she would become a gospel artist like black American Mahalia Jackson. Another character Kela sees America as a dreamland for escape, where people go when they seek asylum. Thus, when Lomba finds himself trapped, his mind is filled with thoughts of escape to America; “passport, exile, asylum…” (185).

In Purple Hibiscus, the student friends of Amaka at the University of Nigeria Nsukka wore shiny lipstick and trousers so tight” as they pored over an American Magazine (141). Students dream of American visas. Aunty Ifeoma makes negative comments about the American embassy and thus who weep tears of blood when denied a visa. Nevertheless, a time comes for her as it did nor Lomba, when America seems to be the only way out and way forward. She actually leaves for America with her children in search of a fresh beginning after the frustrations of her teaching career at Nsukka and its rude termination.

Abani's *Graceland* is from the very title, under heavy American influence. *Graceland* is obviously and most ironically named after the birthplace of Elvis Presley in New Orleans, which is a spectacular tourist attraction. In *Graceland*, the protagonist, Elvis, is a 16-year-old chain-smoking singer dancer who impersonates Elvis Presley to make a precarious living. The young Elvis' dream is to become a famous dancer like his mentor. Other names in the novel, like Kansas, Redemption, Bazooka Joe and Jagua Rigogo seem taken out of wild wild west movies. Friends of Elvis who watch all sorts of sex pervasions on the screen introduce Elvis to homosexuality without hesitation. They simple believe that whatever is shown on movies must be good and can be safely imitated. Much later in the novel, Elvis' aunt, Felicia, flies to America to marry a Nigerian with American citizenship and at the end of the novel, when all hope is gone for Elvis, he finds redemption in his escape to America.

NEW VOICES AND CULTURE

A second major area of comparison between Old and New Voices is in their attitude to culture and the integration of proverbs, myths, folktales and transliterations. Helon Habila's work is the least inclined to reflecting traditional African culture,

partly because the setting is Lagos, which he describes in his interview as a place people see as "Devil's City". From the times of *Jagua Nana* in the 50s, *No Longer at Ease* in the 60s and Ben Okri's Lagos of the 80s and 90s, Lagos is seen as a place where people lose their innocence, where families disintegrate and a place "almost like a living thing" like some wild animal that devours.

Again because of its setting in Lagos city, Helen Habila's characters speak standard English. There is no evocation whatsoever of the village and he makes no apologies for it. Even Pidgin English is only used rarely by a few uneducated men. For example, Brother remarks: "make you go laugh at all the big big Generals who de steal our country money every day de send am to foreign banks, while their country de die of poverty and disease". (136). Habila's attitude is that of let's move on with the times in reflecting current realities, with no mention of colonial days.

Chimamanda Adichie, an Ibo like Achebe, is most closely affiliated to Achebe the culture guru, through language use and characterization. But unlike Achebe and his generation who felt obliged to provide glossary for Ibo words, phrases and concepts, Adichie provides none and uses many more Ibo expressions with ease and pride. Except for Kambili's father, other characters have no qualms with what we may call Engligbo' the mixture of English and Igbo, reflecting the reality of present generation Ibos who can scarcely speak pure Ibo. Grandfather is call Papa Nnukwu, very naturally and Jaja's mother calls him affectionately "Nna". At the sound of a strong knock on her door, Aunty Ifeoma flies off her chair crying "Onyezi? Who wants to break my door, eh?" (230), and Amaka says to her mom, "O zugo, let's go" (129). Jaja exclaims "Omaka, so beautiful!" and his cousin gets a correction from her mom: "Amaka, o gini? I don't like that tone!." Very many sentences are spiced with Ibo words like "biko", "nno" "gbo", "amarom". The effect created is one of greater intimacy, warmth and down-to-earthiness, simply being oneself. It is as if Adichie is saying in essence the mixture is very legitimate because both languages are of equal importance.

Chris Abani on the other hand, cleverly and uniquely introduces elements of African culture by opening the chapters with the following: (a) progressive aspects of the intricate traditions of the kola nut, (b) different recipes of mouth-watering African dishes; and (c) herbal concoctions for traditional healing. He does not integrate elements like proverbs and tales in his Lagos setting, however, in the Afikpo village setting, he vividly describes traditional rites and customs.

COMMITMENT

Literary commitment is a clearer meeting ground between Nigeria's New Voices and all those before them. Helen Chukwuma states that the writer in Africa does more

than a simple story telling in a beautiful manner, he arouses in the reader a true sense of himself, evoking his past and linking it to the present" (2003:vi). The vocation of the cultural past is used

in the words of Obiechina: "to correct imperialist impression on Africa and Africans and to educate the Africans to be more realistic about themselves, their cultures and religions" (1975:81).

Commitment is an old African value, which the New Voices have embraced with new emphasis. The three novels are to varying degrees concerned with the exposure of myriad problematic issues of the days, exacerbated by the corrupt and tyrannical military regimes. Within that premise, they are especially concerned with the fate of the writer within that system where everything smacks of dangerous politics.

Waiting for an Angel is in itself a window on Lagos, through the eyes of a journalist/protagonist, Lomba. The novel opens with Lomba in prison, denied of his greatest need as a writer paper and pen. Before then, a fortuneteller at Badagry had prophesied prison ahead for Lomba. He promised him that he would know when the Angel of Death comes for him. To further buttress the fears and dangers, there are series of bloody encounters between different groups of demonstrators, women, students, petty traders or Poverty Street, and the army punctuate the novel. Each demonstration starts peacefully, but ends in confusion and death. Media coverage becomes progressively more dangerous. Lomba is arrested and imprisoned. The death of Dele Giwa by a letter bomb announces the end of freedom of speech under the military.

Even in the essentially domestic novel of Adichie, the dangerous political background that causes petrol queues, skyrocketing food prizes and a general malaise is clearly described. The narrator supplies a detailed description of the demise of Dele Giwa the head of Newswatch, under the fictional name, Ade Coker:

Ade Coker was at breakfast with his family when a courier delivered a package to him. His daughter in her primary school uniform was sitting across the table from him. The baby was nearby, in high chair. His wife was spooning cerelac unto the baby's mouth. Ade Coker was blown up when he opened the package (206).

Chris Abani captures in *Graceland*, life in sprawling noisy Lagos. It is a frightening world, extremely dangerous for journalists, and then also for men, women, children, petty traders, and everyone else outside the military. The 16-year-old narrator is no doubt the moral voice of the writer as he challenges his father uncompromisingly over his involvement with crime. He questions his friend, Redemption closely as to

the nature of the secret job to be done for the colonel. His sensitive nose smells a rat and he is always bold to stick out for the right, until circumstances force down his guards. Although Elvis is not a journalist, but as Elvis the impersonator, he is an artist and one quite well versed in Western and African literature from Dickens, Dostoyevsky and James Baldwin to Onitsha Market Literature and other works by African writers.

Elvis is equally the author's moral voice. In Afikpo, when Obed suggests to the boys that they experiment with sex as seen at the movies, Elvis, interjects in alarm, though weakly: "Dat is homo. It is taboo, forbidden" (196). His presence at different scenes of crime is like the author exposing

to the reader the complex relationships of city and village lives. His close brushes with the military reveals their dangerous and murderous attitude: "shall we take care of dis dog, sir?", the leader, a sergeant barked, eyes ahead Turning back to Elvis the Colonel asked him "Do you think I should let my men handle you, dog?". Elvis narrowly escapes being shot. His final escape to USA at the end of the novel is a clear commentary on the dangers confronting artists in general. This is a serious challenge in view of increased violence and threats against all those who oppose military rule, all the Dele Giwas, the Lombas, the Ade Cokers and the Elvises.

African writers are united in their commitment, be it Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'O of earlier generation who suffered arrests and imprisonments, or Ken Saro Wiwa who paid with his life, or dozens from apartheid South Africa, who lived and died in exile. The New Voices of Nigeria have by their first novels heightened awareness concerning the precarious situation of university education, mass unemployment, poverty, crime, chaotic housing and above all the brutality of the military against media houses.

CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGES

In conclusion, one may ask: "what are the lessons learnt from these first Nigerian novels of this new millennium? In the writers' quest for balance, there is a recognition that change is inevitable and therefore one must learn to cope with the times and move on. It is obvious that foreign influences cannot be avoided, but there is definite need for control, they seem to say. They also point out the danger of extremes, be it religious or political. Their works confirm that art must reflect societal realities and that one cannot get stuck to pristine African, nor pretend that cultural taboos like incest, homosexuality, rape and trade in human parts are none existent, neither can they be blamed on colonialism any longer.

The challenges facing the artist personally and squarely are many. For example, the three writers under study are all living in Diaspora presently, with little hope that they

will come back to Nigeria soon. The reasons are obvious. The average writer in Nigeria lacks basic amenities and more likely than not is struggling to make ends meet. Writing is relegated to when one can afford the time. On the other hand, for those who like our three writers have own prizes and recognition, open doors to European and American fellowships and grants abound. Ironically, the pattern of reception for African writers has not changed. Western publishers, Western reviewers and Western prizes ushered the first generation African writers into prominence. Thanks to a few serious African publishing houses like Heinemann, large number of works got published later, under Heinemann African writers series. Mr. Aig Higo and his team deserve great praise for a job well done in this regard. But African literature prizes are extremely rare and wealthy Nigerians banking in Europe and America must be sensitized into endowing cash prizes and awards for budding writers.

Yet, another challenge is one of availability. Books published abroad are either too scarce in Nigeria or too expensive to be affordable. Even English lecturers are often unaware of new books. There must be greater use of the Internet to search out reviews on new books, and introduce them to students. At the same time, it is imperative that English Departments should nurture workshops and courses on creative writing.

Finally, for writers still in Nigeria, the challenge is not to join the mass exodus of young writers to America and Europe. Eiochi Amadi in his article on "The Writer and Human Rights" states that a writer has no special rights apart from those he is writing for. His consolation lies in the fact that the world at large is his audience (Speaking and Singing, 81). That is the reality in Nigeria and Africa because there may not be a significant change in attitude to critical writers in the foreseeable future by those in authority. Nonetheless, hope can never die. Literature must continue to play its crucial parts in the survival, and development of our nation.

Conclusion

The article concludes that the new generation of Nigerian writers, while embracing the social commitment of their predecessors, has shifted focus to autobiographical settings under military rule, capturing the pervasive influence of American culture. Their works offer a realistic, often grim, portrayal of contemporary Nigeria. However, significant challenges persist, primarily the economic viability of writing in Nigeria, which drives talent into diaspora, and the limited local accessibility of their internationally published works. For Nigerian literature to thrive domestically, greater local support through prizes, publishing opportunities, and academic engagement is essential to nurture writers and ensure their work reaches a home audience.

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