

# Nigerian Writers and the Quest for the Repositioning of the Nation

Lateef A.yinla ADENIRAN  
Department of History  
School of Arts and Social Sciences  
Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo, Oyo State, NIGERIA  
Email: [lateefadeniran@yahoo.com](mailto:lateefadeniran@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

This study identifies the application of the English Language as an element of the globalization process. It brings to light some eminent Nigerians who have used this medium as an instrument of shedding light on the nature of the Nigerian society. In the process, they have sought to prescribe the ideal of their dream. Through the exercise of their intellectual powers, they have proved to be not merely displaying their skills in the manipulation of the language, but rather as contributors to discourses on the socio-economic and political developments of Nigeria. Thus, this study sees through their writings, deep sociological, historical, political, philosophical and economic insights. It is by this means that they have succeeded in projecting Nigeria's image on the global scene. By extension greater attention is drawn to Nigeria by the international community as exemplified by the acknowledgement of personalities like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Ben Okri, among others by the intellectual world. In essence, while Nigerian leaders seek to attract the interests of the international community for the development of the country through heavy expenditure on lobby groups and propaganda, some distinguished Nigerian writers have proved to the world that Nigeria has much to offer in terms of intellectual skills.

## Introduction

Right from the dawn of independence to the present times, Nigeria has drawn the attention of the international community to itself. This is essentially attributable to its abundant human and material resources, which it is assumed would grant the nation, the leverage to play a leading role on the global scene. Incidentally, this expectation tends to be a forlorn hope. The challenges posed by the yawning gap between expectations and realization of objectives has engaged the attention of political observers, opinion leaders as well as scholars of diverse fields. This is particularly the case given the particularly fast-changing trends on the global scene.

Given the nature of the current trends in the globalization process, nations which fail to structure their systems to be in tune with acceptable best practices would be atrophied. In other words what operates in contemporary globalized world is the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest. To underline this fact, it is pertinent to draw attention to the observation made by a former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, about the fading hopes of the international community on the prospects of Nigeria. At a public occasion in the U.S., Princeton Lyman had asked rhetorically: 'What does it mean that one in five Africans is Nigeria? It does not mean anything to a Namibian or South African. It is a kind of conceit. What makes it important is what is happening to the people of Nigeria. Are their talents being tapped?...' He went further to add that: 'And when I was asked by journalists why President Obama did not go to Nigeria, I said, "What would he gain from going? Would Nigerians be a good model for democracy? Would it be a model for good governance?" (Vanguard, January 6, 2010). From the above, a number of issues could be deduced. Nations do not exist for the sake of doing so. In other words, autarky is antithetical to human civilization. Through interactions which in political terms, can be termed international relations, the leaders of a country strive to gain relevance on the international scene. Through a process of either formal or informal peer review, the nature or significance of a nation is assessed to the extent that its leaders promote social justice.

In drawing attention to itself, a nation stands to promote its national interests. These interests are diverse, ranging from about the most important, which is the protection of its territorial integrity, to meeting the needs of its citizens in the realms of political activities as well as meeting the peoples' socio-economic needs. In terms of addressing the challenges confronting a people, interests are often drawn to the material needs of the people to the detriment of mental needs. It is in this realm that studies in the humanities adequately fit in. It is the thought process that forms the basis of human civilization. This can be better appreciated if attention is drawn to the fact that Thomas Paine's **The Rights of Man** was a major factor in arousing the consciousness of Americans to fight for independence from the colonizing power, Britain. Similarly Martin Luther King's (Jnr.) writings had far reaching effects in non-violent approach to wresting equal rights from their fellow countrymen. The enduring effects is to the extent that an African-American Barack Obama got elected as President of the U.S. in 2009.

Herein lies the relevance of the man of letters in sensitizing the society on the need to work towards the society's cherished values.

### **The Essence of the Literary Elite**

The worth of a man in society, is to the extent that he avails his society, and by extension, humanity the benefits of his calling. In this instance, the man of letters brings to bear in his works, the characteristics humane qualities of reflection and the quest of the ideal for his society. Whatever scientific advancement recorded or technological breakthrough made, the fact remains that these have been anchored on positive thinking. In other words, humanity is highly indebted to great philosophers over the ages. Herein lies the relevance of Literature in the development of mankind. It should be stated that at the onset of European colonial rule in Africa, the intruders dismissed black Africans as being part of the civilized world.

This contention was essentially borne by the fact that sub-Saharan Africa was largely a non-scribal society. Arising from this, there was no written record of the cultural achievements of these various peoples. With the institution of colonial rule and the development of the culture of writing, the science, philosophy, folklore and other aspects of culture of these African peoples started to be documented. In the acculturation process the use of the English Language as well as Literature in English, became part of Nigerians' way of life. Its application became a vital platform for the nation's integration into the global scene. The instrument of Literature, it should be stated, is a veritable vehicle for the expression of a people's way of life as well as projecting the image of a people beyond the national shore. Literature, it should be asserted, addresses itself to the cognitive part of human nature. It taxes the rational element of man. It is imaginative, philosophical and therefore profound. As a result of this, the man of letters occupies a vantage position in society. In fact, one scholar posits that: 'Writers are sometimes, therefore people with visionary and prophetic insights into human life'. Manifestations of these traits can be deduced from the works of the classical Greek Playwright, Sophocles (496 – 406B.C.), who among others wrote **The Thebean Plays**. The same trait runs through such eminent men of letters like the British, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the German Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1749 – 1832) as well as the Russian, Leo Tolstoy (1828 – 1910) author of the famous novel, **War and Peace**. These writers and others in their category, have carved a niche for themselves in their respective societies and beyond such that their fame has endured even centuries after their deaths. Arising from this, scholars have come to identify these writers as conscience of the society. The English poet Shelley (1792 – 1822) sees poets as 'the acknowledged legislators of the world.' The celebrated English poet, John Milton (1608 – 1674) typifies the great relevance of writers in society. Most of his sonnets were occasioned by contemporary events in England. One of such was his condemnation of the massacre of Protestants in 1655. The relevance of Milton in contemporary British and American intellectual circles is such that the following is said of him: 'Milton is an industry', to the extent that, 'The American and English, presses pump out books and articles on his works in volumes' (Carey: 1976). In this mould was Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593), author of **Dr. Faustus**. He was a humanist as well as a moralist. These men of letters were inclined towards applying the instrument of their literary skills to advocate social justice. These occasionally set them against the political leaders of their respective times. Their scope went beyond the immediate as they had a vision of a society where the sense of equity and harmony would be the guiding principles of human relations.

### **The Nigerian Situation**

The nature of the Nigerian society, is best described as a paradox. It adequately fits into Milton's phrase 'Paradise Lost'. In spite of the vast human and material resources, Nigeria ranks among the countries of the world with indices of low human development. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 1996 Human Development Report (HDR), Nigeria ranked 141 among the 174 countries assessed (**The Guardian** September 9, 1996 See also: **A.M. News**, 1995). In other words, Nigeria was about the 33<sup>rd</sup> poorest nation in global ranking in the Human Development Index (HDI).

Despite the vast arable land across the country, coupled with the skilled hands and financial resources at the disposal of the nation, the government has failed in mobilizing resources to ensure food security for its citizens. Consequently, as a way of cushioning the effect of food scarcity in the country, government has occasionally resorted to the importation of certain food items which could be conveniently cultivated within the country. This was the context in which a U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, Robin Sanders breached diplomatic protocol in criticizing the parlous nature of the country's socio-economic status pointing out that Nigeria 'had become the second largest importer of food in the world, despite her vast human and material endowments' (**The Nation** March 5, 2009 p.15).

By 2006, the Nigerian food situation had deteriorated to the extent that it was classified among countries with 'serious hunger index' (Banse, :2006:6). In terms of the quality of life, by 1995, Nigeria's life expectancy at birth was estimated to be about 51 and 55 for the male and female respectively, the same figures

with The Gambia which is poorly endowed in both human and material resources. For Ghana, the figures were 57 and 61 for the male and female respectively. Nigeria's figures contrasts with Japan (male 77, female 83) and Israel (male 75, female 79) (The World Bank, 1998) which countries are scantily endowed with natural resources but have developed their human resources to amazing capacities. By 2007, among 182 countries assessed, Ghana was ranked 152, while Nigeria ranked 158 (UNDP:2009).

In the recent times, an acronym depicting the deplorable health situations in countries with the highest figure of preventable, yet prevailing child-killer diseases was coined by the World Health Organization. This is PAIN, depicting Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Nigeria as nations where the prevalence of polio was giving the international community serious concern. The socio-economic situation in Nigeria can better be appreciated if one assesses it by means of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In spite of the fact that Nigeria is the sixth leading exporter of crude oil, it has a very depressing rate of poverty. 70% of its citizens live below poverty level (Adeniran: 2005). In the second item of the MDGs, Universal Primary Education, there is a high rate of illiteracy in the country. This is in spite of the launching of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme in 1977 and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999. In the account of Action Aid (2008:50) between 4 million and 8 million children who are between the ages of 6 and 11 are not in school by 2008.

The above level of Nigeria's socio-economic development, has been conditioned by the nature of political leadership. In its assessment of good governance, the World Bank has identified certain basic criteria to be met if a country was to qualify to be categorized as well-governed. These are the protection of civil liberties as well as safeguarding political stability; institution of the rule of law; unfettered judiciary as well as a serious commitment towards checking corruption (Santiso, 2001). The summation of all these principles is the type of governance that operates on equity and social justice. The absence of social justice lies at the root of the socio-economic and political crises bedeviling Nigeria. The linkage between social justice and development has been aptly captured by a former President of the World Bank thus:

Without equity, we will not have global stability.  
Without a better sense of social justice, our cities  
will not be safe, and our societies will not be stable.  
Without inclusion, too many of us will be condemned  
to live separate, armed, frightened lives.  
(The World Bank, 1998:9).

The Nigerian scene presents a crisis-ridden society throwing up a sense of insecurity. Political challenges manifest in the massive rigging of elections, intolerance of political opponents leading to assassinations, arrests on trump up charges, denial of rights and the consequent political instability. In the backlash to this, leaders at the various levels of governments have been lax, in responding to the challenges of sectarian and ethnic motivated clashes, rising wave of crimes, particularly armed robbery as well as kidnapping for ransom. The unchecked unemployment rate has been a major source of youths restiveness. These, among others, have combined leading to the continuous decline in the standard of living. In spite of the poverty alleviation programmes of successive governments at the Federal level, coupled with the UN programme of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), poverty level continues to rise. Ironically, while the quality of life of the average Nigerian continues to fall, the narrow-based political class continues to live in affluence. The disparity between available resources and unattainable meaningful life for the citizens has had far-reaching consequences for the citizens. Among other things it has accentuated the atmosphere of insecurity, which manifests in violent sectarian and ethnic clashes across the country. It has equally instigated unprecedented human capital flight from the country. This has had dire consequences on the image of Nigeria. Among others the migration of unskilled hands has tended to overburden the host nations. This has in turn elicited hostile perception of Nigerians, particularly in the developed nations of the world. It is against this background that this paper attempts to examine the relevance of Nigerian writers in English in effecting attitudinal change among Nigerian leaders. In the same vein, instances would be cited as to the influence of such writers on the international intellectual scene, as to the nation's contributions of ideas which can promote the cause of humanity.

### **Engineering a Renaissance**

It is instructive to point out that turning around the fortunes of a people is beyond the general thinking that effecting quantitative changes in the economy would achieve the desired objectives. In the same vein, the primacy of political leadership in bringing about meaningful changes in the lives of a people remains incontestable. However, a vital element that has an enduring impact in a people's lives, particularly in the wider world, lies in the dissemination of ideas. This fact has been well established in a number of literary works, which

philosophy have had enduring effects on human life over the ages. Apart from the examples of world religions, the works of Karl Marx stands out as a reference point.

In the Nigerian setting, the application of the English Language has inadvertently integrated Nigerian cultural life into the global system. Distinguished writers have in the process made their marks through their works which have engaged the attention of great thinkers and scholars. Some of these works have elicited reviews and comments in the wider intellectual circle. By this means, it can be deduced that Nigeria and her citizens cannot be perceived as mere receivers of cultural values from the outside world, but integral elements in the propagation of those values that can advance the cause of humanity. In one of such instances, a former President of the United States (U.S.), Bill Clinton acknowledged Ben Okri thus:

Ten years ago, a young Nigerian named Ben Okri published a novel, 'The famished Road' that captured imaginations all over the world... but the questions the novel poses speak to all of us in a language that is as universal as the human spirit... Okri asks us, "Who can dream a good road and then live to travel on it?" Nigerians have dreamed this road in music and art and literature and political struggle, and in your contributions to prosperity and progress, among the immigrants to my country and so many others (Gana, n.d.).

From the above, it can be discerned that this particular work of Ben Okri did not only draw attention to the then challenges of the Nigerian society, but rather points to the way out of the crisis of governance by prescribing acceptable global practices leading to development. This literary work captured the attention of the global intellectual community to the extent that Okri was awarded the Booker Prize in 1991. It is instructive to state here that men of letters have often been in the vanguard of the struggles to liberate man from enslavement by his fellow man. Drawing from this tradition, a scholar has averred that: 'There is never a complete divorce between letters and politics' (Clark: 1972). In tandem with this observation that eminent French philosopher, Jean Paul Satre avers that: 'The writer... has only one subject... freedom' (Mphahlele: 1979). Thus, while the man of letters might be apolitical, he cannot, because of his privileged position, alienate himself from the realities of his social milieu. Consequently, in keeping faith with his calling, he innately develops revolutionary tendencies. Thus, from a worm's eye view, one sees the writer as a moralist, humanist, philosopher, visionary and the veritable agent of change. We find these traits in the writings of the first African Nobel Laureate in Literature, Wole Soyinka, wherein he criticized the dictatorial tendencies of successive post-independence Nigerian leaders. Elements of these can be found in **A Dance of the Forests (1960)**, which was written to celebrate Nigeria's independence and **Kongi's Harvest (1965)** which is a political satire. In fact Soyinka dedicated the prize to Nelson Mandela who was then under imprisonment by the white supremacists in South Africa. In the process, he advocates democratic practices. In his **Season of Anomy (1973)**, Soyinka, in the tradition of such renowned novels like Jonathan Swift's **Gulliver's Travels** and Bunyan's **Pilgrims Progress**, allegorically illustrates the horror of human degradation. One must also add that his acceptance speech during the presentation of Nobel Prize in 1986 in Sweden dealt on the issue of political repression. Ken Saro-Wiwa, in his numerous plays, poems and pamphlets, criticized the nature of governance in Nigeria that marginalizes minority elements, and the general injustice perpetrated by successive Nigerian governments. In the same vein, Chinua Achebe is acknowledged as a foremost literary figure whose skills are committed towards criticizing the ills of the Nigerian society. For instance, his **Anthills of the Savannah (1987)** is seen as 'a novel about the failure of contemporary African politicians and intellectuals.' **Okike** which he founded in 1971 has been described as 'Africa's most influential literary magazine'.

It is the same abiding philosophy of using the platform of literature to criticize the socio-political malaise in the Nigerian society that is manifested in Ben Tomoloju's **Jankariwo**. In order to underscore the message of his novel, Tomoloju adopts the metaphor, Jankariwo, a Yoruba word for cobwebs. The novel is an indictment of the rot in governance in Nigeria. Given the nature of poor leadership, the mis-governance has tended to lead the nation into a vicious circle. This starts with the primary motive of the leaders to amass wealth at the expense of developmental programmes. In the process, the generality of the people are impoverished the more. These misappropriated funds now catapult them to sudden opulence, which undeserved wealth are carelessly displayed. The backlash of this is the undermining of governmental institutions whereby the elite use money to buy judgements. With the weakening of law enforcement processes, thuggery, armed robbery, and in recent times, kidnapping take prominence in national life.

## Challenges and Honours

It is instructive to state that most of these writers do not see themselves as distinct from the average member of mankind. In fact, Donne John aptly captures this disposition in his **Devotions upon Emergent Occasions** thus: 'No man is an Island entire of it self... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind'. In the same vein, the Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, implored the Western nations to take a serious interests in the welfare of developing nations, by imploring them in the words: 'Do not be spectators to our miseries' (**South**, March 1989:92). In an attempt to push further, their advocacy writings, some of these writers have had to pay great sacrifices. For instance during the Nigerian civil war, Wole Soyinka was incarcerated between 1967 and 1969, the experience which produced another of his works, **The Man Died** in 1969. In the same vein, Ken Saro Wiwa was executed on November 10, 1995 by the Sani Abacha junta.

As advocates of social justice, these writers have, through their works, succeeded in projecting the image of Nigeria on the global scene. Thus, their celebrations in leading global forums have reverberated on the nation such that the Federal Government ensures that it is represented at such occasions. In addition, back in Nigeria, grand receptions are arranged for the recipients as a means of encouraging others. Apart from that these personalities are placed on national honours. It is instructive to add that on the account of their literary works, a number of them receive national honours beyond the shores of Nigeria. One of such was Ben Okri who in 2001, was awarded OBE in Britain. In this class of writers whose works have earned them international renown and national acknowledgement, is Niyi Osundare who became the first Anglophone poet to win Africa's most prestigious book prize, the Noma Award. Beyond this, he was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for poetry. As a reflection of their international acclaim, it was reported that both Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka were among 100 leading public intellectuals being compiled by the prominent U.S. based journal, **Foreign Policy** and Britain's **Prospect** in 2005. According to the report, 'Achebe is credited as the father of modern African literature with his novel, **Things Fall Apart**, regarded as the classic of all time. While Soyinka, among other criteria, was considered as 'the first African Nobel Laureate in literature' (Kalu, 2005: 80). In the very recent times, the rather young creative writer, Chinamanda Adichie has been featured on a number of international media programmes, particularly the Cable News Network (CNN) as one of Nigeria's gifts to the literary world.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be observed that good governance is yet to take root in Nigeria. In particular, abuse of human rights as well as the absence of social justice have been major factors accounting for the parlous nature of the national life. In real terms the interests of the international community has waned on the prospects of the nation to play a leading role in global affairs. This is in spite of her natural endowments. This is a manifestation of the inability of her leaders to transform her human resources to effect meaningful living standards for its people. The privileged positions of the identified writers in no way alienated them from identifying with the less-privileged members of the society who are bearing the brunt of bad leadership.

Consequently, their writings have often been committed to criticizing the prevailing degradation of this humanity. In one dimension this process is directed towards drawing the attention of the leaders as well as the wider reading public to such condemnable practices. From another dimension these writings were informed by the need to awaken the consciousness of the oppressed on the need to avoid being resigned to fate. Thus, in order to have a turn around in all aspects of Nigerian life, it is imperative that the people and the outside world are informed about the deplorable prevailing situation. One can therefore aver that these writers have, in their writings, spoken for every Nigerian. It is instructive to draw attention to the speech delivered by Wole Soyinka titled: 'Reflections on the Wasted Generation', on the occasion of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. He captures the injustices inflicted on Nigerians by their leaders with such questions as:

What were our goals at that time, those of us who matured  
into that immediate, post independence era?.

How many junior Mandelas inhabit our prison walls at this  
moment?

What of the thousands who were killed, detained, tortured  
in police cells?.

In proffering a way forward, Soyinka in the speech, admonished in the following words: 'In the interest of national survival we must discourage the will-to-amnesia'. This attitude he reasoned, 'Is far more debilitating than the sickle-cell in the blood-stream of our national body' (**The Punch** July 23, 1984:8 & 9).

From all these, it can be argued that the writers, applying the medium of an international language, have drawn attention to the challenges standing in the way of the development of the nation. Solutions have equally been identified. Through their creative works, they have succeeded in pointing the road towards exercising the mental faculty in the right direction, rather than being a people to be teleguided. However, their recognition, acknowledgement and celebration by the international intellectual community, have been immensely invaluable in projecting the worth of the nation, than the millions of dollars and pounds sterling spent on lobby consultants to launder the image of Nigeria in the developed nations of the world. So also can it be argued that the impact of resources spent in the rebranding project in recent times, pale into significance when compared with the goodwill garnered for the nation by the writers whose works have been appreciated in the developed nations of the world through the translation of such works into a number of European languages; appointment as chairs in a number of endowed professorial seats; as well as invitations as guest lecturers at prominent intellectual circles in the Western countries.

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