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**The Plights of Nigerian Writers in the Contemporary Era: The Ways
Forward**

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Abstract

Writing is an indispensable means of passing information across. It is an undisputed fact that man differs from the lower animals basically because man reasons and needs information to survive. The imaginative literature, in addition to the information about a society it passes across, has many other vital roles it plays such as helping man to understand himself, helping to ease tension among others. However, in Nigeria, this all-important means of communication seems not to be given the attention it so deserves. Nigeria writers, especially the young ones face a lot of challenges hence the need for this research which aims to chronicle the plights of the average Nigeria writers and then proffer the way forward.

Key Words: Nigerian writer, literature, society, European, publishing, communication, story

Introduction

Every Nigerian who has witnessed any event(s) whether comic or tragic, is a potential writer. One cannot just write if one has no story to tell. The obvious fact is that every story is first conceived in one's memory before it is put down in paper. This is why it is believed that oral literature predates written literature. Emenyonu, Ernest consolidates this assertion when he says that literature had existed in Africa before the coming of the European to African continent. According to him, "This literature was basically oral." In the past, before the advent of writing, people used to gather together at a place to tell themselves traditional stories. Such stories were not written down then because there were no literate people to document the stories in written tradition. In Nigeria today, many people are literate

and so, we have many writers in our contemporary Nigerian society. African literature which Nigerian literature is its appendage has its origin in oral tradition and so, contemporary Nigerian writers incorporate various aspects of oral literature in their written literature. Therefore, if you can tell a folktale or you can narrate a story of any event you ever witnessed in any language, you are a potential writer.

As Charters, Ann puts it, “All stories are created out of an author’s personal act of vision” (5). Charters goes further to say that to understand the effect of a story, you must understand the way the writer achieved it. In her own words, “Showing what life is like by finding words for human experience and organizing these words into a narrative pattern – transferring real or imagined events into fiction – gives the storyteller the advantage of revealing connections and coherence in experiences” (5). Literature is a mirror of a society. It uses language to mirror the society. What this means is that a writer’s work is a representation of his or her society. The reader sees a given society through a writer’s work. That is why it is often said that if you want to know the culture and tradition of a society, read novels from such a society. A Nigerian writer therefore, is one who represents Nigeria in his or her literary works. Chinua Achebe, Nigerian leading novelist, in his article, “The Novelist as a Teacher,” admonishes African writers in general and Nigerian writers in particular, to always project the good image of their society in their works rather than present their society in a bad light. He however, is not against any satiric work. Satire is used to correct impressions and there are satiric strictures in every good work of art. All that Achebe condemns is a situation where a writer only presents the bad image of the society to the whole world as though there is no single good thing about the society. A Nigerian writer is one who paints the good picture of the Nigerian society in his or her work; one who tries to let the European realize that their view about Africa in general and Nigeria in particular is only but an illusion. The European never believed that an African is equal to him. According to Okoh, Nkem in his *Preface to Oral Literature*, the German philosopher, George Hegel says “Let us leave Africa, not even to mention it again, for it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” Hegel’s utterance simply vivifies the European belief that Africa has no tradition and literature. Achebe fails to accept the ostensible remark and so, in his *Things Fall Apart*, he points out to them that Africa did not hear about culture for the first time from the European. Before the Europeans came, Africans had their tradition and they had their culture which the white man came and messed. Achebe says that the white man was cunning, he came like a foolish one and the natives allowed him to stay. “Now, he has put a sword in the thing that held us together and we have fallen apart. A Nigerian writer, therefore, is one who tries to restore the dignity of Nigeria in his or her literature. A writer can write about anything that catches his or her fancy. Wilbur, L. P quotes Late John Gardener, a successful novelist and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Iowa as saying that anything could constitute his fictional dream. However, he is quoted as saying that “The fictional dream must be a strong one to sustain the writer through a complete novel. Similarly, in his *Writers INC*, Sebranek, Patrick, Verne Meyer and Dave Kemper believe that a writer writes about anything. As they put it,

It is sometimes hard to get started, but once you do, you feel much better for it. If nothing personal moves you to write, pick up on the actions of a family member, on something you have read in the newspaper, or on anything that

catches your eye. But please don't say that you have nothing to write about. There is always something to write about if you just get at it.

However, the fact that writing can be about any subject, Nigerian writers are Nigerian whose works centre on Nigerian society with a view to promoting Nigerian tradition and culture.

Major Themes of Nigerian Literature

According to Lostracco, Joe and George Wilkerson in their *Analyzing Short Stories*, A story's central idea (Sometimes called the theme) is the implied comment on the subject of the story. It's what the story reveals about some aspects of existence – as perceived by the author. In the view of Kennedy, J. X, Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein, theme is the prevailing topic or issue conspicuously running through a literary work. A short didactic work like fable may have a single obvious theme but longer works can contain multiple themes. In the novels of the early prominent Nigerian novelists like Chinua Achebe, the predominant theme is the theme of culture contact and culture conflict. There are of course, other implied themes in the works of earlier Nigerian writers but the predominant theme of their works was culture contact and conflict. The world we live in is dynamic and so, as the world progressed, things changed. Today, theme of Nigerian literature has drifted from the issue of culture contact and culture conflict to a variety of contemporary issues. Writers are inspired to write based on what happens around them. What happens around a writer's society constitutes the subject of his or her writing. Today, Nigerian writers witness a lot of contemporary issues about Nigeria and such constitutes the theme of his writing. The predominant issues in Nigeria today include: Corruption, bad governance, tribalism, religious war, boko haram, kidnapping, quest for wealth and such other similar facts. Issues above mentioned, constitute the subject matter of Nigerian literature today. Emeka Nwabueze's *Parliament of Vultures* and Uche Nnyagu's *To Unknown Destination* centre on the subject of corruption of the Nigerian political class; Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* vividly x-rays high rate of fanaticism and charlatanism among the so-called Christians, Inya Richard's *Katakata* is all about the state of unrest in Nigeria. It must be recalled that Achebe has a saying that one must dance the dance that is prevalent in one's own time. The dance that is prevalent in the contemporary Nigerian society is using literature to tackle contemporary ills in the society with the aim to proffer solution. Contemporary Nigerian writers have a task, as Achebe has urged, to use literature to right the wrongs in the society.

Challenges of Nigerian Writers

In every venture, there are challenges. Nigerian writers are confronted with a lot of challenges, most of which could totally dampen the spirit of average writers as well as totally discourage the intending authors. Some of the challenges include:

1. Publishers Are Prejudiced About Young and Unknown Authors

It is a fact that in Nigeria, there are only a very limited number of publishers. What we have in Nigeria are more of book printers than publishers. The few publishing companies known for publishing literature, such as Literamed, Kraft, Longman, Farafina and University Press do not accept manuscripts from young writers. They only have faith in established writers. No matter how good a young writer's manuscript might be, the publishers cannot venture into publishing their works as they see it as risk not

worthy of taking. They are afraid that the money they spend in publishing a work of a new author may not be recouped in a shortest period of time. They prefer to publish only works from established authors because they know that to sell the books is guaranteed. Young and new authors therefore, continue to have their manuscripts turned down by the publishers. Other prominent publishers like Heinemann, UPL, Fourth Dimension and Spectrum well known for publishing novels in the past, stopped publishing completely. However, there are many local publishers around who are willing to accept manuscripts from authors, both established and neophyte author. The problem with such publishers is that they do not pay authors royalties. When they manage to pay at all, it is only peanuts. One of the reasons why some people write is to make money, though that is not supposed to be so. It is appalling that when a writer burns midnight candle to produce a novel and eventually when the novel is published and sent to the market, no royalty is paid to the author. It is not encouraging at all and some authors consequently decide to self publish their works. As a result, the works fail to go far and they are usually not well edited.

2. Nigeria Has Very Poor Reading Culture

For everything we do under the earth, there is a reason. The essence of writing is to be read. We write to communicate and when a novel is published but not read, the aim of the writer is defeated. A derogatory saying goes that if you want to hide anything from Nigerians, put it in writing. An average Nigerian would prefer to watch movies from morning to night to reading his or her book. It is a fact that if one million copies of movies are produced at the same time as one thousand copies of a novel is produced, the copies of the video would get exhausted yet the books may not have been sold up to three hundred copies. This has been experimented when a particular not popular novel was acted by some prominent actors and actresses. In no distant time, the video was all over the places in Nigeria but only about one thousand of the books published remained unsold. Obviously, Nigerians don't value books and they don't read books unless they are compelled to read probably because of examination purposes. Even when a student is under compulsion to read a book for an examination, such a student would still find a way to avoid reading it. Some students would prefer to look for an abridged version of the recommended texts instead of reading the full text. They see reading as a mere waste of time, but watching video and gossiping over trivial issue are tasks worth given quality time to.

3. Piracy is a Major Enemy to Creativity

The issue of piracy is a serious threat to creativity. Pirates are thieves and there are many of them in Nigeria. They sit down and wait for writers to write, when writers write, pirates wait for the books to go to press, when published, pirates wait still for the book to start selling, once the publishers have promoted the book and the book starts selling, in a twinkling of an eye, pirates would mass produce the book in cheap material and send them to the market. Pirated books are much cheaper than the original copies because pirates spend no money to edit the work, they have no authors they pay royalties, they do not pay rent for shop and they do not pay workers. Buyers only buy the pirated copies and so both the publisher and the author are left with nothing. Pirated books are usually not legible, some pages are sometimes blank and some pages are turned upside down because the pirates work mainly at night as not to be caught. Most Nigerians are enlightened and they are able to distinguish between original copies of a book from the pirated copies but because of high rate of poverty level in Nigeria, everybody prefers

to go for the pirated copies which are always very cheap. Sometimes, people use defensive mechanism to justify why they buy pirated books. We thus, hear people make such utterance as “Both pirated and original copies have the same contents so why should I waste my hard-earned money to buy original copies that are usually costly when I can still get the same message from the pirated ones?”

4. The Society is Not Conducive for Writers

Learning thrives in a conducive environment. One may have noticed that European novels and novels written by Nigerians who are living in abroad are always voluminous and usually with very minimal mistakes or no mistakes at all but Nigerians writers in Nigeria usually come up with slim books usually bedeviled with errors. The question had been, does it mean that Nigerians are less talented than their European counterparts? The obvious answer is no. Nigerians are talented but the society is not as conducive to her writers as European society is to her own authors. In Nigeria, writing is not a profession; writers are mainly teachers in higher schools, teachers in lower schools, graduates who work in different companies, businessmen and women, students in universities and prospective undergraduates. They come back after their carrier in the evening and begin to write. Most times, because of the epileptic power supply in Nigeria, Nigerian writers use lamp or candle to write at night. Smoke from the lamp or candle choke them and at the same time, they are distracted by mosquitoes which are ubiquitous in most parts of the country. The affluent ones switch on their generator and they find out that they are distracted by the sound of the generator as well as the smoke it emits. In addition, factories are everywhere in the society even right inside residential houses. As a writer writes, pollution from the different factories distracts him or her. In Europe, things are well planned so that residential place is different from commercial area usually very far from each other. In their residential areas, there is serenity and the weather is conducive with no mosquitoes to distract the writer as he writes.

5. High Cost of Printing Material in Nigeria is a Cankerworm

There are many Nigerians who want to become published writers but they are actually handicapped. As I have stated somewhere in this paper, young writers and unknown writers find it difficult to get a publisher to publish their works. What such writers do therefore, is to self publish. But then, it is not always easy for them to self publish as the cost of printing material has gone very high. Many Nigerians have completed manuscripts they wish to publish but there is no wherewithal for publishing them. Many others get pissed off and decide not to write again.

Ways Forward

Publishers must eschew the illusion they have about young writers. It must be realized that prominent authors were once neophytes. If their works were not published when they wanted, perhaps, nobody would know about them today. Nigerian publishers should stop discouraging young and new authors by turning down their manuscripts simply because they are not popular. They do not bother to read any manuscript sent to them for possible publication once the author is not known. That is an illusion! A young author today, who managed to have his or her book published, may become established tomorrow. All that one need is encouragement to succeed. Most times, publishers turn down good manuscripts simply because the author is not known. T.S Eliot, a prominent modern European writer and a former editor at Farber and Farber publishers once indicted other editors and critics who show

aversion for certain authors' works. According to him, "He who expects a perfect work to see would see none." If the fear of the publishers is that young authors' works would not be perfect, they must remember that no single work is perfect. The editors are there to perfect the works of young writers. When they are published, they become prominent.

Nigerians should try and cultivate reading culture. Reading gives exposure and any society that does not read is as good as being blind. Nigerians should be encouraged to read for reading informs as well as educates the reader. Reading competitions should always be conducted and prizes be given to those who perform well. This is a way of encouraging the indolent ones to sit up. Again, as a means of encouraging culture, government should subsidize books and make them available to the masses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is high time Nigerians woke from their slumber and see writing as an indispensable way or means of preserving the tenets of the society. Any society without literature is moribund. When those voted to power begin to mess the society, the masses would not carry guns and knives to go and fight them, literature is the only means of fighting such war without gun and knives. When Ghana was in total mess, there was nothing Ghanaian masses could do other than to seek ways to leave Ghana for other countries. At the peak of squalor in Ghana, Ayikwei Armah decided to write a satirical novel – *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* so that the corrupt Ghanaian rulers would realize that what they knew, others knew too. It was with literature that the war against decadence and squalor was solved in Ghana.

In developed and some developing nations, writers are not joked with, rather, they are respected. Some countries even pay their authors as a way of encouraging them. In Europe and America, there are publishing companies that encourage their writers to write and for any article written by a writer, the publisher pays him or her instantly while he or she retains his or her copyright.

Governments at all levels should wake up and fight the menace of piracy. Piracy is a serious theft and should not be condoned in any country. In developed countries, their governments do everything within their powers to eliminate piracy drastically. In Nigeria, reverse seems to be the case. The government of Nigeria shows philistine attitudes towards the issue of piracy. Pirates are everywhere in Nigeria and they move about freely as if piracy is a noble profession. Not until government comes up with a strong decree against piracy and ensures that the perpetrators are punished, writers and publishers in Nigeria would continue to suffer untold hardship.

Finally, government should lift the heavy duty imposed on the importation of printing material. They are not produced in Nigeria and so, importation of papers and other printing material should attract little or no duty at all. This would make such printing material affordable and printers would no longer charge very high to get a manuscript printed. When the cost of printing is low, many people would afford to buy original books and so, piracy would completely be discouraged.

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