

## Urban Literature and the Nigerian Challenges

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### Abstract

*Literature has been used and is still being used as a tool for solving societal problems in different nations at different times. Urban literature is a good example of literature that addresses and analyses societal problems. The European novel developed simultaneously with Western urban civilization (Ihekweazu 1992). Some critics argue that modernity finds adequate expression in the city novel as in novels like Zola's Paris (1898), James Joyce's Ulysses (1921), John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer (1925) and Alfred Döbbins Berlin Alexanderplatz (1929) among others. Several of Cyprian Ekwensi's urban novels also fall within the above list. This paper is more of a proposal on the achievement envisaged in the use of urban literature to solve some of our national problems. We, therefore, conclude with the proposition that if literature was used to solve societal problems in different places in the past, urban literature could be used to solve many of the problems in Nigeria today, particularly if targeted to address the problem of poor reading culture among Nigerians.*

**Keywords:** Urban Literature, Nigerian Challenges

### INTRODUCTION

This write-up will show through the ensuing research how urban literature can solve national problems by being used as a tool for action and not just as a piece of written material to be read and dropped. A review of urban literature of different nations has also shown that literature, in general, has been used for the above-mentioned purpose, as a tool for action.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the major problems in Nigeria today is that the generality of her citizens has not developed a patriotic spirit. This explains the reason why a few that cares about Nigeria as a nation always hammers on the importance of national consciousness if Nigeria we know today should take its place as a developed nation.

Asked why many Nigerians have not developed this spirit of patriotism, I would say that they do not yet feel a sense of belonging for the reasons that: there still exists a huge difference between the Haves and the Have-nots in 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria; between urban dwellers and rural dwellers and even between high-class urban dwellers and slum urban dwellers. Nigeria is yet to arrive as a nation that cares for all its citizens. All the above problems are found in Nigerian literature including urban literary form.

## Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to draw attention to the Nigerian public to some of the above mentioned literary works, particularly to the sector of the Nigerian audience that could and should effect a change for the better, thereby winning the populace over to work together to achieve national goals.

## Significance of Research

This study x-rays the important role of literature in every nation, in particular the role that urban literature plays in the development of Nigeria as a modern state.

## Literature Review

This area of study “Nigerian urban literature and the Nigerian Challenges” though not entirely new, is virgin in the aspect that concerns targeting Nigerian challenges with the already existing tool - urban literature. People have done studies of urban literature concerning other problems of the society. Works are available in both software and hardware (internet and books).

In her work *Ben Okri and the convention of Nigerian prose fiction*, Halima Sekula ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)) analyses several Nigerian poetry and prose like Soyinka’s *Interpreters* and Achebe’s *A Man of the people* as urban literature. The work depicts the use of literature in addressing the developmental stages of the country. Sharp W. (1999) uses Emecheta’s fiction to address the survival techniques and search for a new life among the citizens. Edith Ihekweazu’s (1992) paper on “The image of the city in African literature” not only critically analyses the urban literature in Africa including Nigeria but also presents some Western urban literature and their significances Naiwu Osahon’s *A Nation in custody* (1980), a mixture of fiction, description and political pamphlet starts with a vivid picture of Ajegunle:

*Don’t ask me about Ajegunle, it has a mystery of its own. I know this much, though, it is the most neglected, most squalid, most unkempt, most unplanned conglomeration of shanties on this side of the universe, and the natives have passed caring anything you fancy you can get, from fresh human skulls to now down prostitution on the naira and quickly (Naiwu P.15).*

The author presents all that has gone wrong since independence and concludes: “we too are slaves under black leadership” (P.15), in the “richest and strongest country ordained to lead the black world” (P.33). He puts before us “the death dance that laces sightly millions of Nigerians together” (P,72). The city of Lagos is presented as one monument of failure:

*The past, the present and the future converge with unbelievable clarity in my daydreams; the monument of wasted souls; streets of desertion; historical events that do not lie, phoney carnivals of culture (P.72)*

In addition to other calls, this pamphlet calls for hard work and discipline. According to Edith Ihekweazu(1992), reacting to Naiwu’s text, the Nigerian urban/city literature of the period before the dawn of the new millennium shows young people on the verge of criminality, getting lost in slums. On the other side are the elites and politicians, as the allies of the colonial master. The two sides are summarized in the symbols of the “latrine” and the “Benz”. The ever recurrent themes are unemployment, corruption, prostitution, hunger and shit, the latter being one of the clue motives of the city novel (Ihekweazu, 1992:131). The latrine appears almost as often as the symbol of the new African leaders – the Benz. These two items epitomize the social structure of the ‘dual city’. The above picture

of Nigerian social structure has not changed today. The call-in pamphlet remains the same as others before it. There is a serious need for change before all the citizens of Nigeria could enjoy some amenities, whether they are in the village or the urban centre. This is the only way to achieve the so much longed for national consciousness and patriotism. There is a big gap between the haves and have-nots, between urban and rural dwellers, and even between the high-class urban dwellers and slum urban dwellers. Nigeria is yet to arrive as a nation that cares for all its citizens. Our cities as presented in urban literature show prolonged neo-colonial exploitation. Our cities are a rubbish heap of the country, a place of rot, prostitution, criminality and squalor. On a personal note, one feels like crying for the nation any time one sees oneself on Nigerian roads or city streets after the rains. Rubbish heaps are thrown to the roads from the gutter blocked by Nigerians who throw rubbish into the gutters with the notion that they will be carried by flood. These drainages get blocked and divert the flood. As a result, they also damage the roads and the drainages. Needless to mention the danger of some of the strewn rubbish as vehicles step on them on the road!

It is for the picture painted above that this research aims at using some of the cited works and others, and possibly produce some sample texts to be used as productions employed in some sister nations under the terms like experimental theatre, realistic theatre, theatre of the oppressed etc. (Boal: 1978; Dessai: 1991). We can call our production *development theatre; theatre of awareness campaign; theatre of sanity* etc. If well developed, the productions will run daily in our national communicative media and on the streets of major cities in Nigeria for years until the ideal expected gets instilled in us. If Nigerians could imbibe the ideal of discipline in queuing during the Idiagbo days, it is expected that urban literature in the planned adaptation shall instil discipline in them. While we do not advocate class struggles, it is not surprising that some people call for class struggles as a solution to serious gaps in the social strata of some of our developing nations as in Frantz Fanon's, *The wretched of the Earth* (1978). Cyprian Ekwensi wrote urban novels but most of his wretched ones (in Frantz Fanon's terms and description) do not live long enough for any class struggle as in his *Jaguar Nana*. In Ekwensi's *People of the City*, there is a reference to the coal miners' strike at Enugu but that did not fetch the miners anything. Our problem cannot, therefore, be solved by class struggles. We, therefore, suggest a peaceful solution to our problems of a wide gap between social strata in the manner that Pa Ukoha in Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1979) expresses himself,

*We poor men, we do not ask for much, no matter who is ruling us today, we ask for good water to drink and to wash. Good roads to carry our yams and cassava. Good schools to train our children. Good maternities to care for our wives in labour... (P.57).*

We however want to state that Nigeria of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be ashamed of using the promise of pipe-borne water as one of the electioneering campaigns or other promises to the citizenry. It is a big shame that Enugu as an old city of the south-east that enjoyed pipe-borne water before and after independence in almost all the streets then should now depend on water tankers for the water needs of most of its inhabitants in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A lot needs to be done. Though younger Nigerian writers have written urban prose and poetry: Chika Unigwe (*Night Dancer*: 2012), Sefi Atta (*Everything good will come*: 2004), Chimamanda Adichie (*The Thing Around Your Neck*: 2009) among others, we have chosen for this research older literary works of Naiwu, Osahon, *A Nation in Custody* and Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* (1979) as most suited for this study.

## HYPOTHESIS

Nigeria has failed as a nation, despite all administrative agendas and Jingoism Agenda to achieve true democracy through a system that should give the generality of the populace a sense of belonging. Urban literature in Nigeria sees the country over the years in permanent bondage. This literature constantly calls for a change for the better. The needed change in Nigeria will be achieved by the reception of the themes of Nigerian urban literary works by their targeted audience.

## METHOD

- Some urban prose and poetry works will be selected for the study. Two main texts are: *A Nation in Custody* (1980) by Naiwu, Osahon and *Survive the Peace* (1992) by Ekwensi, Cyprian. Despite their age of publication, the messages in these two texts remain contemporary issues in 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria. Other texts will also be used to support them.
- Participants to be used for the study will be put into groups. The number of participants will depend on the number of characters in the works to be studied plus others needed for the execution of the action demanded by the works.
- The prose texts will be adapted for performance on the stage, possibly moving stage. One group of participants will perform production on the stage.
- The second group of participants will be assigned as discussants of the texts to be viewed on the screen of mass communicative media.
- Time table of the presentation will be worked out for discussants and performers of the works on the stage. These are to run for weeks on our popular national video stations on different streets of our major cities. It is expected that the above programmes will run at the hour (s) the generality of the populace will be opportune to view them.
- Invitation of comments by the audience will be worked into the sessions.
- The programmes will require training sessions to be worked out.
- Production on the stage will run for months and on weekly basis.

## INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES

It is expected that the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and other bodies that offer research support would come to our aid when we approach them for support. Although this study is not targeting class consciousness or class struggles in Nigeria, which has been one of the major focuses of the German playwright Brecht, we do believe that exposure to some of his works would help direct the attention of those who are in power in Nigeria on the need to work seriously towards minimizing the gap between the haves and have-nots.

Though those in performing arts have their research focus, we intend to also work with them in adapting the Nigerian urban fiction for the Nigerian stage. We believe that all the above-mentioned facilities and the expertise in our different areas of the Arts are suitable and competent points for this research.

## PERSONNEL

As the methodology and resources above indicate, there are many people to be engaged in the production aspect of this study, as technical and other assistants and as cast and crew. The selected texts would be studied to adapt them for production on the stage. This is expected to last some months. The

cast and crew will start training after the work on selected texts. The technical assistants would also be invited for their input. The final stage, which is the actual production on the stage, is expected to involve all the participants.

### **BUDGET**

There is a need for a constructive and reliable budget that will meet the acceptance of the bodies that would be approached to finance the project.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As we noted in the abstract, this paper is more of a proposal for research than a concluded study or project. The proposition is that if literature solved societal problems in the past, urban literature could solve many Nigerian problems if it is well-targeted to the nation's poor reading audience.

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