

# **A Survey of Adversarial Phases of Nigerian Literature and Emerging Themes in Selected Drama Texts**

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## **Abstract**

Most literary works are usually conceived, even if not finally birthed, during adversarial conditions; hence the statement “necessity is the mother of invention” can be put differently as “adversity is the mother of creativity”. Nigeria, where my discussion is focused, has faced a number of adversities, which creative people, inventors and artists, have responded to in diverse ways and thus have given birth to various forms of arts with which they use to portray their experiences of these adversities. I identify four historical/ chronological phases of adversities in Nigeria, which Nigerian literary writers in their individual ways have responded to in their works: (1) the colonial era, (2) the Nigerian civil war era, (3) the gender/feminist era and advocacies against the subjugation of women, and (4) the present era of crises of leadership, violence and insecurity in Nigeria. Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, for example, depicts the traditions and culture of the Igbo people of Nigeria which were truncated by the colonizers. The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-71 inspired so much literature, prose, that today the war writings constitute a major subject of periodization in the Nigerian literature – up to fifth decades or generations of war writings, mainly from Igbo writers which is understandable because their homes were the battle ground (Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra*, Flora Nwapa’s *Never Again*, Ossie Enekwe’s *Come Thunder*, and then Emeka Otagburuagu’s *Echoes of Violence*, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and later Achebe’s *There was a Country*, among others. There is no closure yet to the war adversity in Nigeria, as new works keep coming up on the war. The third era of adversity in Nigeria concerns gender stereotyping and subjugation of women in Nigerian literature and society, an issue that still engages writers though the preferred concept now is gender balance, mainstreaming – the welfare of the boy-child is as important as that of the girl-child. A number of female writers including male critics have responded to this –

Flora Nwapa in *Efuru*, *Idu*, and *One is Enough*, Buchi Emecheta in *Joys of Motherhood*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in most of her works, including the booklet *Dear IjeAwele or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, have responded to this situation. Lastly, the fourth era of adversity in Nigeria, according to my study, is the ongoing crises of leadership, violence and insecurity in the country. It has led to the creation of a number of literary works all addressing themes relating to the present problems.

### **Depictions of Emerging Themes in Nigerian Plays**

Focusing on the emerging themes in African literature, I shall concern myself with select drama texts, which include Chetachi Igbokwe's *Homecoming*, Clementina Kezie's *The Broken Reed*, Don Veta's *A Cobbler's Travail*, Peter Omoko's *The Mudskippers*, and Yemi Ajagbe's *Morounmubo: Beauty from Ashes*. The playwrights here are obviously responding to and commenting on issues arising from the current crises of leadership, violence and insecurity, abuses, religious bigotry in Nigeria.

Chetachi Igbokwe's *Homecoming*, the award winning work in the drama category of the ANA Literary Prize of the year 2021, is a comic portrayal of issues of conflicts in religion, faith, marriage and life, which often result in confusion, frustration, desperation, mental breakdown, all kinds of losses and death, as seen in the work. Apart from the never-ending conflicts between Nwakibe and wife, the play also reveals the conflicts, both at the secular and spiritual levels, between Nwakibe who is a catechist in the Christian Church and Ahumaraeze, a deity /priest. Ahumaraeze demands a human head as condition for Nwakibe to get back his son, and surprisingly Nwakibe who all the time shows complete disapproval and contempt of the deity/priest actually resorts to taking the new neighbour's head, without realizing this neighbour is actually the son he has been looking for. This work depicts the dilemma in the religious beliefs and practices of the people who are torn between the traditional African worship and the practice of Christianity.

*The Mudskippers* by Peter Omoko is a political satire. The issues of misappropriation, failed contracts, embezzlement, sometimes, the 'entire' monies meant for public projects, are parodied in the text, through characters such as Chief Palmer, Mrs. Palmer and Engr. Jonah, who have no qualms at all about their lack of integrity. Consider these statements from Chief Palmer: "How else can one run away from poverty in this country if not in politics" (p.9). Chief Palmer further asserts:

Let me tell you Engr Jona, none of us ventured into politics because of any specific policy that we want to implement. We just want to make money and remain in power to protect them [sic]. Do you snatch ballot boxes or kill perceived opponent just to implement policy....?

The climax of the looting is when Chief Palmer with the support of his wife arranges for his own kidnap in order to make money from the ransom that will be paid for his release. The play ends on a positive note, though, for Chief Palmer and his cohorts are eventually exposed, and taken to face the law. This will not have been possible without the support of the masses and the likes of

Professor Kemukemu. The drama serves some didactic purposes one of which is to tell the youths and indeed everyone that they indeed have the powers to make the leaders accountable.

Clementina Kezie's *Broken Reed* exposes the emotional trauma surrounding teenage pregnancy in society. There is a quiet reprimand to the parents or guardians of the girl-child whose usual silence on the issue of sex education contributes in no small measure to the problems of premarital sex and teenage pregnancy in our society. One of the ironies of the work is that in the bid for the young Oby to terminate her two months and three weeks pregnancy, she is exposed to further abuses, for example, the prescriptions for the termination of Oby's pregnancy included a quick sex with the chemist, drug seller. In *Broken Reed*, Kezie teaches a universal lesson to all girls, parents and relations.

*A Cobbler's Travail* by Don Veta exposes the issue of radicalization of the youths into insurgency and violence. When youths are mostly ignorant, do not go to school, or have not acquired any reasonable self-sufficiency skills, except, maybe, the very subsistence cobbler skills, they are bound to fall prey to hoodlums and religious bigots who use them to perpetrate evil and carnage in society. One of the lessons of the drama is that the youth who allows himself to be trapped and used as suicide bomber in the hope that his relations would be handsomely rewarded by his masters, the hoodlums, should know that his relations do not enjoy even the so-called settlements, as the settlements expose them as the relations of he who "has sold his soul to the killers of Peace!" (*Cobbler's Travail*, p. 46)

Another work which speaks to present reality in Nigeria is *Morounmubo: Beauty from the Ashes*, by Yemi Ajagbe. The drama text centres on the dangers of permissiveness in child upbringing; the jaundiced/ toxic love of parents for their children; and the criminality of incest and sexual abuse of children. Tanwa, the protagonist of the story, the precious daughter of Adisa and Jenrola, born after six male children, becomes a victim of incest, being sexually abuse by her own father, Adisa. Adisa shows no remorse when he is caught, rather he rushes to hit Jenrola as she curses him. At this time, Jenrola, in her confusion, is already holding a knife which she has got from the kitchen. "Someone save me! Who do I call! Who can I tell? ... In that moment of frenzy, Jenrola thrusts the knife into Adisa's stomach. Jenrola gets fifteen years imprisonment for killing her husband, but she refuses to disclose what really happened as she fears it will tarnish the image of her daughter. Instead, she sends her daughter to her elder brother who lives in the city. Being totally spoilt by her father who prevented her mum from training her as she would have loved, Tanwa could not do much for herself after her parents' tragedies. At the end of the story, she was completely burnt out and sick with a terminal ill-health. Her only hope is in her daughter, Tanwa, whom she had with one of the men in her life. She encourages Tanwa to be different from her: "You are to rewrite a beautiful story of my life. You are the phoenix rising from my ashes. You are my second chance." (p. 86)

As Professor Adesegun Fatusi comments on the text, incest is a perversion, sexual violation and criminality that can "set a young girl on a life journey of emotional trauma and path of

compromised value and eventual destruction” (preliminary page). Another problem which is revealed in the work is the growing passivity of parents in the training their children; hence many children today in Nigeria are being brought up in a jaundiced manner – without proper values. From the play, we find out, as Jenrola says, that “...it is better not to have a child at all than to have a bad one” (p29). In the same vein, it is better not to have a child at all than to have a child and not train the child.