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UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS  
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**ARTISTIC CREATIVITY:  
LITERATURE IN THE  
SERVICE OF SOCIETY**

By

**PROFESSOR (MRS.) THEODORA AKACHI EZEIGBO**



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2008

# ARTISTIC CREATIVITY: LITERATURE IN THE SERVICE OF SOCIETY

To all who appreciate literature and its humanizing influence.

An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Lagos Main Auditorium on Wednesday, 13th February, 2008

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## PREAMBLE

I had resolved, before I became a professor of English, that if I attained this elevated and distinguished position in my my inaugural lecture within a year of my appointment. [After all, an inaugural speech or lecture is supposed to be the first speech or lecture given by someone starting an important job, such as a president or a university professor.] I was confident I would be able to achieve this aim easily, telling myself that as one who loved to carry out research and write, coming up with a topic and developing it into a full-length write-up would be a very simple task. But this was far from the reality. I discovered, as many did and will do, that as human beings we 'propose', but it is often not within our power to 'dispose' or 'execute' the proposal. Years slipped by and found me short of realizing my dream. However, I feel elated that the dream has materialized today, more than eight years after my professorial appointment. As that eminent and wise novelist of our land reminds us, "It's morning yet on creation day." According to an Igbo proverb, the time a farmer begins work in his farm is his morning.

Bearing in mind that an inaugural lecture ought to capture the essence of an individual's scholarship and contributions to knowledge in his or her field and at the same time present these ideas and contributions in a language that a layman or non-expert in the field can comprehend and appreciate, I will try to avoid frolicking in ambiguities or what Alexander Pope described as 'excessive grandiloquent language'. Therefore, my style will be as accessible and as concise as possible. This lecture will set a record as the shortest inaugural lecture in the history of inaugural lectures in the University of Lagos. I will not keep you here longer than necessary; at the end of this exercise, you will not only appreciate the symbiotic contributions I have made to scholarship and the field of literature as a writer and critic, but also come to a better understanding of the more general contributions literature makes to human and national development.

## PREAMBLE

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In the next hour or less, I intend to explore the body, spirit and soul of literature and, based on the creative work of writers, I hope to make you see, hear and appreciate, through the evocative use of language, not only the beauties of imaginative literature but also the ways in which writers' artistic productions have impacted on society and contributed to the development of the human race.

## INTRODUCTION

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth' ... So, God created man in his own image ... male and female created he them" (*The Holy Bible*, Genesis 1:26-27).

The most important gift God gave human beings over and above all other creatures he created is the power of language, the ability to speak, to use language. The power of language was denied all creatures except human beings. Language is a formidable weapon. Writers make creative use of language. Words are potent. Words are a powerful tool in the literary arsenal of the writer. We see the power attributed to 'Word' in the Bible and in every other Holy Book. "Speak the word, and my servant will be healed!" said the Centurion to Jesus Christ (St Luke 7:7). Words can heal, condemn, destroy, encourage and convict. In the hands of a writer, words can do a lot of things! God is the great creator. Therefore, since he made human beings in his image, human beings are necessarily creative by nature. Writers are creative people who 'create' with words.

As a teacher in a language-based discipline, I should define the key terms used in this lecture. Ours is a field which privileges clarity of expression and competence in the use of language, especially in literary discourse or composition. The great writers and critics of the 18th Century – the Augustans, as they are often

called – who gloried in their literary abilities as educated men and intellectuals, advised that people should engage only in the subjects they were competent in. No wonder they were so intolerant of ignorant people and pseudo-intellectuals, as attested in John Dryden's "MacFlecknoe", Alexander Pope's "The Dunciad" and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. These were writers who privileged satire as an instrument for correcting vices like pride, dishonesty, ignorance; used their work to instruct and entertain people and established a literary tradition that has remained one of the most distinguished in the history of English literature.

Perhaps, the great Romantic age ably represented by the poet and theorist, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was concurring as well as modifying the stand of the Augustans on 'decorum' and 'correctness' when he stated that poetry is "the best words in the best order". The emphasis on 'preciseness' and 'exactness' might have compelled Samuel Johnson – who produced a dictionary as a demonstration of the Augustan thesis – to aver that "words too familiar, or too remote, defeat the purpose of a poet." The point being made here is that language is the vehicle through which literature delights as well as instructs. Words belong to the realm of music and share the latter's capacity to inspire and heal us, to teach and guide us. Language is indispensable to the creative artist, to a literary critic, who must have a facility for words.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

For a better understanding of the issues raised, it is necessary to define the key terms through which ideas have been effectively navigated in this lecture. I will forthwith embark on a definition of the following: creativity, literature and development.

## CREATIVITY

The word 'Creativity' in English comes from the Latin 'Creatus', which literally means 'to have grown'. To be creative means having the ability or the power to create. Human beings are creative

animals. In the field of literature, creative writing is taught as a course, in which students are encouraged to be original and imaginative. Creativity is, thus, associated with 'originality' and 'expressiveness' and with 'imaginativeness'. A controversy once raged over the issue of whether creative writing is teachable. Many critics believe that writers are born and not made; that is to say, talent is everything. Others believe that talented writers become better and more accomplished if they receive instructions in creative writing. The number of creative writing programmes instituted in European and American universities today easily tells us which side has won the argument. Even in Nigeria, many universities, Lagos being one example, now teach courses in creative writing.

Creativity or creativeness is defined as "a mental process involving the generation of new ideas or concepts, or new associations between existing ideas or concepts" (Wikipedia, online dictionary). The following factors are variously seen as determining and controlling creativity: divine intervention, cognitive processes, social environment, personality traits and chance or 'accident'. Creativity is a characteristic identified in geniuses and has also been associated with mental illness. In the past, people believed that poets were mentally deranged and expected them to be unkempt; erratic, eccentric and to be plagued by mood swings, particularly manic depressive disorder. Some prominent writers and literary artists identified with such disorder are the Romantic poet, John Clare, Virginia Woolf, who committed suicide by drowning; Ernest Hemingway, who shot himself; Robert Schumann, who died in a mental asylum. The famous Italian artist, Michelangelo, was said to have suffered from mood-disorder. Nearer home, in Africa, we are aware of writers who were similarly afflicted and suffered from mild to significant mood-disorders – Bessie Head, the South African born writer who acquired Botswana citizenship; Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo from Madagascar, who committed suicide at the age of 36; and Dambudzu Marachera of Zimbabwe. It is significant that these

three African writers died young, especially Rabearivelo and Marachera. Both have been described as writers of genius.

Though 'creativity' can be defined from the point of view of various disciplines – advertising, history, philosophy, psychology, science, economics, business and management etc – I look at it from the perspective of literature, which is the discipline most popularly associated with it as well as the focus of this inaugural lecture.

## LITERATURE

The word 'literature' is derived from Latin *littera* – letter; it has different meanings depending on the usage and the context in which it is being applied. However, for the purpose of this lecture, 'literature' refers to works of art, of imagination and includes written texts as well as oral ones including such genres as epic, legend, myth, ballad, forms of oral poetry and folktale. In Africa, for instance, oral literature is highly regarded and seen as the precursor of the written form which borrows heavily from the resources of oral tradition. Consequently, we cannot discuss written African literature without reference to the oral forms and the way writers have incorporated them in the exploration of their people's past and contemporary experiences.

Critics of African literature have long realized that "writing is only a symbolic way of representing speech and as such is secondary to it" (Chika Nwankwo, 315). The gap between the two has long been bridged and both scholars and writers can conveniently draw from the former to enrich and embellish the latter, thus creating a literature that is dynamic and aesthetically satisfying. The marriage between the oral and written forms in the narratives of Achebe, Armah, Aidoo, Ngugi, Emecheta, Head, Awoonor, Amadi, in the poetry of Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Clark, Osundare, Ojaide, in the plays of Soyinka, Sutherland, Rotimi, Osofisan, Yerima, Obafemi, to name just a few, is a testimony to this development. In the works of these writers, one finds in abundance references to and the incorporations of African

narrative, poetic and dramatic traditions. Perhaps this is what distinguishes African literature from its Western counterpart, from which most African writers have borrowed heavily or lightly, depending on the writer in question.

In the Western and African concept of literature, the written form is made up of mainly prose, drama and poetry which may be further divided into sub-genres. The sense in which we use 'literature' in this lecture precludes genre fiction such as romance (romantic novels), crime, detective stories and science fiction.

### FORMS OF LITERATURE:

**Poetry** is the earliest form of literature which has been with humankind since time immemorial and was often referred to as the 'aristocratic genre' probably because it flourished in various forms in the courts of kings and other noble personages in Europe. Some of the earliest forms of poetry include the epic (as in Homer's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*); ballads and pastorals. Poetry may simply be defined as 'a composition written in verse': it uses language in a special way and relies heavily on imagery, metaphor, precise choice of word. In its oral form, poetry has been popular in Africa and is synonymous with song (as in work songs, birth songs, etc). Defined variously by different literary artists and critics, poetry has been considered as the most prestigious of literary genres though it does not command the readership, the followership and the cash rewards enjoyed by its more recent rival, prose fiction, particularly the novel.

**Drama** – another name for a play – is, like poetry, a classical literary form that has evolved over the years, having existed for ages. Its distinguishing features are dialogue (between characters) and action, as it is meant primarily to be performed, rather than read as prose fiction is. Most drama, especially before the 18th century, took verse form, in the English tradition, as in the work of Kyd, Marlowe and Shakespeare. The earliest of this art form is Greek drama which developed in two categories:

Tragedy and Comedy. The former was associated with mostly religious and civic festivals and rituals based on historical and mythological themes. Sophocles' tragedies, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* are good examples – recreated from myths from Thebes. Most classical tragedies explored serious and profound themes. Comedy, on the other hand, explored lighter and more pleasant themes though the moral issues presented are cogent and important as in tragedy. Like tragedy, Comedy developed from its classical form to newer forms which have held sway over the centuries in the West and nearer home, in our own realm – Africa. From the comedies of writers like Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Moliere, Congreve etc in the Western tradition, we gravitate to the plays of African dramatists like Soyinka, Sunny Oti, etc and to the offerings of less literary dramatists like Hubert Ogunde.

**Prose fiction** is the opposite of poetry: it can generally be referred to as 'non-poetic writing'. Prose does not use language in the self-conscious and sometimes stylized manner in which poetry does. Prose often employs the language of everyday usage, imitating the speech mannerisms that obtain in the society or community being mirrored in the work of art. This is not to say that the prose writer does not strive to create evocative language or say things in a beautiful and striking way, as poetry does. It is not unusual to hear critics describe some writers as writing 'prose poetry' or 'poetic prose'. The novel is the best developed form of prose fiction, as distinct from its more slight sisters, the short story and the novella. The novel is described by *The Oxford Dictionary* as "a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length in which characters and acts representative of the real life of past and present times are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity." Eustace Palmer gives a more pointed definition by stating that the novel "is a coherent, unified, fictitious prose narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end" (1). Characters and characterization are crucial to the novel – unlike poetry – and even when animal characters are used, they are made to

possess human attributes so as to conform to the novel's demand that characters reflect real life.

Today, however, many critics would disagree with this definition and label it inadequate in the face of modifications by literary theories such as Modernism, Structuralism, Post-modernism and Post-structuralism etc. Since the rise of the novel in the 18th century through its development in the 19th and subsequent flowering in the 20th century till date, the novel has transformed itself in different ways. In fact, the novel today is a product of human imagination and literary creativity, and has taken centuries to reach its current level of expression and versatility (Ezeigbo, 1998:2). It is not possible to go through the various stages of the novel's growth in this lecture. The novel has come a long way! Daniel Defoe would turn in his grave if it were possible for him to see the progress made and the changes which this ingenious genre of literature has undergone since he published *Robinson Crusoe* in the 18th century. Most of my illustrations in presenting my argument in this lecture will be drawn from the novel, which, no doubt, is the most profound and extended genre in terms of its expression of human experience and its capacity to make profound statements about the human condition.

**Children's literature** is a literary genre which caters to the interest of children though many books in this category are enjoyed by adults. I cannot discuss forms of literature without referring to children's literature which has become increasingly important in the literary circle as well as in the psyche of many nations, especially in the developed world, where reading material for the young and the production of it are viewed with all seriousness. Today's children will become the adults and leaders of tomorrow, so their nurture, upbringing and education are very important to the societies into which they are born. It is sad that Nigeria and many other African countries do not yet give children's literature the attention it deserves or the resources required to ensure the publishing and marketing of good books. Few books

are published in this area and the quality of most of the books produced for children is poor. However, the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas company (NLNG) has set the ball rolling by instituting a major literary prize, **The Nigeria Prize for Literature**. My children's novel, *My Cousin Sammy*, jointly won the Children's Literature Category of the prize with Mabel Segun's *Readers' Theatre*, in 2007. It is hoped that more such prizes will be instituted to encourage people writing creatively for children as well as for adults.

In the traditional past, children were entertained and instructed with folktales. In most cultures the world over, there was a rich oral tradition of storytelling for children and even for adults. Though this tradition still exists in Nigeria, the written culture seems to have taken over storytelling in the form of hundreds of books published for the young today. Some writers have written down and preserved the oral tradition in books which are marketed for children with the intention of instructing and entertaining them. The ubiquitous tortoise tales have found their way into many storybooks, for example.

Some famous children's authors are The Brothers Grimm, German academics known for the folktales and fairy tales they collected; Hans Christian Andersen, a Danish author and poet, best known for his fairy tales, especially *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Ugly Duckling*; Mark Twain, an American and author of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; Enid Blyton, British children's author of *The Famous Five* and *The Secret Seven*, whose books have been translated into ninety world languages and have sold over four hundred million copies; C.S. Lewis, best known for his *Chronicles of Narnia*, among which is the remarkable *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and with a print run of over ninety-five million copies; and J.K. Rowling, British and reputed to be the most renowned contemporary children's author and probably the most successful. This first billionaire-author is the creator of the famous

Harry Potter books which have been translated into at least sixty three languages with three hundred million copies sold. Closer home, we have also had some famous children's authors whose accomplishments must be acknowledged at this point. They are many but we can only mention a few of the best known among them. We cannot but start with Chinua Achebe, the doyen of African letters. His *Chike and the River* and *The Drum* are children's favourites since they were first published; Cyprian Ekwensi, one of Africa's most prolific children's authors, produced classics such as *The Passport of Mallam Ilia* and *The Drummer Boy*; Mabel Segun is best known for her *My Father's Daughter* and *My Mother's Daughter* and Eddie Iroh wrote the classic, *Without a Silver Spoon*; just to mention a few. These were and still are authors whose works have entertained and taught morals to children from various cultures, from one generation to another. They have contributed to the education of the young – giving them pleasure, stimulating their imagination through artistic creativity.

### LITERATURE AND REALITY

Literature in its oral and written forms has consistently remained the greatest tool in the representation of reality. It has become an important means of understanding and interpreting aspects of society such as politics, religion, social conflicts, class struggle and the human condition. The creation of the illusion of reality has been the preoccupation of every literary artist since ancient times. Literature, to put it in Fischer's words, "is born of reality and acts back upon reality" (496). The term 'reality' as used in this lecture, signifies the sum total of human experience – social, religious, political, economic and ethical. Some novelists often referred to as realists achieve the illusion of reality through their selection of factual details from ordinary life to explore their vision of society in order to both educate and instruct their readers.

Through the creation of the illusion of reality, writers are able to expose, on one hand, the evils in their societies with a view to

correcting them and redirecting their people and on the other hand highlight the positive aspects in order to encourage their people to emulate them and perpetuate them for posterity. Okenimkpe has rightly stated that:

literature presents the most life-like and life-size portraits of all behavioural attributes of man: honesty, integrity, diligence, courage, intelligence, sympathy, villainy, cruelty, meanness, sadism, dullness, maladjustment. Made concretely visualizable in literature, they serve as apotheosis or antithesis of benignity, nobility and magnanimity after, or in opposition to, which people can develop their own personalities. (28-29)

Consider, for instances, John Milton's grand recreation of the image of God and the graphic portrayal of Satan's vulgarity and greed in Book One of his great epic, *Paradise Lost*, which reveals vividly the power and the nature of the two supernatural Beings more than any religious or historical document. Intent on enlightening his readers and countrymen and by extension the whole world, Milton set out in his prime to write a powerful epic – the highest form of poetry – about cosmic history. In this scheme are four decisive acts: the revolt of Satan, the disobedience of man, Christ's resistance to Satan's temptations in the wilderness, and Christ's redeeming death on the cross of Calvary. What a task this great poet set for himself! As if realizing his human inadequacy in tackling such a profound subject, Milton seeks supernatural assistance. Hear him:

... O Spirit, that dost prefer  
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,  
Instruct me ...  
... what in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
That to the highth of this great argument  
I may assert eternal Providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.  
(*Paradise Lost*, Book I, Lines 17-19, 22-26)

For Milton, this is the crux of the matter: TO JUSTIFY GOD'S WAYS TO MAN. He is bent on instructing his readers and

compatriots about the disobedience and fall of man and, based on these central acts, he explores the drama of good and evil fighting for the soul of man; and the course of world history or at least the history of Christendom. For this he embarks on writing the epic made up of ten books, which fall under two broad subjects – *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*! No other writer or document challenged the breath and length of Milton's treatment of his great subject; except perhaps his notable epic predecessor, Dante.

One of the interesting things about Milton's epic is the way he created the illusion of reality to illustrate the contemporaneity of his subject and bring it to the level of human experience even when the action involves only supernatural forces and beings. Tillyard puts it succinctly:

Milton was vividly aware that the present moment, life as actually lived now, was part of the eternal process. Adam and Eve are not only figures in the Old Testament and types of humanity at large; they are types of ourselves now. Nowhere is this more evident than at the end of the poem, which describes Adam and Eve expelled by God's angels from Paradise and left to make the best of life outside it. (18-19)

Examples abound in literatures from all over the world of how writers use the power of the imagination and the illusion of reality to create and re-create experiences that hold up a mirror to their societies to view their actions and understand the need to achieve positive transformation of the society. A few more examples from both English and African literature will suffice. Let us consider some well-known characters in literature who have impinged on the psyche of society on account of their actions and reactions to situations around them. We can all recall the greedy and inhumane Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and his foil, the humane and kind Antonio. In the great tragedy *Othello*, two characters, Othello and Iago, stand out as symbols of jealousy and villainy! The eponymous King Lear teaches us how not to

use power; he also reminds us of the reward of pride and folly. And it is not only tragedies that speak profoundly about human vices and their repercussions. Writers have used comic plots, characters and situations not only to entertain but also to educate their readers and audiences: these include Richardson, Fielding, Dickens, Austen, Congreve and Twain, to mention a few. The humanity – strengths and weaknesses – of characters such as Joe and Pip (*Great Expectations*); Josiah Bounderby (*Hard Times*); Mrs Bennet, Mr Collins and Miss Bates (*Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*); Parson Adams (*Joseph Andrews*) never cease to delight us and set our minds thinking.

In our part of the world, we can draw examples of life-like characters, who have left indelible marks on our minds and psyche: In the African literary tradition, characters of similar worth abound: For example Nnaife in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is a comic figure, as this description reveals:

... in walked a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to this side and then to that. The belly, coupled with the fact that he was short, made him look like a barrel.... His skin was pale, like the skin of someone who had for a long time worked in the shade and not in the open air. His cheeks were puffy and looked as if he had pieces of hot yam inside them, and they seemed to have pushed his mouth into a smaller size above his weak jaw.... If her (Nnu Ego's) husband-to-be was like this, she thought, she would go back to her father. Why marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman! (54)

Other comic characters are Brother Jero (in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*); Jagua (in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*); Buntui (in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers*); Danda (in Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda*); Pa Kpalagada (in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*); and Reverend Ezekiel Waweru (in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*). These characters have been humanized in the depiction of their

foibles and the workings of their minds and in their actions, which reveal their reactions to and deliberations on the patterns of human politics, religion, cultural traditions and gender inequity and sexism.

Being a work of art and a creation of human imagination, literature demands from us what Coleridge calls "a suspension of disbelief" to enable us enjoy it as well as imbibe its messages as universal truths. More significantly, Andrew Gurr avers that literature, as art, has "a double function in ... society. It records the present – holding a mirror up to society – and it paints a picture of the future, it offers a possible vision of how the present can be improved" (6). Perhaps this was why the great philosopher and theoretician, Aristotle, proclaimed the superiority of literature to history: asserting that the latter is preoccupied with the past and things of the past while the former – literature – is preoccupied not only with the past but also with the present and the future. According to Aristotle, literature deals with not only what was, but what is and what will be and what could be. Little wonder, therefore, that literature has proved a veritable tool for social engineering, for creating social awareness and redirecting society and projecting society into the future. George Orwell's novel, *1984*, which was published decades before that year, prophetically projected ideas and happenings that were to take place in Britain and other parts of the West when such ideas and events were not even dreamt of by visionaries or political scientists and analysts. In two novels that dealt with the failure of leadership among the political and military class – *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) – Achebe predicts and illuminates the corruption and abuse of power the two power blocks symbolized. As Pilkington graphically put it, the accomplished novelist

tears into the greed, egomania, lust and laziness of post-independence African rulers, giving us a chronicle of Nigeria's descent into autocratic rule under which it still labours today. (13)

The foregoing discourse on the relationship between literature and reality has shown that literary artists strive to recreate reality as experienced in their age and in their societies in artistic forms best suited to their personality and their vision: in prose (fiction), poetry and drama. The conscious and unconscious attempt to represent reality in literature in the European tradition is the subject of Erich Auerbach's classic study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Similar studies done in the African traditions include Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Ernest Emenyonu's *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, Emmanuel Obiechina's *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, to mention just a few. In the engagement with reality, the writer's artistic vision plays on the raw material of experience, history or fact in order to forge a literary work "with its own internal ontological dynamics" (Chidi Amuta, 16). According to the famous literary critic, Charles Nnolim:

Literature teaches us about life.... Every short story, every novel, every poem, every drama worth its salt as a work of art, has a thing or two to say about life, has a moral view of life it enunciates, has a philosophy of life that it imparts. A study of various works of literature is, in fact, a study of various philosophies of life, for every author implants a little stamp of his philosophy in his story, novel, poem, drama. (6)

The erudite scholar also reminds us that "literature humanizes our otherwise science-dominated universe" and that through her literature and her creative writers, Nigeria has won international acclaim and respect (19). The most important of the acclaim is, of course, Soyinka's winning of the Nobel Prize in 1986 – the first Black writer to do so.

### LITERATURE AS A TOOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY

Development in the sense in which I conceive it in this lecture is the gradual growth of a people and a society, so that they become better, more advanced, leading to an unfolding of the potentialities

of the individuals in that society. As Steve Ogude rightly remarked, there are two factors to be considered when development is being discussed: the human factor and the physical, non-human factor. The non-human factor refers to natural resources (mineral oil, solid mineral, etc.) and infrastructure – the basic systems and structures that a society or country needs in order to work properly, such as roads, communication, power and banking systems. Development can take place when people are in a position to exploit the natural resources they have in order to provide infrastructure. Hence the importance of the human factor in development. The point is that the human factor is indispensable in development, for a people properly educated and socialized drive development as a matter of course. Consequently, for a country to develop, the citizens must be 'equipped' with a sound well-grounded and balanced humanities and science education right from primary to the secondary and tertiary levels, as some of us were fortunate to have had between the 1950s and 1970s before 'oil' blighted and doomed our country and our sensibilities. My argument in this lecture is that literature (among the Humanities) is the most efficacious subject or discipline to provide the humanistic education this country needs to make progress, to escape from materialistic philistinism and the scourge of corruption. Why I make this bold claim will become clearer in the course of the lecture.

In traditional African society, art was functional, and the artist, performer or storyteller was fully aware of this. The traditional oral artist knew the didactic role his/her art had to play and geared the performance towards achieving that end (Ezeigbo 2000: 57-58). Thus in such a society, art was placed at the service of the society. Modern African writers are a product of their species of the traditional society. At the African-Scandinavian Writer's Conference in Stockholm in 1967, Soyinka, among other things, declared: "The artist has always functioned in African societies as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his time" (21).

Perhaps writers elsewhere have not always thought it their responsibility to direct their societies. For instance the followers of "The Aesthetic Movement" believed in the dictum "art for art's sake" and defended this position in the late 19th century Europe. This type of attitude has been rejected by most African writers. Chinua Achebe believes that the writer "should march right in front" in "the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done and that the artist is "the sensitive point in his community" (45). Agreeing with Soyinka and Achebe, Romanus Egudu adds that the literary artist "dissects the society not only at its political level but also at its moral level" (64). This is what our writers have done over the years since Nigerian literature came of age with the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. Our writers are among the best in the world; they are contributing, through the power of their imagination and artistic creativity, to the growth of literary productions that are changing the face of world literature. Writers, with award-winning titles, like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide, Zaynab Alkali, Helon Habila, Chimamanda Adichie, Chika Unigwe, Promise Ogochukwu and others have put Nigerian literature in the world's literary hall of fame and contributed to Nigeria's cultural and intellectual development. They have used art as a means of effecting revolutionary changes in society. For instance, in *Season of Anomy* Soyinka creates characters like Ofeyi and Demakin who act as agents of justice with the moral and humane spirit lost by our society through the evil machination of two oppressive regimes. Through them and the forces they represent, Soyinka hopes to restore to his society its moral character and humane sensibility.

The issue of whether literature has the capacity to trigger off a revolution has been an enduring controversy. Some people believe it does not. Others argue that literature is of no use if writers write and no one reads what they write. A work of art becomes effective only when it is read. A writer and critic, Kole Omotoso, has more to say on this:

The society has to use what it produces for literature to be relevant. For instance, had Lenin not responded to some of the 18th and 19th century novels depicting the suffering in Russia, the Russian revolution would not have happened. It was when a member of the British parliament read Charles Dickens' representation of poverty in London in *Oliver Twist* that they decided in 1832 to come up with an Education Act .... I still insist that literature has no function; except what is given it by those who read it. On its own, it cannot change anything unless someone responds to the work and does something with it. If there is no response to literature, there is little literature can do. (13)

What we deduce from Omotoso's assertion is the fact that literature can be a catalyst to revolutionary change: what is required is for an individual (a reader) or individuals (readers) to apply the knowledge, the information gathered from literature to bring about social change. The unrelenting persecution faced by writers all over the world is a clear indication that literature can indeed be a weapon to achieve change, which bad leaders dread; hence the persecution of courageous writers. In Apartheid South Africa, in Kenya during the time of Arap Moi, in Nigeria under Abacha, and in Eastern European countries during the Cold War, many writers faced death sentence, imprisonment and detention as a result of their work and their activism. Literature is a threat to dictators. Bad leaders fear and hate writers and their works.

At this juncture, I believe it is proper to mention the contribution women writers have made in engendering equity and parity in gender relations and in creating awareness of the plight of women in the world's largely patriarchal societies. From Europe to the Americas, Asia and Africa, women writers have consistently portrayed the injustice the female gender faces from birth to old age. There is no doubt that some of the finest prose writers – novelists especially – in the world, past and present, have been women. This is even more evident in the African literary tradition. Modern writers like Virginia Woolf, Margret Drabble, Emma

Tennant, Margaret Artwood, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Isabel Allende, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Nawal el Saadawi, Bessie Head, Yvonne Vera, Zaynab Alkali, Tess Onwueme, Grace Ogot etc, raised women's consciousness, addressed the 'woman question' in gender politics, thus drawing attention to the fact that women are subjugated and marginalized. It is obvious that culture is pivotal in the construction of gender difference (Ezeigbo 1996). Culture plays a prominent role in the subordination of women to a subaltern position in discourse and in real life (Ezeigbo 2005).

Sometimes it takes just an individual to initiate an action that triggers off a chain reaction, which can change the rules for thinking and influence the balance of power in a conservative society or community. This is exactly what happens in Tess Onwueme's remarkable play, *The Reign of Wazobia*, when Wazobia, a young woman from anonymity becomes the Regent of Illa Kingdom, mobilizing the women and some gender sensitive men to bring about a revolution that banishes the obnoxious cultural traditions that infringe on women's rights in the society. Onwueme's play makes a powerful statement about women's ability to change society by drawing from their inner strengths and the power of negotiation. Women's ability to negotiate power is the main thrust of Obioma Nnaemeka's famous and fascinating African feminist theory of Negotiation – Nego- Feminism, as she calls it. A question often asked is: how are women writers using their creativity to better the lot of women? In Onwueme's play, *Wazobia* is a symbol of women's leadership potentials that must be nurtured through the support of women and men. We must not be discouraged by the failure of leadership demonstrated in 2007 by the first ever female Speaker of the House of Assembly in Nigeria. It was a failure that wounded the spirit and morale of Nigerian womanhood. But this single negative performance should not be the yardstick to stereotype women, especially as we have exemplary women leaders like Professor Dora Akunyili (NAFDAC), Dr Ngozi Okonjo Iweala (currently, a Managing Director of the

World Bank and former Minister of Finance), Dr. Oby Ezekwesili (former Solid Minerals Minister and Vice President of the World Bank, Africa Region) and Mrs. Nenadi Usman (former Minister of Finance).

All over the world, writers are imbued with the passion to change and redirect their societies: Consider the example of writers like Pamuk from Turkey, Garcia Marquez from Colombia, Morrison from the USA, Isabel Allende from Chile, the Japanese-born British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, Kiran Desai from India, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee from South Africa, Xiaolu Guo from China, and many more. I agree with Okenimkpe that reading the works of great writers enables us “to sense the efficacy of literature for opening our eyes to the realities behind experience and perceptions which we had taken for granted, and for stirring us to re-order our orientations” (33). The truth is that the agenda of these writers is primarily to ‘humanize’ their ‘dehumanized societies. I have already stressed the point that literature entertains while instructing. A colleague of mine rightly observed that literature does save us in times of pain, sorrow and loss. Literature enriches our lives and enlarges our experience of life by giving us aesthetic pleasure and spiritual inspiration.

Literature can create a love of beauty and a sense of order in the lives of a people. A work of art is “a thing of beauty” which can inspire us to strive for perfection in all we do. The great Romantic poet, John Keats, wrote in Book I of his poem “Endymion”:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and a quiet breathing

Literature can create in us a sense of history and a desire to transform our society. Hear what Ben Okri, the remarkable Nigeria novelist, wrote:

Our history hasn't hurt us enough or the betrayals would stop, the streets would erupt, till we are overcome with the inescapable necessity of total self-transformation – we burn for vision – clear, positive vision – for vision allied with action – for want of vision my people perish – for want of action they perish – in dreams – in dreams begin responsibility – for we have become a people of dream-eaters, worshipping at the shrines of corruption – we can't escape our history – we will dwindle, become smaller, pulped, drained by predators, unless we transform – in vision begins ... responsibility. (1996)

Such profound thoughts and ideas are literature's heritage; they are the fruits of an excellent liberal education that can last one a lifetime. Unfortunately, such an ennobling state of mind is lacking in the make-up of most Nigerians, no matter how highly educated. The major obstacle is that most Nigerians don't read; few read good literature. How many of our leaders, especially parliamentarians read? How many of them have read our great literature: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or *Anthills of the Savannah*, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* or *Season of Anomy*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*? How many of them know whether their children read or what they read? This lack of a reading habit is perpetuated from one generation to another.

Perhaps the inability to read excellent and inspiring literature may be one of the factors responsible for the majority of our people's lack of respect for beauty. How can we justify the dirt, the squalor that is found everywhere, especially in most of our cities? How can Nigerians tolerate the mountains of garbage that rise like the Kilimanjaro in all nooks and crannies of cities like Lagos, Ibadan and Onitsha. Last year I visited three West African countries – Ghana, Togo and Benin Republic – and was amazed at the neatness of their environment and the state of their roads. One could see that these are not rich countries; in fact they could be

described as poor when compared to the stupendous wealth Nigeria is blessed with. But the irony is that these countries are able to maintain a clean environment with the little they have. I marvelled at their modesty, their calmness and self-control. I did not see any mound of refuse. Accra and Lome were particularly neat and beautiful and had regular power supply. How then can one explain our insensitivity in Nigeria, which makes us indifferent to the filth around us – the filth we created or generated in the first place?

Araceli Aipoh, the Korean writer married to a Nigerian, described Lagos as the dirtiest city in the world. Who can contest that claim? Why do our leaders particularly and our people generally not see the refuse dumps in our towns and highways as an eye-sore? Does it strike you that we are the most well-dressed (or is it over-dressed), flamboyant and extravagant people in Africa? At social gatherings and parties, in public places, at meetings and at religious ceremonies, we dress elegantly, but our homes are filthy, our surroundings are dirty and our streets are choked with refuse. The streets are littered with waste materials like bottles, cans and polythene bags. The truth is that we lack the liberal education that should teach us about the importance of beauty in every area of our lives, the need to appreciate what is decent, beautiful and uplifting to the soul. Literature can teach us to be decent rather than brutish, to love order rather than chaos, to cultivate good manners rather than repulsive habits. Our dream to become a great country cannot materialize until we learn to be decent and disciplined, and to cultivate a clean environment.

#### **MY CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP, LITERATURE AND SOCIETY**

In the English and African literary traditions, which most Nigerian literary artists and critics are familiar with by virtue of our colonial heritage and place of birth, examples abound of individuals who were or are writers as well as critics – some of them are academics as well. In English literature, we have such

personalities as Philip Sydney, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Robert Hampson. In Nigerian literature, names that readily come to mind are Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark Bekederemo, Ola Rotimi, Zaynab Alkali, Earnest Emenyonu, Charles Nnolim, Romanus Egudu, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Olu Obafemi, Tunde Fatunde, Ebele Eko, Remi Raji and Karen King-Aribisala and Hope Eghagha, from the University of Lagos.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, I am delighted to say that I too belong to this distinguished group in whose lives a symbiotic relationship has been forged with the marriage of literary criticism and creative writing – the two branches of the literary enterprise. Apart from the periods I spent outside the country as a Research Fellow or Visiting Guest Scholar in universities in England, Scotland, South Africa, Germany and the USA, I have enjoyed a long academic and writing career at the University of Lagos since I was appointed lecturer II in 1981, after a three-year stint as a Graduate Assistant. And I believe this was responsible for my being honoured with the **Long & Distinguished Service Award of the University of Lagos** in April, 2007. I have taught courses in English and African Literature and in Literary Theory to both undergraduate and post-graduate students from the Faculties of Arts, Education and Law. I taught Creative Writing and organized Creative Writing Workshops in South Africa and the UK. I have been responsible for teaching Feminist Theory and Criticism in our department; and introduced the teaching of Gender Studies in the English Department in 1997 when I was Acting Head of Department. (Later I was substantive head from 2002 to 2005.) Feminist Studies and Gender Studies have been very popular over the years in the department; many students have done their projects, dissertations and theses in these two areas at the honours, Masters and Doctoral levels respectively. It will not be immodest on my part to say that I am one of the most visible gender and feminist writers, theorists and critics in Nigeria today. I have

examined Ph.D theses and Masters' dissertations and assessed professorial candidates in these areas in universities in the country: Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; University of Benin; University of Calabar; University of Jos; University of Ilorin; Abia State University and Rivers State University of Science and Technology.

A notable contribution I made to Nigerian literature as a critic came with the publication of my ground-breaking book, *Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War*, in 1992 – the first of its kind. The study was originally my doctoral thesis, based on the literature produced on the war: both imaginative literature and non-fiction – the historical accounts and propaganda materials on the war. In addition, an article I published in the famous *Matatu: Journal of African Culture & Society* in 2005 – entitled "From the Horse's Mouth: The Politics of Remembrance in Women's Writings on the Nigerian Civil War" – was awarded the first Best Researcher Award in the Arts and Humanities by the University of Lagos in 2005. Moreover, while spending a year as a Visiting Research Fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London, in the 2006/2007 session, I gave **four** lectures between December and February and **three** were on the Nigerian Civil War under the following titles: 'The Nigerian Civil War'; 'Literary Responses to the Nigerian Civil War I'; Literary Responses to the Nigerian Civil War II'.

Apart from being an expert in war literatures – having also edited a book on the wars in Africa with Professor Liz Gunner of SOAS, University of London, in 1991 and contributed a number of articles to learned journals in this same area – I have also published extensively on the works of women writers, thereby giving critical attention and evaluation to the works produced by women, especially African female writers. My scholarship and writing career have taken me to many countries to attend sponsored conferences, read from my creative works, enjoy academic and research fellowships – in England, Scotland, Germany,

Macedonia, U.S.A., South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Togo and Benin Republic. In all these places I participated actively in intellectual discourse of literature and in the cross-fertilization of ideas.

But perhaps the greatest contribution I have made to literature is evident in the novels, short stories and children's books I have written since the publication of my first work of fiction for young readers entitled *The Buried Treasure* – a children's novel published by Heinemann of UK in 1992. I have published fifteen books for children. The crowning glory of my career as a children's author has been my jointly winning the distinguished NLNG's The Nigeria Prize for Literature (2007) with my children's novel, *My Cousin Sammy*, published by The Book Company, Ikorodu, Lagos. I have published three award-winning novels: one of them, *House of Symbols* won four awards including ANA/Spectrum Prose Prize and the Zulu Sofola Prize in 2001. I have also published four collections of short stories (two of my stories won major literary prizes), three academic books and three books edited with other scholars. However, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, nothing gives me greater joy than writing for children, especially Nigerian children, for I share Professor Funke Lawal's vision of a virile education in literature:

to raise children who can make responsible choices; writing, acting, singing instead of cultic activities, prostitution and robbery; students who can apply critical thinking skills, inquiry, problem solving and interpretation to issues confronting them instead of passive observation, copying and aping.

It requires making literature a meaningful creative activity, encouraging interactions and transactions among learners with books they read, tapping the power of reflection to develop students' imagination and helping them to attain emotional and imaginative perceptions of the issues raised in their literature books. (52)

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, I want to wind up this aspect of my lecture by reading a poem I composed for young people to capture the condition of many African children while I was in the UK in 2007:

### WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

#### First Voice:

Where are the children?  
I cannot find them anywhere  
There's silence in the village  
There's terror in the city  
Where are the children of Africa?  
I cannot see or hear them  
Where are they hiding?  
Where have they gone?  
I seek them at home  
I look inside the classrooms  
I search the games fields  
But I can't find them in these places.

#### Second Voice:

Brother, if you look hard enough  
You will surely find them  
In the hills as child soldiers  
In plantations as labourers  
In Europe's cities  
As child prostitutes, domestic slaves and gangsters  
As commercial sex workers  
In the streets as cultists and area boys  
In road corners as beggars and pickpockets  
And often as street traders  
Millions have been infected with HIV/AIDS  
Thousands have perished in Refugee Camps  
From disease and from hunger  
Africa's children are scattered  
Like a column of ants disturbed  
By a burning stick tossed by a careless hand.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the course of this lecture, I have tried to explore and analyze the value of literature to society. It is our conclusion that there can be no end to the ways in which literature can contribute to the challenges of societal development, apart from its other role of entertaining people and giving them aesthetic pleasure. We are still at the threshold of the 21st century; the future is beckoning to intelligent and rational individuals, groups and nations to come up with innovative ways of creating comfort and peace for people and nations of the world. Nigeria must not be left out in the race for progress: only disciplined, creative and imaginative people can drive progress, especially technological progress. It is my contention that literature can help our people to acquire the necessary discipline and creative impetus. Consequently even as emphasis is laid on science, engineering and technology, literature must be carried along in order to ensure that our society is properly 'humanized', 'socialized' and integrated into the finest 'ideals' of our cultures. Literature must stand up to be counted as a partner in progress with science and technology. This is already happening as we note that some of our great works of art have been filmed and recorded electronically and produced in other forms for preservation for the present and for the future. The folklore of many parts of Nigeria, for instance, has been preserved in this way.

Perhaps some of you here may be wondering why so much has been made of literature and the culture of reading in this lecture. You might ask even why ordinary Nigerians should bother about reading novels or stories or poetry or watching drama performances when they are desperately poor and hungry. My answer is that when they read, they become educated. When they become educated, they gain knowledge. Knowledge is power. It is only knowledge and the application of knowledge to bring about change that can save our people and cause a redistribution of wealth so that every Nigerian will be in a position to

put food on his table. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, literature is one of the sources of that knowledge. That power that can change things!

At this juncture, I would like to make some recommendations as to how literature can be re-positioned to meet the challenges of serving society better so that the vision articulated above can be attained.

- (1) I recommend that creative writing courses be taught at all levels of the educational system in Nigeria – primary, secondary and tertiary. This will make it possible for potential writers to be identified early in order to receive the proper and adequate training they need to reach their maximum potential and fulfil their destinies. Perhaps we can produce more Achebes and Soyinkas faster than we can imagine.
- (2) Literature should be made compulsory as a school subject from primary school to secondary school level. This was mostly the case in the colonial days when the British were in charge of the school curricula. In schools run by missionaries, literature was compulsory and some of us were beneficiaries of this noble and wise set-up.
- (3) Writing Residencies and Grants should be made available to talented and serious writers so that they can produce good literature books for children and adults. Children's literature should be given the attention and recognition it deserves, and children's authors rewarded accordingly, for it is important to produce good literature for children in large quantities, and children should be encouraged to read. Libraries should be built in schools and communities to provide good reading material for the citizenry.
- (4) More literary prizes of high caliber should be instituted by government and the private sector, as Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) and the Pat Utomi Foundation have done, to encourage writers and give

them the freedom to write full-time in order to produce good literature. Writing requires time, space, money and concentration; many writers do not have access to these in Nigeria, unlike in Europe and the USA where writers enjoy these things. The Art Council in the UK fund many writers and thus help them to have time and money to write.

- (5) Our leaders and our people should be encouraged to read books. Our parliamentarians and those at other levels of leadership should be compelled to read our classics as well as the works of other good writers. This is the way it is in other parts of the world where leaders take pride in enjoying the literary production of their gifted writers. For instance, it is difficult to find an educated Briton or anyone in a leadership position in the UK who did not read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Walter Scott, William Golding, D.H. Lawrence, Conrad, T.S. Eliot, etc. As for children's authors, every British child grows up reading C.S. Lewis and Stevenson (author of *Treasure Island*). Today, the ambition of every child in the UK and indeed in many parts of the world is to read the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. If I may ask, what American child grows up without reading Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?
- (6) Finally, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, the University of Lagos should establish a Writers' Residency to host a talented Nigerian writer for about three months every year. A grant should be made available to take care of transportation (to and fro), feeding and decent accommodation in the University Guest House. Apart from having the time, comfort and facilities to write, the writer will require to give a reading and a suitable lecture in the university.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Sir, at last I come to the stage where I must express my profound gratitude to all who, in one way or another, made me what I am today. I want to begin by thanking my parents: my late father, Joshua Obinali Adimora, who educated me and paved the way for me to attain success in every area of my life. He was responsible for my becoming a writer; hence I add his name, Adimora, to my name, in all my creative works – of course, with the gracious consent of my beloved husband. My mother was and has remained a role model who taught me to be confident, responsible, respectable and kind. She is the kindest human being I know.

I am delighted to express my gratitude to the University of Lagos for providing a suitable environment for me to develop and grow as a scholar and writer. I thank Professor Oye Ibidapo-Obe, the former Vice-Chancellor, whose prompt action hastened the processing of professorial appointments after he assumed office, thus rescuing me and others from misery and frustration caused by the undue delay in our appointments. I thank my colleagues and students in the English Department and my other colleagues in the Faculty of Arts and indeed the entire University of Lagos who have impacted on my life and made the burden of research and teaching bearable by their friendship and support. God bless you all. I owe a debt of gratitude to my many friends inside and outside the campus who have been a blessing to me in one way or another. Because of the constraint of time and space, it is not possible to mention your names. However, I must thank Dr. Patrick Oloko for his useful suggestions when he read the first draft of this lecture.

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I thank everyone who has come here today to honour me and to listen to what I have to say. I appreciate your being here today. I particularly want to thank the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Tolu Odugbemi, for allowing me to have my inaugural lecture in February – the month in which I came into this world. This means so much to me. Thank you, Sir. Ladies and gentlemen, I am a February 'child'; my Guardian Angel is Haniel and my Lord and Saviour is Jesus Christ: you can all wish me happy birthday!

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Sir, ladies and gentlemen, my final word to you is: make sure you read at least **ONE** book a month. It will do you good. And, if you like, you can begin with my novel, **The Last of the Strong Ones**.

Thank you very much for listening.

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