The African Literary Artist and the Question of Function

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Dedication

Dedicated to Rev. Fr. Prof. Amechi N. Akwanya, English and Literary Studies Department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for his painstaking mentorship in my formative years.

Abstract

Critics have argued that the African literary artist [traditional or modern] carries out some kind of function. This includes teaching his audience through his work, having qualified as the keeper of his society's mores. Yet no critic has closely interrogated this stance and the constitution of the space of representation and teaching; what he really teaches; the shades of opinion that make him seem a recorder of his society's mores; and other sundry lacunae. This article proceeds by problematising such terms as artist, society, mores and teaching, on one hand, and by invoking such theoretical concepts of literature enunciated by critics, from Aristotle to Akwanya, on the other, in order to dismantle the argument that the artist teaches. It also argues that the notion of function, either teaching or recording of mores, privileges unity of message. The sense of unity is later exploded via exploring the chaotic meaning in Nigerian literature from traditional to modern works. In addition, this work demonstrates that the artist is a victim of the fleeting space of in-betweenness in which his craft is formed and to which he owes allegiance. Rather than record the mores of a society, at most, society merely affords him a place through its language for the purpose of mediating 'reality' at a second remove. From the explorations of the above varied concerns, this work concludes that either the artist is a bad teacher, or is someone from whom the ability to teach or record his society's mores breaks free.

Keywords: in-betweenness, mores, Nigerian literature, teaching, the African literary artist

> *Osa* (All) *inu*(stories) *bu* (are) *e loye o'ba* (fittingly crafted [into a plot]).
> —An Ukwuani refrain sung to children after a story is told.

Can the African artist, a novelist whose craft is but *poesis*, a fable, and therefore a *mythos* [plot], ever overturn skewed historical discourses that have unfairly described the African and record the mores of his society? Can he, given his peculiar object and the tools with which this object is framed? In 1967, within the decade when most African nations gained their independence and African writers were beginning to define their art, Wole Soyinka made a "famous" remark[1] He declared that "the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself."[2] His compatriot, Chinua Achebe, revealed two decades later that:

> [t]he writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. [. . .] I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.[3]

These statements seem to have been the parameters for judging later African literary artists (and their works). Scholars believe that the literary artist occupies the same position as the historian, sociologist, anthropologist, journalist, or even the social crusader.[4] However, I argue in this essay that these remarks taken for truth are due for reconsideration, especially, in light of the undermining turns, for instance, in the Nigerian literary tradition. It might just be possible that the long held truth has been a myth after all.

By way of introduction, it will interest us to know the history of African literature in which the African literary artist participates. Africa's acquisition of Western written literary culture [consequently replacing some of Africa's older autochthonous written literary culture, as evidence in Egypt and Nubia shows[5]] was concurrent with her encounter with Western education. Many years after acquiring this culture and the documentation of

Africa's oral literary tradition that followed, both have come to earn equal places in Africa's literary tradition. Emenyonu gives credence to their entrenchment when, in reference to Nigeria, he affirms that Nigerian literature consists of the entire ethnic literatures of the Nigerian nation. They include "oral literature (oral performances), literature written in Nigerian languages as well as the literature created by Nigerians in the English language or in other non-Nigerian languages."[6] Riddles, proverbs, etiological folktales, and several other folkloric elements are part of the body of oral literature. Although this body is important for critical study, Emenyonu opines that written literature is "very important in the discussion of the literature of any nation."[7] The concept *artist* therefore concerns both segments of Africa's literary heritage. Another important term, *novel*—the African novel—which Achebe refers to above, like in many other traditions, registered late appearance on the African literary scene.[8]

But can the Nigerian or African artist who is held bound to a fleeting space and an indeterminate language that splatters about figures handed down to him by the tradition in which his activity is enacted and to which (space) he must owe his allegiance record the mores of his society? And, consequent upon this, can he teach this same society what it needs or does not need to know? What is the material feature of his art and how do these features help in incapacitating his teaching efforts, assuming he has one? Efforts will be directed towards answering these questions in detail by picking and casting light on the major terms serving as bulwarks of both Wole Soyinka's and Chinua Achebe's thoughts above. Thereafter, they will be examined in relation to the wider sphere of literature in order to determine how generally problematic they are with regard to literature as a teaching aid. To Soyinka, the modern African artist should fit into the mould left vacant by the traditional artist, by first, recording "the mores and experience of his society."[9] Second, he should "serve as the voice of vision in his own time."[10] To Achebe, he should teach, rehabilitate the Europeans' dark perception of Africans, perhaps, through the novel. The artist to whom Soyinka directs his call to begin living up to his function is what his name implies, designated by his activity—art —which is a making, *techné*, an artefact, in Aristotle's sense.[11] Aristotle further declares that literature, also "literary art," is a kind of nameless artefact, a major reason why he called it poetry.[12]

The artist is conditioned by and nudged into a dialectical relationship with what he does and by how he does what he does. Let us examine the function of teaching, for example, for it is through this activity that recording of mores, correction of wrong depictions, and envisioning of the future are enhanced and furthered. An early conception of literature as possessing teaching qualities is in Plato's *The Republic*. Making Homer and the other poet's his point of reference, Plato sees narratives and, indeed, all poetry as representations behind which is a disguised literary artist.[13] He, like a painter, imitates "the real one"[14] or "the type,"[15] which exists in the mind of God as pure mental form before human existence began. This pure mental form, consequently, is above and beyond the ordinary world of phenomena.[16] To Plato, Homer transgresses realistic expectations in his portrayal of individual characters in his narratives the same way he transgresses generic boundaries which make him pose a threat, as a result of his utter failure to represent properly, to society.[17] This improper representation piques his interest in making a case for the artist's restriction, and where possible, outright banishment from his ideal community.

Plato's opinion stems from the notion that any literary representation inculcated in students would become "habitual and ingrained and has an effect on a person's body, voice, and mind."[18] For example, when a poet represents a female character that attacks the gods, or insults her husband with jollity and remorseless impudence, or when any other character, incident, or event in a poet's representation stands at odds with the treasured morals and values of the day, the guardian, who teaches this poetry, should refrain from teaching these poems to young minds. If he continues, in spite of restriction, his services should be halted and the artist concerned prohibited forthwith.[19] Teaching, to Plato, is consequently premised on the nature of literature which he believes is both "true and false."[20] The alternate qualities of false and true and the issue of teaching are what Aristotle takes up later and critiques. It is through these qualities, as given by Plato, that the instructional quality in literature necessary for passing over mores is turned into a critical code and comes to the fore in the first instance. Mores, in Soyinka's terms, and teaching stand in a cognate relationship, where neither can be intended nor be present in a work without alluding to the other, since both emanate from the willful desire by the reader to achieve from literature

some functional end. One can surmise that Soyinka and Achebe were pontificating behind Plato's shadows and unwittingly fronting his insights.

In subtly critiquing Plato, who in his *The Republic* insists that the artist/poet disgusts, given that they create and teach Forms' shadows rather than the Forms themselves, thereby corrupting society, Aristotle argues that everything, including literary art consists of form and matter, and none of these could be dented exclusively, for good or bad.[21] He says: "it has been proved and explained elsewhere that no one makes or begets the form, but it is the individual that is made, i.e. the complex of form and matter that is generated."[22] If this is so, Plato's bequeathing special and separate attention to teaching, "the required content of stories," while leaving out the question of form in his discussion does not capture in totality what art, say, literature does to readers.[23] Here is where Aristotle comes in. In Aristotle's argument, we infer that it matters to no one what the poet or artist teaches (an after-effect, and not an intended-effect, of his trade) through his art. Whatever is represented in art is an inseparable part of the form art is composed of. Aristotle asserts that the purpose of art is pleasure and intellectual enlightenment, and not serving as instrument for moral education or correction of an opinion or stereotype.[24] This pleasure and intellectual enlightenment is deducible from the textual world and forms, which, as Ricoeur explains, the reader discovers as the text projects it. It is a world, he said, in which

> I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own-most possibilities. That is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to this unique text. . .. Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry *intend being*, not under the modality of *being-given*, but under the modality of *power-to-be*. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations which literature carries out on the real. . . .fiction is the privileged path for the redescription of reality; and that poetic language is *par excellence* that which effects what Aristotle, reflecting on tragedy, called the *mimesis* of reality. For tragedy imitates reality only because it recreates it by means of a mythos, a 'fable', which reaches the profoundest essence of reality.[25]

But this reality whose profoundest essence is reached is neither the world the poet teaches nor what his society, the ethical society, is.

Thus, Aristotle sees the artist through his craft, *poesis*, to which he is tied, an art of imitation common language describes 'making', which is "clearly not 'making' in the ordinary sense."[26] This critical sense of *techné* intones what the Ukwuani of Delta State of Nigeria have in their collective mind when, at the end of telling stories to children in moonlit evenings, sing a refrain twice or more that: *Osa* (All) *inu* (stories) *bu* (are) *e loye o'ba* (fittingly crafted [into a plot]). For example, the literary artist who writes about the commission of suicide by a man in a disintegrating Igbo society certainly did not make suicide or that Igbo society; he has only made an imitation, a fictional reconstruction that fits through language alone. However, it is not the language that bridges reality, that posits an extra-linguistic reality, or that captures an abstract notion verifiable only in linguistic terms. Literature bears a resemblance to other forms of art, but contrary to them, it is represented through the medium of language alone. Form and colour alone are to the plastic arts, what rhythm alone is to music and form alone is to sculpture. As a result, criticism is to literature what history alone is to action and philosophy alone is to wisdom. The craft of the poet-artist, that is, a literary artist, is mythos by which praxis is imitated—*mimesis praxeos*, the imitation of human action.[27] The essence of full imitation comes through as the imitating object of art registers a complete realization as an emerging entity, possessing a beginning, a middle, and an end. Yet imitation is not a copy, a duplicate. In "poetry, fiction is the path of redescription," just as "the creation of a mythos, of a 'fable' is the path of *mimesis*, of creative imitation."[28] The definition of a mythos then is that it consists of a whole—that creatively imitates praxis. Through this mythos, a sequence or collection of sequences, the artist is able to give pleasure and intellectual enlightenment by lifting up the reader's thoughts to the sublime and the universal and not to give the reader moral instructions, or sustain an idea. We hear Aristotle support this claim that it is "natural for all to delight in works of imitation."[29] Delight cannot be achieved when a trite or any story is told. It comes and one reaches it when the artwork, in our sense, literary work, is truly poetic. He explains further that "the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the

same time learning—gathering the meaning of things."[30] Because it is not meant to dispense instructional functions and cannot teach us mores, it consequently follows that the sole intention of art, including literary art, is to carry out poetic recreation of things. Such recreation enables us to gather the meaning of things and issues, thus making the mind dwell sublimely on some concern, a certain condition presented in paradoxes and figures in a literary text. It is at this level that we achieve our delights. As the purpose of art, so is the purpose of the artist. Yet this is not all.

The constitution of society, another term given in Soyinka's remark, is based on some shared norms or mores, common beliefs, phenomena of socialisation, values, and cosmology. Of all the above listed elements, cosmology, "a literary form, not a religious or scientific one,"[31] as it relates to society, has the most feverish grip on the pre-discursive society. This society conveys its ideas through the oral medium alone. Such conveyance accounts for why mores can also be easily recovered from myths and folktales, works belonging to the primitive stage of literary development, than from those of the novelistic genre. Myths, for instance, tell a society what is needful for it to know, whether about its gods, history, laws, or class structure; they are charged with special seriousness and importance but are never really true.[32] Classical mythology had this status as well before assuming their present condition of literariness. Possibly, it is the artist of this sort that Soyinka has in mind, for any people identifying their collective stakes, including their cosmology, in an artwork would seek further instructions and mores from its author-artist. This circumstance probably explains why myths are communally owned. The artist of this plane must endeavour to make mores 'get' into his craft in fulfillment of the expectations of his society. But how successful he is in doing this remains doubtful.

Additionally, cosmology forms the platform for the artist's dreams as a dreamer, for literature is the "total dream of man."[33] It is at the core, recognisable or not, of an artist's ecstatic outbursts as a lunatic, grounding the metaphysical and reifying the inchoate and the abstract in somewhat realistic language.[34] Nonetheless, via incorporating variegated elements, including cosmology, into his art, he sets his art up for the recuperation of some universal figure. Being able to recover traditionally non-specific figures nullifies any claim to specific audience or society. If he ever has a society

and keeps some mores as a matter of principle, the artist only keeps the mores (by mores, I mean the discursive structures of his tradition and society of literary artists to which he is responsible, since artists write in certain ways) and legacies his national literary tradition (conventions) offers him. His responsibility is not to an association of persons who come together to propose what they do, but to a group whose disparateness somehow unites them to some ideals—the ideals of giving vent to an amorphous feeling whose form is literary. This fact Eliot attests to when he says, "there is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position. A common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously."[35] This common cause is positing the figural. The artist belongs to this society of persons who have mastered, through what Aristotle calls "a series of improvements,"[36] the skill of civilising strange feelings through some forms. This cannot be, in Soyinka's terms, the "African society,"[37] the society of persons, nor the mores he records.

Of course, the artist belongs to a community of humans is never in doubt. His human society is of the corporeal, *low*, and the only evidence he bears of this society is its ordinary language, the habits of thought this society's language affords him. The other is of the ethereal, *high*. It is in terms of the sense of beauty, sublime, and pleasure, and it must be the mores of this high community that he must obey and keep, for it is of higher demand on him, if he must put the ordinary language and its appurtenances into some figural use. This was Plotinos's insight when he said "bodies become beautiful by communion with (or, participation in) a reason descending upon it from the divine (universal Soul)," which is to say that the soul is united in the world of forms with the divine."[38] Plotinos declares further that artistic experience is closest to spiritual experience, for one loses oneself while reflecting over the aesthetic object.[39] Art, to him, elevates the soul to consideration of the universal.[40] Once again, we come across contemplation, that is, meditation, which in Aristotle's words means "gathering the meaning of things."[41]

With regard to literary art, both the poet-artist/writer and spectator/reader of the literary object have contemplative attitude and are both contemplators. Contemplation serves as the

link between the *high*, where aesthetic experience equals poetic creation (as poets)/re-recreation (as readers), and the *low,* the language with which this contemplation is mediated. But this language, the ordinary language put into use by the artist in his *in-between* space, is no more the conventional sort that is assertive and indicative of an existing reality. The artist's space and his art change all that as this language becomes "deceased as a sign-signal."[42] Yet it is almost like conventional language, in that there is some kind of reality, a poetic reality conjured up at the instance of its usage in literary art. In-between the high and the low, literature or the literary language the artists churns out, an output of the ordinary language input, engages in the activity of naming, causing all things to appear and truly serving as a "primitive language of a historical people."[43] The reason for causing things to come into view is that the reality a poet conjures up is a reality belonging to all poets. One might say he is engaged in a quaking denotation in an ancient accent of a (poetically) universal thought. The poet swallowed up by this language must dwell in the in-between. Heidegger continues, to be a poet is to dwell in the world poetically.[44] Poetic language—the artist's language—is the source of his misrepresentations by critics, of the solution to improper interpretation and of the levelling out of seeming incongruities arising from what a work means, and other problems associated with the artist's trade. This language is all that the artist has to ply his trade with in the in-between—the space he finds himself, where he converts ordinary language into universal literary images and forms. Using his language thus justifies the transference of motifs, *mythoi* and symbols as conventions and genres handed over to him from one generation of artists to the other.[45] All who have encountered literature know that its language is a different one and that it works in certain ways. It does not tell about an extra-linguistic world. With its indicative propensity blunted, it is impossible for the artist to teach, much less pass on mores.

Castles have been built in the air, in common cliché, with no proof to validate them. As a result, all instances of reference and correlation to reality are deflated and exploded by a non-present reality. At the first level, the text, whether oral or written, becomes translinguistic in that it is now a "permutation of texts," in Kristeva's sense, where "several utterances" taken from other texts neutralise one another.[46] The neutralisation in the textual

space is much aided by the peculiar nature of the space into which the utterances or signs have been grafted. Another reason for the success of translinguisticity is because, being "redistributive," it assigns signifiers of that present space of the text a new function that is "deconstructive-constructive" and in a reflexive and counter-reflexive manner where meaning is text-dependent.[47] This process is unmindful of the significatory function of the language from where these signifiers are drawn, whether from the general text of culture, or "society and history."[48] If ever these characteristics of discourse are present, they are to the extent that they refer to those segments of the narrative that have appeared before, that is, they never refer to any reality at all let alone bear (societal) mores and teach. The pronouns "I" and "you" serve only deictic roles by engaging in "signal interactive relationships" in narratives.[49] This is why it has been consensually agreed that it is the persona that speaks in a poem and not the poet as such. For these reasons, it is neither the traditional artist nor the modern artist, or novelist, in Achebe's sense, that should be "teaching" in *Things Fall Apart*.

With the differentiating features of literature above showing how impossible a task it is for literature to indicate, let alone teach, we may now ask: is teaching using literature in whatever guise possible? To some readers who handle literary works as another text book of anatomy, history or, may be, religion, sociology, and political science, the answer is: yes, it does. The basis for this is that these other disciplines instructional purposes are in tandem with the idiom of the assertive language of their discourses, which is also the sort of language literary art is composed of and appropriates, but which fails to assert like conventional language. The mistaken assumption that literary language is similar to its conventional sort justified the kind of reception of Charles Dickens in nineteenth century England. The same applies to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) when the Great Depression ended, most of Bernard Shaw's works, and Richard Wright's, Wole Soyinka's, and Chinua Achebe's works. It is probable that literature teaches, but the one to whom it does cannot really be a reader whose preserve is to fashion and dispatch generally applicable literary interpretive principles. Time and again, such a reader will stumble upon difficulties that will make him nervy. These difficulties are the reason some works resist analysis and criticism.

So, no matter the echoes a work bears of the group or social conditions of life in which it is contextualised, it is what it bears with its tradition, in terms of imagery, that far outweighs the other. In Frye's words, "literature may have life, reality, experience, natures, imaginative truth, social conditions, or what you will for its content; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can be made out of other poems; novels out of novels."[50] At this stage, one wonders at what level is the artist a record of the mores of his society, in view of Soyinka's thought. Perhaps, it is at the level of his language (and this in itself is a problematic as has been treated far behind) because he does it through a sleight of hand and in the in-between.

The Nigerian literary critical practice and tradition are yet to get to this level of recognizing literature for what it is: art and nothing more. And, it seems to me, this bitter fact has to be acknowledged. It is critics' consistent espousal of this kind of critical template, that literature teaches, that makes one to be too certain that a work is about a single, unified and irrefutable message. The privileging of unity of message means the getting out of the text what was put into it. It is similar to what Frye calls a "fallacy of premature teleology" in spite of us knowing that "criticism of literature can hardly be a simple or one level activity."[51] By way of example, let us examine Nigeria's "The Fulani Creation story,"[52] a myth. Almost by its name, a first time reader is confronted with a semblance of unity of meaning: the story about creation to the Fulani. But if its structure is of any thematic contributive importance, the motif of return, almost of incarnation similar to that represented in *The Famished Road* [53] can be provisionally found, and same in *Sundjata.*[54] The last two are similar to the "Oedipus the King"[55] in that the structure of overcoming a ravaging monster and taking up leadership over the redeemed is presented. *Sundjata* on its part has several versions, but according to Okpewho, there is a core that serves as a rallying point for these variants.[56] One notices also, consequently, from these instances that literary meaning is as chaotic as the representation of myths whose autochthonous abode is the oral domain. Myths being a virile part of any literary tradition, they keep being interpreted through re-representation by later works. What is said of African myths applies to Greek myths.

In Africa, particularly, in the Nigerian literary tradition, chaotic interpretation and reinterpretation takes place regarding the concept of *abiku* (Yoruba name given to a child who keeps enacting a recurring cycle of death and rebirth).[57] This much has been represented or should I say, interpreted differently, by three major literary writers in Nigeria: Soyinka, Clark, and Okri.[58] While the first two interpreted the *abiku* concept in poetry, the last did so in a narrative. The concept "interpret" seems fitting because none of them represented it exactly as the other, not even in terms of its cyclical structure. Soyinka saw the *abiku* as a proud child and went ahead to detail him so, while Clark saw him from the perspective of the mother who is weary and therefore ought to be pitied by the *abiku* child. He makes a plea for him to stay. Enter *The Famished Road* and the *abiku* concept. Besides the one-page narration recounting the history of an *abiku* child's many past comings, Okri took his representation of Azaro, an *abiku* character, too far by not giving us a single instance of his death and coming back. This excess elicited the expressions *spiritual realism* from Appiah,[59] New Ageism from McCabe,[60] and other phrases from very keen critics who see in the apparent *abiku* child of *The Famished Road*, a non-*abiku* representation. What these critics have implicitly suggested is that the Yoruba concept is not just grossly over- or under-represented, the artists concerned have only engaged in their own interpretations, through artistic media that do not bear the burden of exact identification, of a concept domiciled in the oral domain of the Yoruba world. Manifest in these chaotic interpretations and reinterpretations is the inherent failing of the artist as a teacher.

The chaotic element of literature is even attested to by Achebe himself in a reply to a question asked him in an interview with Jerome Brooks whether Yeats and Eliot were among his favourites on reading list:

> I liked Yeats! That wild Irishman. I really loved his love of language, his flow. *His chaotic ideas seemed to me just the right thing for a poet.* Passion! He was always on the right side. He may be wrongheaded, but his heart was always on the right side. He wrote beautiful poetry. *It had the same kind of magic about it that I mentioned the wizard had for me.* I used to make up lines with anything that came into my head, anything that sounded

> interesting. So Yeats was that kind of person for me.[61] (emphasis added)

When Achebe said Yeats' "chaotic ideas seemed to me just the right thing for a poet," that those muddled ideas resolve into "beautiful poetry" and that the same writing has some enchantment, a somewhat incomprehensive, indistinct and hard-to-pin-down spell that invokes the image of a wizard for him, he had in mind the authentic poet. Such a poet's language must be akin to madness because he thinks in images and metaphors and does not mouth founded declarations and assertions, these being prerequisites for teaching to take place. This language, so burdened with clutters, is not fraught with teaching. Achebe's reference to Yeats calls to mind what Frye says about him in the course of an illustration of how a poet adopts symbols from mythology:

> A poet who accepts a mythology as a valid for belief, as Dante and Milton accepted Christianity, will naturally use it; poets outside such a tradition turn to other mythologies as suggestive or symbolic of what might be believed, as in the adaptations of Classical or occult mythological systems made by Goethe, Victor Hugo, Shelley, or Yeats.[62]

Symbols and metaphors with which a poet expresses his art are the major reason for the contingency of the meaning of literary art.[63] No matter how he couches his art, whatever finds its way into this art is merely "suggestive or symbolic of what might be believed"[64]—art's provisional essence—but not what should be believed. If all meanings of a literary work are provisional, what then is the artist to teach readers? Is he to teach one of these or all of them? And if he teaches all of these, to what could his intention be pinned? Perhaps, he never means to teach, signifying that the entire African or say Nigerian critical practice as held and espoused by Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka has been founded on a somewhat false premise: teachability. It seems to me that the burden of teaching, which we assume art and artists possess, has been imagined.

Taking a second and thoughtful look at *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, one sees a budding questing motif, as against what

many critics see as a representation of rural African culture. Yet no critic agrees on what its sole humanistic instruction is. Meyers feels it represents both positive and negative elements of the Igbo tribal society;[65] whereas MacKenzie identifies in it a shift in belief of the African people and feels that this shift results from changing social and economic conditions.[66] Wise takes for granted that the work explores the universality of the plight of the Igbo people as they face the destruction of their pre-colonial culture,[67] while Elder sees Okonkwo's character in terms of his relationship to Igbo society.[68] Furthermore, Quayson, in noting Innes' contrast of Joyce Cary with Achebe and the establishment of a typology of the privileged race against the background of Achebe's reasons for his novels, remarks that *Things Fall Apart* was "a corrective to some of the jaundiced images about the African that were purveyed in writings by Westerners"[69] (an annotative paraphrase of Achebe's own remark of what he hoped his work does at the beginning of this article).[70] Nevertheless, the success of this work in this conventional direction remains debatable because other much more compelling views emerging from the work can splendidly explode the above ideas and analyses critics claimed exist. Thus, one is at pains to identify what specifically *Things Fall Apart* is teaching.

My sense is that what appears to easily attract critical attention with respect to Nigerian literature is what Frye, echoing Gerald Manley Hopkins, frames as "an overthought of syntax."[71] It refers to the seemingly historical concern at which the work is said to be directed. Going by the many critical views on *Things Fall Apart*, the images and metaphors are simply out of critical probe. It is often speciously expected that these should not bother us so long as the postcolonial intent of the work is understood and properly classified. So, to a postcolonial literary critic, this work should not be about any other thing, or so I am made to believe. It should not even have "an underthought of metaphor and imagery"[72] which marks the difference between what has been said (overthought) and what the work shows forth.[73] In *Things Fall Apart*, this underthought is evidenced by the character of Okonkwo and many others in varied dimensions. The image of a quester, in Okonkwo, is clear as a provisional meaning. He operates on a strong and unyielding motivation of not wanting to be like his father, a 'woman', by going the extra mile in his farming

career, family discipline and in the killing of Ikemefuna. We are not so sure whether he gets what he quests for, for he is buried like a dog in a manner less dignified than his father's, and in a way he would have disliked had it been possible for him to be dead and alive simultaneously. His corpse is a forbidden object qualified to be buried in the Evil Forest by strangers, whereas his father's was buried by his kinsmen, with only the place of his burial being different. No forbidden curse was borne by his father and nothing forbidden was at issue. But for Okonkwo, both the place and conveyance to a burial site are issues. Apart from this image, there are the motifs of return, exile, and bondage, and none of these is reducible to the other, no matter how determined a critic's pursuit for a nonprovisional and unified meaning is. With this latter reading, *Things Fall Apart* is way too far from recording the mores of Igbo society and rehabilitating the Igbo past.

Such Igbo Nigerian words as *ogbanje*, *oye*, *iyi-uwa*, *obodo dike*, *ozo*, *umuada*, *tufia*, *ochu*, *agadi nwanyi*, *nso-ani*, *egwugwu*; peculiar Igbo phenomena like the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, the Evil Forest, the Agbala Oracle; and modes of behaviour in form of payment of bride-prices, the New Yam Festival, wrestling matches, taking titles, and others, all given in English and imbuing the text with integrity and originality, are evidences of the African artist's in-betweenness. He acquires the linguistic property of the ethical life of the Igbo people and the English culture because he, being an Igbo and also learned in English, just cannot help doing so. He fuses these into the complex process that moulds an enigmatic figure, Okonkwo, a figure clearly appearing in a universal literary form of tragedy, pure craft. Whatever would have pinned the text to geographical/national/ethnical/tribal verifiable indices and elements of any culture are, in the text and in the form through which the figure is apprehended, neutralized. Translingual and transcultural signs are mentally grasped in regard to what they relate to, the central figure, the core that garners every other textual element into its tragic form in a "deconstructive-constructive" format.[74] We know tragedy as a literary form only in literature, and it is not particular to *Things Fall Apart* nor Nigerian literature alone. In the nullification of local identity marks and paradoxically retaining echoes of same, the work appreciates to universality and Achebe has in this given vent to his share of Frye's total dream of man. Also, by this, he has given

the world one of the most impressive non-functional, nonteaching texts of all time.

I agree it is difficult to break free from a fifty-year-old habit. *Things Fall Apart* has existed for more than fifty years. So has this text's entire critical gamut, which has not really exceeded postcolonial theoretical mantra of authorial intent. I foresee a herculean task in trying to change, nay, sway this sort of critical habit. But we certainly can re-examine this critical stand. In the Nigerian literary tradition to which this work, *Things Fall Apart*, and many others belong, two works have captivated my interest greatly. They possess the instrument with which to agitate the fort of the supposed quality of teaching in literature specified by Achebe and the notion of an artist recording his society's mores by Soyinka. They are Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker*[75] and Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*.[76]

Okorafor-Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker* is the US-resident Nigerian debut. It won the 2008 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature and has earned notable mentions on the final lists of such prestigious awards as the Golden State Teen Choice Award in 2008, Locus Award for the Best First Book, Parallax Award, and Golden Duck Award, all in 2005. Nevertheless, what it has achieved in terms of recognition has not been attained in the area of critical analysis and studies as confirmed by diligent search. The reason is obvious: it does not seem to appeal to majority of critical tastes that seek to analyse a work by making reference to [the purpose of] an intentional authorial teaching of some sort.

The generic orientation of *Zahrah the Windseeker*, from what I make out, borders on the skilful blend of both fantasy and science-fiction subgenres. It is a blend yet to be seen in African literature. All the characters in *Zahrah the Windseeker* are not only exotic in depth, magical in attributes, and extra-human in their display of strength, but are also far-reaching in enabling the work, through its emergence in the Nigerian and African literary tradition, to contest to foundation, and somehow harass those golden critical habits that have sustained the critical enterprise of Nigerian literature for fifty years. If one may ask: in what sense does *Zahrah the Windseeker*, being a segment of that body of art called literature, teach its readers? Is it in the extra-large locks of Zahrah, the work's main character, or in the magic and translucence of life in Zahrah's world and the activities therein? Is it about plants

growing computers or about technology and every item of civilisation—buildings, bridges, and whatnot—solely sprouting from plant life that readers needed to be taught? The plants in the Forbidden Greeny Jungle are like humans, possessing intelligence and, without following a script of genetic engineering, capable of altering genetic compositions. I deduce also that it is not to horses, mangoes, poisonous plants, on one hand, nor talking trees, conscious beings like fairies, and animals like elephants and the panthers, on the other hand, that the work's instructional object is directed. Nor is it in the representation of exotic flora and fauna with a slight mix or semblance of African culture, to wit, skeletal ethno-religious beliefs that Mbachu means to instruct. Even if ethno-religious beliefs were what guided Mbachu's insights (which I doubt), the popular and ancient *dada*lock (dreadlocks by children from birth) concept or belief handed down from many generations that the work posits is inconsistent with the Igbo belief in Nigeria. Rather, it is chaotic. Zahrah's adventuresome nature, which her *dada*locks are said to signify, does not marry at all to this belief. It seems to me that the work is positing, in a half-awake manner, incidents of a dream or nightmarish world. This might have accounted for why it is provenly difficult for any reader to make any tangible meaning out of it in spite of the fact that every major action is quest-poised and quest-directed.

Most action words identifiable in English and modes of behaviour enacted in human relationships in *Zahrah the Windseeker* are the sort noticeable in *Things Fall Apart*. On the other hand, aside from the lexical items like *Ooni* (echoing the titular status of the king of Ife, South West Nigeria) Kingdom and Zahrah, Kirki (seems to suggest Greek *Circe*, */sɜ:si/*), others such as: *Tsami, Dari, Grip, Dark-Market, the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, Ginen planet, elgort*, Zahrah's attire (to which mirrors are attached), the flora computer and many others including placenames are not entirely supplied to the artist from the ordinary language of her low world. Attempts are made to link our knowledge of what is familiar to the very strange and weird as the text redescribes our world through compound (sometimes, portmanteau) English words that capture the fantastical. *Dark-Market, digi-book, netevisions, digi-books, leaf-chipping beetles, videophones* are cases in point. Thus Mbachu's in-betweenness shows forth as she rides on the shoulders of known English linguistic

items to denote the unencountered and strange. Whatever has semblances of the already known is hugely mutated, making the world she creates all the more strange and rattling our perceptions. Very few things exist in the world of *Zahrah the Windseeker* that we can connect with our familiar one. Some of these are newspapers, mentorship, heroic welcome attending Zahrah's arrival, and so on. The artist's language in this work is at pains to communicate the universe clearly, presenting one of the most hypothetical world of the agri-science fiction of our wildest dreams or nightmare in modern Nigerian literature. Brushing aside these surface elements, some plot comes close to being visible: Zahrah, in being a true friend to Dari, braves danger to procure from the Forbidden Greeny Jungle the elgort serum capable of voiding the impact of the venom that almost caused Dari's death. Zahrah quests and realizes it, whereas Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, fails ultimately in doing so. We can manage a pose from all these: in what ways, then, is such an arid and elusive work supposed to teach readers, keep mores, and salvage a grim, decrepit image and stereotypic representation of the African? We simply cannot find it here. We cannot even attempt to visualise our world in terms of the world of *Zahrah the Windseeker*; it is remote from it.

As if *Zahrah the Windseeker* has not done enough damage to the function of teaching that literature is said to possess, Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* knocks off a few stubborn remnants of the teaching purposes of literary art. It does so not only by having a nameless setting, but also by skipping what names characters ought to bear and by recording inarticulate perceptions and thoughts in contrast to both *Things Fall Apart* and *Zahrah the Windseeker*. Nonetheless, from this apparent evasiveness of meaning, it is possible to trace out the structure we earlier encountered in *Things Fall Apart*. We observe in this work the culmination of the shedding off of indexical cultural and national property that began visibly in *Zahrah the Windseeker*. Thus, in *Astonishing the Gods*, we are presented the purest form of a work that cannot be tied to any geographical space. This situation then renders very fluid what characters perceive and the conclusions they reach. Contrasts exist between *Astonishing the Gods* and *Zahrah the Windseeker*, however. Contrasting the former, the latter posits justifications for some known Nigerian terms like the kingly title, *Ooni* for the Yoruba and *dada* for the Igbo, both Nigerian tribes.

On the whole, with an awkward story-line that merely denotes a fabulous referent, *Astonishing the Gods* stretches fantasy to an unimaginable height qualifying as the most elusive work of Okri's corpus. I might include the entire Nigerian literary tradition. The language of the narrator and the reality he (or a she? though I will use *he* for convenience sake) describes has greatly enabled this characteristic of indistinctness to show forth.

The trajectory of action of this work is as follows: a young man(?) becomes fed up with his state of invisibility (can't really tell what it means) goes in search of visibility (still don't know what this is) only to end up being much more invisible. His visibility exceeds those of the partially invisible personalities who dwell in a part-invisible terrain. They help him understand more about his being visible and invisible at the same time. One can trace out a thread of idea through the whole work: there is the presence of a personality who sets out questing for something. From this idea could be derived the theme of quest. But what this main character yearns for is hard to tell and, it seems to me, that no one else can, at least, not from what is posited in the entire work. We do know what Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* quests for, for example. He quests for a space amongst the elders and the nobles of his clan, and after gaining this, he also seeks to sustain it. Zahrah in *Zahrah the Windseeker* is in quest of the elgort to heal her dear friend, Dari. When we place both Okonkwo and Zahrah next to the nameless main character of *Astonishing the Gods,* the opposing vagueness of what the latter character searches for stares us in the face. With the quest-object being indefinite, this essay's doubt that African literary art instructs readers stands confirmed. There is nothing sociological, historical, cultural, re-representational and re-reformational in *Astonishing the Gods.* Moreover, the work does not, in any way through what the nameless character seeks for, teach readers anything, nor record the mores important to Nigerian societies, nor sound the voice of vision for Nigerians. Meaning virtually exceeds readers' grasps. What any reader can agree on is that in *Astonishing the Gods*, language is at its most fluid level: a language playing on itself and enacting a play. And if, from all analysis, Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu's *Zahrah the Windseeker* and Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* are pieces of (literary) art, which are incapable of teaching aught—ethical or correctional—and cannot in any way be classified as nonliterary

art which would have counted them out as different from other forms of literary art, then literature teaches nothing. It also very well means that the Nigerian literary art possesses no teaching or tutorial function, and as such, Nigerian artists cannot teach and cannot assume to be doing so.

Nearing the dénouement of this article, one very important idea that strikes me from all that has been said so far is that the artist is in a space. It is the space of art and language, where the society and other sundry issues, each with a peculiar claim, engage him in a squeeze. While grappling with these issues, which are just too much for him, the artist becomes incapable of doing more than his space affords him. In short, in this in-between, he has given up what really belongs to him, the socio-cultural corporeal world of politics and the purposiveness to make art function. And he must reach out to what belongs to an Other, a super-real world of images and literary forms which his art, through literary conventions, presses him to possess. In possessing them, he ends up giving expression to inchoate and primitive feelings in symbols and metaphors that are in excess of declarations and short of assertions and linguistic indications. This feeling is propped up by desire, a term about which we are told "is the social aspect of what we met on the literal level as emotion, an impulse toward expression which would have remained amorphous if the poem had not liberated it by providing the form of its expression. The form of desire . . . liberated and made apparent by civilization."[77]

There is no doubt that my elders and literary luminaries—Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka—earnestly wished that literature served (other) purposes, say teaching and recording mores, true to the learning of their time, at least, better than serving none. But I am afraid from evidences laid out already that this cannot take place because it is a fruitless laborious task owing to literature's special features of imagery and dulled indicative power, and the inherent incapability of discharging functions. Literature serves no purpose—not teaching, keeping mores, letting out the voice of vision, nor correcting stereotypes. If anything, it lets the mind soar in thought and pleasure, leading ultimately to graveness—contemplation. And it does this through the handy corporeal property of language the artist cannot help but possess. Now, the artist, from what he has been and what he is today appears to me to have disappointed Soyinka and Achebe and the

entire critical practice in Nigeria. Inasmuch as he is unable to discharge the function(s) imputed to him in the long run, owing to an inherent dysfunction and incapability existing between him and his act—his art, I affirm that somehow the artist is a bad teacher. He must have had a premonition of this failing of his. His work and he are enigmas, making impossible mono-interpretation and mono-meaning.

Of course, it is beyond the intention of this work to change existing perceptions and methodologies that kowtow Achebe's and Soyinka's thoughts; this would be attempting too much in a tiny space, bearing in mind what habits are. But it does offer a differing view of what the African literary artist and his art are and points to an untrodden direction, at least, in my opinion. Nigerian literary critical practice could be reinvigorated in the face of disintegrating absolute-concepts that stipulate that the artist, through his art, functions as the record of mores, experiences, visions, and remedying past ill-representations of Africans, if it explores other interpretive methods. Such methods should neither be author- nor tutor-centred. Only then would Nigerian and, indeed, African literary artworks and artists be really appreciated as artefacts and real poets. I find the Ukwuani refrain appealing to restate: "*Osa* (All) *inu*(stories) *bu* (are) *e loye o'ba* (fittingly crafted [into a plot])".

Notes

[1] Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*: *Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59.

[2] Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," in *The Writer in Modern Africa,* ed. by Per Wastberg, (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), 21.

[3] Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 45.

[4] Kolawole Ogungbesan, "Wole Soyinka and the Novelist's Responsibility in Africa," in *New West African Literature*, ed. Kolawole Ogungbesan, (London: Heinemann, 1979), 1-7.

[5] Thomas A Hale, "Bursting at the Seams: New Dimensions for African Literature in the 21st Century," *African Literature Today* 25(2006):11.

[6] Ernest N. Emenyonu, *Studies on the Nigerian Novel* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1991), 25.

[7] Ibid., 25.

[8] Samuel Omo Asein, introduction to *Studies in the African Novel,* ed. Asein S.O. and A.O. Ashaolu, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1986), 2.
[9] Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," 21.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964), chap.6, accessed May 22, 2010, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1974; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 95.
[12] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, chap.1.
[13] Plato, *Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 89.
[14] Ibid., 347.
[15] Ibid., 346.
[16] Ibid., 348.
[17] Ibid., 89–90.
[18] Ibid., 91.
[19] Ibid., 92.
[20] Ibid., 71.
[21] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Book Vii.3, accessed February 26, 2015, http://bookfi.org/dl/1095677/db1382.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Plato, *Republic*, 90.
[24] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, chap.4.
[25] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 142.
[26] Gilbert Murray, preface to *The Poetics*, by Aristotle, trans. Ingram Bywater, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964), accessed 22 May, 2010, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/search/.
[27] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 17.
[28] Ibid., 9.
[29] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, chap. 4.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963), 52.
[32] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 33.
[33] Ibid., 119.
[34] Frye, *Fables of Identity,* 57.
[35] T. S Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Frank Kermode, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 24.
[36] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, chap. 4.
[37] Wole Soyinka, "The Writer," 21.
[38] Plotinos, *Complete Works Vol. 1*, "Beauty consists in participation in a form," trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, (Alpine: Comparative Literature Press, 1918), First Annead, Book 6, accessed February 26, 2015, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/42930/42930-h/42930-h.htm.

[39] Ibid. "Search for a Demonstration of Divinity such that the Demonstration itself will Deify," First Annead, Book 3.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, chap. 4
[42] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12.
[43] Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1949), 284, cited in Amechi N. Akwanya, *Language and Habits of Thought* (Enugu: New Generation, 2005), 205.
[44] Akwanya, *Language*, 206.
[45] Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible as Literature"* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 24.
[46] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 36.
[47] Ibid., 36.
[48] Ibid., 37.
[49] Amechi N. Akwanya, *Semantics and Discourse: Theories of Meaning and Textual Analysis* (Enugu, Nigeria: Acena, 2007),134.
[50] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 97.
[51] Ibid., 71.
[52] "Fulani Creation Story," *Poems of Black Africa*, ed. Wole Soyinka, (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1975), 57-58.
[53] Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1992).
[54] D.T. Niane, *Sundjata* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006).
[55] Sophocles, "Oedipus the King," *The Oedipus Trilogy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912).
[56] Isidore Okpewho, "The African Heroic Epic: Internal Balance," *Africa* 36, no.2 (1981): 209-225.
[57] Douglas McCabe, "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Abiku Texts and Soyinka's 'Abiku'," *Research in African Literatures* 33, no.1 (2002): 45-74.
[58] Ignatius Chukwumah, "Mythic Displacement in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*" (doctoral dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2012), 26.
[59] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Spiritual Realism," *The Nation,* 3, no.10 (1992): 146.
[60] Douglas McCabe, "'Higher Realities': New Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," *Research in African Literatures* 36, no.4 (2005): 1-21.
[61] Chinua Achebe, interview, by Jerome Brooks, "The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review* 139, no.4 (2010), accessed November 30, 2010, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe.
[62] Frye, *Fables of Identity,* 33. One can add that Yeats' innovativeness is comparable to Soyinka's adaptations of the Ogun, Yoruba Pantheon, and mythology; Ben Okri's reworking of *abiku* belief, and Okorafor-Mbachu's appropriation of science fictional conventions.

[63] Ibid., 120-25.
[64] Ibid., 33
[65] Jeffrey Meyers, "Culture and History in *Things Fall Apart*," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 11, no.1 (1969): 25-32.
[66] Clayton G. MacKenzie, "The Metamorphosis of Piety in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 2 (1996): 128-138.
[67] Christopher Wise, "Excavating the New Republic: Post-Colonial Subjectivity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," *Callaloo* 22, no. 4 (1999): 1054-1070.
[68] Arlene A Elder, "The Paradoxical Characterization of Okonkwo," in *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart*, ed. Bernth Lindfors, (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991), 58-64.
[69] Ato Quayson, "Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It," *Research in African Literatures* 25, no.4 (1994): 117-36.
[70] Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, 45.
[71] Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 21.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 36.
[75] Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, *Zahrah the Windseeker* (Lagos, NG: Farafina, 2005).
[76] Ben Okri, *Astonishing the Gods* (London: Phoenix, 1995).
[77] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 106.