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***The African writer: an endangered species in the African socio/political milieu – Nigeria as a case study.***

**Abstract**

Africa is a global concern even in 2011 in spite of her enormous economic and human resources. Between late 1950s when most former colonies, especially British dominions, began to obtain their independence one after the other and 2011 the “international Year for People of African descent, majority of these emerging African nations, though at various levels, have suffered socio-economic and political epilepsy, so much that Africa as a continent today is a global concern. Political instability, starvation, diseases, civil wars, corruption, etc are a common phenomenon in many African countries. The recent happenings in, Ivory Coast, Libya, Zimbabwe, and many others lend credence to this observation. In addition to these self-inflicted challenges is the flagrant and infamous enterprise of many of our leaders to maintain their holds on power indefinitely and at all costs at the expense of the lives and wellbeing of their people. There is no African country, which does not have its own share of these vices. Except for natural catastrophe like famine (as we presently have in Kenya and Sudan), why should Africa remain a global concern even in 2011 in spite of her immense natural, human, and material endowments?

African writers have been in the vanguard of divergent voices against the corrupt ruling classes whose leadership has brought untold hardship on the people and made the continent a global concern. The ruling class has consistently resisted with force these divergent voices, considering them as antigovernment and a call for violent revolution. Consequently, many of the writers have suffered different dimensions of brutality and harassment, ranging from disappearance, assassination, incarceration, solitary confinement, kidnapping and forced exile.

This paper looks at the African writers in the context of Africa’s Socio/political development with Nigeria as a case study. In spite of the United Nations’ proclamation of 2011 as the “international Year for People of African descent” coupled with Australia’s bold and commendable step to improve the lot of Africa in various fronts, Africa may remain a concern unless the African ruling classes accommodate divergent voices and carry along all the stakeholders in the African project.

**INTRODUCTION**

In spite of Nigeria’s immense economic, material and human resources, the majority of its population live in squalor. Roads are in dilapidated state, becoming death traps. Doctors go on strike not for their own benefit but for lack of medicine and equipments to treat the sick. Universities are shut as lecturers go on strike, for lack of infrastructure, conducive teaching, and learning environment, and for non-availability of teaching materials. Generally, the education system is in “a state of neglect.” This has resulted in brain drain of world-class professionals leaving the country almost on a daily basis. Unemployment rate is escalating and this has given

rise to insecurity and criminality. Due to irregular electricity supply, which is a cardinal nugget for economic growth, many Nigerians now seek alternative source of power, which is popularly called "Generator," which only the rich can afford. The present spate of bomb blasts ripping through the land is another frightening dimension of the state of insecurity in Nigeria.

Nigerian writers have consistently articulated their strong and crucial views either in their creative foray, at public fora, or on any other platform on the unacceptable state of the Nigeria Nation and its insensitive and corrupt ruling class. Consequently, the ruling class often consider these writer-critics as enemies of government. Therefore, attempts are often made to silence their collective voice.

In Nigeria today, retired military generals, politicians who are ethnic/tribal leaders and academia who find themselves in the corridor of power constitute the ruling class.

### **NIGERIA AND ITS WRITERS**

On July 29, 2010, the Nelson Mandela Foundation in conjunction with Park and Rite Associates hosted a discussion entitled "The Necessity of Art: Reflections on Writers and Artists in Defeating Oppression and Deepening Democracy." The renowned South African poet and writer, Mongane Wally Serote introducing the discussants who were renowned writers, said, "I want to introduce them as people who hold very strong views."

The above aptly describes Nigerian writers. However, why are Nigerian writers always at loggerheads with the Ruling class?

During the years of military dictatorship, corruption assumed a monumental proportion that eventually spilled over to the democratic dispensation. The jostle for political office is for personal gains and not out of genuine desire to serve the people but to milk the country. The fall out of this is the near total collapse of our moral system. Those who are known to have corruptly enriched themselves are courted and honoured by their communities, religious bodies, social clubs and other private organizations. You are a thief only if your are caught.

In spite this level of corruption, foreign financial aids keep coming to the country from western countries, including the United States of America. Most of these financial aids are meant for infrastructural development and funding of small-scale industries that would eventually improve general living standard. However, these financial aids quite often end up in personal coffers. The immediate past Chairman of the Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nuhu Ribadu at the inauguration of Fix Nigeria Initiative (FNI) accused past Nigerian leaders of having stolen Five Hundred Billion Dollar (\$500billion) aid to Nigeria for development projects.

Nigeria is a country where many things don't work. A renowned Nigerian international scholar and Poet Professor, Niyi Osundare reflecting on the state of Nigeria, concluded that in the face of the socio/economic and political upheavals confronting the people, a situation where nothing works, Nigerian writers could not but be antagonistic of the ruling class.

*"You cannot keep quiet about the situation in the kind of countries we find ourselves in Africa. When you wake up and there is no running water, when you have a massive*

*power outage for days and nights, no food on the table, no hospital for the sick, no peace of mind; when the image of the ruler you see everywhere is that of a dictator ....– then there is no other way than to write about this in an attempt to change the situation for the better.”*

With the above scenario, it is impossible for Nigerian writers not to be strongly critical of those who are responsible for the plight of the people, the ruling class. Nigerian writers in their role as the voice of the people have not been and cannot be silent in the face of such deluge of economic dehydration of the people by the ruling class. Writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Niyi Osundare, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Adichei, Tanure Ojaide, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Ezeigbo and many others, including myself have not spared the ruling class in our work. Chinua Achebe on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2004 wrote an open letter to refuse the National Merit Award from Obasanjo led government. His refusal was a protest against the corrupt ruling class as well as “the sorry state of the country.”

Wole Soyinka has been an unrepentant, consistent, and outspoken critic of tyrannical rulers and bad governance in Nigeria. Several times, he has had to pay for his audacious challenge of the ruling class. He has suffered incarceration without trial, death threat and self exile to stay alive.

Ken Saro Wiwa, a writer and an environmental activist had to pay the supreme price by hanging for daring to challenge the regime of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) on the environmental and economic exploitation of Ogoni people from whose soil Nigeria derives the bulk of its wealth. This regime marked the darkest hour in Nigeria’s political history with Nigerian journalists and writers the prime target.

Other writers like Kunle Ajibade, Ben Charles Obi, Christine Anyanwu and George Mba almost suffered the same fate as Ken Saro Wiwa during the deadly regime of Sani Abacha. They were imprisoned, confined incommunicado for being outspoken on a phantom coup cooked up to get at the perceived enemies of the regime. They were tried by a kangaroo military panel.

Niyi Osundare has always been publicly critical of bad governance and corruption ridden ruling class. He regularly contributes poems to a number of Nigerian national newspapers, commenting on the poor living standard of majority of Nigerian people. Consequently, he has been invited many times by Security Agents to explain the thematic thrust of his poems and to whom they refer.

On March 10, 2007, I had just finished reading from my latest novel, **The Day After Tomorrow** and left the venue. No sooner had I left than a telephone call came from a friend at the meeting, warning me to watch my movement. A security agent in mufti was looking for me. We later gathered that it was in respect of the contents of my earlier novel, **The Newcomer**, a slim novel. For several months, I had to lie low to evade arrest. Is it not a common saying that “He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day?” That was precisely what I did. My crime was my critical view on and the dramatization in the novel of the plight of the displaced Maroko peasant-residents whose plank houses were demolished without the government

resettling them in befitting homesteads. Majority of the displaced Maroko residents are still homeless today.

As recent as January 9, 2011, Oke Ndibe, a US based Nigerian Professor and writer was visiting Nigeria when he was arrested on arrival in Nigeria, detained and his passport seized. Of course, he was eventually released and his passport returned. However, the security agency left Nigerians wondering why Ndibe was detained and his passport confiscated, but we all knew that he had been using his column in Sun newspaper to express his critical views on so many national issues.

However, one is tempted to think that with emergent of democratic dispensation in 1999, the spate of harassment on Nigerian writers seems to have abated to some extent. Of course, there have been isolated cases of writers (such as Indibe's) detained for questioning on their critical views on government policies. This certainly does not call for joy because the Nigerian masses still live in abject poverty with the prevalent state of insecurity, corruption, unemployment, incessant electric power failure, kidnapping, bombing etc. The Nigerian writers may soon go back to the trenches and the clamp down on them may resume.

This sorry state of Nigeria is the focus of my research project. Most of these endemic problems confronting Nigeria today are not necessarily post-colonial ailments but a reflection of our pre-colonial life. However, let us not forget that every society has its own traditional blemishes. Certainly, Nigeria is not a unique exception. In the creative project, I am recreating the past in the present. It is the proverb of our elders that "if you do not know where you are coming from, it is unlikely you will know where you are going." I believe we must revisit the past to correct the evils of the present to enable us have a focus on where we are heading for.

Why are all these attacks on writers? It is simply because they hold and express divergent views against the ruling class, exercising their freedom of speech. I do not think this situation is peculiar to Nigeria. It is happening all over Africa. We have several writers who have had to face the wrath of the ruling classes in their countries. The prolific Kenya writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o who after his release from detention has been in exile since 1982. Dawit Isaac of Eritrea is still in detention, Tahar Djaout an Algerian writer was murdered on 26 May, 1993, Breyten Breytenbach, a South African poet, was imprisoned in 1975 but released in 1982. So also is Jack Mapanje, a Malawian poet who was imprisoned in 1987 after the publication in Britain of his poetry collection of *Chameleons and Gods*. Various African ruling classes have tried and still trying to stifle opposing voices. They want to remain unchallenged in their continued resource mismanagement, maladministration of their countries and exploitation of their people, and perhaps become life presidents of their countries.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the above political and socio-economic scenario how far can the international community go in redeeming Africa if Africa itself is not ready for such redemptive overtures even if United Nations declares every year as "The Year of African Peoples?" The ruling class does not hold a monopoly of knowledge and right to the administration of the continent. It must accommodate

divergent opinions in whatever form or shade. Without this, Africa will remain a global concern for a long time to come. In the word of Thompson Ayodele, *et al.* (2005) "Africa defies conventional logic: grinding poverty amidst immense mineral riches... Helping Africa is a noble cause, but the campaign has become a theatre of the absurd....The more aid poured into Africa, the lower its standard of living" for its people. In such a pathetic situation, African writers cannot be quiet. Of course, the more they talk the more they incur the wrath of the Ruling class and the deeper the society sinks into the pit of poverty, corruption and all other vices. Then international aids in whatever form will become irrelevant to the African people unless the Ruling class can carry along all the stakeholders in project Africa including the brutalized clan of African writers.

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Note: In the last five decades (1960-2000), especially, in the post-independence Africa, cases of writers incarcerated without trial, assassinated, kidnapped, or disappeared are common in Africa. As at June 2011, 120 African writers have been assassinated, kidnapped, arrested, or imprisoned, because they "freely" expressed "themselves through their work."