Affective Literature as an Inclusive Art Form

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Abstract

In this essay, I am largely concerned with the propensity of literature to affect the psychology of readers because of the emotion that it embeds, and I argue that literature generally is affective since it is constructed to entertain, teach, and provide pleasures to the reader. It can only achieve this meaningfully if it embeds emotions that can make the readers respond in diverse ways to express how they are affected: through anger, grief, laughter, joy, sorrow etc. It is the capacity of a literary work to generate these emotions that underlines its significance and ultimate success. New Criticism, Formalism and the later poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches to criticism censure in varying degrees contentual signification and put their stresses on the formal profundities in a text such as language and the figurative dimension of language, the apt and adroit depiction of setting, characters, and narrative techniques as ways of conveying signification, but emotions are best represented and felt through the content and message that a literary work conveys. An aesthetically flawed literary work is one that fails to fulfill the basic functions of literature through entertaining and pleasuring the readers. The capacity of literature to be affective inheres in its ability to conventionally function as explained above. Every successful literary work must in essence be affective and this underlines the inclusivity of the term as it relates to African literature.

Keywords: affect, affective, literature, African literature

Introduction

The word 'affective' used adjectivally characterizes emotion, especially the capacity of the emotion to affect in an overpowering manner anyone so affected. Therefore, 'affective literature' is any creative literary work that affects the emotions of the readers, either positively or negatively, manifesting or eliciting the emotions of anger, rage, annoyance, or laughter, joy or lightheartedness from readers and audiences. *Google* explains that the term 'affective' "refers to the emotional qualities

of a work of literature" and proceeds further to aver, "If a piece of writing is affective, then it 'affects' the reader. They are moved by the content and experience some kind of emotions in relation to it". The extent and relevance of the emotions of a literary work on readers, earlier characterized as subjective, have become the cornerstones of modern literary theories which seek to explain signification in literary discourses from the purview of the readers. Indeed, the American critic, Stanley Fish has given the name 'Affective Stylistics' to his form of reader-response criticism. Earlier, the New Critics, W. K. Wimsatt Jnr and Monroe C. Beardsley (in *The Verbal Icon*, 1954) drew attention to the limitations involved in judging a literary work based on its effects on the emotions of the readers because of its subjective nature. In fact, the two most important testaments of the New Critics typifying grave errors resulting from not distancing oneself from the emotions in a text and viewing a text from the intentions of the author are the 'Affective Fallacy' and 'Intentional Fallacy'. It is important also to distinguish between the terms 'affect' and 'effect' in relation to our discussion of the subject at hand. 'Affect' used as a verb means 'to produce an effect upon', as in 'the weather affected his mood'. Effect is usually a noun 'meaning a change that results when something is done or happens'. 'Affect' as a word, in the context of our discussion, characterizes the ability of a literary work to emotionally affect its readers and it leads to the emotional outbursts earlier outlined, while the outcomes of the process typify the 'effects', in this case, joy, anger, rage, laughter, lightheartedness, satisfaction, discontentment, sorrow, despair, pity and what have you, that the emotions in literary works can elicit from the readers.

Literature, on the other hand, typifies creative writing imaginatively woven by writers to explain nature and other personal or societal experiences but made to look real and capable of happening. The novel especially relies on realism to define its mode of existence, it is based on lived experiences, hence its possibility to take on a true-to-life appearance. Talking about the centrality of imitation to the creative process, Jean-Pierre Durix says, "The relation between art and imitation has always been a basic concern in any study of the creative process" [45]. This mimetic connection is particularly important in conceptualizing literature as a reflective and imitative art and informs the marked difference between Plato and his former student Aristotle in their conception of the mimetic quality of literature. While Aristotle exalts the profundity of the literary creed in structuring the concept of the tragic hero and tragedy as a dramatic art, Plato dwells on the negative dimension of literary emotion in his banishment of literature from his ideal Republic because of its negative influence on the morality of the youths. Peter Widdowson in his book, *Literature (The New Critical Idiom)* provides some illumination on the conflicting views of these early theorists on the issue of mimesis [pp 28, 29].

Properly conceptualized, therefore, it is impossible to divorce literature from emotions, since it is imaginatively created and is the product of a writer's emotions in his musings about life and society. Although the New Critics identify the emotion in a text as subjective and advise readers to move beyond it to achieve objectivity in judging a literary text, a creative work that is devoid of emotion is truly not literature strictly speaking. The capacity of a literary work to affect the emotions of the reader is what makes it literature, therefore, any literary work that is incapable of stirring the emotions of the reader, whether a poem, play or novel would be deemed to be deeply flawed.

The above fact deserves further probing. The conventional functions of literature are to please, entertain and educate the readers. In the western conception of literature and how it offers pleasure, the way a thing is said matters more than what is said. This formalist conception of literature epitomizes the later perspectives of critical approaches to literary criticism such as Structuralism and Deconstruction where contentual signification in a text is undermined at the expense of the form, so much so that the author of a text is presumed to be dead and non-existent, while the text created by the author is subjected to critical scrutiny. In this context, what pleases the readers are the boundless possibilities opened by the writer's use of language, the deployment of imageries and the figurative essence of the language used as well as the adroit depiction of setting or background and the use of scintillating narrative techniques in a literary text. The way a writer blends all these formal accessories to make meaning coincident in a narrative is particularly seen as the true essence of literary perfection and not necessarily the profundity or profanity of the message. From the Anglo-Saxon era through the Neo-Classical, Shakespearean, Romantic and Victorian eras of mainstream English literature, this appears to be the perceived mode of influence, and the way literature entertains. The only exceptions may be in dramatic literature, especially tragedy where the purgation of the cathartic experiences of a tragic hero can have immediate effect on members of the audience, which may result in pity and empathy for the tragic heroes' fates and in comedies, which can result in laughter, lightheartedness and so on.

In the African context, contentual signification more than the artistry of the author of a literary text is important in gauging the degree of influence of the entertainment of a literary work on readers. Here, a literary work 'affects' the readers' emotions if it is deployed to proffer solutions to the social problems bedeviling the society. Any African writer that pays attention only to his craft at the expense of message in his literary work may not be taken too seriously. It is not important whether the writer is a critical realist or revolutionary writer, the degree of his influence on the readers is valued to the extent that the work provides solutions to

endemic social problems such as poverty, corruption of the political class, deficits in governance, military incursions into the political space and other such aberrations in the society. The art for art's sake or basically formalist tradition has no place here, and this is the reason for the failure of experimental literary works such as Gabriel Okara's *The Voice,* Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy* or even Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, three otherwise very fascinating African novels detailing the same or similar issues found in Chinua Achebe's precolonial and neocolonial novels, for example. I am, no doubt, aware that the very extreme to this societal expectation can gag a writer, especially if he has no solutions to advance to the problems of his immediate society. The very best of African writers are those who have used their creative works to rage against the injustices in their society and have successfully carried through their self-imposed duty of being the spokespersons or mouthpieces for their immediate society.

It is therefore clear from the foregoing that what makes literature affective is the degree of emotion that it embeds and the capacity of it to affect the psychology of the reader. A piece of literature might make the reader feeling sorrowful and cry, feel joyful, filled with rage, jealousy, peace, or even fear. Some writers are incredibly capable when it comes to triggering readers' emotions and sometimes making them feel all these emotions within the span of a few pages. In African literature generally, there are certain experiences such as the experience of colonialism and its desecration of the people's culture, the double-faced personality of African political leaders who fought to put an end to colonialism, but were too quick to orchestrate another form of it in postcolonial Africa, the civil war in Nigeria and the opportunism of the war profiteers and the aftermaths of the war, the repressive regimes of the military, the irony of the discovery of oil in Nigeria, which should be a blessing and not a curse to the people whose domains are so endowed etc.; that elicit several emotions from readers. In the next section of this paper, some of these experiences will be discussed to unravel how they affect the emotions of readers in representative texts or in the writings of specific African writers. Since we will not be engaged in full and total exegeses of specific literary works because of the largely exploratory scope of our presentation, we will adopt a largely metacritical stance which will give a pride of place to sundry views and opinions about the texts or writers discussed.

Affective Literature in Africa: Textual Discussion

Judged against the negative representations of Africa and Africans in white colonial literature, dubbed literature of empire, which by so doing, provided a validation for the colonial onslaughts Africa and its peoples experienced during the colonial period of Africa's evolution, Chinua Achebe's very important novel, *Things Fall Apart* and its sequel, *Arrow of God* would be seen as God sent; a timely intervention to disprove

and puncture the claim of the European sense of cultural superiority over the Africans. Against the clearly biased representations of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and other colonial novels written by such writers as Rider Haggard, Graham Greene, and Joyce Cary, Achebe's novels about the African past were conceived and designed to, as I said in another context, "set right these distortions about the culture of the African people, and therefore, they embody within their constitution an unconcealed protest bristling with anger" [Jude Agho, 2011, 9]. No African reader of the works of these European writers would not be emotional and express rage, truculence, and sorrow at this hideous cruelty. Although clearly showcasing the vibrancy of precolonial Igbo people and the despoliation of their culture by colonialism and its operatives, this cultural mandate became:

> the embodying vision propagated in the early novels of some other Anglophone writers, such as Onuora Nzekwu, John Munonye, Obinkaram Echewa, Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* and his other historical novel, *Healers*, where the divisive and contagious effects of the white man's culture on the African culture is highlighted. [Agho, 2011. 9-10]

Achebe himself had variously expressed his rage and distraught at the monstrosity of white colonial writers "who project the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and, therefore, of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" [3]. As he says further, "I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the ground that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's" [11]. The burden of this authorial responsibility is put on African characters and protagonists as diverse as Okonkwo, Chief priest Ezeulu, Njoroge, Waiyaki and others who clearly serve as bulwarks to the colonial incursion into Africa. Conrad's depiction of Africa as 'the heart of darkness' in his novel of same title and his portraiture of Africans as cannibals who are not humanized with basic attributes such as speech and language cannot be acceptable to any African reader of the novel. The image of Africa and Africans in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* follows the same pattern. Johnson, the African character, colonial servant, and court clerk in the novel, is dubious, always a spendthrift, an excessive debtor, and simply a scoundrel. This depiction, borne out of a racist stance, cannot but incense any African reader of the novel as it did Achebe when he first encountered the novel. The obvious effect of this negative portraiture is expressed in such emotional responses as rage, anger, and sorrowful discontentment, which orchestrated the beginning of protest as a thematic touchstone in African literature, which has been dubbed by Charles Nnolim as a 'weeping or lachrymal

literature' [4].

The pauperization of the African masses in postcolonial Africa against the promise of independence by the African political class has further deepened the truculent or reactive character of African literature. Independence which was the aftermath of the agitations of the political class, the labour movements, market women and student bodies and other activists to upturn the colonial administration in African nation states has largely remained ineffectual as it only birthed neocolonialism, another form of colonialism now headed and superintended by African political leaders and the elite class. No African writer has written in support of this otherwise unfortunate transformation. Arthur Ravenscroft was the first scholar to use the term 'post-independence disillusionment' to characterize the new ethos in governance in neocolonial Africa, which has given free reins to corruption, graft, greed and rapacity, false lifestyles and the concomitant poverty, festering crimes and criminality and the general impoverishment that they have given rise to. In literary works which embody these aberrations, the image of governance presented by the writers is generally bleak, negative, vacuous, and highly irritating and democratic structures, where they exist, reflect a travesty of true democratic ideals. Claude Wauthier presents a trenchant critique of a range of novels in Africa that embody some of these aberrations. According to him:

> In all these novels, the oligarchy to be found at the top of the party hierarchy is depicted as vulgar, sensual and uncultured. The luxury of ministerial offices and official residences is blatant and extravagant, cynicism is the order of the day, drinking to excess frequent, and power is simply a way of getting rich. The new image of the African woman as greedy, snobbish, and immoral replaces the venerated mother figure. [320]

The postindependence novels and other literary works of this period are cast in this mode as exemplified by the novels of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Meja Mwangi, Festus Iyayi, Helon Habila, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Adebayo Williams, Ben Okri, Kofi Awoonor, Sembene Ousmane, Wale Okediran and many others where we find the varying emotions of rage, anger, pity and fear freely exhibited by fictional protagonists who are the authorial vehicles employed by the writers to draw attention to the sordid state of things in postcolonial Africa and are the agents of change envisioned by the writers to enforce change and transformation in Africa.

The military establishment and the armed forces in several post-independence African nation states got peeved by the misdemeanors of the political class with their crass leadership styles and corruption and this prompted the

beginning of military coups and counter coups in many African nations, ostensibly directed at ameliorating the pitfalls of African politicians in governance. Although conceived as corrective, military incursions in political processes and leadership have largely failed, often with the military becoming worse than the politicians they remove from government. Detested most are the repressive styles of governance of the military, the oppression of civilians and the clampdown on the press, which is generally seen as 'the fourth estate of the realm'. Again, police/military brutalities on defenseless citizens and general highhandedness are constant insignias of military rule. There is no African literary work that has presented the military in governance from any patronizing perspective. African writers as diverse as Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Abubakar Gimba, Odia Ofeimun, Helon Habila, Wale Okediran, Tanure Ojaide, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and many others who have portrayed the military in power in their novels, short stories and poetry collections have emphasized these draconian postures, eliciting from their readers the emotions of anger, fear and even pity for brutalized characters and protagonists. Thus, whether in power or reflected in literature, military rule induces fear in people, which can also provoke rage and anger. Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* provides glaring vistas of these emotions as well as Odia Ofeimun's poetry collections, especially *The Poet Lied*, Go Tell the *Generals* and *I Will Ask Questions with Stones if They Take My Voice.* In these works, and many others, we find protagonists and personas who are battle-ready to confront the monstrosities of police/military brutalities and highhandedness, thus displaying fearlessness and forthrightness about their avowed missions. Hamzah in Abubakar Gimba's *Sunset for a Mandarin* and Ikem Osodi and Chris Oriko in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and many others display these emotions in their confrontations with military leadership.

No readers of literary works set in the Niger delta where the exploration of oil has led to the pollution of rivers and seas, thereby causing untold economic hardships to the inhabitants, would be unaffected by the large-scale exploitation of the people and the destruction of the flora and fauna of their aquatic habitats. Here, the availability of oil and gas which ought to be great blessings for the people have only brought misery, underdevelopment, and curse, judging by the despoliation and wreckage that oil exploration has brought on the people of the Niger Delta. As I have shown in an essay entitled, “Celebrating the Diversity of African Literature,” writers within the region “acting as the unacknowledged voices of their peoples, have mainly churned out and continue to churn out protest literature” [24] to bring this exploitation and the misery of the people to the attention of the readers with a strong evocation of the emotions of anger and rage at the neglect of government and its collusion with multinational economic interests and sorrow at the large-scale

suffering and misery of the local inhabitants who continue to strive to make a living in the degraded and polluted environment. In tracing the trajectory of the near tragic and monstrous experiences of the impoverished Niger Deltans, Chinyere Nwahunanya points to the unfolding manifestation of a subversive literary culture that essentially owes fidelity to its social environment starting from "the quietist works of the early Okara, Clark and Amadi lamenting the despoliations of the Niger Delta environment" to other works by contemporary writers such as Tanure Ojaide, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey, Kaine Agary, Ogaga Ifowodo, G.G. Darah and others which have become confrontational, "exhibiting a combative spirit associated with the literature of protest" [xix].

Added to the above are the large gamut of literary works that have become eternal mirrors of the civil war in Nigeria and the experience of apartheid by our South African brothers and sisters. These unfortunate experiences caused the death of many people and have been so well documented by writers. The Biafran/Nigerian civil war was prosecuted within the late sixties and early seventies in Nigeria between the leaders of the eastern region and the Nigerian military government and at the cessation of hostilities between the perpetrators of the war, millions of men, women, and children had died, making the war take on the toga of a genocide against the people of Eastern Nigeria. For writers of Igbo origins who have written extensively about the war and even from the accounts of the war generals on both sides, emotions have been given free reins and this has become one major site of high-density affective literature exposing sorrow, misery, fear, sympathy, rage in one breadth. These are the emotions that any reader of war literature would normally come across. From the early poems of Christopher Okigbo whose life was cut short during the war to the novels and plays of Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Eddy Iroh, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Chimamanda Adichie and many others who have written about the war, the experience and its aftermaths would continue to generate in readers varied emotions.

In three separate essays: "Resistance, Liberation, and Aesthetics in the Early Novels of Alex La Guma", "Anger and Beyond: A Study of Some South African Plays" and "The Context of 'Disalienation': The Revolutionary Imperative in the Later Novels of Alex La Guma", I paid great attention to the discussion of the overpowering effects of the indignities of apartheid, especially on the Black and the Coloured populations in apartheid South Africa as reflected and portrayed in the literature of apartheid South Africa. As a result of the prevalence of these indignities such as racial discrimination, violence, and restriction of the rights to life, freedom, movement, and association to the Black and Coloured populations by the white perpetrators of the apartheid policy as a way of undermining their humanity, the

resort to protest to assert their humanity became necessary. Even in the literary representations of these indignities in short stories, poems, novels and plays, protagonists and personas are shown protesting against the monstrous posture of the operators of apartheid and depicting a strong resolve to confront the policy squarely. Indeed, even the option of guerrilla insurrection and physical battle gained momentum as Alex La Guma, for instance, espouses in his novels, *In the Fog of the Season's End* and *Time of the Butcherbird* or even in plays such as Gibson Kente's *Too Late* and Lewis Nkosi's *Rhythm of Violence*. One can only imagine the degree of the suppression and oppression of the Africans and the restriction of their freedom by reading Athol Fugard's play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* where he presents a pitiable and heart-rending account of a character taking on the name and personality of a dead man, just so that he could move freely within the restrictions imposed on Black Africans with the pass law in apartheid South Africa. Other South African writers such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams, Dennis Brutus, Lauretta Ngcobo, Can Themba, Oswald Mtshali, Bessie Head, Andre Brink, and many others operated within the orbit of this protest literary tradition. The expression of protest through sorrow, rage, resistance, and anger affects emotion and the pervasive presence of it in much of apartheid South African literature characterizes the literature as truly affective.

The appearance of female writers on the African literary scene has foisted a feminist/womanist tradition of writing where the writers articulate the ills associated with male domination and the harrowing experiences of women in the hands of men at the home front and generally within the patriarchal system entrenched in the traditional African society. While some of these harrowing experiences are grossly odious and inhuman such as widowhood rites, for example, the experiences of barren women and the unqualified preference for male children and the disdain for female children who are nurtured only for reproductive roles in marriages are particularly decried. This relegation of women to the background also extends to their sequestration from political empowerment. Novels, plays, and poems portraying these experiences have emotional effects on not just female readers alone, but on any reader who hates injustice, discrimination and valorizes fairness, peace, and good neighbourliness among and between both sexes. As expected, the body of works produced under this tradition of writing internalizes a rhetorical vehemence defined by protest expressed variously through sorrow, anger, defiance, hatred, resentment, and other moods depicting truculence and resistance. The above experiences emblazon the writings of female writers as diverse as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba, Ifeoma Okoye, Ama Ata Aidoo, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tsitsi Dangarembga and so many

other female and male-patronizing writers.

It is clear from the exploration of literary works and the preoccupations of African writers above that African literature generally is affective and owes fidelity to its social environment and that what makes literature affective is the quantum of emotion that it embeds and the capacity of it to affect the psychology of the readers. Although emotions are subjective and can stall a critic's quest for objectivity in his critical enterprise, literature cannot be impactful if it does not affect the emotions of readers. Truly, any literary work that is unable to affect the emotions of the readers is a flawed work, aesthetically speaking. Whether from the art for art's sake or basically formalist conception of literature emblematized by much of western literature or from the deeply sociological critical perspective emblematized by much of African literature, the capacity of a literary work to affect the emotions or psyche of the readers determines its acceptability and eventual success. Every writer must therefore strive to make his or her works 'affective' to guarantee the continuous patronage of readers. Therefore, 'affective literature' is essentially an inclusive label to typify literature that functions in accordance with its mandate to please and entertain. A writer's work is not written for himself/herself, but for the readers and if it fails to please and entertain, it would have failed as literature. Therefore, the degree of success of a literary work inheres in its capacity to affect the emotions of its readers, deriving from the emotions that the writer has painstakingly infused in the work to please and entertain the readers. This is, therefore, the proper and conventional mandate of literature.

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