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# LITERATURE: AN IDEAL INSTRUMENT FOR RECONSTRUCTING NIGERIA: *A FAILED SOCIETY*

*Idegwu, Clement Chukwuka*

## Abstract

This discourse is an exposition of the Nigerian Nation as a failed society characterized by the wanton wastage of human life and property. The fact that the degree of destruction in all spheres of life is alarming calls for an urgent reordering of the nation. This article, therefore, tries to show how Literature which is a reflection of the sensibility of a people at a particular time and place could serve as an ideal instrument for reconstructing Nigeria: a failed society, in order for her to nobly stand towering as the giant of African in the comity of nations.

## Introduction

"We are living in a very dangerous time. Everyone... is aware of that, we are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately manacled." (p.3). James Baldwin 1988.

James Baldwin's (1988), postulation in his article "A Talk to Teachers" prefaces this piece: Literature: An Ideal Instrument for reconstructing Nigeria, a failed society. To say that Literature is a vessel of honour for such a reconstruction is stating the obvious. Another truism is that Nigeria is a failed society. William Blake (1975) did ask: *Is this a holy thing to see/ In a rich and fruitful land/ Babes reduced to misery/ fed with cold and usurious hand? / ... And so many children poor?! It is a land of poverty!* (p.33)

This is a beautiful description of Nigeria. A nation so blessed, yet the citizenry greatly deprived. Blake, did create a very pathetic state when he sums it up thus: *And their sun does never shine, /And their fields are bleak and bare, and their ways filled with thorns:/ it is eternal winter there.* (p33).

It is on this note of pessimism that Nigerians live today. In spite of the hue and cry about democracy in Nigeria, it is very clear that if the term ever means anything it is nothing less than "Them all crazy". Even recent displays of acrimony, insults and counter insults, accusations and counter accusations from the office of the president and his vice show that they, and the entire nation are the worst degenerates ever known in the history of man. It is on this premise, that I wish to state that Nigeria is a failed nation, that which literature could restore its' dignity.

Having given a prelude to this discourse, Nigerians starving in the midst of plenty, the unwholesome abuse of power by past and present leaders, daily killings and the need for a reconstruction and rehabilitation of the people, it is pertinent to talk about what literature entails.

Richard Taylor (1977), sees literature as a

Reflection of human experience, an expression of the sensibility of a given culture and a record of the changes in its moral outlook and sense of order or beauty. Literature can be described as people talking to themselves about their values, fears, and aspirations in such a way that even the literary forms and devices they develop reflect that sensibility. (p 193).

Such a record of our experiences, depicting our culture at a given moment will help in sensitizing and conscientizing the citizens, and directing them towards making a good choice: to live for the good of man.

H.L.B. Moody (1982), gives a very simple definition of the term Literature. According to him:

Literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experience. It is usually set down in printed characters for us to read, though some forms of it are performed on certain social occasions. There are a number of different branches such as Drama, Poetry, the Novel, the short stories; all these are works of the imagination or the capacity for invention.

A critical look at Moody's simplistic approach to the definition of Literature will show; the love of telling a story, the arrangement of words in beautiful patterns or order, expressing certain aspects of human experience.

Still on what Literature entails, I wish to quote the West Indian Literary artist, Wilson Harris as cited by D. Ibe Nwoga (1978), who sees literature as

a Drama of living consciousness, a drama within which one responds not only to the overpowering and salient features of a plane of existence... but to the essence of life, to the instinctive grains of life which continue striving and working in the imagination for fulfillment, a visionary character of fulfillment. (p vii)

### **Nigeria: A Failed Society**

The question is not whether Nigeria is a failed society, but the degree, for surely, Nigeria is. Omafume Onoge as cited by Iyorwuese Higer (2002) gives the answer thus:

When a Nigerian president moves, the full intimidating symbolism of awesome power of state apparatus is brought out to public glare. Not so in Nyere's Tanzania. The culture of the piercing sirens more frightening than the nocturnal howls of the Yoruba Oro or the Uvie Urhobo Egri did not seem to be a visible part of Tanzania's public state culture under Nyerere (p.142).

It is even more intimidating now than before. Other road users are forced to run into ditches to make way for the presidents, governors, even their personal Assistants (P.A's) and what have you. They would prefer running into a ditch than to be manhandled by the security agents of the powers that be. Ayi Kwe Armah, laments the situation when he asked how long will Africa be cursed with its leaders? (p. 68), as cited by Hope Eghagha (2004), in his article; why writers tackle Nigerian Leadership of the Guardian, Monday, March 1, 2004.

Right from the amalgamation of the entities called Nigeria to the present there has been a great gap between a man's conviction and his vote in Nigeria. This has been a major problem in Nigeria. J.F. Kennedy (1964), citing Daniel Webster, states that,



Inconsistencies of opinion from changes of circumstances are often justifiable. But there is one sort of inconsistency between a man's conviction and his vote, between his conscience and his conduct. No man shall ever charge me with an inconsistency of that kind. (p. 26).

That, which Daniel Webster of blessed memory swore never to allow any man charge him of, is Nigerians' main preoccupation. The side Nigerians take on each discourse or issue is dictated by their stomach. This is why there is a great variation between what they profess and their conduct. This was why Nigerians who came out to vote on June 12, 1983 for a president of their choice, an election in which late Bashorun Moshood Kashmawo Abiola, was said to have won, could allow their mandates to be taken away without putting up a resistance. That even the supposedly vice-president elect to Late Abiola, could give the vice presidential portfolio away for a ministerial post in a government that stole their mandate shows how sick Nigerians are as a people. That General Babagida who spent billions of the nation's oil money to conduct an election considered as the freest and fairest in our nation, and annulled same for something very inconsequential, making millions of Nigerians to die including the president-elect, could come back wanting to contest the presidential election of the same nation shows Nigeria as a real-failed state.

The Abacha's reign of terror, the judicial murder of the writer and Environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and all other abnormalities of the regime added weight to the degree of degeneration. Hear Ken (1994), in his piece "Before I am Hanged"

My Lord we all stand before history. I am a man of peace, of ideas. Appalled by the denigrating poverty of my people who live on a richly-endowed land, distressed by their political marginalisation and economic strangulation, angered by the devastation of their Land, their ultimate heritage, anxious to preserve their right to life and a decent living, and determined to usher to this country as a whole a fair and just democratic system which protects everyone and every ethnic group and gives us all a valid claim to human civilization I have devoted all my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated, I have no doubt at all about the ultimate success of my cause, no matter the trials and tribulations which I and those who believe with me may encounter on our journey. Neither imprisonment nor death can stop our ultimate victory (p 23).

That was Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa (aka Ken-Saro-Wiwa) before the Kangaroo judicial Panel set up by late tyrant General Sanni Abacha. Commenting further, Ken Saro-Wiwa as quoted in ANA Review, November, 1995, said "Shell is here on trial... On trial is also the Nigerian Nation, its present rulers and all those who assist them. ...I am not one of those who shy away from protesting injustice and oppression, ... (p. 23)

Ken was hanged on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1994. Ever since the issue of the Niger Delta has remained unresolved. The ultimate victory Ken Saro-Wiwa talked about is the victory of humanity over every act of injustices.

Late Bola Ige, was murdered in cold blood in his residence even as a serving minister of Justice of Nigeria. And till date his murderers are still at large.

A failed society is marked by the wastage of human lives and property among other things. In the evening of December 23, 2001, Ajibola Ige, a serving Minister of Justice of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was murdered in cold blood in his residence. About six years later nothing is heard about



the assassins. Various categories of people are murdered daily in Nigeria for various reasons ranging from political to religious. But that a serving minister of Justice is murdered and it remains as if an ant was dropped in an open field unheard of and unsung, shows how bad our state is. If this could happen to a serving Minister of Justice of Nigeria, how safe then is the life of the common man whose life is very much unsung. You can imagine the degree of lawlessness in our country, Nigeria. Professor Wole Soyinka (2002), in his funeral oration at liberty stadium Ibadan, for Chief Bola Ige, titled Ajiobola Ige: An Ecumenical Spirit opened his speech thus:

The murderers are among us. Let no one be in any doubt – they sit among us, right within this somber gathering that honours the passage of a hero. There are the unwitting collaborators whose blind politics brought this moment to be, whose primitive notion of contestation offered up this land of sacrificial platter. Perhaps they are contrite. Perhaps now, they realize that they have been mere tools in the hands of diabolically far-sighted, deeply calculating partners. Those latters are the gloating presences in the assemblage, mocking, ever cynical, triumphalist cold bloodedly, they have begun to debate who shall be next on the list of those whose social resolve will always plague their walking hours, those who stand between them and their nefarious ideologies, their internal obsession to expropriate and waste peoples material heritage and their immaterial pulpable will (p. 16).

That was Wole Soyinka commenting on the gruesome murder of a serving justice minister, Late Bola Ige of blessed memory, whose murderers are yet to be apprehended. Matthew Hassan Kukah (2000) gives credence to the exactitude of the above assertion by taking us back into recent history. He dedicated his book *Democracy And Civil society in Nigeria* to

the many martyrs for democracy especially Ken Saro Wiwa, and his Ogoni, brethren, General Shehu Yar' Adua, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, his wife kudirat and many more who perished in the turbulent seas of Nigeria's democratic quest. To many more foot soldiers especially those in the media who gave their lives, personal freedoms, security and comfort for a just, fair and democratic Nigeria (p iii).

On October, 19,1986, Dele Giwa, one of the foremost and forthright Journalists, a founding father of *Newswatch* magazine, was killed in a Letter bomb, the first in Nigeria, and the second in Black Africa.

Twenty one years after, the murderers are yet to be apprehended. Nobody ever remembers; perhaps pretentiously for those who ever bother to, that there was such a man, whose prose style magnetized its readers drawing them to itself, a toy in the hands of a skilful child.

In *The Guardian* of 14<sup>th</sup> January 2007, Joseph Oketunmbi comments on the conflict between the president, Obasanjo and his vice Atiku Abubakar thus:

Most Nigerians are worried over the bone of contention between the first two citizens of the nation and the persistent conflict that has negative impact on the image of the country economically, politically, socially and religiously (p.14).

Things are what they are today because we need only to ask, for instance, if the constitution to which we consider ourselves bound today truly represents the will of the people. Its dominant tone of centralization – does this articulate the desire of the nation?" as Prof Wole Soyinka (2003), did ask. Professor Wole Soyinka (2003), further illuminates the dark thus:

I shall not even bother to remind us that the 1999 elections were held and the present government sworn into office without public knowledge of the contents of the enabling constitution. It is sufficient to demand do we, or do we not need a radical shift that restores our stolen voices? Does the call for a national conference not ground itself in the illegitimate antecedence of our current democratic pretensions? (pp 4-5).

Having x – rayed these various spheres of Nigeria as a failed state, I wish to look at the state of the religious life of Nigerians before proceeding to talk about how literature can solve these problems. Karl Marx did see religion as the opium of the masses. In a hopeless situation, the Church and the various religious sects ought to be a beckon of hope. Unfortunately, the economic managers of these various religious sects seem to have abdicated their roles. Instead of serving as a succour to the oppressed and hopeless, they exploit and milk them to their bones. No wonder Karl Marx, as cited by Iyorwuese Hagher (2002), opines that.

Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, overburdened by their perpetual work for others by want and isolation. Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters just as inevitably, gives rise to the belief in a better life after death as impotence of the savage in his battle with nature gives rise to the belief in gods, devils, miracles and the like. Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient here on earth, and to take comfort in the hopes of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labour of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a cheap way of justifying their existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price ticket to well-being in heaven. Religion is opium of the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for life more or less worthy of man. <sup>9</sup> (p. 220).

This is why Ngugi Wa Thiong'o believes that the missionary robbed people of their soul <sup>11</sup> (p32). Today every church leader quotes Romans 13vs1-2.

OBEY THE GOVERNMENT, for God is the one who has put it there. There is no government anywhere that God has not placed in power. So those who refuse to obey the laws of the Land are refusing to obey God, and punishment will follow.

To quieten those who question. Believers are even told that the sin of rebelliousness is like that of witchcraft. This is why in spite of the various churches and numerous religious sects, in Nigeria, Nigeria and Nigerians remain a failed nation and people. Hence Pope St Gregory, as cited by Matthew Hassan kukah (2000), says that



Negligent religious leaders are often afraid to speak freely and to say what needs to be said for fear of losing favour with people. ...they are acting like hirelings, because hiding behind the wall of silence is like taking flight at the approach of the wolf... If a religious leader is afraid to say what is right, what else can his silence mean but that he has taken flight (p 177).

Could it be that Nigerian religious leaders are afraid to proclaim the truth, or that greed which makes them slaves to money and every power that be, or both, make them abdicate their functions, for the pleasure of "earthly riches" to use their words.

### **Literature an Inevitable Tool for Reconstructing. Nigeria, a Failed Society**

Having explained thus far why Nigeria could be regarded as a failed society, it is pertinent, therefore, to state unequivocally that the task of a speedy and permanent reconstruction and rehabilitation lies to a great extent on the literary artist, the unacknowledged legislator of the world, as Shelley would put it.

James Baldwin (1988), did opine that the purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make decisions, to say to himself this is black, or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is God in heaven or not (p4).

The fact that such premium is attached to education shows how much literature remains a very viable tool for reconstructing Nigeria a failed society. Gregeon (1973), stressed that all language is concerned with the communication of ideas, and poetry is very often the most effective form of communication" (p 15).

Commenting further Gregeon J.M. (1973), states that:

Good poetry will be a highly effective method of enlarging experience and awareness of a wonder world. This is the most important personal development for children. As poetry of quality has directness and integrity, it will often be the best way of communicating complex ideas and emotions (p.115 - 116).

This as one of the genres of literature helps in illuminating the child's life, and path, helping him to ease or worm his way through the dark jungle that our world is. This is because Osayimwense, Osa (1988), opines that:

The Nigerian Junior novel touches the lives of Nigerian youths. It differs from contemporary American Junior novels in its hardline moral stance. It essentially presents a view of lives which understand, and not a tedious mass of information experimentally irrelevant to Nigerian youth. The novel makes literature meaningful, at least to the Nigerian adolescent, by making contact with cultural values, social functions and individual lives. To do less makes literature irrelevant in a Nigeria that cannot afford more irrelevancies (p. iv).

The above quote is an attestation to the beauty of Literature as a viable means of reconstructing Nigeria, a failed society, and making the teaming, populace human beings who can cross the rubicon, leaving behind an unenviable past;

Ojogan Izechiese and Ojogan Henry (2005), show the pathetic state of our nation thus:

The adolescent girls are worst because some of the behaviours they manifest today are frightening. The girls while they are going to school usually hide their muftis in their school bags which they use to change their school uniforms, from the school. These girls will change their uniform and move into the town. Besides, these girls go to the extent that they visit tertiary institutions and other boys school searching for men... (p 139)

Ojogan Izehiese and Ojogan Henry, above gave shocking tale of our youths on whom we would have anchored our hope for a better tomorrow. It is a perfect explanation of our troubled state. It shows the degree of lawlessness, and degeneration. These are characteristics of a failed nation. However, they were quick to add that Literature is a reformative tool. To quote Ojogan Izehiese and Ojogan Henry (2005).

The use of Literature can change this dangerous trend among our adolescent girls. Literature is a veritable tool that can change and reform the attitude of the adolescent girls in particular. The use of Literature can keep a child emotionally, socially and socially sound and consequently improves one's intellect (p 139)

Gladys Williams, as cited by Clement C. Idegwu (2006), gives credence to the above assertions thus:

Books provide him with stories that help him to understand that some people have the same kind of feelings. They introduce him gently to a recognition of the fact that there is evil in the world, even within himself but they show him also the forces of good, of courage, and of wisdom... In stories after stories, we also allow our children to glimpse a brief fleeting reflection of evils, cruelty, anger, jealousy and to gain, this protecting awareness without experiencing fear, guilt or a sense of inadequacy of face-to-face encounter (p.152).

This, indeed, will make our children as well as adults to be courageous enough to face the realities of life. Andrew Jackson cited by John F. Kennedy (1964), opines that one man with courage makes a majority (p.ix). As identified earlier, in this article, one of the reasons why Nigeria is a failed state or society is that the actions of Nigerians show that, they lack the grace to remain true to their callings. J.F. Kennedy (1964), cited George W. Norris as saying:

I would rather go down to my political grave with a clear conscience than ride in the chariot of victory as congressional stool pigeon, the slave, the servant, or the vassal of any man, whether he be the owner and manager of a legislative managerie or the ruler of a great nation... I would rather lie on the silent grave, remembered by both friends and enemies as one who remained true to his faith and who never faltered in what he believed to be his duty, than to still live, old and aged, lacking the confidence of both factions (p. 168).

George W. Norris, was a fearless and courageous advocate of the good of all. He was well inundated with the tragedy of poverty from his childhood. His father died when he was four and had to eke a living by hacking. Literature shows that, one needs to be a man of deep conviction, fearless,



courageous and honest in order to make a meaningful living anywhere, anytime, and that one needs not to do evil to prosper.

The development of critical mind is one of the functions of literature. And for Nigeria to have a stable political and economic base, Nigerians have to examine things critically before taking a stand. Reading the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o', Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Abubakar Gimba, Idegwu Clement, George Orwell, Femi Osofisan, etc and the plays and poems of other African and Western writers will expose the child as well as the adult to what it takes to live a decent life. This is why James Baldwin (1988), talking about the child in *A Talk to Teachers* said:

I would teach him that he doesn't have to be bound by the expediencies of any given administration, any given policy, any given morality; that he has the right and the necessity to examine everything (p.12).

This is exactly what literature does. It exposes the reader to all that life entails, and even help him in making the right choice taking into cognizance what the ends of humanity are," p 100 as stated by Kolawole Ogungbesan (2004) citing Wole Soyinka, in *Literature and society in Africa: selected Critical Essays of Kolawole Ogungbesan*, compiled and edited by David I. Ker. Romanus N. Egudu (1977), did attest to the postulation above when he states that modern African poetry, and by extension Literature, explores the troubled state of man, through all ages. According to Romanus N. Egudu (1997).

Modern West African Poetry deals essentially with the African predicament, which is an aspect of the tragedy of man's existence. It is the crisis of the past, the present, and the future – the past being hideous, the present confused and harassing, and the future uncertain and intriguing (introduction).

Egudu's Postulation above, demonstrates most essentially the major preoccupation of every literary artist. Be that as it may, literature, therefore, exposes Nigerians (children and adults) to "the crises of the past, the present, and the future," It thus inundates them with all it takes to live happily in our kind of world. And because of the universality of the tragedy of man's existence, literature, therefore, helps in the understanding of the hideous nature of the past, the confused and harassing state of the present, and equips them with the tools necessary for conquering the future that is an embodiment of uncertainties and devastating intrigues.

Ezekiel Mphahlele (1982), approves of the above, saying writers:

Such as John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Wole Soyinka and so on... all these writers are concerned with the predicament of man in a hostile environment and with the sickness that we all see in highly developed societies. They dramatise this predicament, showing us in the process a portion of life... and pleurably teach us without any offensive propaganda, precisely because this is a medium which leads itself easiest to the propagation of ideas. (p. vii-viii).

To a very great extent, that is what Literature is all about. Hence an inevitable tool for reconstructing Nigeria, a failed society.



### **Conclusion**

The task of reconstructing Nigeria, a failed society is a task I have chosen to undertake. There is a desire to ensure not only the reconstruction but a sustenance of, and improving upon the reconstructed. This is why I am in tune with Nelson Mandela, as cited by Hagher (2002), it is an ideal, which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" (p. 14).

Texas's Declaration of independence reads thus: unless a people are educated and enlightened it is idle to expect the contrivance of civil liberty or the capacity for self-government. This is why Nigerians need first to know that they live in a failed nation, accept this naked truth, and appreciate the need to revolutionize the country through literature, and make the country a habitation where progressive growth is possible. The corruption in all spheres of life which occasioned all the anomalies mentioned in this discourse show the degree of failure as a nation.

Alexander Pope, as cited by Drew (1960), calls literature O sacred weapon left for truths defence. Elizabeth, Drew commenting further sees poetry as having "a deliberate moral purpose. In it the past speaks directly to his society and holds its shortcomings for general recognition" (p 149) and how to correct the mistakes.

In conclusion, therefore, I believe in the effectiveness of Literature as an inevitable tool for reconstructing Nigeria, a failed society. This could be likened to William Wilberforce's, as cited by Jimmy Essien (1985), They charge me with fanaticism. If to be alive to the sufferings of my fellow creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large This, therefore, is my submission, that literature is an ideal instrument for reconstructing Nigeria, a failed society.

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