

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Literature and Corruption in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Waiting for Maria*

Assoh, Bernard Bem

Lecturer, Department of English/French, Nigeria Police Academy Kano, Nigeria

Osondu Unegbu C.

Lecturer, Department of English/French, Nigeria Police Academy Kano, Nigeria

Abstract:

The research takes an analytical look at literature and corruption in the Nigeria State. As part of the social responsibility of the creative artist, Ifeoma Chinwuba's waiting for Maria, is studied as a microcosm of the Nigeria state. Waiting for Maria is set in a prison, and Chinwuba uses the setting and the cross examination of the inmates within the prison to expose issues of corruption in Nigeria. Using the sociological theory to the criticism of literary works, the study explores that, modern Nigeria literature is sociologically conditioned, draining from the contemporary issues that are drawn from the society where the author draws her source materials. The study concludes that corruption to bedevil the Nigerian state and thus, literary artist should rise to reflect it in their creativity with a view to correcting as well as exposing same.

1. Introduction

Nigerian political independence in 1960 brought in its wake a great awareness of the problems of building a nation out of the diverse ethnic entities which makes up the huge conglomerate called Nigeria. This fact has dominated a sizeable portion of her literature especially in the early years of independence. At present, the Nigerian Novel in English attracts greater attention and has great influence nationally and internationally. The prominence is because the literature has been produced by the new Westernized elite who often have greater literary competence in English than in their indigenous languages.

The Nigerian novel has raised issues relevant to our contemporary situation: of cultural-contact and culture-conflict, the place of tradition in the modern ethos, the problem of the administration of a modern polity, as well as the notion of sexism and the place of the woman folk in the context our new social reality. It has also been concerned with the way forward if the Nigeria nation is to recover from its present problems, realize its full potentials and become a member of the world's prosperous nations. Nigerians has cultivated virtually every known genre of literature including fiction, poetry, drama, biography and autobiography. Nevertheless the emphasis here will be on the novel (prose fiction) which has made very significant literary achievement.

In the wake of the euphoria that can with independence, better prospects were held out to the masses and more promises were made. This promises included commitment to equal opportunities, greater equality in the standard of living, improved opportunities in education, health and employment. The nationalists promised better condition of living for their people, but when time came for fulfilling the promises, it became clear that a gulf separated fulfillment from hope. Within a few years of independence, hopes collapsed and disillusionment set in. political independence was not the solution to the myriad of problems confronting the continent. Instead, when the former imperialists vacated their various colonies, the black political elite stepped in. this turned out, an exchange which only saw a change in the pigmentation of the rulers, not in ideology sadly, to be or commitment. As a consequence, the new leadership continued with programmes of the imperialists. The new political class proved unequal to the challenge of nation-building and proved to be incapable of providing moral and civic leadership. The political leadership and social structure set up at independence broke down and there were instabilities attended by coups and counter-coups with violence as a result of the corrupt nature of the new states.

With the African states inability to handle the affairs of their countries effectively, many problems cropped up; namely armed robbery, fraud, prostitution, violence, bribery and corruption, political sycophancy, thuggery and embezzlement of government funds. The failed leadership is now characterized by blatant human rights violation, corruption, constitutional breaches, lack of accountability and transparency by public office holders, lack of respect for the rule of law and many other social ills that have been worsen by the self-seeing motives of the political leaders. Corruption which is one of the ills to be checked by every incoming administration has rather been institutionalized thereby making wrongful practices to be accepted as norms of the society. As a result of this, the rule of law habecome weak leading to the insecurity of life and property.

The Nigerian novel is mostly influenced in recent times by the social responsibility of modern creative writing. The Nigerian novel has raised fundamental issues relevant to our socio-political and economic life. The importance of the issues reflected herein is a manifestation of the contact of the creative artist with the inhabitants, and with immediate social environment. In doing so, the research identifies novels that border on the Nigerian situation whose thematic preoccupation reflects the relevance of the

issues discussed with the society where these novelists emanate. Modern Nigerian novel deals with the conflict arising from the ongoing confrontations in Africa, between traditional life and the demands of modern society.

2. Corruption in Ifeoma Chinwuba's *Waiting for Maria*

Waiting for Maria is a set in a prison. This, of course is deliberate. With this kind of setting Chinwuba intends to discuss the entire present day Nigeria. The prison in which the inmates find themselves is dilapidated and congested. A photographic description from the early pages of the novel provides the best illumination into this dilapidation and congestion:

Freeman Fort squatted in the middle of a large enclosure like a monster, ready to bounce. The walls are discoloured by age and were haggard-looking. Holes peered at you from between mud bricks eaten away by the elements. A clustered gutter, probably a meat snaked round the miserable facility... Freeman Fort houses' over five hundred inmates... its intended capacity of one hundred had been exceeded five times over (2).

From this point the novel continues with its graphic description of 'decrepit windows', 'crumbling corridors and passages' as well as the 'small quantity of watery or rubbery substance' whose rations are served to the inmates to bribe their humbling stomachs into silence (3). Short of all doubts, the physical decay of the prison environment is suggestive of, and is actually linked to the moral decay in the society itself. Thus, what happens in the prison is a parable of what happens in the country as a whole. Chinwuba is unsparingly honest about the crimes of her prison inmates as each woman is sympathetically, but inexorably, cross examined by her dozen cell mates. In many cases, though, the criminal is a victim.

There is a reaffirmation of the insincerity and inhuman disposition of those in authority in this novel as the rights of the ordinary citizens are trampled upon with equanimity. A pastor who visit the prison to conduct a Sunday morning church service returns three days later to seek audience with the chief superintendent of Freeman Fort in order to find out what can be done to help decongest the prison is surprised at a revelation by the prison officials.

... the Black Maria has been grounded for over a year now. I have written several letters to headquarters, outlining the problem, but they say no money. Meanwhile, the inmates and their relatives accused me of not sending them to trial. Am I to carry them on my back from here to the court? Even if it is possible, how many could I carry? Look at that board. Out of the five hundred and six inmates, four hundred and nine are awaiting trial (163).

This amounts to a violation of human rights on a grand scale. These are people who have the right to be heard in the court of law, but they have not been able to go to court for one year due to the inhumanity on the part of those who are in a position to make this possible, they remain in the already overcrowded prisons for days on end, 'prisons that cannot boast of a paracetamol tablets' (195). This situation breeds disillusionment in the poor prisons as noticeable in the words of Intelle "...we that are in, awaiting execution and those that are outside living, what is the difference? We are all awaiting the same thing, the same end Death, after all, is a garment we shall put on" (195).

Chinwuba is quite rational when she blames the head of state as having no justification whatsoever, to claim ignorance of what is going on in the prisons since he himself an ex-convict and has been through all this and yet is doing nothing about it. Her conclusion on this matter that; "... our leaders have short memories. In this country as a whole, we have a short memory, institutional memory if you like, people forget easily" (197). A hard look at the human right issues presented in Chinwuba's novel that behind the seeming silence of human right abuses are some vested political and economic interests. A classical example is seen where Mrs. Alice the wardress whom the prisoners nicknamed "Malice" made a proposal to the inmates to the effect that:

Government would grant pardon to two inmates from our wing to mark Independence Day that she was going to submit the names of who pays the highest so, inmates have passed the message to their relatives, that is those who receive visitors (234)

Unfortunately for some of the inmates such as Amen and the white woman, Susanna, whom no one has visited in a long time, they stand no chance in the bargain for pardon. The case of Bridget is even the worst. She was raped while in police custody and again in solitary confinement and is expecting a baby. She has been transferred from one prison to another across the country to such an extent that even her family cannot locate where she is.

The above, depicts the devaluation of human rights in Nigeria and Africa in general which force a cleric to note that:

... the failure of human rights springs from wickedness in the human heart and if it is peculiar to African alone, it has had more damaging effect in African and the developing world where the sense of public responsibility leaves much to desired (Melaba, 25).

In line with afore mentioned the inmates continue to bemoan their fate while the Black Maria is grounded with its 'tires flat', 'cobwebs' and 'dust'. The highest point of disillusionment by the women is captured by Chinwuba thus:

Our cases are at a standstill. The dockets may have been misplaced. May be by now the prosecuting officer has been transferred or died. No vehicles to convey us. Some have been awaiting trial for years. We've lost hope. Some have stayed longer, awaiting trial, than the sentence their offences carry if found guilty (196).

Chinwuba in this novel presents various perspectives on the problem of corruption which I one of the problems of contemporary African nations. The gangrene of corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of African life, benefiting a few who live in unbelievable opulence and leaving the majority cramped in the jungle of abject poverty (Melaba, 29). In *waiting for Maria*, the author captures the problem of greed and the propensity to get rich overnight by our political leaders which is at the root of corruption in Nigeria. She rightly points out thus:

The only job that I know to be free-for-all is politics... No qualifications required. When you retire from one job, whether armed robbery, 419, civil service or army, or if you don't see any work to do, you join politics, enter the house (222).

It is obvious from the above that it is the propensity to get rich overnight that lures people into politics in this country thus custodians of public funds shamelessly steal from the. This atmosphere is propelled by wrapped public attitudes that make a laughing stock of people who leave public office without enriching themselves (Melaba, 28). Consistent with the above, the summary of Intelle's thesis on the "origin and source of the wealth of Africans" is quite illuminating. Chinwuba puts it this way:

... the easiest way to enrich oneself in our continent is via government employment. It enable one to embezzle public funds... each department, ministry, agency, has a budget or a vote. All the chief executive has to do is, dip his big hand and misappropriate the public goods whether it is money, land, oil bunkering, building, vehicles or government property. To cover his tracks, he awards contracts to himself, his cronies and fronts. Over inflated contracts, sometimes not done, but fully paid for, usually upfront (236).

Corruption in Africa shows itself in various forms. There on one hands the sophisticated, bureautic corruption where contract figures are inflated resulting in great disparities between the contract sum and the actual project executed. Of course government contracts are not awarded without kickbacks in the first place. A specific instance of corruption is quoted below:

Bribe is therefore, a principal source of personal wealth in this part of the world. The bigger the favour or contract sought, the larger the bribe. It is not always monetary. It could come in the form of gifts, sex, plot of land, house or political appointment (237).

As a matter of fact, the theme of corruption is found on every page of Chinwuba's *Waiting for Maria*. People prefer to circumvent the law rather than exercise restraint, self-discipline and necessary sacrifice to obey the law for the general good of the society at large. This evident in the sale petroleum products, where profiteering and hoarding to cause artificial scarcity are in vogue despite fixed pump prices. Even when Father Charles seeks permission to speak with the female inmates and tell them about the donation for diesel to enable the Black Maria to move, the joy of the inmates is still shortlived on hearing the news as malice barked from the doorway:

"Where you go see fuel buy? Don't you know that fuel people are on strike NUPENG, PENGASSAN, tanker drivers... for the past ten days, no fuel anywhere, Go and see the queues in the empty filling stations where you go see fuel buy" (262).

The result of all these inherit contradictions is a potential economic giant whose dreams of greatness have continued to be evaporated and whose once patriotic citizenry is beginning to lose faith their nation. What therefore poorly articulated decentness exists in *Waiting for Maria* is so much in line with the declaration of synod of the Nigeria Catholic Bishops in 1991 that:

The problem facing the nations... are many and great... many measures adopted to serve the nation, often flawed in conception and haphazard and half-hearted implementation, have been largely in effective. The nation is dire need of salvation (MELABA, 122).

Whether it is as civilian or military regime, Nigeria has only had self-servicing leadership that has perfected just one trade-making the nation dry. Leadership has not been in the interest of the people at all.

"All our leaders care about is political office, contract awarding positions, in order to line their pockets. They scramble for lucrative jobs. So they get a post at the Ministry of Federal Capital Territory. They allocate tens of plots of land to themselves, their wives, girl friends and other family members (waiting for Maria, 446)

This explain why the country is lagging behind inspite of all its mineral wealth. "A lot of motion, but no movement, no progress" (447) thus, the mineral rich West African Country turns out to be one of the world's poorest nations.

Much more disheartening is the fate of the nations past workers who are due for pension and gratitude. Many of them die of poverty and depression before their pension is paid. The government is not interested in finding ways to speed up the payment as a social commentator Chinwuba laments.

Look at my poor father, army pensioner. Oh! He slept for months at the pension's office. For sixteen months he slept there on cardboard paper spread on the grass. Every day, they would cook up one story or the other. Come back next week, we are computerizing our records... (447).

The reality of corruption in the Nigeria society is a social disaster that is doing a lot of harm on the Nigeria Nigerian nation. Embezzlement of public funds meant for the development of the nation. Excessive accumulation of wealth and selfishness are common features of leaders. Chinwuba adds her voice in condemning this trend through the instrumentality of her novel. Where it is state as follows:

"All they care about is political office, contract-awarding positions, in order to line their pockets... they allocate tens of plots of land to themselves, their wives, girls friends and other family members... they put a mansion in G.R.A another in south Africa (446 - 447).

Faced with this reality, the Marxist idea of protest for social change and even distribution of wealth and services, which the sociological theory of literary criticism employs in the analysis of literary works, is also brought bear by Chinwuba.

That is why are, no diesel for Maria to take us to court. Yet we produce petrol. And petrol was discovered in this country in 1943 (444).

On the whole, Ifeoma chinwuba has been able to achieve in *waiting for Maria* a very realistic picture of the dysfunctional state of the contemporary Nigeria society, a nation "adrift in a sea of confusion" (Melaba, 122). Chinwuba has also identified poverty of leadership, indiscipline, corruption among others as generally responsible for the social decay. The vulgarity of the characters' use of language underscores this increasing decay as well as devaluation of value in the polity. The event described in the novel, the attitudes of the ordinary people –the inmates on death and those in government reflect contemporary Nigeria with astonishing details. Ordinarily, Nigeria as a country richly endowed with mineral deposits should have made a positive economic impact on the lives of its citizens but unfortunately, this significant wealth has only succeeded in fueling greed, with the result that Nigeria's population today remains among the world's poorest in terms of per capital income.

3. Conclusion

From the preceding our study has explored the sociological imperatives of the Nigerian novel. In our introduction, we contended that as a result of the constant social injustice, corrupt practices, immorality. Bad governance, political instability that come to pat of the Nigerian society, recent writers have risen up to write up to write largely influenced by the sociological theory of literary which seeks to voice out the reality of the contemporary Nigeria society.

Given that the Nigeria novel in contemporary times is sociologically oriented, the adoption of the sociological theory of literary criticism which contextualized our analyses of Ifeoma as main tested in the conceptualization of the issues of corruption in the novel.

4. References

1. Chinwuba, Ifeoma. *Waiting for Maria*. Ibadan, Spectrum, 2007.
2. Asoo, Ferdinand Iorbee. "The Nigeria Delta in prose Fiction" Ed.
3. *The Ker Review*. Makurdi: Aboki, 2007.
4. ----- *The African Novel and the Realist Tradition*. Makurdi: Aboki, 2006.
5. Melaba, Daniel Ter. *Church in Africa: our pain over hopes*.
6. Makurdi. *Abi, 2009. Abi, 2009*.
7. Palmar, Eustace. *The Growth of the African Novel*. London:
8. Heinemann, 1979.
9. Ogunbesan, Kolawole. "The Modern
10. writer and commitment" (ed) David ker. *Literature and Society in Africa*. Ibadan: Spectrum, 2004