

The Dehumanising Mood in Early Nigerian Creative Writing: A Hallmark of Modern Literature

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Abstract

The early Nigerian creative writings are recognised as modern literature not simply for the time of their production but among other prevailing characteristics is the recurring mood. Several of Nigerian literature is laced with the dehumanising mood and a systematic reading of certain works here has not proved the contrary. In this paper we follow a synchronic study of mood on some selected works to substantiate this hypothesis (that there is dominant dehumanising mood) in certain texts of Nigerian literature. Narratives in the texts under study capture time hues of Nigerian cultures and circumnavigate around issues that create dehumanising mood. However, dehumanising feeling itself is one of the major quirks of modernism. This work therefore discusses how the texts consistently narrate oppositions and hostilities that sustain dehumanising mood through narrators and some characters who speak for themselves. Although the texts bequeath a fecund legacy of cultural assertion that later corresponds to the global avowal of black dignity/integrity – negritude, dehumanising mood remains constant and marks those works out as modern literature. Thus, attention will be given to some works of Elechi Amadi's *The Great Pond*, *The Slave* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. The argument is sustained under these sections: modernism/modern literature; source

of dehumanising mood in the *The Great Pond*, *The Slave* and *Efuru*; stigmatisation and rejection of conventional truth; and the conclusion.

Keywords: Modernism, new sensibilities, World Literature, Nigerian literature, dehumanising mood.

Introduction

This paper is committed to a critical argument that Nigerian literature is a modern literature. The survey that supports this position is based principally on a closed reading of Elechi Amadi's *The Great Pond*, *The Slave* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. We will be using African and Nigerian literature interchangeably as the argument progresses. The fact remains that modernism itself has been a very complex term which seems a morphous as we can see in the section on modernism below. Its beginning remains contestable as its end – from enlightenment to 1960 (?). Certain thinkers still hold that modernism is ongoing, yet some school of thought feel it had ended in the mid-20th century to pave way for post-modernism. We will see that in the subsequent section.

Very little attention is given to studying Nigerian literature as modern literature. This may be due to the fact of the bias for making African Literature a continental issue, such that even among African scholars studies are hell bent to extricate African literature from being read as world literature. And as such people judge African literature from national or continental lenses, leaving out the characteristics it, Nigerian literature for instance share with other continental literatures that makes it part of the cultural seismology that runs across major groupings like modern literature, world literature etc. In this case some African scholars also sometimes alienate African literature; looking for African way of studying African literature, instead of seen the literature from Africa through the universal lenses, focusing on the peculiarities that make the literature fit the universal groupings, yet remains unique. Today, thanks to the recent development from continental studies, African studies

etc. that have borrowed much materials from African literature and have contributed in projecting African literature, though not totally in a healthy manner (having favoured extrinsic approach over intrinsic study of African literature.

As a matter of fact, the early creative writings from Nigeria, by their characteristics belong to modern tradition. Even the texts that are generally received with prejudice as Onitsha Market literature owe their lineage to the modern tradition, and have contributed to the great literature later produced in Nigeria, and Africa at large. For example, the subject matter of prostitution as depicted in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* and *Jagua Nana's Daughter* have reverberations in contemporary texts like Chika Onigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* etc. other issues like failed government, corruption, poverty/destitution and travel in the so-called Onitsha Market literature have taken central stage in late 20th and 21st century literature. Terhema Shija has argued in this regard that:

But long before the general shift from the rural woman to her urban counterpart, Cyprian Ekwensi's fiction had led the way to depict the not-so-educated urban woman who expressed freedom in female sexuality and the erotica especially in his two novels: *Jagua Nana* and *Jagua Nana's Daughter*. (5)

Shija affirms the position that the so-called Onitsha literature has contributed to our present writings as his submission above links the sophisticated current ideological issue like feminism in Nigeria. It must be understood that the major concerns of the early writings, though intended just to give morals, they have a tendency to dwell heavily on chaos that subsists most of the works, a trend similar to that of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats etc. So, modernism for the early Nigerian writers was a fashion of thinking and seeing the world that provided an outlet for them to chronicle their histories. David I. Ker had earlier stated that,

“modernism provided the African novelist with an art that could adequately express his view of history” (1).

Having observed the general outlook of the very first literary production in Nigeria we focus on mood in the early African writing, dwelling on the history of chaos as traced in the texts in focus. Ker also acknowledged that “modernism’s consciousness of disorder, despair and anarchy is the perfect medium for the African novelist for conveying on the one hand his nostalgia for the past, with all its imperfections and on the other hand his bitterly ironic indictments of the present” (1-2). This statement can be taken as a critical testimony of what African literature looks like.

We are moving away from the prejudice against Nigerian literature, that it’s concern has been local tradition and local themes, such that even colonisation has been reduced to be Nigerian local affairs. Shija had earlier shared this similar view that “the 21st century Nigerian novel has developed tremendously in the direction of transnational and diasporic discourse. More Nigerian novels have transcended the narrow ethnic and nationalist viewpoints that described corruption and other sundry issues of statehood” (5). Of course, there is more engagement with diasporic discourse in Nigeria today but it is of interest to know that even the early works of Achebe engaged in a certain manner, diasporic issues. In fact, colonialism itself as I have argued in *Busy Pathway to the Stream*, has been a world phenomenon and not a Nigerian affair as most critics have made it look (Orkusa).

Since art work cannot be complete without an emotional involvement, the synchronic study of mood in the Nigerian literature therefore is central to understanding and appreciating the period of their production. José Ortega y Gasset explains this better as he argues, showing that mood plays an important role in identifying or recognising aesthetic pleasure in a work of art. His argument indicates that mood is the predominant emotion that the work creates that either draws attention to itself or detracts. In his words,

A man likes a play when he has become interested in the human destinies presented to him, when the love and hatred, the joys and sorrows of the personages so move his heart that he participates in it all as though it were happening in real life. And he calls a work 'good' if it succeeds in creating the illusion necessary to make the imaginary personages appear like living persons. In poetry he seeks the passion and pain of the man behind the poet. Paintings attract him if he finds on them figures of men or women whom it would be interesting to meet. (8-9)

The feeling created by way of narrative is central to appreciating a work of art as has argued above. In y Gasset's words, the 'sentimental intervention' in a work remains central to the general reception of the work. So in the case of the early Nigerian creative writing one may ask, what kind of recurrent sentimental intervention do they bring? It is in answer to this question that this chapter is devoted to discussing the dehumanising mood in some Nigerian literature as a hallmark of modern literature.

Modernism/Modern Literature

Modernism does not have a straight cut description that is universally fitting. This explains why it's important to look into what this term mean to times and places. Practically speaking, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane paint a clear picture of how this concept could be understood. They are of the view that:

Indeed Modernism can look surprisingly different depending on where one finds the centre, in which capital (or province) one happens to stand. Just as 'modem' in the England of today can mean something very different from what it meant a century ago for Matthew Arnold, so it can also be observed varying significantly from country to country, from language to language. (30-31)

This is a holistic view on the nature of modernism and can be applied to the modern literature today. The width and length of the concept modernism with emphasis on its spatial

and temporal disparities are palpable in the definition and the nature of modernist works across time and space attest to that. In other words, modernist production in terms of literature from different regions and times are not identical twins but this is neither to say the variations exclude any of them nor the diverse manner of such works exclude them from the larger hyperonym - modernism. Among modernist works are dissimilarities, a characteristic that is profound within many categories. Aristotle had earlier shown that things differ in what they have in common. It is in the light of the above that we consider modernity or modernism in literature as a larger umbrella that houses groups of similar but divergent thoughts that stand contrary to romanticism before it. For Bradbury and McFarlane, "Modernism has been used, from time to time, analogously to Romanticism, to suggest the general temper of the twentieth-century arts" (23) So, historically, modern art begins from the enlightenment period, and to others, it stops in the 1960s giving way to postmodern. But for others, even postmodernism is considered as a strand of modernism, so for them modernism is still ongoing.

Significantly, y Gasset identifies new artistic sensibility as of one common feature of modern art irrespective of their differences. In his words, "This new sensibility is a gift not only of the artist proper but also of his audience. When I said above that the new art is an art for artists I understood by "artists" not only those who produce this art but also those who are capable of perceiving purely artistic values". The sensibility y Gasset speaks of is felt through the general characteristic nature of modern art, which is to dehumanise art (y Gasset, 21). What y Gasset means by "dehumanise art" is that modern art, over against what existed before, using painting for example, is less concerned with the likeness between the real object and the portrait. The traditional painter, according to y Gasset, may commit blunder in his painting, yet his blunder points towards human or natural object. On the contrary, the modern artist does not seek likeness between the natural/human object he creates. In y Gasset's

words, “It is not that the painter is bugling and fails to render the natural (natural = human) things because he deviates from it, but that these deviations point in a direction opposite to that which would lead to reality”. The modern artist, y Gasset further says, “is brazenly set on deforming reality, shattering its human aspect, dehumanising it. With the things represented on traditional painting we could have imaginary intercourse”. (21) But this intercourse is not possible with the modern art. Earlier, Aristotle spoke on the difference between tragedy and comedy saying, “This difference it is that distinguishes Tragedy and Comedy also; the one would make its personages worse, and the other better, than the men of the present day” (Aristotle, Poetic 9). In both ways there is a disfiguring, one brutal, and the other innocent, both deform reality, as one makes it better (than it is) and the other worse (than it is). This has been the ground of being for the post-structuralist to argue against objective reality in a literary text (Dobie 162).

It is obvious that societies, objects and humans in modern works are not photographs of specific object in the real world but a portrayal of those objects in the real world. So the modern artist (I use artist in y Gasset’s sense above) see the Nigerian or African societies in every art work as a portrait – portrayal, and only this view validates the works as art. But to consider those societies as the real Nigerian or Africans for example removes them from art and make them real (read y Gasset p.10-11). Yet we are not unaware that some Nigerian writings, like most of the 19th century works are realist works and have denied us “the power to focus on transparency and images, a power characteristic of artistic sensibility; all they require is human sensibility to sympathise with our neighbour’s joy and worries” (y Gasset11), and as such it is difficult to describe them as modern works.

Again, Herbert Read, speaking of modernism says:

There have been revolutions in the history of art before today. There is a revolution with every new generation, and periodically, every century or so, we get a wider or deeper change

of sensibility which is recognized as a period - the Trecento, the Quattro Cento, the Baroque, the Rococo, the Romantic, the Impressionist and so on. But I do think we can already discern a difference in kind in the contemporary revolution: it is not so much a revolution, which implies a turning over, even a turning back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution. Its character is catastrophic. (Read qtd. in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane 20)

The cultural quirk as Read asserts, led to what we now consider as modernism in literature. It is important to acknowledge that before this, many traditions were ongoing in certain geographical areas from which modernism later staged a breakaway. This perhaps, explains why modernism itself differs from place to place and from time to time. In Africa and Nigeria, to be precise, what existed in form of art, especially literature was oral tradition. So, even though it may be taken for granted that there was a radical shift from orality to the written form, practitioners of literary criticism in Africa must take this shift for a major break away. Apart from this, most of the African writers primarily, modelled their writings after the European works, which most of which were already of modernist tradition. In this case, apart from the devolution as Read describes above, there was already characteristic dehumanising mood that had already dominated the Nigerian literature of the 20th century. In the remaining parts of this paper we will discuss the sources of dehumanising mood in Nigerian literature.

Sources of dehumanising mood in some Nigerian Novels

The concept, dehumanisation is central to modern literature. It relates to inhuman treatment of situations and events. y Gasset explains it as being “unnatural” or “inhuman” but inhuman as it is here does not imply mere heartlessness. It has to do with “lived” reality. In y Gasset’s words, “the human point of view is that in which we “live” situations, persons, things. And, vice versa, realities – a woman, a countryside, an event – are human when they present the aspect in which they are usually “lived”” (y Gasset 18). He adds that “We use our

ideas in “human” ways when we employ them for thinking things” (18). Thus, dehumanisation in literature is the sensibility at the centre of modern literature, which is fond of ultra-objects that create secondary passions, the aesthetic sentiments. It is to this regard that Gasset says,

To achieve this result, it would be simpler to dismiss human forms – man, house, mountain – altogether and to construct entirely original figures. But, in the first place, this is not feasible. Even in the most abstract ornamental line a suborn reminiscence lurks of certain “natural” forms. Secondly – and this is the crucial point – the art of which we speak is inhuman not only because it contains no things human, but also because it is an explicit act of dehumanisation”. (22)

Dehumanisation as Gasset argues, is a way of thinking by artist that later results to a dehumanising mood, a sensibility at the turn of modern art. In the following argument we will present the dismissal of human form in some of the Nigerian literature as well as the explicit act of dehumanisation that creates dehumanising mood in the texts. This argument will unavoidably call forth modern themes. So in the process of discussing the dehumanising mood, the modern themes may be spontaneously highlighted.

In Elechi Amadi’s *The Great Pond*, the source of vexation that breed anger and later sadness is the Wagaba pond that creates a perennial feud between the neighbouring communities. The text centres on two villages, Chiolu and Aliakoro, who suffer double tragedy of war and epidemic. Brief cultural or economic activities are recorded but the two phenomenon of war and epidemic dictate the mood of *The Great Pond*. Therefore, social evil serves as one of the causes of the sombre mood in the text. The poaching activities of Aliakoro people at the Wagaba ponds is the source of vexation to Chiolu people. These poaching activities lead to the major conflict between Chiolu and Aliakoro. The EzeDiali’s meeting change the gay mood with which the text opens. It reads:

People of Chiolu,' the chief began, I have learnt that poachers from Aliakoro will be at the Great Ponds tonight. There is no doubt that they will try to steal from the Pond of Wagaba which as you know is rich in fish. Our plan tonight is to bring one or more of these thieves home alive and ask for heavy ransoms. This line of action will have two effects. Firstly it will prove our charges of poaching against the people of Aliakoro, secondly the heavy ransoms they will be obliged to pay will be a deterrent. We need seven men for this venture. I call for volunteers. (7)

The speech of the chief above would affect the general atmosphere and make it tensed. His call is a call for combat and the persuasion and the solicitation for arm guards continues for volunteers who will go and kidnap poachers who steal from Wagabapond. Besides this tensed atmosphere, the intercommunity relationship between these two communities has been poor as Aliakoro is alleged to be 'illegally' poaching at their neighbour's pond and the neighbour seek to kidnap them for a fine, without any option for a civil solution. The lack of dialogue between these communities also creates an atmosphere dearth of human relationship. The call for volunteers later shows that Chioluis battle ready as the chief himself begins to interfere in the choice of who should volunteer for the task. The elders understand as they unanimously chose Olumba to lead the team. The choice of Olumba to head the group and the subsequent order that Olumba should choose his team speaks of the nature of the task for those who know Olumba. The atmosphere of the text is completely changed into a combatant atmosphere. So the gay felling is lost even in the company of jocundity. The dialogue between Ikechi and Olumba draws on the harsh atmosphere of war. After Olumba's choice of Ikechi, a young man who regales himself with fight, he expresses his gratitude towards Olumbain their conversation as follows and the exchange also explain the implication of guard they were to mount at the Wagaba pond that evening. Ikechi opens the conversation as follows:

'I am glad you chose me,' the young man said. 'You may not be quite so glad after the fight tonight,' Olumba said chuckling. 'Will the fight be tough?' 'Of course. Do you suppose our enemies will hand themselves over to us without a struggle? We may even be taken prisoners. 'Are you afraid?' 'I fear no man. Rather I fear the gods on whom depend the results of any fight. But I have never failed to offer sacrifices to them. I am sure they will always be by me. 'Gods or no, I can't imagine anyone taking you prisoner,' Ikechi said studying Olumba's formidable physique.

Olumba and Ikechi are strange fellows that enjoy brutal power. The relationship between the two is like master apprentice relationship, where the former drills the later for physical combat.

From time to time there are interludes that take away the mind from the war that is brewing in the text but it soon returns to the warrish atmosphere that finally dominates the text. In the preceding chapters, war has become the order of the day; the community feud continues and the worth of an individual is measured by the number of people he has killed. There is an inhuman presentation of situation where people earn honour for killing fellow humans. So Ikechi now earns a great recognition for killing someone in the war. Another of such similar situation is that of Okatu, the grandson of Ochomma. Okatu is also valorised for killing a man at age of thirteen. This is not barbarisms that may be traced to Africa alone, we can read of the biblical David who became a national hero in Israel for killing a philistine enemy, Goliath. In an English novel, *Lord of the Flies* the boys from Jack clan beat Simon to death; Roger, another boy cracked open the skull of Piggy. The issue of war and community/family feud as seen in *The Great Pond* are common characteristics of modern fiction, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago* captures the experiences of mass murders and inhumane prison systems where human life is reduced to nothing. Similarly, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* portrays family feud in American literature that is similar to

those in Amadi's *The Great Pond* and *The Slave*, where individual families go after their targets with the aim to kill them. It is similar to the experiences of the English boys on the island in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Even though we focus on dehumanising mood in African literature, it is important we have the general understanding that dehumanisation is a common act in modern fiction across the world, and it is responsible for the dehumanising mood in those texts where it is found. So Nigerian literature as discussed here is not an exception. This simply means that cultural contexts define values in every community. And these similar cases mentioned above may only serve to show that barbarism like poor attitude and character neither have hemispheric region nor nationality.

Towards the climax of *The Great Pond*, kidnapping activities have increased, taking a new dimension. People are kidnapped and sold into slavery among the natives, even though this may seem less cruel as to compare with killings of fellow human that is celebrated. Yet, kidnapping and selling of fellow humans casts another sombre mood in the text. This mood complicates the climax of the text as the test of power by the warring communities continues at the detriment of their victims.

The war activities and the social life in general introduces border crossing in this text – a transcendence into the spiritual world. The societies in *The Great Pond* are commonly organised with this sense of border crossing where the dibia and the chief priest become the bridges between the living and the ancestors/gods. And finally even the influenza epidemic, the entire population understand it through the spiritual vantage point, which for them it is a punishment from the gods. This position in the presence of pandemic is not peculiar to *The Great Pond* as the classic literature had earlier understood pandemic as a punishment from the gods. So in *The Great Pond*, the pandemic that engulfed the whole world is first received by Chiolu as a spiritual attack from their enemy, Aliakoro community. It is later understood as a punishment of the gods on Chiolu, but the local people of Chiolu soon realized that

Aliakoro people are not exempted from the same scourge. At last, when the two women who were sold into slavery in a distant land were ironically set free as their master also died of *Wonjo*, everybody at Chiolu understand that the epidemic affected and killed people even beyond the neighbouring communities. It is from this same spiritual perspective that the people administer treatment on those who are affected by *wonjoh*. Thus, the pandemic, a natural disaster further complicates the mood in the text as it introduces angst because of the many deaths and pains that result from it. Angst envelops and controls the denouement of *The Great Pond*. Even the chiefs and the great warriors in different communities now live in fear of the unknown. By this dominant presence of angst, *The Great Pond* shares affinities with modern literature; though it carries the new sensibilities of modern literature, its temporal and spatial settings are pre-modern Africa.

Again, the pandemic in *The Great Pond* raises moral question on Olumba and Chiolu as a community. People have linked it to the morality of Olumba who represents Chiolu to take an oath as the legitimate owners of Wagaba Pond. The population see *wonjoh* as the punishment from the gods that are out for social justice. And even though *The Great Pond* is a modern novel, its pre-modern African setting, as have mentioned earlier accounts for this mind-set that the pandemic is a divine punishment from the gods. Further, the plot is complicated as both sides of the warring communities taste *wonjo* until the idea that the pandemic was a divine judgement against Chiolu as a community wane down itself. Yet, this knowledge *wonjoh* is remains only with the reader as the characters still carry this believe that the gods are responsible for the pandemic. This dramatic irony stands clear in the text because even the readers are confused at first. So *wonjo* killed both friends and foes, great and small. Death smells everywhere in *The Great Pond*. Those who escape the war died of *Wonjo*, no one is certain of tomorrow. This creates the sense of futility that underlies nihilism. The gravity of the matter is in the fact that *Wonjo* defiles sacrifices and treatment, so

the old wells where the people buried their dead are filled yet more are still dying. Finally, the authorial voice reveals that: “But it was only the beginning. *Wonjo*, as the villagers called the Great Influenza of 1918, was to claim a grand total of some twenty million lives all over the world” (*The Great Pond* 249). This authorial voice plays a significant role as it shows that the characters are insufficient to disclose what *wonjo* is in a true sense. Prior to the 20th century as mentioned before, pandemic in literature is seen only as divine judgement but the 20th century marks a period which scientific discoveries demystifies most myths about human reality. So *wonjo* is not a mystical disease, it is an influenza that is caused by some microorganisms. The revelation of the authorial voice about *Wonjo* from a scientific standpoint as the historical Great influenza of 1918, marks the transition from a typical primitive society of the character to the modern society where the authorial voice first lived and the modern readers follow. Interestingly, *Wonjo*, as known in *The Great Pond* is the flu Katherine Anne Porter refers to in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. The interliterariness on the matter of topic treated here – between Amadi (Nigerian) and Porter (American) – marks out the fact that the early Nigerian texts were not a conjuration from African writers but the writings themselves followed the world cultural tremors in writing and not just African.

Dehumanising mood runs through Nigerian literature from the beginning of the seminal novels of Achebe which identify colonialism as the source of vexation to the people. In the narratives of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*, as the titles indicate, the new order (colonialism) remains the source of irritation that affect the entire atmosphere of the texts. However common the source of dehumanising mood in Achebe’s and Elechi Amadi’s works, a striking dissimilarities emerges where the natives in Amadi’s work irritate or vex one another while in Achebe’s works, the colonial whites and their apparatuses of colonisation plays the role of irritating the natives. When placed side by side with Achebe’s works, Amadi’s work is not a glamorisation of the African past, seeking

to give the black society an identity of being a utopian society before the coming of the whites. The blacks like any other race as have mentioned in most non-african novel above, are inhuman towards fellow men. And a representation of such cruelty goes with the dehumanising mood that runs all through the texts. In the next section, we will also discuss how powerlessness is source of dehumanising mood.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness is a source of dehumanising mood. Characters without power often times feel dehumanised, creating the dehumanising mood in the text. The situation in *The Slave* of Elechi Amadi is not an exception. The text opens with the mood of anxiety which source is the deep seated fear in the major character, Olumati. He feels socially, and materially unsecured due to his family status, and strength. Through the dialogue between Olumati and Enaa below the source of anxiety begins to unfold.

‘Which is your family?’ he asked. ‘Otutua. It is a small family/None can be smaller than mine. We are only three.’ That is true. Will other members of your family come back as you have done?’ ‘I can’t say/‘Where are they?’ ‘I don’t know/‘Chei!’ ‘Hm?’ ‘I feel sorry/The gods know best/‘You are alone in your family/‘There are three of us/‘You are the only man/That is true. (*The Slave* 12-13)

The family size of Olumanti is genuine source of worry given the setting of the text, which is an Igbo setting in Nigeria, where family relations constitutes one’s strength, and it’s +expressed philosophically in the name, *Igwebuiké*, meaning, crowd is power. So to be a lone man in an entire family brings a feeling of powerlessness in Olumati. He confirms this at another discussion with Enaa that:

Not that you are not strong, but that you fear people will... will hurt you perhaps/Olumati smiled. ‘Everyone avoids getting hurt/‘I know, but being the only man in your family, I am sure you try to be very careful/‘That is true. (16)

The recognition of the fact of his family size influences how he relates with people, and points to the negative influence this fact creates in him. It is in relation to this reality that there are so much suspense and ellipsis in Olumati's way of talking at the beginning of the novel. He has an obscured past that is pathetic. This feeling of Olumati is fragile and his interlocutors that are friends learn to carefully select words to speak in order not to hurt him. It is not only Olumati who feels unsecured, in fact, the entire family feels so. His sister, Aleru and grandmother, Nyege because of this feeling suspect that everybody in the community wants to kill them and terminate their family. In a response to the greetings of Enaa's mother, Aleru's grandmother says, 'I thank her. She is one of the few who greet me from the heart. All others want to kill us. He who pursues an innocent chicken must stumble' (20). This ill temper consumes the grandmother such that she remains hostile in the community.

The Slave no doubt, is filled with colourful cultural activities but such beautiful activities turn to be mere interruption of the persistent sombre atmosphere that underlies the dehumanising mood. For instance, the *mgbede*, which is a traditional rite for young women before marriage is overshadowed by the feeling of powerlessness and later betrayal of Olumati. The hope that Enaa's *mgbede* seemed to be raising for Olumati is first interrupted by grief at Aleru's sudden death. Another of such similar event is the wrestling competition that normally brings joy, excitement and recognition to the winner as well as keep the community lively. On the contrary, the case of Olumati is not the same. The joy of his victory is short-lived and he couldn't enjoy all the fame as his opponent is badly injured and he feared he may die. In the end, the traditional new year celebration became nightmare to him as the old year has taken his only sister. These few cultural events have aesthetic effects on *The Slave* but they are at the same time swallowed up by the dehumanising mood that overruns the text. In a similar situation, Aleru and his brother decide to forego an important rite like *mgbede* for Aleru. When Enaa, her friend speaks to her about *mgbede*, she dismisses

it that her social and material condition cannot afford her that “luxury” thus, she considers it unnecessary. In her words, ‘He has his wife to think about. I wouldn't let him. He is too young and poor to go through all that. We don't all have to go through mgbede/ Aleru's eyes were now red and heavy with moisture. Enaa went to her and embraced her. They both began to weep’ (24).

In relation to this, the physical portrayal of Nyege is a displeasing sight of an old hag. Her physical appearance is a clear image of destitution and penury. She is described thus: Nyege was short. The stoop which the years lent her made her shorter still. Her skin was red and firm, her hair white, her torso bare with flapping breasts; a double navel (the larger of them had grown out after a serious illness) and a deeply wrinkled face lit by greyish-green eyes rare in her race, all gave her an unusual personality. Even the elders felt uneasy in her presence. (29)

Almost like a monster, her physical appearance, apart from old age which is natural, depicts ugliness and unpleasantness that years of mental, social and physical pains have bequeathed on her. As she approaches the elders' meeting to defend the fate of her grandson, Olumati, who is suspected to be an *Osu* we see the viciousness of an angry woman. But through this meeting much is revealed on how Achala family is not treated well as the community has taken advantage of their ill fate and some of their lands is taken away. So the pains for her lost, deprivations and injustice have contributed to give the grandmother the ugly look she carries. Couple with all these, the feeling of powerlessness by this family is not unfounded and it keeps reducing them to lesser than life ideal condition for every human.

The Slave progresses with the narrative of acrimony between families and history of slavery and cast system among the people. Nyege continues to be irritated by this history as she keeps cursing even without provocation. The only man in the family is ostracised on the ground that he is *osu* and *osu* system itself underlies dehumanisation in the text. When

Olumati's father first felt unsecured, powerless, he ran to Isiala to take refuge under the shrine of Amadioha. By implication, his entire lineage has become *Osu*, except those who were conceived before he took refuge in the shrine of Amadioha are free. The entire family forever remain outcasts and must not interact with the free born. We may catch the better glimpse of *osu* in the Igbo society as emphasised in *The Slave* through the brief description of Igbo society by David Wittaker and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska below:

The democratic nature of Igbo society was coupled with an encouragement of healthy individual and group rivalry and an emphasis on individual accomplishment. It was a society that was delineated by a patriarchal class system: with free-born men (*amadi*) at the top, slaves (*ohu*) in the middle, and an ostracized class of untouchables who had been dedicated to a deity (*osu*) at the bottom. (28)

The father of Olumati belongs to the class of untouchables and that is why, overtime the status of Olumati was contested. The sad twist in the resolution of *The Slave* is Olumati himself returns to the shrine of Amadioha. After Olumati's freedom has been confirmed and he is beginning to integrate into the society of free born, the pressure of lost, pain, betrayal, sadness and loneliness cause him to slip back into slavery as he by himself decide to take refuge at the shrine of Amadioha. We learn this as the community leader sensitizes the community about Olumati's disappearance thus:

'Let us wait till tomorrow morning/ Eze Minikwe said. 'If he does not appear we shall organize search parties/But Olumati did not return. Three days later people who had gone to the market at Isiali reported that he had taken refuge at the shrine of Amadioha. (*The Slave* 238)

Olumati is the second generation to express his powerlessness at the highest level. Going back to take shelter in the shrine of any god is the last option that anyone could take,

haven understood the implication, which means, one will forever remain ostracised along with his/her unborn generations.

With such characters and incidences that dominate Amadi's *The Slave and The Great Pond*, there are two realities that are responsible for the dehumanising mood in the texts. Firstly, is the dehumanising act itself, which conveys callous attitudes towards others. Secondly, the inhuman treatment of reality, for instance, Olumati's going back to slavery, Chiolu and Aliokoro fighting one another to the point of self-extinction, constitute the dehumanising mood that defines the texts as modern literature. But, we can also find the dehumanising mood in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* as a woman stands to reject of conventional 'truth'.

Rejection of Conventional Truth

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* takes another dimension of modern literature. The text intrinsically rejects conventional truth on gender stereotype and present woman's emancipation in African context without breaking the society nor beating war drum against masculinity. The text opens with a feeling of gaiety between Efuru and Adizua. The love story shortly nosedived into great apprehension as Adizua deserts his loving wife for no reason, except that he ran away with a less beautiful and ignoble woman. This cast a despondent feeling in the text. But most profoundly, it rather pinches on an aged long despondency in Adizua's mother, which is the 'normal' situation of women. She narrates the despair Adizua's father caused her in a similar manner, the circle repeats as Adizua also causes misery to Efuru. She says to Efuru, "You don't know what my life had been. I have not told you my life-story with Adizua's father. No woman of today can suffer as I have suffered" (*Efuru* 70). Of course, Efuru's mother-in-law resigned to her fate as she got accustomed to being abandoned by her husband for no known reason and her husband later died. But beyond despair, grief also set in not only for being abandoned but also for loss: for

Adizua's mother, she lost her husband to death and Efurualso lost her only child to death. The two women react to their despair and grief differently. For the mother of Adizua, she remains in her husband home despite all her pain but *Efuru* remarries, as she is further weighed down by grief. So despondence/despair and grief hovers over the text.

Nevertheless, the statement of Adizua's mother, "No woman of today can suffer as I have suffered", is ambiguous; it is both a cry and a prophetic utterance as we later see Efurur rejecting to be subjugated by men and marriage. Efurur becomes that modern woman that refuses to suffer in the hands of men. Efurur is shown to be a modern character that influences the text. She is of noble birth; she lacks nothing from her father's house but she runs away with a man who could not pay her bride price, a practice that is quite experimental in her community. She outrightly tells her husband that she is not carved for farm work. She also refused to depend on her family background but work by herself to carve a niche in her society. All these acts are a break away from traditional truth of her time in the text, thus, it amount to "unnatural" treatment of reality. At first it looked like Efurur is wayward and could also be considered as a rebel. But she proves otherwise with time when she worked hard with her husband and raised the money for her bride price. Later, her choice of not going to farm finally proved her stability in self-recognition and serves as foresight. Even though her choices have shown to be wise choices, their break from tradition at the beginning shocked the folks and became a source of gossip in the town. Beyond these two acts mentioned here, Efurur in the end of the novel convinces us that women are not necessarily the extended self of men. Rather, a woman is capable of living her life as human being. She does not reject marriage but marriage for her is not an escape from responsibility, but a selfless union that should be based on love and responsibility. In her two marriages, Efurur brings changes in the lives of her husbands. In the first instance the neighbour gossip that Adizua is lucky to marry Efurur, for she is so beautiful, of noble birth, as well as hard working and industrious. In fact,

many wonder how such a woman could accept to marry someone like Adizua. Some of this gossip can be heard in a dialogue like the one below:

As they were coming, some women asked ‘whose daughter is that?’

‘Don’t you know her? She is the daughter of Nwashike Ogene.’

‘She is very beautiful. I have never seen a woman so beautiful. Who is her husband?’

‘Her husband is Adizua.’

‘Who is Adizua? Who is his father? Is he known?’

‘He is not known. And nobody knows why she ever married him, and besides, not a cowrie has been paid on her head.’

‘What are you telling me?’

‘It is true. The husband has not even gone with his people to Nwashike Ogene.’ (*Efuru*16)

Ajanupu, the auntie of Adizua further expresses this at different instances to emphasise the fact that Efuru is a great woman and did not take marriage as an escape route to life. In Ajanupu’s words:

‘And now,’ Ajanupu went on, ‘your son, where is he now? Your son who was married to such a woman. Let me tell you the truth, for it is when you are angry that you say the truth. I was one of those people who wondered what Efuru saw in that son of yours. I did not say anything then. I was up in arms against those who criticized the marriage because Adizua was my sister’s son, and not because he was a good match for Efuru.’

‘Now, your son, instead of settling down with Efuru and working hard to rebuild the family which your husband left in such a mess, did exactly what his father did – this time your son ran away with a woman who had left her husband. And you stay here doing nothing. You stay here watching that innocent woman pining away. (97)

The desertion of Efurū by her husband as seen above causes pains in the mind of objective characters like Ajanupu and contributes to the sombre mood that Efurū's acts of self-determination earlier created in the conservatives.

Efurū remarries again, but unfortunately, another occasion of grief and pains set in as her fidelity and nobility is wrongly questioned by gossip and her second husband and Ajanupu is still useful in disclosing the truth. She confronts Efurū's new husband, Eneberi thus: Eneberi, who are you? Who is your father, who is your mother? What have you got to be proud of? You went to school. Eh? If your own brand of education is the only brand, then I am glad I did not go to school. Eneberi what happened at Onicha? Tell me what happened at Onicha? You don't know that we know that you were jailed. And here you are accusing Efurū, the daughter of Nwashike Ogene of adultery. You...' (275-7)

Characters like Ajanupu are useful for disclosing the concealed reality. Ajanupu is a community woman who knows all these characters well and has a personal relationship with them without harbouring an ill motive towards any of them. So when she intervenes, her intervention is trustworthy. So she gives the profile of Efurū. Yet it must not be forgotten that with all her virtue, Efurū is not an ideal traditional woman as she keeps upturning the tradition. On the other hand, with all her beauty, wealth and good character, Efurū did not succeed to live in the house of a husband for very long. At least she could have stayed with Gilbert; after all, she loved him and Nkoyeni who is now her 'daughter' has given birth to a baby boy and preparation is on the way to marry Ogea to Gilbert. These realities are enough for Efurū to stay-on with Gilbert, but she would rather leave the marriage for her integrity and internal peace. Ironically, after discussing her two broken relationships with Difu, we read that "Efurū slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty

and wealth but she had no child” (281). It is rather fearful that Efuru has had the goddess now as her model; the goddess has no child, no husband but she lives happily. This is another unnatural treatment of reality that modern literature projects. Efuru evokes impersonality in the mind of the readers by the way she handles her own woes. A woman after discussing her two failed marriages should have sleepless night, but for Efuru, she slept sound that night. Her happiness is not external but in her personal dreams. It is this inner source that enables Efuru to overturn the tradition that has now become the philosophy of her people, expressed as, “but what can a woman do?” (21, 209, 210 and 224). Efuru has changed this as she always knows what to do. She grows into strong community woman that has her choices and support members of the community including men. This draws attention to the age long question about sexism which to some extent cannot be separated from the economic strength of a woman.

Efuru consistently rejects the conventional truth by the way she lives her life. Although this causes pains to her father, relations and finally herself. Her community in general is mal at ease with her as it is it manifest in the gossip. Unfortunately, this gossip is chiefly done by fellow women to express their jealousy for the kind of woman she has become. The narrator consistently presents her as a beautiful, kind and loving woman. Her personality confirms this as well as other characters who objectively speak of her.

The portrayal of Efuru is a realistic representation of a modern African woman who has her pains but at least, does not leave her life as the alter self of man. Much more, she is an ideal woman that add value to marriage, except that she is unfortunate. Beyond the dehumanising acts towards Efuru in the text, the non-conventional nature of the protagonist constitutes the new sensibility.

Placing *Efuru* side by side with Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, it is intriguing how things differ in the manner which they are similar. Flora Nwapa seems to be against the

traditional way the African woman is perceived but for Soyinka, the focus is on how colonialism redefined Africa; most of his works are set towards factualism, which contradict among many hurdles, the truth colonialism seems to have introduced and promote. So several of his characters become split personalities while others get alienated in the process of their intercourse with two opposite civilisations. In *The Interpreters* the people have seen a transition from the typical African traditional society that is at a cross road with the western civilisation. The five main characters through whom the story is told are split personalities who tell the story of a nation from their own personal points of view, each interpreting the same society as he sees it. All their realities are equivalent, each being authentic to its corresponding point of view but at the centre of it all are irreconcilable realities that the new civilisation has placed on their roots. In the end, we find that with all their sophistications, the interpreters are dismayed, and unfulfilled. Both have become indeliberate, a condition that tilts towards angst. These characters share some things in common with Obi Okonwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. With the sudden death of Egbo, Sekoni's madness, etc the people are shown to be unfulfilled as well as disillusioned. This further projects the new sensibility of the modern art in the text.

Conclusion

Aetiologically, vexation, anger, powerlessness and inequality serve for the dehumanising mood in the texts of *The Great Pond*, *The Slave* and *Efuru*. But dehumanising mood in modern literature by standard is the new sensibility that modern literature creates through an "inhuman" presentation of reality. And because of this sensibility these Nigerian texts share much in common with writings across Africa, Europe and America. We have observed generally among other issues that the three major novels discussed here are narratives of chaos; ranging from war to community and family feuds, disintegration of families, natural disasters and pandemic as well as other social evils. In the end the texts

introduce sombre and tense atmosphere, where the major characters are highly dissatisfied, except in the case of Efurú who from the beginning keeps “breaking” some existing traditions such that her life is associated with break away from tradition like modernism itself.

Importantly, the texts portray some cultural heritages that form part of the identity of African civilisation, which shares much in common with the rest of the world. It is worthy of notice that these Nigerian texts could accommodate the African tradition and foreign practises by presenting African culture through the modernist tradition. At certain intervals among the three texts there are blossoming and fecund African culture and traditions that distinguish the texts. For examples the relationship among human, gods and society in these texts draw attention to the justice system, horology, etc. which speak of a distinctive civilisation. And most strikingly is the sense of African world view that runs across the texts through the relationship between the dead and the living. So, the priests and the seer remain prominent in all the texts to link the living with the gods/dead as well as prognosticate into the future and the unknown, and by so doing, this literature share much in common with the Greek Theatre.

Finally, some of the valiant warriors/characters in the texts share some extoling qualities with several characters in classic literature. In this way, Nigerian literature presents itself as a rich literature that is identified as modern literature through the dehumanising mood and also share in common with classic literature its gods and warriors among several issues that makes it an integral part of world literature. It is with the contribution of these exalting qualities that negritude movement, a vowal of black dignity/integrity was formed and sustained.

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