

**MODULE 4 OTHER ISSUES AND THE NEW WRITERS**

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we will discuss feminism and gender issues as treated in Nigerian literature. We shall examine selected Nigerian literatures in order to understand how they treat gender issues. Nigerian women, who are also concerned about sexual politics, understand that a discussion of feminism must grapple with more than the issue of sex. So many issues are raised when the topic of gender is discussed in Nigerian literature. They include: the representation and misrepresentation of women in literary texts; the education of women; the access of women to the economic means of survival; motherhood; women in the domestic sphere; women as part of their communities; women's role in politics and revolution; women and cultural practices; sexuality; and the direct treatment of women by men, and men by women. We shall use Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, Catherine Acholonu's poetry collection *The Springs Last Drop* and Zulu Sofola's play *Wedlock of the Gods* in treating the gender issues in Nigerian literature.

**2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- understand what gender issues are treated in Nigerian literature;
- appreciate Nigerian literature with gender themes;
- recognize gender themes in Nigerian literature;
- distinguish Nigerian literature with gender bias from others; and
- discuss gender issues as presented in Nigerian literature.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 General Overview

In gender studies in Africa, Nigerian women have been at the pivot. Flora Nwapa is one of the first writers to give the women voice in African literature. Her novels *Efuru*, *Idu* and *One is Enough* among others set out provocative gender issues in Africa. The role and history of feminist politics or activism on women's rights in Africa is a discourse which African women are studying and clarifying for themselves. The debate over feminist criticism and the development of an African feminist theory has been a concern to African gender scholars. As a Senegalese figure, Mariama Ba represents a kind of feminine Leopold Sedar Senghor. She shows that not only men are important in this world. She also shows that to succeed in this life, women should identify themselves and also trust in themselves to overcome the difficulties that compose life. In showing the importance of women, their role in bringing up families and keeping them together in time of calamity is clearly brought out in the novel.

Buchi Emecheta has a different view. She criticizes the society's belief that a woman is worth anything if she becomes a mother. Nnu Ego, as did other women in the Ibo society, bore many children in the hope that she would have someone to take care of her in her old age. Again, this was an Ibo custom. Some argue that it is not the responsibility of the children to support and care for Nnu Ego. They argue that Nnu Ego's children had the right to choose in what manner and to what extent they would do so, if at all. Others argue that there was never any real communication with regard to this expectation of Nnu Ego from her children, that this message was never expressed. Although that may have been the case, the understanding was implicit. It was a cultural understanding, a cultural expectation that, although not fully expressed, was always understood. It is a case of motherhood appreciation.

Catherine Acholonu's poetry examines women in cultural situations. In *The Spring's Last Drop*, she examines the expectations of women in cultural things like ritual, rites of passage and cultural hegemony. She is the proponent of the feminist theory of motherism which she interpreted as the Afrocentric alternative to feminism. The theory discusses the place of African women in the feminist discourse and to correct some obvious lapses in womanism and feminism proper.

Zulu Sofola, one of the earliest female dramatists to have come out of Africa, has produced plays that give attention to the issues of female subjugation, culture clash and anarchy. Her plays have been recognized as trail blazers in the discourse on female subjugation and male dominance. She has often portrayed the need for harmony among the sexes in a community; the need for appreciating the place of the man and the role of the women and the need to discard those indices of anarchy that place women in bad positions in society.

#### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Examine the role of Nigerian female writers in the propagation of gender issues in Africa.

### 3.2 Gender Issues in *The Joys of Motherhood*

One of the many issues raised in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is the conflict Nnu Ego feels in embracing and accepting new ideas when she moves away from her Ibo society to make a new life for herself in Lagos. Nnu Ego is caught between two cultures. While she sees that her old customs and beliefs are not conducive to a better life for her or her children, she is unable to come to terms with Lagos's different societal rules. It is shocking to her that money is now the status quo, not children. She finds it hard to believe that gender roles have been exchanged. Men now work as household servants for the "white man." Women are no longer having a large number of children. Nnu Ego finds it difficult to adjust to her new life. Her strong cultural beliefs are in direct conflict with her new life in Lagos. These cultural beliefs are the cause of her enslavement.

Nnu Ego's cultural background is one in which women are exploited to men's advantage. Womanhood is defined by the ability to bear children. The more male children a woman has, the higher her status. In this patriarchal society, a woman's duty is to bear male children for her husband to continue his lineage. A childless woman is considered a "half woman," a failed woman. The man, therefore, is of critical importance to the woman, for a woman cannot bring forth a child without a man. This way of thinking can be seen in Adankwko's advice to Nnu Ego: "Have you ever heard of a complete woman without a husband?" (Emecheta, 158). A husband who can father male children is greatly admired.

In Nnu Ego's society, a daughter's value to her parents is only as high as the bride price she can fetch. The Ibos' way of thinking is that daughters are raised to glorify another man when her turn comes to produce male offspring. That is why daughters are not as highly regarded as sons are. In Nnu Ego's patriarchal society, women are viewed as tools of production. The younger the woman is, the better able she will be to reproduce. Women are valued in terms of their economic worth. In Nnu Ego's Ibo society, a woman is always owned by a male. First, she belongs to her father until she is of an age where she can be sold. Pre-arranged marriages are normal. How the daughter feels toward her husband is of little importance. After acquiring her, she is chattel and only valuable in terms of "producing" offspring, preferably males. She is his to command. Her duty is to obey him always.

All of these beliefs and customs are embedded in Nnu Ego's subconscious. Her new life in Lagos does not change that. She is not surprised, therefore, when Nnaife chides her for questioning him: "What did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?" (Emecheta, 48)

*The Joys of Motherhood* is a mirror image of today's society in Africa and in many other parts of the world. It speaks of the struggles and conflicts of women and the gender roles imposed upon them. It further speaks of women's struggles to gain independence from their subservient roles as wives and to gain a voice of their own.

Women in third world countries are still hesitant to speak out and make themselves heard for

fear of being punished by their husbands and society in general. Their objections to being treated unfairly are seen as unimportant.

In Ibo society, wife beating was also common and, indeed, accepted. Since wives were property, husbands had the authority to do as they pleased. Wife beating elevated a husband's self-esteem and gave him a sense of control. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnaife threatens to beat Nnu Ego when she presses him to find a job. He actually beats the pregnant Adaku when both she and Nnu Ego go on strike for more housekeeping money. Things have not changed very much for women in third world countries. They are still considered second class citizens. Although they work alongside the men in various fields, in addition to taking care of the household, their contributions are seen as insignificant. A woman is faceless. Her identity is forever linked with that of her husband's. They are as one.

Nnu Ego's conflict with her new life in Lagos first becomes evident when Adaku comes to live with them. Although in her Ibo society husbands have many wives who live together harmoniously, Nnu Ego resents Adaku and does not like to share Nnaife with her. Nnu Ego is torn between her Ibo customs and the reality of her poverty filled life in Lagos. As she struggles to put food on the table for her children with the little money Nnaife earns, she comes to the conclusion that she is a prisoner because of her role as mother and senior wife. She reflects on the way her life would have been in Ibo society as a senior wife. She dreams of having the courage to abandon Nnaife and leave her children with him. As senior wife in Lagos, she has many responsibilities but none of the rewards that come with being a senior wife in Ibo society:

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, and imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. (Emecheta 137)

When Nnu Ego first comes to Lagos, she is shocked to discover that Nnaife works as a domestic servant who washes "women's underwear." She questions his manhood and loses all respect for him. She would have preferred that he had a "real" man's job, like working on a farm. Her constant comparisons to Amatokwu must have been a source of pain and humiliation for Nnaife, who is content with the work that he does and does not understand Nnu Ego's exasperation and disbelief. Nnu Ego comes from a male dominated society where men and women each have their assigned roles.

Nnu Ego feels obligated to her family, her husband and her children. Everyone makes demands on her. Although she takes care of the household, the children and her husband in the traditional way, she also has to take charge of supporting her family when Nnaife is unable to do so. Although at times Nnu Ego expresses her anger and exasperation to

Nnaife, her attitude changes when she realizes that because of him, she is a mother, she is a woman, therefore she is complete. To Nnu Ego, Nnaife proves his manhood by fathering many children. According to the Igbo ideology, Nnaife has made her a woman. That is why, although Nnu Ego loses respect for Nnaife when he doesn't find a job, she still clings to the Igbo custom of silence. "All the same, like a good woman, she must do what she was told, she must not question her husband in front of his friends" (Emecheta, 114).

Nnu Ego's hesitancy in expressing her emotions and anger is common in many African societies even today. The woman's role is to obey her husband and accept any decisions he makes in silence. To express your opinions could mean a night of abuse. Nnu Ego's conflict further comes into evidence when Adaku receives a visit from Igbonoba's wife. When she sees how elegantly dressed this woman is, she feels desperate and angry. Not at the visitor, but at herself. She has begun to realize that the high status she so desperately sought by having so many children is of little value in her new society in Lagos. Values have changed. Money is now the status symbol. Yet all because she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty, in her nail-biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room . . . Oh, it was a confusing world. (Emecheta 167) Nnu Ego is in a state of transition. She is slowly moving away from her Ibuza customs and beliefs but is still hesitant to fully embrace new ideas.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Nnu Ego is a mother who desired the joys of motherhood. Does this expectation reveal her gender roles?

### 3.3 The Feminist Poet: Catherine Acholonu's *The Spring's Last Drop*

Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's position as the first daughter of a chief is significant because she plays the role of helping to organize her father's household even though she is married. She claims in the poem "the message" to be the reincarnation of the spirit of her dead father. She is a chronicler of tradition, and in her poems she sets out to restore order through expert crafting of words, and in continuation of her father's mission, as a chief in her village. Since in Igbo culture, politics is not separated from religion, Acholonu finds her father's role as the leader of her community tied to his religious role, which tie has the potential to produce a richer and more balanced life for the individual and the people. She attempts to show the spiritual and traditional roots of her poetry as a testimony of her cultural roots and privileges of a poet in her community. Her social positioning and role in her father's house testifies to her Africana womanhood in seeking for a more egalitarian society where women participate in the political, cultural, and religious life of their community by right. Catherine Acholonu in *The Spring's Last Drop demonstrate in their poetry a consciousness of the spiritual as a tool for creative empowerment, making spirituality both subject matter and source of diction so as to be relevant in their societies.*

Acholonu belongs to the second generation of modern Nigerian poets, who are neither confronted with the task of fighting for independence as the pioneers poets were, nor experimenting with different poetic forms and individualistic romantic concerns as the first generation of modern Nigerian poets were. The vision of the poets in the second generation of

modern Nigerian poets is to give poetry back to the masses (i.e. to make poetry the voice of the masses) and to use their art to correct the evils and corruption that swept the nation after the Nigerian civil war (1967-70). The Nigerian civil war contributed to the erosion of traditional values, and marked the onset of armed robbery and other forms of violence, as common crimes. Acholonu attempts to use her art to reconnect the people to the traditional values they knew before. It is in her collection *The Spring's Last Drop* that she suggests that the solution to most societal problems lies in turning back to tradition, even to its mystic experience. Obi Maduakor in "Female Voices in Poetry: Catherine Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie as Poets" acknowledges Acholonu's commitment to traditional values and faith. Maduakor summarizes her themes and structure in the collection: "To a certain extent all her poems sum up to one supreme statement on the need to be rooted; to be anchored to tradition, to a faith or some kind of supernatural agency. The absence of anchorage she calls "Cultural loss," and the consequence of cultural loss is "Social death" (76). Even Acholonu's social criticism is guided by her commitment to traditional virtues; hence commenting on her role as a chronicler of the virtue of traditional life, Maduakor says "her poetry [. . .] has passion, for it flows from the heart and is conceived from within" (81). Her position in her family, training, and in the nation affirms her commitment to upholding spiritual, traditional, and Africana womanhood principles for liberation and restoration of the dignity of Black cultural values. Acholonu is rooted in both the tradition and spirituality of her community, and she finds such rooting inspiring to her creativity and in articulating themes relevant to her experiences as a Black woman and to that of her people.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Discuss Acholonu's perception of the role of women in culture and ritual in *The Spring's Last Drop*.

#### 3.4 The Feminist Drama: Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*

Zulu Sofola believes that Black women, in publicly reclaiming what has always belonged to them in terms of creative empowerment, present evidence that there exist relationships among creativity, religion, community, and gender. Even though there were existing forms of patriarchy, colonialism heightened male superiority and did not leave room for other forms of governance "while the African traditional system in concept and actualization [had] room for many or more". For instance, education that ought to empower Black women helps to divide them into socio-economic classes and makes it difficult for them to agree, organize, and believe to a woman that they can revoke any decision made by men that is contrary to women's interests. Sofola laments the loss of traditional egalitarian values and writes about the difference between the educated Black woman who lives in delusions of grandeur and speaks in a demeaning manner about her illiterate, rural, 'traditional' counterpart. It never occurs to her that while she parrots the phrase, 'What a man can do, a woman can do better,' her illiterate counterpart asserts: 'What a woman can do, a man cannot do.' While she quotes the European saying, 'Behind every successful man is a woman,' her illiterate counterpart affirms: 'The strength of a man is in his woman,' or 'A soldier with a mother does not die in a war front.'

In *Wedlock of the Gods* a girl was bundled off to marriage because her parents needed

money from her dowry to pay medical bills for her sick brother. She considers herself as been in bondage for three years the marriage lasted, then the husband dies. Rather than wait for three months as stipulated by custom or agree to the obnoxious custom of levitation, she becomes pregnant for her erstwhile lover. Custom is broken, the consequences are severe - the plot thickens as the tragedy unfolds. The dynamism that marked the pre-colonial African societies is not completely destroyed but it needs to be rebuilt. Cultural alienation has made familiar the once alien notion of the powerlessness of women; Black women seem therefore to be losing hold of their ability to organize and exert pressure on the patriarchal set-up in order to meet their needs. As well, instead of the society being run by decisions made by recognized socio-political groups and women's lines of authority, the instituted foreign male-centered system of governance completely eliminated women's leadership.

Zulu Sofola in her article "Feminism and African Womanhood" writes about the political powerlessness of women as a result of imperialism: "Chaos set in and women were dislodged and made irrelevant, a fact that is now full-blown in today's European / Arab systems of governance in contemporary Africa where our women have been rendered irrelevant, ineffective, and completely de-womanized" (59). The greatest problem of modern African woman is herself because she lacks knowledge about how to effectively combine existing traditional egalitarian values with her Western education so as to recover the collective memory of African womanhood and so refuse to be "de-womanized," being backed by both the physical and spiritual mandates replete in African cosmologies. According to Sofola there is always available a "particular traditional power-line" under which Black women can mobilize themselves to overcome obstacles against the full expression of their humanity (61). By going back to the culture, especially to their spiritual heritage, Black women may be able to recover their ability to negotiate for their rights in patriarchal societies.

#### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4**

Discuss the violation of the marital rights of women in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Being a woman from Nigeria, Buchi Emecheta knows firsthand the unfairness of a patriarchal society and the conflicts it causes. Although, she is reluctant to be called a feminist, Ms. Emecheta writes about the plight of African women and their struggle for freedom and equality. We can see that she does not think very highly of the patriarchal society from which she came. Through her writings, Ms Emecheta hopes to be able to empower women, especially women from third world countries, to educate themselves. Only through education can these women overcome the many obstacles in their paths. *The Joys of Motherhood* is about a woman from a third world country who, because of the patriarchal society which she lives in, cannot liberate herself from the chains of poverty. It is an honest look at women in the society of a colonized nation who, before, during and after colonization, do not quite fit in. They are still enslaved by men and their society.

Going back to African roots and origins, Black women writers and theorists demonstrate

that there is no traditional politic of an irrevocable nature that enshrines discrimination against or limitation of Black women in the physical realm; then how much less could there be in the spiritual realm, which is genderless? This has been Catherine Acholonu's proposition. She believes that Black women's future in the African world has the potential for development and freedom despite the cultural ambiguities that on one hand uphold the importance of women in the society and on the other hand marginalize them. Nevertheless, there are loopholes in at least some African societies that provide the platform on which Black women can negotiate for their rights. Zulu Sofola provides a secure basis to argue that most traditional African societies in pre-colonial times were dynamic so that an average woman pragmatically manipulated her circumstances and potentials and achieved independence and visibility. The colonial intrusion that gave way to cultural alienation, capitalism, and class distinction compounded the problem of average modern Black women in their struggles to achieve the independence and visibility their foremothers had. This has been Sofola's proposition in her plays that the result of colonialism on Black women has been to reveal indigenous and foreign structures of male domination on the women.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

Buchi Emecheta is concerned with the domineering attitude of African men because of their cultural placement in society. She advocates for a reversal of the attitude. She also pleads in her works that the women deserve to earn the fruit of their labour; to be properly cared for and adored. However, Catherine is of the opinion that women ought to work out their respect. She believes that motherhood is a symbol of honour and must be revered. She also criticizes the subjugation of women when it comes to cultural issues like: birth, death and other rites of passage. She believes that women have the potential to perform what the men do especially where the mantle falls on them. Zulu Sofola decries the effect of colonialism in compounding the tighter gender disposition of African people. She sees western culture as a problem. She advocates a rethink at the way African women are seen as people with no spiritual, physical and emotional essence. Her plays go back to the primordial beginning examining what has been in comparison with what is in their works, these women writers feature characters that see themselves in a male dominated culture and seek to redefine their future.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Answer these questions carefully:

1. Discuss the various issues of gender that Nigerian female writers have been projecting in their works.
2. Catherine Acholonu believes that women can perform ritual and other spiritual essence. Explain how she revealed this *The Spring's Last Drop*?
3. Nnu Ego is a mother who knows the worth of her husband and children. Explain how her roles helped her achieve motherhood.
4. The male characters in present in the works treated here are very queer. Does this reveal anything about Nigerian gender literature?
5. Appreciate Zulu Sofola's dimension of gender trend in *Wedlock of the Gods*.



**7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS**

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## UNIT 2 TRADITIONAL BELIEFS IN NEW NIGERIAN LITERATURE

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall study the reflection of traditional beliefs in new Nigerian literature. Some new Nigerian writers draw heavily from the traditional beliefs of their people in the creation of their art. They believe that modernity has never spoilt the real traditional beliefs of the people even though some people have been trying to run from it. In trying to attack the incessant military coups and unstable governance in Nigeria, Okri decided to use the motif of the Abiku in Nigerian traditional belief to capture this reality. Oyeyemi in her novel reveals that many people die out of the ignorance of their culture. The culture of 'ere ibeji' in Yoruba traditional belief is exploited in the story. Chinweizu in his poetry reveals that only African beliefs and values are viable tools for a true African literature. He explores this in his poetry which he termed 'Afrocentric' poetry.

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- distinguish between new Nigerian literatures with traditional beliefs as motifs;
- appreciate the use of traditional beliefs in new Nigeria literatures;
- compare the treatment of African values in the new literatures with those of their predecessors;
- answer questions regarding the relevance of traditional beliefs in new Nigerian literature; and
- accept traditional beliefs as viable themes in new Nigerian literature.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 General Overview

The application of traditional beliefs in modern literature in Nigeria is a true reflection of the Africanness in the literature. African literature started with African orature, African beliefs and African values. The part that literature plays as a unifying institution of art is paramount to our understanding of how a people can survive the present and win the future. This leads to a proper understanding of what a true African literature entails. Chinua Achebe was once probed on his thoughts on the African novel and the novelist. Rather impatiently, he responded that definitely the African novel had to be about Africa as a geographical expression and as a metaphysical landscape. He added that it should be about "a view of the world and all of the cosmos perceived from a particular position."

The term "African" appears to correspond to a geographical notion but we know that, in practical terms, it also takes in those areas of collective awareness that have been determined by ethnic, historical and sociological factors, all these factors, as they affect and express themselves in our literature, marking off for it a broad area of reference. Within this area of reference then, and related to certain aspects that are intrinsic to the literature, the problem of definition involves as well a consideration of aesthetic modes in their intimate correlation to the cultural and social structures which determine and define the expressive schemes of African peoples and societies. The essential elements of African literature which should include the obligation to represent the image of Africa, given that Africa is relatively still unknown, underestimated and despised in the world, should be an important criterion. Some African writers have respectively depicted Africa's past and traditions, for their contributions towards the better understanding of Africa.

Furthermore, for literature to reflect its society, it should be presented in the form that comes naturally to the people's appreciation of art. Moreover, in time to come, due to extreme pressures of life in modern cities, society will resort to less time-consuming ways of reading and communicating by finding new means, and new forms and then new definitions of changing practical consciousness. Thus, it is not surprising that Nigerian traditional beliefs are often reflected in the new Nigerian literature. This is because it helps in the proper communication of Nigerian values and aids in simplifying the message by using the people's known beliefs.

Ben Okri has often exploited the power of the supernatural to give his novel a proper leaning towards the Nigerian cultural situation. This style of writing often termed magical realism runs through his novels. A much younger writer, Helen Oyeyemi, 18 years at the completion of her debut novel, *The Icarus Girl*, exploited the Yoruba mythical belief on the 'bond' of twins which has been neglected in modern times due to deliberate attempts at avoiding those traditional values in modern literature. Oyeyemi, a diaspora writer, exploited this belief which made her novel draw much attention from critics and writers. Chinweizu, the modern Pan-Africanist, uses the traditional beliefs of his people in the creation of poetry of Afrocentric values. He believes that the utilization of African orature, African

traditional beliefs and cultural values in African literature gives it a true African touch.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Critically assess the importance of traditional beliefs as motifs in new Nigerian literature.

### 3.2 Magical Realism: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist. Okri has risen to an international acclaim, and he is often described as one of Africa's greatest writers. His best known work, *The Famished Road*, was awarded the 1991 Booker Prize. He has also been described as a magic realist, although he has shrugged off that tag. He writes about the mundane and the metaphysical, the individual and the collective, drawing the reader into a world with vivid descriptions.

*The Famished Road* is about an 'Abiku' child named Azaro. Shortly after birth, it became clear that Azaro was a spirit child. He had vivid dreams, which foretold the future and he could see spirits interacting with the living. The spirits called to him and caused him to leave his body for a time, which caused his parents to think he was dead. He woke up in his own coffin and his parents found they could not afford the spiritual ceremony to cut his obvious connection with the spirit world. Azaro grew and learned more about his "gift." He ran out of his compound (forcing his mother and father to follow) just before it went up in flames. Priestesses who saw his true power abducted him. Azaro made a narrow escape, only to end up in the house of a police officer whose dead son tried to communicate with him.

*The Famished Road* is the amazing story of the journey of a spirit child through the poverty and suffering of modern day Africa. In the pseudo-reality where the book is set, there is a spirit, as well as a physical world. A spirit child is one who only wants to be in the spirit world, so they kill themselves whenever they reincarnate in the physical world. The story is centred on Azaro, an abiku or spirit child. Spirit children are born into the world of the living but some promise that as soon as they are born they will die and thus return to their friends in the land of spirits. Azaro makes such a promise but on being born he is stopped by the beautiful, suffering face of his mother and decides that he will try life. His spirit companions do not like this and haunt him to return to the land of the dead. This makes the childhood of Azaro both beautiful and harrowing. In almost every scene of this novel the world familiar to us leaps and pours with the beauty of a spiritual presence. Spirits mingle with the living, in human or animal form, or in the form of lights and omens. Sometimes Azaro disappears altogether onto a spiritual level and a world that is both magnificent and terrifying runs by the reader.

Azaro is haunted by these spirits and some scenes can be quite distressing, even terrifying in places. The undead come as blind lecherous old men who want to use the eyes of children, beggars with misshapen limbs and horrific wounds, freaks and wild animals. Even the road of the title in this story is an entity with a stomach, a being who will destroy unwary travellers who do not leave proper sacrifices.

The novel is set in Nigeria and has an African feeling to it. We are always in the ghetto with Azaro's family, always just on the brink of starvation. Spirits, herbalists and witches and wizards all have their places in the communities, the people are riddled with superstition but in the context of this story every superstition is a real answer and cure. Each one works and we as readers see the spirits being affected by the superstitions of the living.

Azaro lives with both abuse and a prevailing love. One of the most intriguing characters of the book was Black Tyger, Azaro's father. A great boxer, Black Tyger is an abusive father and husband, the almost unbearable suffering of his life taken out on his wife and child. He is also a powerful and noble man crying to be heard. The boxing sequences of 'The Famished road' are among some of the most dramatic action scenes I've ever read, the opponents of Black Tyger don't always come from the land of the living but from the land of fighting ghosts. The strength of the man and the power he draws from makes gripping reading. When he decides to become a politician we see he is noble in his thoughts, all he wants is to build schools for the beggars, the people laugh at him but I admired him.

Azaro's mother likewise suffers hopelessly, etching out a miserable living by labouring all day to sell goods. At times it gets too much for her and she takes it out on Azaro but the love she also feels for her child and husband is heart warming. At the lowest points of our characters lives we sometimes get a glimpse of love or happiness that seems like a diamond found in a pile of coal. The novel is throughout harrowing and painful but the overall message is one of progress and hope.

Politics play a large part in the story as the party of the rich and the parties of the poor vie to get the people of the ghetto's votes. Progress is represented by the splendid, voluptuous character of Madame Koto. This kindly, overweight lady begins the story running a poor bar of palm wine and her famous peppercorn soup. Without giving too much away she is the first to bring electricity to the ghetto and the first to own a car, both stupendous, magical artifacts to the eyes of the very poor. The richer she gets though the nastier she becomes. It is brilliantly done. You will feel suffering reading this novel, you will feel hunger and long with the characters to find even the smallest of successes. In return you will be rewarded with some of the most beautiful prose I've ever read, as one critic on the sleeve of the novel says: "Okri is incapable of writing a boring sentence."

### **Characters**

1. Azaro is the story's narrator. He is an abiku, or a spirit child who has never lost ties with the spirit world. The story follows him as he tries to live his life, always aware of the spirits trying to bring him back.
2. Azaro's father is an idealistic labourer who wants the best for his family and the community. He suffers greatly for this, eventually becoming a boxer and later a politician. Azaro's father loves him deeply, but is often bitter at having an abiku and occasionally goes on angry violent tirades.

3. Azaro's mother works very hard selling anything she can get her hands on for the family. She cares for her family deeply and constantly gives up food and security for her family and their ideals. She is proud that Azaro is her son and goes to great lengths to protect him.
4. Madame Koto is proprietress of a local bar. She has a liking for Azaro, though at times is convinced he brings bad luck. She starts out as a well-meaning woman, trying to get along with everyone else. However, as the story progresses, she becomes richer, siding with the political party of the rich, and is often accused of witchcraft. She tries to help Azaro and his family on numerous occasions but seems to try to take Azaro's blood to remain youthful.
5. Jeremiah, the Photographer is a young artist who brings the village to the rest of the world and the rest of the world to the village. He manages to get some of his photographs published, but practices his craft at great personal risk.

The story moves between Azaro's adventures in the real world with his struggling parents and dirty politics, and another peculiar world limited to Azaro's vision – Madame Koto's palm wine bar, the (famished) road and the forest – which are crowded with spirits, and supernatural elements. Often it is Azaro's visionary world that leads him through all the tribulations of the real world.

## SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Explain the application of magical realism in the satirical presentation of politics in *The Famished Road*.

### 3.3 Traditional Belief: Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*

Helen Oyeyemi was born in Nigeria in 1984 and moved to London when she was four. *The Icarus Girl* was written while Oyeyemi was studying for her A-levels and she is also the author of two plays, *Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese*. The title '*Icarus*' is taken from a Greek mythology and it means 'protector'.

*The Icarus Girl* is a story of overwhelming, corrosive loneliness. Jessamy Harrison lives in London, the only child of a Yoruba mother and an English father. As the novel opens, this intellectually precocious, angry, solitary eight-year-old has shut herself into a cupboard because only in such confined spaces does she feel in control. Jess's alienation springs from everyday realities. She has been moved up a year in school because of her academic gifts. Her rages and screaming fits distance her further from her classmates. She is a stranger to her mother's family and language. On a deeper level, Jess is haunted by other identities which threaten to take over and destroy her own. The strongest of these takes the form of a little girl, Titiola, whom Jess encounters when she first visits Nigeria. Jess names the girl TillyTilly, and she appears to be the typical imaginary best friend of an isolated child. But TillyTilly is far more powerful than this. It emerges that Jess is not an only child, but a surviving twin. It also becomes clear that this novel is as much metaphysical as it is realistic.

*The Icarus Girl* takes its premise from the Yoruba belief that twins inhabit three separate worlds: the Bush, a 'wilderness for the mind' (page 298), the normal world and the spirit world. Oyeyemi has said that TillyTilly is from the Bush, 'a world that doesn't have the

same structure as our world'. Through Jess's loss of her twin and her isolation at school, Oyeyemi explores themes of loneliness, alienation and the difficulties — particularly for a young child— of being very obviously different. Jess's mixed race, her precocity and her tantrums set her apart from her schoolmates, marking her out and only serving to intensify the loneliness she already feels. Helen Oyeyemi has drawn on her own experience in exploring this emotional terrain. She describes herself as 'a real mess at school', isolated from her classmates and regarded as 'the weird girl'. At the age of fifteen she took an overdose and while recovering took refuge in reading: she still proclaims herself to be 'more of a reader than a writer'. That summer, another family visit to Nigeria set the seal on her recovery although she doesn't feel wholly Nigerian: 'I'm just British' she says.

Twins bring blessings in Yoruba culture, but may also bring misfortune. If one twin dies at birth, the surviving twin is thought to have lost half her soul. A sacred image of the dead twin, an *ere ibeji*, must be carved and then tended like a living child; in its turn the 'ere ibeji' protects the family. Otherwise, disaster follows in the form of sickness, death and barrenness. This fate overtakes Jessamy Harrison's family. Helen Oyeyemi describes Jess's psychic torment and near disintegration. Her father is sucked dry by depression, her teacher disappears on sick leave, and Jess's one good friend is almost killed during a sleepover from hell. Oyeyemi's writing is powerful if uneven. But at its best this is a chilling story about the anguish of separation from all that should be most familiar and dear. In the end, it is only in Nigeria, within the traditional family compound, that wounds can begin to heal.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

How realistic is the treatment of Yoruba belief about twins in *The Icarus Girl*?

### 3.4 Afrocentric Poetry: Chinweizu's *Invocation and Admonitions*

In Chinweizu's award-winning poetry collection *Invocations and Admonitions published 1986; his Africanist vision begins to loom large* in the poet's consciousness. Significantly, this volume is dedicated, to the memory of Cheikh Anta Diop, Egyptologist, scientist, historian great pioneer of Afrocentric history who reconnected the modern African consciousness to black Egypt. *Invocations and Admonitions* dwells on the community, the bard's own folks, and their mannerisms. Women, love and sex in '*Desire*', '*That Lady*', '*A Gift of Maidenhead*' and '*Sex in Space*' are treated with his usual masculinist rebuttal. '*Desire*' for example maintains a subtle rhythm in the public jeer at womanhood. Other poems – '*The Penis of a God*', '*Blest Freight for the Slaughter House*', and '*Chant of Hired Planters*' – recast the redundancy of the ruling class and their exploitation of the underprivileged through all history. There is sympathy for the workers who actually 'clear the bush, plough the soil, harrow the ground' but are cheated in the harvest ('not for us the harvest time'). On the other hand, there is contempt for Capitalism and its lechery ('what do you expect...we who make sure the roads are built'). Chinweizu often adopts this stance of poet-reformer on a mission. He presumes to bulldoze his art with an acute sense of history ('Admonition to the Black World'), to flatten Imperialism's footholds (Islam, Christianity, Marxism, Capitalism) in our consciousness and, by these 'demolitions', retrieve from the distant past an 'icon' for the inspiration and pride of his generation. For this rare and courageous singer, putting on the garb of the griot in modern writing could be onerous, particularly when lamenting the fall of the heroes of our history

('Lament for a dauntless three') and attempting to capture a historical experience in an artistic memento that evokes the chequered Nigerian independence, its betrayal by a tribe of military interlopers and their civilian counterfeits incarnated even in millennial leaders.

Art is thus inscribed for posterity in the serial national conflicts which had come to signify, for recent Nigerian poetry, the point of departure from the aesthetics of the league of euro-modernists represented, in Chinweizu's argument, by the poetry of Okigbo, Soyinka, and Clark. Thus *Invocations and Admonitions*, distinguished by an Africanist alliance, adopts more complex techniques of expression in various traditional literary forms that had helped to enrich and distinguish the poetry of the new Nigerian writers from that of their older counterparts. This distinction lies in the realignment of heritage from a more credible interpretation and organisation of traditional repertoire. There is always the inevitable presence of a local audience achieved partly by the story-telling nature of the poems.

In *Invocations* the griot is more at home with his traditional repertoire: the prayer ('*Invocations on a day of Exile*'), the abuse: ('*The Pagan's Reply*'), work song: ('*Chant of Hired Planters*'), dirge song: ('*Lament for a Dauntless Three*'), and song of admonitions ('...*To the Black World*'). The prayer in '*Day of Exile*' is remarkable in its adoption of òfò, to represent the Igbo poet-diviner. This totem of justice urges steadfastness on the holder through any human or divinely instigated adversity. The persona of this poem is therefore not unlike the exile of an unjust society 'where truth is cast out of the gates and falsehood sits majestic.' It draws from the traditional incantation as the supplicant calls upon his ancestors and gods: and you forest spirits/and you spirits of the rivers/and you my ancestors' (16). The journey motif parallels traditional rites of passage: 'I have travelled a road without rest/I am hungry for a patch of earth' and the rhetoricism is appropriately adapted to elicit the element of pathos: 'where can I settle my rump/and cool my blistered feet?'

Though my path is hard  
my chi is alert...  
And what is that crouching in  
ambush...?  
I say my chi will not permit it  
move out of my path  
my chi is alert (16)

Thus in this time-old precept of ritual self cleansing do we declare him/her clean and free from incrimination—an expression which is achieved by the accompanying device of rhetorical questions:

Did I get loose another man's tethered goat?  
Did I lean unto my bed another man's unwilling daughter?  
Did I loot the public granary and harm another man's crop . . .? (17)



The truth of retributive justice reflects from traditional philosophy and, in Chinweizu's poetry, is deployed with extensive structural repetitions and parallelisms important in African communication art:

If prosperity should visit me  
 It shall find me at home  
 It shall not overwhelm me  
 It shall not drive laughter from my teeth  
 It shall not surround me with faces mad with envy  
 It shall not kill me before my time. (17)

In this lament, the subject-heroes take on mythic dimensions, quite disproportionate to actual historical positions. Now they are full of goodness, had elevated the material well-being of their people, helped the poor and made the peace. So their death is made to acquire a tragic outlook that should leave the bereaved utterly helpless as aptly projected in this rhetorical parallelism:

what voice shall comfort us...?  
 what arm shall strike for us ...?  
 what hand shall cleanse this rot ...? (11-13)

With the poet we can traverse further to reconstruct traditional funeral occasions where, as assumed, the deceased is not really 'dead' until a 'thorough search' has been conducted around the familiar places the deceased usually stayed during his life time. When at last he is not found, he is then adjudged dead. 'Lament for a Dauntless Three' is informed by such funeral practices in Igboland. The three heroes are sought after in places associated with their physical and spiritual homelands.

#### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4**

Explain the Afrocentric properties in Chinweizu's poetry.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

From the works under study in this unit, the three Nigerian writers exploited Nigerian traditional beliefs in their writing. They believe that a true African literature must carry African themes, forms and beliefs. They are African writers writing about African cultural situations. They are African writers writing about Africa from the bias of African traditional beliefs. They are writing to contribute to reflect African culture in modern literature. Even though we observe the use of these traditional beliefs as motifs for discussing modern experiences, we notice a serious appeal in the usage. These writers wrote about Nigeria (Africa) as a part of their contribution to elevating and recalling traditional beliefs of the people. While Oyeyemi's story of twins is deeply rooted in Yoruba cultural belief, Okri's reflect a belief that runs through almost all the tribes in Nigeria. Every tribe in Nigeria has the belief in the emergence of a child who dies only to return with the purpose of tormenting their parents. Chinweizu exploited the traditional beliefs in gods, chi, nature and tradition. Even as modern African writers engage in

anti-African moves in their bids at undermining African values, here are writers using the traditional beliefs of their people in creating functional literatures with modern relevance.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

These writers wrote about Nigerian traditional beliefs with much dexterity and vivacity. Their literatures truly reflect Africa. Helen Oyeyemi was born in Nigeria but relocated to UK at the age of four. Definitely at that age, she ever knew anything about Africa her ancestral home. So, writing about a cultural issue like the Yoruba belief in the affinity of twins seems surprising. Definitely, she must have written her work based on what her parents told her. The character of Jess in the novel reveal a child alienated from her culture, a true picture of how Helen may have felt at younger age. The Icarus Girl reveals some misrepresentation of African cultural situation as a result of misinformation. Okri's Azaro is a reflection of traditional beliefs in modern times. The setting is modern. The issues are modern. But the culture is traditionally hinged on the destiny of a people as a result of powers unknown. Africans believe so much in the power of the supernatural. This is also reflected in Chinweizu's Afrocentric poetry.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Answer these questions carefully:

1. Explain some traditional beliefs reflected in Okri's *The Famished Road*.
2. Carefully examine the way Oyeyemi treated the Yoruba belief in 'ere ibeji' in her novel.
3. From your reading of these novels, do you think they reflected the real beliefs of their people?
4. Afrocentric literature is bent towards African belief system. How does Chinweizu reflect this in his poem?
5. Distinguish the various ways each of the writers treated here handled traditional beliefs in their works.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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**UNIT 3 THE NEW NIGERIA POETS****CONTENTS**

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we will study the works of some selected new poets in Nigeria. They are classified as new poets because they fall under the third generation of writers to emerge from Nigeria. However, one of the selected poets here, Hyginus Ekwuazi has been writing poetry for a long time alongside the second generation Nigerian poets like Osundare, Osofisan, Enekwe amongst others but his only collection of poetry *Love Apart* was just published in 2007 by Kraft Books, and hence he falls under the new generation poets in Nigeria. Other works to be used in illustrating this new poetry in Nigeria include: Austyn Njoku's *Night in Lagos* and Akeem Lasisi's *Iremoje*.

**2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the thematic focus of new Nigerian poetry
- appreciate the works of new Nigerian poets
- discuss the style and themes in new Nigerian poetry
- distinguish the new Nigerian poets from the old Nigerian poets
- see the new poets as versatile and broad in scope.

**3.0 MAIN CONTENT****3.1 General Overview**

Writing poetry is a most personal enterprise and hence poets are prone to expressing certain peculiar opinions in defense their works, especially when faced with a criticism that challenges the value of such works. For some Nigerian poets the problem is less of talent than of their indolence and reluctance in undergoing the laborious process of developing their craft. Many critics believed that the third generation writers are hasty. They accuse

them of being too anxious to get published. They ask: how many of the poets of this generation are ready to undergo pain-staking craftsmanship? Every true poet who desires greatness must as of necessity be determined upon a life of poetry - he must be ready to work hard at his art, suffer for it, bleed for it, he must make himself amenable to constructive criticisms and most of all he must be his own bitterest critic.

The question remains: what will the future poets find in the best poets of this generation to admire and emulate? The poetry of every generation the world over has always had some distinctive features that distinguish it from the one of the preceding generation. Are there some distinguishing features peculiar to the poetry of this generation of Nigerian writers? Some critics have also observed that in spite of the increasing chunks of poetry that are being churned out everyday, Nigerian poets are yet to evolve a style that would distinguish them from their predecessors and that there are hardly new trends in the poetry being currently written. They want to imitate the trends of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide. Almost every poet still wants to write in the oral, lyrical fashion of Osundare and Ojaide. There is nothing wrong in being influenced by the great masters of the art of a preceding generation, as Wole Soyinka asserts in his preface to *Poems of Black Africa*:

There is a distinct quality in all great poets that does exercise a ghostly influence in other writers, but this need not to be cause for self- flagellation. The resulting works is judged by its capacity to move ahead or sideways by the thoroughness of ingestion within a new organic mould, by the original strength of the new entity(2)

The renown that the Niyi Osundare generation presently enjoys is a result of its resolve to 'move ahead' from the conservative poetic trends of the poets of Soyinka's generation and evolve its own unique poetry in a new 'organic mould'. The present generation of Nigerian poets has tried to do likewise.

As exceptional as the poetry of Osundare generation is, it still does have some gross weaknesses. It is unfortunate that the poets of the present generation have continued to imitate such styles. Its best poets though very brilliant still have their bilabials lost in the gutturals of the masters, to put it in stricter words, their voices can at best be categorized as self - displaying babels that are yet to evolve into one organic, unmistakable voice that would denominate their generation and distinguish it from the preceding generation. Our poetry should reflect that vastness and endlessness.

We have had poets addressing the so called socio - political ills since the country's independence, yet nothing has changed. There is no way politics can be completely expunged from our poetry, but if we must write about politics let us be more subtle and creative about it. Every student of literature knows that the development of poetry, nay literature, has always followed and maintained fidelity to one unchanging tradition - the tradition of action and reaction, of counter reactions and returns. Thus we have romanticism as a reaction against neo-classicism, modernism as a reaction against Victorianism, etc., and poetry is much the better for it. Why then has the present generation

of Nigerian poets created for itself dark stagnant waters in which it has continued to wallow in the oral traditions of the second generation of Nigerian poets? Why should our contemporary poets continue to write in the aesthetics in whose evolution they had no hand and in which their predecessors have continued to record unsurpassable achievements?

Literary history is a self-pruning process - it prunes poetry to the study of few poets of each generation and it may be that these poets generally regarded as the best of this generation will be studied, Hyginus Ekwuazi, Akeem Lasisi, Ogaga Ifowodo, Uche Uduka, Eberonwu, Obi Nwakama, Remi Raji, Promise Okekwe, Austyn Njoku and others. But this is only a tentative judgment. However ecstatically we praise these poets, the final verdict belongs to the future generation of poets, who will find in some of these poets something to admire and emulate. Every poet worth his salt knows that his poetry will be richer if he submits himself to vast extensive readings; if he makes himself receptive to all poetic trends all over the world, while maintaining a consciousness of his base; if he loosens up his current stilted poetic lines and finally if he embraces all subjects as material for poetry. It is, however, gratifying to note that propitious signs about the development of new Nigerian poetry are already emerging from certain poets. In the freshness of imagery, in the musicality of lines, in the inventiveness of imagination and language these new poets are certainly some of the poets that shall define the aesthetics by which their generation of poets will be enjoyed and remembered by subsequent generations of poets.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Critically discuss the various criticisms against the new Nigerian poetry.

### 3.2 Poetry of Passion: Hyginus Ekwuazi's *Love Apart* (2007)

Hyginus Ekwuazi is a director at the Nigerian Film Institute in Jos. He was a Senior lecturer at the department of Dramatic Arts, University of Ibadan. He has been a well known researcher in the field of dramatic arts, films studies, Nigerian home videos and creative arts generally. He has been writing poetry for the past two decades. His earlier poems were ranked alongside the second generation Nigerian poets like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, and Okinba Launko (Femi Osofisan), amongst others. However, his only collection of poetry *Love Apart* was published in 2007. This collection won two awards: ANA NDDC Prize and Gabriel Okara Prize for literature. The judges commended the poetic novelty in the collection.

In this collection, Hyginus uses a poet persona who passes through series of love experiences to explore issues of human relationship, politics, culture, and the essence of societal growth. *Love Apart* is a poetic journey that grows from innocence to experience where apart from love other aspects of human passionate realities are treated with in- depth poetic essence. According to Ekwuazi in his preface to *Love Apart*:

All I've been leading to is simply this: there are here, like Okigbo would say, the errors of the rendering. I daresay, the amount of such errors here could (should?) be overwhelming. Of course, I'm only too well aware that no amount of polishing/rewriting can completely or, even, substantially, remove them. (6-7)

The poems trace the effects of separation, the obvious effects of living apart after a long time of togetherness. We see the effect of power as one of the obvious causes of separation. We see greed, anarchy and other forms of subjugation which are parts of the errors of the rendering. He sees silence as poetry. Silence is golden when applied with caution and reasoning. In the poem "Those men that prance and dance around you", he attacks those leaders, politicians, military men and other people who have been killing the joy of the helpless populace who dance to the various tones of anarchy permeating the entire system:

the one who would share and share alike the ancient  
throne of his fathers for half your bed...

the one whose carrot stick is a mansion and a million in any currency not the dollar or  
the euro the oil sleek politician false as only a Nigerian butchers scale can be...

*Love Apart* takes careful incursion into the effects of betrayal, lust, denial and rejection. It uses personal relationship as yardstick for measuring communal belief and the need for love which should form the basis for harmony in the society.

## SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Explain the effectiveness of the theme of love in appraising governance in *Love Apart*.

### 3.3 Poetry of the City: Austyn Njoku's *Night in Lagos* (2008)

Austyn Njoku has been in Nigeria's literary sphere for more than two decades. He was a crew staff of the defunct Nigeria Airways, a job which sharpened his interest in literature. Haven travelled to over 20 countries, his contact with people of many races in comparison with his Nigerian life helped so much in making his poetry a unique voice. He writes poetry with individualistic touch. So far, he has written three collections of poetry *I've Been a Crew* (1998), *Scents of Dawn* (2002) and *Night in Lagos* (2008).

Lagos is beyond a mere city. It is a phenomenon: the good, the bad and the ugly. Austyn Njoku's *Night in Lagos* (2008) takes a poetic incursion into the various aspects of Lagos: the sociological, the psychological, the physical and the spiritual. It treats each aspect with much dexterity. In his preface to *Night in Lagos*, Olu Obafemi says: "Talking about commitment and passion, the two most notorious passport of any Nigerian poet, I dare say in our obsolescent Nigerian society today, Austyn Njoku robs soul and body with his contemporary third generation Nigerian writers" Talking about Lagos, the subject of the collection, Obafemi adds: "Osofisan has warned us, in a recent Ibadan Lecture Series, to expect more of literature of anguish, disillusion, delectable sensuality in, hopefully arty forms from Lagos, a new centre of creativity haven seized the baton from Ibadan"(v).

In the beginning of Nigerian written literature, Cyprian Ekwensi began with *People of the City*, a novel which examines the social life of Victorian Lagos. It juxtaposes the new urban passion with the rural beginning of the people. The sad news is that the city, though with everything good, lacks the unity, love and the expected passion for brotherhood. The city in Nigerian literature since then has been a symbol of everything odd. *Night in Lagos* takes a deeper look at these odds of the city using the same Lagos as focus. Most of the poems revolve around the poet's experiences in the city of Lagos where there are marked differences in class and topography. Some questions that come to mind are: why did the poet choose the title *Night in Lagos*? What does night portend for Lagosians? Does Lagos night define uniqueness that the daytime never carries?

In one of the poems entitled "Lagos", he pictures the ugly scenes of dirt, hate, destruction and the labyrinthine: "The sinks solemnly sigh/ At the sight of drab dishes/Swelling their brooding bowels" (2). This verse becomes more realistic with the next poem "Flood Lagos" which tries to question the population explosion in the city. Lagos population, to the poet, "Leaves a mystery yet unraveled" (3). Lagos is one of the most populated cities in the world but the infrastructural development is not as fast as the population increases by the minute. Even in the elite part of Lagos, the Island, the commercialization of the city centre which results in high traffic bothers the poet in the poem "Lagos Island". The poem "Oshodi Oke", pictures the inhuman part of Lagosians. Oshodi bus stop has been described as the busiest bus stop in the world with human traffic of over one million people on a daily basis. In this poem, the poet recalls how a dying man was left unattended to in the bus stop because "They all filed past him/ Like black busy ants/ In a long black procession" (7). Every body is busy in Lagos fighting for greener pastures even at the detriment of love, compassion and charity. It is in the title poem "Night in Lagos" that the poet revealed the horrors of Lagos:

Whispering in the shadows Smooching  
shuffling of flesh Moaning in the corners of  
Allen Grabbing stabbing in Mushin And  
slashing off a head or Simply plucking some  
eyes- Sleeping with serpents in Oshodi  
While private parts fly into thin air!

These are just rhythms of night in Lagos (51)

Each of the poems in this collection examines the state of Lagos in various dimensions as the poet ruminates in awe at every aspect of the city's odds. One is left at the end of the reading with much taught at the height of human carnage, environmental odds, political insincerity, underdevelopment and even spiritual wickedness. Olu Obafemi, in his affirmation of Lagos as a good subject matter in Nigerian literature adds thus:

In Lagos...in the mixture of rancid stench in deodorant fragrance; the ghetto and the super-maul(sic); abjection and opulence; lavish love and searing hate; pain and joy; prey and predation we see the new centre of creative burst of the emerging generation that will lead the light of Nigerian literature by young men and women (iv)

All these and more are captured in *Night in Lagos* in subtle poetic monologue with racy comprehensible images and message.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Explain the sullen images of Lagos as reflected in *Night in Lagos*.

#### 3.4 Ritual Poetry: Akeem Lasisi's *Iremoje* (2001)

Ritual poetry is a type of oral poetry. It is that poetry expressed through the spoken medium. It is much realized when performed. Ritual poetry is a special kind of poetry that originated from the Ijala tradition. Ritual, according to Emeaba (1987) is, "A drama dealing specifically with religious beliefs in godly scenarios. The dramatic personae of most ritual dramas are made to represent gods, deities or spirits. Masks and masquerades are used to represent dead ancestors. The drama relies very much on excessive action and mime with little dialogue." (176) Ritual poetry is, therefore, a type of poetry (with dramatic and/or rhetoric properties) usually performed as a tribute to the dead or a fallen hero. *Iremoje* is a tribute to the late Ken Saro Wiwa and other fallen heroes in Nigeria. More so, Ritual poetry is an art of 'Ijala' tradition, which is a type of Yoruba traditional poetry. 'Ijala' according to Emeaba (1987) is "a poetic composition of lengths varying from between ten and hundreds of lines presented and conforming to specific rules of theme, meter and languages. Ijalas are connected with the legendary traditions of a people especially the Yoruba and accounts for the heroic exploits of Ogun and it is usually performed during annual festivals" (90). According to Akeem Lasisi in his 'Preface to *Iremoje*' (2000):

The Yoruba tradition is a functional art and it is largely event based. "Iremoje", is a strictly specialized form, a valedictory ritual poetry, in honour of dead hunters. Other sub-genus such as Ekun Iyawo, Ijala e.t.c. are identified with ceremonies such as marriages and naming ceremonies. (1)

The Yoruba believe that hunters are great chanters with Ijala being their art-in-trade. But, when one of their ilk passes away, they celebrate his exit with a night of 'Iremoje performance' that invokes his great exploits especially during hunting expeditions; how he gunned down the wildest of hyenas and how he wrestled a buffalo to a standstill. (All these are just indications of what makes him great). More importantly though, is the form which symbolizes "a necessary rite of separation,

the one that serves the lord that binds the deceased and the world and enrolls him into the league of his ancestors, who are believed to be carrying on their hunting business in their new sphere of existence." (Akeem Lasisi, Preface 1). The context and structure of *Iremoje* are 'heavier' than other forms because of its ritual property. It is experimentation in the direction of old venerable tradition. The performance aims at serving the dual purpose of giving Ken Saro Wiwa- the indefatigable environmentalist, dogged human rights activist and accomplished author, who was murderously hanged on November 10, 1995, an immortal remembrance and to entertain using African orature. *Iremoje* is a service of poetry and also the renewal of a dying orature in modern literature.



In Irewoje, Akeem Lasisi makes use of anaphora scheme either through question asking or illustration of a point. This can be illustrated in the following extract:

Ask them:

Ask the snail  
 What it did that ruined its voice; Ask the toad  
 What it did that cut its tail; Ask the tortoise  
 What it did that spoiled its skin; Ask the vulture  
 What it did that fallowed its head; Ask them;  
 Ask the widowed wife of the hilterite weevil  
 Who trampled on the intricate traffic of nature's web? (36)

The repetition of these initial lines gives the poem a songlike quality, as if it is a chorus. It also shows his emotional state. More like rhetorical questions, each of the imperatives creates images of reality and builds up feelings and thoughtfulness. The regular application of the words 'ask' and 'what' brings in a high level rhetoric inquiries whereby the human mind is constantly pushed towards deeper state of thoughtfulness. There is high invocative essence in the application. Anaphora is also a means of regulating the musicality of the poems. The imperative lexical choices build in tension and increase the tempo of the renditions. The fictionality of the reality paves way for truth and practicality. Akeem Lasisi uses some words to express his mind or inner thought. This occurs, not in clear language, but in various local dialects. Thus, the messages of such likes are still not elusive for they could still be understood in the context of application. Such words can be seen as illustrated in the poem below:

The elephant will yet weigh more than a healthy deer  
*Kulu kulu kulu. (46)*

This onomatopoeic choice 'kulu kulu kulu' mimics the heaviness of an elephants exploits. It captures and/or shows how the word formulated illustrates the leaping of the verses. It reveals revered personality and suggests a heavy picture or outburst of reality. The onomatopoeic contour in the choice above shows the overwhelming truth of the war against environmental degradation and the odds of bad politics!

The sparrow wonders kwaai! kwaai!  
 Why the ferocious cruelty of the hunter's gun. (33)

This epitomizes the sounds of anger and pains of the suffering populace.

There is the image of a sparrow croaking with anger at the cruelty of the hunters. The choice of this onomatopoeic lexis shows the place of sounds at capturing reality and at the same time revealing situations. We see 'the sparrows', (innocent common man), being hunted and killed mercilessly by the blood thirsty hunters with their guns (the military men in power). The sound 'kwaai' mimics the word 'cry' and captures the sorrowful experiences of the people.

My poetry is oruku tindi-tindi  
 My poetry is oruku tindi-tindi (45)

Akeem Lasisi blends the local dialects and sounds freely to the extent that the non-Yoruba consumers of this art are forced into it in manner that does not make room for absolute complexities. The choice of this lexical choice of sounds, oruku tindi-tindi, suggests that the entire verse is filled or pregnant with ideas untold. It may also suggest the mysteries of poetry as the little song that reveals the reality of things or the unknown states of man. It also shows that poetry is shrouded in hidden truths, which must be told.

In Irewoje, there are serious attempts at blending African orature with modern poetry. Each blending carries with it a special effect in whole ritual recourse. Each poetic application aims at achieving certain effects which are realizable. They are significant as they embody the ideas of struggle and anarchy as reflected in the life of the hero, Ken Saro Wiwa. The use of local dialects like Ogoni and Yoruba languages adds more oral reality to the verses. As an oral discourse, Irewoje has the effect of realizing the truth of the message with less doubt and this is one way that modern African poets have evolved in domesticating their arts.

#### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4**

Explain the various oral properties in Lasisi's Irewoje.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

There have been these calls for caution to the younger poets in Nigeria. Many critics believe that they are too hasty to publish. In essence, there are over 10,000 poetry collections published within the last two decades in Nigeria especially by the young writers. There are marked prolific outpourings especially in the genre of poetry. Many of these poets write with reasons: to belong to the edified group of writers, to express themselves poetically no matter the weakness in their craft, to get published and be called authors (as most of these works are self published). Many of these writers complained that established publishing outfits reject their manuscripts because they were not known authors like Soyinka, Achebe, Clark, Okara or Osofisan. Prof. Femi Osofisan decided to experiment with a pen name in order to find out whether established publishing outfits would be able to find any substance in his poetry. Fortunately his collection was found publishable and since then he had published several works under the pen name 'Okinba Launko'.

However, these writers: Njoku, Lasisi and Ekwuazi are significant in their arts. Their poetry projects thematic vivacity, stylistic newness and painstaking poetic balance. Each of the poems in the collections treated here reveals a measure commitment to art and humanity. Njoku ponders on the odds of modern Lagos and uses the setting as a micro dissection of the general odds in Nigeria and Africa in general. Lasisi takes a careful incursion into the Yoruba ritual art, using it as a viable too for the revelation of

the draconic governance in Africa while Ekwuazi takes a dive into the emotional and psychological make up of the vast populace of the downtrodden in the Nigerian society. At least, within this sea of insignificant poetry, there are still some good ones to consume.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

The collections of poems treated in this unit are some of the significant poetry of this generation. It is not that there are no other better poets with good poetic skills but the choice here is based on style, theme and time. It is not surprising that all the poets treated here are males. This is because there are fewer female poets in Nigeria today and interestingly they far outweigh the female poets of the other generations. We have such strong female poets as Promise Okekwe, Molar Wood, Unomah Azuah and Angela Nwosu amongst others. They have good poetic skills but most of them are based in Europe and America. However, the male poets far outweigh the female but there seem to be many female novelists and they are than the female poets. The poets treated here are chosen because of the content of their message and their craft. They rank among the best poets in Nigeria today and they constitute a framework for discussing the poetic craft of the generation of Nigerian poets today.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Answer the following questions carefully:

1. Discuss the various critical attacks on modern Nigerian poetry.
2. Explain the major thematic thrust in Njoku's *Night in Lagos*.
3. Assess the function of Ijala ritual in Lasisi's *Iremoje*.
4. Ekwuazi's *Love Apart* is a poetic dissection of Nigeria's trauma. How true is this perception?
5. Distinguish the thematic concern of modern Nigerian poets from their predecessors.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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**UNIT 4 THE NEW NIGERIA NOVELISTS****CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 General Overview
  - 3.2 Political Satire: Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*
  - 3.3 Socio-Political Factor: Helon Habila *Waiting for an Angel*
  - 3.4 Niger-Delta Situation: Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit we shall study the prose fiction of select new Nigerian writers. These writers write about the events that chronicle the experiences of the new Nigerian situation: politics, society, culture, religion etc. Interestingly, most of them are females. These new Nigerian novelists produce artistic works that show that Nigeria has her own history, culture, and civilization. They see their works as a service to their societies. They reveal that Nigerian society had its own contradictions and spiritual crises. Their fictional approach sharply contrasts to the early writers, such as Ekwensi, Achebe, Soyinka, and others, whose artistic works idealize Nigeria. They examine the social situations from the standpoint of class conflict. They use the English language to suit their purposes in fiction writing. We shall select a few of these writers in order to study their message about the new Nigerian situation.

**2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- appreciate the new novelists in Nigeria
- assess the message in the works of these new writers
- contrast their novels with the early writers in terms of themes
- discover the newness in their approach to novel writing
- identify their contributions to the vast African Prose fiction.

### 3.0 MAIN CONTENT

#### 3.1 General Overview

These new writers of novel in Nigeria reveal in their works the traumas of the present age: starvation, torture, oil spillage, environmental pollution, AIDS, murder, cultural odds, religious and political problems. Their tales/images reveal instances of pain and deprivation. Their novels enter the heart by sneak attack. The questions that often trail the minds of their readers are: Why are we so depressed? Is there no joy in our existence? How is it that our best and brightest are not mindful of the end of the machete that hurts our motherland? Regardless, these writers have every reason to be worried about the situation in Nigeria (Africa). The question becomes: What are they doing about it? Many of these writers spend a lot of time painting gory pictures of Nigeria's (Africa's) sorry state. These writers focus on the Nigeria's (continent's) corrupt leaders, warlords, "tribal" conflicts, child laborers, child traffickers and women disfigured by abuse and genital mutilation amongst other issues.

They write to critique and correct the horrible images of Nigeria (Africa) as one giant beggar-continent that will someday be erased when the intellectuals and writers like these millennium writers direct their rage inwards. They believe the African writers and intellectuals can stop feeding the West stories of irredeemable despair that turn Africa into a caricature continent. They believe there is hope, because there is a return to the oral tradition of storytelling by our ancestors and they call this change.

These new writers write for a precocious generation that went through books with the same intensity with which they surf the pages of the Internet. The pressures on these writers of fiction are enormous. Their voices never stopped singing, they delivered story after story, so painstakingly about the odds of the age. As you read their novels, you feel the passion and the love for the word, pulsating through every word; there is a near obsession for perfection that borders on a disability. These new writers focus on the true condition of the country without reducing the land and her people to ridicule.

#### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

These new novelists are engrossed with revealing the totality of Nigeria's ugly state. Discuss this proposition

#### 3.2 Political Satire: Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Kambili, the protagonist in *Purple Hibiscus*, uses the draconic ruling pattern of her father, Chief Eugene Achike, to reveal the problems in the entire Nigerian society. The unnecessary religious conflicts that make Kambili's father to hate Papa Nnukwu; her grand father shows the high-handedness of some African people who use religion as a means of creating discord in their families. Uncle Eugene allows religion to becloud his sense of fellowship with his culture and society. His children must comply with the tenets of Catholicism. It becomes surprising that a man like Chief Eugene Achike who fights

for the political freedom of his people through his journalistic ventures could apply what he attacks in his home. He engages in children and wife battery but criticizes those who batter the society. It looks like denying a phenomenon and embracing it at the same time. A paradox! He celebrates the relief that comes from coups believing that a new government means freedom in sight. He expects freedom but blocks it from his vicinity.

Kambili sees the contrast between her father and the military government when she critically asserts, “of course, Papa told us, the politicians were corrupt..., what we needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. Renewed Democracy. It sounded important, the way he said it...” (25).

This whole dream sounded as if Kambili is expecting a ‘renewed approach’ to the family affairs first before hoping for a renewed governance in the country. Adichie explains that the issue of governance in Africa would change when the individuals begin to examine within themselves the correct approaches to life that would enhance the development of good governance.

Kambili and Jaja never experienced ‘real’ love in their home at Enugu. It was Auntie Ifeoma’s home that provided the needed environment for them to experience love. Jaja falls in love with flowers and other chores. He expresses himself to his cousins. He visits scenes and places and exchanges gifts and experiences. He sees the love of a ‘heathen’ grandfather who tells them moral folk tales and the love of a reverend father who provides the needed atmosphere for peace and joy. Kambili sees the love of a sister who teaches her to cook meals, care for others and accommodate people around her. She ‘falls in love’ with Father Amadi. Father Amadi sees in Kambili the character of a heroine who talks less but acts more in her mind, “she does not waste her energy in picking never-ending arguments. But there is a lot going on in her mind, I can tell.” (173).

Amaka is also a strong voice. She seems to be one of the strongest female voices in our contemporary fiction. Amaka refuses to take an English name for her confirmation because she sees no need for such ‘colonial’ necessity. She was never forced to accept this ‘necessity’. Not even from Father Amadi whose closeness to the family ought to have given the necessary touch for Amaka to choose an English name:

“I told you I am not taking an English name, father,”  
she said  
“And have I asked you why?”  
“Why do I have to?”  
“Because it is the way it’s done. Let’s forget if it’s right or wrong for now,” father Amadi said, and I noticed the shadows under his eyes.  
“When the missionaries first came, they didn’t think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized. Shouldn’t we moving ahead?” (271-272)

Amaka represents the new hope for the coming generation of African women. Amaka seems to be the most vocal of these characters: young, resilient, outspoken and unbending in the things that touch her African pride. Kambili describes her thus: “She walked and talked even faster and with more purpose than Auntie Ifeoma did” (78). She is a rare breed of the new generation of youths. She is creative, accommodating, honest, outspoken and a dogged fighter. Even when Amaka left the country with her mother, she never stops her protests against those things she finds unpalatable in the Nigerian society. Kambili tells us that:

Amaka used to write to the office of the head of state, even the Nigerian Ambassador in America, to complain about the poor state of Nigeria’s justice system. She said nobody acknowledged the letters but still it was important to her that she do something. (300)

Adichie takes a historical stance in the exposition of the travails of military oddities in the novel. Ade Coker fights the military regime through the Standard newspaper. Uncle Eugene sees the fight as his needed role in the correction of military anarchy. Auntie Ifeoma flees the country to the United States in search of peace and academic freedom. Brain drain increases daily. Later, Ade Coker is murdered. Nwankiti Ogechi (a typology for Ken Saro Wiwa) is murdered: Soldiers shot Nwankiti Ogechi in a bush in Minna.

And then they poured acid on his body to melt his flesh off his bones, to kill him even when he was already dead. (200-201)

After this killing, commonwealth countries suspended Nigeria and imposed sanctions. The Big Oga later dies “atop a prostitute, foaming at the mouth and jerking-...” (297). The Big Oga, invariably General Sani Abacha, is revealed as the ending point of Nigeria’s military rule. His death and the death of Uncle Eugene bring in a new hope, a dawn, to the polity. Jaja’s acceptance of the crime of murdering his father, even though his mother had claimed responsibility, shows the yearning of the family to get freedom from the brutal and strict father, just like the needed respite the Nigerian nation experienced with the exit of the dictator, General Sani Abacha. The symbol of the purple hibiscus bringing a new hope in their home is seen in Kambili’s new vision of tomorrow: “I reach out and place my arm around mama’s shoulder and she leans towards me and smiles...The new rains will come soon (307).

## **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

*Purple Hibiscus is the picture of Nigeria at the zenith of anarchy.*  
Explain how Adichie achieved this.

### **3.3 Socio-Political Factor: Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel***

Nigeria in the 1990s, the setting for this novel, was a police state of such sadistic violence, with human rights abuses so staggering, that the country was expelled from the Commonwealth

of Nations, and virtually every other country had sanctions against it. As the author says in the 'Afterword' to this stunning novel, "There was nothing to believe in: the only mission the military rulers had was systematically to loot the national treasury; their only morality was a vicious survivalist agenda in which any hint of disloyalty was ruthlessly crushed." Every hint of dissent and every suspicion of democratic thinking by many of the country's most gifted writers and thinkers were wiped out by the military government of Sani Abacha.

Focusing primarily on Lomba, a journalist and frustrated novelist, who, in the opening chapter is a starving political prisoner in a Lagos jail, author Helon Habila jumps back and forth in time, introducing us in succeeding chapters to the lives of ordinary citizens of Lagos, men and women, including Lomba himself, living on Poverty Street, trying to maintain some semblance of hope in an increasingly hopeless world. Lomba, jailed for two years without a trial as the novel opens, has gone beyond anger, which he describes as "the baffled prisoner's attempt to re-crystallize his slowly dissolving self," and entered "a state of tranquil acceptance" of his fate. When the jailer finds the poems and journal entries he has written and hidden, he persuades Lomba to write some love poems for the better-educated woman he is courting. A brief ray of hope flickers when the woman recognizes Lomba's cryptic messages and comes to the prison to meet him.

The novel then flashes back to the years before Lomba's arrest, and as various episodes unfold, the author shows us the effects of this dictatorial government on the ordinary people who populate the country. Though life is difficult and opportunities almost non-existent, the young people still have hopes and dreams. When Lomba and a friend have their fortunes told by a poet, one of the young men asks to know the day of his death, which he hopes will be "spectacular and momentous," a day he is assured he will know when the time comes—and does. A second friend, whose parents have been killed in a car crash, is so grief-stricken that he makes an intemperate and idealistic speech, then is arrested, severely beaten, and driven insane. With no chance of getting his own novel published, Lomba himself takes a job writing for the Dial, for which he occasionally reports on political demonstrations, one of them a demonstration in which people peacefully protest the neglect of their neighborhood. "We are dying from lack of hope," his friend Joshua says at the demonstration. The unarmed protesters are suddenly attacked by fifty armed riot police, tear gas is exploded, protesters are severely beaten, and running women and children are killed by cars speeding on the adjacent highway.

Because the author presents these episodes in random order, depicting the families, everyday life, and hopes and dreams of the participants, the reader easily imagines what life must have been like during this time and can envision what his/her own life might have been under the same circumstances. But Habila adds further reality to his depictions of life in Nigeria under Sani Abacha by including some well-known historical events and their effects on Lomba and the fictional characters: the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa, the killing of Dele Giwa, the editor of Newswatch magazine, by a letter bomb, and the shooting of the wife of Abiola, the opponent of Abacha who was jailed simply for challenging him.



In one of the most telling episodes in the novel, Lomba goes to a party and meets the writers and poets of Lagos. A man introduces himself to him, saying, "Hi, I am Helon Habila." Suddenly, the reader realizes how much of this novel may be autobiographical, a factor which makes the drama of the story even more intense. We know from the author's biography that he once held the same job as Lomba and that he is now living in London. What we do not know is how many of the other realistically presented events may also be true. The reader may wonder how he knows so much about life under sadistic jailers in the prisons of Lagos, though no one will doubt the accuracy of his descriptions.

Because the chronological ending--Lomba's imprisonment--appears as the first chapter, the reader experiences a sense of déjà vu throughout the reading of the novel, as the action backtracks, forcing the reader to experience the events which led up to the opening chapter and to wonder if anything could have prevented Lomba's eventual imprisonment. Habila makes us think, ponder the fragility of democratic institutions which we take for granted, and explore how the slow erosion of rights can lead to the rise of dictators who seize absolute power to continue their rule. Though the drama and violence are presented with almost journalistic clarity, the novel's emotion is engendered by our identification with the characters and our ability to understand that these are people not much different from ourselves, people who through no fault of their own have become victims of circumstance and the power of a military controlled by one man.

Habila's novel is a powerful defense of the freedom of the press and a celebration of the lives of those courageous writers who have refused to be silenced, even when faced with death. As he says, "Every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there'll be revolt. That is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it." This moving study of idealistic young people refusing to give up, even when faced with threats to their very lives, is an unforgettable story of the human spirit waiting for an angel--and sometimes meeting the Angel of Death.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Discuss the themes of political odds and military dictatorship in *Waiting for an Angel*.

#### 3.4 Niger Delta Situation: Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow*

Kaine Agary claimed that he was inspired by Saro-Wiwa's book entitled *A Month and a Day in writing the novel. Yellow-Yellow was the first* novel of Kaine Agary, who grew up in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The honour was to reflect the relevance of the book on how literatures have been used to illuminate the Niger Delta question. Kaine was in the United States of America for a while before relocating to Lagos. *Yellow-Yellow was all about a young biracial girl, Zilayefa, who was born of a Nigerian mother and a Greek sailor, who left her rustic existence and the protective grip of her mother in the village in search of a better life in the city of Port Harcourt.*

With a recommendation from her pastor, Zilayefa, the main character in the book, took in and was cared for by an elderly biracial woman, Sisi, and her friend, Lolo. She was thrust into the bustling city of Port Harcourt, unprepared for the pitfalls awaiting a young girl so unsure of herself and also in desperate need of direction.

She was confronted by prejudices against her racial identity. Zilayefa joined the fast Port Harcourt life, coloured by the presence of expatriates in the oil sector and declining societal values during a military regime.

She struggled with accepting the void left by not knowing her father and tried to fill that void with the attention of an older lover. Through her budding sexuality experiences, Zilayefa grew to a higher level of knowledge and understanding. Yellow-Yellow portrayed life and culture in the Niger Delta through the eyes of Zilayefa when she struggled with development of her identity. It revealed a portrait of beauty and social destruction of the Nigerian Niger Delta, giving a picture and a human face to the hardships of the people.

At the early chapters of the book, the author reflected the menace of oil spillage on hectares of farmland that was supposed to be cultivated for food production. The villagers constituted a pressure group to fight against oppression especially from the foreigners, who were operators of the oil companies that laid their oil pipes in the village. They reported the case to the village head for immediate rescue. Some were crying, others were agitating for compensation. The crude oil, as reported by the author, spread out and covered more land and drowned small animals in its path. The air was polluted with bad smell from crude oil and decaying animals. Men and women were covered knee-deep in the crude oil.

The oil company rejected the accusation, declaring a suspect sabotage of the youth in the village. They insisted on not paying any compensation for all the destruction the burst pipes had caused. Many people lost their main source of sustenance to the spillage including the author's mother. Women rowed their canoes farther away to find land for farming. Every year, it was hard to catch fish. It was contrary to the early days of the author's mother when every husband was expected to give his new wife a dugout canoe he had carved out and crafted himself. The wife would use the canoe to fish, earn a living and help to feed the family. The big boys carved out decorative paddles that carried the legends of the Ijaws in every curve.

Sisi, who took care of Zilayefa, stopped schooling at primary six level. She was exposed to all influences that converged on Port Harcourt before Nigeria's Independence from the British. She used the exposure to get contracts for construction and food supply in government hospitals. She was good with creative ideas for projects she was selling to the procurement officers of the establishment. She was involved in the supply of toilet papers and leasing of pick-up trucks. She was the only woman who got contracts from oil companies. At the concluding chapters of the book, the author reviewed how young girls, who wanted to escape poverty, were looking up to white men to rescue them. Girls were trooping into hotel lobbies at Warri and Bonny, looking for how to attach themselves with the white men. There were people on contract, linking up good looking young girls with prospective white men. On one of such night cruises, Zilayefa met Sergio, his former jilted lover whom she thought was one of those hanging out for young girls.

There have been different reactions over the quality of artworks compiled in *Yellow-Yellow* by its author, which made it to gain such befitting recognition at a first trial. *Yellow-Yellow* takes us on an amazing journey through the Delta region of Nigeria: our guide is a young woman trying to find herself seeking her fortune in a big city, a city hungry to swallow her soul and spit out her jaded hollow shell. It is a truly authentic narrative of a region, the burden of its incredible wealth and a young woman's determination to carry it. This literary gem is a must read.

#### **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 4**

The Niger-Delta region in Nigeria is a focus of attention because of environmental degradation. How successful is Agary's treatment of the issue in *Yellow Yellow*?

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The new Nigerian novel is based on contemporary human experiences in order to remain relevant. One fundamental character of the contemporary Nigerian novel is that it provides a specific manner of narration which identifies and assumes human names in such a way that suggests that they are to be regarded as individuals in the contemporary society. The new Nigerian novel becomes an exploration of the personality as it is defined in the interpretation of its past and present self-awareness. The mark of true realism therefore, is the depiction of an age as individuals' experience and the bourgeois exploration of the individual's experience reaches its highest form when this individual is not a fragmentary experience but the quintessential representation of a particular historical and social experience. The political life of a nation and its social-national dilemma is thus depicted through an individual experience, the individual himself being shaped by the socio-economic circumstances in which he finds himself. These writers reveal social cohesion or social consciousness. They reveal new interests and experiences in their crafts of fiction. Their novels are constantly interrupted in the effort to maintain and expand contemporary artistic activities and institutions in the face of their country's problems and a general sapping of energy and initiative.

#### **5.0 SUMMARY**

The new Nigerian fiction writers are producing artistic works that show that Nigeria (Africa) had its own history, culture, and civilization. These writers apply pathos and emotive power of their works to instigate the oppressors in their societies and to initiate a political and economic reorganization of their society in the interest of the oppressed. However, some critics maintain that the intentions (of the pathos and bitterness of these novels) are to whip the emotions of the people into revolutionary action. The artistic forms reflect the ideological content, for these writers use satire and ridicule as corrective narrative techniques to enlighten their society morally. The despair that pervades these works, which portray the oppressed as trapped and helpless, arises in the writers' political misunderstanding. These new Nigerian fiction writers have no choice but to join in the people's struggle for survival. In that situation, they will have to confront the ruling elites whose services are not beneficial to all. These writers apply the real language of struggle in the actions and speeches of their people, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves.

**6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT**

Answer these questions:

1. The new novelists reveal every ugly thing that hinders Nigeria's development. Explain how they achieve this.
2. *Purple Hibiscus* touches on the odds of militarism in Nigeria. Discuss the thematic concerns in the novel.
3. Discuss the blend of politics and social trauma in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*.
4. There are vast social and environmental traumas in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. Carefully discuss how Agary revealed this in *Yellow*.
5. Compare and contrast the thematic thrust of the new fiction writers with their predecessors.

**7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS**

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**UNIT 5 THE NEW NIGERIAN PLAYWRIGHTS****CONTENTS**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Objectives
- 3.0 Main Content
  - 3.1 General Overview
  - 3.2 Political Drama: Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit*
  - 3.3 Historical Drama: Ahmed Yerima's *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen* (1997)
  - 3.4 A New Theory: Sam Ukala's Folkist *Dramatic Theory*
- 4.0 Conclusion
- 5.0 Summary
- 6.0 Tutor-Marked Assignment
- 7.0 References/Further Readings

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this unit, we will study some new plays that reflect different forms from what has been in the years before. The theatrical practices of Soyinka and Clark among others in the first generation dramatists in Nigeria reflect the basic imitative patterns of Europe and America. Their plays juxtaposed the African thoughts in Europeans style of art. However, the new playwrights have often evolved something different from their predecessors. They exploit African beliefs, environment, art, and life in the creation of new forms of theatre. For instance, Ahmed Yerima, has written plays utilizing the Nigerian historical and mythical experiences covering almost all the ethnic divides. Sam Ukala propounded the theory of Folkist theatre. It is a theatrical form of drama using the folktale tradition as yardstick. Their plays reflect new forms of theatricality.

**2.0 OBJECTIVES**

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the new forms of theater in Nigeria;
- appreciate the new forms in terms of their relevance;
- distinguish the old forms of drama from the new forms;
- discuss the new theatrical forms and their contributions to Nigerian literature; and
- accept that the new playwrights have unique ways of expressing their arts.

**3.0 MAIN CONTENT****3.1 General Overview**

In Nigeria, theatre is a reflection of life. Right from the pre-colonial, pre-literate days, it has been in existence and it is reflected in the people's festivals, rituals, mythology and other forms of social engagements. The typical African is bound to frown on theatre as entertainment

because, to him, it transcends that. It is a medium through which he reaches out to, or better still, courts the supernatural world and certain enigmatic developments or phenomena of life in order to transcend them. However, the African man's contact with the colonial world has eroded some of the importance attached to certain African values. Exposure to education and other seemingly more refined religious practices has diminished, significantly, the importance that was once attached to certain beliefs and notions. Today, the story has changed. Nigerian playwrights in the years before and immediately after independence wrote to correct certain misconceptions about her people. Others wrote to magnify and eulogize those aspects of the Nigerian culture that promote good will and social harmony.

Wole Soyinka, no doubt, is a master of his art. He has commanded attention, both at home and abroad. His literary activities cut across the diverse genres of literary writing. When, in 1986, he won the laureate, not too many people were taken unawares. Since Soyinka, however, a good number of literary activities both in writing and performance have taken place in the Nigerian society – major playwrights and theatre practitioners whose work cannot just be wished away, have emerged. Foremost among the emergent playwrights is Femi Osofisan, who has been widely acclaimed as the next literary giant that the Nigerian literary society is producing after Soyinka. Other pronounced and highly acclaimed dramatists and theatre arts practitioners who are coeval with Femi Osofisan include Ola Rotimi, Bode Sowande, Zulu Sofola, Tunde Fatunde, Wale Ogunyemi, Olu Obafemi, Bode Osanyin, Ben Tomoloju, Sam Ukala, Tess Onwueme and a host of others. These are all theatre arts dramatists and practitioners who have caused ripples in recent Nigerian theatre history. Not any one of the aforementioned has less than a dozen published plays – and they are still writing and publishing.

Femi Osofisan is famed for plays like *Morountodun*, *No More the Wasted Breed*, *Midnight Hotel*, *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen*, *Midnight Blackout*, *Once Upon 4 Robbers*, *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*, *Another Raft and a host of others*. In his repertory are about fifty published plays. He continues to write and publish. He is, perhaps, the most performed playwright in Nigeria today. A folklorist dramatist, Femi Osofisan approaches the diverse problems that confront man in his society, in parables and song. His language is easy to comprehend and his style amenable to different tastes and experiments. The fluidity of his style of writing makes virtually all of his works the choice of theatre houses both within and outside the academia.

Ola Rotimi is reputed for his lingual experimentations; profoundly conscious of the multilingual nature of the Nigerian society, Rotimi puts forward a kind of theatre play that would meet the yearnings of all major ethnic groupings in the Nigerian society. In plays like *Hopes of the Living Dead and If... A Tragedy of the Ruled*, this becomes immediately obvious. Hitherto, influences on Rotimi at the early stage of his literary writings are traceable to the Classical and the absurdist traditions. One is, therefore, not surprised that his earlier plays like *The Gods are not to Blame and Holding Talks* follow these great theatre traditions. Perhaps aware that these traditions did not meet the social and political immediacy which his art was later to command, he turned a little bit to the left in his later plays. His *Man Talk*, *Woman Talk* and *Tororo* are more of social commentaries on the Nigerian situation while his comedy, *Our Husband has gone Mad Again* is more of a political satire – a grotesque revelation of happenings within the continent's political landscape even years after political independence had been achieved.

Zulu Sofola is an indisputable neo-Classical writer. Most of her plays are modeled along the Classical concept of tragedy. She adopts this approach in plays like *Wedlock of the gods* and *King Emene* among others, to reprimand man for his hubris. Man, she contends, will always be brought back to where he truly belongs as long as pride remains in him. However, Sofola's later plays like *The Sweet Trap* and *Song of a Maiden* are a radical departure from the tradition which she has always adored. Respectively, the two plays deal with the woman question and where she truly belongs in the society in a radically different manner. One would have expected Zulu Sofola, a frontline woman leader, activist and female writer, to use her plays to propagate the ideals of womanhood and then scream equality or women liberation from the roof-tops the way some contemporary feminist writers and performing artists are wont to do, but no; this is not to be with a Sofola. She insists that though women should possess certain rights in the society, feminism, as presently advocated and propagated, which places the woman at par with her male folk would, definitely, not make for a good social equilibrium. A woman should aspire to any height in the society in her numerous endeavours and she is free to possess limitless ambitions but this should not make her blind to the realities of her existence; she should assist her husband to build a better society, not dictate to him. She can pursue her ambitions and yet maintain her position at home as the officer in-charge of domestic affairs. The man is expected to support his wife and encourage her of her dreams, not lord things over her. This is the panacea for the present turbulence in contemporary society. Instead of feminism, as is currently being trumpeted, therefore, womanism should be advocated. Feminism is antithetical to the spirit of the African woman.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

Carefully discuss the background to Nigerian theatre practice that led to the present new forms.

### 3.2 Political Drama: Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit*

Niyi Osundare is better known as a poet. He is one of the finest poets from Nigeria for the past two decades. *The State Visit* is his first play. It is a Stage Drama published by Kraft Books in 2002 but first performed by The Creativity Workshop at the Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan in 1997. The genre chosen for expression by the writer is a sartorial comedy. The play is a satirical attack on the political odds in Nigeria. Many Nigerian playwrights consider it a point of social responsibility to discuss the issue of the excesses of the military leaders and Osundare is no exception. Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*, Wole Oguntokun's *Who's Afraid of Wole Soyinka?* and Deji Toyé's *Botching of a Brute* are some examples of plays attacking the excesses of the military in Nigeria.

The location is the fictional Yanke, which appears to be a thin veil for Nigeria itself and the antagonists are the ruler of the country simply known as "Head" and his entire cabinet of ministers. The Head and his ministers prepare for a state visit by a ruler of a neighbouring country, Wilama, hence the title of the drama, a visitor known by many names including the "Son of the Leopard, Descendant of the Towering Giraffe, Offshoot of a warrior family..." among many others.

The cabinet of Yanke, an obsequious crew that follows its leader, the Hyena of Yanke to the point of absurdity in his various schemes are given curious characters by the playwright bordering on the farcical. The Minister in charge of Public Morality is female but spends time engaging in touching and being touched in sensitive areas of her body by the Minister of Agriculture, all these taking place during cabinet meetings. It appears the Minister of Agriculture whose ministry is deprived of money designed to keep the masses from starvation is a form of the former Roman Emperor Nero who fiddled as Rome burnt. This minister has no problem with the impending starvation but finds the threat of hunger to the people amusing. The Minister simply known as "Agric" says: "What future are you talking about?" The future is not the problem now. When it comes, it will take care of itself. Let us eat and be merry today. Why should we bother about tomorrow? You can only grab what you see."

The Minister of External Affairs is lent more intelligence than the entirety of the cabinet combined, indicating to the reader that sometimes, the dictator-rulers of Africa often add members of the intelligentsia and academia to their ranks, people who should know better but instead become willing aides in the continuous pillaging of the African continent.

The voice of conscience in the cabinet of Yanke's government is the Minister of finance who makes his opposition known to his fellow cabinet members and the Head of Yanke. He then walks out on the cabinet and is replaced by a more unscrupulous and opportunistic Finance minister. It is unlikely that in reality, any finance minister could state his opposition plainly to a ruler like the Head. Opposition is not accepted lightly by people of this ilk, is regarded as a personal affront and extreme and final steps are taken against those regarded as disloyal. Sanni Abacha of Nigeria (who appears to be the Head) and Idi Amin Dada of Uganda are examples of the reactions of maniacs in power.

There is an official journalist for the Head and his ministers and the extremes gone to, so as to be perfect in the pictures taken are absurd, ridiculing the entire cabinet. It appears that the main pattern of satirizing the excesses of African and particularly Nigerian leaders is farce. The journalist represents those that fiercely opposed the Head but who were bought over by subtle threats and the largesse given by the government to those it tries to silence. The question to be asked here is, "Does everyone have a prize?"

Even today, in modern day Nigeria, it is obvious that parallels may be drawn between the cabinet of Yanke, deaf to the entreaties and sufferings of its people and the ruling government in Modern day Nigeria peppered with members of the ruling political parties. The discontented people of Yanke are represented by a selection of beggars, students, workers and a discontented painter who refuses to use his skills for preparing for the visit of the neighbouring ruler. The beggars tell their own stories of how they have been betrayed by the state, left to fend for themselves in extreme deprivation. It is obvious that Yanke is a failed state, lacking all forms of welfare for its people and the similarity to the Nigerian situation is extremely disturbing to this reader.



One of the beggars becomes an alms-receiver as a result of an accident with a piano he was helping to unload. The Piano itself, an instrument of cultural enlightenment meant for his master's daughter, falls on him as he helps with the unloading, and causes him the use of his limbs. The master, representing the upper class does not see to his welfare and subsequently he becomes a beggar. The symbolism of the piano as an instrument of subjection and repression is a striking one. The painter (or creative person) who refuses to work for the Lion of Yanke fearlessly calls the entire cabinet derogatory names to their faces. He refers to them as tyrants and vampires but the Head chooses to remain obtuse, not understanding what is being said. When the cabinet finally realizes the "artistic" insults of the painter, the ensuing rage costs the painter his life.

*The State Visit does not take place; at least in the play as the people violently resist the excesses of the Lion of Yanke. The Narrator is left to finish the story in the end, saying that "Yanke will never be the same again" and indeed the songs of opposition are heard continuing despite the deaths of several citizens at the hands of the law enforcement agents of Yanke. The Narrator who set us on the path to an understanding of the play ends the performance and it appears as if the future of Yanke is in the hands of the people and whether they will choose to react or be silent. One wonders if this is a call to revolution by the playwright. For those who might think all revolutions are calls to anarchy, we must remember that we have seen the success of a rose revolution where no shots were fired but where the people took back the reins of government from undeserving leaders.*

The writer seems to be comfortable with a didactic approach, one where lessons are taught and learned and indeed the entire play through its Narrator, plot, twists and the development of its characters teaches moral development all the way. The helplessness and frustration of the citizens in the country today are well thought out and a way out is revealed by the playwright. The people must speak up and reclaim what is theirs or die in the throes of tyranny.

## **SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2**

Carefully assess Osundare's exposition of military dictatorship in *The State Visit*.

### **3.3 Historical Drama: Ahmed Yerima's *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen* (1997)**

*The Trials by Ahmed Yerima is another historical version of the great punitive invasion of Benin and The Trial of the Chiefs who killed White men in the Phillips party. Unlike the two plays above, this play starts with Ovonramwen telling his own story with a melancholic anger: Here I am seated in my glory... how can I discredit myself when the truth is that the story will never be written well if I don't tell you myself... the white men. He desired my Empire and envied my position and wanted my throne... (19) The overzealousness of the Acting Consul-General Phillips is the next dramatic action and this dialogue of his below expresses the desire of the British Empire: There you are. The great Benin Empire, I need you... you*

extend to Otun in the north, Asaba in the east, and Lagos in the west. The British Empire must have you in order to have the whole Niger area under its grasp. And it must be now... (21)

Phillips' action negates the advice given to him by District Commissioner Burrows, who says that the intelligence report from Eyebokan (one of their moles in Oba's palace) did not recommend them to enter Benin at that time, especially when the Oba and his people were celebrating one of their sacred festivals. However, Phillips insists on entering Benin because of his own inordinate ambition, "I must take Benin for the glory of the British Empire and mine." In an overlapping order the following scenario makes *The Trials a captivating play: Ologbosere, Ovonramwen's father-in law*, builds his loyalty on the Oba, the oracle of Uhe's warning and the inevitability of the destruction of Benin city, Obaseki and Omatshola also report to the Oba the situation at Warri with Ovonramwen expressing his suspicion and doubt of the integrity of Obaseki about state affairs, Eyebokan delivers Phillips' message of his intended visit as regards the Trade Treaty, the chiefs of Benin discuss the issue of the uninvited visitors and the need for them not to visit Benin, Uzazakpo recounts his dream to Ovonramwen and how the colour of the white-man frightens him the dramatic conflict of the play becomes visible when Ovonramwen demands the white men and Ologbosere says that, "Dead, we killed the white men". Obiro, the Court Seer, informs Ovonramwen that he cannot do anything to avert the impending disaster, Ovonramwen also warns Iyase to be a good umpire for he hears through Obiro that: "... My son Aiguobasimwin in a wrestling contest with an older wrestler, the prize was my crown" (56). Obaseki's supposed classical betrayal of the Benin people becomes exposed through his discussion with Carter in the play after the fall of Benin:

Obaseki: Not enough

Carter: What do you need then?

Obaseki: Some authority. I need something new. Some powers so that he can believe me. The Oba must know that when I am talking to him it is with power...

Carter: I see your point. Then you must go as a representative of Her Majesty's government.

Obaseki: Yes. Very good

As the most senior Bini man with British Empire here in Bini Country. (60) Consul-General Moor is the judge and the prosecutor in the Trial Scene with Obaseki supporting every move of the British Officers in the trial. Ovonramwen makes obeisance to the British Monarch without his crown, which he gives to Chief Obaseki in trust. Idiaghe dies in the play for telling lies against the Oba and Chief Obaiuwana commits suicide after he is arrested during the trial. Moor finally delivers his judgment:

Yes. Let it be entered that... the Oba did not order the massacre. Let Ologbosheri, Obaradesagbon, Uso, Obakhavbaye and Ugiade guilty and hereby sentences them to death. (77)

Ovonramwen is dethroned and banished to Calabar and he ends the play that he starts by accepting the fate that befalls him:... Take me whiteman. Take me...For the love of Bini, Take me...To the royal valley...Where the gods await their sacrifice. (79)

The theme of this play includes; overweening ambition, conspiracy, deceit, disloyalty, disobedience, partiality and fate. The text explicitly create practical impressions about the story of Oba Ovonramwen; the political scenario that leads to the massacre of the Phillips Party, the great invasion, the celebration of the Igue festival, the warning of the oracle of Uhe, the intrigue and deceit that follow the coronation of Ovonramwen, Ologbosere's unflinching patriotism and loyalty to the Benin Kingdom and their Oba, Phillips' overzealousness, the big trial and the revenge tragedy that follows it and the subsequent banishment and dethronement of Ovonramwen to Calabar. Throughout the play, Ovonramwen is presented as a strong defender of tradition who also understands the scheming of the British Monarch to gain control over his kingdom as the stronger Empires and Kingdoms have fallen honourably to the British Government. With caution, however, he strongly warns his people to protect the white men against any form of intimidation or attack: The ceremony must wait... I shall see them... you follow Eyebokan to the camp of the white men. See their leader called Phillips. Tell him that I shall receive him. Eyebokan, how many white men are in the party? (The Trials... 37) Ovonramwen's diplomatic overtures are at variance with the overzealousness of the white men who think that Benin must fall if the entire Niger-Delta area must be under their firm control.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Comment on the historical accuracy in the play *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*.

#### 3.4 A New Theory: Sam Ukala's *Folkist Dramatic Theory*

Sam Ukala is well known literary scholar, theater arts practitioner and dramatic theorist. He has written several known plays where his theory of folkism is put to practice. Some of his popular plays include *The Slave Wife*, *Akpakaland*, *The Log in your Eyes*, *The placenta of Death* etc. Ukala's thought provoking essay, "Oral Literature, Development and National Integration" is a confirmation of his firm standing that the developmental potentials of our oral traditional literature have not been fully and properly explored and exploited by contemporary Nigeria. It is, therefore, a seeming extension of the argument of the earlier considered "Literature and Governance" and a further authentication of Ukala's strong belief that a recourse to the oral traditions is one effective panacea to Nigeria's multi-varied problems as a nation. A curious statement made by Ukala in the two essays reviewed so far is that an enduring ideological standpoint should be relevant to a vast array of issues within and outside a discipline, and, even more importantly, should proffer solutions to humanity's many problems. These essays are, by and large, a certification of the fact that a subscription to the folk resonates in most of Ukala's writings, as stated earlier in this paper.

Ukala holds that the oral traditional art forms should be desperately deployed to put aright everything written literature which its imperialist backgrounds and negative aftermaths have destroyed in Africa. The above opinion is founded on Ukala's conviction, that "Western

literature was the tool by which the African mind was shackled by the colonialists.” With the example of Ika folktales, Kwagh-hir stories, the masquerade performances of the Efik, the Kwa, the Ibibio, the Egugu of Illah, the Ikaki masquerade of the Kalabari and the oral poetry of various traditional societies of Africa, Ukala is able to prove that oral literature could provide the escape route for Nigeria from its many socio-political and economic woes.

In this essay too, he reminds us that this formula has worked for both the French and the Russians. In the final analysis, he recommends: "Nigerian government should take a cue from France and Russia and champion the renaissance of Nigerian oral literature and, thereafter, encourage Nigerian writers to reinvent modern Nigerian literature with a view to making it perform among its audience the same roles performed by oral literature among the rural populace. The governments, through their ministries of Arts, Culture and Tourism, must tackle the great task..."

Unarguably, Sam Ukala's most remarkable and enduring contribution to literary/dramatic scholarship in Nigeria (Africa) is his theoretical postulation of "folkism" which according to him is, "the tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture, and concerns of the folk... and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale." This theoretical framework, which has been given flesh in some of his plays, most notably, the hugely popular *Akpakaland*, has negotiated a high rating for Ukala among African scholars of the theatre, as he joins the exclusive league of literary theorists who have demonstrated enormous commitment to the job of carving a new authentic aesthetic identity for African literature.

Thus, Ukala must have satisfied a major craving of African literature, especially as most articulately outlined by the redoubtable critic of African literature, Professor Charles E. Nnolim: ... the task facing all of us in the 80's (is) to build up carefully and painstakingly a poetics, a theory of African literature. We need a scholar or a group of scholars with the synthesizing mind of an Aristotle to build for us a poetics of African literature whose uniqueness is no longer a matter for debate, whose vital juices are fed with uniquely African orature.

Thus, Ukala's success with the seminal essay "Folkism: Towards a National Aesthetic Principle For Nigerian Dramaturgy" in the context of African literature tallies with the accomplishments of fellow dramatic theorists, Wole Soyinka (*Myth, Literature and the African World*), Biodun Jeyifo (*The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*), poetry critic, Sunday Anozie, (Christopher Okigbo: *Creative Rhetoric*), occidentalist Chinweizu, Ihechukwu Madubuike and Onwuchekwa Jemie (*Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*) and prose critic Ernest Emenyonu (*The Rise of the Igbo Novel*).

From all indications, Ukala intends the theory of Folkism to fill a vital lacuna in African drama—that that has to do with making African drama more audience-friendly and, consequently, more effective in helping to combat Nigeria's socio-economic and political problems. Folkism appears inspired by what Ukala has identified as fundamental lapses in the dramaturgy of Nigeria's most prominent playwrights- Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and J.P. Clark. He charges Soyinka and Clark with dabbling in unnecessary esoterism and abstraction, and Osofisan with a

misdirected manipulation of myth, especially, the Moremi in *Morountodun*.

Against the backdrop of what Ukala perceives as dramatic miscalculations, he recommends the concept of “folkism”, an aesthetic direction which seeks to impress the cruciality of the resources of the traditional African folktale on African drama. He says: “Apart from the Africa folktale’s capacity for clear communication and its popularity among the folk, there are other reasons why it should provide a matrix for folkism. The folktale and the literary play are narratives, ultimately realized in performance.”

Both are largely secular- unlike most African ritual and festival performances- and also temporal, mimetic, interpretative, and synthetic. Perhaps, to validate Ukala’s concern for the folk in African theatre, one has to mention that certain other scholars of the African theatre share in the sensibility of operating a literary drama institution that carries the entirety of the people along.

### SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 3

Folkism is a blend of folktale in dramaturgy. Discuss the folktale narrator as a one man theatre

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

The new playwrights write and perform committed arts. They write and act for correction. They reveal the image and function of the writer as griot and raconteur, the sole characteristics of which they are practitioners. Indeed many of the dramatists of the 'new generation' tell Africa's story in costume, sound, mime and movement in a manner whose physical representation forcibly engages the consciousness. There is a radical, even revolutionary project, a robust belief that the theatre is not just a house of speeches and props, but also a battleground for contending images and ideas. Wole Soyinka remains an enormous and highly seminal influence. But for the generation after him he has been both a venerable model and fertile point of departure. Thus, he is many ways the relationship of the 'new' generation to Soyinka's dramaturgy has been somewhat problematic. The plays treated here under the new generation playwrights represent the thematic and the stylistic forms of this age. Osundare takes a punch at the odds of politics, militarism and parochialism which are the major thematic concern of the playwrights of this time. Yerima’s *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* represents the vast historical plays which the playwrights have been enacting. However, there are no dramatist theorist within the new generation range except Sam Ukala and a few others. They are more concerned with acting than with theorizing. Thus, Sam Ukala’s ‘Folkist theory’ is a welcome contribution to this new playwrights’ artistic development.

## 5.0 SUMMARY

In the 'new generation' drama, history re-connects with mythology and a reinterpretation of both yields a reality which provides a handle on the present and the future. This is evident in the plays under study here. In *The State Visit*, we Osundare’s reenactment of history in a fiction form.

We see the playwright's attempt at using history in the presenting of Nigeria's past and future impediments. Yerima's *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* is a continuation of anti-colonial attacks on the after effects of colonialism in Africa. Using the conquest of Benin kingdom, he makes a case for carefulness in the way and manner; Africans assume and adopt those things that impinge on the development of Africa. Ukala's theory of folkism is like an oasis in this dry theoryless generation. Ukala's theory has influenced several plays the way Soyinka influenced his contemporaries.

## 6.0 TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

Answer the following questions carefully:

- 1 .Explain the major thrusts of the new playwrights in Nigeria.
- 2 .Discuss the presentation of dictatorship in Osundare's *The State Visit*.
3. Assess Yerima's *The Trials* as anti-colonial play in the new spirit.
4. Theories guide creativity. Trace the influence of Ukala's 'Folkist' theory in the plays of the new playwrights.
5. Using any other play of your choice, discuss the use of new forms in the new plays from Nigeria.

## 7.0 REFERENCES/FURTHER READINGS

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