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A Re-assessment of Generationalizations in Nigerian Literature: The Generationalizations Palaver

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Abstract
Nigerian literature is currently being 'besieged' by an emerging phenomenon: the generational palaver. Our motivation for writing this paper is to draw attention to, as well as interrogate, the undue classification of Nigerian literature into generations of writers. We argue against the unhealthy practice, as such generationalization hinders the appreciation of writers' creative utilization of the resources of language in narrating Nigeria's peculiar experience, tends to disconnect the present from the past, and fails to observe that in reality the present is a reflection of the past. Even though it is thought in certain quarters that generationalization is a critical attempt to mark such developments, we will soon clarify that generationalization hinders the bond of continuity in terms of understanding the linguistic modality and thematic similarity Nigerian writers have shared over the years.

Introduction
The aim in this article is to interrogate the undue division of Nigerian literature and its writers into generations. Generations/'generationalization,' as used in this article, describes the act in which Nigerian writers are grouped and studied according to their time of birth, time of publication, shared thematic interests, ideology and linguistic style.

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The expression 'Nigerian literature' is preferred because we are in this article concerned with Nigerian literature. Conceptualizing the 'Nigerianness' of Nigerian literature, Wendy Griswold writes that Nigerian literature 'has developed in conjunction with the country itself' (12) not with other African countries. In a similar tone, Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Oyerionwu say that Nigerian literature is 'a body of creative writing that has kept faith with the experiences, occurrences, events, fortunes and misfortunes, dreams and aspirations, feelings and emotions and ways of life of a geographical and political location known as Nigeria' (54-55). Corroborating this position, Romanus Aboh maintains elsewhere that, 'What makes Nigerian literature distinctly Nigerian is one's inability to separate it from the everyday experiences of Nigerians. These experiences are ingrained in Nigerians such that even in diaspora, as they write, this 'Nigerianness' stems up like an un-pacified ghost haunting its killers' (37). Accordingly, Nigerian literature has all the trappings of the ways of life of a people known as Nigerians; it is an archive of Nigeria as a country and her metamorphic transition from precolonialism through colonialism to nationhood, or neocolonialism.

Our focus in this article, therefore, is to examine the many generationalization terms that have been associated with dividing of Nigerian literature into generations. Also we propose an alternative approach, based, for example on thematic reflection of events, linguistic differences and similarities and development. There are, of course, the older approaches: social-functionalist and structuralist. But the central point in this article is to prove that generations do not exist in Nigerian literature. Our analysis will be supported with examples from prose fiction and poetry.

Generationalization Palaver

In undertaking this study, our effort is inspired by James Tar Tsaaior's assertion that 'there is a sticky and knotty generational problem in African poetry' (129), and also Harry Garuba's remark that, 'The term 'generations' has been adopted in Nigeria in describing – not

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demarcating – the positioning of one group of poets to another. Thus we now have a first generation of poets, a second, a third, and so on' (53). This generational puzzle remains unknotted until now, as years after Garuba's and Tsaaior's clarifications, critics have continued to use the 'ambiguous and unstable' expression 'generation' to describe Nigerian writers and writing. Babatunde Ayeleru, for example, has classified African literature into three generations: first, second and third. The first-generation comprises writers like Abdoulaye Sadji, Amadou Hampâté Bah, Ayi Kwei Armah, Bernard Dadie, Camara Laye, Cheikh Anta Diop, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Félix Couchoro, Ferdinand Oyono, Léopold Sédar Senghor, J. P. Clark, Mongo Beti, Nazi Boni, Olympe Bhely Quénum, Ousame Socé, Sembène Ousmane, Wole Soyinka. The second-generation writers are Ahmed Yerima, Ahmadou Kourouma, Femi Osofisan (whose pen name is Okinba Launko), Festus Iyayi, Jean Pliya, Kofi Ayindoho, Isidore Okpewho, Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide. The third-generation includes writers like Abimbola Adunni Adelakun, Abibatou Traoré, Adelaide Fassinou, Ademola Dasylva, Akeem Lasisi, Ben Okri, Chabi Dere Allagbe, Chiedu Ezeanah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Esiaba Irobi, Helen Oyeyemi, Lola Shoneyin, Maik Nwosu, Ogaga Ifowodu, Ramonu Sanusi, Remi Raji, Sefi Atta, Sule Egya and Toyin Adewale (1-2). Babatunde goes on to state that the third-generation, 'which is very large, especially in Nigeria,' (2) is further divided into two: the first part is made up of writers who were born mainly around the 1960s, while the second category constitutes writers born in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

Though Ayerelu's classification seems to take care of writers such as Joe Ushie and Remi Raji, who straddle 'second- and third-generation' writers because they published at the time writers like Niyi Osundare and Ben Okri were also publishing, it is not without its troubles. The questions of thematic concern and stylistic differences, which Ayeleru utilizes as distinguishing criteria among these 'generations' of writers, are unhelpful. There is no clear-cut distinction between Niyi Osundare, for example, a 'second-generation' poet and Joe Ushie, a 'third-

generation' poet whether in style or theme. Since style seems to be Ayeleru's classificational yardstick, it will be helpful to examine two poems from the works of these poets:

When you get home,
Tell your father,
The one who talks as if his mouth
Were a grindingstone for hot pepper;
Tell him he is the proud offspring
Of the mating madness of Agbake* monkeys,
Tell him his wisdom left the village
In the turbulent saddle of yesterday's storms
(Osundare, *The Word is an Egg*, 21)

See O lion
the kepepeh bird
famed for dodging the marksman,
hanging, now from a child's snare;
See Anwiansu the trickster
Writhing, now in a fool's trap;
And from the cripple's cooking pot
oozes, now the aroma of the warrior's head.
(Ushie, *Hill Songs*, 18)

When we drew Ushie's attention to the stylistic similarity and wondered whether he aimed at imitating Osundare's (an older writer) style, he mentioned that both collections of poems were published in the same year by the same publisher. So there was no way he could have imitated Osundare. Besides the sameness in lines, there is the characteristic loaning of indigenous items: *Agbake monkeys* (*The Word is an Egg*) and *kepepeh bird and Anwiansu* (*Hill Songs*); adoption and adaptation of indigenous thoughts: *grinding stone for hot pepper* (*The Word is an Egg*) and *cripple's cooking pot* (*Hill Songs*); all these linguistic experimentations work as the medium through which the poets express themselves and make their message shift from a personal one to being a communal property of their Nigerian people who they

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traditionally write for and on behalf of. Thus, the linguistic nuances can become an interesting field of cultural studies.

Obviously these are examples of folklore shaping artistic output. It is also clear that many Nigerian writers are influenced by their oral cultures. Ayeleru contradicts himself as he contends that 'third-generation' writers 'take inspiration and indeed formal training in creative writing from these precursors' (3). One visible weakness with Ayeleru's categorization is its inability to point out what specifically differentiates these 'generations' of writers. Having studied Osundare's and Ushie's poetry, it is pertinent to mention that Ushie's writings show some continuation or reflection, in terms of stylistic nuances and thematic exploration, of Osundare's creative tradition. Why does one have to 'cut off' the poets into distinct 'generations?'

Taking thematic differences as the basis of their categorization schema, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, referenced by Alli Erritouni, argue that there is 'a new generation of writers born mostly after 1960, the emblematic year of African political independence from colonialism. This generation, the first in Africa to be temporally severed from the colonial event … came to be identified as writers of the third-generation in Anglophone and Francophone critical traditions'. In contrast to the 'first- and second-generation' writers, who are 'massively over-determined by the colonial event,' 'third-generation' writers 'are shaped more distinctly by contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism, globalization, nomadism, and liminality than their predecessors' (14). That the likes of Achebe wrote about colonialism implies that it is natural for younger writers to engage their narratives with globalization, afropolitanism, and kidnapping, among other issues, for these are the issues they are struggling with. Eyoh Etim's *Alien Citizens*, artistically depicts the crisis between Nigeria and Cameroon over the oil rich Bakassi Peninsula. In the novel, Etim, through symbols and images of suffering and displacement, expresses the idea that the ordinary fishermen, who struggle to earn a living, are the ones who bear the brunt of the disputed neck of land. Similarly, in *Every Day is for the Thief*, Teju Cole limns the dynamic complications of contemporary Nigeria. He

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does not, for example, hesitate to describe, like Eyoh Etim, how the oil wealth of the Niger Delta region is shared among an oligarchic few, making it completely impossible for the oil wealth to trickle down to ordinary Niger Deltans:

> My, those people have suffered. All that oil wealth, and they don't see a penny of it. Nigeria has been rough on them. Ken Saro Wiwa hanged, all the military repression, the ongoing environmental damage (103).

Expectedly, one does not read of colonialism as it seems not to be the 'current' issue at hand. It follows that every writer's attempt is to capture the situation of their time. In fact, Henry Akubuiro elaborates how 'The city is my playground, so I am depicting it better. A writer is only a mirror that reflects the society, so I can only reflect the society that I know' (21). This also connotes that thematic differences are not reason enough to generationalize Nigerian literature.

Yet, to say that those who started writing after the Achebes are not concerned with colonialism is a step in undermining the timelessness of literature. In a thought-provoking comparison of two Nigerian novelists and explication of the timelessness of literature, Grace Eche Okereke writes:

> The early parts of *Things Fall Apart* and *The Last of the Strong Ones* are devoted to a holistic fictional reconstruction of the African way of life as lived out by the Umuofians and Umugans respectively. The fact that there is no alien presence and the Umuofia and Umuga communities enjoy a thriving stable though internally embattled civilization, interrogates and dialogizes the colonialist's view of Africa and its people as a dark continent whose past was 'one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them' (Achebe *Morning Yet* 45). In fact, the relative stability and harmony that characterise life in pre-colonial Umuofia and Umuga, challenge to a disruptive dialogic the instability and

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> disharmony that the coming of the white man ('kosire') (sic) inflicts on the two communities (22).

Okereke's argument is that subject matter, narrative style and linguistic similarity, not generations, exist in Nigerian literature. *Things Fall Apart* and *The Last of the Strong Ones* were published 38 years apart. Yet, they both capture colonial experience in a similar narrative manner; exploiting 'literary resources to locate the African as represented by the Umuofia and Umuga Igbo respectively in the politics of traditional and colonial history in Igboland' (22). Besides providing insights into the timelessness of literature and accentuating the truism that no writer is irrelevant, as older writers serve as inspiration to younger ones, Okereke's study of two novels published almost four decades apart clarifies that the 'the political correctness' and 'the linguistic correctness' remain valid approaches to the study of Nigerian literature, if not all literatures of the world.

Responding to Adesanmi and Dunton's classification based on subject matter, Erritouni contends that 'Adesanmi and Dunton identify a significant shift in African fiction, but their categorization labours under two shortcomings' (3). First, the duo place too much emphasis on the influence of colonialism on the 'first- and second-generation' African writers, overlooking the fact that many of them have been equally marked by the failure of independence. Second, they take for granted 'certain commonalities' that exist between 'second- and third-generation' writers. The 'third-generation' writers, for example, share in their predecessors' concern with the political situation in post-colonial Nigeria. Like their predecessors, 'third-generation' Nigerian writers discuss the history of Nigeria in order to expose the abuse of despotic rulers. However, Erritouni insists that 'third-generation' writers differ from their predecessors, as they reject the idea of Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Wole Soyinka, among others that the Africans are solely to blame for their misfortunes.

In a cinematic presentation of the African as the source of their own socio-political quandary, the narrator in *A Man of the People* grieves:

> As I stood in one corner of that vast tumult waiting for the arrival of the Minister, I felt intense bitterness welling up in my mouth. Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame… in honour of one of those who have started the country off down the slopes of inflation (2).

While the above suggests that writers like Achebe also agree that Africans make their own trouble, it also counters the position that the Achebes were primarily preoccupied with 'colonial events'; implying that many a writer writes about what is prominent at their time. This does not debunk the truism that Achebe's earlier novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, project the European as the cause of Africa's problem. It only confirms that at every phase of existence there are issues which engage writers' attention.

At the other extreme and separated from the perspectives followed by Ayeleru and Adesanmi and Dunton, is Sarah Agbor's method which leaves one in a logical impasse. Agbor places Niyi Osundare in 'third-generation' Nigerian poets along with Odia Ofeimun, Tanure Ojaide, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Olu Oguibe, 'while Dasylva can be pitched in the fourth generation poets along with the host of Chin Ce, Esiaba Irobi, Onookome Okome, Uche Nduka, Chiedu Eeanah, Usman Shehu … Joe Ushie and Maik Nwosu' (109). In terms of thematic thrust, she contends that 'third-generation' poetry is 'characterised by social contradictions that are resolved in favour of the masses'. One is forced to wonder whether there are no 'social contradictions resolved in favour of the masses' in the poetry of the writers she designates 'fourth generation.' She ends up with the implication that there are 'four generations' of Nigerian writers so far.

But there is perhaps an echo of Joseph Ushie in this. Ushie, writer-critic, in his 'Many Voices, Many Visions: A Stylistic Analysis of 'New' Nigerian Poetry', draws attention to the 'generationalization' dilemma of Nigerian writers:

> If we exclude the oral renditions in various Nigerian languages and the earliest phase of Nigerian poetry in English (represented by the works of Epelle, Enitan Brown, Dennis Osadebay, Adeboye Babalola

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> and Olumbe Bassir) as recognised by some critics to constitute the first generation…there will be two clearly defined phases of Nigerian poetry in English. In this study, we will refer to the remaining two generations simply as the first and the second. The first generation is represented by such names as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and J.P Clark-Bekederemo, while Odia Ofeimun, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Onuora Ossie Enekwe, Catherine Acholonu and Harry Garuba are the major voices of the second generation. There is, then, the third and emerging group whose artistic vision is yet to be discerned (23-4).

Probably being conscious of the 'many' contradictions of the adjective *new*, Ushie puts it in quotes. His study focuses on the 'third and emerging generation' to which he belongs. Although one could exclude 'oral renditions in various Nigerian languages' because one is looking at Nigerian literature in English expression, why would one exclude 'the earliest phase' which was written in English? Is it that those works do not qualify as literature? Is it that those works have lost contemporary significance? Does literature lose significance? The tendency to exclude the beginnings of Nigerian literature in English expression is worrying.

Donatus Nwoga's *West African Verse* (1967), a collection of striking poems of some West African pioneer poets should not be forgotten. In the preface of *West African Verse*, Nwoga tells us of pioneer poets' determination in making us look inward, in recognizing and appreciating the value of our culture, as well as the essence of creating poems which address our own socio-cultural reality:

> We read a poem about a daffodil and we know what it is all about though we have never seen a daffodil. But when an African writes about an *abiku* we may be lost, though he is talking about a phenomenon that is common, through West Africa if not through all Africa. This was perhaps excusable when all our minds were geared towards Europe, when we thought that only Europe contained things that needed to be learned. But we are now coming home and with this should come a readiness to work to understand ourselves and our culture (*Preface*).

Do we then exclude one of Nigeria's pioneer poets, Dennis Chukude Osadebay who wrote thought-provoking poems such as 'Who Buy My Thoughts,' 'Young Africa's Plea,' etc. which questioned the degradation of Africa by colonialists, and supported Nigerian nationalists in the struggle for political and economic emancipation from Britain in discussing Nigerian literature? What would be the reasons or parameters for such exclusion? Nwoga clarifies that some of the pioneer poets 'achieve significant success in giving valid poetic expression to subjects of importance of their time' (124). Our suggestion that Nigerian literature be studied based on periodic reflection re-echoes here. Sadly enough, owing to the 'generationalization' palaver, the majority of works written about those historic moments which shaped Nigeria's (Africa's) transition have been 'excluded' as Ushie recommended.

In what they subtitled 'defining variables' of 21st century Nigerian literature, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, provide an intriguing yet disturbing classification of '21st Century Nigerian Literature.' According to their classification, writers such as Joe Ushie, Usman Shehu, and Onookome Okome, are 21st century poets. To them, 21st-century Nigerian literature 'refers to the first ten years of the 21st century,' which 'also has something to do with the return of democratic rule in Nigeria' (95). Although it is a truism that socio-political changes prior to the 21st-century significantly shaped literary output in relation to thematic and stylistic presentations in Nigeria, we still wonder what to say about Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Omotoso's *Just Before Dawn*. Habila's and Omotoso's creative capture of the past imprints on the mind of their readers the need to appreciate historical contexts, as it makes one more appreciative of art forms in unfamiliar styles. These novels go-back-and-forth through time to tell their readers that the present cannot do without remembering the past. In the light of this, the archival role of the writer is articulated. Moreover, these novelists fictional presentation of Nigerians' extenuating subjugation to a system that almost made them slaves in their own country fulfils one of the many social functions of literature. Charles Nnolim reiterates the role of

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literature thus: 'As we know, literature is judged always in relation to its social function: the better the function is fulfilled, the better the literature' (6). Approaching literature from the social function alone is not usually a helpful approach. Walter Benjamin has argued for the combination of artistic correctness as well as political correctness:

> literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency.... This literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every *correct* political tendency of a work includes its literary quality *because* it includes its literary *tendency* (221).

Benjamin's thesis is that a 'work that exhibits the correct tendency must of necessity have every other quality' (221). Exploring the 'relationship between tendency and quality in literature' (221) is, in his view, another way of examining what the 'relationship between form and content' (221) is. The 'dialectical approach to this question' (222), Benjamin insists, 'has absolutely no use for such rigid isolated things as work, novel, book. It has to insert them into the living social context' (222); this is not unconnected with the notion that social situations are 'determined by conditions of production' (222), the traditional way in which a 'work was criticised from a materialist point of view ... was to ask how this work stood vis-a-vis the social relations of production of its time' (222).

Benjamin's postulation notwithstanding, Nnolim's contention is only an echo of one of the dominant ways in which Nigerian literature has so far been read: the social-functionalist paradigm. Literature serves as the mirror through which society can view itself. If Nigerian writers write to capture their experiences as a country, 'to represent our experiences, and to emphasize difference, even within the African continent, I think our critics should be alert to their own responsibilities in this regard, making the assertions of the writers clearer and more discernable' (Udumukwu 611). Udumukwu's position is an affirmation that Nigerian critics should step up their criticism, to interrogate how the writer has adequately reflected on issues that bother the people.

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Even though it is the same critical tools that need to be adopted for all literatures, there is also need to fashion these in such a way that they explicate the specificity of Nigerian literature. Udumukwu further contends, 'This is not the era in which our critics should dwell too long in abstract issues and theories' (611).

Definitely, we are not implying that the Nigerian writer is some sociologist. The Nigerian writer deserves a better interpretation and interrogation of their creative ingenuity. While it will seem as though we are trying to set a critical standard, it must be stressed that Nigerian literature cannot be studied in isolation from the people and their ways of life. Nnolim cautions that Nigerian critics should not be carried away by activism, undermining the aesthetic value of literature. It is necessary for the critic to remember that language and literature are mutually reinforcing: an understanding of a people's literature is invariably an appreciation of their language. Literature makes use of words, and language is the essential tool of literature. Language and literature are important aspects of people's 'cultural and intellectual patrimony' (Osundare 213). The critic needs to explain, to interrogate Nigerian literature in relation to how it has used language to express its cultural affiliations and dissonance with sociopolitical disturbances.

Nigerian literature can also be examined in terms of the pre-colonial period, colonial period, military dictatorship, and democratic era, or from thematic angles: women in post-independence Nigeria, for example. The implication is that if a Nigerian writer who did not experience the Nigerian Civil War is yet able to narrate the carnage as though she witnessed it, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has done with her *Half of a Yellow Sun*, neither the work nor the novelist has anything to do with 'generation.' She has only been able, through creative imagination, to remind Nigerians of the past. In like manner, her novel can be treated thematically along with Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra*, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, among others as 'war literature.' But then, the various enunciations and complexities that marked the period, as the war raged across the country, have to be duly accounted for. If the study of Nigerian literature is taken from

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thematic concerns rather than generational matrix, no writer will lose out, provided the writer's work is of 'contextual' or 'contemporary' significance.

Evidently, examining Nigerian literature based on criteria such as 'generations,' will not only destroy its beauty, but also deter the 'older bards,' to borrow Chin Ce's words, from making input into the development of Nigerian literature. The contributions of the likes of Soyinka, Okara and others have continued to serve as a model for the younger writers. Achebe's *There Was a Country* – no matter the mixed responses that trialed its publication – provides glimpses into Nigeria's Civil War, as well as educating those who did not witness it. Today, in many Nigerian universities, both students and established critics have found *There Was a Country* both literary text and reference material. In this way, literature allows one to see more than the present, to appreciate the fact that the present is a Siamese twin of the past. Through literature one may gain first-hand experience like those who lived and struggled with the problems of the day. These experiences help to understand what living is all about. It can be deduced that thematic differences or shifts are not dependable 'generationalization' criterion for describing Nigerian fiction.

It may be emphasized that the presentation of women oppression and their fight to break away from patrilineal hegemony in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, as well as Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* is also articulated in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Abimbola Adunni Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*. Just as *Efuru* deals with the premium society places on procreation, and a woman's social identity is defined by her ability to have children, so do *Everything Good Will Come* and *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*. The implication is that the novels can be studied without minding whether one was a 'first-generation' novelist, and the other a 'third generation.' But more importantly, one would be reminded that the issue of men's dominance over women and women's determined effort to resist the dominance had existed before Atta and Adelakun were born and would likely continue to the end of the age. This, then, is recognition that literature

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imaginatively inhabits multiple periods. Clearly, 'literary periodization remains a messy business' (Garuba 51) which needs a shoving aside.

The messiness of literary periodization has made many a Nigerian critic to in a hurry forget Nwapa's contribution – Africa's first published 'feminist' novelist – to the development of Nigerian prose fiction. It is from her 'creative ovaries' that writers like Zaynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Julie Okoh, Abimbola Adunni Adelakun were brought forth. This reinforces our earlier assertion that Nigerian writers are not to be grouped into generations. Generationalization unduly blurs the understanding and hinders the critical reading of Nigerian writers as 'writers who should be within the period by nature of their preoccupations and styles fall outside and others within very clearly pronounce their unbelonging in their work' (Garuba 51).

To divide Nigerian literature into generations of writers is a step in undermining the value of earlier works and writers. Nnolim laments how 'Pioneer writers like Achebe and his contemporaries have fallen silent or are now playing into what soccer enthusiasts refer to as 'injury time'' (6). Also Emilia Oko draws attention to how Nigerian critics seem to be 'too caught up with change to appreciate the true greatness of the past. They [have] no sense of the historic that gives true grandeur to each epoch' (23). This is obviously not a suggestion that one should dwell in the past. Still, the division of Nigerian writers into groups that do not actually exist is a big handicap to understanding the development of Nigerian literature.

Thus, to understand more clearly the ongoing transactions between history and the present – for which Nigerian literature is particularly known – there is need for it to familiarize itself with the treasures of the past; such treasures will inspire in Nigerians the pride of belonging to Nigeria, to her history, culture and people. Respect for the works of the earlier writers does not mean to undermine the achievements of the younger writers. Conversely, appreciating younger writers should not mean ignoring the past.

Another controversial categorization of Nigerian writers worth interrogating is that of Macaulay Mowarin who describes Osundare,

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Ofeimun, Ojaide among other 'second-generation poets' as 'post-modernist poets' (123). For Mowarin, Osundare's group is different from Soyinka's – which he tags 'modernist poets' – because they 'broke the mysticism and obscurantism of the earlier generation of poets when they tried an artistic expression that adopts a language permeated with features of oral tradition' (124). It is obvious that Mowarin's classification is based on style. If Mowarin sees the adoption and adaptation of oral traditional lore as a distinguishing paradigm of 'post-modernist poets,' there seems to be another problematic classificational criterion. Because of colonial experience and cultural nationalism, African poets 'felt the need to be authentic in their [artwork], they had to go back to their indigenous tradition of poetry-making' (Senanu and Vincent 9). The adoption and adaptation of indigenous expressions into Nigerian creative works is not a new narrative technique: it is a prominent artistic feature that characterizes Nigerian writings. Our illustrations have shown that 'third-generation' Nigerian poets are not exempt from the adoption and adaptation of oral traditional forms in their creative works. Moreover, probably being careful, Mowarin called Joe Ushie's group of writers an 'emerging generation of poets,' who are 'less ideological than the post-modernist poets' (124). Whatever Mowarin means by 'less ideological,' Chin Ce's description of these same writers seems to contradict Mowarin's. Chin Ce had observed that 'the emergence of a third generation of African writers with a distinguishing temperament from the older bards is a welcome development' (15).

Another 'sticky and knotty' issue in generationalization bordering on date of birth and 'persecution' of writers is that provided by Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, a writer-critic better known as Remi Raji. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Ibadan, Raji-Oyelade opines:

> I belong to a generation of poets whose writings became noticeable in the late 1980s and the early 1990s in Nigeria. Known as 'third generation' authors, this is the group which bears the African genius of survival, perseverance and brilliance, against all odds. Many of the writers of this generation were born around the 1960s, which

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accounts for the reference to the group as post-Independence writers (36).

Four things are worthy of note in Raji-Oyelade's assertion. One, there is a group of writers known as 'third-generation' writers; two, these writers started receiving literary attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s – this period captures the time frame they obviously started to publish; three, many of the writers were born around 1960 – Nigeria's year of independence from Britain; and four, they are also described as 'post-Independence' writers. The same writers are described as 'third generation' and 'post-Independence' writers!

Though a problematic canonization, Raji-Oyelade's defining variables agree, in terms of age, that is, when 'third-generation' writers were born, with those of Ayeleru and Adesanmi and Dunton, but differ as to when 'third-generation' poets started receiving literary attention. If date of birth is a factor for grouping writers as 'third-generation,' what would one say about writers born in the late 1970s and 1980s? Would they be grouped under the second set of 'third-generation' writers as offered by Ayeleru? Or would they be seen as 'fourth-generation' or even 'fifth-generation' since there is already a 'fourth generation?' An Online interview between Jamila Brown and Molara Wood, excerpted below, tells more about the sticky and knotty nature of the 'generationalization' palaver that surrounds Nigerian literature:

Jamila Brown: Hello Molara. You have been a member of the Nigerian literati for a very long time and are considered a member of the 'Third Generation' of writers, yet your debut collection of short stories is only just coming out. Why the long delay? Can you give us a background of you and your writing?

Molara Wood: Well, a good number of the 'Third Generation' writers started the race before some of us and were already making their names in the late 90s, going into print in the early noughties (sic) – the likes of Unoma Azuah, Uche Nduka and Lola Shoneyin. So, they had a head start.

While this could be seen as Wood's affirmation that she is a late junior of the third generation, the subtext in her response remains that it is

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not only unjustifiable to place her among writers who had already 'started making their names,' but also an unequivocal illumination that generations do not exist in Nigerian literature: all we have is Nigerian writers, regardless of when they were born, what they write, and/or when they 'started making their names.'

Raji-Oyelade also contends that his group was 'persecuted' for their writing, and such persecution instead of deterring them from writing, became the impetus, the platform for 'new writings [to emerge] which begin to interrogate our existence as a people, our peoplehood' (36). Raji-Oyelade's position indicates that his contemporaries' shift from colonial issues to interrogating re-colonialism by their own Nigerian rulers marks them off from 'older poets,' who concerned themselves with colonialism. In agreement with Raji-Oyelade's summation, GMT Emezue insists that one of the outstanding features of the 'emerging generation of poets' is that they are ''Jeremiah' breed of poets who lament the betrayal by the political leaders, or the dilapidated state of the Nigerian nation (while) their anger over the corruption that afflicts the nation is unmistakable' (29). Yet one wonders whether at any point in Nigeria's literary history Nigerian writers did not protest the sociopolitical realities of their time. In fact, a reading of most of Niyi Osundare's poems would reveal a concern and amazement at his own 'freedom fighter' metamorphosing into a 'freedom killer.'

Taking the above argument a little further, it is expedient to remind ourselves that Wole Soyinka, like Christopher Okigbo and Chinua Achebe – as revealed in his book, *There Was a Country* – was 'persecuted' for their writings. Okigbo died fighting the Nigeria-Biafra War; Soyinka was imprisoned during the Nigeria-Biafra War for criticizing military action. However, Soyinka's imprisonment gave birth to works such as *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and *The Man Died*. We should also be reminded that Achebe's *There Was a Country* is a product of hegemonic persecution. Needless to say that whether writers were 'persecuted' or not, is not reason enough to differentiate one group from the other. Of course, literary history tells us that there is no love

lost between the 'pen' and the 'state,' especially when the pen does not write for the state.

In a similar vein as Raji-Oyelade and Adesanmi and Dunton, Mowarin maintains that most of these poets were born at the dawn of Nigeria's independence in 1960. This is yet another contradictory classificational principle: same writers with divergent tags. In response to time and theme as defining variables, Ushie contends that 'what seems clear thus far is that Nigeria's poetic works of the early eighties and beyond are not one homogenous entity, even if the dividing line among them is only form and language to the exclusion of theme and tone of political commitment' (39). Again, if the tone of political commitment is the gauge that measures 'ideologically driven literature,' where lies the aesthetic dignity of literature? Can literature be so given to 'political commitment' that its linguistic importance is obliterated? Deepika Bahri believes that:

> We do no service, therefore, either to our political goals or to literature if we do not attend to the specific modality of literary representation…a modality that illuminates the manner in which artwork is limited by sociopolitical realities but can potentially contribute something of nuance to its determinative and confining scripts (16).

Bahri's all-encompassing theorization facilitates an individual's understanding of the conflated dynamics of aesthetic form and sociopolitical content of literature. Language explains literature and literature creates a luxuriant ground for expression of potent thoughts, fertile imaginations and infinite processes.

Conclusion

An ill-conceived generationalization can pose a serious problem to a beginner in the study of Nigerian literature. The beginner will be faced with two obvious problems: understanding the direction of Nigerian literature, and the miscellany of confusing classificational variables. It must be noted that this is not an attempt to undermine the contextual differences that characterize each phase of Nigerian writing, for

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nothing exists independent of one or more contexts. As it is possible to tell a similar story in startlingly contrasted historical periods, it is necessary to avoid making large-scale generalizations, and absolute evaluations of Nigerian literature and its historical resonances. The study of Nigerian literature should concentrate on its value, its use of language to address social realities, to better the life of the Nigerian people, rather than wasting energy on its division. Nigerian literature should not be burdened with generational palavers. In fact, conscious of the many troubles of categorizing Nigerian literature into generations of writers, Edward Gar cautions that '[Nigerian] literature cannot for now and the near future admit any definite categorization or even definitions' (7). Gar is in agreement with Garuba, who has written that, 'For a body of writing as 'young' as Nigerian [literature] in English, to suggest over-categorical demarcations at this point in time would be foolhardy' (51). Thematic and stylistic studies still offered the best promise of understanding literature in relation to the social history behind it.

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