
Political Trends and Perspectives in the New Nigerian Fiction

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Abstract

In consonance with the overarching position that African literature must engage the society's socio-political issues, this study, "Political Trends and Perspectives in the New Nigerian Fiction", examines four prose works of four relatively 'new' Nigerian novelists to gauge the level of the authors' fidelity to their forerunners' role as voices for the voiceless and conscience of society. The novels and their authors are: Fumes and Cymbals (2002) by Promise Okeke, Tenants of the House (2009) by Wale Okediran, Beneath the Rubble (2009) by Liwhu Betiang and Sieged (2011) by Adamu Kyuka Usman. Given the ethno-religious and regional sensitivities and sensibilities in the perception of political events and developments in Nigeria, the selection of the novelists has also been deliberately made to be representative of the material geo-political zones of the country such that voices from the South East, the North, South-South and South West are represented. The study entailed a literary analysis of each of the texts highlighting each novelist's dominant thematic preoccupation. Interestingly, the paper reveals that, in spite of the ethno-religious and regional differences of the authors, all of them are agreed on the fact that, like Achebe before them, the problem of Nigeria lies with the political leadership. Equally interesting is their consensus that the solution to the nation's political problems lies with a revolution among the followership based on rigorous intellection. The study, hence, has established that, though relatively new voices, these four authors' prose works have engaged Nigeria's neocolonial political

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class with the same verve and nerve as the older generation of writers did the colonial masters and, subsequently, the incipient neocolonial ruling class.

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Introduction

The interaction between literature and society is neither simply mutual nor incidental but essentially and fundamentally habitual. This symbiotic relationship between literature and society – which includes social institutions – entails that while literature depends on society for its raw material, society is shaped and transformed through literature. Appropriately, Harry Levin observes that “the relations between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes, it is also the cause of social effects” (quoted in Scott, 1961).

One of the social institutions often affected by literature is politics, and politics on the other hand is a foremost subject matter of literature. There is, hence, an intimate relationship between literature and politics. This close relationship is both historical and cultural. For one, both enterprises have their roots traceable to the classical antiquity of ancient Greece where Greek city states got organised into political entities while art (literary works) flourished through the writings of Homer, Euripides, Sophocles Aeschylus and other literary icons of their time.

Secondly, both art (literature) and politics are products of cultural evolution. Hence, it is not uncommon to talk about the literary culture as well as the political culture of a given society. Impliedly, the culture of a society births, nurtures and sustains its politics and its art – Literature. Given the centrality of culture in the production of art (including literary art), Willbur Scott's popular assertion becomes quite apposite here. In his opinion, art does not exist in a vacuum. It is the work not simply of a person, but of an author, who is fixed in time and space, responding or reacting to a community of which he is an integral part (p. 123).

The implication of Scott's assertion above is that literature is a reflection

of the society that produces it, including its politics, its religion and its social institutions. It is not surprising therefore that politics constitutes one veritable subject matter and preoccupation of literature and literary writers. It is perhaps for this reason that Ngugi wa Thiong'o sees literary writers as writers in politics. For him, "...power relations is a whole territory of concern to a writer. Politics is hence part and parcel of this literary territory" (p. 477). With this position, Ngugi apparently echoes Chinua Achebe's earlier submission on the issue of literature, the literary writer and politics:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flame (p. 78).

In line with his submission, Achebe has relentlessly engaged "the big social and political issues of...Africa" in his writings – both fiction and non-fiction. For example, the search for effective political leadership constitutes a discernible common thread that holds together the entire fabric of Achebe's creativity as embodied in the tragedy of his protagonists beginning with the impetuosity of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, the enigmatic complexity of Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, the ruthless and Machiavellian style of Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People*, the gullibility and ineptitude of Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease*, and the brutality and despotism of Sam in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe's disappointment and frustration at the failure of political leadership in Nigeria is succinctly articulated in his non-fictional work *The Trouble with Nigeria* where he says: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership". (p. 1)

Like Achebe, most Nigerian literary writers from flag independence in 1960 till date have continued to imbue their works with relevance by exploring issues that are germane to the contemporary Nigerian society. Thus, Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark–Bekederemo devoted their dramaturgy and poetry to this cause while the late Christopher Okigbo did same exclusively in poetry, particularly in *Labyrinths* and *Path of Thunder*. It does appear, however, that fiction is the most preferred

medium adopted by Nigerian literary writers in the articulation and projection of the political challenges in the country. The seeming preference for fiction may not be unconnected with the language of prose which is generally and inherently straight forward and mostly transparent as against the opaque and terse diction of poetry and the dialogism of drama.

Hence, this essay periscopes the works of four new Nigerian writers with a view to unraveling how literature, particularly prose fiction, has kept pace with political trends from the onset of the 21st century, which incidentally coincides with the period of the present democratic dispensation in Nigeria. Meanwhile, a key concept in the title of this essay “new Nigerian fiction” needs some elucidation within the framework of the essay. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the word “new” as “not existing before, recently made, invented, introduced, different from the previous one, modern, of the latest type, having fresh energy or courage”. The last two definitions seem to best serve our purpose here and therefore provide the working definition of the word new as used in this essay. The novels selected for study are 'new' in the sense that in addition to being 'recently' published, they embody the freshness of ideas, novelty of style and vigorous assertiveness of the authors in appraising the Nigerian political leadership challenges. The novels and their authors are: *Fumes and Cymbals* (2002) by Promise Okekwe, *Tenants of the House* (2009) by Wale Okediran, *Beneath the Rubble* (2009) by Liwhu Betiang and *Sieged* (2011) by Adamu Kyuka Usman.

It is interesting that the four novels which were written within a decade of one another share a common thematic preoccupation despite the obvious differences in the social, political, professional, religious, ethnic and geographical backgrounds of the authors. It is even more interesting that one of the authors – Promise Okekwe – is a female who has actively engaged the murky waters of Nigerian politics in *Fumes and Cymbals*. The choice of the four novels is deliberately done to cover the four regions of North, South, East and West. This geographical spread is a conscious attempt to reflect the perception of politics and political leadership in Nigeria by the different sections of the Nigerian society. The unanimity of purpose of the authors in this direction and the coincidence of themes explored in the works attest to the imperative

need for the evolution of new strategies for politics and political leadership in Nigeria.

Political Leadership and Social Disillusionment in the Novels

Fumes and Cymbals: The novel was published in 2002 by Promise Okekwe who hails from the South Eastern region of Nigeria and has to her credit more than sixteen published works in the genres of prose, poetry and drama. She also ventures into the art of painting. The choice of Okekwe's *Fumes and Cymbals* was informed by her seeming departure from the feminist preoccupation of many a female writer who, according to Chikwenye Ogunyemi, “concentrates on patriarchy, analyses it, attacking it, detecting its tentacles in the most unlikely places” (p. 69). Instead, Okekwe “focuses on the oppressive political and social landscape on which her people exist (Chukwuma, Okoye, p. 69).

In *Fumes and Cymbals* Okekwe satirizes the tyranny, oppression and intrigues that characterize political leadership in Nigeria as embodied in the character of president Umeh who surrounds himself with hoodlums who frustrate any attempt to execute projects that will improve the lot of the people. This way, meaningful development projects are abandoned in favour of personal projects that benefit only the president and his cohorts in order to perpetuate their stay in power.

The frustration of the people is evident in the debate at the beer parlour between Aguba-juku and Okongwu. Aguba-Juku blurts out:

Why is it that when he (president Umeh) builds a paradise in the land he bought from a ghost, when he pumps money into his private project, all the disgruntled elements would go into slumber? But when it is time to create a meaningful relief project which others will benefit from..., disgruntled elements will wake up from slumber and scuttle his plans? (*Fumes and Cymbals*, p. 303).

An example of such a project is the low cost housing units built for the masses but which were appropriated by the president's men, prompting

Aguba-juku to ask Okongwu: “Tell me, do you have the means to possess one of the housing units? Are you as a citizen of this beloved country not entitled to live in a decent house?” (*Fumes and Cymbals*, p. 304).

Aguba-juku's questions above imply that Nigerian leadership only caters for people within the ruling or elite class. The masses have no confidence in the nation's leadership whose attitude they see as hypocritical. For the masses, the leadership “...lie all the time. Each time they appear in the news, they lie, their pretences are glaring, stealing with two hands, working with none” (*Fumes and Cymbals*, p. 188).

Although President Umeh claims to operate a democracy, in reality his rule is authoritarian, conforming to what Basil Davidson in *The Blackman's Burden* describes as “rigid dictatorship in which government's policies and actions lack popular input” (p. 208).

The recklessness of President Umeh's government and its maladministration stir rebellion among different sections of the masses. One of such rebellious groups is the Black, Black Birds notorious for its *modus operandi* characterized by mob action against the government. The group is led by Captain Black, who articulates the reasons for the group's action against the government thus:

You wreck the economy, use these foolish girls as tools for your private joys and tomorrow you stand somewhere in a campaign podium and declare that posterity will judge you, posterity; my foot... There is a force you have not taken into consideration. And that is the raw force of the people that have been mobilized from grassroots. (*Fumes and Cymbals*, 245-246)

Captain Black's comment above reveals awareness, on the part of the masses, of the various levels of abuse and deprivation they are subjected to by the political leadership. It is also a form of protest against insensitive and callous politicians who come to the people only when they are in need of their votes during electioneering campaigns and abandon them afterwards to continue their looting of the nation's treasury.

Okekwe shows that political leadership engages in self-delusion by assuming that the masses will remain ignorant, gullible and helpless in the face of exploitation and oppression. The turn of events in the novel proves otherwise as the people oppose and resist the undemocratic social system through violence as reported by the visiting professor:

The very first week I arrived was when bombs exploded, and damaged a lot of things especially human life, the second week the famous journalist J. K. Shakpa was murdered, the third week, police went on strike, the fourth week which is the present one, the ethnic strife rages on. The teachers and market women are also threatening to go on strike (*Fumes and Cymbals*, 380)

The palpable tension in the above observation by the professor is a product of leadership corruption, insecurity, electoral fraud, censorship of the press and assault on the freedom of association of the people. By this exposition, Okekwe shows awareness of the political leadership problems which have plagued Nigeria since the onset of her present spell of democratic dispensation which began in 1999. The author's concern for her country and people resonates loudly in the comment of Squint Eyes: “my eyes have seen the filth and horrors of people in power” (*Fumes and Cymbals*, 188).

Liwhu Betiang shows the same awareness in *Beneath the Rubble* which was published in 2009. Betiang hails from Obudu in Cross River State, southern Nigeria. He teaches Drama and Broadcasting in the Department of Theatre and Media Studies, University of Calabar. In addition to *Beneath the Rubble*, he has written two other novels: *The Cradle on the Scales* (2011) and *The Rape of Hope: Diary of a Wasted Generation* (2016). The novelist deploys the aesthetics of satire and extended metaphor to x-ray politics and political leadership in Nigeria particularly from 1999 when the present stretch (Fourth Republic?) of democratic governance began.

Beneath the Rubble begins with a tragic event that is reminiscent of political violence in contemporary Nigeria. The official response or reaction to the incident in the novel illustrates the leadership lethargy

and inertia that has come to characterize political leadership in Nigeria and the consequent helplessness of the citizenry. A pall is cast over the once-serene community of Agigah following the brazen and dastardly murder of Agim Ububua by a restive mob who set his house ablaze with him trapped inside. This scenario parallels the election scenarios in the 2nd and 3rd Republic Nigeria thus resulting, for instance, in the infamous “Wild Wild West” appellation of that era.

Utsu Agaba – the Village Head's reaction to the news of the mob action typifies the callous indifference of political leadership in Nigeria to the plight of the masses particularly when the welfare of the citizens crosses the path of the political ambition of such leaders. Utsu Agaba's response to the news bearer is a confirmation of the above assertion:

My dear Itisha, at bad times like this when one is faced with the whole burden of chieftdom, it cannot be possible to be in control of affairs, at least not every little mishap (*Beneath...*, 13)

To the Village Head, the violence that consumes Agim Ububua is a “little mishap” – a distraction from the latter's efforts to consolidate his hold on power. This “little mishap” incidentally is a harbinger of a “big mishap” foreshadowing the catastrophe that will soon engulf the entire village. Appropriately, Agigah village is the author's fictive recreation of the Nigerian society in which potentially dangerous situations which should be nipped in the bud are ignored until, like gun powder, they explode and cause extensive damage. The Boko Haram insurgency, the Niger Delta militancy, and the Fulani herdsmen menace are apt examples.

At the core of the violence in Agigah is the tussle for supremacy between the leaderships of two rival cults – the land cult, controlled by Utsu Agaba and the water cult, controlled by Ukandi Igbal, the Chief Priest. The tussle polarizes the village along political and religious lines with palpable tension in the air. Meanwhile, the village is already plagued by mysterious ailments and deaths resulting from the “executive” recklessness of Utsu Agaba's predecessor's children's abominable incest. Ironically, it is the commoners that bear the brunt of the wrath of the gods for the crime committed by the King's children – like Ikpe's seven-year old daughter - who mysteriously disappears into “the big gutter by the road side” (*Beneath...* 20) while returning from the farm

with her father. This is the author's artistic portrayal of the situation in Nigeria where citizens are constantly subjected to hardship by incumbent governments because of the mis-governance of past administrations.

The evil plaguing Agigah can only be exorcised by means of human sacrifice which must be that of an indigene, not that of a slave. And the indigene must be from the family of the elite. The Chief Priest gives the reason for the strange condition:

We planted the evil; from among us a man must come. Who would eat a vulture when there are wholesome birds? The oracle demands the scion of the soil, for such would wash better where strangers cannot even dust. Give the oracle unclean meat and let the land continue to rage in ill (*Beneath...*, 24).

The above echoes Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. Betiang, like Soyinka, advocates sacrifice but he subverts the messianic principle of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* in which a chosen member of the downtrodden carrier family is sacrificed to redeem the society. For Betiang, the perennial sacrifice made by the citizens amounts to exploitation and wastage. Instead, the author stresses the need for such sacrifice to be offered by the leaders and elite members of the society represented by "the scion of the soil". Aware that the leaders lack the collective will needed for such sacrifice, the author advocates the evolution of an ingenious strategy that will ensure their commitment and thus halt the continued use of the masses as expendable pawns on the political chessboard of the leaders.

To provide the sacrifice needed to remove the plague from Agigah, a curfew is imposed on the land. Whoever violates the curfew will be used for the sacrifice. Interestingly, Ishabo the Village Head's son breaks the curfew and he is apprehended by guards on his way back from his mistress. Expectedly, frantic efforts are made as high level connections are deployed to free him. This mirrors perfectly the situation in Nigeria where family members of wealthy political office holders breach the law with impunity and evade punishment as if the immunity clause protecting political office holders covers them too.

However, in line with the subversive approach of the novel, Ishabo,

unexpectedly surrenders willingly and offers himself to be used as an instrument to free his people from the plague. Ishabo's action further exacerbates the tension between the two groups in the village. The land cult group headed by Utsu Agaba perceives Ishabo's action as manipulation by the rival water cult group to undermine Utsu Agaba's power and discredit his chieftaincy. The water cult group, on the other hand, sees in this an opportunity to assert its superiority by enforcing the law.

The volatile atmosphere created by this stand-off explodes into a conflagration when, on the day of the big sacrifice, Ishabo's mistress, in a bid to save her man launches herself on the cloaked victim and in the process, unmasks him. The result is both surprising and bewildering. The victim is not Ishabo. The Village Head with the connivance of the guards, had ingeniously crafted the escape of his son from custody. The authorial voice describes the feeling of the crowd gathered to watch the sacrifice:

The two divisions in the village playground felt alike. But only in different ways. whereas the royal sympathisers experienced the true emotions of pity and fear, the traditionalists felt a kind of betrayal and the suspension of the release of their fatal emotion of sadistic hate (*Beneath*, 113). What results next is an implosion of a long over-heated polity which now plunges the village over a precipice. Again, the authorial voice paints a graphic picture of what ensues:

The village was like a piece of cloth that had been outstretched from both sides only to have it tear in gasping fault in the middle...the age-old quarrels and suspicions, the tension and pent-up violence broke forth like an eruption of the active volcanoes (*Beneath...*, 113)

The result of the above is carnage of unprecedented proportion which could have been avoided if the leadership of the two rival groups exhibited the spirit of self sacrifice by placing the interest of the society above their political ambitions.

However, the author takes a swipe at the villagers for their gullibility in allowing themselves to be led into a war that neither the leaders who caused the war nor their children fought. In fact, some of the fighters do

not even know the reason for the war as confessed by one of them:

All of us have fought for what I don't even know. In fact, I wonder why I ever went to the war at all. I felt like a goat led by the tether... True, I fought but I did not and still do not know why or what I fought for (*Beneath*, 161).

The above confession recalls J. P. Clark's submission on the causes and consequences of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 in the poem "The Casualties". The persona indicts the leadership on both sides for their use of sly propaganda to manipulate the innocent citizens into a fratricidal war while they (the leaders) are:

Outside the scenes of ravage and wreck;
They are emissaries of rift,
So smug in smoke-rooms they haunt abroad
They do not see the funeral piles
At home eating up the forests.
They are wandering minstrels who, beating on
The drums of the human heart, draw the world
Into a dance with rites it does not know
(*Casualties*, 20)

Through hate speech and manipulative propaganda, politicians often instigate conflict among the masses thereby resulting in instability in the polity. This serves as a distraction which enables the leaders to divert attention from themselves and their misdeeds while the masses slaughter one another.

Another trend evident in the novel which reflects the Nigerian political situation is the politicization of religion. The violence that engulfs Agigah in *Beneath the Rubble* is primarily triggered by religious intolerance among the people. Rather than unite the people, the two dominant religions in Agigah polarize them and the political leaders exploit the fanatical religious disposition of the people to stir trouble. Itisha Bisong explains:

My brothers, do you think it was because the chief would not submit his blood for sacrifice that the village is now divided against itself? The truth I must say it, is the different worship

systems we have in the land. These two religions do not listen to each other. They do not want to understand themselves (*Beneath...*, 115).

The author thus indicts religious fanaticism for much of the violence that has dogged Nigerian politics from the 1960s up until now. According to the author: “In fact, if there was anything that lived in the unconscious recesses of the minds of everybody who took part in the village crises, it was their zealous and puerile affinity to their modes of worship” (*Beneath...*, 153). Omaka Ngele agrees with the above assertion by noting that:

Religion in Nigeria functions as a means for the perpetration of violence, fueling ethnic consciousness, and solidarity, acquisition of political power and socio-economic gains... and vandalization of property of those considered as infidels or who pay allegiance to other religions (62).

Religious leaders have sometimes become more reprehensible than politicians as most religious leaders who go into politics ostensibly to sanitize the system and provide exemplary leadership have become worse than the real politicians. In *Beneath the Rubble*, Pastor Ugal, a church founder, gives up his ecclesiastical calling for secular politics because “he could no longer sit and watch his people suffer in the hands of politicians who had never come to awareness of the will of God concerning love for one's brother”. (*Beneath...*,32). But the Pastor's attitude later shows that his going into politics is for anything but “love for one's brother” because “life in the pulpit was fast losing its glamour with the seams of his treasury breaking, so politics would surely prove a higher manipulative art” (*Beneath...*, 32). And it does not take long for Pastor Ugal's real motive for going into politics to manifest. Andornimye observes:

The Reverend Pastor made the whole art of Politics and governance look like one big business corporation... Who doesn't know there is a lot of money in this thing? With politics you control everything including our very lives, and that is the tragedy of it all (*Beneath...*,40).

Unfortunately, the marriage between religion and politics has continued to reap grim harvests not just in Nigeria but all over the world. And the tragedy will continue if religious leadership continues to meddle in politics.

Betiang's concern in *Beneath the Rubble* is the entrenchment of selfless leadership that places collective interest above self interest. The exact opposite is what we find in Agigah. Utsu Agaba the Village Head is asked to name a project the government can execute in his village. His response typifies the response of an average Nigerian leader- "I would like you to complete the building of my half-completed house... It is still roofless" (*Beneath...*, 176). Utsu Agaba forgets that the only road to his village is impassable and that his village children are now taught under trees outside their classrooms because the school roof had been destroyed by rainstorm.

But this situation is hardly surprising to the average Nigerian who knows that in most cases, communities attract government projects according to their pattern of voting during elections. Utsu Agaba reminds his people of this formula as elections approach.

...the governor has asked me to remind you that commencement of this venture will depend on the performance of your people at the coming polls. In other words, even if you don't have chance to vote, don't let your people make any kind of protest when the result is announced from the headquarters (*Beneath...*, 178). The people are thus warned beforehand to remember that votes are an investment which will yield returns in the form of government attention depending on the number of votes received from a community. This is a most regrettable reality of Nigerian politics which worries the author and leads him to the conclusion that Nigerian politics always provides a situation in which "personal interests triumph over common good" (*Beneath*, 176). One major reason for the prevalence of this reality in Nigerian politics is the unprecedented level of corruption inherent in Nigerian politics. This is the preoccupation of *Tenants of the House* by Wale Okediran.

Published in 2009, the book documents an eye-witness account of the political maneuverings and intrigues in the Nigerian legislature especially the House of Representatives of which the author was a member from 2003-2007. Although a medical practitioner, Okediran is

more renowned for his literary foray having served as the national secretary and later national president of Association of Nigerian Authors. His published works include. *Rainbows are for Lovers* (1987), *The Boys at the Border* (1991), *Storm of Passion* (1995), *The Rescue of Uncle Babs*, (1998) *Sighs of Desire* (2007), *Strange Encounters* (2004), *After the Flood*, (2005), *The Weaving Looms* (2005), and the *Riot and Other Stories* (2006).

Tenants of the House is a blend of the author's firsthand experience at the National Assembly and a fictive portrayal of events in the legislature. The book can thus be described as faction- a literary genre described by Thrall and Hibbard as “historical fiction” (202). Chijioke Uwasomba says it is “an artistic practice involving the melding or inter-weaving of both the product of imagination and real-life events and situations” (96).

At another level, the book can be seen as a prose adaptation of Emeka Nwabueze's play, *Parliamanet of Vultures*. In *Tenants of the House* the author exposes the rotten underbelly of the presumably “hallowed chamber” of the lower legislature which reeks of graft and corruption. The legislature as portrayed in the work is synonymous with corruption. This is hardly surprising because the process through which the law makers emerge is fraught with corruption, beginning with the party primaries to the main elections. Bakura gives an insight into what obtains in a typical Nigerian Political setting:

To get my nomination confirmed at the constituency level had been a fierce struggle. I had coughed up half my annual income for the nomination but it was not enough...Every step of the way it was more and more and more money. Money for the chieftain; money for the consistency moguls... (*Tenants...*, p. 3).

The above excerpt underscores the centrality of money to Nigerian politics. It is difficult to contemplate politics in Nigeria without much money. Politics in Nigeria is thus seen as a business characterized by “fierce struggle” among the competitors. With this kind of money politics, leadership becomes not an avenue to serve the people, but an avenue to make profit from investments made during campaigns and elections.

The legislature has the statutory duty to make laws through committees which should be constituted based on the professional competence and experience of members. In *Tenants of the House* however, neither of these qualities is a criterion for membership of House committees. The primary consideration for membership of a committee is the amount of money a member can pay to the speaker. Headship of a committee attracts more money particularly if such a committee is considered juicy and lucrative. This is confirmed by Hon. Winike, the Head of the anti-speaker group. He says: "...Ogebode paid the speaker a hundred thousand dollars for the chairmanship of the NDDC committee" (*Tenants*, p. 17).

Where the speaker fails to give the headship of a lucrative committee to a desperate member despite the member's ability to pay, the aggrieved member, often with the support of his sponsor, initiates the process of impeachment of the speaker. Bakura, who is a first-time member of the House is so disappointed with the trend that he laments: "I wonder what kind of parliament we are. Once you are not given headship of a committee, the next thing is impeachment..." (16). Impeachment is thus used indiscriminately as a weapon to compel the speaker to indulge the whims and caprices of greedy members and their sponsors. Often, phantom offences warranting impeachment are invented with the sole aim of replacing the speaker who is considered not malleable. The anti-speaker group adumbrates the point:

...what our sponsor wanted was a new speaker and not chairmanship positions – Our brief from the Presidency is to effect a change of speaker and since the incoming speaker is our man who has promised to take good care of us, we will end up killing two birds with one stone (*Tenants...*, p. 40)

Sometimes, even the president condescends to sponsoring the impeachment of the leadership of the legislature that he considers as a threat to his ambition. Of course, the interest of the president in this regard means much more money for the legislators. This was the situation in Nigeria during the 2nd and 3rd Republics giving rise to the "Ghana Must Go" Syndrome associated with the National Assembly.

In *Tenants of the House*, President Ambrose Oneya is the mastermind of the impeachment plot against the speaker, who is opposed to the president's plan to change the constitution to enable him to run for a third term in office. His major problem with the speaker is that he, the president, did not have a hand in the emergence of the speaker, so it is difficult to manipulate the speaker as revealed by the deputy speaker:

The whole nation is witness to the laudable manner in which our parliament ensured that the current speaker was elected without any interface from the presidency. This singular act, the very first in our democratic experience proved a bitter pill for the president to swallow (*Tenants...*, p. 105)

The president uses the anti-speaker group whom he has paid handsomely to cause chaos in the house when he fails to win the speaker's support. The speaker survives the turmoil in the House, and the president re-strategises. He denies publicly any involvement in the impeachment saga. But in line with the Mafian dictum that everyman has a price, President Oneya makes Yaya the speaker an offer he (Yaya) cannot resist.

If Yaya helps the president to amend the constitution to allow him run for another term as president, the speaker will become the governor of his state. The speaker falls for the bait against all expectations but he feels some pangs of guilt on remembering that Bakura stood like a bulwark against his impeachment bids. He determines to convince Bakura of the expediency of the shift in his stance and the pecuniary benefits expected from it. Bakura refuses to budge reminding him that “the moment you mix filthy lucre with political virtue, you find you are in a quicksand of failure. A pure vision unclouded by money politics will bring us victory” (*Tenants...*, p. 20). But the speaker persuades Bakura further:

The president means well. Now if the tenure prolongation sails through, it's honey for us. We shall all smile... There is more money in politics...what is at stake for us is to give the president our support. Life is a risk. And this is a good risk. If the plan succeeds, all well and

good. If it doesn't, we have nothing to lose you and I, Sam, all of us would at least have gained some money (*Tenants...*, p. 167).

The above turn of events illustrates perfectly the inconsistency of vision engendered by political leadership corruption in Nigeria. Corruption blurs leaders' vision and blinds them to the plight of their followers. Yaya, for instance, sacrifices the collective interest of his people whose turn it is to produce the next president after the incumbent, President Oneya. His response when confronted with the fact of his betrayal illustrates the perception of political leadership by most Nigerian politicians. Yaya says:

Honourable Samuel, politics is not arithmetic One plus one may not always equal two. In this country, clean politics is a loser's game. How do you want to survive? To be a good politician you must think of your survival, of yourself first (*Tenants...*,p. 159)

It is the avarice of most Nigerian politicians to grab their share of the metaphorical national cake without sparing a thought on the electorates who sent them there. This attitude is evident in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, where the protagonist says:

Cakes are too soft gentleman. Just you wait! Once we get elected to the top, *wallahi*, we shall stuff ourselves with huge mouthfuls of the national chin-chin, something you'll eat and eat, brothers, and you know you've eaten something" (36)

The eating culture in Nigerian politics has not changed. It has persisted to the detriment of the people who are seen as inconsequential by Bakura, as he says:

The people of the North? They are an amorphous sociological mass, not a political entity. The people. Which people? Our hungry passive constituents? What do

they care about politics? The hungry masses will go for anything. (*Tenants...*, p. 167)

The passivity of the people is no doubt evidence of their disillusionment and disappointment with both the politicians and the political system in the country. Nigerian politics is largely built on deceit, falsehood and distrust. Broken promises by politicians have made many Nigerians apolitical. But politicians are not perturbed by the indifference of the people, otherwise political parties would refrain from making false promises during electioneering campaigns. Curiously, such false promises appear to make the parties and their candidates popular and famous. Douglas Anele corroborates this view:

A party that does not exaggerate promises might appear dull, unambitious and uninteresting to voters compared to the one that does. Sometimes this can give an exaggerating party an advantage over the truthful... (120). The political apathy of the people, on the other hand, does not stop the politicians from winning elections and assuming office with the support of their godfathers because according to Yaya, "there is no truth in politics, only compromises. The truth we have forgotten" (*Tenants...* p. 167).

The author is baffled at the greed of political leaders which drives them to indulge in all kinds of frivolities. For example, President Oneya orders that a birthday party be organized for his mother for which all ministries, parastatals, states and local governments are to "drop something. One million naira each" (*Tenants.*, p. 84). In addition, the president directs that all ministries should sponsor full page advertorials in the national dailies to congratulate his mother on her birthday. All of this is done with the people's money in a country where many are hungry and sick with no reliable means of livelihood.

A similar spate of political violence, corruption and leadership failure is evident in *Sieged* by Adamu Kyuka Usman. Published in 2011, the book chronicles the many indices of political violence, corruption and misgovernance in Bivan's house which is no doubt the author's symbolic representation of Nigeria. The title of the text immediately alerts the reader to the tension inherent in the narrative. The author portrays Nigeria as a nation under siege by political violence, corruption and

leadership recklessness.

Usman adopts a historical approach to identify the source of the problems that have besieged Nigeria from inception. He seems to affirm Achebe's position that we will continue under siege until we identify "where the rain began to beat us". (*There was a Country, 1*). For Usman, Nigeria's political problem is linked to the history of its politics which is steeped in violence, thuggery and vandalism. According to the author:

Like butchers started surgery, myth had it
that headhunters started politics in Bivan's
house. From its headhunting ancestry,
politics in Bivan's house was to later
graduate into a game played by people of
the streets (*Sieged, p. 3*)

The implication is that politics in Bivan's house requires no particular skill or qualification. Thus, it is an all-comers affair in which the never-do-wells call the shots. In Bivan's house "if you had failed at everything, if no one could engage you in any job because you were not qualified for any, you joined politics" (*Sieged, p. 3*). It is not surprising therefore that politics in Bivan's house has been marred by corruption, violence and leadership ineptitude. Through the deployment of allegory, the author reveals the endemic level of corruption in Bivan's house. A political thug tells a minister that the political office occupied by the minister is like a gourd of palm wine jointly purchased. It is usually given to one member to share among all those who contributed to buy it. But all members have a stake in the gourd of palm wine. In order to underscore his point, the thug further compares it to the dead body of an elephant felled by hunters. Therefore, any member of the group of hunters that felled the elephant is entitled whenever he is without meat to come with his knife and cut, just as Ushie (2000) satirises in his poem, "Elephant":

Eat,
It's the Elephant,
Eat!

Its trunk
Its tail
Its limbs

all flesh, fleshy,
unfinishing

So, eat!
It's the Elephant,
Eat!

Eat
the tenuous Elephant
or
Your tenure expires...

Government in Bivan's house thus cuts the picture of a feast of exclusion – restricted only to the sponsors of the feast. This is a total negation of what democracy should be – a government of the people, by the people and for the people. The reality of Bivan's house government is captured vividly in these words:

Because of the quality of people engaged in politics in Bivan's house, government was not seen as an agency of public service but of *eating* public money... politicians had barricaded themselves inside government eating (*Sieged*, p. 6).

The eating mentality associated with government in Nigeria is sustained by the godfather tradition which ensures that godfathers who sponsor political office holders reserve *de facto* power while the officials are mere puppets who claim to exercise power *de jure*. The accounts in the novel reminisce the real-life situation in Anambra and Kwara states where the political office of the executive governor has for almost two decades been stage-managed by certain godfather dynasties are good examples. Besides, many states in Nigeria are currently governed by either political neophytes or those who had no stakes in the ruling party but were foisted on the party at the eleventh hour by the incumbent governors who were desperate to have their backs well covered. This is the scenario captured here:

Two weeks after his emergence as the primehead candidate of the UAC in the party's primary election, Merima was yet to

come to terms with the fact that he was indeed the party's primehead flagbearer. How could a man that only wanted to be an archer end up as the primehead candidate of a vast country like Bivan's house and a behemoth political party like UAC which was almost certain to win the election? (*Sieged*, p. 33)

Merima initially had his eyes on the National Assembly seat for his constituency. But his wealthy, corrupt father-in-law, Kamalun with the active support of the party chairman, Boyama who was bought over, deploys his wealth and connections to design a grand plot that propels Merima to the candidacy of the large party. The result is that Merima finds himself in the shadow of his corrupt father-in-law and other party thugs who employ violence against LPM opponents by derailing their campaign train in order to kill Jamimi, the LPM primehead candidate. Many of the LPM supporters die in the train accident but Jamini survives providentially. Merima finally emerges the winner in an election in which

tales of ballot box-snatching and ballot box-stuffing, agents of the opposition abducted into farms and into rivers, locked up in the booths of cars and shot point-blank abounded (*Sieged*, p. 151)

This is a déjà vu election scenario in many African countries including Nigeria. The result of such election hoax soon becomes manifest in Bivan's house like in Nigeria as

periodically, there were fuel scarcities in Bivan's house. Then long queues were seen at the fuel stations. However, whenever fuel disappeared from the filling stations, it miraculously appeared in big and small jerry cans in the black market, sold at prohibitive prices by fuel vendors on the streets (*Sieged*, p. 154)

The post-election period usually exposes the extent to which corruption has eroded virtually all machinery of government including the

judiciary. Election tribunals set up to try electoral offences are many times compromised so that “often the decisions of the courts were rigged the way the election was” (*Sieged*, p. 134). The rigging of elections usually disenfranchises the people thereby making their participation in politics cosmetic and futile as the winners are often imposed or selected through brute force and intimidation.

However, the author seems to believe that the people are as reprehensible as the leaders. For him “we are all like farmers coming back from the farm in the rain with all dirt of the earth” (*Sieged*, p. 211). Usman's view is not different from that of the other novelists examined here. The process of clearing this dirt forms the subject of the next segment of this essay.

Hope and Transformation in the Novels

The examination of political trends in the four novels selected for this study has shown that literary writers particularly in the genre of fiction are well abreast of sociopolitical developments in their society. Ima Usen affirms that

Literary writers have consistently addressed their works to the historical, social, political and economic problems of their societies. Nigerian writers are not left out.... Since they operate in an oppressive system, their works are preoccupied with themes of racism, protest, conflicts and violence (106).

The reflection of common themes is a unifying factor among the four novelists whose works have been studied here. By reflecting in their works the different forms of political developments and social ills bedeviling the country in the last two decades, the writers have affirmed Chidi Amuta's assertion that “social experience is the primary source of literature” (85). In chronicling these social experiences, the writer fulfills one of the fundamental responsibilities of the literary writer. Achebe insists that it “is a self-imposed responsibility hoisted on the writer by the realities of his existence (*Morning Yet...*, p. 15).

However, the social responsibility of the writer goes beyond

documenting social experiences to embracing and articulating strategies for solving the problems of the society. Consequently, Emeka Nwabueze posits that “literature constitutes the best and brightest expressions of all humanity. It helps us to solve real problems, the problem of existence, the problem of being human” (5). In the light of this, the four novelists have, in different ways, offered a ray of hope that will lead to transformation and ultimately ensure positive change in the politics and political leadership of Nigeria.

In *Fumes and Cymbals* for example, Okekwe employs women as agents of transformation in order to attain a new Nigeria. She does this through the creation of strong, enterprising and dynamic female characters who are strategically placed in positions of authority. These women are imbued with leadership qualities and the capacity to challenge and revolt against poor leadership, corruption and misgovernance. Aku, for instance, is portrayed as a politician who establishes a child-care agency through which she is able to bring succour to destitute children. She sees her position as First Lady as very demanding and tasking and therefore requires a lot of sacrifice. Although her husband, the president, is dictatorial, Aku does not imbibe his dictatorial tendencies; instead, she boldly confronts him and condemns his high-handedness and the insensitivity of his rule. She imbibes the special consciousness that enables her to realize that the deprivation, repression and marginalization suffered by the people can be changed through purposeful and committed leadership which is attainable through an all-inclusive political system that accommodates women like Aku.

This change can only come through a revolution which in the novel is initiated by the Black, Black Birds. But Okekwe faults the violence associated with the operations of the group. The author seems to advocate mental revolution as the prerequisite for a revolutionary action that will effect complete change. Hence, Okekwe chooses Raphael as the leader of the New Found Hope Foundation (Beautiful City). He is fully aware of the political trends and the corruption in the country. But he identifies with the masses and devotes his time and resources to better their lot. Above all, Raphael is highly cerebral and articulate, thus pointing to the role of the intellect in the quest for transformation. Raphael is one of Okekwe's symbols of hope for a better Nigeria.

Similarly, the character of J. K. Shakpa, the journalist, underscores the role of the literary writer in the fight for transformation. The commitment of Shakpa is evident in this personal resolution: “I would not relent in my effort to canvass for equity and justice and to give the world a balanced view on every issue I investigate (*Fumes and Cymbals*, p. 350). Like Chris in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Shakpa is the conscience of his society and he is firmly resolved to maintain his integrity despite the obvious risks involved. This he does when he fearlessly criticizes the minister of information for “building one big house with a swimming pool in his village, ten houses in Lagos, ten in Abuja, ten in Port Harcourt and ten in Onitsha” (364). Shakpa's resolve is tested by the Minister when:

Twice the minister had invited him and made him mouth watering offers he dared not refuse. He refused them and walked away. He did not even have a house. He pursued instead, what he called the path of truth which ate him (*Fumes and Cymbals*, p. 345).

Shakpa's character embodies the author's vision for a positive change and transformation of the decayed system. The cold-blooded murder of Shakpa is a sad reminder of the high price that the society must pay to achieve this change.

In *Beneath the Rubble*, Betiang depicts religious fanaticism and ethnic consciousness as constituting an albatross to Nigeria's political advancement. The politicization of religion in Nigeria has been a major sore point in the nation's march towards political freedom. Hence, the author recommends the need to de-emphasize religion in national politics. In the novel, the author's vision for his society comes through the narrator's rhetorical wondering aloud, “why don't we abandon the cults be it water or earth... let us not let a private personal matter create a bloody division between us and the land” (*Beneath...*, p. 160).

Again, relying on positive characterization, Betiang, through Itisha Bisong, reveals the role of the intellect in repositioning and sanitizing politics in Nigeria. Like Okekwe's Shakpa, Betiang's Bisong is the conscience of his society. As a teacher, Bisong is portrayed in the text not confined to the classroom. He is often seen in social contexts mediating

in conflicts and providing a constant check on the leadership of Agigah community. During the crisis period, he remains non-partisan and through his efforts, peace is restored to the community. In a similar vein, literary writers, through their works and social involvements, must remain bastions of peace, unity and good governance in Nigeria.

Wale Okediran in *Tenants of the House* rouses the people to consciousness by exposing the sordid activities of the legislators who are supposed to be the custodians of the people's 'house'. The power of the people to effect positive change in politics and leadership in Nigeria is encapsulated in the symbolic title of the novel. The legislators are mere tenants who can be evicted by the people who are the landlords. Hence, like Okekwe in *Fumes and Cymbals* and like Usman in *Sieged*, Okediran advocates revolution by the people in order to eject the fraudulent and corrupt occupants of our collective "house" and reclaim the "house". The author is convinced that the collective will and strength of the people will outlast the sheer bravado of the corrupt and inept legislators and leaders. This conviction is dramatized in the episode involving Hon Bakura and Gidado. Despite knowing that Batejo has long been betrothed to Gidado, Bakura is bent on marrying Batejo after abandoning his wife and children abroad. He uses his wealth, connections and intimidation to attempt to win over Batejo from Gidado. But poor Gidado is not cowed. He does not have money and connections, but he has genuine love and determination.

Bakura's desire illustrates how inordinate political leaders can be in a bid to satisfy their selfish ambition. Despite being afraid, he agrees to a flogging competition to determine who will marry Batejo. He ruminates: "the thought of being flogged with those menacing Fulani sticks was not palatable to me and I was momentarily disturbed, still I tried to put up a bold face" (*Tenants...*, p. 275). In the end, Gidado defeats Bakura and claims his wife, thereby showing that with strong determination, the people can install positive change in Nigerian politics and leadership.

Adamu Kyuka Usman is unpretentious in his indictment of the people for remaining politically stolid for a long time. Like Okekwe and Okediran, Usman believes that only revolution engineered by the masses can free Nigeria from its current siege. This revolution is that of "conscience and consciousness to completely overhaul the thinking

process and the value mechanism of the Nigerian to the extent that he will reassess his values and reorder his priorities” (Chinaka Mgbojirikwe, p. 9). This kind of consciousness, the author believes, will reveal to the people their exploitation by the leaders and the need to stop fighting one another but to turn attention to their common enemy, bad leadership, and dislodge it. In *Sieged*, it takes the ingenuity of the half-demented - drunk 'through' a traditional song known to both Chokali and Gurungutsi - to bring them to this awareness. This is an indication that the solution to Nigeria's political problems lies within our shores – it is embedded in our history and in our culture – not beyond. And soon after coming to this realization, both men stop fighting and head straight to Boyama who is the cause of their fight. The events that follow in rapid succession culminate in the death of the oppressor and the liberation of the people.

Consequently, Usman asserts that “we are all irresponsible in this country, leadership is irresponsible because the followership is irresponsible” (*Sieged*, p. 95). This supports Bernard Dickson's position in “Achebe's *Blind Gods* and *Blunt Arrows*: Implications for Nigeria” that “while leadership constitutes a problem, the political lethargy of most Nigerians like that of Umuaro constitutes a bigger problem” (14). In other words, a conscious, well informed and determined followership will ensure a responsible leadership.

Conclusion

This essay has examined political trends as portrayed by new voices in Nigerian fiction. The essay focused on four novels published between 2000 and 2011, a period that is approximately coeval with the period of the present democratic governance that began in 1999 and continues till date. The study has revealed that the four novelists who hail from different parts of the country are unanimous in their portrayal of politics and political leadership in Nigeria as tragic for the citizenry. The authors have shown, through realistic representations of the Nigerian socio-political milieu, that Nigeria is deeply stuck in a political quagmire from which it can only get out through a quantum leap that only the people can make happen.

Through the techniques of satire, lampoon and parody, the authors have indicted the leadership for its deceit and exploitation of the masses, and

the masses for their stoic acceptance of the status quo. The authors seem to be in agreement that nothing significantly positive has changed from the Nigerian politics portrayed in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, (1987) and Soyinka's *Beatification of the Area Boy* (1999). This agrees with Dickson's conclusion that "Nigerian politics has been characterized by changelessness over the ever changing seasons" (1).

However, each of the authors projects a vision of hope and transformation through positive characterization whereby individuals with high intellectual capacity galvanise others towards meaningful revolutionary actions motivated by an awareness of political leadership failure, corruption and exploitation.

In *Fumes and Cymbals* Okekwe, through the characters of Aku and Shakpa, advocates a liberalization and democratization of the political process so that more dynamic women like Aku are encouraged to embrace politics in order to sanitise the process and transform the society. This can only be achieved through responsible leadership that is not averse to constructive criticism and is not given to smothering critics and literary writers as is the case with Shakpa. Also, Betiang in *Beneath the Rubble* underscores the urgency of revolutionary actions which result from intellectual and mental re-orientation of the people facilitated by characters like Bisong, who embodies the author's vision of hope and transformation.

A similar vision is projected in both *Tenants of the House* and *Sieged* in which the authors portray the nation as a country under siege and held hostage by a group of power-drunk politicians whose stock in trade is to set the people against one another in order to distract them from holding such politicians accountable for their actions. But through the victories of Gidado in *Tenants of the House* and Jamimi in *Sieged*, the authors project a positive vision of hope in the capacity of the people to initiate change and ultimately transform the society.

Through their works, the writers examined here have succeeded in devoting their art to the service of the people thus fulfilling Fanon's view that "each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it" (166). The study further validates T. S. Eliot's position in his oft-quoted essay, "Tradition and the Individual

Talent”, that “No poet, no artist, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (Kermode and Hollander, 2014).

In sum, while political leadership in Nigeria has continued to betray the hopes and aspirations of Nigerians since the nation's flag independence in 1960, the nation's literati have maintained consistency in the fulfillment of their mission as the voice for the voiceless and conscience of society right from the onset of nationhood till date. It is equally worth particularizing, once more, that in the nation's art there is unity of direction among the artistic voices of the different ethno-religious and regional writers even as the material world of the society seems to be drifting apart in the hands of its political leaders.

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