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**Heart of the Masses: Thematic Trends in Popular Literature in  
South Africa and Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

The tremendous growth of popular literature in Africa can be traced during the period of colonization; which has led to massive publication of pamphlets across South Africa and Nigeria respectively. This paper examines the various popular literature published, and its major thematic preoccupations with an insight on the tremendous but gradual developmental progress. However, not much has been done in enlightening readers and scholars alike on the various new trends that have emerged from these regions. This paper will investigate the forms of popular literature from these regions with the purpose of exposing its hybrid nature. It argues that new forms of popular literature have emerged from Nigeria in particular. The study applies New Historicism theory in the study and analysis of the texts in the paper. Popular culture and oral literature becomes the hedge or platform which gives support to pamphlet literature from these countries in Africa. This paper therefore concludes that contrary to popular research findings, popular literature has extensively increased the growth of popular literature in South African and Nigeria despite its limitations.

**Key Words:** Popular literature, pamphlets, Obiechina, South Africa, Nigeria

### Introduction

African literary terrain is dominated by numerous popular literary materials which encourages reading culture among Africans who now have access to various pamphlets to water their appetite for pamphlets. However, various thematic preoccupations explored in the literary works of popular authors is revolved around the lives and living conditions of people (Africans) from the countries mentioned above. Ekwensi and Ogali are among West African popular authors that championed the publication, spread and growth of pamphlet literature in the West African sub-region. Obiechina states that “Any literature which appeals to the masses must have at least three predictable characteristics: it must be simple in language and technique, it must be brief, and it must be cheap” (10). This paper focuses on the growth of popular literature, which gave birth to a passionate reading culture among Africans and how New Historicism literary theory is applied in the relevant literary materials in this paper. Giambattista Vico and Johann Gottfried von Herder contributed tremendously to the growth and formation of historicism.

Onitsha market pamphlets are literature for the masses; the cinema is also a product of mass culture and a form of popular literature which is now a major problem for high culture or sophisticated literature such as Achebe’s classic entitled *Things Fall Apart*. Obiechina illuminates the importance of the strategic location of Onitsha market which invariably contributed to the increase in production and sales of pamphlets when he states “The Onitsha main market, however, remained the chief centre of pamphlet trade, attracting itself pamphlets produced as far as Sapele, Ibadan and Lagos” (4).

The moral and artistic challenges inherent in South Africa, stimulated writing up to a point, but the South African concern with “race” problems may ultimately have proven inimical to the creation of an authentic natural literature. At about that time, English speaking writers, both African and European, began to blend on a restricted scale, a cross-fertilization that may have had significant value to popular or pamphlet literature. The similarity between oral and written tradition and in particular between oral and written literature is one of great complexity and not a matter of simple evolution, this is a result of the fact that most pamphlet literatures were inspired from the rich oral tradition of its people. Moreover, Obiechina states that “It would therefore be unrealistic in any discussion of the rise of the pamphlet literature to ignore local, social, culture and psychological factors” (3). As a result of its simplicity, popular author’s diction, the fusion of his/her rich oral tradition to capture the experience of their people played a significant role in the growth and spread of popular literature in the regions. It was also affordable for people especially low income earners to buy these pamphlets. Popular literary materials that have emerged from Africa are to a certain degree hybrid as a result of culture contact among Africans and Europeans who either

came as missionaries or colonialist. Its impact on writers in Africa is partly negative as it brought along their values, culture and world view (cosmology). Paul Gilroy examines our hybridist popular literary creative works which is interestingly a product of popular culture and its influence on pamphlet authors cannot be overemphasized when he opines that:

It has little to say about the profane, contaminated world of black popular culture and looks instead for an artistic practice that can disabuse the mass of black people of illusions into which they have been seduced by their condition of exile and unthinking consumption of inappropriate cultural objects like the wrong hair products, pop music and western clothing (32).

The media which includes the cinema, musicals, films, television, and the various social networks that have emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has ultimately led to a tremendous boost of popular literature and experience in African and the various regions to be précised. As a result of western education which gave birth to an enlightened reading class, the main audience or readers of popular literary materials are the average low income earners. Western culture and values came along side with popular literature or culture. Gilroy summaries the present situation thus:

Here, the polyphonic qualities of black culture expression form the main aesthetic considerations and there is often the uneasy but exhilarating fusion of modernist and populist techniques and styles. From this perspective, the achievements of popular black culture forms like music are constant source of inspiration. (32)

Obiechina therefore opines that “Literary historians have done much in establishing popular market literature as an integral, if unique and startling, part of the West African creative science” (1). According to Elizabeth Knight who emphasized more on the contribution of blue chip publishing company like Heinemann states that “Charles Mangua’s *Son of Woman*, however sold 10,000 copies in six months and the follow-ups, *A Tail in the Mouth*, sold 15,000 copies in two months” (177). This indicates the rate at which pamphlets sold in East Africa which made it a huge success. Educated writers made use of the knowledge they acquired through Western education to promote the growth of popular literature by establishing print and newspapers which made it possible for young writers to get published. It is therefore, pertinent to observe that popular literature appeals to the sentiments rather than reason as the language of pamphlet literature is easy to comprehend and differ from high culture and literary publications. Using New Historicism theory, we shall demonstrate these claims in our analysis of the materials from the regions under discourse.

### Popular Literature in South Africa

When we observe popular literature in South Africa from Bernth Lindfor's perspective, we have to bring into consideration some important factors which include the following: geography, economics, education, politics and group aesthetic preference. In view of this, chief among the popular authors in Southern Africa that championed the spread of popular literature is Athol Fugal in his book entitled *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. One of the major factors that made his work popular literature is because it sold millions of copies in South Africa and it also had a large group aesthetic preference among readers. Tanure Ojaide describes this kind situation when he states that "It is thus very understandable that there is lot of protest in modern African literature against colonialism, racism, apartheid, political corruption, class distinction and injustice among others. Modern African (southern) literature is a literature that response to the people's plight, feelings and aspirations" (6).

Southern Africa popular literature is therefore, a product of their experience during apartheid with all its inhuman face and treatment on black majority, the major thematic preoccupation in Fugal's text is the negative effects of apartheid among black South Africans. Be that as it may, the very need to work so as to earn money becomes the motivating factor which drives the protagonist in the play to making use of a dead man's passport. The story however, reflects the humiliation of black South Africans by the colonial white minority. As a result of the fact that Bansi was unable to get a job in Port Elizabeth where he leaves, after facing numerous raids. The constituted authority insist he returns to his native land, he and Buntu sees the corps of Robert Zwelinzima on the road, the dead man has a valid passport and he transfers the photograph of the dead man passport to his. From then on he assumes the identity of the dead man. The author makes use various techniques such as flashback, direct audience address, dramatic monologue and comic language in a satirical manner to ridicule the apartheid era in Southern Africa in general and South Africa in particular. Fugal also reveals the social and economic inequalities inherent in South Africa, black workers and their families are exploited extensively by the white ruling class in South Africa. Ojaide opines that "Since literature is a cultural production, it only follows that a people's narratives, poetry, and drama should be an expression of their culture's artistic disposition at its highest level" (10). It is moreover important to observe that many Southern Africa popular authors made good use of binary opposition such as light and darkness, good and evil, rich and poor which ultimately is reflected in their literary works. This explains why Stephanie Newell observers that "In the case of popular literature, writers of popular novels were for example criticized for containing references to American popular culture or for being "soapy" as well as for creating "simple binary opposition between 'good' and 'bad' characters" (5).

Since popular literature in Southern Africa is appreciated by the people who live in the city, as a result of urbanization and the rural/urban migration, Birgit Englert says “While it is certainly true that urban areas are largely the cities of popular creativities- especially those which succeed in reaching a broader audience- the reception of popular culture can hardly be limited to the urban spheres” (5). The major channel through which popular literature was expressed in Southern Africa by popular authors was through the publication of works in print. The link between popular culture, popular music and popular literature is that they are inter-related so to speak. We can therefore deduce that the major thematic preoccupation in popular literature of writers, artist of popular music is revolved around anti-apartheid protest. Stephen Orgel a New Historicist critic locates literary works in the context as part of historical documents of some sort. In South Africa, a popular dance troop goes around Africa promoting South African culture which has earned them a reputable position in Africa, as they also express popular culture of the South African people.

Interestingly, this brings us to popular literature in South Africa unraveled in the media though artists such as Yvonne Chaka Chaka and the late Brenda Fassie who sang popular music for many years. Their music expresses the popular culture of South African people and has made millions of sales across the world. The various South African soap opera that is aired on DSTV is also a product of popular literature and to a large extent expresses the popular culture of the South African people. We cannot but conclude by saying that the popular literature in Southern Africa was not fully expressed as a result of apartheid which restricted the growth and spread of popular literature in Southern Africa. New Historicism in relation to popular literature in South African literature is targeted towards analyzing a literary text in connection with a particular society.

### **Popular Literature in Nigeria**

The spread of the popular literature in West Africa and Nigeria in particular can be said to have emerged after the Second World War, be that as it may, Obiechina has observed in his book entitled *An African Popular Literature: A Study of the Onitsha Market Pamphlets*, that “The first popular pamphlets appeared in Onitsha in 1947, but it was fifteen years later that commentaries on them began to appear” (2). Popular or pamphlet literature is common in major cities in West Africa namely Accra, Lagos and Onitsha, they are cheap and are produced periodically. In appreciating the relevance of New Historicists approach to understanding the works of popular authors, it is important that we locate the various incidents in their creative works to time, place and the historical situations when they wrote. Since events in history are unique, writers from South Africa and Nigeria give a historical (creative) account of events that have occurred through their popular pamphlets, music and culture. Furthermore, Newell is of the opinion that popular literary materials are “Written in English and published in urban

printing presses, these pamphlets are aimed at male and female readers, young and mature, single and married. The most popular pamphlets are reprinted regularly and may remain on sale for several decades” (16). Onitsha market seems to have promoted the growth and spread of the pamphlet in Nigeria, many other factors contributed to the massive spread of the pamphlets or popular literature in Nigeria and West African. Since popular literature seems to appeal to the masses and the fact that it is cheap, this led to massive increase in the general reading public to embrace the reading of pamphlets. Obiechina opines that:

Other factors include the tremendous spurt in the growth in literacy after the Second World War, the growth in the urban population of Onitsha, the spread in locally-owned and operated printing presses, the division of much energy and money previously devoted to the war effort to commercial, industrial and technological development, the significance of Onitsha market as the commercial mart of eastern Nigeria, the influx in the 1940's of Indian and Victorian drugstores pulp magazine fiction which became a model for the pamphlet literature, and a flourishing of what could be vaguely called the 'democratic' spirit (4-5).

The point moreover, is that many popular authors were inspired and motivated as a result of the popular newspapers established already which invariably was the training ground for many of them to explore their creative and imaginative ideas. Often, the message of the popular literary artist is clear, he writes about the change in his environment as he provides some form of guidance to the people trapped as a result of the change. These pamphlets depict life in the city and the various negative trends that is associated with urban life. Popular authors in Nigeria examine numerous thematic concerns in their pamphlets which range from corruption, quest for materialism, hard work, violence, disease honesty and a lot of emphasis on obedience. Works of popular authors are didactic and vital in the transformation of the society. Agwuncha Arthur Nwankwo earlier noted that “The patriotic writer evaluates his immediate socio-political environment, studies its failings and works assiduously to transform society through his writings” (32). Pamphlet literature focuses on the ordinary lives of the people in the city, what they go through every day and how they try to earn a living in the densely populated urban area. Other various forms of advertisement are all also forms of popular literature as its sole aim is exploiting the masses, this is as a result of the fact that it appeals to sentiments rather than reason. In West Africa and Nigerian in particular various soap opera, home video and many other programs showed on air are all forms of popular culture. Many musical groups or artists in Nigeria express popular culture in their songs and have achieved commercial success and admirers abroad. Since many cities in the country are linked or associated with modernity, many pamphlets are

sold at various strategic locations which include the parks, inside commercial vehicles, bookshops and bookstands across various locations in the city.

The church is not left out as they also print popular literary materials geared towards the conversion of imaginary ‘lost souls’ and win new converts to their various churches to be indoctrinated and brainwashed. The church therefore becomes an agent that contribute immensely to the spend of Christian pamphlet in Nigeria. Stephanie Newell holds that:

Running alongside the proliferation of local charismatic ministries and churches, ever-increasing quantities of cheap, locally published religious pamphlets have become available in Nigeria and Ghana, circulating from one country to another along sophisticated and well-established distribution networks (297).

### **Language in Nigerian Popular Literature**

Language is fundamental to any culture or people, its usage vary from one’s level of education and social status. In Nigerian popular literature, the authors’ choice of words is very important as his prospective readers are considered before before writing. Sam Onuigbo made a sweeping statement to this effect when he states that “the relationship between language and literature has always been interesting just as literature live and thrives best in language, language blossoms and explores in literature” (41). The importance of language in relation to popular literature in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized; a critical example is the pamphlet of popular author Okenwa Olisah play entitled *Elizabeth My Lover*, the language of the characters in the play below shows their level of education and background.

**Chief Cookey:** This thief thief boy Otofioke, wettin you dey finding for my house  
Go away quickly quickly. I go call police for you.

**Ototofioke:** There is nothing bad in my coming here, Chief Cookey. May it please you  
to hear that I come to marry your daughter Elizabeth (18).

The illustration above indicates the level of education between the two characters in the play, while Chief Cookey is uneducated, Ototofioke is literate. Onuigbo admits that “it appears, therefore that no critic can adequately appreciate the beauty of literature outside language” (42). Therefore, the grasp understanding of the language of a writer or his diction will go a long way to unraveling his thoughts, actions and inactions of characters, we observe that in popular literature in West Africa and Nigeria in particular is sometimes written in pidgin or broken English. Some popular authors also make use of their indigenous languages for stylistic effect. Onuigbo emphasis that “This language has produced and sustained a literary culture within and

outside the native home and the expression of the “nationalist emotions” would have a wider readership and apparently popular appreciation” (45).

### **Textual Analysis of Themes Explored in Popular Nigerian Literature**

Popular Nigerian literature is a reflection of the numerous events that have shaped her as a result of post-independence crises which are widely elucidated in the pamphlets. Furthermore, Obiechina observes that “The influence of the newspaper is most evident in the large number of pamphlets dealing with political events and personalities in (and sometimes outside) Africa. This in itself is not surprising since the growth of the popular press in Africa was inextricably bound up with the fight by African nationalists against European imperialism” (90). Ayi Kwei Amah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* and Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* are good examples of popular literature that appeal the masses, their works more importantly has aesthetic and utilitarian value to the West African readers of popular literature. Nwahunanya therefore expresses his view “*Two Thousand Season* is a vision of the ideal, especially when we consider the central position he (Amah) accords the ethos of “the way” as a guiding principle in pre-colonial Africa, and which could be exploited in chanting a new course for Africa” (272).

Amah’s explores life before colonialism and after colonialism in a functionalized way in his home country Ghana; he therefore tries to fulfill his role as a writer who expresses the popular opinion of his people in particular and Africa in general. Nwahunanya observes that “He (Amah) digs into the past, retrieves an almost lost gem, “the way”, and presents it as the most viable option to Africa of the future” (273). Scholars such as Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, and Elechi Amadi have derived inspiration in writing their works from the rich oral tradition of their people, Obiechina comments “The combination of entertainment and didactic intents in the pamphlets derives its inspiration from the oral tradition. The specific oral tradition most closely imitated is the folktale” (103). Many popular authors examine the role of religion and morality in their pamphlets, Ogali like I made mention of in this paper, championed the spread of pamphlets in Nigeria. In his *No Heaven for the Priest*, he criticizes the corruption of the priest who exploit the people who they ought to protect “Many of them (priest) sold the relief materials intended for the poor and needy. Relief materials went to Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers, follow Clergymen, very important personalities, beautiful girl friends and car owners” (113).

Another major theme explicated in popular literary materials in Nigeria is the theme of love, authors like Highbred Maxwell, J.O. Nnadozie, Chike Okinyia and Okwudili Orizu examined the theme of love in their pamphlets; they also associated love with marriage and are thrilled by Western concept of marriage. Okenwa Olisah explores the theme of love in *Elizabeth My Daughter*, the protagonist is in love with



Ototofioko, although her father was against her but later gave her his consent toward the end of the play.

**Ototofioko:** (Smiling) Chief have the twenty pounds. (he give the twenty pounds chief Cookey accepts it.)

**Chief Cookey:** Ototofioko you can go now with my daughter. She don be your wife. No palaver again. Live in peace with her.

**Cecilia:** It is my hope that you will live with happiness, peace, and prosperity with my daughter. May God bless this marriage for Christ sake. (31)

### Conclusion

It is therefore convenient to conclude that the growth of South African and Nigerian popular literature has increased the reading culture among the masses but has also suffered a tremendous set back as a result of popular authors' intellectual limitations. The hybrid nature of their popular or pamphlet literature is illuminating to readers and scholars alike. The environment of these writers forms the bedrock of the bulk of their materials. This paper applied New Historicism as the theoretical framework for the study. Popular authors in Africa are faced with the challenge of addressing the political situation inherent in their home countries as a result of colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial realities in the two nations.

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