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‘High’ Regime, ‘Popular’ Protestant: Negotiating the Cultural Departures in Nigerian Literary Consumption and Criticism

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Abstract

As an academic discipline, literature it would seem has created a consumption culture remote from its layman anticipation as an imaginative document for leisurely edification – evident in the now-obligatory engagement of creative writings more for intellectual discourse, and less for their aesthetic merit. From this bifurcation, Nigerian literary culture evinced a material taxonomy that drew the line between writings that constitute canon and achieve curricular recognition, and those alleged as predominantly bereft of content that make intersection with ideology possible. Through recent scholarship, however, it is becoming increasingly palpable that the statutory departures of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ literary cultures have appeared to have held sway, without even as much as a standard authoritative theoretic supplying their distinction. Also, academic boards are warming up to the growing influence of popular culture and the clout of proliferated technology on the traditional import of ‘literature’, and have begun to study these realities. However, in spite of new curricular curiosity in this direction, there has remained the insistence on holding the hierarchical premise of quality to canonical texts, and against popular ones, that are avidly consumed, but curiously deemed unworthy of academic credit. The objective of the study, therefore, is to come to terms with what supplies the ‘high versus popular’ departures in literary culture. The study argues that their divide is artificial and critically prejudiced; and entertains the dismounting of the hierarchical barriers between them in order to passably appreciate both in their consumption and criticism.

Keywords: Cultural departures, Literature, Nigerian literary culture, consumption culture, Criticism

Protesting the Regime

The inclusion and study of popular culture and its literature in curriculum is welcome. It does placate Barber's (1987) argument that the popular arts in Africa would remain stranded in purpose if it is not afforded the same merit and visibility granted elite culture (p. 10). However, popular culture still has a lot to achieve to measure up to its curricular counterpart. Though, formal scholarship is beginning to accept expansionist redefinitions of authorship, text and the literary, it still harbours an epistemological suspicion of popular culture as a usurper of the polished tastes curricular texts seem better designed to satisfy. More so, it would seem that the entrenchment of orientations insisting on the hierarchical separation of high literature over the popular has always been an implicit academic responsibility in censoring quality, access and preference. Hence, popular culture and its literature have remained positioned within high culture's new tolerance beyond the cultural departures separating them – a tolerance that accommodates the popular as an 'other', at best.

As an expression, 'popular' brings to bear four basic implications: that which elicits mass appeal; tastes, which are therefore not elitist, but plebeian; sellable and commercially viable artistic produce made largely for quotidian consumption; and that which people everywhere can, and do make for themselves (Williams, 1983, p. 237). While every layman can decently discuss the term, it is this "embeddedness in everyday life" that makes popular culture difficult to isolate and elucidate. We recognise that "the food we eat, the clothing we wear, the people we spend time with, the gossip we share, the roadways we travel" and other everyday sensations constitute this term, but despite the fact that "we all seem to know what we are talking about when we talk about pop culture its exact meaning has been debated for decades". It is for this perceived triviality that popular culture struggles to entrench itself in academia, following the "persistent disbelief that academic theories and methodologies can shed new light on phenomena whose meanings seem transparently obvious" (Harrington & Bielby, 2001, p. 2). But the prospect of mass participation in a given cultural attitude being capable of giving up information about the zeitgeist of that age helps its case, and suggests that popular culture can be a viable tool in interrogating societies

to diverse depths (Nachbar & Lausé, 1992, p. 5; Falola & Agwuele, 2009, p. 4). Such is the magnetism and flexibility of this 'democratic' popular culture, it boasts a near-infinite range of content: music, television, magazines, sports, advertising; and is reflected in countless disciplinary outlooks. Popular culture can represent a tolerant variety of theoretical frameworks: media studies, cultural studies, literary theory, sociology and political economy; and provocatively engages issues of diversity: race, ethnicity, gender, sex, nationality, age and economic class. Popular culture is too opportune and its indices so auspicious, that it has no apparent methodology and scope (Harrington & Bielby, 2001, p. 1-4).

Consequently, popular culture has had to legitimise itself in the academia by selectively sourcing interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that approach relations of marginal culture and hegemonic power. The most successful in this regard, has been Cultural studies, which concerns itself with the role social institutions play in shaping culture. Cultural studies as a field emerged in Britain in the late 1950s, and became identified with the 1964-founded Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, before spreading internationally. Through pioneering efforts of scholars like Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams – themselves influenced by Marx and Gramsci – cultural studies would attain a broad influence in the humanities and social sciences, implicating even science and technology. Cultural studies fluidly appropriates theories and methodologies from anthropology, psychology, philosophy, history, linguistics, literary criticism, musicology, media and film studies, political science, economics, and art theory. Cultural studies interrogates the normative marginalisation of cultural outputs that are ideologically and aesthetically remote from Western metanarratives; and inhabits the social, economic and political conditions that affect institutions and cultural products such as literature, art and music. Cultural studies evidences its critique by expressing an epistemological suspicion of the habitual privileging of traditional value hierarchies in tensions between sex and gender, race and ethnicity, nation and empire, state and indigeneity, and centric and marginal, in the production of cultural knowledge. It contests especially the set distinction between 'high' canonised art, and 'low' popular culture; and straddles the landscape separating old established knowledge, and postmodern cultural and academic inquiry (During, 1999 [1993];

Dworkin, 1997, p. 116; Hall, 1996, pp. 31-48; Hall, 1996b, pp. 337-39, 342; Hall, 1999 [1993], pp. 99-109; Johnson, 1986/87, pp. 42-45, 52-58, 72-74). Consequently, cultural studies pursues its interests away from canonised knowledge, and in the crevices of energetic creative culture inhabited by cultural minorities and oppositional identities – postcolonial writing, popular music, urban fads, folk festivals, ethnic beliefs, social media as alternative press, etc.

The materiality of culture – in terms of produce and consumption – has created a system of power, wherein hierarchy and primacy are contested. In the heat of this contest, there has been a 'high' winner and a 'low' loser. Recently, cultural studies appear interested in querying the reason for the 'loss', and understanding, indulging even, the potential for the revival of this lowly, disadvantaged contestant. Popular culture embodies the subordinated classes – marginalised societies, postcolonial identities, members of border cultures who barely surpass the requisites of centric acceptability – and then the fraternity they warp to resist their auxiliary label (Fiske, 1989, pp. 1-2). This standpoint insists that popular culture's mass appeal signifies its majority-status and ensuing significance to society. Despite allegations of ideological and philosophic sparseness, popular culture protests its deviation from aristocratic connoisseurship as a heroic stick-out for the rights of the margins of society to realise their standards of leisure and artistry, departed from the centrism of high art. In a protestant pro-margin standoff, popular culture combines dissidence and egalitarianism to appropriate space for low-class identities in the politics of artistic appreciation, in what represents "the triumph of a democratic aesthetic" (Rollin, 1975, p. 5) in cultural relations.

Long neglected as a topic of scholarly concern, popular culture has in recent years began to attract critical interest. Novels and stories of various excitable genres voraciously consumed by a huge reading public around the world since the debut of the paperback in the late 1930s, are now earning critical notice. As a result, scholars have produced studies on the works of popular authors as J.K.K. Tolkien, J.K. Rowling, James Hadley Chase and Dan Brown, citing the merit of their writing as cultural documents. While critics still defame works of this nature – escapist entertainment, formulaic narratives, metropolitan pedagogy, poor ideological leaning, ostentation and sensationalism – postmodern theorists now challenge the accepted notions of what constitute *serious* literature.

Other scholars have opted to dismount the hierarchical barrier between elite and popular literary culture in order to passably appreciate both. Thus, new strategies are being devised to draw all modes of literature – from canon to something as transitory and unheralded as radio advertisement or viral memes – together in the study of cultural history.

Facilitated a great deal by the idea of canon, the major criticism against popular literature is that it is a substandard aesthetic, and at best, perversions of the loftiness of Classical and Renaissance traditions. Read for its distraction value, popular literature is oft-maligned because pleasure is the keystone of its construction, as premium is "placed on the imperative of entertainment as motive for its consumption" (Onoriose, 1997, p. 4); and even unsophisticated readers can participate in its meaning-making with minimum effort, without "intimate knowledge of the arts of literature to appreciate its more delicate beauties" (p. 8). But if critics value literature – as discipline or creativity – purely for its ideological bent or privatist mysticism, then perhaps they are not influenced by literary content. What makes literature literary does not take much to achieve: simply, the qualitative coalescence of plot, character, language, and theme. Foremost of what makes literature literary is that hue of creativity, than, and before the politics and bureaucracy of social function. Popular literariness, as distinct from popular sentiment, is identified when people like a story for its characters and action, without emphasising its (non)elitist attributes. Far from being patronising or derogatory, 'popular' describes positively, literature that has succeeded in communicating as *literature.*

Early Popular Literature in Nigeria

It cannot be overstated that written-*ness* as a condition prejudiced the idea of literature a great deal in Nigeria. Appreciating what is literary can be problematic when there is not just a binary division, but bias, between orality and writing. The spread of print, in Africa was heavily aided by the European Christian missions, but in order to capture African dialects in alphabets, huge compromises were made to determine the most tenable transcriptional rendition to capture each word. Except compromise between Western alphabetic capture and native density was put in effect, African language

writing would be disadvantaged. The Yorubas were able to arrive at such compromises for transcription in 1875, due largely to the pioneering translation of the Bible by Samuel Ajayi Crowther. This enhanced Yoruba written literature before that of other Nigerian tribes, and marked a watershed in the use of vernacular to spread the colonial religion, and most notably, aid demotic literary effort (Ricard, 2007 [2004], p. 12). Popular literature in Southern Nigeria was thus impacted by the early indigenous energies of semi-literate writing among the Yorubas and Igbos especially, evidenced in the legacies of Hubert Ogunde's Yoruba folk opera, and the Onitsha market literature tradition respectively, in the mid-1940s (Onoriose, 2007, pp. 88-94).

To the West African readership of the mid-1900s, popular texts written and produced by local authors and publishers offered greater charm than curricular ones. Much of the popular literature supplies to this region came initially from India: cheap pamphlets posting idyllic cover designs; as well as romance movies beamed at cinemas, influencing youth culture and popular theatre (Larkin, 2002 [1997]; Nwoga, 2002; Obiechina, 1971, p. 61). At least three catalysts account for the unique cultural association between India and Anglophone West Africa. First: the generous reportage of Gandhi's political activism in local newspapers in the 1920s and '30s, and its regard as viable inspiration for, or precursor of an African nationalist equivalent. Second: West African servicemen at the end of World War II, returning from Burma with cosmopolitan mindsets and paraphernalia (movies, songs, literature), at the same time literacy was increasing back home. Third: with growing interest in the Orient in the 1930s and '40s, local newspapers attracted adverts from gurus and mystics offering charms and potions sellable by post. Buoyed by newly acquired literacy, young people sought stimulating literature outside curriculum, found inspiration in nationalist pursuits, and began to interrogate their world through demotic creativity that would blossom into formulaic popular art. They wrote pamphlet literature dappled with Christian themes; metropolitan romantic novels showing youth diffidence against social mores; and palimpsests of traditional oral repertoire. As early literates were mostly male, authors of these forms were predominantly so. West African popular literature concerned itself with problem-solving pedagogy, hence, critics could detect in its spine, a literary craft and didacticism that fed a new national

mindset. Whether nationalist, culturally liberal or conservative, these exertions were a lucid expression of civil society and thus portended (and yet promise avenues for) emerging participation of youth. This lax inclusiveness and dynamic authorship, is another impediment to popular literature's academic credit (Newell, 2006, pp. 101-23). From the mercantile buzz in the Nigerian city of Onitsha – famed continent-wide for its large vibrant market – arose a literary culture where writers of Igbo extraction were fashioning their works to suit a newly literate local public just coming to terms with the urbanisation of their cultural-scape. The ensuing pamphlet literature was cheap, accessible, brief, and popular, offering to help people navigate 'the business of living' – how to woo females with love letters, counsels on complexities of love and romance, how women think, and how to solve knotty issues in marriage, finance or the workplace (Obiechina, 1973). From 1947 to 1966 just before the Civil War, this semi-amateur tradition blossomed through over 200 titles (Onoriose, 2007, p. 88), with household names like Ogali A. Ogali and Wilfred Onwuka. While Nigerian popular writing emulated its foreign counterparts in discourse (Nnolim, 1989, p. 56), it did not gain similar traction, but did have notable names like Cyprian Ekwensi, Kole Omotoso, Eddie Iroh, Bode Sowande, Kalu Okupi and Mohammed Sule. In all that time, and arguably until now, popular literature has remained peripheral in the academia, largely because through their reading lists, bodies like West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), tacitly, if not blatantly, advanced the impression that only literature of the *serious* sort is worth reading. This was even as *high* literature was read compulsorily by a population of young people who needed high school credits in examinations; and popular writing, consumed compulsively, by those who read for leisure, without curricular encumbrances (Achebe, 1975, p. 39; Onoriose, 1997, pp. 61, 114).

Apart from these examination gatekeepers, publishing houses in their prioritisation of manuscripts most fitting for curriculum, helped to push popular writing into the periphery. James Currey's *Africa Writes Back* (2008) details the drama, politics, colonial relationship and economic temperaments that accompanied Heinemann's solely educational publishing enterprise to cope with, and provide facility, for the growing faculty of African writing, by the launch of the African Writers Series. Analysing the vagaries of

publication from a materialist critique, the conditions of writing and muse created and censured by curricular publishers, and the capitalist prediction of market response, served to limit the visibility and viability of popular culture and its free literariness, against its illustrious other. The most influential publishing houses in the freshly postcolonial West African sub-region, all appeared to prioritise providing reading matter for school use; thus creating whether deliberately or not, a schism of literary culture and consumption for the formal literate ideologue, and the lay semi-literate seeking entertainment and edification.

Popular Culture and Industrialised Society

When scholars began showing interest in popular forms, they were perceived as perverted of the real deal, not elite in language and style, and consequently labelled 'sub-literature', applying to this category a "traditional qualitative distinction between high culture and mass culture" (Cawelti, 2001 [1969], p. 203). By 'traditional qualitative distinction', what is implied is that in the stead of painstakingly developed criteria delineating high and popular art, what exists is a rhetorical cartography from whence a dubious poetics has sprouted; more a sentimental posture, than a well-informed theoretic. Popular literature has thus been fixed as a class of value, and departures of *high* and *low* have been negotiated by some scholars as political and classist labels. The adversarial context of the high and popular became vehicles for the organisation of specific cultural power relations (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6; Swirski, 1999; Harrington & Bielby, 2001, p. 7). For Newell (2006), if a boundary exists at all between high and popular texts, it exists not at the behest of structure and form, but as a result of the different ways in which these modes interact with their audiences (p. 73). What we find in the verdict on popular literature – pervasive standard and commercial specialism – is but a psychologised version of the mass society critique that flatters to connect social and mental conditions: literate people beget high culture; laymen, mass culture. Even tastes are hierarchical: aficionados have 'affinities' and 'preferences' (elite, stately, sedate); common folks are 'fans' (avid, hysterical). In both forms of admiration, one is deemed superior and more socially suitable (Jensen, 2001 [1992]). High and popular cultural departures are results of artificial artistic and material forces

responsible for placing curlicues of value on them: a commodification of culture.

Much of what influenced (and still does) the perception of the literary in Black Africa was supplied by the same cultural and economic forces that transformed the continent in the past century: colonialism (Lindfors, 2007 [1997], p. 22). By 'commodification of culture', Barber (2007) meant how (post)modern forces of industry and capital provided avenues for turning otherwise unruffled cultural mores into restless commercial schemes; and how contemporariness interfaced with the olden and demotic for pecuniary gain (pp. 219-24). Print capitalism (the system of publishing houses determining the visibility of literary art, and the power of exam bodies to rubberstamp curriculum) altered the relationship between authors and their readers. To attain visibility, writers have had to depend on the roles publishers play in taking their art to the wider market. Manuscripts would be vetted, the disposition of the writer may be overturned by publishers investing capital and machinery, and who understand the market. James Currey, having worked with Heinemann Publishers in Africa, and helped create the 'African Writers Series' to cater for the publishing demands of African curricular fiction in the 1960s, thoroughly addressed how this practical economic and political conditioning of art often disrupted original manuscripts in his book, *Africa Writes Back* (2008). It was discussed how the West's economic clout had adversely affected the content and style of West African literature, such that profitability seems unfeasible when not publishing from European and American stables. Narrative exercise was a norm in ancient Africa, and storytellers interacted deftly with participatory audiences and stale elements in the art. Increased literacy spurred conversion, 'reduction' even (Barber, 2007), of these narrative energies to writing. Then modern economics conditioned muse, inured the innocence of writing, and twisted it to a citation of 'writing for whom': curriculum or leisure readers? By this commercial specialism and literary cartography, print capitalism was birthed.

Print capitalism has "radically altered the relation of audience to author and of author to work" (Ramanujan, 1999, p. 9), proliferating genres and spurning competition for the reading market. It is shattering the clout of educational and cultural establishments that determined curriculum, regulated literary

standard, and "acted as gatekeeper and filter, selecting certain texts and authors for the category "literature" while consigning the rest to "entertainment"" (Barber, 2007, p. 220). Upon the advent of the printing press in West Africa, the attendant proliferation of publishers, and evolution of a vibrant writing industry, the right to bowdlerise what can be *literature*, and what is prejudiced as *entertainment*, has frizzled away from these institutions: the "canon has been exploded or discarded and all genres compete for a share of the market" (pp. 220-21). Such *de*-monopoly of the market, and copyright, changed the posture of literary culture, its produce and ensuing consumption. The consequence of this cultural re-packaging and the new predominance of imaging and branding can only be postmodernist: writers started mixing *high* and *low*, western and indigenous cultural allusions, to satisfy varied predilections; and by this generic perversity, abandoned the so-called redemptive mission of art. The result was:

> a steady expansion of the fields in which authorship and new forms of cultural authority are claimed: celebrity performers can now trademark their physical pose, their singing or performance style, their vocal characteristics, and their frequently used phrases, mannerisms and gestures" (Coombe, 1998, pp. 285-86).

By such commodification, "the aura of author as cultural originator" (Barber, 2007, pp. 221-22) exploded beyond the exclusive of published writing, as a phenomenon of industrialised society.

Defending the Popular: Discourse of Merit and Critical Ironies

A major accusation against popular literature is that its plots are formulaic and therefore not inventive enough to interrogate changing zeitgeists. But there is a merit to this. Formula stories are structures of narrative conventions which perform a variety of social functions in a unified way with principles for the selection of plot, character and setting. Though formulaic narratives may suggest weak quality, they are industrial and economic translations of conventions essential to the efficient production of popular cultural commodities, and should not be simplistically vetted by elite aestheticism. Cawelti's article, "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature" (2001 [1969]) submits a positive effect it can have on the reader:

> If the individual does not encounter a number of conventionalized experiences and situations, the strain on his sense of community and identity will lead to great tensions and even to neurotic breakdowns. On the other hand, without new information about his world, the individual will be increasingly unable to cope with it [...] (p. 206)

Such narrative conventions stabilise culture, such that when indices of conformity are stated and re-iterated, individual psyches become immune to socially disruptive propensities. Popular plots, character stereotypes, mores, though repetitive and pedagogic, stabilise the individual sense of attitude and propriety, and imparts one with ample orientation about extant society. Barber (2007) proposes that the same esteem high literature has, be given local and personal writings – the ones "never published at all, but gathered dust in a suitcase under somebody's bed [...] diaries and letters half-intended for an audience or lodged in official archives with one eye on posterity" (p. 223) – arguing that the context of the 'literary' that informs their construction, has been fulfilled. Likewise, Newell (2006) argues that West African professional authorship is not the exclusive of "European-language writers like Senghor, Kane, Achebe and Soyinka", rather it includes griots who perform salient cultural communal roles "as performers and interpreters, as praise-singers, oral historians, storytellers, singers, dancers, and drummers" (p. 59). Even regular people can play these roles when need.

This premise reflects the growing tolerance of the perception of literature beyond the convention of written-*ness.* The cultural schism created by postcolonial capitalism and kept in momentum by pro-canon literati should not be allowed to obscure the sheer openness and dynamism that characterise Nigerian, and indeed African *literariness:* the quality of being literary. The ready market for curricular literature is reason to point more towards commercial specialism than pure literary craft, when negotiating the high-low cultural departures. Commerce and profit, produce and syllabi suitability: these indices commodity what should be a humanistic culture of literary activity, and give primacy to the economics of reading audience than the intent of style. Including a work in the curricular reading list does not affirm superior literary quality; and elite criticism, not noticing or rating popular culture enough, is tantamount to masking complacency as intellectual grace. Swirski (1999) substantiates:

> The sentiment expressed to me by a senior English professor at a major North American university may be typical in this regard. Asked why *literary* scholars by and large ignore popular *literature,* he replied that this is not really the domain of departments of literature but of cultural studies. This strikes me as a grave abdication of professional responsibility. Any demarcation of a field of study that leaves 97% of its subjects camping outside the city gates must be regard as methodologically suspect. (emphasis retained l p. 2)

The present study encourages contesting the hierarchy of centric literature produced “for the purely aesthetic activity of those who simply use texts as objects for exotic curiosity or literary and ideological demands” (Mudimbe, 2007 [1985], p. 60); and draws attention to popular art and their textual economies of uncomplicated pedagogy.

Savagely brilliant, intentionally ideology-dense literature that seem designed not to be read the ordinary way, have the tendency to shut out the greater number of readers who read literature for the love of it, for the smaller exotic coterie who read them for seminars, theses development, reviews, exams and other studious pursuits. Within such a trend, the novel is fast becoming a patrician pursuit, where published copyrighted texts are only rendered consequential by a cliqued coterie; and where the interpretation often depended on elite, exclusive knowledge? The novel was an anti-aristocratic response of narrative creativity that eked out a cultural space for proletarian taste and craft, departed from the sophisticated rhetoric and bombast of high drama and poetry (Chinweizu, Jemie & Madubuike, 1980, pp. 19, 28). At the behest of elite criticism, the novel is threatening to become less alluring to the lay mass of people who just love stories for their entertainment, and is ominously returning to the very snobbery it contested. Tutuola’s grammar may be “comically fractured” (Lindfors, 1994, p. 4), Ekwensi’s stories may not suit curriculum (Onoriose, 1997, pp. 133-36), Tortoise wit, James Bond melodrama and Spiderman heroics may seem juvenile; but what essentially denies them literary merit, as against Marxist and psychoanalytic super- literatures?

It does seem feasible even, to compare high and popular literature on the premise that one sires the other, and that the beneficiary owes its complexity to the atomistic but autonomous elements that combine in a relational, processual emergence:

popular primitiveness, structuring the bedrock for the finesse of curricular literatures. It can be rendered that quotidian exertions of literate and semi-literate word culture "diaries and letters half-intended for an audience or lodged in the official archives with one eye on posterity" (Barber, 2007, p. 223) is the source of the epistolary novel. It is possible to surmise that oral folk heroes (Tortoise, Spider, etc.) inspired the phenomenon of stock characterisation in comedy soaps and comedy of manner skits on popular social media platforms. It is arguable that forms like tragedy and comedy are constituted from what Bakhtin (1986) calls "transformed primary genres" (p. 98, qtd. in Barber, 2007). Barber (2007) reads that "Bakhtin's model suggests the possibility of a sociology of literature that traces the building of complex forms from everyday ones, rather than treating valued, large-scale works as intrinsically different from other genres" (pp. 95-96). Barber's intent is not to disassemble *serious* literature, but infer that they are Darwinian evolutions of less eminent forms.

In light of this especially, critical ironies have belied the denigration of popular culture by scholars. In the fullest sense, popular literary art includes urban creative dimensions as influenced by margined society and multimedia technology, literature in indigenous languages, literature that does not meet requisites of curriculum, amateur craft, and most notably, folk tradition. In critical circles, the last on that list – implying folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, fables, songs, and indigenous spiritism like incantation, ritual and festival – has been a respected area of scholarly interest called 'oral literature'. It has not at any point in Nigerian criticism been regarded with disrespect as popular culture, even when 'oral literature' is a subsection of the popular (Onoriose, 1997, p. 29). In fact, while in the mid-1940s to '60s, popular Nigerian literature was rated only a para-literate industry, the heritage of oral tradition enabled the atmosphere for the importation of popular fiction, because the aetiological legacies of the moralising dénouements of tales in oral lore would feature in pop fiction, reconvened as gentrified and written. Also, scathing criticism of popular literature for instance, from two respected Nigerian scholars decades ago, now appear ironic in light of how their art has careered to the backdrop of popular culture. Osofisan (1981) ruthlessly decimated Ekwensi's oeuvre and popular tradition as a whole, in the fashion of the Platonic obloquy of the arts. Such was

the disdain, that Osofisan posited that Nigerian popular literature was too illusory in edification and manqué in catharsis to afford practical social value; and was at best an opioid culture of disguised mediocrity. Osundare (1987) was as reprehensive, describing pop literature as banal, pseudo-art, and incapable of lofty social function (p. 159), except the illusion of it, "to chloroform the people" (p. 165).

Cometh the disapproval, cometh the irony: Osofisan's reputation as a dramatist is built on the folkist tradition – a strategy that appropriates traditional African folk aesthetics as a deviation from Eurocentric dramatism, and is informed chiefly by free theatricality or meta-theatre, and the effervescent erasure of the audience-performer schism. Notable writers whose works regularly enter curriculum, like Efua Sutherland, Ropo Sekoni and Sam Ukala, happen to be practitioners of folkism (Anigala, 2007, pp. 5-6). Osundare on the other hand, alongside Tanure Ojaide and Odia Ofeimun, helped convene a second-generation 'Alter-Native tradition' of anti-elitist poetry, criticising the genteel lyricism of first-generation Nigerian poets, and their remoteness from the realities of mass society (Egya, 2019 [2014]; Fasan, 2010, pp. 39-40; Okunoye, 2006, pp. 107-08). The fifth annual edition of the Niyi Osundare International Poetry Festival (July 14-16, 2019) – where his oeuvre and legacy is celebrated, and emerging talents encouraged – was hosted by the University of Calabar. It was not enough that the host city for the event has in recent times become a postcard for the biggest urban congregation of popular art in Nigeria: carnival. But the notable irony is not lost on the chosen theme for the event that Osundare himself witnessed as an impressed front-row participant, while the discussants Odia Ofeimun, Obari Gomba and Joe Ushie thrashed it out: "Popular Poetry and the Search for Development in a Modern State".

'High' Regime, 'Popular' Protestant: Negotiating the Cultural Departures

We are aware of the high/popular cultural departure and referential pivot it gives the study, but we are also interested in the 'in-betweeners', those taxonomically indeterminable works that dispute the idea that all literature can be fashioned to either side of the divide. Some literatures have proven to obscure and disorient

cultural classification, such that they are 'popular-within-canon' and 'canonised-within-popular.' Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale,* the first published Yoruba single-bound novel, and translated to English by Soyinka is an example. Fagunwa's debut is a seminal work in the Nigerian popular corpus, woven from Yoruba folklore to a composite narrative, transmuting from one generic oral form, to a more gentrified popular literary rendition in print (Aloko, 2011). Within curricular concern, it retains a reputation of folk quaintness, while recognised more as a reference, than feature, on curricular reading lists. The reason may be that the diction precludes it from wide consumption. However, Soyinka's 1968 English translation (*The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*) in one breath ascribed the vernacular text a higher prestige of content and style, and attracted critical attention (Lindfors, 1994, p. 4).

Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* had initially been ascribed a tag of quaintness and aberrant grammar. It did enter curriculum as the first Nigerian novel in English, published in 1952 by Faber & Faber, one of London's most prestigious literary enterprises. But due to its style, and claims of heavy plagiarism from Fagunwa's corpus – the very style that excited stupefied British literati so much he was termed avant-garde (Lindfors, 1994, p. 4-10) – it was marginalised in Nigerian critical circles. At the behest of Achebe's insightful Olaudah Equiano memorial lecture at the University of Ibadan, in 1997, this would change. Tutuola got bestowed a refreshed critique (Currey, 2008, p. 42). His postures of magic and mundaneness, sophistication and primitivism, were even deemed postmodernist, and neatly classifying him became a stupefying exercise: "If Tutuola is neither a European modernist nor a Yoruba plagiarist, how are we to position him?" (Newell, 2006, p. 82). Then there is Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – so read, translated, reviewed, rendered in film, adapted to theatre script, it is now befuddling where to draw the line between over-flogging and revivalism.

How do we classify such dichotomy-betrayers? How do we negotiate the fact that even Nigerian popular literature has its own 'canon' or seminal texts (Ogali's *Veronica my Daughter*, Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy*); and curriculum its own 'popular' (Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Clark's 'Abiku' and 'Ibadan')? By 'curriculum's popular', it is implied, ultra-successful texts that have been so engaged for scholarship and leisure, even reworked

for television, that it would be analytically imprecise now, to utterly categorise them as *high* departures, as much as it is tricky to label them public domain. Such commonalities relieve the high/popular binary, and afford us the malleability to unravel the spine belying it.

On October 13, 2016, the Swedish Academy announced its winner for the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature: American singer and songwriter, Bob Dylan, who in almost six decades of an illustrious musical career never authored as much as a published page. It was a shocker because such a prestigious award had never been given primarily to appreciate lyrical excellence in music. The Academy's permanent secretary, on the Nobel Prize official website, Professor Sara Danius justified the stunning choice of Dylan in descriptions that are highly significant for our understanding of literature and literariness today: Dylan's songs were "poetry for the ears"; his "influence on contemporary music is profound". The Swedish Academy's justification meant it was well aware of the critical implications of considering 'song' in the same breath as 'poetry', and by consequence, literature. Dylan was bestowed the honour for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" (The Nobel Prize, 2016). Following the controversy that greeted a rock star being awarded the same honour previously accorded the likes of Toni Morrison, William Golding, Wole Soyinka and Samuel Beckett, much of the literary commentariat were bemused, and struggled to come to terms with the parameters that qualified Dylan. Chris Anyokwu's article in Guardian Newspapers, dated March 16, 2017, titled "Revisiting the processes of literary canon formation: A Nigerian perspective", tows this awe. Anyokwu considers Dylan's award a deviation from the norm, and admits the strange feeling of the Swedish Academy's "subsuming of song within the category of literature" and "collapsing popular culture with High Culture".

Anyokwu is uneasy that "the Nobel Committee is the body trying to stage a seismic, tectonic paradigm shift in our traditional conception of Literature", and therefore admits the need to "re-think and re-conceptualise our age-old conventional understandings of literature". Anyokwu analyses the import of Dylan's award on literary curriculum, by implicating the industrial collusion between award committees and curricular bodies: "any work of imaginative art declared the best in a literary competition, thus making it a

"masterpiece", goes straightaway into the canon. It becomes a permanent staple on the reading lists of all Departments of English Studies across Nigeria and beyond". Has Dylan's folk, rock, vocal jazz, blues, gospel and country music genres, hacked the portal to the convocation of song, and therefore popular art, to the degree of mainstream literature? In an earlier reaction, Head of Department of English, University of Lagos, Professor Hope Eghagha contested the merit of Dylan's award, averring that it had political trappings (Mwantok, 2016). Literature and its most sacred decisions like awards of such critical import, it would appear, should never leave the precincts of the curricular.

Bob Dylan's acceptance lecture on June 5, 2017, was insightful, as it was humbling. It betrayed the impression many had of pop music, and stretched the critical frontiers of the high/popular debate beyond the adversarial, and into the complimentary. The audio clip and transcript of his lecture on the Nobel Prize website was illuminating. Dylan admits when he was informed of the award, he did wonder how his songs connected to *literature*. He proceeds however, to analyse the literary influences that heavily impacted much of his music: from Beat poetry to Anton Chekhov, folk songs, and the vernacular of the day. Dylan recalls growing up, reading classics like *Don Quixote, Ivanhoe, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, Tale of Two Cities*, and plainly admitted the extent to which he owed his lyrical and thematic merit, to what he learned reading them. Dylan's speech gets even more surprising when he begins to discuss at length, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Homer's *The Odyssey*, as literatures that have remained relevant to him and his career, since grammar school.

Dylan's conclusion is a well-informed suggestion of the best mode to experience poetry. For him, Shakespeare's words come alive when spoken or performed, "Just as lyrics in songs are meant to be sung, not read on a page". In one breath, Dylan encompasses the implicit argument that his music is *poetry* in all its right, only that it is always performed and not fixed on the page; only that his *poetry* is always heard, and not hinged to the curricular fetishism of Book. Dylan's Nobel lecture reflects illuminatingly on the remarks of Anyokwu and Eghagha, in the manner it bypasses the clarion alarm of a rabid agenda to re-define Literature; and instead, negotiates the interstices of the high/popular bias. Dylan surmises that his

poetry is really not a bifurcated corpus existing firmly on the popular divide, but simply *literary,* by its evocation of imagination and sublimity. Dylan renders blunt the prejudices of the high/popular binary, by convening his music as rooted in curricular influences, as much as they embody counterculture and the trivial. Dylan's construal of his music as poetry, and canon as a creative influence; his defence of his songs as performed poetry and more spirited than paginated verse; the branding of his *literature* as an event – these serve to recalibrate the high/popular bias, as a dubious, picaresque metaphor. While the Swedish Academy may have done the unthinkable, infiltrating the caucus of literature's *ne plus ultra* to enthrone a pop star, it on the other hand unhinges how deep the critical universe has sunk in its fetishism of taxonomy, over the primary obligation of gauging *literature* by virtue of its literariness. But supposing we go back to the basics, and look at the subtypes of poetry, we will find within the lyrical verse tradition (the generic header, constructed originally as composition sung to the lyre), the ballad (sentimental song), the dirge (funeral song), and the epithalamium (bridal song). Even pop music lyrics are written in verse and stanzas, with refrains, rhythm and tropes. It makes you wonder what the fuss is about, or rather, how nuanced our perception of poetry is, that we even have a fuss.

Conclusion

What necessitates the present study is not only the dichotomy that instructs elite and mass culture, but the hierarchy that accompanies it. The study perceives a superficial bias as facilitating the primacy of high craft over supposedly uncultured exertions; not just bias, but a jingoistic willingness to append elite aesthetic criteria as the barometer for the valuation of popular art. Against the oligopoly of the highbrow, Swirski (1999) captures clearly the coming-of-age of the demotic arts: "More than two hundred years of fruition in all corners of the world warrants the examination of popular literature as a literary phenomenon, rather than as a mere cultural nuisance" (p. 2). The minutiae of daily life perpetuated by popular craft should not be superseded by grand themes and the seeming abuse by academia of its evaluative jurisdiction and intellectual midwifery. Effervescent popular art that exist in anecdote, song and snapshot remain underappreciated; critical attention is inherently uneven,

and at the behest of academia, this kind of 'literature' has been cajoled into a moniker with a denigrative underlay: *popular*. Like Swirski, the present study senses the need to arch over such misrecognition as the unjust transcendentalist sign of literature's otherness. The present study comes to terms with the high/popular conflictive departures; arguing that the best epithet of our modernity should not be an elitist missionisation against popular fluency. Rather, it proposes an inquiry into why these distinctions exist; an insistence on the merits of what is perceived trivial; a critical expansiveness that realises the interstices between high and popular literature; and then inhabits them to underscore their extant cultural collaborations in genre and form.

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