

Canons and Margins: Contemporary Nigerian Writing, Father-Surveillance Criticism and Kindred Economies of Othering

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Abstract: Prominent within debates focusing on the imaginative site of contemporary Nigerian writing is an impasse that derives from locating this new literary trend within canonical identification. In a number of cases, the contemporary Nigerian writer is treated as relatively inferior to writers of older generations, despite their novel and revisionist statements on ethnicity, nation, nationalism, gender, place, home, exile, and postcolony. On the one hand, this paper contests this questionable critical persuasion as biased and symptomatic of an essentialist mode of reading it refers to as “father-surveillance criticism.” On the other hand, it interrogates certain new institutional and ideological practices that tend to bifurcate contemporary Nigerian writing along categories that privilege the migrant version at the expense of the home-grown stock. Thus, the paper reads contemporary Nigerian writing as a revolutionary site of several imaginative, thematic, and discursive possibilities which problematizes familiar orientations of canonizing and therefore compels a democratizing and reviewing of the idea of the Nigerian literary canon.

KEY WORDS: Canon, Margin, African Literature/Writing, Contemporary Nigerian Writing, Father-Surveillance Criticism.

Introduction: The Discourse of the Canon and Acts of Differing

Attempting to determine the “definitive” canon of any dynamic field of creativity such as Nigerian literature is to engage in the futile enterprise of seeking the configuration of the face through the contours of the mask! As Du Ping argues, “[c]anon formation is a complicated process imbued with tensions of different powers and relations competing for literary legitimacy.”¹ She goes further to suggest that “[a]n unequal distribution of cultural capital constitutes a hierarchy of agents and agencies in literary field, and accordingly the amount of cultural capital those agents and institutions possess in different hierarchies determines the power they have, the role they may play as well in canon formation.”² In this submission, Ping draws attention to the contentious and often inconclusive practice of assigning privileged recognition to certain texts, authors, and literary modes as representative of “the standard,” while they integrally embody the tendency of being interrogated, displaced and/or revised. Along this line, Christopher Kuipers sees a canon as a “literary-disciplinary dynamic” which constitutes “a field of force that is never exclusively realized by any physical form.”³ David Damrosch, inspired by a contemporary poststructuralist drive of subverting the perceived “self-arrogance” of the canonical ‘I’ (the

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dominant canon) in national and world literatures, categorises the literary canon into three formations. These comprise the “hypercanon” (consisting of authors and texts held as the template of a literary culture), “countercanon” (made up of less known or less acknowledged authors/texts projected in indigenous and “great-power” languages), and “shadow canon” (minor authors/texts of an old(er) literary tradition that are better recalled by that generation’s reading audience).⁴ What cannot be ignored, from the foregoing, is a volatile status-assigning trend in which the canonical ‘I’ is always in conflict with its differing and contending others.

That dominant canons have helped to construct high levels of creative consciousness in World literature and have informed enduring conventions of deep imaginative practices in national, regional, and global contexts can hardly be denied. Several intertextual artistic exhibitions of work succeeding particular earlier literary traditions or generations bear ready witness to this. For instance, English literature is renowned to be a progressively transforming artefact originating in the determining influences of “precursor” canonical texts, followed by clearly defined imaginative breakaways of successor writings. Frederick Karl points out how, despite the transgressive literary turn of a cream of new-generation English novelists of the twentieth century, “Joyce Cary seems to be following Sterne, Fielding, and Dickens; and Graham Greene appears akin to Wilkie Collins, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rider Haggard, and early Conrad.”⁵ In a similar vein, Harold Bloom intones that “Shakespeare employs Marlowe as a starting point, and such early Shakespearian hero-villains as Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* and Richard III are rather too close to Barabas, Marlowe’s Jew of Malta.”⁶ He however notes that “[b]y the time that Shakespeare writes *Othello*, all trace of Marlowe is gone.”⁷ Indeed, the canonical achievements of European writing, which have informed what is loosely identified as the “European literary tradition,” are to a great extent instrumental to the phenomenal postcolonial productions of European-language literatures of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), was greatly influenced by William Butler Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming,” which expresses the phrase to which the former’s novel’s title is indebted. Similar European canonical influences are noticed in the writings of authors such as Nigeria’s Wole Soyinka; India’s R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao; West Indies’ George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Edward Kamau Brathwaite; and Algeria’s Assia Djebar.

In American literature, canonical frameworks of predominantly white male authors that greatly shaped the literary sphere now accommodate creative contributions of African, Hispanic, Arab, and Asian American writers, both male and female. This latter body of work, at some aesthetic or ideological junctures, show indebtedness to their forerunners. “Ethnic” or “non-white” authors such as Claude McKay, Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, whose outputs are arguably postcolonial, benefited from predecessors such as James Fenimore Cooper, William Faulkner, Emily Dickinson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck. As in any national literary context, the American canonical picture reveals “great traditions” of imaginative horizons that continually (re)inscribe identity, ideology, race, nation, ethnicity, and gender.

It is noteworthy, however, that canonical affirmations and subversions often construct tense but creative moments of dialogue involving adherents of the aesthetic, thematic, or ideological currents of the previous generation(s) and the iconoclastic representatives of the present. The stake is always on ideas of best practices which the new entrants are often

accused of lacking, ignorant, or negligent of, and which their forebears struggle, almost always in vain, to successfully conserve in the face of new-generation acidic confrontations and queries. It is often the case that the literary “insurgency” of contemporary writers forges transgressive pacts with new readings of society, art, and representation that deliberately misread and re-write erstwhile conventions of identity and creative commitment.⁸ For example, in the contemporary English scenario, the narrative of English literature as portraying “Englishness” in the conservative sense of a racially white, cultural, and national production has been significantly ruptured by a new-generation wave. English literature today is a (post)national, transcultural, and transracial phenomenon produced by authors with “authentic” white racial, geo-cultural claims to English citizenship and those with migrant, multiracial, and divergently cultural backgrounds. The latter challenge the “colonialist” appearances of Englishness in the conventional imaginary of “English literature,” as in the present-day erosion of the idea that Commonwealth literature is ontologically an English-language literature produced by authors of nation states historically colonized by Britain.⁹ With the English citizenship of seminal migrant writers of African, Caribbean, Arab, and Asian extractions like Ben Okri, Benjamin Zephaniah, Hanif Kureishi, and Kazuo Ishiguro respectively, contemporary English literature arguably projects a hybrid identity with an apparent postcolonial gene that discursively remaps its “nationalist” and canonical frontiers. It is responding to contemporary global trends in which national literatures, more often than not, transgress national, cultural, and racial borders to privilege transcultural, (post)national, and transracial orientations of cultural citizenship.¹⁰

This article engages a set of outlooks that contest the imaginative initiatives of contemporary Nigerian writing within the politics of canonizing. In the generation-bent views of these positions, the contemporary Nigerian writer is often treated as relatively inferior in imaginative potential to the older cream of writers, despite the fact that their literary productions exhibit a new development that revises notions of ethnicity, tradition, nation, nationalism, gender, place, home, exile, and postcolony. On the one hand, I identify the significant characteristics of contemporary Nigerian writing, positing that these portray notable statements of difference in Nigerian literary history, as happens in many new-generation national literary moves all over the world. On the other hand, I question certain emerging institutional and ideological practices that tend to bifurcate this writing in a manner that assigns certain texts and authors (almost always migrant) more visibility than others (mostly local(ized), resident in the country), not necessarily on considerations of superior imaginative depth. This development is largely orchestrated by a “literary late capitalism” domiciled in the West, and whose machineries include the publishing industry, literary award systems, and (Western) audience imperatives. Contemporary Nigerian writing (particularly the novel) is not just a representation of an epoch’s aesthetic ideology, but a complex, subversive, and crucial development offering new perspectives of discursive, thematic, and imaginative purchase. I suggest the democratization of the Nigerian literary canon to accommodate the diverse imaginative, institutional, and temporal contexts that produce texts, rather than constructing a mere signpost pointing to the literary achievements of certain individuals and texts of some past generations.

Nigerian Writing in the Forest of a Thousand Dialogues

Dominant Nigerian writing (that is, the Nigerian postcolonial literature of Euro-modern influence) participates in the global trend of literary canonization arguably because it was

initiated and “inducted” as Commonwealth literature via two predominant cultural arsenals of British colonialism: the English language and requirements for “European literary standards.” These legitimized its visibility in World literature and also largely informed its shades and contexts of canonical politics and formation. It must be noted that England began to assert its difference and hegemonic importance in the European cultural/textual universe in the eighteenth century and this intertwined with its imperialist machinations in global (cultural) relations.¹¹ This development had serious implication on the fate of “marginal literatures” which were influenced, directed, and controlled by the European (Western) cultural capital of globally recognized writing, a site Pascale Casanova calls “the Greenwich Meridian of Literature.”¹² Anglophone Caribbean, Asian, African, Middle Eastern, New Zealand, Canadian, and Australian literature that aspired towards, and indeed at some remarkable historic moments gained global literary recognition, had to operate through this literary space and logic.¹³ This has birthed dominant and contested ideas of canonicity that have been crucial to instructive but ever unstable definitions of literature and literariness in the world’s “literary peripheries,” including Nigeria.

Thus, upstaging a pre-colonial literary heritage that was largely oral and popularly identified as one of the people’s seminal indices of identity, dominant Nigerian writing could be read as an acquired art of transgression.¹⁴ What may be upheld as canonical Nigerian writing, in this sense, is nothing more than a re-processed product of the colonial “civilizing” imagination. Aside from the fact that this literature is mainly realized in English, it champions the conditions that warrant the search for a still illusory Nigerian writing. Ropo Sekoni notes, for instance, the challenges involved in appropriating the aesthetic resources of oral literature in the development of written literature in Nigeria under the English education system, thus frustrating “the natural transfer of artistic and ideological aspect of literature from one medium (the word of mouth) to another medium (the written or printed word).”¹⁵ Obi Wali’s historic 1962 Makerere outcry against the reduction of African literature to the “sterility, uncreativity, and frustration” of European-language expression is, among other things, a lamentation of a new systemic order of assigning canonical status to a body of texts culturally and creatively distant to the indigenous imaginative experience of oral literature produced, consumed, and enjoyed by the masses of the traditional African populace.¹⁶ The implication of this development, in Wali’s terms, is that “this kind of literature...lacks any blood and stamina, and has no means of self-enrichment. It is severely limited to the European-oriented, few college graduates in the new Universities of Africa, steeped as they are in European literature and culture. The ordinary local audience...has no chance of participating in this kind of literature.”¹⁷

It can be argued, based on the positions above, that the Euro-modernist rupture of the traditional African literary experience largely changed the concept of its author from the community to the individual, its medium from the oral to the written, its discursive language from the indigenous to the European, its participatory site from a largely open space to the (often) closed book, and its audience from the populace to some modern elitist literati. Further, it fragmented the organicity of its multiple-genre outlook, substituting it with a Eurocentric legacy of literature being appreciated as tripartite: consisting of fiction, poetry, and drama. Some critics explain this rupture as a necessary stage in the evolution of African literature and culture.¹⁸ However, this has not prevented others from trying to figure out what actually constitutes contemporary Nigerian literature: what is the language, theme, or style of African/Nigerian literature? Should a Nigerian text have a particular ideological disposition? Who counts as a Nigerian author? And should that author write for an African

or Western audience? These, and many other related concerns, are roadblocks constructed by the idea of the canon, a domain largely informed by the orchestration of Western literary definition.

The cultivation and nurture of the Nigerian literary canon is, to a great extent, the creation of certain writers and critics of the so-called first and second generations, considered to be its major custodians. These were largely products of colonial/Euro-Modernist education and determinants of a national literature labelled “Nigerian.” Their postcolonial and nationalist ideas about Nigerian writing brought about the first-wave of debates concerning the Nigerian literary canon. The former seemed to be the guardians of an arcane Western-oriented creativity (particularly in the manipulation of language, ritual, and hybridized forms of Greco-Roman and indigenous myths of creation and fertility), described by Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike as symptomatic of a “colonial hangover.”¹⁹ Tracing the indebtedness of canonical Nigerian writing to “the scriptural conception of literature” influenced by Western critics such as I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, Abiola Irele argues that the evaluation of literature in Nigeria “solidified around a tiny handful of writers and their works.”²⁰ Thus, according to him, “Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe – these four constitute the central figures in a canon that seems to have been tacitly agreed upon.”²¹ This categorization implicitly excludes seminal women writers like Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, and Mabel Segun, largely canonized within the female literary folk. But engaging the considered Eurocentrism of this canonical framework through a populist attitude founded on orality and Marxist/socialist consciousness, the second-generation school, emerging between the late 1970s and the 1980s, initiated a redirection. Members of this school, made up of writers/critics of the Ibadan/Ife and Ahmadu Bello guild, included Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Femi Osofisan, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Fatoba, Biodun Jeyifo, Omafume Onoge, Kole Omotosho, Funso Aiyejina, Bode Osanyin, Isidore Okpewho, Festus Iyayi, Bayo Williams, and Olu Obafemi. Renowned female writers in this list include Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Tess Onwueme, and Catherine Acholonu. Osundare points out:

In the Ife/Ibadan axis, a radical group emerged which championed its cause in a prominent publication called *Positive Review*. They yanked literature and art from the hermetic closets of the Soyinkas and Okigbos, and subjected it to bold, experimental dissection under the public glare. Well-worn Aristotelian concepts and Leavisite orthodoxy were pushed to the backstage by new insights gained from Marxist theory.²²

Wole Soyinka’s reaction to this new-generation avalanche is suggested in an interview with Biodun Jeyifo, that “in ideological terms, a lot of it, you will admit is, a lot of blather.”²³

Despite their different approaches to what constitutes Nigerian writing and how best it may be realized, a careful observation of the scramble for the canon by the contending schools highlighted above betrays a structural and discursive leaning I refer to as “father-surveillance criticism.” Among other things, this gaze oversees a process that enables a pocket of dominant male authors/critics and publishing interests to advocate procedures of verbal art reminiscent of Lacan’s link of language to maleness in the arbitrary and structural ways it names and signifies, identified as “the Law of the Father.”²⁴ “Nigeria is male” exclaims Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and “[t]he literature is phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience.”²⁵ In her introductory

comment on *Breaking the Silence*, a feminist literary anthology, Toyin Adewale also emphasizes the near-invisibility of women in the imaginative cosmos of Nigerian writing, regretting that though “a collage of our women writers have won laurels within and without our shores, the ripple of Nigerian women’s writing is nearly graveyard silent.”²⁶

It might be misleading to assume that women, as writers in the Nigerian literary sphere, did not project any form of visibility or respectability worthy of canonical pedigree within the dominant male literary tradition. The cases of the female writers mentioned above exemplify such portrayal, being artists whose brands of (feminist) writing challenged the second-place depiction of female characters in male-authored works, interrogated the canonical picture of Nigerian writing as a male preserve, and inscribed a respectable narrative of Africanist feminism(s).²⁷ Canonical recognition, however, often eluded Nigerian female writers for at least two reasons. First, the major writers that commenced the flagging, activism, and global reckoning of modern Nigerian writing were male and they laid the foundation of what got “understood” (ideologically, thematically, and aesthetically) as “Nigerian literature.” Second, these “forerunners” (mostly of the first generation) initiated a perspective of creative “commitment” rooted in a nationalist/postcolonial discourse mediated by the “best practices” of Western artistic direction. This was in line with an Africanist engagement that “subtly subsumed concerns about women under what turned out ultimately to be patriarchal concerns under the impetus of a nationalist agenda.”²⁸ The predominant second-generation male writers continued this vision of artistic commitment but with some measure of gender-sensitivity and populist consciousness. The Nigerian female writer became better recognized, but occupied an arguable marginal, or “upcoming” position in the canon, more so because women were less involved in the literary arena both as writers and active participants in the politico-economic operations of Nigerian writing and its circulation.²⁹

The father-surveillance orientation of the first and second-generation writers/critics ultimately forged a seeming discursive alliance against the contemporary Nigerian writer, who began to emerge in the 1990s. This development occurred to notionally write off the latter as lacking the imaginative altitude of committed socio-cultural and national consciousness displayed by their predecessors, akin to the traditional African father’s castigation and surveillance of the “erring child.” Though acknowledging the “daunting odds” of socio-economic challenges faced by this generation of writers in terms of falling standards of education, the largely disconcerting scenario of publishing, the challenges of unemployment and consequently, the drive for imagined migrant opportunities, an almost already-determined perception is that these new breeds operate, to a “disturbing” extent, in a kind of ideological absence.³⁰ Femi Osofisan, among other things, laments that “[s]adly, rare is the writer among the present tribe of aspirants who possesses genuine concern for the righting of wrongs or for the cleansing of society such as one found among our predecessors.”³¹ And in addition, peruses Osofisan, “[o]ur aspiring writers in the main have welcomed democracy in their writings just like the man on the street, with foreboding and blindness.”³² For Osundare, the contemporary writer is culturally uprooted with regard to “indigenous cultural ways and their long and tested wisdom.”³³ In his submission on this purported lack, he argues: “[m]any, many members of the new generation are doing to our literature what Islamic and Christian fundamentalists have done to indigenous religion and cultural integrity. It’s all part of that CNN Syndrome which lures one into ignoring—even despising—the happenings in one’s own backyard.”³⁴

A number of views against the contemporary writer abound. For instance, Charles Nnolim concludes, quite dismissively, that the latter “lack a clearly defined thematic focus.”³⁵ This type of assumption, unfortunately, assumes such a normalized hold on a sizable section of critics of this embattled literary epoch who have been caught in its web. Chijioke Uwasomba, for instance, invokes the father-surveillance whip when he says that “in spite of the quantum of creative eruption that has been thrown up by this generation of writers, the writings lack deep imagination and symbolism. This is because, for literature to be successful, it must be done in a way that accords with what Coleridge calls “a suspension of disbelief.”³⁶

Objections to contemporary Nigerian writing, such as highlighted above, dwell on questionable grounds of judging what constitutes canonical literary potential. One wonders how a literary text or generation, in Nnolim’s terms, could gain or produce canonical respectability just because of “a clearly defined thematic focus.” Does a “thematic focus” supersede imaginative depth? And how does one measure creative commitment just through a problematic nationalist or social anchorage that excludes or misreads new drawings of instructive (post)national and subjectivist content? As regards the allegation of their distance to traditional culture (in Osundare’s opinion), is it possible to deny the seasoned appropriation of the indigenous dirge-poetry of Yoruba hunters in Akeem Lasisi’s *Iremoje* in celebrating the demise of Ken Saro Wiwa in the executioner’s hands of the Abacha military regime? Or could one erase Lasisi’s creative indebtedness to *Ekun Iyawo*, the bridal-chant genre of Yoruba oral literature in *Night of My Flight*? Could one ignore the poignant aura of the *agbo-ile* Yoruba community in Abimbola Adunni Adelakun’s *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* in discussing Yoruba cultural kinships, intrigues, neighbourliness, sets of social/linguistic practice, and political inclinations, even in contemporary times? More importantly, could one ignore the friction between traditional cultural phenomena and modernity in novels like Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani’s *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* and Sade Adeniran’s *Imagine This*? Ironically, in Uwasomba’s terms, the imaginative “dearth” of the contemporary writer is implicitly due to their distance to a Eurocentric approach of achieving “suspension of disbelief” in their writings.

Despite the acknowledgement of traditional culture or orality in some sections of contemporary Nigerian writing as seen above, absolute artistic allegiance to it is however impossible. This is because the contemporary writer engages present and complex concerns—ranging from unguaranteed socio-economic security and corruption to migration, cybercrime, kidnapping, human trafficking, single-parenting, homosexuality, millennials, and drug abuse—which make hybrid/postmodern aesthetics unavoidable. While the debate between a nativist outlook of African/Nigerian literature as proposed by Obi Wali in 1962 and an eclecticist/hybrid option persists, it is important to note that the contemporary Nigerian imagination asserts the right to benefit from any historically-produced cultural/textual asset available to it.³⁷

Indeed, the present global age, characterized by fluid cultural and transnational exchanges particularly aided by social media and an unprecedented trend of mass migrations, presents what may be called “the deconstructive age of Nigerian writing.” It showcases the interrogation of the countercanon in Damrosch’s terms, a variety of provocative themes, dominantly revised worldviews, and aesthetic experimentations. This presents, perhaps, the most dynamic/complex incident of creativity in the annals of Nigerian literary history.

Contemporary Nigerian Writing and Plural Locations

The entry of the contemporary cream of Nigerian writers has phenomenally re-mapped the borders of Nigerian literature, dwelling crucially on engagements which challenge the signpost of the father-surveillance directive. Certain distinguishing markers of difference in the contemporary development obviously characterize it as seminal. One of these is the comparatively larger volume of publications and writers than the previous generations, with a phenomenal parade of women writers challenging the erstwhile dominance of male presence.³⁸ What is however unique is that this generation of women writers tends to unsettle not only the patriarchal cartographies of the Nigerian literary discourse, but also the fixities of representing women as necessary victims of “the hegemonic male” as presented by earlier female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Zainab Alkali, Zulu Sofola, and Buchi Emecheta. Diana Evans’ *26a*, Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s *In Dependence*, Sade Adeniran’s *Imagine This*, and Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* are representative of this development. While Shoneyin ruptures the patriarchal structure of conventional polygamy to allow women some privileges within the family, Adeniran, Evans, and Manyika, in a number of ways, present their male and female characters as equally victims and victors of the existential and social circumstances they encounter. Maleness and femaleness become largely assigned with subjectivist imperatives that, to a great extent, violate the gender-group solidarities of erstwhile Nigerian feminist assertions. The female writer, in this context, seems to construct her text both as a signifier of female visibility and liminality in the male-oriented space of Nigerian “literary commitment.” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s absorbingly transnational projection in *Americanah* is a novel in this cast that redresses male superiority in relation to ethnicity, nation, and belonging.

Another very important feature of difference in contemporary Nigerian writing is the thematic and aesthetic diversity that characterizes its transethnic/(post)national and revisionist gaze, installing what has been described in some circles as “internationalist writing.” Very significant along this line is a postmodern/revisionist attitude of reflecting on identity. This has largely informed the rethinking of place, home, belonging, and difference, a trend shaped by dialogic exchanges between “home-grown” and “migrant” writings/writers. In this manifestation, particularly in the migrant versions, “Nigerianness” shifts from being a mere marker of national identity to an African participation in the present global dialogue(s) projecting an interactive but problematic multicultural/intercultural world community. The migrant Nigerian/African, in these texts, projects an identity often more related to fellow African or non-African migrants than to Nigerians/Africans resident within the continent. Texts in this cast include Segun Afolabi’s *Goodbye Lucille*, Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s *In Dependence*, Teju Cole’s *Open City*, and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*.

It is significant, however, to note that new patterns of metropolitan experience, identity formation, and negotiations are evolving in the picture depicted above. For example, Onyeka Nwelu’s *The Abyssinian Boy*, with a dual setting intersecting India and Nigeria, provides an Indo-Nigerian deconstruction of recent migrant Nigerian/African narratives whose predominant transcultural gaze is shaped by encounters with the West. David (the child protagonist of Tamil/Igbo cultural provenance), his parents, and their Indian/Nigerian affiliations, are cast within familial, racial, and ethnic circumstances that expose Asian as well as African racism, bigotries, superstitions, cultural peculiarities, civilizations, and compromises. These, among other things, invite the audience to encounter transculturation

as a dynamic human field with differing realities of identity-construction and dialogue. Indeed, it seems Asia is becoming an alternative resource for imaginative metropolitan deployments in Nigerian migrant writing, even if not specifically dealing with migration. Chika Unigwe's short story, "The Itinerary of Grief," presents a plot in which the Nigerian widow-narrator (on a grief-purging vacation to India) reveals Indian hospitality and rich cultural heritage amidst its air of cosmic difference to Western-oriented (post)modernity. This development is in arguable conversation with the West's often unclear stance on globalization, multiculturalism, and cultural citizenship.

The tendency for contemporary Nigerian writing to dwell more on personal stories and histories than on group-representations of culture, nation, or race is very pronounced, discursively in dialogue with normative notions of identity and belonging. An example is the interrogation of "home," provided by the grim encounters of Lola Ogunwole, the protagonist of Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This*. Her father's decision to re-settle her and her brother, Adebola, from their London childhood home to his village, due to a marital crisis that breaks up the home and witnesses his wife abandoning their children, unfolds a series of events that question the morality or ethical justification for an unbending ethno-cultural identification or the rationality for a geo-cultural/national affirmation of identity. Lola experiences the trauma of psychic brutalization caused by the extreme abuse of her personality and sexuality (through rape by her uncle). The loss of her only childhood friend and brother, Adebola, in the ensuing events, proves highly devastating. She also suffers bouts of demeaning embarrassments through the cultural ambush of her village relatives, championed by her grandmother. In the end, she is "fortunate" to be able to escape homeland (Idogun, Lagos, Nigeria) for the utopia of hostland (London, United Kingdom). She avers toward the end of the novel: "Yes, I'm going back to London and it's better to go without baggage from the past."³⁹

The re-direction of the boundary-based discourse of "the group" or "home" in contemporary Nigerian writing towards subjectivist inclinations, as seen in *Imagine This*, is perhaps this generation's most potent transgression of "social commitment" in Nigerian writing. In the migrant version, this seems to articulate a new politics of belonging, as suggested by Taiye Selasi's 2005 essay, which asserts the inescapable "Afropolitan" condition of the African migrant in the West. She posits that she belongs to "the newest generation of African emigrants...not citizens, but Africans of the world."⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Teju Cole, pursues that "[s]ome Nigerians object to me being called an American writer, for example, as though I were shirking some invisible responsibility to be allied to one place and one place only. But, really, I don't care...My writing has European antecedents, Indian influences, Icelandic fantasies, Brazilian aspirations."⁴¹ Adichie's famous 2009 TED talk also charts this space of fluid belonging, putting forward an argument about how peoples, cultures, texts, and histories cross familiar sites of identity in framing multiple and dynamic stories of their still evolving existence.

The scenario indicated above presents some revealing implications. Among other things, the definition of Nigerian/African literature becomes significantly problematic just as much as it proffers new sites of aesthetic/ideological experimentations and inclusion. On the one hand, the Nigerian/African migrant text responds to novel cultural and capitalist conditions dictated by a cosmopolitan environment with its publishing and audience imperatives which makes it, according to Manthia Diawara, "a literature more about being a citizen of the world going to Europe, going back to Lagos."⁴² On the other hand, it challenges, or even upsets, the canonical structure of not only the Nigerian literary scene,

but more interestingly, the foreign host's literary sphere. Felicia Lee, reflecting on the American literary scene in which the Nigerian input plays a crucial role, submits that "too many literary publishers put out work by writers from Africa rather than work by African-Americans because in the current climate the Africans are considered more appealing for what'll be seen as a 'black slot'."⁴³ She also posits that "[t]hey are on the best-seller lists, garner high profile reviews and win major awards in America and in Britain."⁴⁴ This notwithstanding, Nigerian writers like Helon Habila and Yewande Omotosho have objected to being part of Selasi's "Afropolitan" idea of "the newest generation of African emigrants." Similarly, other contemporary migrant African writers, like Kenyan Binyavanga Wainaina, would rather love to be embraced as pan-Africanists.⁴⁵ Emma Dabiri, an Irish/Nigerian social historian, argues that Afropolitanism is skewed because "the insights on race, modernity and identity appear to be increasingly sidelined in sacrifice to the consumerism Mbembe also identifies as part of the Afropolitan assemblage."⁴⁶ All this said, what the internationalist development reveals is the fact that relationships with cultural or (post)national belonging are "chosen" along select lines of personal conviction that, more often than not, challenge rigid group-belongings.

The home-grown contemporary Nigerian literary picture projects a more sympathetic "national locale" in terms of its predominant Nigerian setting and its preoccupation with aesthetic forms and thematic concerns. However, it more or less presents a defining image that suggests, as Adeleke Adeeko points out, a situation in which "the activists' ethical obligation to the self and his or her immediate surrounding are not subordinated to those extended to them by their nationality."⁴⁷ The show of nationalist consciousness, hence, does not necessarily compel the patriot-protagonist as "the carrier hero" or a messianic/martyr figure. This character is rather guided by his/her judgement more in line with personal choices than group-impelled pressures. In this circumstance, "the conscientious individual can leave the nation's shores untainted by the odium of betrayal."⁴⁸

Of Kindred Economies of Othering

Contemporary Nigerian writing is arguably the most challenged and complex of the three generations of Nigerian literature with regard to the politics of canonization. While the operations of father-surveillance criticism have been identified in this paper, it is important to note that there also exist certain (subtle) modes of reading that tend to erode the literary achievements of the moment's generation of writers "from within." One device that ensures this is the present capitalist and global endorsement of what becomes "celebrity literature" — a fabrication that has its roots sited in the West. One historic institutional arrangement that paved the way for this was the complicit manner in which literature and modes of determining its canonical status aligned with the political and cultural designs of Western colonialism which set the initial categories of the European (Western) "Self" and the colonized "periphery" in motion. By extension, things Western necessarily assumed superiority over those of the periphery; and in addition, peripheral projections (such as the text) needed to be "authorized" to gain privileged universal visibility. The institutions of Commonwealth literature and World literature may be viewed as some of the major disciplinary constructs by which Europe (the West) defined literature and its global criteria of canonization.⁴⁹ Some of the agencies of literary endorsement in this context included the adoption or appropriation of the European (Western) literary tradition, the European language (especially English), the publishing/marketing establishment, and the "ratification"

of the Western audience, an equation which Akin Adesokan insightfully captures as adhering to the European (Western) calculus of global literariness, literary marketability, and audience-patronage.⁵⁰ Within the present reality of “the deterritorialized rule of empire,” migrant postcolonial texts, including those of Nigerian extraction (un)consciously compete for recognition, a field which the home-grown counterparts comparatively fail to appropriately fit into.⁵¹

The development above feeds the capitalist, creative and imperialist logic of what Pascale Casanova calls “the world republic of letters.” According to her, this imaginative site consists of dominant and dominated world literary-spaces, Western and non-Western respectively; and they are measured and defined through the Greenwich meridian of literature that “makes it possible to estimate the relative aesthetic distance from the center of the world of letters of all those who belong to it.”⁵² This Western initiative consequently allows the global visibility of migrant texts, which are closer to that center, ahead of the home-grown varieties that reflect or celebrate “only the local norms and limits assigned to literary practice by their homelands.”⁵³ This unfortunately reflects the Nigerian home-grown experience, especially because of the national economic crunch and low-market performance of texts. This challenge is compounded by “customs charges, poor road networks, and the high cost of transportation” in the event of text distribution.⁵⁴ It is also lamentably affected by the incident of, in some situations, poor or “vanity” publishing, in which the writer “publishes and markets his or her own books by himself or herself, thereby bypassing all the usual quality-control points.”⁵⁵ But perhaps the most pathetic challenge is a largely indifferent and often formalized audience whose business with literature is almost always conditioned by the school system within the custody of a few struggling and underfunded departments in the Faculty of Arts.

The internationalist politics of literary remuneration significantly maps the boundaries of “center” and “other” in contemporary Nigerian writing. In the current global dispensation, texts must participate in what Ed Finn calls “the social lives of books” in the Western context to be able to aspire to global fame and market significance.⁵⁶ This partly explains why nomination of texts for literary prizes based in the West such as the Man Booker Prize, Caine Prize, Sillerman First Book Prize for African poets and the Brunel African Poetry Prize, talk less of the actual award, promises a fortune of author-followerhip, patronage, and invitations for literary residencies or juicy writing contracts to contemporary Nigerian writers. To the home-grown, remuneration in terms of literary awards based in the country such as the NLNG Prize, the Etisalat Prize for Literature (now 9mobile Prize for Literature), the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) series of prizes, and the Saraba Manuscript Project Prize would seem to be mere stepping stones. This is despite the fact that in monetary terms, the Nigerian offers compete very remarkably with their Western counterparts, and in a number of cases, comparatively seem more inviting. Despite the fact that the Caine Prize offers the monetary reward of a modest £10,000 compared with the Nigerian NLNG’s fat give away of \$100,000, the former would rather be more taken for its global-visibility edge. It is a complement that what makes the pan-African Etisalat (9mobile) Prize for Literature attractive to many is the understanding that the winner would, in addition, enjoy an Etisalat Fellowship at the University of East Anglia, including the opportunity of relating with other writers and publishers toward the publication of a second book.⁵⁷ In this light, it could be argued that if the renowned cream of Nigerian migrant writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila, Sefi Atta, Helen Oyeyemi, Teju Cole, Chris Abani, and Chika Unigwe had been mere authors and

beneficiaries of the remuneration packages of the home-grown scene, their genius might not have been internationally acknowledged. What is thus at work in this arena of discursive literary commendation is a construct of authorization that has an awesome capitalist, consumerist, and media mechanism with implications for canonicity, “signed” and guarded by the West.

The internationalist othering of the home-grown text is perhaps worse felt in certain institutional and public attitudes within the Nigerian nation state, due to the influences of globalization and literary late capitalism. Though the media must be commended for encouraging and supporting the imaginative articulations of the younger generation, the place of the home-grown writer and text remains unguaranteed. This is underscored in the fact that each time a parade of the considered canonical writers of all-time Nigerian writing is televised, the cast is often overwhelmingly populated by renowned representatives of the first and second generations, with the fractional inclusion of one or two revered members of the contemporary guild who definitely live in the United States or the United Kingdom. Commendable book reviews of new works in Nigerian newspapers such as *The Punch* and *The Nation*, including the advertisements of book fairs or literary competitions, have not helped in any significant way. It is also disturbing, along this line, to discover that most of the contemporary Nigerian writers/writings known and studied in a number of literature-oriented departments in Nigerian higher learning institutions are migrant, courtesy of Facebook posts, migrant-writers’ blogs, online announcements of which writers got long or shortlisted for Man Booker, Caine, or Brunel. Of course, this does not exclude “cutting-edge” criticism of African literature in leading literary academic journals based in the West, understandably dealing with texts by migrant writers. The “chance discovery” of invaluable home-grown contribution, on the contrary, circulates through the hard work of marketing agents for challenged local publishing outfits in collaboration with adventurous lecturers who include these texts on their reading lists.

Conclusion

Any spirited engagement with the literary history of any national literature with the view of establishing its “proper” canonical sites risks the challenge of several counter-readings with peculiar temporal and ideological orientations of difference. With regard to Nigerian writing, the contemporary experience provides a development which rewrites, to a great extent, familiar landscapes of belonging, nationality, culture, gender, literariness, and identity. It also presents problematic sites of its own very self-identification, especially in the migrant/home-grown depictions. What therefore distinguishes its phenomenal entry is its tendency to neutralize essentialist ties to particular functional or structural obligations in the name of national affinity or postcolonial bias. From the foregoing, contemporary Nigerian writing may be accused of being implicitly trapped within a “totalizing notion of Africa, one driven by the demands of publishing and the spectre of Africa as a colonial invention, inscribed onto the global imaginary by and for the West,” within certain critical ranks.⁵⁸ However, it could be rightly applauded for contesting conservative sites of the Nigerian literary canon, steeped in contestable nationalist, postcolonial, and gendered myths of commitment. In this move, the contemporary literary scenario promises to enviably re-inscribe the Nigerian locus of literary judgement, a process which is vibrantly ongoing.

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- 2 Ping 2015, p. 2.
- 3 Kuipers 2003, p. 51.
- 4 Damrosch 2006, p. 51.
- 5 Karl 1972, p. 4.
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- 8 Bloom 1994; Damrosch 2006; Olusegun-Joseph 2018.
- 9 Warwick 1979, p. vii; King 1980, p. 4.

- 10 Olusegun-Joseph, 2018.
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- 12 Casanova 2004, p. 88.
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- 14 Wali 2007; Chinweizu et.al. 1980; Darah 1988; Sekoni 1988.
- 15 Sekoni 1988, p. 46.
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- 52 Casanova 2004, p. 88.
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56 Finn 2011, p. 1.

57 See <http://prize.etisalat.com.ng/about-the-prize/>.

58 Krishnan 2014, p. 17.