



October 2023

## Lecture 03

### The Emergence of African Literature

#### I. What is African Literature?

African literature is the range of literary texts produced by African writers whether in African or European languages. African literature is usually used to describe literature from the sub-Saharan region of Africa.

Often, African literature is referred to as ‘postcolonial literature,’ which gives the impression that ‘precolonial’ literature does not exist. However, contrary to this claim, African societies are rich with oral literature. Different occasions and celebrations are commonly accompanied with folktales, poems, and performances that go back to old/precolonial traditions. Writing also can be found in different regions across the African continent. Travel and historical narratives were written down in native languages like Arabic and Hausa in Nigeria or Ge'ez and Amharic in Ethiopia. These manuscripts tell of precolonial communities and their ways of life.

#### \*The Question of Language in African Literature

The debate on which language to use in writing African literature is led by two main figures; Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Each of the two writers has a different view as whether to use European languages or native languages in writing.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite the contradicted views of these figures, critics like Chinweizu et al (1983) and Larson (2001) consider the shared values, cultural ethos, and experiences as the points that define the African text.

#### II. The Development of (Modern) African Literature

The term ‘modern’ African literature is generally associated with literary texts written in European languages: English, French, Spanish, etc. The emergence of this form of literature was a result of the European education and introduced to the continent through missionary schools and colonial

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<sup>1</sup> The debate is detailed in the PPT slides of this lecture.

institutions. Therefore, when discussing the emergence of African literature, it means literary texts by African writers written in European languages. To cover the large range of African literary texts produced since the colonial period until current times, critics divided African writers into three generations according to the themes discussed in their works.

## 1. First Generation

Writers of this generation published their works during the colonial period to reflect on their people's struggles during colonialism. Moreover, as a reaction to colonial claims that Africans are inferior to white people and have no history, these writers aimed to re-establish an identity rooted in their African cultures through their literary texts.

### Characteristics

- Hybridity: This generation of African writers is known for its conflicted background, for they lived in societies that maintained their attachment to pre-colonial traditions and cultures while at the same time being educated in missionary/colonial schools. The conflict between these two contexts (traditional vs. colonial) largely shaped the works of these writers.
- Counter-narrative: Most of the literary texts produced in this period are set in a pre-colonial context. Writers tended to use proverbs and rituals from their traditions in their narratives to explain Africa to the coloniser/outsider. To do so, this generation relied on realism as a technique in their writings in order to deliver an accurate and realistic image of their people and communities.

### Themes

- Tradition vs. Modern/Colonial Values: as a result of their hybrid context, the first generation of African writers focused on topics that address the conflict between their traditional cultures and the values presented by colonialism. This conflict between European and local cultures, between traditional and colonial values, resulted in what is known as a **clash of cultures** in the African communities.
- Anti-colonial Sentiment: African writers of the first generation used their literary texts to reveal how colonialism has negatively affected their people and traditions. Due to this, these writers called for the end of colonialism and demanded self-government, while also drawing an image and forming an illusion of a free and developed Africa ruled by African leaders.

## 2. Second Generation

After independence, a new generation of African writers dominated the literary scene. With the end of colonialism, these writers turned their attention to discuss local sociological and ideological problems (e.g., feminism, employment, social equality, ...) in their countries.

Characteristics	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Explaining Africa to Africans</u>: Unlike the first generation that used their literature to speak to the coloniser, this generation used their works to communicate with their own people. The second generation attempted to draw a new image of Africa taking into consideration the political and economic changes that took place during the years after independence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Disillusionment</u>: Images of disillusionment and disappointment became the main characteristic of African literary texts of the 1960s and 1970s. African literature of the second generation addresses the issue of how not colonialism but African leaders are the ones ruining their own countries. The dreams and hopes of stability and development that Africans had for their newly independent countries were torn down by the continuous political crises that dominated the post-colonial period.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Criticising Political Regimes</u>: During the post-independence period, African countries experienced various forms of political unrest such as military coups and civil wars. Writers of this generation used their literary texts to focus on these events as a form of protesting against the fight for leadership and wealth by the new leaders while ignoring the problems experienced by their people. However, by showing their direct displeasure with the new leaders, most of these African writers were either killed, prisoned or forced to flee their own countries.</li> </ul>	

## 3. Third Generation

By the turn of the 1980s, African writers turned their attention to address everyday life problems like unemployment, diseases, and domestic violence. Furthermore, while separated from experiences of

colonialism and the crises of the post-colonial periods, this generation tends to revisit these events and provide a contemporary commentary on them.

Characteristics	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Emigration/Diaspora</u>: These writers are often located in the Diaspora; USA or Europe, which grants them more freedom than the previous generations. In other words, unlike the other two generations, being outside of Africa provides this generation of writers a certain level of freedom from the political and cultural pressure of their communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>New Form of Otherness</u>: In the works of the first generation African writers, Otherness is used to address the relationship between the colonised/African and the coloniser/European. However, in the case of the third generation, Otherness refers to a different and more contemporary struggle—that is their Otherness as foreigners in a foreign land.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Diverse Literary Texts</u>: Due to their existence in different contexts, African writers of this generation have managed to develop and experiment new forms of literary writings and linguistic expressions. While the previous generations used the traditional structure of the novel as a main literary form to deliver their ideas, this generation of writers used plotless structures and individualism in their narratives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <u>Breaking Taboos</u>: As a result of being free from political and cultural limitations, third generation African writers are able to discuss topics that would be considered taboo in their African communities. Issues like gender identities, criticising patriarchy, and protesting political corruption are key topics the new generation of African writers can address from the Diaspora.</li> </ul>

### III. Female Writers in African Literature

🔔 As the names of writers mentioned through this lecture show that most of the key figures of African literature are males.<sup>2</sup> This is usually explained with the fact that women were not allowed to get an education, especially during the colonial period. **Flora Nwapa** (Nigeria) is an exception as she is the only African female writer that can be considered part of the first generation. Through her works, Nwapa tells stories of women who can set an identity for themselves and reach social fulfilment in their traditional communities without the need for marriage. It was not until 1980s – third generation – that

<sup>2</sup> Check the lecture's slides.

literary writings by African women have flourished and spread widely among readers. These female writers, whether located in Africa or the Diaspora, use their literary works to bring to the surface the struggles and the various roles of African women during colonialism, civil wars, the process that women go through to understand their own identities, among other topics. In so doing, African female writers set female characters at the centre of their narratives which grants them a voice and power.

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