

Portraiture of Factors Decimating Nigerian Tertiary Education Standards in Selected Literary Texts

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Abstract

Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning are experiencing twin perilous challenges national leadership irrationality and internal anomie. As a result, many of the products of the institutions are not only half-baked but they are also unemployable. The deterioration is perennial and its causes are legion. Little or no decisive steps have been taken to ameliorate the situation over the years. In this study, an attempt is made, from the literary perspective, to historicise the problems, unearth their genesis and, in view of the findings, proffer suggestion that can help revive the standard. The theoretical framework adopted for the study, which is predicated on qualitative research methodology, is New Historicism. Each problem identified plaguing the institutions, from the selected texts, constitutes data for the study. The findings show that the moral decadence in the larger society is reflecting on Nigerian institutions of higher Learning, because the institutions are microcosm of the macro-society. The schools are not maintained; they are littered with substandard structures and academic programmes are marred by erratic policies, paucity of fund, riots, strike action and the purloining of fund appropriated for their development. To address these problems, the study suggests declaration of state of emergency on the Nigerian educational sector and reforms to salvage it from the sharp practices corroding standard in the system.

Keywords: Institutions, higher learning, leadership, anomie, historicism.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary exposition of the ills in the Nigerian tertiary institutions of learning often invokes a sense of déjà vu, a sort of echoes of the gritty state, in anyone conversant with current affairs across Nigerian campuses. This study sets to underscore the point that in any setting where bad leadership is enshrined destruction reigns supreme among successive tyrant rulers. The motif borders on government's absurd decisions and unethical conducts of some academics that destroy Nigerian institutions of higher learning. The leadership factor is a parlous external invader clogging the smooth running of academic programmes while the latter is an internal cankerworm ruining academic standard. The study avows that in their own ways and deeds; some academics contribute immensely to the deterioration of academic standard in Nigeria. Accordingly, the article aims at making a holistic assessment of the conducts of some principal stakeholders in the Nigerian tertiary education. The significance of the study is premised on the anonymous axiom which says that no nation, region or community can develop beyond the quality of

education she offers her citizens. Jonathan (2023:1) states that, "over the years, education has proven to be the fulcrum facilitating national development in any state...., because, through the creative process of the mind, innovation is made".

It cannot be gainsaid that Nigeria is divinely endowed with abundant human and material resources that can make her achieve greatness easily among comity of nations. That the country still remains underdeveloped in spite of her resources has continued to raise serious concern across the globe for years. Neither her numerical strength (of over 200 million people) nor the manpower or mineral resources have translated into substantive development since independence. The root cause of this pitiable situation and the thrust of this study are succinctly accentuated in another Yoruba anonymous aphorism: "if the head is rotten, all parts of the body are affected." The kernel of the dictum is aptly elucidated in Chinua Achebe's slim but very informative book, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983:1), which asserts inter alia that: "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership....The Nigerian problem is the

unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.” From Achebe’s submission, it is lucid that Nigeria’s problem is not with the natural ambiance but emanates from the endemic absence of patriotic and charismatic leaders. Consequently, all aspects of the nation’s parastatals, including the educational sector, are mismanaged and are grossly affected by this national challenge.

Western education was successfully planted and tenderly nurtured to world-class standard in Nigeria by the ecclesiastics and later the colonial masters. It was one of the legacies bequeathed to the country at independence. As such, Nigeria has a long history of western education. In this article, comparative literary study of the old and contemporary Nigerian academic standard comes to the fore. Unlike the comparative education studied in the General Education Curriculum which involves the comparison, with merits and demerits, of the educational systems of two or more countries, with the aim of arriving at an informed decision that will enhance improvement of the educational standard of the epicentre of the study or both countries as the case may be or what, in literary scholarship, is called comparative literature, encompassing the analytic study of literatures of two culturally diverse regions, the comparative study this essay sets to make is intra-country based but in two phases.

Objectives of the Study

This study sets to:

- i. examine the standard of education in Nigeria from the colonial period to date;
- ii. explicate how government and teachers in tertiary institutions of learning contribute to low academic performance in Nigeria;
- iii. state measures to address the factors responsible to decadence in Nigerian tertiary institutions of learning.

Statement of the Problem

The standard of Nigerian education was high during the colonial period and after independence to the late 1980’s. Prior to the independence of Nigeria, two categories of schools existed at the primary and secondary school levels. Achebe (2012:20) avows that missionary schools and Government owned schools existed. The Anglican Protestants of the Church Mission Society, as well as the Methodists, Baptists, and the Roman Catholics built missionary schools throughout the South and Middle Belt of Nigeria. Government Colleges—in Ibadan, Ughelli, Umuahia as well as King’s and Queen’s colleges—were built by the Government. Those schools were among the very best secondary schools in the British Empire. The schools had sufficient financial backing, excellent amenities, befitting laboratories and libraries. They were not only well

staffed but also well managed by first-rate teachers and other personnel (Achebe, 2012:20). Those were the days school certificate holders with good grades had no difficulty getting admission into institutions of higher learning in Nigeria or abroad. School certificate holders of those days could compete favourably with their counterparts anywhere in the world.

At the tertiary education level, Yaba High School, 1932 (now Yaba College of Technology), was the first institution of higher learning in Nigeria. Upon the establishment of the University College, Ibadan, in affiliated arrangement with the University of London, in 1948, the staff of the Yaba High School and some of her students were moved to Ibadan to start the University College with other students admitted across the country. Ademola (2010:153) presents a historical analysis of staff-student relation and the standard of education at the University of Ibadan at its inception. The high standard was made possible because the Nigerian Premier University, Ibadan, was modelled toward Cambridge and Oxford Universities. Ademola (2010:153) affirms that:

The core of the staff of Ibadan was thus a blend of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge (usually referred to as Oxbridge Staff). The first Principal, Kenneth Mellanby, was himself a product of Cambridge University. It is therefore not altogether surprising that in those early years, there were constant references to Cambridge and Oxford as the models to which Ibadan had to look up to.

Ever since, the University of Ibadan serves as the flagship of university education and postgraduate studies in Nigeria. Mojuetan (2000:412) submits that in the realm of academic affairs, there are dedicated lecturers as well as students in the University. Ademola (2010:157) corroborates Mojuetan’s submission, averring that “lecturers expected their students to do some independent reading and thinking and the students, of course, lived up to the academic expectation of their lecturers. They read widely, well ahead of the classes”.

Reminiscing about the halcyon days of the Nigerian academic standard in their works, it is not uncommon to notice the nostalgic mood of Nigerian literary writers. Those who grew up when the colonial educational infrastructure and the succeeding governments until the late 1980’s celebrated hard work, qualitative education and high achievement, now lament the pitiable standard of the country’s educational standard. Things were working well those days. Holders of the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), University degrees and National Diplomas had requisite knowledge of their areas of specialisation. So good was the system of education and the Nation then that Achebe (2012:29) confesses, regrettably though upon reflection on the awry ways the country is run in contemporary time. He states that “after graduation I did not have to

worry about where I would go next. The system was so well organised that as we left university most of us were instantly absorbed into civil service, academia, business, or industries. We trusted...the country and its rulers....” Hardly can one have such unflinching trust considering the way the country is run this day.

Research Methodology/Theoretical Framework

This study hinges on qualitative research methodology within the tenets of new historicism. Given the methodology and theoretical framework, the study is squarely a text-based literary exegesis and hermeneutics. Qualitative research methodology enables one to collect and analyse non-numerical data in order to understand a phenomenon. It provides an insightful explication into how and why something happens through procedures like interview, group discourse and textual content and context. In this study, the qualitative design is delimited to narrative research, involving a diachronic and synchronic study of Nigerian educational standards in selected literature texts. Seven Nigerian literary texts with shared thematic preoccupation and relevance are purposively selected for the study. They are representative texts from the educationally advanced south-east, south-south and the south-western Nigeria in contrast to the educationally disadvantaged northern Nigeria. Attention is paid to the portraiture of the Nigerian educational standards, following a close reading of the selected texts. Therefore, each episode of a breach of academic standard constitutes data for the study.

Reflecting on the early Nigerian educational system in contrast to the contemporary standard, this study adopts *new historicism* as literary theory but assumes an eclectic approach in the main, tilting toward *social realistic* dimension in its analytic stance because the theory borrows heavily from and relies solidly on other theories such as structuralism/deconstruction, feminism, Marxism and cultural materialism. In literary scholarship the theory is credited to Stephen Greenblatt, an American critic, in his book: *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980). New historicist sees a text as an instrument of political awareness and a statement of ideology. In the words of Dobie (2009: 179), ‘Critics who work from this perspective often want to change the culture, and the stories they bring to light are deemed to be tools for modifying it. The critics assume that literature addresses cultural concerns and can affect society’s attitude and values’. In literary exegesis, *New historicism* perceives all texts as ‘social document and, as such, they both reflect and affect the world that produces them. Reading any single one renders an incomplete picture; understanding multiple documents requires piecing them together to produce an interpretation (Dobie, 2009: 179). It is a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts (Barry, 2002: 116). As it will be revealed in the course of this study, new historicism

involves the location of the content of a literary text in other texts. It is about paying close attention to the historical context of literary works. The notion is that literary works: plays, poems and novels, are products of a specific time and place. Digging into the *archive* for verifiable information makes this achievable. Such archival information is derived from related literary and non-literary texts. Hence, it embeds intertextuality. Even when a text portrays historical account, new historicism puts primacy on textuality of history (the historicity of texts). Therefore, new historicism is interested in history ‘as represented and recorded in written documents, in history-as text’ (Barry, 2002). In the main, there is juxtaposition of literary material with contemporary non-literary texts.

Dobie submits that reading literature from a new historicist perspective involves ‘accepting a new understanding of what a text is. Instead of assuming that it is static, reflective artefact of a definable culture, this approach treats literature as a participant in a dynamic, changeable culture. The potential for change becomes important, because it means that literature has a role to play in the reformation of the society....’ In the light of this study, the season of anomie, inordinate ambition, cum power tussles and randy advances toward female students by male lecturers which characterise the affairs of higher institutions in Nigeria, having adverse effects corroding the standard of education and, by so doing, plunging the image of the nation into disrepute are amply brought to the fore by the application of New historicist literary approach. The clamour for change, which is central to New Historicism, is the leitmotif of this study.

The culture of perpetual deformation of the standard of the Institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, institutions established to be the custodians and fountains of knowledge illuminating the macro-society, speak volumes of the level of the anomie plaguing the country as a whole. It is against this backdrop that social realistic approach to literary study is brought to complement the tenets of New Historicism so as to canvass for change in the status quo. In the face of the multifaceted issues bedevilling Nigeria and all the sectors therein, Nigerian literary writers, many of them dons, display some protest in their writings. They effectively use words creatively to assert change. In the humanities, ‘literary artists use language and the power of words to communicate messages to their audience or readers’ (Patricia, 2013). The writers take side with the downtrodden and refuse to forge ally with the power that be at the expense of the powerless.

Leadership Challenge and Deplorable Educational Standard in Nigeria

Periodisation plays an immense role in literary analysis. It shows the faces and phases of literary works as well as events narrated. The scenarios Achebe and Ademola made known about the good days of Higher

Education in Nigeria in the preceding paragraphs had been overtaken by bad leadership. This is characterised by mismanagement of military interregnum, graft, and lack of political goodwill by the succeeding civilian governments. As a result, creative writers at post-civil war Nigeria discovered they had a perilous time and problem to deal with. A good number of them expose the state of Tertiary Education in the country.

Sarah Ladipo portrays, in her debut novel, *Independence* (2008), a scenario that is in sharp contrast to the enchanting standard earlier discussed about the University of Ibadan and by extension all Higher Institutions in Nigeria at that time. Ladipo writes about the universities in Nigeria, using the University of Maiduguri as an archetypal campus and Omotayo (also called Tayo) as a prototype Lecturer, teaching a set of students. The narrator, without mincing words, traces the collapse of Higher education to the military administrations but the systematic collapse climaxed during the General Ibrahim Babangida's regime. In its bid to suppress opposition and enshrine dictatorship, so as to rule absolutely, the administration saw the academics as threats and tried to debilitate their influence on the general public by asphyxiating academic programmes. Since education is an eye-opener, the military was against intellectual challenge in print or in the mass media. This is not new to Nigerian writers though. The enigmatic Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, affirms in his classic autobiography and prison note, *The Man Died* (1972:9), that "Books and other forms of writing have always been objects of terror to those who seek to suppress truth". The situation and reality in the Nigerian political milieu is what the writers portray on one hand but which the tyrant rulers strive to hide on the other hand. To this end, new historicist critics conceive of a literary text as situated within the totality of the institution, social practices, and discourse that constitute the culture of production and a product of cultural energies and codes (Abrams and Geoffery, 2009: 219).

During the military regimes, tertiary institutions of learning and, indeed, all levels of education in Nigeria were underfunded. Feeding of students on campuses was proscribed. University scholars who wanted to fight the aberration were severely dealt with: their offices were ransacked to confiscate writings exposing detestable government policies. More often than not, such works were destroyed. To further silence the intellectuals, in fact, to make living difficult for them, "ever since 1974 the budget for *Higher education* has fallen, yet the number of universities has been expanding," (109) Ladipo laments (*italic is mine*). The military interregnum was characterised by impunity and large-scale corruption. All social amenities and infrastructure malfunctioned. Hospitals suffered dereliction; power supply became epileptic and brutality became the order of the day. It was a period of unprecedented brain drain. Miriam, Tayo's wife in *Independence*, advises her

husband to abdicate his position in the university of Maiduguri, assuring him that he "could be writing abroad, teaching abroad" and he 'would even influence things here at home more by being out of the country" (109). More seriously, she makes Tayo see reason he must leave:

Tayo, all our friends are leaving. The Adewales, the Wisemans, the Shahs-even your beloved writers, Soyinka and Achebe, have left. Everyone is going, yet we stay.... There's nothing. Nothing. You can't even teach because of rioting and strike (106).

As the narrative continues, Tayo, in a bid to extrapolate the level of deterioration intellectual rigour has suffered in the university system, asks his students to discuss, "the Indian National Congress in the 1940s...and their respective views regarding religious tension at the time" (115). To his utter disappointment, when the students handed in the answers to the assignment, they only succeeded to plagiarise and/or submit mere summary of books without critical analytic impact on their part. What a deteriorating standard! "It frustrated him to find undergraduates writing in this way...." (115). Students cannot be expected to study well when the enabling condition for learning is not available. It is appalling that a hostel room for two students now houses over six or more students; in the library, antiquated books are not weeded out; the libraries are not stocked with current and relevant books. These social realistic events are the concerns of Nigerian writers. Similar concern is expressed in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006). The writer presents the attrition of professionalism and the elevation of mediocrity during the Military adventurism in the Nigerian politics. In the case of the central character of the work, *The Activist*, who, after obtaining a PhD degree in the United States is being sought after by his home state university to return to teach there. "The Federal Military Government drove professionals out of the country with its blatant human rights violation.... A reporter for Index on censorship...quoted the military leader as saying that anyone who wanted to leave his country was free to run away...." (32)

Tayo Olafioye exposes similar infrastructural deficit in "College without Convenience", a poem in his poetry collection entitled *The Parliament of Idiots* (2002: 75). The setting of the poem reflects Kwara State Polytechnic. The poetic persona had gone to the school to visit his erstwhile students lecturing there. The visitor wanted to use the restroom but he was amused more than being annoyed discovering that the campus had no such facility anywhere from its inception.

A college, K-Poly that is
Has no convenience anywhere
Since its genesis 25 years before
On a visit, I had need.

My students there
Now Chief Developers of the Mind

Confession now compulsory

‘‘No such facility, Prof.
Not a single one all, these years
We live it in silent discomforts’’
Students—men and women,
Future leaders so indecently deprived

This is how the proprietor, the government
That is, nurtures its seeds
A reflection of its own value

How will the State Assembly Feel?
Without restrooms in its premises
Or the Governor on his own?

Olafioye portrays the bad leadership style of the Nigerian government that is inversely destroying all institutions. His grouse is the unimaginable manner the campus complexes are built in modern time without the indispensable facility like the toilet. Rhetorically though, he raises a thought-provoking question about how the members of the state house of assembly or the Governor of the state would feel if toilets were not in their own complexes. This anomaly is a reflection of how much value the government puts on education. It is demoralising that ‘future leaders’ are ‘so indecently deprived’ of essential facilities in institutions of higher learning. This is the tip of the iceberg considering the magnitude of the substandard structures all-over institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

Anomie in Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning: A Literary Revelation

In literary exegesis, there is connection between texts and their historical contexts. A literary text is less the product of the author’s imagination but more of the social circumstance of its creation. A work of literature is influenced by the author’s time and circumstance and the critic’s is also influenced by his environment, beliefs and prejudices. Daily despicable events in Nigeria influence literary production. In Chukwuemeka Ike’s *The Naked Gods* (2015), an unbecoming and heinous struggle/politicking among academics vying for the Vice Chancellorship position of Songhai University is presented. In the narrative, the cognomen, Songhai, represents Nigeria. The tussle is between Professor Ikin and Dr Okoro; both dons jostle for the position at all costs. Dr Okoro schemes to take Professor Ikin’s life and goes to the extent of planting charm at his threshold. Inter-textual relation exists between Osita Nwosu’s *Dog in the Ivory Tower* (2004) and *The Naked Gods* (2015). Similar scenario is depicted in the former.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* (2008) presents a replica of Adichie’s narrative. In the text, the

victim of the untoward treatment from Dr Komolafe, a Lecturer in the Department of Geography and Estate Management, University of Lagos, is Ofomata. Ofomata has gone to Dr Komolafe’s office to submit an assignment. Upon entering the office after knocking, ‘Get out and knock again. And come in only when you hear me say so’, is Dr Komolafe’s response, in an imperative tone. An hour after Ofomata had left the office to wait at the corridor, the lecturer came out, not to call Ofomata in, but to go home. Sighting Ofomata still waiting, he collected the assignment from him but not without making an outrageous demand from the student: ‘can you get me some tyres for my Volvo?...I need at least two’(32). During the subsequent lecture, the lecturer also demands a ‘Jerry can of fuel’ (106). Ofomata would have turned down the request but gave it a thought. ‘Dr Komolafe was teaching him two courses this semester alone and was likely to teach him again in his final year. How could he risk jeopardising his chance of passing his courses? To refuse would be suicidal’ (107), he reasoned. Komolafe is not the only avaricious lecturer in this unwholesome act. Prior to that, ‘another lecturer, Mr Ogamba, had asked him for a loan of fifty thousand...which he was sure the man would never pay back’ (34). Extortion of students is not the only unethical practices of the lecturers. ‘...Some of the books they sold to students are *shoddily* produced and *lacked substance*. But the students had no choice; they either bought the books or failed the courses’ (35), Akachi wrote (*italic is mine*). As an academic of enviable echelon, Akachi presents a realistic and/or factual scenario in a seemingly fictional way.

Randy lecturers are not spared of the expository resolve of the Nigerian writers. Male lecturers in Institution of Higher learning and female students barter grades for sex. And, more often than not, such randy ones usurp their position to flunk female student(s) who does not accede to their advances. An unsuspecting female student’s academic programme can be elongated for one or more year through advertently-caused failure by the concerned lecturer(s). Nwosu’s *Dog in the Ivory Tower* (2004) indicts Songhai University of this menace (Songhai symbolises Nigeria in the text). The school in question suffers infrastructural deficit; others around it are not maintained and academic programmes are marred by erratic government policies, paucity of fund, riots, strike and the purloining of fund appropriated for the development. The narrative portrays what has become of the Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning whenever dons are jostling for positions. Pursuing their ambition, they use cultists to intimidate one another and polarise the campus into cliques. In the novel, Chioma finds herself in quandary. The Vice Chancellor who rescues her from attempted rape in the hand of the Dean of her Faculty turns to lust after her. The young damsel is in the VC’s office on courtesy visit to express gratitude for his enormous role in the Senate meeting which liberated her from the grip of the Dean. Resisting the VC’s advances,

'You will not get this degree if you don't want to be reasonable' (159), he threatens.

In the course of new historicist analysis, power is contextualised and its scope is widened. It is seen beyond exclusive class-rated conferment but extends all over the society. Power structure in the society is segmental and it is utilised over one another to other people's detriment depending on the privileged position individual occupies. Many Nigerians use their positions to oppress others as seen in the cases of Dr Komolafe and the Vice-Chancellor in the preceding paragraphs. Recently, beyond the fictional mode, this took more realistic dimension with verifiable evidences in the Senate report of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife over *sex-for-mark* audio conversation that went viral on the internet involving Professor Richard Akindele and Miss Monica Osagie read by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor Eyitope Ogunbodede, and published in the Wednesday, June 20, 2018 edition of the Punch newspaper. Reading the report at a press conference, Professor Ogunbodede said inter alia that:

Professor Akindele operated in position of power and authority over Miss Osagie and as such sexually harassed her. Professor Akindele was liable for all the allegations of misconduct levelled against him...Accordingly, the Senate recommended that Professor Richard Akindele, having been found liable on the allegations against him, should be dismissed from the services of the University....

Realistically, when students cheat or get undue grades in examinations, under any guise, whatever certificates they obtain cease to reflect their true aptitude. Consequently, whatever decision is made on the basis of such grades is invalid and, on that ground, the rationale for assessment is utterly defeated and national development will be at a low ebb while ineptitude will reign supreme.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian academic standard has fallen drastically. Students no longer learn in a befitting and enabling environment. The schools are not maintained and academic programmes are marred by erratic government policies, paucity of fund, riots and strikes. Unemployable graduate are being produced by the schools. Season of anomie has overshadowed Nigerian institutions of higher learning. All these anomalies border on bad leadership style and moral decadence in the larger society which have crept into Nigerian Institutions of higher learning, because the campus is a microcosm of the macro-society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and the conclusion arrived at, it is recommended that the decadence in the Nigerian Institutions of Higher

Learning should not continue unabated. Nigeria needs well-funded institutions of higher learning that meet up with the standard of benchmark Institutions and best practices globally. The twenty-six per cent budgetary allocation recommended by UNESCO to education should be seen as priority by government at all levels. Basic amenities and infrastructure should be provided on all campuses. Students admitted into Higher Institutions should be worthy in character and in learning. To curtail ineptitude and unproductiveness, the academics recruited should be those who have the requisite aptitude for the courses they are assigned to teach; they should be those who are dedicated to their work, not those with lackadaisical attitude to work. They should be those who grade their scripts objectively, award marks based on the merit found in the scripts, not those who award grades to students on sentimentality or to students who are ready to compensate the academic(s) in cash or in kind or those who award marks arbitrarily to cover up their own dereliction of regular class attendance so that students will not lodge complaint against them if they fail. This is achievable through decisive quality assurance after confirmation of appointments of academic staff. Above all, state of emergency should be declared on the Nigerian educational sector and the whole system should be overhauled.

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