

**LITERATURE AND IDENTITY: AFRICA AND THE DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE****Dr. Benedict Binebai****ABSTRACT**

Literature across ages and continents have functioned as the embodiment and interpreter of a peoples' culture, a conveyor of a people's language as well as their philosophy, politics, psychology and national character. This is essentially a literary tradition influenced by the search for our roots. Literature whether cast in the mode of agitation, negotiation or based on historical reconstruction or mythological recreation has a touch of identity. That quest for distinctiveness makes literature an epistemological body for contest and negotiation and as a carrier of eccentricity. Across the world, works have been written based on peoples' culture. Thus, using the post colonialism theory, this paper investigates the dialectical link between literature and identity in Africa and the diaspora. It argues that literature across generic boundaries is a fundamental indicator of identity. Moreover that literature is empowered by identity as identity can also be empowered by literature. The paper concludes that the symbiotic relationship between literature and identity is a fundamental linkage to national and racial heritage.

**Keywords:** literature, identity, Africa, diasporic, experience

**Introduction**

Colonialism and reckless political rule all over the world have contributed a lot to the growth and development of literature and have also established a link between literature, identity and nationalism. In developed societies like Britain, writers like John Osborne and other notable British writers like Arnold Wesker and Rodney Auckland used their critical and radically revolutionary writings to change the British society. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), famously kick-started the theatrical trend of the Angry Young Men and Drama that put the British society's discontent at centre stage. (Oliver 1). That was theatre and nationalism in advanced countries. Literature and nationalism or struggles are interlocked in societies or independent nations bestridden by tyranny. Literature played a significant role in the gestation of the modern Irish nation; and the Anglo-Irish Literary Movement led by Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and John Millington Synge became repeatedly involved in the political struggle. The political situation in Ireland was unbearable; hence, writers like W, B Yeats and J. M. Synge came into Irish National

prominence and became celebrated literary voices. In fact, in *The Cry of Home: Cultural Nationalism and the modern Writer* (1972), the point is made by Robert Tracy in Ireland: *The Patriotic Game* that Yeats made his remarks about literature and nationalism only a few months after the fall of Parnell (1890) had destroyed all hopes of bringing about Irish Home Rule by legal parliamentary methods. Robert Tracy further states:

Yeats believed that writers must now take the lead in the struggle for independence and proceed by other than political means, by creating among Irishmen an intense national spirit. This would be accomplished by arranging for the publication and distribution of nineteenth-century literary works which could be justified both on literary and patriotic grounds (40)

The implication is that Yeats and a lot of his contemporaries purposely set to work to generate the sense of national identity which they thought of as an obligatory prelude to political action. Thus, the Irish theatre was founded principally for national purpose. It is the strong position of Robert Tracy that the myth about modern Irish literature and Irish nationalism is that the present day Irish Republic owes its survival as an independent polity of literature.

In the Asian continent, particularly in India, the colonial experience brought about a fresh logic of identity even during the colonial era. Indians not only rejected British culture, their historians were faced with the task of writing a revisionist history to straighten the colonial historical account which they claimed was not a true version of Indian history. The school of study that emerged in the last near three decades is the post-colonial subaltern re-writing of the self.

Homi Bhabha, a foremost theorist in post-colonial thought, highlights the importance of social power relation in his working definition of subaltern groups as “an oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority groups. The subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power.” (191). This position of Bhabha was also expressed by Boaventura Sousa Santos in *Toward a New Legal Common Sense* (2002) when he declared that subaltern can be seen within the context of counter hegemonic practices, movements, resistances, and struggles against particular social exclusion. The subaltern theory takes the perspective of the “other” as one who has had no voice

because of race, class or gender. It establishes the fact that norms are established by those in power and imposed on the “other” (458). This post-colonial theory is built around the concept of resistance which can carry ideas about human freedom, identity and individuality which may not have been held in the same way, in the colonized culture view of humankind.

Thus, the sympathies and interests of post colonialism are thus focused on those at the margins of society. This position is a deviation from the theoretical intellectual exertions and is based on the challenging socio-economic and political landscapes as well as the struggle for positive solution to these challenges (Robert Young, 114).

Explaining the point further, C. Okoye in his paper on Soyinka: “Text, Embodied Practice and Post-Colonial Resistance” states

Post-colonialism continues the battle against colonial insinuations even after the demise of direct formal colonization. It contests the emergent local repressive regimes which often posture deceptively as progressive alternatives with the objective to launch crippling offensives against imperialism, corruption and bad governance, only to turn around and repress the very people they profess to protect. The various postcolonial dictatorships in Asia, Latin America and Africa are typical instances of this inconsistency. Most significantly, post colonialism is about the pursuit of justice, dignity and access to basic social amenities for/by those to whom these amenities are denied (40)

This study shall, therefore, appropriate the postcolonial theory to critically investigate the subject of identity in literature in Africa and the diaspora.

### **African Literature and the question of linguistic identity**

The debate of African literature and the question of literary identity indigenous to Africa is one that has persisted for so long and many scholars have made their inputs and positions. For Yakubu Nasidi, African literature is an enclave of freedom where the African re-conquers his lost identity and dignity. (21) This position seems to vividly capture the overwhelming impulses that characterize the early modern African writers, hitherto. The question of identity in African literature in the writings of regional and national writers persists because of the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in the continent and among the countries of the continent.

For writers in Africa, the question of language and identity in African literature is very strong. Several conferences and summits have been held and several scholars have come up with one theory or the other on how to attain the African linguistic identity. This has resulted in linguistic experimentations by African writers. Ranging from writing in African Languages, producing an African version of the English Language, writing with both the African Language and the English Language called Bilingualism as proposed by Ola Rotimi in his inaugural lecture *African dramatic literature: to Be or to Become?* (1991) as well as other communication resources like cultural iconography, and performing arts like dance, music and chants etc. Language, as an emblem of identity, is more relevant and successful among ethnic groups than nations like Nigeria faced with the problem of cultural and linguistic pluralism. Beyond the Nigerian landscape, it is beneficial to look at the linguistic identity issue as handled and appropriated by Ngugi wa Thiong’O and others.

Ngugi wa Thiong’O of Kenyan was more radical in this politics of linguistic identity. In 1970, he and his colleagues at the University of Nairobi issued their famous declaration calling for the abolition of the English Department and the placing of African literature at the centre of the curriculum of literary studies in African Universities. (Biodun Jeyifo cf. Gbemisola and Adeoti 27) Ngugi wa Thiong’O also went on experimentation with writing in his native Gikuyu Language. Despite these colossal attempts to do away with English Language by people who once were colonized by the British, such as India and Other African Countries, the English Language remains in great use as a language of communication.

The demands of internationality, the question of communication with the world outside Africa and other issues such as accessibility and marketability of African literature in the global environment seem to have poisoned the dream of an African linguistic identity among African writers. Again, the multi-cultural character of African language and the emphasis on the protection of individual people’s linguistic identity have emasculated the great dream of the total institutionalization of African language for literary communication contemplated for the replacement of the English Language.

The question of identity as a vehicle of literary expressions is also a major concern and debate among African writers. To put an end to the obstacle of inventing identity in a post – colonial state, writers like Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara vehemently find a sense of identity in writing African literature in English by recognizing the English Language as a medium of literary expression giving it an African colour and characterisation. Gabriel Okara states:

Some may regard this way of writing in English as discretion of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grows like living things, and English is far from a dead language. Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English ...now used to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our way" (cf. Heather Sofield 1).

For Chinua Achebe he declares that he has no choice in the use of the English Language because he has been given the language and he intends to use it. He gives support to the position of Okara stating that the English Language will be able to carry the weight of his African Experience. But it will have new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surrounding (Ngugi 286).

Ola Rotimi's bilingualism and what Dapo Adelugba designated as "Yorubaenglish" and all styles of writing aimed at inventing and imposing African stamp of identity on writing African literature in English gave in to the postulations of the aforementioned African writers. Heather Sofield affirms in an article titled *Post-Colonial Identity and the Position of English in African, Literature* (2) that "post-colonial literature is an example of a successful cultural transplant. Post-Colonial literature written in English should only serve to strengthen a sense of identity by proving that African values and ideas can survive the translation. The key is to make the language one's own; to incorporate rather than being incorporated. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (1972) co-authored argument calling for the abolition of the English Department and the creation of a new Department devoted to the study of African language and literatures are arguments designed to establish African identity in post-colonial literature. Ngugi's idea of a post-colonial African Literary identity is total, radical and bristles with revolutionary temperature. This obsessive identity drive in him led him to write in his native Gikuyu language. The strong desire to articulate an African literary aesthetic by Ngugi and many African writers is identity politics itself. Obi Wali declares in "the dead End of African literature" that:

The uncritical acceptance of English and French as the medium of educated writing in Africa is largely misdirected and that it will not advance the cause of African Literature and Culture...until African literatures are written in African languages, African writers are merely pursuing a dead end. (20)

This radical position on African literature taken by the likes of Ngugi, Obi Wali and others seems to have the strong backing of Dele Layiwola in *Rethinking African...* when he rationalizes that if language and religious ideology (or faith) are two great cultural routes to the soul of any ethnic group or race...one would realize the gravity of what those gentlemen are advocating (46). Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drunkard* (1952) served as a representative guide in the creation of identity for African Writers. He appropriated local language with the weight of transliteration as a literary medium. *The Palm Wine Drunkard* is an embodiment of cultural identity as it draws expansively from Yoruba fairy tales and cosmology. It is also on the record of literary history in Nigeria that Amos Tutuola and Gabriel Okara are monumental influence on modern Nigerian literature particularly in the context of their style of language deployment as a literary device. Beside the question of linguistic identity, modern African literature tended to carry the banner of empowerment of culture and identity.

### **Drama and identity**

A terrain considered cardinal to the objective of our study is the influence of identity politics in the cultural history of humanity. The love for one's social group, race ethnic nation and region which has from the distant past ruled the attention of man in many parts of the world has found expression in literature – a product of culture. In third world African nations which experience colonialism, cultural identity and cultural nationalism existed side by side with political identity and nationalism. In fact, the emergence of the artistic philosophy of realism appropriated art to the discussion of issues in the society.

The use of drama as a political weapon has long been acknowledged. There are many authorities and scholars to quote and or refer to, to establish the political use of drama but here we shall make do with the claim of Barzun Jacque in *The Use and Abuse of Art* (83) when he said, "The political use of art began with the French revolution of 1789. The patriotic Totalitarian

mood inspired plays, songs, canvasses, dances and fictions composed to show that the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity were the only tenable ones". Lanre Bamidele in his *Literature and Sociology* gave positive voice to the political use of Art. We cannot run away from this political function, since art itself cannot escape in an essentially political era from the political world. (32).it is in the same vein that Nelson Fashina holds in his *A Season of Harvest* that Poetry should cast the veil of deceit off the faces of oppressors, and illumine the world. Thus poetry cannot be ideologically neutral in the face of apparent struggle for justice and fair-play in a modern world where politics and governance are bereft of truth. (9)

This political function of art admits arts particularly of the literary typology as a partaker of identity politics. Thus,

among literatures of the nineteenth century, poets, dramatists and novelists have been conspicuously successful propagandists of nationalism. At their hands national traits and national character have been as rigidly conventionalized as was the chorus on ancient creek stage. The average man's notion of a Frenchman or a German or an Irishman or a Jew is gotten not from extensive personal observations but from archetypes supplied by versifiers, story tellers and playwrights" (Carton Hayles quoted in Abati 208).

All over the world and across ages, the use of literature for the preservation and promotion of identity has been institutionalized. Dramatist and literary scholars seem to have a general and tangible concurrence concerning this position. But John M. Robertson puts forward an argument which condemns the fact that the use of literature for the propagation of national pride "is an error of errors, a falsity of falsities". By this position John M. Robertson seems to be directly condemning the excellent works of world class dramatists, like Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, Bernard Shaw and even celebrated dramatists after their age like Soyinka, Clark, Ngugi Wa Thiong' o etc who spoke for their countries. Robertson's logical point of criticism is that literature should be universal in scope and spirit; instead of nationalistic, continental, provincial, or local (See Abati 208).

Robertson's critique of literature of nationalism or provincialism is not such a sound position. This is because literary work is a tropology; it is first of all particular before it is general or universal. A work of literature has nested realities. Therefore, to vote against particularity in

preference to the general is an attempt to dig an infinite grave for the burial of literature. Existing records of literary writings have shown that literature is a veritable tool for identity projection. This is confirmed by Dapo Adelugba when he stated clearly in an interview conducted by Dasylyva that, “for a work to be truly universal, it must begin by being thoroughly local. An ethnic- based drama does not preclude universal significance” ((144). This position of Adelugba is further strengthened by McPhilips Nwachukwu in an article entitled “what is Nigerian literature?” When he said that “literature itself is an identity marker” (1) Adelugba and Nwachukwu seem to be stating the obvious fact because the literary voyage from the classical period shows and establishes dramatists who expressed one form of identity or the other in their works. Such works of Sophocles as *Oedipus Rex* is a paradigm of drama and identity. King Oedipus search for his shrouded reality from the home of his surrogate parents is a hallmark of the “who am I” identity. We also find in the play the question of political identity on the part of the people of Thebes in search of peace and freedom. The Thebes needed someone, a leader to destroy the powers of the Sphinx which Oedipus did and was rewarded King of Thebes. The search for a good leader dramatized in Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* is a phenomenon found in many societies of the world. It was therefore a Sophoclean play which celebrates Greek value of leadership. Rotimi’s *The Gods are not to Blame*, the Nigerian adapted version of *Oedipus Rex* is also strong on the concept of identity. Self-identity of King Odewale and political identity on the part of the Kutuje people who were being invaded by the people of Ikolu.

In this debate between Robertson and writers outside his postulation, some firmly established writers and critics have spoken, written and taken position subjectively or objectively, intentionally and unintentionally. Achebe (75) declared that an African writer who avoids the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat. And in *The writer in a Modern African State*, Soyinka holds the view that a concern with culture strengthens society... the artist has always functioned in African society as the record(er) of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself (21) These universally acclaimed Nigerian literati have, from their positions, established the fact that writers have responsibility to write about the prevailing issues in their societies.

These particular prevailing issues are first African before they become universal especially when they apply to other cultures, themes and characters in other parts of the world.

Robertson's logic of literature of internationality can only be seen as accessible if the fact is acknowledged that international literature begins from the cultural root of the writer. A universal status can only be achieved if, and only if, such works deal with characters, experiences and themes that are or may be found in other regions of the world. The point being made here is that literature is first, local, provincial and national, before it becomes universal. African literature no matter the universality of their themes and characters is strongly founded on cultural roots. Same can be said of the writings of Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht, Bernard Shaw. The writings of Soyinka, Clark, Ola Rotimi, James Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Wale Ogunyemi and those of many others function within identity construction as their art reflects on the myths, history, legend, traditions and collective cultural heritage of their peoples. Even Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is a classical drama that deals with women struggle for identity. The same can be said of *The Wives' Revolt* (1991) by J.P. Clark, *Dance on His Grave* (2005) by Barclays Ayakoromo, Irene Salami's *Sweet Revenge* (2004) and *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* (1977) by Ola Rotimi. These texts present negation of cultural colonization of women and attempt to reconstruct radically the identity of women in Africa. In fact, feminism is another fertile subject that has taken the creative attention of African dramatists. In contemporary critical circles in Africa, feminist drama which invariable is a drama of women identity and empowerment emerges as a measurement for artistic credibility and commitment of African writers.

### **Literature and Identity: the African Experience**

In Africa the fact is established that there is flowering of the emergence of literature as part of cultural identity and revolutionary struggle against domination, marginalisation and political cruelty in African states like Kenyan, Nigeria, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa Guinea Bissau etc. Oyeniyeye Okuneye (228) holds that the African writer in the decade of independence constituted the cultural wing of the nationalist movements. This function which they give to themselves enables them write based on the cultural and historical

identities of their people. Jean- Pierre Durix (19) holds that, “the writer in the new literatures in English considers that one of his privileged missions is to rehabilitate the history of his people. He underlines his differences with colonial historians in that he gives his own version of the trauma that affected his country when a new set of values and system of Government were imposed by outsiders.”

Okuneye Oyeniya holds that “the reality that empowers the creation of the popular East African drama *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is predicated on the debate as to what constitutes historical identity of Kenya is central to the writing of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* because of colonialist historical account which misinterpreted the nation’s history and demonized the person of Dedan Kimathi. Okuneye further expressed the point that “Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo wrote their play to celebrate Kimathi in order to restore him to his rightful place in Kenyan history, and he is, in the final analysis rewritten into Kenyan history in the way heroes of his standing are represented in traditional epics... The celebration of Kimathi as a national hero provides an occasion for the promotion of national identity and spirit” (230). Beside the historical identity question *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* dramatizes cultural self-definition, resistance and the clamour for economic and political liberation. In *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* Biodun Jeyifo noted that Ngugi and Mugo’s *Dedan Kimathi* shows that culture is created or forged anew in struggle. The old songs and myths, the erstwhile values, customs, relationships and identities are reshaped and given a new meaning. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* provides model for post-colonial writers who are often confronted with the task of redefining the identity of their people with the intention of interrogating their misrepresentations. (49) Ebrahim Hussein is another East African writer who dealt with identity. His *Kinjeketile* reflects the experience of collective resistance against German incursion in former Tanganyika. The play rings loud as resistance identity in opposition to German invasion. It can then be said that East African identity’s struggle received its impulsion from literature, specifically from literature of dialectical paradigm and revolutionary aesthetics which has a fundamental identity characteristics.

African writers are major conscious exponents of identity in post-colonial literature. Tanure Ojaide states that the African writers in affirming their faith in their native culture defend

it against alien encroachment and prejudices. They assert their Africanity to fight against colonial prejudices. In asserting their cultural identity, they condemn western interventions as disruptive of the growth and development of African culture through colonialism. (46) Tanure Ojaide further states that “

The works of the Ugandan poet. Okot P'Bitek, in *Song of Lawino*, Lawino is imbued with the symbol of African cultural independence, with dignity, humility, respect and authenticity. Lawino is opposed to Clementine and Ocol who indiscriminately copy alien western ways of life and so look absurd. Lawino assumes the royalty and courage of the bull and the beauty and gracefulness of the giraffe. But repulsive animals such as the hyena, Monkey, Ostrich and Python represent the copied alien ways.

In this question of the defense of African cultural identity in African literature, Nigeria's legendary poet Christopher Okigbo who was described as Nigeria's finest poet of his generation in West Africa deserves to be mentioned here. In his *Heaven's Gate* a difference is drawn in the use of both negative and positive images to describe both the strange and African culture. While the off-putting metaphors are assigned to the Western foreign culture, the positive images give a picture of the African way of life. Christopher Okigbo, like his classical Greek poet equivalent, Aeschylus, who fought in the Peloponnesian wars, took part in the Nigerian civil war on the side of Biafra. Both Aeschylus and Okigbo, by their participation in wars of identity set off their literary works which celebrate the values of their land. Soyinka is another vibrant African writer of the top echelon whose works vividly reflect identity. From *Lion and the Jewel* to the *Death and the King's Horseman*, the question of cultural identity dominates. *Lion and the Jewel* introduces culture conflict between the west and Africa to uphold the cultural identity of Africa as it affects the issue of bride price and marriage. Sidi's decision to get married to Bale Baroka in preference to the Village Teacher, Lakunle who is imbued, with European sensibilities and sensitivity which he holds against African tradition is an enactment of African cultural nationalism in Soyinka's Drama. In *Death and the Kings Horseman*, Soyinka shows the world as a writer that he is deeply rooted in his native Yoruba land. Cultural identity is presented strongly and in defiance of the European intervention and attempt to discontinue the sacred tradition of the Yoruba people. The conflict of this archetypal African tragic play is largely metaphysical as embodied in the human

vehicle, Elesin Oba and the universe of the Yoruba psyche which is the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links it all, the transition gulf.

In South Africa identity sentiments vigorously dominate the writings of its dramatist. Francis Ngaboh-Smart (1967) states that *Woza Albert* (1983) is a play conceived of and written collectively by Mtwana, Ngema, and Barney Simon as product of the black power movement and black consciousness movement respectively which constitute a mode of intervention, political and aesthetics, into a world of discourse that sought to annihilate blacks. *Woza Albert!* Treats vehemently, the question of black racial identity constituted around experiences and confrontation with white society. It dramatizes South African picture of deprivation and inhumanity evoking in memories and images of torment, broken, and desecrated African bodies and seeks change through revolution. Its twenty six scenes are authorially decreed to radically inveigh against every aspect of the apartheid universe in South Africa. *Woza Albert!* is not only a bold trope of contemporary African human struggle, it clearly and bravely interrogates the South Africa racial dilemma. The racial question and the search for identity are contextually revisited in the works of other popular South African dramatists like Athol Fugard's, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972). The South African identity politics, as reflected in literature, is nationalistic. It is designed and pursued to create space for cultural, economic and political independence and dignity of the black South Africans in their land. This was the reason behind the South African freedom struggle by the likes of Tam Mbeki, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela etc which attracted voices in the arts of South Africa.

The South African sense of identity struggle, portrayed in literature, has similarity with the experience of the blacks in America. And this is captured intensively in no other work than Baraka's *The Slave Ship*. Francis Ngaboh-Smart, in his paper, "The Politics of Black Identity: *The Slave Ship* and *Woza Albert!*" notes that *The Slave Ship* seems to be influenced by two distinct, but complimentary ideological agendas like *Woza Albert!* These are the black movement and the black consciousness movement respectively. Baraka's seminal drama is written with a strong sense and susceptibility to black identity. It dramatizes the disfiguring and distortion of black reality and raises resistance by constructing an African sense of identity. In an interview organised by Werner Sollors (258 – 9), Baraka declares: "...the question of national oppression of

black is an important respect, certainly of everything I have ever done". This assertion institutionalizes Baraka as a negritude writer in the politics of identity.

Nigeria parades a vibrant and accomplished corpus of writers in drama and identity politics. The works of Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Wale Ogunyemi, M.M. Umukoro, etc establish the contiguity between drama and identity. Identity is prominent in works like, *Ozidi*,(1966) *Song of a Goat*(1961) *Lion and the Jewel*(1963, *Death and the King's Horseman*(1975), *The gods are not to Blame*(2000) *Akassa Youmi* (2001), *Isaac Boro*(1978), *Nana Olomu*(2001), *Drums of the Delta*(2010) etcetera . These works as discussed previously are fundamentally predicated on cultural, economic and political nationalism. Identity discourse in the Nigerian literary cosmos has become a useful phenomenon as identity itself has become the source of art; it is the emblem of truth among social groups portrayed in literature. Nigeria's multicultural status and the politics of difference and the struggle for self-determination within the nation seem to have given rise to this romance between identity and literature. It is evident in Nigerian drama that tribal, regional and social group identity struggles are given literary expression by writers. Matthew M. Umukoro's is of the view that J. P. Clark's achievement lies principally in his attempt at documenting and re-interpreting the folklore and mythology of his immediate cultural environment (See Ifie ed. 245). Clark confirms this in Dennis Dueden and Cosmos Pieterse's *African Writers talking* when he said: "In the search for the most opposite expression you often find you are going back to your people, which means you are going back to your roots". (77).

Going back to one's roots as used by Clark here demands semantic clarification. Roots, in this context may refer to Africa, Nigeria, the Niger Delta or the Ijaw ethnic nationality which he belongs to at the same time. The marketable roots meant here is his cultural root which is Ijaw. As we have seen in most of his works particularly the dramas, Clark writes from his roots about the cultural, economic, historical and political identities of his people. Ola Rotimi's drama, like Clark's comes strong on identity politics. Plays like *Hopes of the Living Dead*, *Akassa Youmi*, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *Kurunmi*, place him concretely as a card-carrying dramatist of identity politics. *Hopes of the living Dead* is a play of group advocacy for lepers' right to life. The lepers struggle in *Hopes of living dead* is of clear and practical identity struggle by the disabled given

expression in literature by Rotimi. In Osofisan's compendium of papers christened *The Insidious Treasons*, he acknowledges in his paper *Theatre and the Roles of post Negritude Re/membering* that:

*Hopes of the Living Dead* is a revealing trope on the issue of identity as it dramatizes in full the astonishing process of the lepers' resistance against the intimidating orders of the state, they mobilize themselves into a force of resistance, feeding and supporting one another, till the state finally yields and agrees to establish a leper colony with proper medical facilities for them. (166)

The successful struggle of the lepers in Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* establishes the triumph of identity politics. This goes straight to register Rotimi as a radical and committed aesthician of identity politics in the Nigerian literary scene. The same question of identity is firmly treated in another of his later works, *Akassa Youmi* (2001). From culture to politics, from economy to religion, issues of identity in the drama pulsate. It's a play set in Nembe, an Ijaw sub kingdom in Bayelsa State. Nembe suffered identity dislocation from the administration of the British Royal Niger Company, hence the Nembe under King Frederick Williams Koko Fight back to regain their lost pride and identity. Identity also features strongly in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1998) and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Both plays are thematically predicated on cultural nationalism and identity. S.N.A. Agoro is another dramatist whose works capture the question of identity. To cite but one example is *Generation Gap*. The play dramatises the Epie youths quest for a viable traditional leadership and prudent management of the economic resources of the kingdom. Most of these plays investigate the relation between cultures and history as context for an appreciation of identity.

It is significant to note that literature and identity whether ethnic, regional, national or social groups like workers' rights with good intention for the people have also been identified as a major cause of bitterness between dramatists and national politicians. This is a phenomenon experienced all over the world. In America, the dramatist Arthur Miller was invited for questioning and to expose writers who identify and propagate the ideals of communism and its apostles and saw himself indicted. He wrote *The Crucible* which evokes the witch-hunt in Salem, using it as a representation of the McCarthy hearings. The Kenyan writer James Ngugi Wa

Thiong’O has suffered so much and found himself in exile on account of this. In Nigeria, Ogunde the legendary theatre artist, during the Colonial era suffered in jail and also had some of his plays banned. A play like *Yoruba Ronu* is a point of reference.

### **The Caribbean Practice**

In the Caribbean, the question of identity manifests strongly in a number of its arts, from drama, dance to music. A prominent dramatist of the region, and a Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott, treats the question of identity in his works. The black consciousness themes exist as a refrain in most of the works of Caribbean writers across literary genres. A theme of identity that is of particular interest to me is Rastafarianism, a social philosophy among the Caribbean’s which finds its place in the literature of the area. The fundamental driving force of this philosophy is about the return of the Africans in the Diaspora spiritually and physically back to their roots which is Africa. This is due to social dispossession and psychosomatic trepidation suffered by blacks under white domination. In spite of the fact that Derek Walcott does not believe in Rastafarianism with his argument that ancestral search and cultural identity can be achieved without a physical return to Africa, it is very clear that his poetic drama *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970) dramatizes black quest for identity and establishes the program of Rastafarianism. The pursuit of cultural derivation and cultural affirmation, the reverie of self actualization and realization are treated in Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Makak and other characters in the play are browbeaten and marginalized people who are passionate about a return to Africa. Makak’s unswerving clamour to be left free so he could return to Africa and Corporal Lestrades vilification of his European sensibilities and his recognition of the black identity struggle in the play establishes Walcott as a post-colonial writer who appropriates identity as a subject of discourse in his dramas.

The association of literature with the question of identity establishes literature as a social art which is used for many possible purposes. In reflecting identity especially through protest or even negotiation literature can come against reactionary authorities. The Soviet Union paradigm of brutality against its writers deserves to be mentioned here. According to Abati, “Stalin’s displeasure with the emergence and growth of the Russian Pre-Raphaelite who, contrary to state

policy advocated the practice of Arts for Arts Sake, were arrested and not less than a hundred of them were murdered (219). This is given further thought by Gao Xingjian, the Chinese who won the year 2000 Nobel Prize in literature. In his address titled: "The Case of Literature" (2), he added voice to this debate on political leaders and the question of identity. He stated that Chinese literature in the twentieth century time and again was worn out and indeed almost suffocated because politics dictated literature. The attack on Chinese traditional culture resulted in the prohibition and burning of books. Countless writers were shot, imprisoned, exiled or punished with hard labour in the course of the past one hundred years. This was more extreme than in any imperial dynasty period of China's history. The fact is established that literature of identity is a literature, to borrow from Femi Osofisan, which plays "dangerously". This is a position properly argued in his inaugural lecture, *Playing Dangerously: Drama at the Frontiers of terror in "Postcolonial" state*. (1997). From east, to west, from north to the south of Africa, writers of literature of identity, agitation and negotiation have suffered in many ways. Ogunde, Clark, Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and South African dramatist are clear examples to point art.

## **Conclusion**

This paper undertook an analytical methodological excursion of literature and identity in Africa and the diaspora, particularly in the literary works of its authors. Language, culture, politics, national character, economy, historical reconstruction, philosophical contemplation, the struggle for self-determination, the writing of African heroes into historical and literary prominence, the evil consequences of powering literature with identity, documentation of the myth, legends and traditions of Africa and the diaspora are dimensions of identity explored in the works investigated. In all of these works, the web of relationships between literature, identity and the cultural context as well as the significant roles literature plays in the construction of identity is well founded. The point is established firmly that African and diasporic works of literature are clearly authorized by identity. In the same vein, identity as a phenomenon is powered by the literature of Africa. Thus it has been argued logically in this study that literature is not only conceived as a cultural marker, in union with identity, it becomes a functional and fundamental viaduct of ethnic, regional, national and racial heritage.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Dr. Benedict Binebai is a lecturer in the Department of Fine, Industrial and Theatre Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Amassoma, Bayelsa State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. A holder of the B.A, M.A, Degrees and a PhD, all in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Teaches dramaturgy, dramatic literature and dramatic theory across the levels of the Bachelor of Arts programme. Ben Binebai also has special research interest in performance aesthetics in Traditional African Drama and Theatre.