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Popular Perception Social Reality: The SAP Experience in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Nigerian literature, like other literatures, is a product of her history and the social issues which influence it. Colonialism may have come, and can be said to be gone as it was practised in the 1880s to the 1960s, but its effects are great and have lasted especially on the establishment and transformation of the literary culture of the African continent. Contemporary Nigerian writing, especially its prose fiction, addresses two main issues: the negotiation of a contemporary identity, and an expression of a general disillusionment with post-colonial Nigeria. Interwoven in the writings of contemporary Nigerian writers is an engagement with the perception and reality of the effects of the World Bank/IMF sponsored Structural Adjustment Programme of the mid-80s to the late 90s on the populace. This paper explores the SAP phenomenon as reflected in the writings of selected contemporary Nigerian novelists, with a view to identifying these writers' perception of this experience that has and is still affecting Nigeria's socio-cultural, political, economic and historical landscape. This investigation, through a general synopsis of selected contemporary Nigerian prose fiction, examines how the implementation of this policy facilitated an increase in the military government's repressive attitude and the escalation of the economic crisis that was being experienced at the time.

Keywords: Reality, Perception, SAP, Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

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1. Introduction

The IMF/World Bank sponsored Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was the response of the Babangida administration in 1986 to the economic crisis that had engulfed Nigeria since the early 1980s and it provided the conditions for the administration's political and social programmes (Walwema, 2013, p.1). Given that General Ibrahim Babangida, and later on General Sani Abacha, attempted to reorganize society based on the recommendations of the World Bank/ IMF (International Monetary Fund), the Structural Adjustment policies were off shoots of neo-colonialism, brought about by avaricious elite and which led to a near total collapse in the country's economic, social and political setup (Ogbimi, 1998, n.p). The direct fallout of the 'social cost' of the structural adjustment policies, led to the rise in totalitarianism through military rule. This led to an increase in poverty, the proliferation of unskilled labourers into the labour market, and the collapse of rural areas. The collapse of rural areas brought about a rise in urban migration and integration, thus, creating new and unique problems related to rights, citizenship, emergence of ghettos, and a collapse in education and social services. Said Adejumobi's (2000) following argument aptly summaries this ordeal:

At no time in the Nigerian post-colonial history has the level of the socio-economic crisis been as profound as under the regime of structural adjustment programme (SAP). Virtually all social sectors were hit hard, either entering a comatose state or declining substantially in performance. (p.204)

Good governance is essential to any country's stability economically and socially. The subsequent increasing unemployment, galloping inflation, widespread poverty, and debilitating debt burden, revealed the Nigerian state as performing poorly in all

spheres of life. As it is with every society, Nigeria's political, social and economic existence and success cannot be separated, the three are inter-twined. The connection therefore, between these discouraging political, social and economic outcomes and the SAP, sponsored by the IMF/World Bank, is apparent. This is evident in the manner contemporary Nigerian writing draws attention to the socio-economic dislocation caused by several years of military intervention in governance especially during this era, and which the nation, even at present, has yet to overcome. Indeed, it is evident that it is out of the turbulent history of the 1980s to the 1990s that a majority of third generation Nigerian writing is being constructed as these narratives [re]present the lived experiences of the people at the time.

In this article, I examine eleven novels written by ten contemporary Nigerian writers and which have been published since the year 2000. In their representation of the era of SAP in Nigeria, they draw attention to the socio-economic and political dislocation that has been caused by several years of military intervention in Nigerian politics. My engagement with these novels does not in any way suggest that they are sole representative of the writings of the present generation of writers from Nigeria. The choice of these novels is because they share the trait of drawing the world's attention to the plight of a people at a very perilous time in the history of Nigeria as a nation. The authors whose works are under examination here therefore, use their memory and imagination of the recent past and using a realist mode of expression, present to us postcolonial national narratives.

In examining these texts in the context of the Nigerian SAP experience, I engage with a direction contemporary Nigerian writing is taking in its engagement with the nation. I

examine the socio-economic fallouts of the SAP and also how the implementation of the policy gave rise to repression by the military. I do this and in the process identify some of the issues that have and are affecting Nigeria's socio-economic and political landscape especially in this era of globalization. I present these writers as using a realist mode of representation to negotiate a Nigerian postcolonial reality in the manner they engage with the socio-economic phenomenon that was SAP in their fiction.

This article examines the military dictatorship of the mid-1980s to the late 1990s in contemporary Nigerian fiction and connects it (especially by the economy policy of SAP) to the perpetuation of the political, social and economic crisis experienced at the time. This paper therefore, proceeds on the assumption that the novels under examination here, present a concern with the Nigerian experience of SAP and illuminate the discontent of a majority of the populace with the biting 'excesses' of the governments of the time. But, in order to fully grasp the phenomenon that was SAP in Nigeria, it is pertinent to examine the policy's enforcers - the military.

2. The Military in Nigeria

The year 1960, saw Nigeria come into independence as a nation from British colonial rule, but by the years 1962 – 1966, Nigeria's ability to function as a sovereign nation started to be challenged even though Nigeria was just coming into its own as a nation. The major problems, the federal government had to contend with at the time were; threats to national unity caused by ethnic rivalry, factionalism and the desire for autonomy by the various political groupings and alliances within the federal system. These threats and tensions were regional as well as religious. Regional rivalries and ethnic sentiments were reflected even in the

armed forces and this eventually led to a military takeover.

The military always take over power with the promise to purge the society of the corruption; economic mismanagement and inept leadership that they point out are the trademarks of the government that is being brought to an end especially. We see an example of this in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1962). But the military in Nigeria have been known to treat the people and her resources as badly as the civilian governments they depose of. This has given rise to speculations in some quarters that "the colonial authorities did not treat Nigerians as badly as the military has done" (Ihonvbere, 1998, p.1). Thus, the years from 1962-1999 were characterized by military intervention, takeovers and a brutal civil war. This "Shows the military was not only intervening in the political process and overthrowing the constitutional civilian authority, but also establishing its supremacy over elected politicians" (Photius.com, 1991, n.p). The military has ruled Nigeria for the better part of her existence as an independent state from British colonial rule and contemporary Nigerian writers find themselves unavoidably having to deal with the military in their writing especially as the issues they are grappling with, are informed by their experiences as a generation that grew up after Nigeria's independence and therefore witnesses to the period of military dictatorship with a set of experiences different from that of their predecessors (Ouma, 2011, p.4).

3. The Social and Economic Fallouts of SAP

El-Nukoya's (2006) debut novel *Nine Lives* tells the story of Olupitan Ogunrinu, the son of a poor village fisherman and his deceitful, even though difficult, but persistent and incredible rise to the top of the Nigerian society. In this novel, El-Nukoya engages



with themes as many and as varied as cultism in Nigerian universities, the influence of bad company, struggles with personal and national identities, immigration, exile, corruption and incest. Believing that life in the West would be the solution to the myriad of problems he had, Olupitan steals a family heirloom and escapes to the U.S.A. In the course of the story, he is forced to return to Nigeria after blackmailing his boss' wife Aretha and coming into five hundred thousand dollars. In the process of changing his largess into naira, he observes that:

It was evident that the nation's economy had deteriorated badly. The benefit of inflation, the over-devaluation of the naira and the high interest rates were being reaped by an alliance between the financial sector, the importers and the few people at the helm of government affairs and their cronies. (p.380)

The inflation and the devaluation, of the naira he refers to, are tied to the economic policy of SAP. The International Financial Institutions (IFI's) ¹ insisted on the devaluation of the naira amongst other conditions in the implementation of the SAP in Nigeria. This insistence on the devaluation of the naira, the unification of exchange rate and elimination of exchange controls (Ibhawoh, 1999, p.158), weakened the naira and it brought about a drastic deterioration in the economy which made the people's standard of living to fall considerably.

This deterioration of the naira, and the fall in the standards of living is a concern Adaobi Nwaubani (2010), also addresses in her book *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*. Though the story Nwaubani narrates in this book, engages with the phenomenon of the Nigerian advanced fee fraud scam², her story

is relevant to this study on two counts: Firstly, it falls into the rubric of work classified as third generation Nigerian writing. Secondly, the story in the book is built around experiences that were prevalent during the military era of General Sani Abacha. In this book, Nwaubani implicates the military and ties it to the socio-economic difficulties experienced at the time especially in the way people were forced to seek 'ingenious' ways to make ends meet. From the beginning of her narrative, Nwaubani makes it clear that "Life was hard. Times were bad" (p.17). In telling the story of Kingsley Ibe and his family, she shows how the middle class, as a stratum in the Nigerian society of the 90s, has been done away with in the manner she exposes the 'uselessness' and the 'powerlessness' of the naira earned by hard work.

The debilitating effects of the economic crisis and of SAP for the majority of the population, especially, in regards to social sector programs, made essential services such as health care, power, education and access to water inaccessible to the people. Lola Shoneyin (2010) in *The Secret lives of Baba Shegi's Wives*, aptly captures the state of decay and degeneration in public health care. Shoneyin's character, Bolanle tells us during a visit to the hospital that:

The University College Hospital – or UCH as it was known – had a horrible reputation. The lack of government funding, coupled with the misappropriation of the little the hospital generated, had left the buildings dilapidated. Crucial medical tests were rationed and the doctors refused to treat patients who hadn't brought their own medicine. The only reason people went there rather than to the thousands

¹ These are financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that provide financial support through grants and loans to developing countries for economic and social developments.

² Also known as '419' the number which refers to the article of the Nigerian criminal code dealing with fraud.

of back-alley clinics was that they could be sure the doctors had proper medical degrees. (p.30)

Nwaubani (2010), also deals with falling health care services in *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*. In her description of the state of the hospital in Umuahia, she talks about the lift that was not functional, the stained walls, the rusty bed frames, lumpy mattresses and lack of beddings. She also talks about lack of medical supplies and medication (p.75). The picture she paints is indeed grim.

Education, like the health sector in Nigeria, also became a victim of the social sector crisis engendered by SAP. Babalola et.al.(1999), in their study on education under SAP, observe that SAP had some devastating effects on the public expenditure on education, the purchasing power of teachers, quality of education, access to education and gender gap in the provision of education at all levels (p.79). In Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Kambili and her brother Jaja travel to Nsukka to visit their widowed Aunt Ifeoma and her family. Ifeoma is a university lecturer and from the goings-on at the University of Nsukka, the university staff quarters and Ifeoma's particular situation and experiences, we are given a picture of what became of Nigerian tertiary institutions under the military and during the SAP era.

The downward trend in education on different levels is made evident given the level of deterioration Adichie (2006) illustrates (p.76). The reduction in the funding of education in the national budget meant there was a decrease in research or some forms of research could not be undertaken, staff salaries when they are paid are not regular, and services that were the prerogative of the staff and students such as

medical care and meal subsidies became non-existent. Adichie (2006) provides a two part explication of the kinds of deterioration that are apparent here. First, there is intellectual deterioration and secondly, there is infrastructural deterioration. Hence, because of the challenges staff faced in the discharge of their duties, many of them left for 'greener pastures' abroad (p.76). Students, on the other hand, take to strikes and protests to challenge the failings of the government (p.222) or like one of Ifeoma's female students, who chooses to get married because "when her fiancé learned of yet another university closure, he had told her he could no longer wait until she graduated, since nobody knew when the university would reopen" (p.228).

Helon Habila (2002) in *Waiting for an Angel* deals with the tenor and character of the university students' protests. The university student leader Sankara³ stirs up the emotions of the students by spelling out the failings and shortcomings of the military government and then goes ahead to incite them to a protest because "we can't continue to be onlookers when a handful of gun-toting thugs are determined to push our beloved nation over the precipice" (p.40). The students' up rise, as presented by both Adichie (2006) and Habila (2002), was therefore, a response to the infrastructural decay and political tyranny or oppression that were the defining characteristics of the period of SAP hence, the students actions were directed towards the problems of corruption and wastefulness on the part of the leadership, economic mismanagement and political misgoverning, the deteriorating living standards of the people and the problems in the educational sector. Although, the challenges faced by the people of Keti in

³ It would appear that this character is symbolically named after the revolutionary assassinated leader of Burkina Faso Thomas Sankara.



Habila's (2007) *Measuring Time* in regards to education are not presented to us as directly caused by the conditions brought on by the SAP, they are certainly linked to the overall effects of this policy. The Ketu community school was started by the community with the objective to give the village's secondary school dropouts and those who had failed their O'Levels a second chance at education. The community was forced to take this initiative because the government, as represented by the Commissioner of Education, did not think a school such as this was a priority and in spite of the community's sacrifices and dedication exemplified by Uncle Iliya's commitment to the school, the government sought to and closed down the school.

The IFI's also insisted on cuts in the Nigerian public wage bill (Ibhawon, 1999, p.158) and this led to mass retrenchment of workers. Job cuts created the situation whereby a large number of people were unemployed. Two categories of unemployed people arose; those who were retrenched and those who could not find jobs even though were trained and qualified to work. Chisom in Chika Unigwe's (2009) *On Black Sisters Street* was such a person. Chisom like Nwuabani's Kingsley Ibe, had gone to the university and done well but had difficulties finding a job. Unigwe lays bare Chisom frustrations as the years went by and nothing came out of her numerous job applications. It finally dawns on her that she needed 'connections' to get a job as her training and competence were not important considerations. These 'connections' are to use the words of Mohammed Salisu (2006), 'rent-seeking' activities tied to 'corruption' (p.2) and it points to the depth of the failure of leadership in Nigeria, an idea that Chinua Achebe (1983) in *The Trouble with Nigeria*,

promotes appalled at the scale of official corruption in the country.

The dearth in jobs promoted migration causing people to move from rural areas to the cities and this brought about an explosion in urban migration. This meant a lot of slums and shanty towns sprang up making the situation as it were much worse. Describing one of such slums, Helon Habila (2002) in *Waiting for an Angels* says

The houses were old and craggy and lichened. The place had the unfinished, abandoned appearance of an under waterscape. Crouching behind the bigger houses or in their own clusters were hastily built wood and zinc structures that housed incredibly large families: the fathers were mostly out-of-work drivers, labourers, fugitives convalescing between prison terms (p.97).

Unigwe's (2009) Chisom in *On Black Sisters Street* describes one of the houses in the slum and says, "The sitting room with the pap-coloured walls, the shared toilet with a cistern that never contained water; anyone using the latrine had to fetch a bucket of water from the tap in the middle of the compound. A kitchen that did not belong to her family alone" (p.43). Sefi Atta (2008) in *Swallow* in her description of the squalor and deprivation evident in the general living condition of the people tells us, "In the dark, with the lanterns in the windows, our block of flats looked like a normal place to live. During the day the building was as it really was, as though it had barely survived a fire" (p.58).

The outcomes of SAP especially, the ones brought about by its economic stabilization policies generally worsened the living conditions of the people as we have seen. What this meant was that the government increasingly lost popular support which in turn encouraged it to use suppression rather than persuasion to stay in power in its bid to continue the enforcement of the SAP. This

stance by the government was met with protests, riots and resistance by the people. Helon Habila (2002) again in *Waiting for an Angel* captures the tone and spirit behind these riots in his presentation of the people of Poverty Street. Jude Dibia (2007) also depicts this in his novel *Unbridled*. In this novel, Dibia examines the involvement of civil society in the agitation for good governance in telling the story of Pius, Uloma's boyfriend. The military government had increased the prices of petrol and kerosene which further escalated the costs of living. Pius, along with other members of the labour movement, gets arrested by the government for their role in mobilizing and actively participating in a strike action to challenge these changes in prices. Uloma becomes worried and agitated because, she knows Pius could be killed by the government. Indeed, she was certain that, "One day I would get a knock on the door and the news would be delivered to me; your man is dead" (p.72).

4. The Implementation of SAP and the Repressive Nature of the Military

The manner, in which SAP was implemented in Nigeria, was a challenge to the advancement of human rights. Indeed, SAP and human rights were inherently incompatible goals. Claude Eke (1989) points out that "there is no way of implementing the structural adjustment program without political repression" (p.62). Furthermore, Bonny Ibhawon (1999) opines that the "intensity of the repression employed by the state to sustain the policy had a significant impact on human rights in Nigeria" (p.63). Knowing first-hand how military regimes turn on the people, the character Uloma in Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007) exhibits a fear on behalf of Jude who is taken by the authorities into custody. Uloma's fear comes from seeing her father be a victim of government brutality and which led to his death. The government that Dibia (2007)

presents in this novel, although thinly veiled, is obviously either that of Babangida or Abacha given the levels of their high handedness and high incidences of abusive treatment of the press and every form of opposition. The harsh treatment, the people were subjected to, included detention without charge, secret trials by military tribunals, torture by police and state security agents and like Uloma's father, people would disappear only for them to turn up dead.

Chimanda Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) and Sefi Atta in *Everything Good will Come* (2005) present different, but eerily similar, stories of Nigeria at the mercy of her military rulers where raw violence is used as a tool of governance. In narrating Kambili's first experience with the military, Adichie (2006) tells us:

We saw a small crowd gathered around the vegetable stalls we had passed earlier, the one lining the road. Soldiers were milling around. Market women were shouting and many had both hands placed on their heads in a way that people do to show despair or shock. A woman lay in the dirt, wailing, tearing at her short Afro. Her wrapper had come undone and her white underwear showed...I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It curled in the air before it landed on the woman's shoulders. Another soldier was kicking down trays of fruits, squashing papayas with his boots and laughing. (p.44)

Atta (2005) recounts a similar incident:

A truck load of Soldiers drove past sounding a siren. The Soldiers jeered and lashed at cars with horsewhips. We pulled over to let them pass. A driver pulled over too late. Half the Soldiers jumped down from the truck and dragged him out of his car. They started slapping him. The driver's hands went up to plead for mercy. They flogged him with horsewhips and left him there whimpering by the door of his car. (p.66)

The military operated outside of constitutional limits and exercised powers that were unrestrained by institutional checks



and balances. It thus, becomes evident why the character Sunny Taiwo, in *Everything Good will Come* says of the military that, “They can do whatever they want; the power of a constitution comes from the respect people give it. If they don’t, then it is words on paper. Nothing else.” (p.77)

Another strategy, used by the military governments of the era of SAP to ensure the continued marginalization of the people, was the censorship of the press. The government’s abuse of power and arrogance, which is made evident in the moral depravity of the rulers and the debility of the ruled, is particularly underlined in contemporary Nigerian writings’ treatment of government’s consistent censoring of the press. In her treatment of censorship, Sefi Atta (2005) in *Everything Good will Come* exposes how the state used silence as a weapon of oppression in the public sphere. Whole arenas of national consciousness became silenced by the government in the manner that certain actions of the police or military, statements and writings by ‘banned persons’, and the activities of pressure groups and other organizations were made inaccessible to the people. The journalists Peter Mukoro and Grace Ameh in Atta’s (2005) novel were either being arrested, or having to go into hiding to avoid arrest. The government on the other hand, always fell back on either “Decree Two, under which persons suspected of acts prejudicial to state security could be detained without charge, or Decree Four, under which journalists could be arrested and imprisoned for publishing any information about public officials” (pp.77 & 78) to censor and control the press. Grace Ameh accurately describes the situation:

Our reporters are being dragged in every week, no explanation given. They are kept in detention for weeks, questioned, or they are left alone, which I am told is worse. Nobody speaks to you in detention, you see. If you

don’t cooperate, they transfer you to a prison somewhere else, packed with inmates. Sick inmates. You may end up with pneumonia, tuberculosis, and you won’t get proper medical attention. Jaundice, diarrhoea – food in Nigerian prisons isn’t very good. (p.206)

In Chimamanda Adichie’s (2006) *Purple Hibiscus*, the fictional character Ade Coker, the editor of the ‘Standard’, is killed (after a series of arrests and torture in the hands of the military) by a letter bomb in a way that is reminiscent of the actual killing of Dele Giwa Editor of NewsWatch magazine in 1986 by the government of the time. Helon Habila’s (2002) *Waiting for an Angel* and Okey Ndibe’s (2000) *Arrows of Rain*, also deal with the challenges faced by the press and the manner in which the military governments of the 80s – 90s tyrannized journalists and in the process brought about a sense of general disillusionment in the society. In the history of the Nigerian press, the worst form of censorship is associated with the dictatorial maladministration of military officers who frequently stage coups and counter coups in order to grab power and control the government (Festus Eribo 1997, p.64) and in Nigeria’s particular case; it was at its peak during the era of SAP.

5. Conclusion

The present generation of writers, in and from Nigeria, are building on the literary foundations laid by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and their contemporaries in the manner they are engaging with national issues. This paper aimed to examine selected contemporary Nigerian writing and to establish a link between the military economic policy of SAP and the adverse social challenges experienced during the era of military rule in the 80s – 90s as represented in this literature. In my examination and evaluation of SAP in contemporary Nigerian writing, I made no effort to make a distinction between the impact of SAP and of external

factors such as oil prices and Nigeria's debt burden. Firstly, this is because this paper is solely a literary endeavour and although SAP is an economic issue, I only examined it in relation to its representation in literature. Secondly, this paper sees SAP as an offshoot of these external shocks and therefore, while SAP might not be the only contributing factor to the social crises experienced at the time, it is my observation that SAP magnified and brought about an increase in the infrastructural and super-structural deformities experienced at the time. The cumulative result of reading these eleven novels together therefore, allows us to draw up some tentative conclusions about contemporary Nigerian fiction as it is emerging in Nigeria especially in its engagement with the nation.

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