

Book Review

Nigerian Literary Imagination and the Nationhood Project by Toyin Falola

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Toyin Falola's *Nigerian Literary Imagination and the Nationhood Project* historicizes the evolution of Nigerian literature from the 1960s to the present day. In particular, the author explores the ideological relationship between the country's literature and its nationalism. Falola argues that, although its ideological relevance is challenged by ethnocentrism and nation-statism, Nigerian literature contributes to the formation and development of the nationhood project (x). He unpacks this argument in three parts and eight chapters.

In the introductory chapter, Falola draws attention not only to the capacity of Nigerian literature to be a medium of socio-cultural inquiry, interpretation, and sensitization, but also to its representational intersection with politics (1, 7–8). Historically, then, Nigerian literature evinces its ideological relevance to and cultural inextricability from the nationhood project.

Falola hence resists the “long-standing

contestation between history and literature as intersecting but separate fields” (2). Instead, he underscores the ontological overlap of history, literature, and society (7). In doing so, Falola accords with the Saidian concept of critical consciousness, which implies the worldliness of any text. Thus, the fictionalization of Nigerian nationhood is intrinsically political. Throughout, in fact, Falola disavows the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterestedness and Barthesian formalism, both of which treat literary narratives “as isolated moments in history or divorced from extra-textual influences” (3–4). Rather, he adopts “the new historicist mode of textual exegesis”, within and through which “a narrative can remain in dialogue with the structures of the society as narratives in their own right” (4).

This interdiscursivity informs Chapter Two, which traces how British colonialism shaped the Nigerian nationalism, ethnocentrism, and ideological sensibilities of early

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writers, chiefly Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka. Falola posits that these early writers enlightened readers by portraying the cultural dynamics of pre-colonial societies and bluntly denouncing the British intrusion (35).

While Falola acknowledges, indeed immortalizes, the formative anti-colonialism of canonical texts such as Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, he interrogates their ethnocentrism, which unwittingly, and so counterintuitively, reinforced rather than subverted the divisive politics of British indirect rule. Indeed, both writers and nationalist leaders shared this political culpability, for they nationally opposed British colonialism, even as they asserted their ethnocentric apartness.

In Chapter Three, Falola unsurprisingly reveals the omnipresence of ethnocentrism after independence. Moreover, as a form of neo-colonial patronage, ethnocentrism abetted post-independence misrule and, with it, the perpetual betrayal of the nationhood project (75–76). Nonetheless, as “a conscience voice for the society” (33) or “mouthpiece of the masses” (59), early writers not only celebrated their ethnocentric autonomy against colonial hegemony, but also exposed indigenous cultural injustices. A critique of pre-colonial imperfections and, quite indelibly, if regrettably, of the atrocities of the Biafra War is a case in point.

Chapter Four shifts the focus to the nationalist contributions of the first-generation of Nigerian female writers: Flora Nwapa, Mabel Segun, Zulu Sofola, Buchi Emecheta, Tess Onwueme, Zainab Alkali, and Stella Oyedepo. What underpins their writing is a feminist counter-discourse against double colonization, that is, the simultaneous oppression of patriarchy and colonial disempowerment, which devalued women as submissive wives, mothers, and prostitutes (100, 116). To the extent that independence reinforced double colonization, their writing is necessarily

radical and emancipatory (97).

Chapter Five marks the postcolonial phase by examining how modernity overdetermines the ideological imbrication of Nigerian literature, nationalism, and neo-colonialism. For Falola, Nigerian postcolonial literature employs the decolonial strategy of “writing back to the center”, or “correcting erroneous and ill-informed notions of Africa” (158). However, if modernity entails both cultural hybridity and conflict, then Nigerian postcolonial literature is ideologically ambivalent.

In Chapter Six, Falola associates this ideological ambivalence with contemporary female writers: Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin, Abimbola Adelakun, Tomi Adeyemi, Chinelo Okparanta, Chika Unigwe, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, Nnedi Okorafor, and Yejide Kilanko. He points out that these writers challenge normative notions of identity, home, race, class, gender, sexuality, sex trafficking, multiculturalism, and Afrodiasporic mobility (174–175). Stylistically, in this regard, they experiment with postmodernist aesthetics and techno-scientific themes (174–175).

Falola elaborates on this experimentation in Chapter Seven by contending that, although Nigerians perennially experience poor internet connectivity, the country's literature has adopted digital approaches (215, 217). His examples include Kiru Taye's fan fiction, Adichie's blogging in *Americanah*, short story experimentations (Teju Cole on Twitter, Unigwe's “Dreams”, and Atta's “Glory”), and online poetry (Romeo Oriogun, Chuma Nwokolo, Dike Chukwumerije, Iyanu Adebisi, and Tolu Akinyemi).

Falola concludes his study in Chapter Eight with a critical reflection on contingencies, controversies, continuities, and discontinuities between Nigerian literature and the nationhood project. Overall, Falola's book offers an authoritative intervention and erudite insights into current debates about Nigerian literature, culture, and politics through diverse and nuanced theoretical lenses.