CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

Literature, is an art of cultural self-definition. Commonwealth Literature, basically, is a new writing in English outside the traditions of Great Britain and the United States of America, written in the English Language of those territories of the world loosely gathered together into the British Commonwealth. Commonwealth literature as a heterogeneous product of diverse cultures and mentalities constitutes a part of world literature and offers possibilities for intelligent meeting of the East and the West through yet unexplored territories.

African literature like other living literatures is an end in itself and is more functional and purposeful. It has explored and exposed the great potentialities of self, the man of Africa. The basic things, of African literature are not beauty and pleasure alone. It endeavours to preserve African Cultural identity and integrity unaffected by the outside world through 're-education and regeneration of African Society. African writers have attempted to define the world in their own term depending upon their distinct, cultural, aesthetic values and
philosophical assumptions and attempted to re-evaluate the western aesthetics.

Africa is no longer a gloomy phenomenon, a 'dark' continent of dense forests, cannibals, and wild life. It is the western motion pictures that have distorted the concept of Africa. Outsiders like Rider Haggard, Edgar Wallace have a century ago portrayed Africa as a fantasy world inhabited by bushman, which-doctors, mysterious beings and a literally swinging Tarzan. Africa attracted the European mind in the past right from the time of prince Henry, the Navigator in the fifteenth century, and it has been found both fascinating and repellant. The impression given by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* as a land of thrilling silences of thick forests, sudden sunsets, formidable vultures and black-water fever and the throbbing big drums and primitive customs has prompted the European mind to dismiss Africa as a 'trackless wilderness' devoid of meaning. But Olaudah Equiano's autobiographical narrative "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa" (London 1789), the first literary work in English by an Igbo speaks of the richness of Africa and Igbo heritage. And contemporary African writing, the new voice of world
literature has endeavoured to emancipate Africa from its literary stereotype by highlighting the "unique and novel" potentialities of the man of Africa and African experience, its rich culture and mythology.

Nigeria And The Igbo:

Nigeria is a twentieth century creation, arbitrarily created by bringing together different ethnic groups by the British colonial administration. The British, who succeeded the Dutch and Portuguere as slave trader masters in the seventeenth century, prohibited the trade in 1808 and decided to establish their rule in West Africa. The colony of Logos emerged when the king of Logos conceded Lagos to the Queen of England in 1861. By 1893 all the territories of Eastern Nigeria became a protectorate of Great Britain. The troops of the Royal Nigeria Company occupied Ilorin in 1897, which together with the Western Region formed the Southern Nigerian protectorate in 1990 A.D. The protectorate of Northern Nigeria was established at the same time. The colony and the two protectorates were amalgamated to form the protectorate of Nigeria on 1st January 1914. The people had new education, became
politically conscious, protested against economic exploitation and demanded direct participation in the colonial administration. Consequently the British, to pacify the educated, and to avoid discontent, promulgated the Richards constitution granting representation to the East, West, and North. Between 1949 and 1960, emerged three national parties in Nigeria on regional lines mainly to safeguard regional interests. The Igbos formed (N.C.N.C) under the leadership of Dr. Nnaundi Azikwe; the Hausa Fulani formed the Northern People's Party (N.P.P.) under the sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadau Bello and the Yorubas formed the Action Group lead by Obafemi Awolowo. In 1956 the Eastern and the western regions became self-governing and in 1959, the North. On 1st October 1960, the Federation achieved political independence.

Nigeria, the giant of black West Africa, Populous and vast, stretching from the forests and swamps on the southern edge of the Sahara, has been by tradition the 'White Man's Grave'. The malarial mosquito and the yellow fever bug have saved Nigeria from the problems of the East and South of the continent. Britian did not set her policy of administration in Nigeria. It granted economic security
and political rights to the people during colonial rule. Lugard, who strongly believed in what he called 'the dual mandate in Africa, experimented 'indirect rule' to establish a new cordial relationship between the representatives of the colony and those of the colonial power. These political changes find functional expression in the four major novels of Chinua Acebe.

*Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966) which as critiques of colonization, constitute a kind of chronological survey of life in Eastern Nigeria. In *Arrow of God* (1964), James Ikedi becomes the warrant chief of Okperi, the first Obi and His Hughness Ikedi. Also Ezeulu, the chief priest of Umuaro is chosen by captain Winterbottom to be the paramount chief of Umuaro. In *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Obi Okonkwo, is a civil servant, scholarship Secretary at the Federal Ministry of Education. In *A man of the people* (1966) Chief M.A.Nanga, M.P., is the Honourable Minister of Culture in the colonial Government. The novel is prophetic of the military coup detat on 15 January 1966 when the Federal Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and
other ministers were killed and the civil wars that followed. The two non-fictional accounts—Elechi Amadi’s *Sunset in Biafra* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died* also record the violent events of Nigerian history when Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon’s regime organised massacres of Igbo civilians in the north.

Of the six major language groups—the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Kannri, Fula and Efik-Ibibio—the three largest ethnic groups that dominate different parts of Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the South-West and the Igbo in the South-East.

The novels of Chinua Achebe speak of Igbo life, history, culture and cultural change. The Igbo earlier did not have well established, centralised institutions and powerful chiefs to constitute a large Igbo ‘tribe’, but have later developed a rich cultural heritage and a well-defined tribal consciousness. The Igbo traditional society has a pluralistic system of administration where power is decentralized and is vested in small groups like priests, diviners, and medicine men representing religious power and lords of the village, men of title and elders constituting
temporal authority of the village. The Igbo traditional
society is primarily societary. There are no rulers, only
rules regulate the social order. As the rules are not rigid
and codified, some of them are subjected to examination
debate and change. In Thing Fall Apart, Obierika resents the
tribal law banishing okonkwo for seven years for
accidentally killing a village boy with his loaded gun.
Even some of the rituals which are traditional but humanly
wrong are not palatable to may like Nwoye. In Achebe's third
novel Arrow of God the authority and powers of Ezeulu, the
chief priest of Umuaro and the chief deity, Ulu are
questioned by Nwaka and others. In the traditional society
individual is but a corporate being whose primary concern
should be communal good. The society in turn takes care of
the individual when he becomes economically crippled. In No
Longer at Ease though Obi, a prodigal son has been
disgraced, the Umuofia Progressive Union the president has
all sympathy for him- "a kinsman in trouble had to be saved,
not blamed; anger against a brother was felt in the flesh,
not in the bone. And so the union decided to pay for the
services of a lawyer from their funds."

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The Igbo traditional society does not grant too much freedom for individual expression and personal gratification. Okonkwo and Ezeulu in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* fail to comply with the coherent life-pattern, violate the social norms and consequently suffer in the end. The society grants considerable freedom of action to deserving people like Okonkwo with dynamism and ambition within its flexible and non-authoritarian social system. The society is mostly rural, egalitarian and achievement oriented. Titles of village are conferred on individuals showing virility and skill at war and on the basis of barns of yam seed produced. The traditional society is exogamous, establishing relationship and affinity with neighbouring clans.

The Igbo religion is not a redemptive one like christianity and Islam, nor utilitarian. Igbos are only ritually religious. Every activity of life, society and agricultural season is devoutly punctuated by some religious exercise or expression. They observe 'peace week' before planting of yam seed and celebrate 'pumpkin leaves festival', a ceremony of purification and 'New Yam Festival' before harvest of Yam Crop. Igbos believe in the worship of
public deities like Ulu, Idemili, Eru etc in *Arrow of God* and personal gods like Ikenga, ‘chi’ etc. Their ancestors are represented by the masked Egwugwu in *Things Fall Apart*. Chukwu is the supreme God, the creator and sustainer. Among lesser gods, the goddess of Earth-Ala, Ani (For Igbo), Onile (for yoruba), is considered most powerful, the queen of the under world, and ‘owner’ of men both dead and alive and is responsible for Igbo morality. The Egwugwu act as her agents controlling morality and as the Jury of the village as in *Things Fall Apart* settling disputes-personal and with the neighbouring villages. They believe that every individual is granted by Chukwu a ‘chi, a soul or spiritual double’ to which his or her fortune and abilities are ascribed.

**The Igbo Novel:**

Chinua Achebe, and Cyprian Ekwensi, the two prolific Nigerian pioneers of modern Nigerian novel in English and Flora Nwapa have made rich contribution to the West-African writing in English and popularised Igbo literature beyong Igbo readership. The Igbo literary revolution, a transition from fiction-writing in Igbo to writing in English took place in Nigeria after the second
The colonial writers used the 'novel' to voice the traumatic experiences of colonial rule. The early missionaries of the church missionary society in Onitsha in 1857 were till the middle of the twentieth century engaged in the tasks of education, evangelization, and westernization of the Igbos. Rev. J.F. Schon after the Niger expedition to Onitsha in August 1841 attempted to communicate in Igbo and later published *A Grammar of the Igbo Language* (1861) *The Primer*, a linguistic text of Rev. S.A. Crowther also contributed to the development of Igbo written literature. The translation of the Bible into Igbo was also undertaken under the supervision of Archdeacon Dennis. The influence of Christian missionary education on the Igbo writers and the Onitsha pamphleteers is evident in their use of biblical quotations, allusions and Christian imagery. Onitsha pamphleteers even sought to impose western values on the Igbo through their missionary teachings.

*Etheopia unbound* (1911) was an untidy and confused piece of fiction, the first-African attempt at a novel by E. Casely Hayford (Ghana). E.E. Obeng's *Eighteen Pence* (1943) was an allegory about healthy familial ties personal integrity and a true rural life. *Omenuko* (1933) the first
Igbo novel of Peter Nwana, is a biographical novel about an offence against the rural community, and the consequent expiation. The Onitsha Authors, a non-literary group of Igbo writers produced pamphlets as they hawked their wares in 'Otu Onitsha' (the largest market in the West Africa) are responsible for the transition from writing in Igbo to writing in English. 'Onitsha market literature' as genuine African popular literature about the middle class, acting as an intermediary between the intellectuals and the illiterate masses, attracted the readers outside.

The 'r. ellas', folklores' and full-length works of Cyprian Ekwensi, are rooted in the action-packed Onitsha formula. Ekwensi's early novella *When Love Whispers* (1947) depicts sex, violence, and brutality, mystery and intrigue. His *People of the City* (1954), the first modern Nigerian novel in English is in tone and essence a sophisticated and more lasting version of Onitsha literature. The novel depicts social evils like corruption, squalor, bribery and wretchedness in contemporary urban society in particular in Lagos. Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1964) is less profound in its description of Lagos life. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*
(1958) is a novel of Igbo tradition and historical in perspective and has become a classic in modern African writing in English. It articulates social changes through cultural encounter and tensions. Achebe is the first Nigerian writer to transmute successfully the conventions of the 'novel', a European art form, into African literature and is the first fully realized novel to influence other Nigerian novelists like T.M. Aluko. The first prose fiction depicting world of fantasy to attract the western eye was The Palm-Wine Drinkard (1951) by Amos Tutuola written in so 'un English' according to western critic but with a unique distinction of its own for the oral literature material used in it. Tutuola is one among many African writers to alter the shape of the western genre to his own purpose and also to satisfy his native audiences. His works are called "nave romances", some as 'ghost-novels'.

African writers have chosen 'novel' among all forms like poetry, drama, prose fiction, to present the ongoing reality in African states. Writers like Achebe, exploring the human condition in Africa, have exposed the traditional mores and social evils because of the exposure of the native society to the alien culture. Though they
have adopted the western form of 'novel'; they have put
'things' African drawing much from African oral literature
and using indigenous techniques of narration.

South African writers too are interested in the
re-creation of their past and historicity and try to
establish their cultural identity exploring the human
condition and relationship in a culturally and racially
diversified society. Writers like Alan Paton, Peter,
Abraham and Lewis Nkosi are concerned with natural human
relationship. And contemporary south African writers like
Danjacobson, Nadine Gardimer and Ezekiel Mphahlele are
interested in the prevailing human predicament and living
conditions in South Africa.

Exposure to the west with its consequences has
been the predominant theme in African fiction depicting
precolonial, colonial, pre-independent or post-independent
situations in the country in transition. Based on their
thematic concerns African novels are classified into five
categories by Charles Larson in *The Emergence of African
Fiction*:
1. The novels concerned with the clash of cultures and faiths:
Novels portraying the initial exposure to the west as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and James Ngugi's *The River Between* concerned with Africa's confrontation with the Western religion (or) the initial stages of colonial Government.

2. The novels concerned with the promotion of new values of life:
Novels concerned with the problems of adaptation to western education such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *La aventure Ambigue* and Bernard Dadie's *Climbie*.

3. Novels concerned with urbanisation and loss of ethos:
Novels of urbanisation as Cyprian Ekwensi's *Lagos* novels and the novels by the Onitsha writers.

4. Novels concerned with the political struggle for freedom and social justice:
Novels concerned with the problems of politics or narration building either prior to independence as in Peter Abraham's *A Wreath Forudomo* or in a post-independent situation as in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*—and
5. Novels concerned with individual and collective problems in modern society:

Novels concerned with a more individualised life style such as Armah's *Fragments* or Ezekiel Mphahlele's *The Wanderers*.

In the first four categories of the novels, though the focus is on one or two characters, the emphasis is on the problems of the community and group consciousness. In Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's suffering symbolizes the traumatic experiences of Umuofian society during pre-colonial period. Another group of novels merely documented the problems of the community without central or main characters. The novels like *The Interpreters* by Wole Soyinka, *A Grain of wheat* by James Ngugi and *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* by Sembene Osunane, and *The American* by Henry James fall under this category. On the contrary, the problems of an individual and his problems with others in the society are emphasised in the conventional western novels.
Native myths, idiom and oral literature material Africanised the novel. The novel of depth and imagination is yet to emerge and flourish in Africa. Since their primary commitment, is for the society, and its concern for social morality and cultural identify, African novelists are not interested in characterisation and dramatisation of characters. Further, it is noticed that the idiom, 'African English' used is not a uniform language but with variation influenced by several indigenous languages.

Ngugi wa Thiongo, a Kenyan novelist has rejected the use of metropolitan languages as medium of expression, and has opposed cultural imperilism in Africa. Ngugi later took to writing only in Gikugu, his native tongue or Swahili and his works are later translated in English. His first novel, *The River Between* presents how the social life of the traditional societies concerned with communal consciousness and harmony has been disturbed by the arrival of the whiteman. The focus is on the social problems caused by alien faith and culture.

Ngugi, in his first published novel *Weep not Child* epitomises a crucial phase in the lives of Gikuyu people,
the struggle for regaining their alienated land and for political emancipation. He appeals to the Kenyan youth to come out of despair to take charge of the freedom struggle. In his novel *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi portrays the influence of the emergency on the individual psyche. Later, he denounces the evils affecting the peace and harmony in independent Kenya in his novel *Petals of Blood*.

Wole Soyinka, like Chinua Achebe, is genuine in talent, but richer, more elaborate and more conscious West African dramatist belonging to Yoruba tribe. He is a scalding critic of his own society unlike other African Negritude writers. His first novel *The Interpreters* is concerned with the responsibility of intellectuals in reforming the society. But, they fail in their attempt as the society is corrupt to the core. Soyinka’s second novel *Season of Anomy* also deals with similar theme. These two novels have set a new trend in African fiction writing in English with less emphasis on central characters and they evoke the scene in native setting to present the crisis in society and leaving much to the imagination of the reader. Further Soyinka provides a poetic touch to his novels which other novelists could not give in their novels.
Eleehi Amadi also is deeply concerned with sorrow and suffering in the civil war and pleads for efforts for the reconstruction of Nigerian society. Inspired by Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, another East African writer too has depicted post-independent situation in his novels. Like Achebe, Armah portrays the chronological history of African state in transition in Two Thousand Seasons.

Creative writing in West Africa is a post-war phenomenon. African literature in English and several other native languages emerged in the later half of the twentieth century. Contemporary African writing traces the history of the country and records the traumatic experiences of the imperial rule and the cultural cringe and economic bondage and with the struggle for political freedom. Some African writers like Philis Wheatly and George Moses Horton are opposed to imposition of the values of the West. The European models and literary conventions influenced the African writers to give vent to African experiences and to depict the human condition and predicament in Africa. Much of African literature of colonial rule and pre-independence is dominated by the themes of protest and conflict. Negritude movement of this century endeavours to restore to
African society its pristine glory and for psychological emancipation of Africans. Negritude writers taking pride in their colour and culture contended that

"Based on sociological historical and cultural evidences that African literature is a donro culture, not a client one."

The development of transterritorial cultures during and after the colonial period formed the basis for modern African literature. "The artistic creative impulse of the west African literature began to bud once more with the awakening of national consciousness that has actually been flowering since the attainment of National Independence.

"Some African writers took to writing in their native tongue like Swahili, Yoruba, Hausa or Xhosa-dialects of Africa."

English has become an 'African language' for both utilitarian and literary purposes in both West and Southern Africa. African writers like Anons Tutola, Chinua Achebe,
Ezkiel Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka and others used English for global communication, specifically their tribal audience. The chief function of African literature is to educate the society and inspire the Africans to fight for their political freedom. Writers like Achebe and Soyinka are critical about their society and rituals. They defined the world in their distinct cultural and aesthetic values and philosophical assumptions.

REFERENCES: