TWO OF A KIND: THEMATIC, IDEOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC CONVERGENCES IN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURES

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In her inaugural lecture entitled *The Nature and Functions of Literature: The Comparatist’s Perspective*, Aduke Adebayo (2010) convincingly enunciates and exemplifies the tenets and utilitarian functions of Comparative Literature. To her:

The advantages of studying and practising Comparative Literature are many...In studying and practicing Comparative Literature, the comparatists gain a better understanding of the phenomenon called Literature. We are able to appreciate the unity and universality of mankind through Literature. Any national literature therefore becomes a part of a larger whole. The scholar of comparative literature…gains a more balanced view, a truer perspective than is possible from the isolated analysis of a single national literature, however rich in itself (32).

Using the foregoing theoretical assumptions, an attempt is made in this chapter to compare two seemingly unrelated literatures – American and African literatures. In the main, the study explores the significant relationship between American and African literatures. This is with a view to gaining a better and more profound knowledge of their thematic, ideological and aesthetic thrusts. There is a sense in which it can be argued that literature, across ages and the regions, reflects or refracts human ideas, beliefs and societal norms; it is also used to discover human ways of understanding life and significant differences. Thus, the task of this paper is to argue that although separated by geographical barriers, American and African literatures share more thematic, aesthetic and ideological convergences than divergences. Both of them share similar universal global themes, including: love, coming of age, identity, good versus evil, perils of power, triumph of adversity, redemption, revenge, warfare, courage, death, sincerity and disillusionment.

It is axiomatic that a people’s literature evolves out of their individual and communal experiences. In the works of American and African writers, there is a harmonious interplay of history and social realism. Although African literature is more shaped by social, political and intellectual factors than American literature, certain socio-political themes still recur in both literatures. For instance, like African literary works, some American works deal with American experience in a pan-American or hemispheric context. Such include Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990), Madison Bell’s *All Souls’ Rising* (1995). However, the tension that the realities of African societies generate leads to the urge to convey socio-political themes to the readers in
unmistakable terms. In a like manner, there was a literary explosion in America during the post-
World War era. Among the most famous American war novels are Norman Mailer’s *The Naked
and the Dead* (1948), Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-
Five* (1969). African writers have also dwelt on the issue of “the civil wars that have plagued the
African continent in the post-colonial period, from the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo
that started soon after independence in 1961 to the one in the Sudan that, in a sense, is still raging
because it involves the horrible events in Darfur, have had a variety of causes” (Eustace Palmer,
2008:13). African literary texts that dwell on the problem of wars in the continent include
Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn*, Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s
*Sozaboy* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

One of the enduring ideological signifiers of African literature, whether oral or written, is
socio-political commitment. It always reflects or refracts the happenings in the society which
experience forms the basis for written expression in any branch of literature” (1). In the main,
African writers always prioritize what may be loosely referred to as “Litterature Engagee”, that
is, literature serving as the recorder and interpreter of the socio-political activities in its enabling
milieu. In the first stage of its existence, it concerned itself with the issue of cultural nationalism,
whereby African culture, mores, traditions and the like were glorified and eulogized. This was
the era of ‘paradise on earth’, and the temper is best reflected in the Negritude writings of
Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, Tchicaya U’Tamsi, David Diop
and Barrage Diop. This phase was closely followed by the age of ‘Paradise Disturbed’, the age of
colonialism in the continent. African literature, at this stage, was marked by political and cultural
revolution. This temper is found in the writings of Hamidou Kane, Camara Laye, J.P. Clark,
Eskiah Mphahlele, and others. African literature at this stage was also used as an anti-colonial
weapon. In the third and the current period, African literature is inward-looking, chronicling,
lampooning and satirizing the foibles, misdeeds and misgovernance of the ruling elite. Satire
dominates the writings of this period, and it is well reflected in the works of Ngugi wa Thiong’o,
Chinua Achebe, T.M. Aluko and Wole Soyinka.

In an insightful essay, entitled “The Social Functions of the African Novel”, Aduke
Adebayo (1987) succinctly enunciates the nexus between literature and life in the African novel:
The relationship between society and African literature in general and the
novel in particular can be visualised along two lines: how literature has
constituted itself into a model of analysis and synthesis of social reality,
and the effect of literature on society. Since its beginnings, the primary
role of the African novels has been to elucidate historical and social
phenomena. Thus, the literary historians have divided the existence of
written African literature in European languages (spanning less than a
century) along historical lines of colonial, pre-independence and post-
independence literature. And indeed, African writers have history (an
eventful and tumultuous one) at their doorstep, and their novels display a
deep historical awareness. They dramatise moments of history rather than individual destiny, since they see history as a collective working out of a people’s destiny (297).

To the contemporary African writer, the hope of regaining paradise as a result of independence has been castrated. The bourgeoisie is conceived as the major enemy of the political and social freedom of the masses; it is the class of the predators. Seven conflicts can be identified as parts of the thematic preoccupations of postcolonial African literature. These are the clash between Africa’s past and present; between tradition and modernity; between the indigenous and the foreign; between individualism and community; between socialism and capitalism; between development and self-reliance, and between Africanity and humanity. Also included in this taxonomy of the thematic preoccupations of postcolonial African literature is the critique of social ills, including corruption, economic disparities and the rights, migration and roles of women. In the same vein, racism as a theme in African American literature and apartheid as a theme in South African literature converge in their protest form. Protest against Apartheid is found in the works of South African writers, including Dennis Brutus, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Alfred Hutchinson and Arthur Nortje. Protest is appreciated by both white Americans and African American artists. Actually, the African American’s image has even been projected by many white American novelists and poets, including Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Vachel Lindsay, William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. African American writers who prioritize the depiction of the image of their race include Williams Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt, Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brook, Toni Morrison and Richard Wright. LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), in a 1962 address to the American Society for African Culture, insisted that the job of the Negro writer was to portray the emotional history of the black man in the United States: as its victim and its chronicler. He as a dramatist has taken his own advice. The black man is the victim in his plays, most especially *Dutchman* (1964) which dwells on the themes of race and racism, and he, himself, with an increasingly strident voice, is the black man’s chronicler and, perhaps, America’s chronicler.

The theme of cultural pluralism is also shared by both literatures. According to Doris Abramson (1969):

In real life and in the literature that purports to reflect that life, most American Negroes belong in one of the two categories. There is no doubt that the swing toward cultural pluralism in the 1960s is a reaction by Negroes for not being let into white society in earlier decade (3).

There are four ways by which African Americans and black South Africans sought to advance themselves to improve their lot: through the ballot box, education, migration and emigration, and economic nationalism. These various approaches are reflected in individual black man’s problem of being assimilated into or revolting against the dominant white society.
The society thus becomes a love/hate object for the characters, like Richard in Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) and Michael Adonis in Alex La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* (1962). Justifying the preoccupation of African American writers with the theme of protest, Richard Wright (1969) opines:

If the expression of the African American Negro should take a sharp turn, then you will know by that token that we are suffering our old and ancient agonies at the hands of our white American neighbours. If, however, our expression broadens, assumes the common themes and burdens of literary expressions which are the heritage of all men, then by that token you will know that a humane attitude prevails in America towards us (105).

The foregoing, therefore, reveals the impossibility of applying universal standards for analysing African American writings. This assertion is critically argued by Richard Gilman (1968) in a review of Elderidge Cleaver’s *Soul on the Ice* (1968):

Negro suffering is not the same kind as ours. Under the great flawless arc of the Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions, we have implicitly believed that all men experience essentially the same things; that birth, love, pain, self, death are universal; they are in fact what we mean by universal values in literature and consciousness. But the Negro has found it almost impossible in America to experience the universal as such; the power, after all, is conferred upon the individual, or rather conferred for him by his membership in the community of men (25).

Therefore, in African American writings, there is no euphemism of the expression of experiences and vision. Since the writers are estranged from the mainstream of American life, socially and culturally, they deploy their imaginative prowess on protest. This same temper is seen in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965) where the emerging African elite are at war with their society. Aduke Adebayo (1996) confirms the thematic and structural convergence in African and American literatures by arguing that Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Sembene Ousmane’s *Le Docker Noir* (*The Black Docker*) (1956) “are two novels which have demonstrated thematic and structural similarities even though they are products of two black authors from two different social milieux, the former being set in America, while the latter is set in France” (74). Also, Robert Frost’s basic themes include man’s life, dealing with the individual’s relationships with himself, with his fellow men, with his world and with his God. Likewise, anti-Apartheid South African novelists clearly show an uneasing concern with their past, the traumatizing effects of colonialism and the legacy still left by the Apartheid reign. The South African literary scene, in fact, abounds with the novels featuring traumatized individuals who strive for closure and struggle to leave their past behind, but are
persistently ‘re-visited’ by their past in the forms of flashback, nightmares, and other psychosomatic symptoms.

American and African literatures also share the thematic thrust of depicting the socio-cultural and spiritual importance of physical environment. Most of the writings are very earthly and close to nature, almost in the genre of Romantic poetry. For instance, in Robert Frost’s poetry, there is the overwhelming presence of nature— in the mountains that rear high above man’s head; in the curve of valleys; in the leaf-strewn roads; in the crowding of trees, singly or in dense dark woods, blooming of tuft flowers, brooks that race downhill, and in the happy description of seasonal change (Uma Maheswari, 2008). The following verses provide an illustration of this claim:

Look down the long valley and there stands a mountain
That someone has said is the end of the world.
Then what of this river that having arisen
Must find where to pour itself into and empty?
I never saw so much swift water run cloudless
(“Too Anxious for Rovers”).

In Frost’s poetry, nature is depicted as a dual phenomenon. It is a benefactor of human beings, and there is also much in the nature against us. Therefore, to Frost, nature is both a friend and foe to human beings:

There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
Take nature altogether since time began,
Including human nature, in peace and war,
And it must be a little more in favour of ma.
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least.
Or our number living wouldn’t be steadily more,
Our hold on the planet wouldn’t have so increased
(“Our Hold on the Planet”).

The connection between literature and the earth’s current environmental crisis is also a veritable theme of African literature. A few contemporary African writers also dwell on their physical environment of their society by foregrounding nature as a major part of their subjects. For instance, Niyi Osundare’s poetry incorporates broadly conceived ecological thinking. He has a keen awareness of the ecological nature of his milieu by representing the natural world and applying a range of eco-centric concepts as tropes in his poetry, including nature’s growth, uses of energy and resources, balance and imbalance and symbiosis. Osundare’s “They too are the Earth” dwells on the importance of the earth for the masses. Earth is used as a metaphor where filths, injustice and man’s inhumanity to man are satirized. He apparently pitches his tent on the side of the masses. In “Forest Echoes”, one of the poems in The Eye of the Earth, Osundare eulogizes the nature thus:

The rains have kept their time this year
(Earth has [finally] won the love of the (sky). Trees both with backward sap and leaves Leaves grab a deepening green from the scanty sun (3).

Like Frost, Osundare depicts the binary character of the nature. It is portrayed as an amalgam of growth and decay. His poetry dwells on the features and functions of rain, earth, sky, sun, tree and many other ecological materials.

Among the major themes which are common to both American and African literatures is the journey from innocence to awareness. In such works, characters encounter experiences that change them in some significant ways. By the end of the novel or play, such characters become different persons than they were at the beginning. This theme finds expression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) where Kambili and Jaja gain awareness after their visit to Aunty Ifeoma’s family in Nsukka. They metamorphose from docility to activity and from ignorance to awareness. This bildungsroman experience is similar to that of Santiago in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) and Biff Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). However, in *Purple Hibiscus*, the metamorphosis is ultimately rewarding because the characters are strengthened by their struggle. However, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the transition is ruinous because the old man is destroyed by the experience he goes through.

The theme of disillusionment is also common to both American and African literatures. For instance, the American dream is a motif in American literature. Dream is shown to be little more than an illusion; it is hollow, deceptive and even destructive. For instance, in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953) and *Death of a Salesman*, Frederick Douglas’s autobiography and Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the protagonists have their hope dashed. Their expected American dream does not materialize. In some American literary works, the idea of suffering leading to failure and illusion is a motif. Examples include Pecola’s suffering and self-hatred in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes* (1970), and invisibility in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). Also, in Meja Mwangi’s *Kill me Quick* (1973) and *Going Down River Road* (1976), the protagonists are disillusioned as their hope of a better postcolonial Kenyan society is castrated. This is also similar to the fate of Baako, in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1970). In such works of unaccomplished dream, the evil that each protagonist struggles against is very often his/her own society – its rigidity, prejudices, constraints, limitations and its cruelty.

The United States is one of the most diverse nations of the world, so also are many African nations. Therefore, American and African literatures are likewise dazzlingly diverse, eclectic, constantly evolving and multicultural. New voices are arising from many quarters, challenging old ideas and adapting literary traditions to suit the changing conditions of the national lives. In fact, American and African literatures have become democratic and heterogeneous. This is mostly reflected, in varying degrees, in the postmodernist features of some contemporary American and African literatures, which exhibit fragmentation, collage and
hybridity, use of various voices, scenes and identities. They question external structures, whether political, philosophical or artistic, and they tend to distrust the master-narratives of modernist thought, which they see as politically suspect. Instead, they mine popular culture genres, especially science fiction, spy and detective stories; they, thereby, become, in effect, archaeologists of pop culture. These features permeate Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), a quintessential American postmodernist text. In this novel, what confronts the reader is an array of imaginative and adept mixture of both postmodern and realist strains. According to Haidar Eid (2008):

> Despite its postmodernity, the novel does not adopt an anti-mimetic attitude, but rather question—-aesthetically and ideologically—the postmodern logic behind the rejection of mimesis, or realism, by applying the principle of mimesis to a different “reality” from that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1).

Therefore, *White Noise* can be described as a realist postmodern text that uses the character, Jack Gladney, to depict the contemporary world as one replete with fear of death, alienation, estrangement, toxin and family disintegration. It should be asserted that rather than reveling in postmodern depthlessness, DeLillo’s fiction pursues realism. Postmodern tenets are also used significantly by postcolonial African novelists, including Ben Okri, Biyi Bandele, Dambudzo Marechera, Syl Cheney-Coker and the like. Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), for instance, employs some of the basic tenets of postmodernism, including mixing of genres, cross-cultural boundaries, intertextuality, and parody.

Another significant common motif in American and African literatures is the problems inherent in modern cities. Such works portray loneliness and addiction in the cities. They also dwell on city-induced conflicts, such as cowboy versus the Indian; the farmer/settler versus the outlaw; the rancher versus the cattle rustler; oilman versus ecologist; the developer versus the archaeologist, and the citizen activist versus the representatives of nuclear and military facilities. Jane McInerney’s *Story of my Life* (1989) is a good example of such works. Jhumpa Lahiri also focuses on the consequence of city habitation: the younger generation’s conflict and assimilation in *Interpreters of Maladies* (1999) and in her novel, *The Namesake* (2003). The theme of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is also a bye-product of living in modern cities, most especially human and material waste and disillusionment as a result of such wastes on two planes—national and individual. It reveals the selfishness and greed in the conception of wars. *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is Ernest Hemingway’s response to the World War 1 and individual tragedy within the larger picture of greater tragedy.

Closely related to the theme of city trouble is that of crime/violence. Violence characterizes postcolonial Africa (Jean-François, Bayart 1993; Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, 1999; Achille Mbembe, 2001, and Toyin Falola, 2009). Africa is a continent that has been wracked and bedeviled by many coups, military dictatorship, autocratic rulers, civil wars, collapse of economies, grand-scale corruption and internal state of anarchy. As a result, “in this
political and social chaos, youths have been implicated either as victims or perpetrators in some forms or another given that some estimates suggest that they make up 80% of the continent’s population” (Niebuhr, 2002:37). Therefore, violence is a veritable source of African writers’ thematic preoccupations. For instance, some African writers have dealt with the twin theme of crime and violence in their works. This is noticeable in Kenyan creative writings, particularly the ones set in the 1970s, 1980s into the 1990s. In fact, the prevalence of crime and violence in postcolonial Kenyan works parallels a history of crime and violence that is generally attributed to the youth in postcolonial Africa. We have appreciable examples of the narration of neocolonial problems of crime and violence in the works of John Kiriamiti, Meja Mwangi and John Kigia. According to Tom Odhiambo (2007):

The prevalence of juvenile delinquents in their works and the related acts of violence and criminality could be read as indictors of the failure of the postcolonial Kenyan State to ‘include’ their young men (and women) into the mainstream of society--- there is a correlation between marginalization of the youth in society and their adoption of anti-social behaviour as strategies to access material resources (134).

Belief in the existence of an active evil (the devil) and in a sense of determinism (predestination) is another common thematic concern of American and African literatures. For instance, this is reflected in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s prose works, including “Young Goodman Brown”, The Scarlet Letter (1850) and The House of Seven Gables (1851). In African literature, Elechi Amadi’s The Concubine (1966) and Helen Oyeyemi’s The Icarus Girl (2005) offer veritable examples of the thematization of the belief in the existence of an active evil in the contemporary world. In such works, the protagonist is in a state of alienation because of self-cause or societal cause, or combination of both. This is the fate of Okonkwo and Ezeulu, in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1058) and Arrow of God (1964) respectively; King Odewale in Ola Rotimi’s The Gods Are Not to Blame (1968) also experiences a similar fate. In these works, pride, the hubris of the protagonists, is treated as evil. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s My Kinsman, Major Molineux (1832), Robin signifies physical pride, while Goodman Brown, the eponymous hero of “Young Goodman Brown”, represents spiritual pride, and Rappaccini, in “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, is the trope used for intellectual pride.

It is valid to assert that contemporary American literature is a literature of commitment, the writer being a conscience of his/her people. Like its African sibling, the contemporary American text can be productively interpreted only when it is placed against the background from which it emanates. This accounts for the relational quality and dependent nature of American postmodernist texts on their contexts. Actually, American and African literatures are products of the cultures and of the social and political circumstances that produce them. They are, therefore, complex expressions of their enabling contexts, as well as indications of the values and worldviews of the societies in which they are composed. Thus, both literatures reflect
and refract particular issues and experiences. Like African literature, American literature also
dwells on various forms of conflicts in the societies. Langston Hughes’ poem, entitled “I, Too,
Sing America”, substantiates this claim:

I, too, sing America

I am the darker brother
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh
And eat well
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes
Nobody’ll dare
say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen”,
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed-

I, too, am American (from The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes,

This is a poem about racial discrimination; it envisions a better future for the African Americans.
As a conscience of his society, he foresees a future when African Americans will be seen as
partners in progress by white Americans. It is inspiring to see how he pushes aside the fact that
African Americans are subjugated and dehumanized, knowing that one day, African Americans
will be empowered. Indeed, the poem is prophetic as the emergence of Barack Obama as the
44th president of the United States of America, in 2008, confirmed.

Similarly, Ernest Hemingway expands American fiction’s social spectrum to encompass
both high and low life, and his works, including A Farewell to Arms (1929), The Old Man and
the Sea (1952), For whom the Bell Tools (1940) and The Sun also Rises (1926), are connected to
the naturalist school of realism. Likewise, Edith Wharton, in The Age of Innocence (1920), deals
with the upper-class, Eastern-seaboard society in which she had grown up. Stephen Crane also
depicts the life of New York City prostitutes in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893). Similarly,
Theodore Dresser, in *Sister Carrie* (1900), portrays a country girl who moves to Chicago and becomes a kept woman. Cyprian Ekwensi, the Nigerian novelist, shares similar thematic concerns with these American writers in his *Jagua Nana* (1961) and *Jagua Nana’s Daughter* (1987). Indeed, African and American writers are influenced by socio-historical realities; they both recognise, though in varied ways, the importance of narrating the various aspects of their national experience. Therefore, both literatures could be studied with the intention of fairly assessing them as reflections of the peoples’ peculiar position and persistent problems in the societies, most especially their position in the political, social and economic status in their individual milieu. However, it should be stated that American literature has more ‘transgressive’ texts than African literature. ‘Transgressive’ texts refer to modern and postmodern texts, involving a fusion of the physical and metaphysical worlds, a preponderance of images, repetition, rhythm of words, non-linear narratives and non-closures. Contemporary American and African works mingle realism and fantasy, and they fuse the personal and the political. This tendency is noticeable in Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* (1978) and *The Miss Firecracker Contest* (1980). This is also the case with the novels of many African writers, including Ben Okri, J.M Coetzee, Biyi Bandele and Helen Oyeyemi. Hence, Adeleke Adeeko (2002) opines that:

> At this moment, African texts that are circulated internationally deal with topics that are easily assimilated into large global concerns, like feminism and transnational migrations and their repercussions in the politics of multiculturalism. Works that deal with national issues like development, social dislocation, problems of democratic institutions, and so on will have to be written in post-modern styles with which cosmopolitan critics can easily identify in order to enter the international circuit (317).

However, Adeeko is not oblivious of some efforts by African writers to participate in the global trends of postmodern, postcolonial and feminist writings. For instance, he identifies, among many others, Tsitsi Dangrembga *Nervous Conditions* (1989), Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991) and Biyi Bandele’s *The Sympathetic Undertakers and other Dreams* (1991) as feminist, postmodern and postcolonial texts respectively.

Therefore, the fact that American and African writers act as the conscience of their individual societies cannot be gainsaid. They are spokesmen for the feelings of their generations. Their heroes offer a reflection of a moral code arising out of a cult of innocence, love, alienation, and redemption; they often form a particularly adolescent troupe of spiritual non-conformists, tough-minded and fragile, humorous and heart-breaking. They are also forced to compromise their integrity with a pragmatic society. Specifically, the average character of a committed American writer is alienated due to his/her peculiar off-centre vision which sensitizes and distorts his/her sense of truth in a false world. For instance, Justin Horgenschlag’s *Heart of
Broken Story (1924) and The Inverted Forest (1924) dwell perceptively on the theme of alienation.

According to Emerson (2003: xxiv), literature is “a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, and by which we may move it.” Various African critics also hold a similar view. According to Wole Soyinka (1968), the artist has always functioned in African society as the recorder of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. To Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981), literature is, of course, primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and the values governing human relationship. Chinua Achebe (1973), in his essay, “The Role of a Writer in a New Nation”, opines that:

One of the key motivations for producing African literature was to restore the moral integrity and cultural autonomy of all the Africans in the age of decolonisation. The fundamental theme of African writing was that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many Africans all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this they must regain now (8).

It should however be stressed that there is a sense in which it can be claimed that American and African literatures have very similar, but contextually different, tone; that is, both literatures diverge in tone, “the totalising effects of a work of art, the peculiar ring or accent of a work that moves the reader” (B.M Ibitokun, 1988:35). However, they both offer a plausible criticism of life as they see it from varying perspectives. This allies with the claim of Matthew Arnold (1958) that art is the criticism of life. For instance, in Gerald Robert Vizenor’s Chancers (2000), there is an imaginative chronicling of some of the socio-political realities of contemporary American societies, including nationhood, hybridity, mobility and cyber identity. In the main, Chancers dwells on the truisms that in contemporary American societies, peoples must shun authenticity, which is an illogical myth, owing to the contemporary realities arising from globalization, multiculturalism and transculturalism. Thus, it is suggested that Americans should move beyond victimization and the attitude of victimhood. Also, Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies (1999) is one of the first of the current wave of transnational literati in the United States. Two thematic threads dominate her stories: gender and domestic issues. There is a juxtaposition of relatively dark and light stories. In “The Third and Final Continent”, the reader comes across issues that are germane to migrancy/exile, such as family bonding, affirmation of the positive effects of migration, home, cultural hybridity, mixed identity, and broken relationships (family, matrimonial, and community). In this story, however, migrants have easier time than they have in some other settings.

Postcolonial African literature is also preoccupied with the themes of identity, hybridity and transculturalism. The issues of identity, multiculturalism, hybridity and transculturalism are
motifs in postcolonial African fiction. Examples include Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and Mark Nwagwu’s *Forever Chimes* (2007). With the postcolonial theorisings of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Edward Said providing the theoretical basis, the two novels are shown to share a common thematic feature: identity formation in a multicultural society. Both novelists, like many other contemporary American and African writers, prioritise cultural pluralism to envision enduring experience and consciousness of mixed racial, ethnic and cultural identity - a possibility that has long remained repressed in most precursor postcolonial African novels. Multiculturalism is envisioned for enrichment of cultural outlook, while transculturalism is recommended as a quintessential weapon for uniting peoples across races, ethnicities and cultural divides.

In American and African writings, there is an amalgam of existential and essential issues. One comes across the existential themes of death, dread and bad faith, the ‘death’ of God, the non-existence of an ‘other’ world, the fact of human responsibility for all value systems, and the like. Hence, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the issues of slavery and freedom are imaginatively depicted. It also depicts how race, gender and power are constructed in African American literature. Time, space and meaning interact in such a way that we have a Manichean dichotomy between permanence and impermanence, as well as spatial and a-spatial. In fact, there is an oppositional interaction of feeling, knowing, remembering, and re-memory of horrific moments in human life. The events portrayed in the text are traumatic and emotional. They imaginatively capture what it means to be unable to protect one’s family in the face of external aggression and what happens to those who encounter aggression. In fact, it is also an emancipatory narrative that dwells on what it means to lose one’s inalienable freedom, and it chronicles the existential pains of suffering, memory, poverty and excruciating psychological condition in American societies. Thus, Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) partakes of the recuperation and re-writing of the history of African American struggle. It offers an ingenuous re-writing and encoding of the history of American slavery and the oppositional agency of African American slave women. Indeed, Toni Morrison, like many other African American writers, writes in the realist tradition in a distinctive poetic and deeply evocative prose style.


Many contemporary American writers, including Bret Easton Ellis, Dave Eggers, Chuck Palahniuk, and David Forster Wallace take a knowing, self-conscious, sarcastic, and condescending attitude towards their subjects. Don DeLillo exposes the foibles of the contemporary period in his milieu in his text, *White Noise* (1985), through the postmodern strategies of ellipsis and indeterminacy. These satirical comments are, however, found in the margin of the text. In the main, he dwells on social, economic, political and environmental
issues. In his narration, the postmodern city is depicted as bedeviled with a bewildering amalgam of environmental problems, including “the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by micro-computers, the asbestos fireproofing …” (35). Also, Allen Ginsberg, in his *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), dwells on the plight of the masses and the downtrodden. This claim supports that of William Carlos William (1956) in the introduction to the poems: “This poet sees through and all around the horrors he partakes of in the very intimate details of his poems” (8). In “Howl – For Carl Solomon”, for instance, the reader hears an elegy:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
Madness, starving hysterical naked
Dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
Looking for an angry fix… (1956:9).

Therefore, although contemporary American literature is slightly different from African literature in style and ideological orientation, its landscape is as bleak as that of African literature. It is thus possible to surmise a relationship between the dark vision of Ayi Kwei Armah, Nuruddin Farah and Dambudzo Marechera and American writers like Allen Ginsberg, John Grisham, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Tom Clancy and Michael Crichton.

Traditional beliefs, most especially the conception of and attitude to death, are common thematic threads in American and African literatures. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria believe that “Aye ni oja, orun ni ile” (The world is a market, the heaven is the home), meaning that man’s stay in this world is highly ephemeral. The belief of most Africans about death indicates that binary oppositions are an essential component of their structure. That is why living/existence is equated with the market that is always ephemeral and transient, and the heaven/hell is linked with home, a permanent place of abode. This belief is espoused in Chinua Achebe’s philosophical/psychological story, “The Madman” (1972), and Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975). Dellilo’s *White Noise* also dwells on this philosophy. Two attitudes to death (Jack Gladney’s and Babette’s) are noticeable in Dellilo’s novel. This is analogous to the attitude of the king’s Horseman (Elesin Oba) and that of his son (Olunde) in Soyinka’s *Death and King’s Horseman*. Also, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1989) is replete with taboos, superstitions, linguistic appropriation and traditions similar to African’s.

The trio of J.P Clark, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo, in their initial stage of writing, were accused by the likes of Chinueizu, Onwuzechewa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (1980), in their book, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, as being Euro-modernists, and, therefore, employed obscure, craggy, and far-fetched images in their poems. They were accused of sacrificing their indigenous African sensibilities in pursuit of obscurantist Euro-modernism. However, later, they started to write in accessible, but not simplistic, language. Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian poet, in his pragmatic definition of poetry asserts that “poetry is man meaning to man” (*Songs of the Marketplace*, 1983:3). A similar trend is noticeable in contemporary American literature whereby the hitherto hieratic obscurity, difficulty and quaint anachronism now give way for plain discourses, the commonplace and a naturalistic
aesthetics. For most of contemporary American writers, including Thomas Pynchon, Tim O’Brien, Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, Raymond Carver, John Cheever, Joyce Carol Oates, and Anne Dillard, the world exists only through our understanding of it, and the prime medium of that understanding is everyday language.

Transition from preoccupations with the private issues to the public concerns is also a shared thematic/ideological experience between American and African writers. For instance, initially, African poetry was predominantly quasi-autobiographical, centering on individual writers’ experiences. However, now, the private is given public colouration; the local is globalized, and the personal is depersonalized. Correspondingly, from the 50s, or so, till present, American poetry has shifted focus from the private to public realm. The self is now subsumed by a poem’s voice. This tendency was perhaps heralded by Ginsberg’s *Howls* and Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959). Actually, this is a turning point in American poetry, whereby private life is put on public view.

The issue of gender conflict is also a common motif in American and African literatures. For instance, Maxine Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* treats similar gender issues that recur in African feminist discourses, as we find in the works of Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangrembga, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Nawal El Saadawi, Seffi Atta and Nadine Gordimer. Fearless girls, wise women, and beloved sisters are common motifs in African narratives. In fact, the etiological tales and myths that populate Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* recall to mind the heroic exploits of African great women like Moremi, a great Amazon in the politics of Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba race. In fact, Moremi’s redemptive exploit has served as a thematic repertoire for many African writers, most especially Femi Osofisan’s *Morountodun* (1983). The myth of Fa Mu Lan (a woman who took her father’s place in a battle) that is reconstructed in Kingston’s text is similar to that of Moremi. In a similar vein, *The Woman Warrior* can be described as a tribute to womanhood. It chronicles the plight of the depraved, deprived, humiliated and abandoned women. A narrator in the story comments about the status of woman/girl-child in the society being narrated thus: “girls are maggots in the rice. It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters” (16).This is also a thematic concern in most African feminist narrations.

Furthermore, African literature is handcuffed to rearward-looking historicism (Afro-pessimism). It is often trapped at the embryonic stage of ‘what has happened’ or ‘is happening’, with a little or no focus on ‘what can happen’, to use the oft-quoted Aristotelian phrases. The urge to use literature as a weapon of political criticism makes most African writers shy from transmogrifying the historical events into global/universal issues which should actually serve as a raw material for their writings. However, in most American writings, it is noted that there is an attempt to make the actual abstract, to localize the global and globalize the local. This is mostly revealed in the works of African American writers, including Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Amiri Baraka. Thus, American writers also reflect and refract historical issues, including the Great Depression, capitalism, civil rights movement, war, consumerism, and issues of race and gender.
It is convenient to conclude that this paper carries out a comparative exploration of American and African literatures by dwelling on the nature of the relations between both literatures in the specific contexts of ideology, themes and aesthetics. It is revealed that this is a wide field that deserves serious attention, with a view to foregrounding the genetic and contact relations between both literatures. Also, the discussion has revealed the issue of influence between both literary cultures as well as the typological affinities of literary forms, ideology and themes in both literatures. Another significant discovery of this study is that American and African literatures have had their growth and expansion both in style and range of subject matters in all their varied aspects of drama, poetry and prose. Indeed, Aduke Adebayo’s (2010) theoretical pondering that Comparative Literature assists the critic in appreciating the unity and universality of mankind through literature is valid.

Works Cited:


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