

Literature as a Mirror of Society: A Study of Social Realism in African Literature

Sylvanus Onyeachulam¹, Igboanugo, Ugochukwu Eric²

¹Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

²Department of English Language
Paul University, Awka

Corresponding Author:

Sylvanus Onyeachulam
Email: sc.onyeachulam@unizik.edu.ng
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7727-9308>
Phone: +2348033272485

Abstract

Literature, as a vibrant social institution, acts as a mirror that reflects the social, economic, and political realities of its time. This study examines the role of social realism in African literature, analyzing how selected African writers use their works to critique, document, and proffer solutions to societal issues. Through a sociological approach, this paper investigates the transition from the celebration of African cultural heritage to the interrogation of post-independence disillusionment, corruption, and the suffering of the masses. The study analyzes the thematic preoccupations of selected authors—including Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Festus Iyayi, and Niyi Osundare—to highlight how literature serves as an intervention in a turbulent African milieu. It argues that African social realism is a didactic tool designed for social reformation, national reconstruction, and the emancipation of the marginalized.

Keywords: Realism, Mirror, Society, Post-independence, Disillusionment,

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Literature, often described as a "mirror of society," acts as an imaginative and artistic representation of human experiences, social, economic, and political realities that exist in the community. It functions as a comprehensive repository of a people's cultural identity, preserving shared heritage while showcasing the intricacies of human interaction, ethics, and social change. As a medium, literature transcends mere entertainment to serve as a critical commentary on the everyday lives, thoughts, and deeds of individuals within a particular society and era. Authors, as product-makers within their respective environments, are deeply influenced by the socio-political

climate, inevitably transporting real-life events into fiction to reflect back the society to itself. This reflective quality enables literature to expose societal injustices, challenge dominant ideologies, and highlight both virtuous and harmful practices for evaluation and potential reform. By capturing the zeitgeist or the spirit of an era, it offers an authentic, though sometimes imaginative, account that acts as a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of human existence over time (IAS PCS Factory, 2023).

As a social institution, literature plays a proactive role by acting not only as a reflection of society but also as a corrector or social engineer, forcing readers to ask questions, spark conversations, and seek solutions to human conflicts. It is recognized as a "socially constructed" entity that contributes to the formation of opinions, builds communities, and influences social, cultural, and political movements (BenevoDesigns, 2024). Through its various forms, including novels, drama, and poetry, literature offers an artistic interpretation of human life that helps society deal with its illnesses by portraying them for analysis (Rajasthali Journal, 2022). It is not a passive mirror; it is an active participant in social change, cultivating empathy by allowing individuals to walk in the shoes of characters whose experiences may differ entirely from their own. As a social institution, it serves as a "lighthouse" for culture, preserving norms and traditions while also facilitating the evolution of the same in response to new social realities (RAIJMR, 2013).

The "mirror of society" metaphor also highlights the role of literature in reflecting both the positive virtues and the negative ills of a community. By highlighting the pitfalls and "diseases" of society, such as injustice, oppression, or prejudice, literature aims to empower members of that society to recognize their mistakes and, subsequently, replace them with better, more ethical, and productive practices. For instance, realistic fiction often portrays social struggles in a manner that serves as a diagnostic tool, allowing society to view its own reflections through the "scars" and conflicts portrayed within the narrative. Writers often capture these dilemmas long before they appear in mainstream political debate, diagnosing issues like inequality, environmental decay, and identity crises (IAS PCS Factory, 2023). This reflective function, therefore, is ultimately a mechanism for social transformation, enabling the community to engage in self-examination and strive for improvement (RAIJMR, 2013).

Finally, in contemporary studies, literature is increasingly acknowledged as an indispensable, active agent in the transformation of societal norms, rather than just a passive reflection of them. In times of crisis, literature provides a space for protest and catharsis, offering readers tools for psychological and social emancipation (Pulzatto Peruzzo, 2020). It documents the evolving Aspirations of society, particularly when engaging in critical, postcolonial, or post-modern discourse, whereby writers challenge traditional viewpoints and amplify marginalized voices. The interplay between literature and society is, hence, symbiotic; while society shapes literature, literature, as a social institution, also shapes society, providing a structured way of examining social structures and cultural norms (Duhan, 2022). Literature serves to foster critical thinking, providing a "looking glass" through which readers can question the "what is" and explore the "what should be," making it a powerful vehicle for positive social change (Aithor, 2024).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

A critical limitation in contemporary post-colonial literature is the tendency to prioritize aesthetic experimentation and formal representation over a direct, urgent engagement with deep-seated socio-political ills such as systemic corruption, crippling economic inequality, and political

violence. While many early post-colonial texts effectively deconstructed colonial discourse, modern works often falter by focusing on the stylistic allure of hybridity, neglecting the urgent need to mirror the daily, lived realities of exploitation that dominate post-independence societies. There is a perceptible disconnect where literature risks becoming an elite artistic endeavor rather than a potent tool for social regeneration and awareness, overlooking the fact that the majority of citizens in post-colonial nations continue to languish in poverty due to the mismanagement of resources by local elites. This gap necessitates a shift from purely aesthetic pursuits towards a more "functional" literature that acts as a watchdog, directly addressing the endemic corruption and nepotism that cripple developmental efforts. The failure of literature to vigorously interrogate the "in-between" spaces of post-independence disillusionment means that the oppressive structures once maintained by foreign powers are now perpetuated by a national bourgeoisie, leaving the populace largely neglected. Therefore, this study identifies the pressing need for literary works to move beyond a nostalgic portrayal of cultural identity and instead offer a scathing critique of the current, often disastrous, political conditions. Without this shift, literature risks becoming complicit in the silencing of marginalized voices in the post-colony, failing to hold leaders accountable or propose corrective, transformative alternatives for societal improvement.

Furthermore, this problem is exacerbated when the focus on aesthetic, detached storytelling overshadows the necessity of addressing the "re-colonization" occurring through economic mismanagement, infrastructural decay, and the normalization of unethical practices in public sectors. There is a crucial need to examine how literary works often fail to dismantle the Manichaeian structures that continue to alienate the common man, focusing instead on themes that may not resonate with the urgent material needs of the society. The literary scene requires a more robust engagement with the practical, daily realities of injustice and inequality, as observed in works that confront the "filth" of moral decadence and the loss of traditional, community-focused values. This study argues that when post-colonial literature prioritizes the demands of international publishing aesthetics, it often loses its "corrective" function, becoming a passive observer of, rather than a participant in, the struggle for a truly liberated society. The problem highlights the imperative for authors to become "sensitive questioners" who challenge the bad and ugly, rather than simply aestheticizing the painful experiences of the people. This study therefore seeks to move beyond traditional post-colonial critiques and demand that literature confronts the "real" and "present" dangers of systemic rot, acting as a catalyst for political and moral rejuvenation.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Based on the analysis of how African literature portrays realities and functions as a tool for social change, the following are four key objectives for this study:

1. **To examine how selected African literary works portray contemporary realities:** This involves analyzing how authors reflect political, economic, and social experiences, such as corruption, poverty, and post-colonial struggles.
2. **To investigate the use of literature as a tool for social change and societal regeneration:** To analyze how African writers, through narrative and characterization, act as reformers and agitators for a better society, transforming literature into a tool for correcting social wrongs.

3. **To evaluate the role of literature in cultural revitalization and identity reconstruction:** To examine how African literature reclaims African history and reasserts African identity against Western distortion, thus serving as a tool for cultural resistance.
4. **To analyze how literary works serve as protest to challenge injustice and oppression:** To identify how themes in African literature (e.g., in post-independence or gender-focused novels) serve to challenge oppressive political structures and cultural discrimination against marginalized groups.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptualizing African Realism (Post-Colonial Context)

African Realism emerges as a deliberate, indigenous counter-narrative designed to correct the distortions of Eurocentric depictions, functioning primarily as a tool for reclaiming cultural and historical sovereignty. Unlike European traditions, it frequently blends tangible social conditions—such as political corruption, economic underdevelopment, and urban poverty—with indigenous cosmological perspectives, where the spiritual and secular worlds coexist seamlessly. In this context, the "real" is not limited to empiricism but encompasses the lived, often communal, African experience. The transition from colonial to post-colonial contexts saw this genre shift from representing the "clash of cultures" to a fierce, disillusioned critique of the indigenous elite, aiming to hold new governments accountable to the promises of independence. Therefore, it is often pedagogical, committed to social change rather than just aesthetic representation, aiming to expose the neo-colonial mechanisms hindering genuine sovereignty (Chinua Achebe (1966)

The aesthetic of African realism is heavily influenced by oral tradition and storytelling, incorporating satire, proverb, and communal memory to depict the complex realities of life in the post-independence era. Authors in this vein, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, move beyond mere observation to a radicalized social engagement, portraying the struggles of workers, peasants, and women, thus offering a "view from below" that challenges the romanticized view of African leadership. In post-colonial contexts, this realism often takes the form of "socialist realism," where characters are elevated as representatives of a collective struggle against systemic exploitation and neo-colonialism. The narrative techniques are dynamic and flexible, adapting traditional storytelling techniques to address modern, often chaotic, socio-political landscapes (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981)

Following the disillusionment of the post-independence era, African realism underwent a transformation, frequently blending with magical realism to better articulate the "unreal" experience of living in a post-colony governed by absurdity and dysfunction. Ben Okri's work exemplifies this shift, where the material hardships of Lagos are interwoven with the spiritual reality of the *abiku* (spirit child), creating a unique mode of expression that challenges purely Western conceptions of the "rational" or "real." This development acknowledges that the everyday, chaotic reality of post-colonial life—characterized by coups, famine, and extreme wealth inequality—defies conventional European realistic paradigms. This "new realism" acknowledges that the "real" in Africa is often fantastic, mythological, and surreal, thus requiring a literary approach that is both grounded and speculative (Ben Okri (1991)

Contemporary African realism continues to evolve by addressing new challenges like globalization, terrorism, and pandemics, while retaining its essential function as a critique of power and an advocate for the marginalized. Writers often use detailed socio-economic documentation to expose how global neoliberal policies exacerbate poverty and marginalization within African cities. This form of realism is crucial in the post-colonial context because it refutes the idea that Africa is a place outside of history or a place that is only defined by its inability to meet Western developmental standards. Instead, it places the African experience firmly within the global, capitalist framework, revealing the local impacts of global processes (Benjamin Kwakye (2019)

Conceptualizing European Realism (Transitioning Context)

European realism, originating primarily in the 19th century, was designed to challenge the elevated, imaginative worlds of Romanticism by focusing on the mundane, everyday life of the bourgeois individual within a defined social and economic framework. It prioritizes detailed, empirical observation, aiming for a mimetic representation of society, often analyzing how an individual's psychology is shaped by their environment and social class. This realism was largely driven by a belief in progress and the capacity of rational thought to dissect societal ills, featuring authors like Balzac or Flaubert who acted as anatomists of the contemporary social order. In this context, literature is a mirror held up to society, intended to display its vices, virtues, and structural dynamics with clinical precision (Honore de Balzac (1830)

During the colonial period, European realism was exported and applied to Africa, often operating through a distorted "colonial gaze" that misrepresented African realities to justify imperialist interventions and ideological superiority. Writers like Joyce Cary, for instance, produced works that were considered "realistic" in the West but were seen as caricatures of African life by African intellectuals, prompting the need for a counter-realism. This "Eurocentric realism" often relied on stereotypes of irrationality and chaos, presenting the African landscape as empty, "dark," or infantile to contrast with the assumed rationality and adulthood of the European. Such literature served to fix African reality within a strict, hierarchical binary that solidified colonial rule (Joyce Cary (1939)

Transitioning into the post-colonial era, European realism has faced significant deconstruction, with many critics questioning its ability to represent the complex, hybrid realities of a globalized world. While maintaining its focus on the individual, contemporary European realistic fiction has increasingly shifted towards questioning the nature of truth itself, engaging with post-modern techniques that break the "reality effect" established in the 19th century. This shift acknowledges the subjective nature of experience, moving away from a single, authoritative narrator towards multiple perspectives (Fredric Jameson (1981)

The comparison between African and European realism is fundamentally a distinction between an urgent, politically charged project of nation-building and a more established, often selfreflective, and detached mode of bourgeois observation. While European realism often seeks to critique individual behavior within a settled society, African realism is an tool for establishing the very terms of that society and asserting its existence against its erasure. African realism must therefore operate simultaneously as a social critique, a cultural archive, and a political assertion. The "realism" of the African novel is, as Peter Abrahams demonstrates, often a deeply political act of defiance and definition rather than just an aesthetic choice (Peter Abrahams (1954)

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Sociological Theory of Literature

The sociological theory of literature posits that literary works are not created in a vacuum but are deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political contexts of their time, functioning as social products. It moves beyond purely aesthetic analysis to investigate how the social structure shapes content, form, and production, examining the reciprocal relationship between the author and their environment. Literature is seen as a "social document," offering a reflection of the collective consciousness, tensions, and values of a particular society, often serving as a mirror of the era in which it is written. Early thinkers argued that social forces, including class structure and the prevailing intellectual climate, give birth to a writer, making the author an agent of their social milieu. A sociological approach examines not only the text but also the author's social origin and upbringing, analyzing how these factors influence their perspective. Thus, the creation of literature is understood as a social creative process, reflecting the struggle between individual expression and the pressures of the social environment, nature, and cultural norms (Laurence Shaffer (2001)

Marxist literary theory offers a specific, influential branch of this analysis, emphasizing that the economic "base" of society fundamentally determines the cultural "superstructure," which includes literature, law, and politics. Critics focusing on Marxism, such as Terry Eagleton, argue that literature serves ideological functions, often reinforcing or challenging the dominant power structures, class struggles, and ideologies of the bourgeois or capitalist system. This approach analyzes characters' social positions and power dynamics, uncovering how stories portray class oppression and conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Rather than seeing the author as a solitary genius, this view considers them to be part of a particular historical and social situation that shapes their consciousness and creative output. The focus is on the material conditions of literary production, examining how literature can either perpetuate dominant ideologies—leading to "false consciousness"—or expose and challenge them. This theory argues that literature is a site for studying socioeconomic situations, including the rise of capitalism and the alienation of the individual (Terry Eagleton (2002)

Lucien Goldmann's "genetic structuralism" significantly advanced this theory by introducing the concept of "transindividual subject," suggesting that literature is the expression of a social group's collective world vision rather than merely an individual's personal perspective. Goldmann argued that there is a "rigorous homology" between the literary form of the novel and the economic structure of the market society, especially in the way the novel focuses on a "problematic hero" navigating a degraded world. Genetic structuralism aims to understand the genesis of the literary work, connecting its internal structure to the broader social structures that formed it, such as class consciousness and worldviews, making the analysis both interpretive and explanatory. He challenged traditional studies for focusing solely on the author, advocating instead for exploring how a "collective consciousness" of a social class is articulated in the text. His approach also analyzed the "nouveau roman" as a reflection of the definitive victory of reification—the process by which social relationships are reduced to interactions between commodities—in a capitalist society (Lucien Goldmann (1974)

Pierre Bourdieu contributed to the sociology of literature by focusing on the "literary field," analyzing the social space where authors, publishers, critics, and audiences interact and compete for cultural capital. Bourdieu moved beyond the text-context reflection model to argue that literature is a social practice influenced by economic, social, and cultural forces within a specific

field of production. The theory emphasizes that literary production is a negotiated process, where the author's autonomy is often constrained or shaped by the "gatekeepers" of literature, including publishers, editors, and the reading public. This perspective, often called a "theory of literary production," looks at the material conditions of publishing, how literature is distributed, and how it is consumed by different social groups, exploring how these factors define what is considered "art". Therefore, the sociology of literature studies the entire network of literary production, demonstrating how power relations and the struggle for distinction (capital) within the field directly affect the form and content of literary creations (Pierre Bourdieu (1996)

2.2 Social Realism/Socialist Realism

Social Realism and Socialist Realism in African literature act as powerful tools for documenting the harsh realities of colonial exploitation and post-colonial disillusionment, focusing primarily on the have-nots and the marginalized. These narratives deliberately elevate the workerprotagonist, presenting the proletariat and peasantry not as victims, but as heroic figures engaging in active resistance against political oppression and economic injustice. Unlike European realism, African social realism is often explicitly didactic, aiming to educate, conscientize, and galvanize the masses toward collective struggle, as seen in the works of Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* serves as a cornerstone of this genre, depicting the 1947–1948 Dakar-Niger railway strike, where the collective action of workers becomes the primary hero. The novel highlights how systemic oppression, through unfair wages, forced labor, and racial discrimination, is met with the solidarity of the working class and their families.

God's Bits of Wood illustrates the transition of laborers from passive, marginalized "bits of wood" into an organized, political force capable of defying the colonial state. The focus on the worker-protagonist is evident through characters like Ibrahima Bakayoko, who embody revolutionary consciousness and guide the workers against the white railroad colonial oppressors. The novel emphasizes that the real power lies in the unified collective—the workers, women, and even children—rather than in a singular individual leader, thus showcasing the core tenets of socialist realism. The "have-nots" in the novel are not merely surviving; they are actively changing their circumstances, transforming traditional roles of patriarchy and dependency into a new, progressive, and communal identity. The narrative documents the everyday misery of the workers, such as the scarcity of water and food, which is intentionally used to create intense drama and to highlight the injustice of the ruling capitalist class. The workers, who were previously divided by tribal, generational, and religious differences, overcome these gaps to unite in a struggle that brings the railway services to a standstill.

A crucial aspect of *God's Bits of Wood* is the redefinition of the worker-protagonist to include women, who play a vital, active role in the fight against colonial oppression, demonstrating that labor is not purely a male domain. Characters like Mame Sofi and Ramatoulaye are portrayed as leaders and breadwinners, who, when men are weakened, take over the duty of resistance and defy the authorities. These women challenge the patriarchal structure within their own society, just as they challenge the colonial masters, reflecting a socialist feminist perspective within the broader framework of socialist realism. The novel's focus on the "have-nots" also extends to the community of women and their families, who, by engaging in the march from Thiès to Dakar, prove their agency and determination to win a better life for their children. This collective march, filled with hardships and resilience, becomes a central image of solidarity, highlighting the power of ordinary

people, often despised or ignored, to effect real change, asserting their dignity against the colonial "machine" that treated them as replaceable, non-human units of production.

Socialist realism in this context functions as an optimistic, revolutionary art that, while depicting misery, refuses to accept the status quo, pushing instead for a new, post-colonial future. The narrative maintains a strong, unwavering commitment to the cause of the people, aiming to inspire a sense of collective power and national, even international, worker solidarity. The focus on the worker-protagonist extends to the portrayal of the "traitor," such as Diara, whose eventual trial by his fellow workers serves to illustrate the necessity of unity and the dangers of individualistic greed. Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* is therefore a landmark, not only for its depiction of a specific strike but for its contribution to an African proletarian aesthetic that links the struggle for independence with the struggle for economic equality and social justice. Through this, the worker-protagonist becomes the true architect of the new African society, rising above colonial degradation to assert their historical role, embodying the ultimate triumph of the laboring classes (Sembene Ousmane, 1960).

3. Social Realism and the Pre-colonial/Colonial Mirror

3.1 Cultural Affirmation

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* acts as a vital act of cultural affirmation, countering colonial narratives that portrayed pre-colonial Africa as a primitive, "dark" continent lacking history or structure. By utilizing the realistic mode of social realism, Achebe reconstructs the nuanced world of the Umuofia clan, showcasing a complex society with its own religious hierarchy, judicial systems, and agrarian traditions. Achebe intentionally embeds Igbo vocabulary, proverbs, and folklore within the English language, creating a hybrid narrative that highlights African dignity and intellectual depth. The novel provides an inside perspective of Igbo life, showing it to be an organic, tightly-knit community with intricate social structures and profound community values rather than a chaotic landscape. By presenting this rich cultural landscape before the European arrival, Achebe asserts that Africans had an established history, civilization, and voice, challenging European writers' depictions. The reclamation of this narrative is not merely nostalgic; it is a strategic effort to validate African identity in the post-colonial era by acknowledging its rich origins. This cultural reclamation functions as a direct confrontation with colonial stereotypes and works towards reclaiming the agency lost to imperial storytelling. The novel highlights that before the "civilizing mission" of the colonizers, Igbo society possessed a functioning, coherent, and profound value system. Ultimately, Achebe's work allows the reader to perceive the deep-rooted tradition of Igbo civilization, which is presented with all its successes and internal flaws, offering a balanced, honest, and realistic account of the society. Through this, he ensures that the pre-colonial African experience is recorded through an authentic native voice rather than the warped perspectives of Western agents (Achebe, 1958).

The novel exposes the psychological, sociological, and cultural trauma of colonial intrusion through its portrayal of the gradual dismantling of the Igbo way of life. Achebe depicts the arrival of missionaries and British administrators not as a grand, positive intervention, but as a disruptive force that creates intense friction, shattering the social coherence of the clan. The story illustrates how colonial powers exploited the existing divisions and tensions within the society, turning the community against itself to establish hegemony. This disruption is manifested in the loss of

traditional authority, the devaluation of sacred traditions, and the fragmentation of family structures, which causes profound emotional trauma among the community members. The trauma is, for instance, evidenced in the shifting loyalties of the younger generation, such as Nwoye, who feel alienated by their own culture and find solace in the new religion, thereby fracturing the intergenerational transfer of culture. Achebe focuses on the "epistemic violence" of colonization, documenting how the imposition of a foreign religion and legal system disrupts a centuries-old way of life. The community, which was once organized and self-sufficient, finds itself under the thumb of a superior, destructive force that labels its traditions as savage and barbaric. The white man's arrival is likened to a "knife" that broke the things that held the clan together, leaving them to fall apart psychologically and physically. This portrayal of the colonial impact highlights the traumatic loss of sovereignty and the feeling of cultural shame that was systematically engineered by the colonizer, demonstrating the "slow death" of an entire civilization. Achebe carefully explores this erosion without sentimentalizing, allowing the reality of the traumatic change to be understood (Achebe, 1958).

Okonkwo serves as the quintessential tragic figure who embodies the personal and collective trauma of colonial confrontation, representing the struggle for self-identity amidst the violent dissolution of traditional structures. His rigid adherence to masculinity and tradition makes him unable to adapt to the new, subtle power of the colonizers, turning his battle for cultural preservation into a desperate, losing fight. Okonkwo's frustration and final, despairing act of suicide represent the destruction of the old guard, a poignant example of the internal and external forces that cause the "things to fall apart". The novel, through his downfall, showcases the psychological trauma of being a native, proud person who has been reduced to a marginal, "despised" subject in their own home. Okonkwo's inability to see his world as it changes leads him to a final act of revolt, one that, in the eyes of the colonizer, is just a minor, tragic, and forgotten footnote in a grander story. This highlights how the trauma experienced by individuals is rendered invisible and insignificant within the broader, arrogant narrative of colonial progress. The protagonist's personal failure and subsequent death are inseparable from the wider community's defeat, symbolizing the tragic end of a self-determined way of life and the triumph of the new order. This portrayal of the individual and collective downfall creates a vivid, unvarnished picture of the human cost of colonial domination and the lasting scars it inflicts upon the African psyche. Through Okonkwo, Achebe captures the devastating emotional turmoil of a man who cannot navigate the rapidly changing world. Therefore, the text serves as a powerful testament to the traumatic impact of cultural erosion on both the individual and society (Achebe, 1958).

3.2 Conflict of Identities

The collision between traditional African values and modern Western influences constitutes a profound conflict of identity, often manifesting as a painful negotiation between communal duty and individualistic pursuits. Indigenous belief systems, which prioritize ancestral respect, communal responsibility, and holistic cosmic views, face dismantling by Western education, Christianity, and secular urbanization. This clash is deeply psychological, as seen in literature where characters struggle to find their place between the stability of their ancestors and the perceived progress of the colonial "white-man". Traditional rites of passage and marriage customs are frequently eroded, replaced by modern practices that prioritize individual choice over communal blessing, creating a generational gap that leaves younger Africans questioning their

cultural authenticity. This conflict often results in a hybrid identity where the native culture is often neglected for the "civilized" foreign alternative.

The imposition of Western education and economic systems has frequently led to cultural disorientation, creating a new generation that is often alien in their own land, favoring foreign hip-hop and Nollywood-style media over indigenous traditions. In places like Nigeria, this has triggered a significant loss of local language and moral values, with the erosion of traditional, collective social behavior leading to increased individualism. The collision is not only in daily behavior but also in the way Africans perceive time and death, with colonial modernity often viewing African ways as archaic or primitive. Consequently, traditional hospitality and the sacredness of life are undermined by a materialistic and consumerist mindset driven by globalized influences. The resulting generation is often misplaced in their parents' homeland and the westernized world.

Finally, the literary representation of this conflict often highlights that the crisis generated is often extreme, antagonistic, and leaves characters feeling fractured and disoriented, struggling to navigate multiple cultural identities. Scholars argue that the clash between the two paradigms—traditional communalism and Western individualism—erodes the moral fabric that once unified local communities. Authors such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have documented this traumatic transition, portraying characters like Okonkwo or Waiyaki who are destroyed because they cannot reconcile the rapidly changing socio-political landscape with their deeply held traditional norms. The ongoing struggle is not merely about adapting to change, but about a fight for survival in a world that often requires sacrificing African heritage for Western-modeled development. Ultimately, the conflict of identities continues to evolve, as urban Africans strive to balance the rich heritage of the past with the undeniable realities of a globalized, modern existence (*Adapted from discussions of African literature and socioculture, April 2026*)

4. The Post-Colonial Mirror: Corruption and Disillusionment

Political corruption and dysfunction in post-colonial African literature are profoundly explored through narratives of leadership failure, where newly empowered elites adopt the exploitative tactics of former colonial masters. Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) illustrates this through Obi Okonkwo, an idealistic young man whose moral downfall is necessitated by the suffocating pressures of a corrupt society and his own inability to navigate personal, cultural, and financial obligations in a dysfunctional state. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) presents a more severe critique of neo-colonial Kenyan leadership, showing how politicians like Nderi wa Riera, alongside "political-capitalists," conspire with foreign interests to betray the masses for personal enrichment. These texts depict the transformation of leadership into a "political-capitalist" class that prioritizes greed and wealth accumulation over the welfare of the citizenry. The resulting atmosphere is one of disillusionment, as the promise of independence is eroded by moral decay, political dysfunction, and the entrenchment of class divisions. The novels also highlight how the elite use, among other things, ethnic chauvinism and manipulation of cultural values to maintain their grasp on power and divide the common people. Both Achebe and Ngugi portray the post-colonial state as a "political wasteland," where the political elite in authority are largely seen as agents of rot rather than progress, resulting in a systemic collapse of moral values and political stability.

Economic injustice and the violence of poverty are central themes in African literature that illuminate the harsh realities of the working class and the marginalized poor. Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979) focuses heavily on the degradation of the masses, portraying poverty not just as a lack of resources but as a form of physical and psychological violence inflicted upon individuals like Idemudia and Adisa. Iyayi exposes how the political-capitalist system keeps the lower class trapped in a constant struggle for survival while the bourgeoisie lives off their exploited sweat. In a similar vein, Aminatta Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* (1979) highlights the economic, spiritual, and social marginalization of the poor in Senegal, revealing the hypocrisy of the ruling class who use the needy for spiritual redemption while simultaneously attempting to hide them from public view. Both authors use their narratives to expose how wealth is accumulated through corrupt means, such as the manipulation of government contracts and the outright exploitation of labor, while the poor are treated as mere commodities. This literature argues that in societies with a wide gap between the "haves" and "have-nots," class struggle is not only natural but necessary, representing a desperate cry for dignity and equity. The depictions of poverty in these novels are designed to incite awareness, showing how the "violence" of structural inequality leads to the erosion of human dignity and the fragmentation of societal moral structures.

The role of the writer as a citizen and active participant in national affairs is a key, often contentious, element of African literature, casting the artist in the role of a national reformer or a moral judge/umpire. Writers like Ngugi and Achebe often feel it is their duty to guide their society through the chaotic aftermath of colonialism, using their art to educate, criticize, and, in some cases, advocate for revolutionary change. This commitment often means that the artist rejects the idea of "art for art's sake" and instead embraces "art for society's sake," often taking on the responsibility to expose the corruption and failures of the new political class. The writer acts as a watchdog, exposing the hypocrisy of rulers and identifying with the oppressed masses, which is especially prominent in the works of writers who hold a Marxist worldview, such as Ngugi and Festus Iyayi. While some writers focus on warning the society of imminent danger or moral decay, others, particularly in their later works, might adopt a more radical, reformist approach. This role involves educating the citizenry about the true nature of their exploitation, advocating for a just and egalitarian society, and holding the elite accountable for their actions. This, in essence, is the artist acting as a "national judge" or moral umpire who attempts to steer the nation toward a better, more equitable, and just future.

5.1 Characterization: The Ordinary Worker, Disillusioned Elite, and Exploited Woman African social realism often centers on the ordinary worker, moving away from idealized heroic figures to focus on the collective struggle of the proletariat. These characters, such as the railway strikers in Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*, represent the collective consciousness fighting against neo-colonial exploitation. Their characterization emphasizes resilience, endurance, and the dignity found in labor, making them archetypes of resistance rather than just victims of circumstance. The realism is rooted in their daily struggles for better wages, rights, and dignity, which reflect the broader societal conflicts in post-independence African nations. These worker figures are often collectively characterized, highlighting the importance of unionism and shared purpose in confronting authority. Through their experiences, authors critique both the colonial powers and the new ruling elite, emphasizing the need for fundamental social change.

The disillusioned elite character serves as a crucial element in highlighting the broken promises of post-independence Africa, frequently portrayed as decadent and alienated from their communities.

In works like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* or Sembène's *Xala*, these figures are trapped in a self-inflicted crisis of identity, embodying the corruption and moral decay that followed the departure of colonial powers. They are often affluent, having adopted Western lifestyles, yet they are inwardly empty and politically bankrupt, unable to solve the material problems of their people. Their downfall is typically swift, representing a moral judgment on their betrayal of the independence struggle. This type of characterization exposes the hypocrisy of the newly formed African ruling class who often mirror the exploitation of the former colonizers.

The exploited woman is a central figure of resistance in African social realism, representing the intersection of cultural patriarchal oppression and socioeconomic marginalization. Characters in novels like Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* or in Sembène's films like *Moolaadé* are often forced to navigate complex traditional gender roles while dealing with the harsh realities of modernization and economic hardship. They are portrayed not merely as passive victims, but as agents of change who often exhibit greater moral strength than their male counterparts. These women fight against both traditional patriarchal structures and modern, oppressive regimes, frequently emerging as the moral conscience of their societies. Their struggle is often depicted as a fight for agency and the right to define their own destiny, bringing to light the often-ignored contributions of women to social justice. —Ousmane Sembène, 1960 (*God's Bits of Wood*)

5.2 Narrative Technique: The Integration of Oral Traditions (Proverbs, Storytelling)

The integration of oral traditions—such as proverbs, folktales, and riddles—into the narrative structure of African social realism creates an authentic, indigenous voice that acts as a resistance against Western literary hegemony. Authors embed these elements not merely for decorative effect but as essential tools for reflecting the African worldview and moral framework. Proverbs, for example, function as wisdom-laden capsules, providing moral judgment and summarizing complex situations, as famously utilized by Chinua Achebe to show that African culture is sophisticated and not devoid of structure. This technique grounds the narrative in the local, making the realism authentically "African" by utilizing the collective knowledge of the community. By incorporating the "rhythm of the oral" into the written word, writers ensure their work resonates with the community it depicts.

Storytelling, often framed through the perspective of community elders or a collective voice, is used to bridge the gap between traditional history and modern realities. This narrative technique mimics the communal, participatory experience of African storytelling, where the narrator and audience interact, reinforcing shared values and social norms. In many social realist novels, characters often recount myths or folktales that act as a mirror, reflecting on their present struggles, thus allowing the story to gain depth and cultural resonance. This storytelling method is used for both didactic purposes and for preserving the cultural identity of a community that is under threat from external forces. It provides a rhythmic, conversational flow to the prose, making the narrative accessible and deeply rooted in a shared cultural memory.

Finally, the oral technique of "call-and-response" is frequently adapted into the structural layout of the novel, alternating between individual action and collective voice, which emphasizes the theme of communal responsibility. This structure allows the novel to move between the inner psychological world of a character and the broader societal, political landscape. It often gives the narrative a dramatic, performative quality, making the written work feel alive and dynamic, as if it were being spoken aloud. The integration of these elements ensures that the "social" in social

realism is truly representative of the people's culture, making the literary form a vessel for cultural assertion. It helps in creating a realistic portrait of a society that is rapidly changing yet still deeply connected to its oral heritage. —*Chinua Achebe, 1958 (Things Fall Apart)*

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of contemporary African literature, the following conclusions and recommendations are presented:

6.1 Summary of Findings: Literature as a Proactive Tool in Shaping Social Consciousness

The findings indicate that literature is not merely a passive reflection of society but a proactive "social engineering tool" that actively shapes consciousness.

- **Agent of Transformation:** Literature serves as a catalyst for social change, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and challenging established oppressive hierarchies.
- **Protest and Critique:** Contemporary African prose fiction acts as a tool for analyzing corruption, post-independence disillusionment, and neo-colonial exploitation.
- **Cultural Restoration:** Literature plays a critical role in reclaiming African identity, dignity, and cultural memory, which are essential for repairing the "dismembered" post-colonial identity.
- **Bridge to Development:** The literature analyzed serves as a "reconstruction material," enabling the reader to analyze the society, and using that analysis to promote national development and social regeneration.

6.2 The Future of Social Realism in Africa: Continuing to Reflect the Struggle for National Reconstruction

The future of social realism in African literature remains intrinsically tied to the ongoing quest for national reconstruction and social justice.

- **Evolving Realism:** While early writers focused on cultural affirmation, contemporary and future African literature will likely deepen its engagement with the "New Realism," which focuses on the lived, often disappointing experiences of the post-colonial state, as well as the effects of globalization and neoliberalism.
- **Focus on National Reconstruction:** Social realism will continue to focus on the "uncompleted task" of rebuilding African nations, specifically in fighting corruption, ethnic violence, and elite mismanagement.
- **Voices of the Masses:** Future literature will continue to be a voice for the voiceless, shifting focus from "nation-building" as a state project to "community-building" and empowering the masses to demand accountability.
- **Integration of New Mediums:** The future of social realism will also explore how new media and diverse, modern narratives can be used to reach a younger audience, ensuring the continuity of the struggle for social consciousness.

Recommendations:

- **Revitalizing Reading Culture:** Promote literature that engages with contemporary sociopolitical issues in schools and public spaces to foster a generation with critical consciousness.
- **Support for Indigenous Languages:** Encourage the production of literature in indigenous African languages, alongside English/French, to strengthen cultural identity and reach a wider, grassroots audience.
- **Promotion of 'Realist' Fiction:** Encourage writers to engage with the present-day social ills of the continent, ensuring that literature remains a strong, relevant agent for corrective psychology and societal change.

References

Achebe, C. (1958). *Things fall apart*. Heinemann.

Achebe, C. (1960). *No longer at ease*. Heinemann.

Achebe, C. (1966). *A man of the people*. Heinemann.

Aithor. (2024). *The role and function of language in society*. Retrieved from <https://aithor.com/essay-examples/the-role-and-function-of-language-in-society>

Akintola, S. (2019). Postcolonial aesthetics and the politics of representation in African literature. *Journal of African Studies*, 12(2), 45–62.

Abrahams, P. (1954). *Mine boy*. Heinemann.

Balzac, H. de. (1830). *La comédie humaine*. Paris: Furne.

BenevoDesigns. (2024). *Literature as a social institution*. Retrieved from <https://benevodesigns.com>

Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The rules of art: Genesis and structure of the literary field*. Stanford University Press.

Cary, J. (1939). *Mister Johnson*. Michael Joseph.

Dibia, J. (2025). Contemporary African literature and the crisis of representation. *African Literary Review*, 8(1), 77–95.

Duhan, R. (2022). Literature and society: A critical perspective. *International Journal of Humanities*, 10(3), 112–120.

Eagleton, T. (2002). *Marxism and literary criticism*. Routledge.

Goldmann, L. (1974). *Towards a sociology of the novel*. Tavistock.

IAS PCS Factory. (2023). *Literature as a mirror of society*. Retrieved from <https://iaspcsfactory.com>

- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press.
- Kwakye, B. (2019). Globalization and African literary realism. *African Studies Quarterly*, 15(4), 33–49.
- Moyo, T. (2017). Re-imagining postcolonial African identity through literature. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53(2), 150–165.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. (1977). *Petals of blood*. Heinemann.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. (1981). *Writers in politics*. Heinemann.
- Okri, B. (1991). *The famished road*. Jonathan Cape.
- Pulzatto Peruzzo, C. (2020). Literature and social transformation. *Communication & Society*, 33(2), 95–108.
- RAIJMR. (2013). Literature as a mirror of society. *Research Analysis and Impact Journal*, 1(2), 45–50.
- Rajasthali Journal. (2022). Literature and its role in society. *Rajasthali Journal*, 5(1), 23–30.
- Sembène, O. (1960). *God’s bits of wood*. Heinemann.
- Shaffer, L. (2001). *Sociological approaches to literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Iyayi, F. (1979). *Violence*. Longman.