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Literature and the Historical Imagination: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* as Historical Documents

*Clara Ijeoma Osuji**
*James E. Onyeashie***

Abstract

Arguably, literature holds a rich but still under-researched potential archive for the exploration of the annals of the past and, in some cases, can be subjected to historical analysis. However, there has been a longstanding debate on the relationship between literature and history, based on the idea that the two disciplines, ostensively, dwell on past events. This paper attempts to advance the understanding of the relationship between Literature and History by closely examining the historicity of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*. Remarkably, it is often difficult for the literary scholar or even the historiographer to, effectively, establish where history (fact) starts and ends and where literary imagination (fiction) begins in a piece of narrative work. This paper argues that literature is a significant part of history, therefore, evidenced by the "historicized-storytelling" nature of the selected two narratives where, most times, a sense of historical reality is evoked by the use of actual historical figures, events and settings alongside imaginary ones. It concludes that any comparison between the two

* Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Augustine University, Ilara-Epe, Lagos, Nigeria. Email:claraiosuji@gmail.com (Corresponding author)

**Associate Professor, Department of English, Augustine University, Ilara-Epe, Lagos, Nigeria. Email: james.onyeashie@augustineuniversity.edu.ng

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disciplines might yield more rewarding fruits when approached from the perspective of examining them, discretely, as cases of the documentation of the "actual" (history) on the one hand, and the "artistic" (literature) on the other hand, in the representation of past events that are mostly domiciled within human socio-cultural formations.

Keywords: Nigeria, Uganda, Achebe, Isegawa, history, literature, imagination, historical-documents

Introduction

Writers of literary fiction under the genre of the historical novel, such as Nigerian Chinua Achebe and Ugandan Moses Isegawa, have much of their literary productions steeped in the histories of their nations. Thus, literature can be read as alternative renderings of the past because, similar to texts on "factual history," the historical novel attempts to achieve literary truth-telling by documenting varying degrees of events and figures of earlier periods. In this manner, literature often allows the reader to have a reasonable peek into the "silenced-past" that harbours undesirable lived-experiences that, ordinarily, would have remained silenced forever, were it not for the agency of literature. By the expression, "silenced-past," the paper refers to American Toni Morrison's influential work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* where she explains that "silence from and about the subject [of slavery] was the order of the day [in early black American writings]. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing narrative" (51). The condition in America, at the time, was very much the same situation in the continent of Africa where books that are written by Western authors held sway for a long time and were, erroneously, categorized as African literature.

Through the agency of literary storytelling, writers provide intervention in the area of unearthing suppressed histories. The stereotypical image of the primitive savage that has been projected of Africa and Africans by Western writers had continued to be viewed as authentic. This was the perceived state of affairs of the African region until first generation African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Kenneth Kaunda and Ngugi Wa Thing'o, intervened through more realistic representations of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial African countries and societies. The Caribbean region is not left out the quest for authentic representation since the difficult colonial history of the West Indies can be gleaned through the literary works of authors from different parts of the region such as George Lamming (Barbados), Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia) and V. S. Naipaul (Trinidad and Tobago).

Also, the pursuit of literary truth-telling guides the African American accounts of slavery that have been authored by black writers from the turn of the 20th century. Writers that have richly represented the African American history are numerous and include Richard Wright, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Literature often revolves around cultural productions and authors, consciously or unconsciously, engage in the task of bringing the hidden and near-forgotten past "out of the closet" (Hostettler 415) in order to deal with its realities, and in the process entertain and enlighten readers. Consequently, much of literary writings dwell on emotional interpretations of the past through the inner workings of the minds of characters. Much of the emotional interpretations are accomplished through realistic sequence of events and choice of words/everyday language usage, that convey realistic temper of specific time as well as human experiences that reverberate more easily with readers of literature.

Nonetheless, a significant area of disputation in the longstanding conversation amongst literary and history scholars on the relationship between literature and history is the pervading issue of rivalry. Thus, Lionel Gossman maintains that the contention on the subjects of literature and history seems deeply entrenched in an institutional rivalry of which no literary scholar can remain unaware for long, and further clarifies that "[w]hen the modern study of literature was institutionalized in the last century it was quite clearly associated with and subordinated to history" (15). The similarity between the two disciplines is evident in other areas such as their shared narrative natures, but the mode of presentation makes a strong difference; and as Ade Adejumo explains, "there is usually the presence, in the literary enterprise, a marked fidelity to socio-cultural millieus which produced the literature. History also does this but while history hardly brooks authorial embellishment [in contemporary times], literature spices the raw data of history and social events with the creative imagination of the writer" (97). This type of spiced-up storytelling is more likely to attract and retain the attention of readers more than the traditional style in which history is documented. For instance, when a reader gets attracted to literary works such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles,* such reader would be brought face to face with history. This way, more readers who would never have studied any history books would continue to get to know about the collision between British rule and traditional Igbo culture in southeast Nigeria and the excruciating postcolonial power struggles of Milton Obote and Idi Amin in Uganda as well as the role of the West in birthing that struggle and untold human suffering.

Notably, among the three main genres of literature, the place of prose fiction in, effectively, recreating realistic past events is without much reservation. In an interview with Helen Daniel, David Malouf explains the significance of the imagination in helping readers to, more profoundly, have a clearer perception of lived-experiences of the past. He elucidates that:

> Our only way of grasping our history—and by history I really mean what has happened to us, and what determines what we are now and where we are now—the only way of really coming to terms with that is by people's entering into it in their imagination, not by the world of facts, but by being there. And the only thing really which puts you there in that kind of way is fiction. Poetry may do so, drama may do so, but it's mostly going to be fiction. It's when you have actually been there and become a character again in that world. (Malouf 3)

While for Malouf, the historical novel plays an important role in the representation of culture since it allows readers to interact with the past in a more meaningful way than factual writing struggles to do, Hayden White insists that "the conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information" (149). Perhaps, this emphasis on the importance of the authentic information in artistic fictional accounts for the reason historian Robert Rosenstone, insists that a lack of coordination between an author's use of language and the world the author attempts to encapsulate and document, can make such world to pass as not really authentic (12). However, both disciplines – literature and history have had a fair share of scholarly reservations based on the issue of authenticity concerning a number of issues such as accuracy of source of materials/criteria for selection, writing styles as well as method of research and documentation. In an interesting article, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," the American cultural critic and historian, Richard Slotkin, argues that the historical novel can recount the past as accurately as history, because it should involve similar research methods and critical interpretation of the data (225). Other writers such as Mark McKenna insist that the historical authority with which mythic fiction is viewed by readers, generally, hurts history as a factual form means of documenting the past (*Financial Review*), Inga Clendinnen points out that "novelists have been doing their best to bump historians off the track" (16). Both authors are of the view that historical literatures usurp the role of history by creating fictive histories that undermine works of professional historians.

Whilst sometimes, history is constrained to be economical with facts due to socio-political and religious reasons; literature can tell the truth by hiding under the

cover of the artistic license that is commonly associated with imaginative writings. Equally, certain unsavory truths that have been carefully and consciously omitted by history can be challenged or be brought to light through the intervention of imaginative writing. The truth sometimes hurts, thus, some accounts of the past are occasionally skipped in historical documents even on the simple grounds that such accounts may upset or hurt some important sections of the society. For instance, the history of slavery in America was not the same again after the publication of Morrison's slave narrative, *Beloved*, which is set in 1870s America. The opening paragraph of *Beloved* is captivating and situates the reader in a very specific place and time at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati in 1874. In this historical fiction, Morrison opens a darker can of worms on the atrocities of slavery that, otherwise, would have remained sealed from the records of history. This way, literature becomes some form of alternative history where the author can, under the authority of artistic license, dig up the hidden truths of the past.

In an interview with Bill Moyers in March 1990, Morrison makes reference to stories the "Master Narrative" which encompasses the domains of literature, history and the sciences. Morrison explains that "[t]he Master Narrative is whatever ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority on everybody else" which includes master fiction and history that have "a certain point of view" (N. Pag.). In literature, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe (*1719), H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), exemplify this type of narrative. Manifestly, the characters of Defoe's Friday, Conrad's "black cannibals who act as the crew of the steamer," Cary's Johnson, and Haggard's Gagool, all speak to the animalistic manners in which the Master Narrative showcases the black world. Thus, similar to Morrison's ignorant schoolteacher in *Beloved* and Achebe's District Commissioner in *Things Fall Apart*, these early writings by *Crusoe,* Haggard, Conrad and Cary, belong to the category of grand Master Narratives that sustain Western perception(s) of Africans in order to justify their activities in the African continent. Thus, Achebe and Isegawa set out to write against the Master Narrative in order to counter Western misrepresentation by producing more authentic histories of their nations through their literary imaginations of the colonial pasts of Nigeria and Uganda.

In the course of exploring the remarkable relationship between literature and history, some of the questions that demand for resolution include the following: Should the disciplines of literature and history, then, be regarded as intertwined and interdependent? Should literature be, rightly, perceived as some form of pseudo-

history? The two disciplines, though related, target different goals and objectives; they are subjects and branches of learning that are often separately designated under the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. Might literary imaginations, effectively, produce dependable account of the past? Significantly, literature reveals historical truths and is, consciously, crafted with artistic embellishments that are calculated to attract, entertain, and sustain readers' attention.

Consequently, through close reading, this paper attempts to explore Achebe's classic first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and Isegawa's debut narrative, *Abyssinian Chronicles*, as artistic texts that are historically shaped by the forces of religious, political, economic and colonialism, by examining their different historical contexts. One of the significant issues for the longstanding scholarly conversations on the relationship between literature and history is the issue of authenticity, especially, in relation to literary representations of history. As a result, while history is usually accepted as factual accounts of the past, the factuality of literature is in question and often held suspect because of its fictional nature. However, "[i]n Ancient times, the writing of history was a mixture of fact and fiction with prominent references to divine intervention" (Chirobocea "Perspectives …" 191). Consequently, the idea of imaginary writing is not solely a literary principle and might not even have had its origin in literature. This suggests that similar to the idea of literary imagination, there had been historical imagination which points to the notion that the acceptance of what qualifies as authentic history has evolved over the years. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that Achebe and Isegawa's *Things Fall Apart* and *Abyssinian Chronicles* are explored as apparatus of history through a random selection of factual past events and figures that are represented in the two novels. This selection of factual past events and figures are supported by secondary materials of which Morrison's essays and novel, *Beloved*, form a significant component. Thus, from the next section, the paper focuses mostly on three significant past events in each novel and examines them as realistic elements of authentic Nigerian and Ugandan history.

Things Fall Apart and *Abyssinian Chronicles* as Historical Documents

The image-making ability of the human mind to perceive and recreate realistic past events enables literary writers to draw on their imaginations in order to tell, re-tell or even fill the gaps in history. Literature often revolves around socio-cultural and political lived-experiences of individuals within familial and communal settings. As

historical novels, Achebe and Isegawa's *Things Fall Apart* and *Abyssinian Chronicles* are deeply rooted in the histories of pre-colonial Igbo society in Nigeria and Uganda's recent history. Maya Hostettler points out that the enterprise of "[t]elling the past" is a very difficult task but one that must be done. Hostettler explains that "[o]ne way of doing it is writing fiction. It needs the artist to shape this material into a narrative" that tells the truth of the past even when such truth-telling might be too unsavoury (215). In other words, fiction affords the literary writer a safe-path through which knowledge of the censored past can be revisited, explored and represented what has been suppressed. This category of writing falls under what Stuart Hall succinctly describes as "[t]he histories that have never been told about ourselves that we could not learn in schools, that were not in any books, and that we had to recover (52). Thus, for Hall, "[t]hat is how and where the margins begin to speak. The margins begin to contest; the locals begin to come to representation" (53). In this manner, writers such as Achebe and Isegawa also begin to speak from the "margin," and their narratives, *Things Fall Apart* and *Abyssinian Chronicles* become credible documents where the reader finds incontestable realistic echoes of the Nigerian and Ugandan histories. To precede the analysis of the two novels, a brief outline of the storyline of each work will be useful in helping to better situate their historical contexts based within the individual author's artistic purpose. Firstly, a cursory look at Achebe's celebrated historical fiction, *Things Fall Apart.*

Things Fall Apart is set around a few years after the Berlin Conference that took place in 1884-85 and focuses on the life of Okonkwo, in a fictitious pre-colonial Igbo community of Umuofia in south-eastern Nigeria. Okonkwo grows up from a very humble background but quickly establishes himself not only as one of the lords of the clan, but also as one of the greatest men of his time. In the nine villages of Umuofia, Okonkwo is idolized for his sterling personal accomplishments. When he inadvertently kills a clansman in a funeral celebration, he goes into a seven-year compulsory exile in order to assuage the desecrated land. This is because killing a clansman, in whatever form, is considered a crime against Ani, the earth goddess. He returns after seven years to find that some white men have arrived in Umuofia as missionaries and colonial administrators. This turn of events is unacceptable to Okonkwo; he puts up a fight against the European colonialists which culminates in the series of events that lead to his tragic death. Manifestly, the narrative is situated in an identifiable historical period around the years immediately following the 1885 completion of the partitioning of Africa and tells the story of the laying of imperialist

foundation in Igbo land (Pearse 105). The reader is shown through the portrayal of Okonkwo in Umuofia community what this era was like in Igbo land, Nigeria.

Since literature is part of the cultural heritage of a people, to effectively understand the nuances and complexities of the works of literature, one also needs to have a reasonable grasp on their historical contexts. Thus, through the agency of fiction, the author recreates the period of the 1880s in Igbo land; as a result, the reader is better able to piece together the sequence of events represented in this era. These include important figures, geographic locations, real socio-religious events, dates and timelines that enable the reader partake in the events. Thus, the reader sees, hears and experiences the information that may have already been proffered by historical texts through the life-like portrayals of literary fiction. Evidently, literature functions as a conduit through which events in different epochs are revisited artistically in order to showcase the past more vividly to readers.

Achebe's literary creations are often examined through the prism of the dialectics of culture, colonialism and the effects of Christianity with the resultant clash of Western and traditional Igbo values. However, this paper attempts a re-reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* based on its historicity. *Things Fall Apart* straddles the frontier between fiction and history; thus, from the lived-experiences of the protagonist and other significant characters in the text, Achebe depicts pre-colonial Igbo life and the eventual European incursion. Set in 1890, during the early days of colonialism in Nigeria, the novel presents an Igbo society in transition, from its first contact with the British colonialists to the growing dominance of British rule over the indigenous people. In Achebe's book of essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, he insists that "most African writers write out of an African experience and out of commitment to an African destiny" (9). Consequently, the author's main project is to go back in time into Igbo Communal life and show readers a well-organized society but not one without its own flaws. Therefore, he writes Okonkwo's story to counter Western stereotype of feckless black men such as the creation of Cary's main character, Johnson, in his eponymous *Mister Johnson* that is set in Nigeria. Achebe's first novel intensely challenges that Western stereotype of Africa and Africans.

Remarkably, through his literary imagination of the Igbo history in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has abundantly documented pre-colonial Igbo worldview, culture and tradition. The author accomplishes the documentations by vividly recreating ideas on the Igbo past; for instance, the rites of passage which includes the colourful celebration of *uri* (marriage ceremony) of Obierka's daughter as represented in

Chapter Twelve (81-87) as well as a detailed portrayal of Ogbuefi Ezeudu's death and funeral in Chapter Thirteen (88-91). The author provides hints on the value of personal achievements, Igbo market days, diseases that are regarded as taboos such as the swelling disease that claims the life of Unoka (14), beliefs in gods/ goddesses as well as roles of priests/priestesses, the potency of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves (13-14), communal events - the Feast of the New Yam (27-29), wrestling sports (34-37), Egwugwus and their roles as spiritual fathers of the land (64-69) and the Week of Peace (23-24).

There are also depictions of the phenomenon of Ogbanje and exorcism of the spirit child (6, 55-63), ritual killings of twins as well as the character of Ikemefuna (43), the significance of title-taking/feminization of untitled men such as Osugo (20), and the European incursion and the resultant undermining of Igbo civilization that is portrayed from Chapter Seventeen to the end of the novel. Interestingly, much of Igbo historical information that is portrayed by Achebe's in *Things Fall Apart* is corroborated by Elizabeth Isichei's pioneering work, The *History of the Igbo People*, where she documents early Igbo traditions (39-41), worldview (24-26), and vehement resistance to colonial conquest as well colonial experiences (119-139). To explore the authenticity of some of these well-known and verifiable Igbo traditional culture, worldview and religious beliefs in Achebe's novel, the representation of funeral rite of passage, the Egwugwus as dead ancestors that traverse the world of the living and the epochal event of European incursion into Igbo communities are examined. In this regard, an interesting starting point is the funeral rites of passage represented in *Things Fall Apart*.

The celebration of the rites of passage is taken seriously among the Igbos. This rite is one of the socio-religious functions that Achebe gives prominence to in his novel. Thus, the thirteenth chapter is devoted to the portrayal of the rituals associated with a warrior's funeral. On a quiet of night, the sound of ekwe musical instrument and cannons announce the death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, an influential elder in Umuofia. The entire clan attends Ezeudu's funeral, as a great warrior and holder of three titles. Even the *egwugwus* show up in solemn honour of the deceased as "[t]he land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors" (89). The ceremonial dancing, clanging of machetes, beating of drums, firing of cannons, and gunshots become progressively intense as the diseased is being buried in order to ease his passage into the spirit world. In Chapter Ten, Achebe mainly depicts the Egwugwus and their male-specific ceremonial role when they gather to administer justice in the clan. Their appearance in the village square is announced by their

enigmatic greetings to one another in rasping voices. The narrator explains that "[a] steady cloud of smoke rose from the head of Evil Forest" (67), their leader who boasts aloud, "I am Evil Forest, I kill a man on the day that his life is sweetest to him" […] "I am Evil Forest, I am Dry-meat- that-fills-the-mouth, I am Fire-that-burns-without-faggots" (68). The Egwugwus are masked spirits. This underlines the significant roles of ancestors in Igbo philosophy, who although dead, but continue to exit and re-enter the community to help maintain order in the world of the living.

Achebe devotes chapters 17-25 of the novel to the portrayal of European incursion into Igbo communities. The white men come to Umuofia and establish a church; they gradually win many converts such as Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye. The arrival of the white colonists with their religion weakens the bonds among community members. While the church continues to grow, schools and hospitals are built and the white men subject Umuofia people to foreign judicial system and mode of governance. A new convert, Enoch, unmasks an ancestral spirit (an *egwugwu)* during the annual ceremony in honour of the earth goddess, which is equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The next day, the *egwugwus* gather and burn Enoch's compound and the church building. The District Commissioner orders their arrest; after their release, the village crier announces a meeting for the following morning. While the first speaker laments about the abomination that has come upon the clan, the meeting is disrupted by a court messenger. Okonkwo has had enough; he simply draws his matchet and beheads the messenger. According to Andrew H. Armstrong, "the novel has often been an apparatus for, and aid to, cultural memory, especially as it engages with the painful past" (127). Essentially, what Achebe has done in *Things Fall Apart* is an engagement with the Igbo past using remarkable characters, settings and a unique language-style that enliven the plain history that is similar to the one recorded by Isichei in her *History of the Igbo People*.

Adejumo argues that history merely provides the literary artist with the raw materials which are manipulated to spin the literary yarn (97). The historical raw materials that serve as a source document for the literary writer are often embellished and distorted with events omitted in order to serve the author's purpose. For Chirobocea, "[f]iction does not claim to present the truth but history does and […], history fails at its purpose as it relies on the interpretation of representations and it is therefore victim of subjectivity and intentional or unintentional distortion. History is just a narrative, like fiction" ("Perspectives…" 201). However, what is important is that while both disciplines are related, they should be perceived for what they truly stand for; one for the documentation of an authentic past, the other as a life-like

artistic production based on events of particular epochs. Clearly, by reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the contents of Igbo historical studies in books such as Isichei's *The History of The Igbo People* and K.B.C Onwubiko's *School Certificate History of West Africa AD 1000-1800*, are made more life-like to the reader. Thus, the reader is able to grasp, more easily, the events that happened at that specific period of Igbo history in southeast Nigeria. Moreover, the reader will have more profound intimations concerning the actions and inactions of the people of that era, as exemplified by the attitudes and conduct of the character of Okonkwo.

Achebe makes allusion to the fact that earlier writings about pre-colonial and colonial Igbo societies often favoured the West when he informs Jerome Brooks in a 1994 interview, that "[t]here is that great proverb — that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (www.theparisreview.org). Achebe's allusion raises a flurry of questions such as, "what really qualifies as history?" "What is the place of literary artistry in the scheme of recording the past?" In other words, "is literature capable of producing reliable history?" Literature can significantly influence culture and, by extension, the history of that culture which might, in turn, initiate the re-writing of cultural histories. Simon Gikandi examines the connection between history and literature in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and maintains that literature dwells on "real and familiar worlds, of culture and human experience, of politics and economics, now re-routed through a language and structure that seemed at odds with the history or geography books" (3). Thus, for Gikandi, the historical fiction writer engages in truth-telling that is presented with a mode of language and form that is different from the writings of expert historians. In this manner, literature serves as a window through which an avid reader of fiction, who might not be an enthusiast of historical books, can get a reasonable glimpse into the past. It is for this reason that history, truly, becomes an important element in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*.

Unlike the Nineteenth century pre-colonial Igbo world of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* is a growing-up-novel (bildungsroman) that is set in mid Twentieth century Uganda. The narrative vacillates between national issues and the personal experiences of the protagonist/narrator, Mugezi Muwaabi. The sequence of events starts in a village around Mpande Hill in 1971, the year Idi Amin came to power after overthrowing the government of Milton Obete, who had come to power when Uganda gained independence from British colonial rule. The narrative revolves around the lived-experiences of a prominent Catholic family that

is steered by Mugezi's politically-inclined and influential grandfather, simply referred to as Grandpa, in the turbulent period of Uganda's history. Wedged between familial and national abysses, Mugezi grows up in the city of Kampala and struggles to overcome his despotic parents as well as survive school and work, in a highly volatile nation. The storyline touches on a range of time periods, from the 1950s colonial era to independence in 1962, with Obote as president and extends after the coup of 1971 that heralded Amin's tyrannical rule. The narrative covers political instabilities that follow the ousting of Amin and the return of Obote to power. The novel closes with a nation torn by guerrilla wars and the subsequent overthrow of Obote by the leader of the National Resistance Army, Yoweri Museveni. By this time, Mugezi has become a young adult and moves to the Netherlands in search of a better life. Similar to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* is a historical fiction. The works of historical fiction are typically set in real places, and often include details about the socio-cultural, religious, political and other material conditions that define the place and time within the setting of a specific story. Often, writers of historical fiction set out to correct some misrepresentations of the past. According to Ulrich Pallua, Isegawa attempts to rewrite history in order to correct the distorted colonial image of Uganda by representing the country's post-European struggle for independence and how the West benefitted from such distortions (28). Thus, the reader absorbs a good dose of history evidenced by real sites, around which the author weaves his narrative, and factors in Ugandan recent history into the equation of storytelling.

In *Abyssinian Chronicles*, Uganda is represented as an abyss - a never-ending cesspool of anarchy (751) while in Isegawa's second novel, *Snakepit*, his country has become a snakepit – a killing field (50). The author acknowledges that Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle's *Uganda Now*, Joseph Kamau and Andrew Cohen's *Lust to Kill: The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin* and Mahmood Mamdani's *From Citizen to Refugee*, helped him to artistically deal with the chaotic events in his country and the fate of Indians at that time in Uganda (Isegawa 792). The author's prior research on the historical timeline within which he sets *Abyssinian Chronicles*, demonstrates his interest in representing a realistic Ugandan past, using his imagination to interpret the happenings of the time in order to better relay the series of events in a believable manner. Thus, to present his readers with a realistic background to the story of the Muwaabi family, Isegawa digs into the Ugandan past within his timeline of interest, in order to accomplish his core artistic intention. Morrison refers to this type of fiction as a kind of literary archeology in which on the –

> basis of some information and a little bit of guess work [literary imagination] you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image - on the remains - in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. ("Site of Memory" 92)

Moreover, with the word, "chronicles" in the title of the novel, the reader expects a good dose of the historical in Isegawa's narrative. Therefore, reading *Abyssinian Chronicles* as someone who has not been to Uganda, the sights and sounds of the author's 1970s artistic representations of his growing up days within a very strict Catholic family, his lived-experience of the fallouts of Milton Obote and Idi Amin's race for power, the influence of Britain in this race as well as in their meddling in the internal affairs of the Ugandan nation, become quite palpable.

Although the progression of events in the text starts in the protagonist's village, this setting is situated in a real time which alerts the reader to expect a considerable degree of actual accounts of past events from the novel. Interestingly, Book One of the novel starts with the title, "…1971: Village Days," which is a reference to a particular period in early 1970s Uganda. Through the child protagonist, Mugezi Muwaabi, Isegawa represents some of the accounts of the Ugandan past by bringing in many historically accurate details of socio-political and religious events in order to present a realistic story, although the manner in which the details are incorporated and artistically woven into the narrative is, predominantly, fictional. For instance, the typical burst of activities in the cosmopolitan city of Kampala is brought home to the reader through the portrayal of important and long-standing familiar sites such as the Nakasero Hill, "[r]ising out of the bowl and swelling northward [...]. Lashed by asphalt and boxlike buildings, this was the home of wholesalers and retailers fighting to prosper in the doomed air of commercial asphyxiation," in Book Two (146). Also vividly portrayed in the Isegawa's narrative are other sites in Kampala such as the notorious Owino market and its mighty stench in Book Two (142, 524); "the filthy Nakivubo River" in Book Two (145, 190, 524); as well as Nakivubo Stadium that is "sweltering in its diaphanous illusions […] dripping with streaks of stale piss and blobs of graffiti, " in Book Two (135, 653); the Muslim Supreme Council Mosque which towers over the stadium was actually created by Amin "to control Muslim affairs in Books Two/Five (145, 494) and Lubaga Catholic Cathedral with its twin towers in Books Two/Five (145, 527). Isegawa does not only seem to represent a faithful portrait of these real structures and places but also brings the reader face to

face with their sights and sounds in a lifelike manner while, sometimes, giving histories of specific places and buildings. For example, the author brings to the fore the history of religious rivalries in Uganda by describing how the Lubaga Catholic Cathedral stands on the next old Kampala hill:

> shrouded in tall, gracious trees and bombastic history, its phallic twin towers flirting with the nippled dome of Namirembe Protestant Cathedral. The old rivalry dated back to 1877 and 1879, when the first Protestant and Catholic missionaries arrived in Uganda. It was a rivalry redolent with the blood spilled in unnecessary religious and political wars. In their search for allies, both factions had periodically turned to pagans and Muslims for support. This part of the city, with its places of worship, its hospitals and schools, was called the Religious Wing. (145)

Equally, there are portrayals of other actual places in the course of the narrative such as Christ the King Church in Kampala where Aunt Lwandeka and her long-time lover, the brigadier, got married in Book Six (695). The focus is on how the author brings the socio-religious and political history of Uganda alive to readers through the element of setting in terms of times and places. In northern part of Uganda, places such as Masindi "where the old southern kingdoms came in contact with northern peoples in the seventeen and eighteenth centuries in Book Six (672); Lango District, whose "most famous son, Milton Obote, was seeking refuge in some foreign country, well away from the troubles he had caused area and all of Uganda" in Book Six (672); the famous Gulu Road in Book Six (672) and Lira Town with its air of "cheerful disorder" in Book Six (674) are all likely to be identifiable to individuals who lived through the highly volatile periods of Obote and Amin's reign of terror. Sverker Finnstrom corroborates Isegawa's narrative in *Abyssinian Chronicles* concerning rebel and military violence in northern Uganda by documenting how rebels "burned some fifty huts and killed a local councillor and at least one Ugandan soldier" and abducted a number of people to carry their loot (157) in one attack alone. Finnstrom also confirms that there were prevalent gang rapes by government soldiers (183) in the Obote-Amin era." Like Finnstrom, Phares Mukasa Mutibwa records the political upheaval in Uganda during Obote and Amin's rule. In his revealing work, *Uganda since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*, Mutibwa documents the initial support for Amin's government (very much like the way Mugezi admires him in Isegawa's narrative). But as Amin eliminates his perceived enemies in order to consolidate power; he becomes unpopular due to his

institutionalised violence and murders (104-6), therefore, he goes from being Uganda's saviour to a tyrant. Mutibwa attests to Isegawa's artistic representation of the general political upheaval in Uganda during the despotic administration of Obote and Amin at that period in Uganda's history. Isegawa's narrative is also shaped by the instability caused by guerilla wars in Uganda around the middle of the 20th Century. This is also true of how his protagonist, Mugezi, perceives his place in the Serenity-Muwaabi's family and how he reacts to this self-perception under such socio-political and economic instabilities.

In *Abyssinian Chronicles*, Isegawa represents a highly unstable nation where the extent of hunger, diseases, violence, human suffering and death through wanton state killings are unimaginable. Besides, there are widespread incidents of rape by military personnel, of which Aunt Kasawo (555) and Mugezi (581) are victims. Uganda witnessed genocides during the reign of Idi Amin and Milton Obote – of which the character of Grandpa, the patriarch of the Muwaabi family, becomes a victim (532). Isegawa recreates other events in the history of his country such as the expulsion of foreigners from Uganda in 1972. In the novel, the author depicts how by presidential decree, Amin orders Asians that had not taken Ugandan nationality to leave the country within seventy-two hours and labeled them as usurpers of black Ugandans' economic power. By portraying this event in his fiction, Isegawa brings to the fore the psychological and emotional effects of this expulsion on Asians and how some of them decided to set their properties ablaze, some opting suicide, with majority of them deciding to just auction their properties to get whatever money such properties can fetch them. Mugezi's father, Serenity, brings home some of the auctioned items from the expelled Indians as prized possessions. Also, portrayed in *Abyssinian Chronicles* is the difficult time of upsurge of HIV/AIDS in Uganda, popularly referred to as the mysterious slimming disease, initially thought to be an evil spell (685-88). The narrator reports of the ravages of the virus as people die daily. Mugezi's family is affected as the virus also kills Aunt Lwandeka (718), Uncle Kawayida's two concubines as well as his in-law's twelve young unmarried women within three years (686). The expulsion of foreigners from Uganda who are mostly Indians and the unprecedented AIDS epidemic that are depicted in *Abyssinian Chronicles* are of historical significance both within and outside Uganda.

Mugezi refers to his grandfather as "an encyclopedia of our political history who had made predictions on national explosions" (534). Thus, through the knowledge of his storytelling-grandfather, Mugezi learns the role of the British in initiating the

starting point of modern tribal strife in the early history of his Uganda. Mugezi recounts Grandpa's stories of his younger days when:

> Kampala was divided between the Europeans and the Indians. Africans came from the villages to work there, mostly in minor functions, and returned to their villages. Life was segregated, courtesy of official British policy. The British had first used Indian soldiers to defeat the central part of the country, and when it came to conquering the rest, Protestant chiefs from this region headed armies which fought to spread the tentacles of British colonial rule. As in the case of the Indian administrators, bureaucrats and traders imported to administer the area Indian soldiers had helped to conquer, the local Protestant chief were given administrative powers in the regions they had conquered, thus planting the seeds of modern tribal strife. (193)

For truly, Britain played a huge role in the production of "Uganda [as] a land of false bottoms where under every abyss there was another one waiting to ensnare people" (751). The narrator further tells the reader that "[o]n the night of January 25, 1971, General Idi Amin, helped by his British and Israeli friends, seized power in a military coup. He overthrew his former benefactor, Milton Obote, the prime minister who had led the country to independence and had gone to suspend the constitution" (141). The implication is that the role of Britain clearly undermines the political and economic stabilities of Uganda under the guise that they are rendering assistance to the young nation. For as Richard J. Reid perceptively notes, "[t]he history [of Uganda] dwelt on anti-colonial struggle against the British, and the heroes of that struggle; the monstrous darkness that enveloped Uganda during the 1970s Idi Amin, and the violent aftermath; the resilience of Ugandans in overcoming war, dictatorship, poverty and the aids epidemic to build a national community of growing strength and confidence" (3). The reader emerges from the reading-experience of *Abyssinian Chronicles* with a profound sense of the turbulent times during the leadership of Obote and Idi Amin in Ugandan history. As Helen Tiffin argues, '[d]ealing with Uganda's colonial past, therefore, is to face the heritage of postcolonial writing back to the center, counter-discursively challenging the "dominant discourse" (99) of European innocence in under-developing Africa.

Ugandan history in the days of Idi Amin is presented in storytelling form in Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (which continues in his *Snakepit*) while the precolonial/colonial history of the Igbos of southeast Nigeria as presented by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (which continues in *No Longer at Ease* and

Arrow of God). One of the striking similarities between the disciplines of History and Literature is that they are often presented in narrative form. Both disciplines are stories told by individuals, or a group of individuals, as is occasionally the case in the documentation of history. In literature, writings in the genre of historical fiction such as Thomas Mofolo's as *Shaka the Zulu*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*, are unquestionably, significant historical documents of the socio-cultural and political histories of the ancient Zulu kingdom in South Africa, the harrowing and untold black slave-experience in 1880s America, the pre-colonial socio-religious and cultural lives of the Igbos of southeastern Nigeria as well as the turbulent political era in Uganda.

Literary writers such as Achebe and Isegawa understand the significance of the element of history as an important tool for imaginative writings. As a result, embedding imaginative arts within identifiable past, more or less, place a stamp of authenticity to literary storytelling. Olivia Chirobocea-Tudor explains that until the 20th century, the study of history was considered one of the noblest professions because understanding the past gave meaning to the present and established national identities (9). Thus, an appealing sense of the past is often gleaned from literary writings. It is, perhaps, in relation to this appealing dimension of literature that in his article, "Historical Discourse and Literary Writing," White maintains that "literature became history's other in a double sense: it pretended to have discovered a dimension of reality that historians would never recognize and it developed techniques of writing that undermined the authority of history's favoured realistic or plain style of writing" (25). Interestingly, while the use of stylish writings might seem unprofessional to historiographers, they become veritable tools through which literary artists woo readers and offer them a peek into the past through their literary imagination.

If Literature provides a window into knowledge of the past, can literature also be read as alternate rendering of the past of a people? How do readers isolate facts from fiction in a typical historical novel, poem or drama? For instance, readers have often asked if Virgil's Latin epic poem, *The Aeneid*, is a true a story. It is widely-believed by scholars to have been written between 12 and 19 BC and focuses on the founding of Rome. This epic is a work of fiction - although the poem contains sketches and allusions to real people and events before this era, no real Trojans have been historically traceable in Italy around the 12th century BC. Andreola Ross avows that *The Aeneid* unequivocally has the history of Rome […] (147). In the "Introduction" of *Citizens of Discord: Rome and Its Civil Wars*, Brian Breed, Cynthia Damon and Andreola Ross point out that the poet communicates both his

sense of Rome's history of civil war and the impossibility of telling that history outright: the poet can only suggest, sketch, allude, and align (19). In the positions of Ross and Breed et al., regarding the reliability and objectiveness of literary genres that appear to tell stories of past events, one can easily find echoes of history that suggest how much literature has given to the world, generally, in relation to its sensitivity to the knowledge of the past.

Conclusion

Literature is pure art and, thus, deploys writing-styles that are acceptable to the arts discipline. These are unique literary styles of writing that appeal to the readers of literature. Conversely, history is science, and therefore, records the past in mostly scientifically acceptable method of documentation in the Social Sciences, and thus, is constrained by adopting writing styles that are within the stipulated guideline associated with the writing of professional history. In storytelling, generally, the literary artist is inextricably enmeshed in a web of past events around which the very important idea of verisimilitude is achieved. In prose fiction, verisimilitude describes a situation where a story is presented in such a way that the events appear realistic. Thus, the imaginative prose writer targets literary productions in which a reader is left with a sense of realism concerning each narrative, or at least, the idea that the narrative is life-like and believable. Achebe and Isegawa's literary efforts to document and communicate their sense of the Igbo/Nigerian past as well as Uganda's recent history in the two novels cannot be claimed as professional histories. They are sketches of imaginatively embellished factual lived-experiences of individuals in Nigeria and Uganda that are capable of stimulating the keen reader and goading such reader towards further explorations of works by expert historians concerning the colonial history of the two countries. However, *Things Fall Apart* and *Abyssinian Chronicles* represent appealing and rich renderings of their disparate characters' lived-experiences in a maze where diverse historical epochs and artistry meet and constellate. Truly, the two novels function as fragments of the Nigerian and Ugandan past, therefore, their historical significance is not in doubt. Consequently, extensive comparisons and assessments in an attempt to judge either literature or history as more elevated than the other based on its seeming superiority, or otherwise, in truth-documentation, unnecessarily stretch the limits of the argument on the veracity of both history and imaginative writings as veritable record(s) of the past.

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