

# Historicity and Negrophilic Reminiscence in Tade Ipadeola's *The Sahara Testaments*

Gideon Uzoma Umezurike & Moses Odibe Ogbaji

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

[gideonuzomaumezurike@gmail.com](mailto:gideonuzomaumezurike@gmail.com) & [moses.ogbaji.188564@unn.edu.ng](mailto:moses.ogbaji.188564@unn.edu.ng)

## **Abstract:**

*This research is based on the exploration of Tade Ipadeola's *The Sahara Testaments* using new historicism. Since new historicism, as a literary theory, views literature from a historical and cultural contexts, it is a viable tool that sheds light on *The Sahara Testaments* as a surge into the historical past of the world—a quest to retell the story of the black race, a race whose history the world seems eager to forget, has under-taught; and whose present status is, as a result, undervalued. This project, therefore, dwells on the economic and social importance of the black race in the long course of history, as revealed in the primary text under study. What Ipadeola does in *The Sahara Testaments* is more than a description of the flora and fauna of the Sahara. He uses the Sahara as a metonymy, or if you like a synecdoche, for the whole of Africa, as he delves into recreating and reposition the true image and history of Africa which Europe and the rest of the West has bastardized in their supremacist quest for power and economic wealth. Ipadeola's a negrophilic invocation of history is clearly seen in poems such as "Our Hands," "Sahara Sighs," "A Great One," and many others. In these poems, the persona expresses love for Africa as he recounts pre-colonial history, showing the relevance of the black race to the rest of the world.*

**Keywords:** Negrophilia, History, New Historicism, Historical Materialism, Negritude, Eurocentrism, Historical Consciousness

## **1. Introduction**

The Western world, as part of its intellectual politics, is ever ready to downplay the history of cultures that are not her own and to uplift its history as superior over that of any other people. Thus one of the bitter consequences of colonialism is the death and belittling of native cultures, civilizations, and histories which had existed before the making of colonial empires. This, in fact, is the story of colonialism in Africa. It is for this that Adaoma Igwedibia and Ikenna Dieke in their reading of Langston Hughes' poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," lament thus:

History books, especially Western history books, rarely, if ever, write of the significance of African peoples in the course of early human civilization. Many simply ignore the early historical contributions of all non-Europeans. Native Americans and Africans are not usually discussed, only trivialized and minorized as a footnote, until the overly celebrated voyage of Christopher Columbus. Then all of a sudden these people are followed and chronicled through what are the most painful and dehumanizing time periods in their histories. (155)

This downplaying of native histories extends across Africa, the Americas and even the Asian continent where British rule held sway for a long time. Karl Marx in his essay, "The Future Results of British Rule in India," for instance, noted the implication of British colonization of India, saying: "The British were the first [real] conquerors superior, and therefore, inaccessible to Hindoo (sic) civilization. They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting

the native industry, and by levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society. The historic pages of their rule in India hardly report anything beyond that destruction” (N. pag.). Therefore, colonized societies are regrettably said to have no history at all, at least no known or recorded history: “What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of [that] unresisting . . . society” (Marx, N. pag.).

Another upsetting thing about history written from the perspective of the colonialist is that it “leads young [in other words, naïve] people especially to believe, erroneously, of course, that only Europeans had a significant role to play in the course of human civilization” (Igwedibia and Dieke 155). As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation, wrote Frantz Fanon who decried the bastardization of native people’s histories, the West paints the natives of Africa as a sort of quintessence of evil:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values . . . the absolute evil. (Fanon 32)

Hence the Eurocentric view of Africans, like those of other native people, are fraught with beastly images of savagery that leave readers in false appreciation of Europe’s unhallowed mission of colonialism which—although claiming divine beneficence and treating the whites as the holy knights on a mission to bring salvation to a beastly nation, a fallacious notion well exposed in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, *Things Fall Apart*, and in Mongo Beti’s *Poor Christ of Bomba*—was actually an economic enterprise backed by capitalist aspirations.

Resulting from this falsehood that mars historical document is the need to look for historical truth elsewhere other than in the Eurocentric documents of popular history. In this course, literary texts such as Tade Ipadeola’s award-winning *The Sahara Testaments* proves to be another means of accessing history. Therefore, this reading falls within the parasol of new historicism, a literary theory which gives critical attention to literature in a historically situated context.

## 2. New Historicism as a Literary Theory

The place of history in literary production has been a source of long debates in the area of literary criticism. As Rodney J. Decker notes, for many critics, literary criticism should take an ahistorical approach, that is, it should “simply declare questions of historicity to be irrelevant, or it [should] assume that the text is, at least in part (if not the whole), not true to fact if tested against the actual historical events which it describes” (2). Literature, for such ones, “is nothing but ‘imaginative’ writing in the sense of fiction – writing which is not [historically] true” (Terry Eagleton 1). However, a good number of theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt and Michel Foucault do not treat literature or the arts as an exclusively imaginative field whose material contents are devoid of the historical. Literary historians insist on “viewing literary texts as integrally informed by their historical milieu” (M. A R. Habib 760). The different proponents of this view are better known by the term new historicism, and what they share in common is the belief that there exists a great volume of history in literary texts.

New historicism is, therefore, “a general term given to a wide variety of theories and methodologies that are historicist in orientation” (Gregory Castle 129). In other words, the term describes a form of literary theory whose goal is to understand intellectual history through literature, and literature through its historical and cultural

context, which follows the 1950 field of history of ideas and refers to itself as a form of “cultural poetics” (Nour Hasan, N. pag.). The theory sees literature as a form of *critical history*. According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, the New Historicist approaches literary criticism “based on the premise that a literary work should be considered a product of the time, place, and historical circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated work of art or text” (N. pag.).

## 2.1 Background to New Historicism

Although historical interpretation of literature has been practised all through history from Plato to the present, the emergence of modern literary theories, and the connection it has with “the political and ideological turmoil of the twentieth century” (Terry Eagleton 130), made it ever more appropriate to classify historical critical approaches under one or other categories of theories which, though not originally made for textual discourse, offer remarkable ways of interpreting the text. As Anthony C. Thiselton mentions in his work *New Horizons*,

Literary theory, for good or ill, brings into [literary] studies an intimidating and complicated network of assumptions and methods which were not in origin designed to take account of the particular nature of [literary] texts. These carry with them their own agenda of deeply philosophical questions about the status of language, the nature of texts, and relations between language, the world, and theories of knowledge. (471)

New historicism, one of the emergent theories of the twentieth century, is rooted in a preoccupation with the historicity of a text.

Rooted in a reaction against the “New Criticism” of formal analysis of works of literature which was seen by a new generation of professional critics as ignoring the greater social and political consequences of the production of literary texts, new historicism developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt, gaining widespread influence in the 1990 and beyond (*New World Encyclopedia*, N. pag.). However, inasmuch as Stephen Greenblatt coined and used the term “new historicism” in the 1980s, textual historicism has begun since the end of the eighteenth century with German writers such as Herder and Nietzsche, and continued through the nineteenth-century historians Von Ranke and Meinecke to twentieth century thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, R. G. Collingwood, Hans Georg Gadamer, Ernst Cassirer, and Karl Mannheim (Habib 760). Friedrich Nietzsche hinted on and even wrote extensively on the relevance of history in the study of arts, as well as the importance of arts to the understanding and recollection of the past. According to Castle, the new historicism is strongly influenced by poststructuralist theories of language and textuality and is indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche, whose “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” sets out the terms for a historicism that calls its own assumptions into question and that rejects the dominant modes of historiography” (129).

Nietzsche’s view is that life’s existential cruelty makes factual history painful to recollect or study. In the light of the cruel existential conditions of man, he mentions critical history rather than factual history as the form that could best combat the oppression of a “present need” (“Uses” 72). He captures the need to set aside factual history in the following words: “If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it; every past,

however, is worthy to be condemned” (“Uses” 75–76). Breaking up with and dissolving of factual or proper history thus gives man the chance to derive existential succour from the history embedded in the text which is part of what he calls the supra-historical. Hence he recommends two alternatives to history proper, namely, the unhistorical, which is “the art and power of forgetting and of enclosing oneself within a bounded horizon,” and the supra-historical, which “lead[s] the eyes away from becoming towards that which bestows upon existence the character of the eternal and stable, towards art and religion.” The unhistorical and the supra-historical are “the natural antidotes to the stifling of life by the historical, by the malady of history” (“Uses” 120–21, cited in Castle 129).

Moreover, Nietzsche’s “anti-historical” (or, in a more literal term, artificial) approach to history is known to be Foucault’s theoretical foundation in his archaeological method to history (Castle 129-30). The growth of new historicism as a critical theory in the literature has not only been influenced by Foucault but, in fact, owes much of its impetus to his work, as he

Based his approach both in his theory of the limits of collective cultural knowledge and on his technique of examining a broad array of documents in order to understand the episteme of a particular time. [Therefore,] using Foucault’s work as a starting point, new historicism aims at interpreting a literary text as an expression of or reaction to the power-structure of the surrounding society” (New World Encyclopedia, N. pag.).

For Foucault, a historical “event” is not a stable phenomenon that can be captured by documentary evidence; nor is it the result of purposeful human action. It is instead a sign of domination, of the shifting of power relations. It is “the reversal of a

relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked ‘other’ (“Nietzsche” 154, qtd. in Castle 130).

## 2.2 Some Substantial Tenets of New Historicism

- *The mapping of a reading formation that mediate the relations between text and context*

Furthermore, a remarkable principle or tenet of new historicism is seen in Foucault’s method in his *The History of Sexuality* and in his other genealogical works. Foucault abandons conventional ideas about historical events, diachronic sequence, causality, and origin. Instead he follows Nietzsche to focus on the interpretations of the relations of power and how they shape human experience through the agency of critical discourse (Castle 130). Thus new historicism does not necessarily emphasize conventional ideas about historical events; it does not give a one-to-one correlation of factual history to textual or critical history, nor does it seek to offer a diachronic sequencing of historical events; it may or may not reveal causality and origin. In fact, new historicism

Has something in common with the historical criticism of Hippolyte Taine, who argued that a literary work is less the product of its author's imaginations than the social circumstances of its creation, the three main aspects of which Taine called race, milieu, and moment. It is also a response to an earlier historicism . . . which sought to de-mythologize the creative process by re-examining the lives and times of canonical writers. But new historicism differs from both of these trends in its emphasis on ideology: The political disposition, unknown to an author

himself, that governs his work. (*New World Encyclopedia*, N. pag.)

Therefore, although “all texts and all modes of reading must be understood as historically embedded,” notes Castle (131), new historicists recognize that “we can have no access to a full and authentic past, to a material existence that is unmediated by the textual traces of the society in question,” and at any rate, it is not the goal of the new historicist (Louis Montrose 410). Rather, what the new historicist must do is to ‘map’ the various connections and relations between literary texts and the social and cultural contexts. The result of these discursive negotiations and exchanges is the construction of what Tony Bennett calls a reading formation, a set of determinations that “mediate the relations between text and context” (Montrose 398, cited in Castle 131). Hence Castle pointed out that what Greenblatt offers in his cultural poetics is a form of reading that “draws from both materialist and textualist traditions and entails a flexible and self-critical framework for historical criticism” (130).

- *Flexibility in situating texts within specific relations of power and systems of public signification*

Although he coined the term “new historicism” and is widely considered a major proponent of this theory, Greenblatt is flexible in his insistence that literary texts are the products of history. There are texts to which he ascribes “relative” autonomy from social conditions. Nonetheless, he maintains that such texts (even though they may at times elude these relations and systems) are embedded in specific relations of power and “systems of public signification” (Greenblatt 5). Moreover, Catherine Gallagher and Greenblatt in their work, *Practising New Historicism*, differentiate between the flexible approach of new historicism and the approaches offered by theories like formalism and post-structuralism which parade themselves under the facade of close readings: “Where traditional

“close readings” tended to build toward an intensified sense of wondering admiration, linked to the celebration of genius, new historicist readings are more often sceptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial” (9). Despite this negative attitude towards post-structuralism, new historicism does not totally reject all the post-structuralist ideals; in fact, it owes a debt to post-structuralism, as it follows the latter in its assurance

That literary works mean any number of things to any number of readers (the doctrine of the plurality of meaning), freeing New Historicists to find the warrant for their interpretations not in the author’s intentions for his work but in the ideology of his age. Similarly, the New Historicist’s effort to assimilate the literary text to history is guaranteed by the poststructuralist doctrine of textuality, which states that the text is not aloof from the surrounding context, that there is a contiguity, an ebb and flow, between text and whatever might once have been seen as “outside” it. (D. G. Myers, cited in *New World Encyclopedia*)

- *Overwhelming interest in cultures that are distinct in time and space*

Gallagher and Greenblatt also reveal that new historicism takes special interest in the notion of a distinct culture, particularly a culture distant in time or space. They wrote that such interest carries the core hermeneutical presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated; “explication and paraphrase are not enough; we seek something more, something that the authors [and people] we study would not have had sufficient distance upon themselves and their own era to grasp” (8). The duo state that when reading “powerful” texts of history and culture, “we feel at once pulled out of

our own world and plunged back with redoubled force into it” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 17).

The foregoing reveals that new historicism is a literary theory that was prompted by the critical issue of whether or not “one can get beyond the textual level of analysis (of primary documents and historical accounts) to say something meaningful about the concrete social world” (Castle 132), a world that is unmediated by the politics of documentation which makes historical documents prone to doubt. If the past can be known only through the negotiation of competing interpretations of the archival evidence and through the critical awareness of the historian’s own role in the selection and representation of it, then an exploration of the archive is a prerequisite to understanding fully the relations of power in any given epoch and to subverting prevailing historical explanations (Castle 132). As such, new historicism expresses the desire to say something “true” about the past. And this truism is that found in the literary text, unmediated by mere historical documents. Reading such texts as Ipadeola’s *The Sahara Testaments* gives the reader the sense of history and plunges him back to the time past.

### 3. Methodology

The textual analysis of this research will take a subjective and, therefore, qualitative research method. This involves interpreting the selected poems from *The Sahara Testaments* using deductive reasoning. Expectedly, the three tenets of new historicism discussed above will form the basis of such deductions. In addition to these tenets, Aram H. Veerer’s assumptions will help to facilitate our new historicist reading; these assumptions are: that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; that literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably; that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to

unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature; and that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (Veerer xi). Nevertheless, practical views drawn from other hegemonic theories are to be adopted from time to time; but such borrowing is not to be done in a way that casts doubts on the theoretical plausibility of the research, nor in a way that will overshadow the primary theory.

It is with these in mind that we undertake the problem of burrowing into the past, a past unmediated by the Eurocentric politics of popular history, in an attempt to unveil the importance or significance of Africans in the sands of time, especially the Africans of ancient Saharan civilizations whose histories are not only underwritten but also seem to be totally forgotten and eclipsed in the Western-supremacist worldview. Reading Ipadeola’s *The Sahara Testaments* from the point of view of new historicism will therefore enable us to see the individual poems within the context of culture and history, and thus reveal the long-hidden truth that Africans are not insignificant in both the ancient and present practices of culture, governance, agriculture, architecture and politics.

Moreover, in the course of the analysis, reference to the individual poems in *The Sahara Testaments* will be made using the first phrase in each poem. This is for ease of reference, especially because the poems originally do not have independent titles. Also, our analyses of Ipadeola’s poems in this paper is inevitably limited in scope. We do not attempt to analyse every single poem found within the anthology. At any rate, such undertaking will prove to be a task in futility. Hence, our focus is on some selected works of the collection such as the poems “A Great One” in chapter III (*TST* 57), “Our Hands” and “Sahara Sighs” in chapter IV, pages 75 and 88 respectively, and “Arbaete Asmera” (*TST* 70).

#### 4. Discussion of Negrophilic History in *The Sahara Testaments*

If, as critics have often said, literary criticism involves the search for meaning(s) within the text, then a strategic way in which a reader could make sense of *The Sahara Testaments* is to see it as a surge into the historical past of the world—a quest to retell the story of the black race, a race whose history the world seems eager to forget, has under-taught; and whose present status is, as a result, undervalued. Just like Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” which, in order to pronounce the black man’s significance, delves deep into ancient world history, going as far as alluding to the world’s foremost power of Egypt, Ipadeola’s *The Sahara Testaments* could be reckoned a testimony of the world’s indebtedness to the ancient African race, the ancient civilization that took place within the Sahara long ago. The poems in the collection speak of a conscious attempt to revitalize a past forgotten.

While the flora and fauna of the Saharan civilization are seen in the many poems that constitute the collection, there are distinct poems that draw our attention, especially for their overt resort to the collective memory of a historical past. They include but are by no means limited to the poem “A Great One” in chapter III (*TST* 57), “Our Hands” and “Sahara Sighs” in chapter IV, pages 75 and 88 respectively. Even though these could be called independent poems, the link they make to the past (the collective memory of African history and the history of the world) will have us see them as the utterances of one persona. But what manner of persona? The persona is one who is historically conscious; one who does not only understand the past but also wishes to tell the story of the past so as to reshape the image of the present. In the following analysis, we shall explore how the collective persona of *The Sahara Testaments* portrays the relationship between Europe and Africa in terms of Marx’s historical materialism; also, it will be shown from the book

that historic civilizations have thrived in Africa even before Europe’s cradle for the black continent.

##### 4.1 Historical Materialism in *The Sahara Testaments*:

A fundamental principle of new historicism favoured by Greenblatt is the notion that literary texts are the products of history and are embedded in specific relations of power and “systems of public signification” (Greenblatt 5). Corroborating this point, Veeseer asserts that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably with literary language describing culture under capitalism (ix). Following new historicism, therefore, *The Sahara Testaments* could be situated within the context of history which depicts specific power relations that involve what Marx sees as historical materialism. Historical materialism argues “that human societies and their cultural institutions (like religion, law, morality, etc.) were the outgrowth of collective economic activity” (“Social Theory Rewired,” N. pag.). According to Seligman, historical materialism springs from a fundamental underlying reality of human existence: that in order for human beings to survive and continue existence from generation to generation, it is necessary for them to produce and reproduce the material requirements of life; that is, to carry out production and exchange, people have to enter into very definite social relations, most fundamentally ‘production relations’ (Seligman 163). In chapter four of *The Sahara Testaments*, we see the existence of this economic relationship between Africa and the rest of the world.

In the poem “Our Hands,” the persona describes how the world has benefitted from having an economic relationship with Africa. According to Marx, societies operate by the interrelationship between social classes (N.pag.). Unfortunately, the poem showcases that in this relationship between social classes, Africa is at the losing end as they

are the lower classes who are being exploited as slaves. However, the collective Africa-persona deems this role of profiting the world an honour, as he recount not only the achievements but also the significance of the Negro race. Beside the complaint that the history of the black race is undervalued in the Western world, Igwedibia and Dieke in their already cited reading of Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," also aver that Hughes is expressive of the age long historical achievements of the black race. Similarly, the persona in "Our Hands," of chapter four, recounts the significant roles played by the Negro in the advancement of the world, especially in the area of agriculture – which is, no doubt, the most substantial aspect of man's undertakings (*TST* 75). The persona attributes the introduction of the "seeds of sweet melons"—a seed that has spread and produced fruits which has benefited the global community—to the children of Africa whose peregrination is dubbed a northward movement from the cradle, "the deepest south." These migrants are said to have brought Africa to every mouth:

Our hands brought the seeds of sweet  
melons  
Up north from its cradle in the deepest  
south  
Sowing and reaping, as farmers and as  
felons  
Our hands brought Africa to every  
mouth.

Metaphorically speaking, the term "Africa" is a synecdoche which referent is the vast wealth of resources from Africa. But it does not seem that the hands that brought the seeds from Africa has undertaken the task by their own volition, for in the third line of the quatrain, the inclusive we-persona (which is a racial/collective voice) mentions that the "hands" have come "sowing and reaping, as farmers and as felons," that is, as convicts who are forced to do the hard labour of farming because of their having committed some felony. This is

reminiscent of Africans who were made slaves for acts considered felonious.

Even more clearly, the term "hands" in the very first line of the poem creates another image, which, as it could be said, echoes the ideas of the Marxist godfathers, Marx and Friedrich Engels. In *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Engels explicitly elucidates the meaning of the term. From him we learn that "the hands" refers to the downtrodden members of society who are subjected to long hours of work in factories and mines of industrial cities under oppressive and threatening conditions (just as brutally as machines are used in today's industries) which may lead to their death in a way more violent and brutal than that by sword and gunshot (139). In the context of the poem, "our hands" could be said to hint on the slavish existence of the black race. Thus the synergy of the two words, *hands* and *felons*, aggravates this image of a people who are seen as nothing but machines, field hands, that are devoid of hearts, souls, faces, and can be trampled on like "felons" who have no rights to make decisions for themselves.

Therefore, the emphasis on Africa's positive influence on the world nullifies the beastly image of a quintessence of evil which the West paints of the natives of Africa (Fanon 33). According to Fanon,

When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms, he constantly refers to the *bestiary*. . . . Those *hordes* of vital statistics, those *hysterical masses*, those faces *bereft of humanity*, those *distended bodies* which are *like nothing* on earth, that mob *without beginning or end*, those children who *seem to belong to nobody*, that *laziness* stretched out in the sun. (33; the italics is ours.)

However, the persona of *The Sahara Testaments* makes it clear that Africans are not bestial, nor bereft of humanity, and certainly, neither are they lazy, for he shows in concrete terms how different regions, states, peoples of the world presently enjoy “the seeds of sweet melons” produced and circulated by Africans. These states mentioned in “Our Hands” include not only Georgia, Atlanta, but also Virginia, Sichuan, and Mexico (*TST* 75). These places are seen to be indebted to black manpower or slaves who have at first brought the seeds from their cradle. Because of this grand role of the persona’s race, “. . . this morning, on Tassili’s rugged height / Two artists share a bowl of fruit salad,” just as “. . . this afternoon in Sichuan, a merchant / Of seeds will smile to his piggy bank,” while “in Atlanta, this miracle of nature / Wets as many throats as perched Georgia / Can bring to the feast of summer’s rapture,” even “Australia is hushed in the melon tango” (lines 5-6, 9-10, 13-15, and 20). These lines not only deconstruct the racist notion that ancient Africans were beastly and lazy, a view carried in works like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, but they also entrench the truth that Africans have imparted to the world in various significant ways.

Notice that inherent in the persona’s avowal of Africa’s indispensability is the humour which he speaks of, and which we will touch on, in “A Great One.” The Africans’ peculiarity of finding humour amidst distress is manifest in the fact that even as the *farmers* and *felons* go from *the deepest south* under harsh conditions of slavery, they still go along with the good in them, and also make out time to ruminate on, and allow their spirit to be sustained by, the fact that they are still of use to the world. The rumination on one’s achievements and good quality, which is just an aspect of finding humour in the time of trouble, helps the persona, the black race, to confront life despite its many harsh realities, and to overcome being discouraged by the very possibility of failure, as it takes on the good and bad lots of life as inevitable. This is denotative of what Dieke has elsewhere defined as

the tragic spirit—“the courage to face something that can infinitely outweigh all struggles and anguish” (83)—a concept that is inherently Nietzschean.

If indeed the tragic spirit is “the affirmative spirit which can aid the black man in America [and other parts of the world] in this age of anxiety to surmount racial injustice, cultural displacement—in short, the whole nihilistic foundation of modern life” (Dieke 83)—we then see and understand the reason behind the persona’s resort to it, for he is one who has undergone such injustices like servitude and cultural displacement (*TST* 70). Concerning the magnitude of such injustices, the persona in the poem, “Mauritanian Serirs,” of the same chapter confesses that even he cannot claim to understand the depth of all the injustices meted out on Africa. He says:

I wish I knew you better, Chemama  
Nestled by the Senegal, I wish I knew  
You better. Your friendly dark schema  
Rippling with the fecund and the new.  
For who can measure the length in  
seasons  
Of slavery for a life? Who on earth  
Presumes to know the many forms of  
treasons  
Perpetuated against a people? Robbed  
of mirth. (*TST* 71-2)

The persona thus mentions other economic products like sugar, cotton, tobacco, wool, for which the Western world has enslaved Africa over the years. He asks: “in a world that cherished sugar, cotton / Tobacco and house [slaves], who could measure / those horrid spans in seasons?” (72).

A bitter thing, however, is that whereas the Sahara (which is a synecdoche referring to Africa as a whole) has benefitted the West positively, it itself is portrayed to have received only the unpleasant fruits of this economic relationship. Some of these bitter fruits of colonization and imperial incursion are summed up in the poem

“Sahara Sighs.” In the third stanza of the poem, “Sahara Sighs,” the persona makes a long list which include “the consternation of uranium,” a reference to the bombs and other weapons of mass destruction that have found their way into Africa through the instrumentality of the West; there are also “the leaking whispers / Of spymasters, of cold warmongers, [and] dandy scientists” (88). These dandy scientists are not humanitarian workers as history books usually present them. Rather, they are economic profiteers and merchants who lay waste African lands in their quest “after every metal that prospers / Every mineral and liquid likely to interest actuaries” (lines 3-4, stanza 3). Due to the activities of these dandy scientists and profiteers, the

. . . Sahara transforms from silent  
garden  
Into busy inventory of implacable  
gatherers, noise merchants,  
Tails of capitals in [forgotten] cities.  
Sahara turns midden  
Pitiful as space, full of debris, the  
Golgotha of angry chants.  
(Stanza 4, “Sahara Sighs,” 88).

In the stanza, the persona uses gruesome images to draw attention to the pitiful conditions which Africa has been reduced to. While the expression “Golgotha of angry chants” portrays the image of a place where people murder themselves in brutal anger (for the word Golgotha originally meant place of skull), “the tail of capitals in [forgotten] cities” echoes the fate of cities such as Khartoum and Arbaete Asmera which are respectively sung of in the poems “Gordon and Mahdi” (*TST 21*) and “Arbaete Asmera” (*TST 70*).

As the persona shows, it is the present state of dissatisfaction that makes the Sahara sigh and long for the splendour of those ancient cities, as it dreams, “nostalgic for new moon, for Chaucer / Before the plutonium isotopes and yellowcake treasures / When it was right to sip from a silver saucer” (*TST 88*). Through these forgotten cities,

the persona reveals Africans as a people who have rich customs, vegetative wealth, and dense population of civilized societies before Western imperialism decimated their traditions and civilizations.

#### **4.2 The Sahara Testaments and the Re-Writing of Africa’s Economic and Historical Value**

Following a Jungian historical perspective, it is evident that the persona of *The Sahara Testaments* embodies a collective memory (a memory of mankind’s earliest civilization, of human’s peregrinations from the African Sahara to Europe, Asia, the Americas, and to other parts of the world). In the face of the present hostility against the race, this racial memory influences the voice of the persona, so that he reminiscently sings of his historic past. In a nostalgic feeling, full of the intense emotions often associated with Senghor’s personas (for example, the persona of “Noliwe” who exclaims: a “voluptuous / Beauty, aesthete of veld and wine lands”, “a great one for anecdotes”), Ipadeola’s persona recalls Africa: Africa—which is presented in the poem “A Great One” in the likeness of a lover, a “voluptuous / Beauty” richly adorned with “veld” (which conveys the image of grassland, of vegetative food) and “wine lands” (a conveyance of wine, drinks)—is seen as the “mother of every [human] race,” who shows “indifference to [the] skin” colour of its children (in the third stanza, *TST 57-8*). The persona honours the “blend of heart and mind” which Africa infuses in its original children so that they set out to bridge the “plural distances” across boundaries. Still in his panegyric tone, the persona now make reference to Africa’s tendency to find humour even in the face of the gravest situations: Africa finds a “calm spot / Where conversations hold [amidst] . . . the rough,” “inclement weather”. Even as the persona states that Africa is “a great one / For the hint of humour . . .” (lines 23-24), it is in the aforementioned “Our Hands” and in

“Arbaete Asmera” that this humour prove to be truly manifest (70).

The poem “Arbaete Asmera” could be read as an expose of the splendorous glory of an ancient Saharan civilization, a city of earliest existence of the Eritrean people. Recall Veesper claim that one of the central assumptions of new historicism is that literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably (*xi*). As such, literature and history go hand in hand, as every literary text is situated in the context of history. In the poem, therefore, the persona speaks of Arbaete Asmera, which he describes as an Eritrean civilization of “a different age.” This civilization has, despite its overreaching feats, gone defunct and out of existence, so much so that its name and city are now being mistakenly seen as relics of European colonization. Walking down (racial) memory lane (of the Saharan-African past), the persona narrates the history of this Eritrean natives, a history which he himself has not experienced but has inherited. In his description of Arbaete Asmera, the persona calls it a “stalwart land.” In this city, men practise speech in a distinguished, “egalitarian” manner. As the persona exquisitely captures it, the ancinet people were “obsessed with the finest diction / That human tongue conjure” (lines 3-4). As history has it, Arbaete Asmera grew during the 12th century through the settlements of shepherds from Akele Guzay. According to Luwam Berhane,

They founded four villages on the hills. Mostly Tigrinya and Tigre people use to live around there. These four clans living in the Asmaera area on the Kebessa Plateau were: the Gheza Gurtom, the Gheza Shelele, the Gheza Serenser and Gheza Asmae. These villages fought each other until the women of each clan decided that to preserve peace the four clans must unite. The men accepted, in fact the name Arbaete Asmera litteraly

translated is: "the four (feminine plural) made them unite. (N. pag.)

Appropriately then, the persona sings that “the Sahara touched down / Here and a company rose, grew like coral / Into land and sea, the people, windblown / Scattered like cotton tree seed. They become / History in the annals of many settled kingdoms / Inventing tools, diplomatic women, measured fame / And a bonsai resources of meanings and norms” (70).

We see therefore that as against the “single story” (Chimamanda N. Adichie) that Europe had brought civilization and sense of humanity to Africa, Africa was already a civilized, peace-loving people before the whites set foot on the African soil. There were the “diplomatic women” to broker peace when the voice of the men fail, there was the invention of tools and the earning of “measured fame,” as well as a huge “resource of meaning and norms” to rule over the people. These were Africans who rule themselves and made their own laws before the Italians came and subdued them with greater military might. As Berhane puts it, while “Asmaera indeed became more modern, . . . it was a city that had a long history before it fall to European colonialism,” a state of affair which has led many to the wrong conclusion that the city was merely an appendage to Italian rule over Eritrea (N.pag.). It is, therefore, the perversity of this lie that makes the neuro-psychic programmes innate in the persona respond by making available to him the cultural and historical repertoires of his race, so that he manifests the archetypes of the tragic spirit, courageously finding reasons to humour himself, reasons which spring from history (Peter Shepherd 181). We see this sense of hmour in the last stanza of the poem where, rather than weep or mourn over the bastardization of history perpetuated by the Europeans, the person muses over “a song of Nakfa [which] replays in my mind / Like smooth jazz flight notes of an impala” (*TST* 70).

Consequently, *The Sahara Testaments* debunks or deconstruct the Eurocentric notion that Europe brought civilization to the world, that Africa was a land of savagery and the quintessence of evil before the arrival of the whites. Contrarily, the book brings to the fore the fact that long before the imperialistic invasion of Africa by Europe, Africa (as typified by the Sahara) has witnessed the existence of some of the finest civilizations on earth. Also elucidated in the poems is that while Europe claims to bring development to Africa, its colonial activities in the continent, as in Asia and the Americas, is an economic enterprise wherein it is the sole-benefactor, with the natives at the giving and, therefore, losing end. Based on this, Ipadeola's *The Sahara Testaments* could be described as a quest to retell history from the perspective of the colonized, and thereby reshape the image of the black race (a race whose value the world seems eager to forget, has under-taught; and whose present status is, as a result, undervalued) in world affairs.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In this research work, we have delved into reading Ipadeola's *The Sahara Testaments* from a theoretical perspective that is grounded in new historicism. As a literary theory, new historicism sees the relationship between literature and history as inseparable. A new historicist reading, therefore, gives critical attention to literature's foundation in a historical context, as the theory operates on the assumptions that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; that literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably; that, however, no discourse – imaginative or archival – gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature; and that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (Veseer ix).

This being the case, *The Sahara Testaments*, as the name clearly indicates, testifies to the historical and economic worth of Africa. The book is situated within the context of world history wherein there is an unfortunate Eurocentric view of everything which erroneously perceives the world as being at the mercy of Europe's benevolence. Against this backdrop that Africa, and much of the colonized world, was a savage land prior to colonial incursion by European powers who were said to bring a sense of humanity to the natives, *The Sahara Testaments* shows that the Sahara is "the mother of every race," and "a great one for anecdotes" (that is, a fertile site of stories of great civilizations of old that were ruled by sets of conventions), as well as a historically rich continent whose outstretched hands brought economic blessings to Europe.

Compared to the volume and semantic density of *The Sahara Testaments*, what has been done in this paper is merely a cursory study of segments of the text, a study which by no means claims to be holistic. As such, there is still a large room for more research into the intricate matrix of thoughts which Ipadeola weaved in his book. We therefore recommend that more attention be given to other chapters of the book which are not covered in this study. Even so, the portrayal of history in the work needs to be given deeper reading in poems like "Sudan Rid the Landscape" (64) and "Gordon and the Mahdi" (21). It is my opinion that in these poems, a critic can gain more insights into ancient Sudanese history, and hence facilitate the revisionism which the entire collection perpetuates.

Finally, what we see in *The Sahara Testaments* is a conscious efforts at revisionism, the kind of revisionism which rewrites Africa into significant existence. The book does this by debunking the Eurocentric notion that Europe brought civilization to the world, that Africa was a land of savagery and the quintessence of evil before the arrival of the whites. By so doing, Ipadeola's work portrays Africa as a place which did not, had not,

and does not need Europe in order to exist. In propagating a negro-philic renaissance of history, *The Sahara Testaments* beckons on the Africans to think of its future not in terms of what the West can contribute to it, but in terms of how indigenous knowledge and efforts can bring about the reality of Raphael Patai's description of: "the only kind future in which many of us can still believe in this world of technical and social breakdowns, war and waste, a future in which problems still exists but are always met with determination and tremendous will, a world that is at once overwhelmingly attractive and ultimately reassuring" (85-5, cited in Dieke 114).

### Works Cited

- [1] Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." *Ted.com*. Web. 30 July 2017.
- [2] Berhane, Luwam. "Arbaete Asmaera: The Origin of the City." *Eritrea – Ministry of Information*. Web. 30 July 2017.
- [3] Butler-Bowdon, Tom. *Carl Jung- Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (1953). The Literature of Possibility*. Web. 30 July 2017.
- [4] Castle, Gregory. *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print
- [5] Chukwumerije, Uchenna-Franklin. "A Review of Tade Ipadeola's *The Sahara Testaments*." *Uchenna-Franklin Chukwumerije Blog*. 27 July 2017.
- [6] Decker, Rodney J. "Realistic or Historical Narrative? The Question of Historicity in the Context of Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation." Seminar. Pennsylvania, 1999.
- [7] Egbunike, Nwachukwu. "Introducing the WriteHouse Notable Series." *Feathers Project*. Web. 27 July 2017.
- [8] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1963. Print.
- [9] Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977. 139–64.
- [10] ---. *The History of Sexuality*. 1976. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- [11] Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- [12] Gallagher, Catherine. "Marxism and New Historicism." In *The New Historicism*. Ed. Aram H. Veesser. 37–48.
- [13] Gbogi, Tosin. "'They Are Secrets The Desert Kept of Itself': In Conversation with Tade Ipadeola's *The Sahara Testaments*." *Saraba Magazine*. 24 Sept. 2013. Web. 27 July 2017.
- [14] Habib, M. A. R. *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print
- [15] Igwedibia, Adaoma and Dieke, Ikenna. "Walking Backwards into Tomorrow: Poet Langston Hughes, Collective Memory, and the Construction of Historical Consciousness." *African and World Literature: University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies* 6-7 (2006): 154-168. Print.

- [16] Josh, Jagran. “*The Sahara Testaments* Written by Tade Ipadeola.” *Jagranjosh.com*. Web. 26 July 2017.
- [17] Marx, Karl. “The Future of Results of British Rule in India.” Web. 26 July 2017.
- [18] Montrose, Louis. “New Historicism.” In *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York, MLA, 1992. 392–418.
- [19] Myers, D. G. *The New Historicism in Literary Study* (1989).
- [20] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson. Trans. Carol Diethe. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- [21] ---. “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” In *Untimely Meditations*. Ed. Daniel Breazeale. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 57–123.
- [22] “*The Sahara Testaments* Set for French Translation.” *Sabi News*. Web. 27 July 2017.
- [23] Sam-Duru, Prisca. “2013 NLNG Literature Prize: How Ipadeola’s *The Sahara Testaments* beat 200 Others.” *Vanguard*. 17 Oct. 2013. Web. 27 July 2017.
- [24] Seligman, Edwin R. A. “The Economic Interpretation of History.” *Political Science Quarterly*. 16. 4 (1901): 612-640. Print.
- [25] Senghor, Leopold Cedar. “Noliwe.” *African Poetry Collectives*. Web. 30 July 2017.
- [26] Shepherd, Peter. *Transforming the Mind*. (n.p) 2001. Web. 30 July 2017.
- [27] Sotanmide, Oluwatobi Moses. “A Review of *The Sahara Testaments* by Tade Ipadeola.” *SankofaMag: The Magazine of Culture and Development*. Web. 26 July 2017.
- [28] Tanko, Okoduwa. “Modern Nigerian Poetry: No Destination, New Direction.” *The WWN Blog – Whole WoMan Network*. Web. 27 July 2017.
- [29] Thiselton, Anthony C. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.
- [30] Tumbleweed. “Translating *The Sahara Testaments*.” *Muddy Roads & Dusty Trails*. Web. 27 July 2017.
- [31] Veesper, H. Aram, ed. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.