In the 1980s whatever defensiveness, self-consciousness and uncertainty had characterized West African literature hitherto became things of the past. Critical debates continued to rage, but in reality these related not so much to the criteria to be used in evaluation, as to the quality of the individual works themselves. Most importantly, the award in 1986 of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Wole Soyinka demonstrated that even in the eyes of non-Africans, African literature could be placed unashamedly alongside literature from other areas. The award implied that West Africa has produced creative writers who, in the eyes of informed international opinion, are as good as the best produced anywhere else in the world. It was the surest indicator that West African literature had come of age.

In the Eighties there was no dominant trend as far as the novel in West Africa was concerned. Some novelists, particularly the women writers, utilized a conventional linear chronological form. Others, like Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* and Okpewho in *The Last Duty*, made use of alternating and shifting points of view, multiple narration and a non-linear chronological pattern. Some, like Mariama Bâ, capitalized on the immediacy of the epistolary technique. The most important thematic preoccupation was the exposure of the contemporary African malaise and the debasement of standards and values in post-independence Africa. But novelists, mindful of earlier criticism that their satire was merely negative, were anxious to posit alternative scales of value to those they were decrying and suggest positive ways in which African society could be restructured. However, in the Eighties, West African novelists showed themselves quite capable of handling a variety of themes not necessarily connected with social comment.

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Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*,² for instance, is a powerful presentation of the personal anguish and moral dilemma of the Imam, while the emergence of a new generation of articulate women writers like Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta placed the focus on issues like polygamy and the condition of women in Africa in a way male writers had never done before.

In poetry, the decade saw more and more writers like Atukwei Okai and Kofi Anyidoho making use of traditional African forms and techniques. There was a return to simplicity and clarity of expression, though poets like Syl Cheney-Coker continued to write in the old idiom, their poetry reflecting cosmopolitan influences characterized by density of texture. In drama, the most significant trend was the continued rise and importance of vernacular theatre and community theatre.

This paper does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey of all the West African writers active during the Eighties. Instead, it will concentrate on significant trends and some important works.

One of the most welcome trends in West African literature during the nineteen-Eighties was the consolidation of Sierra Leonean literature, particularly in the field of the novel. Sierra Leone had seemed to be lagging behind other West African countries in as far as creative writing was concerned. However, the Eighties saw the production of three novels - *Road to Freedom* by Yema Lucilda Hunter, *The Mocking Stones* by Prince Dowu Palmer, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* by Syl Cheney-Coker - and an impressive collection of short stories, *The Feud and other Stories*, by Sarif Easmon.³

Yema Lucilda Hunter's *Road to Freedom* is an accomplished first novel which dramatizes the experience of freed slaves from Nova Scotia who settled in Freetown and thus laid the foundations not only of the colony, but of the country that

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