

Literature as a Reflection on Socio-political Realities: An Examination of Three Nigerian Writers

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ABSTRACT

Considering the degree of resemblance between literature and human societies, one is convinced that literature is not just a social construct which is rooted in mere ideas, imaginations or imaginary situations. Instead, it is a social institution; a form of tradition, which has existed for a long time and is accepted as a vital component of a given society to perform certain functions. In this paper, we see literature as a social reality, which presents the state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be. In the selected literary works for this study, the three writers expose and condemn the harsh and hostile social and political realities which confront the African society at different periods of its evolution. Premised on sociological approach to literary criticism, this paper justifies that literature can be employed in working out national reconstruction being a tool that can make people co-operate with one another through information sharing and dissemination.

Introduction

In fairness, we do not castigate or oppose the *art for art's sake* in totality. What we frown at is its narrow mindedness nature, which sees arts including literature as a close entity of its own. Faulting the closeness and, or autonomy of arts as claimed by the exponents and the practitioners of the art for art's sake, (Berthoff, 1981, p. x-xi) remarks thus: "... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture". In other words, arts, which literature is an integral part of, and the society which produces it have strong connection which cannot be automatically disassociated. The elements of fiction are found in non-fiction. Hence, no work of narration; drama, poetry or prose can be completely for its mere aesthetic value of beauty and just the purpose of entertainment. Literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is indeed a distinct rapport between literature and the milieu/environment where it is invented with the aim of performing some relevant functions.

Literature is expressed in a given language since language is the major tenet of communication and the most outstanding feature which distinguishes man from other lower animals. Language is the vehicle, the context or the medium by which message content/information in any literature is been conveyed and disseminated to its publics. Language and literature therefore, are two inseparable kinds. (Wellek and Warren, 1968, p. 228) submit: "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation...Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation". Adebayo Faleti's *BayòrunGàà* (1972); Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984) and Tunde Fatunde's *La Calebasse Cassée* (2002) provide corpus for this discussion. The three playwrights are Yorubas from the South-western part of Nigeria. The Yorubas, without sentiments, are the most educated and perhaps the most informed indigenous Africans by every calculation or standard. These selected writers; Adebayo Faleti, Wole Soyinka and Tunde Fatunde capture their experiences in Yoruba, English and French respectively for an all-round documentation and global dissemination of African literature. Although in different languages, the playwrights are able to mirror successfully the resemblance of African society in art not only for us to laugh but also to have a sober reflection over the actions and inactions of various periods in history with a view to pinning us to reason out

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solutions to our societal problems. In whatever language it is coded or presented; English, which is our colonial master's tongue, French, a foreign language/the perceived second official language as proposed by the regime of Late General Sanni Abacha because Nigeria plays a major role in the sub-region and it is unfortunately surrounded by the French speaking countries or vernacular/a native language; African literature has the potential to institutionalize the desired positive social changes which will foster peace, unity and sustainable developments.

Theoretical framework

Our discussion in this paper picks tent with the famous sociological criticism since what we attempt to do is basically focused on sociology of literature. In understanding a writer's literary work(s), one may need to probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be "the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature" because it (the approach) takes into consideration "everything within our society which has informed the work" (Irele, 1971, p. 9-24).

Discussion

It can be argued that life is also concerned about measurement, assessment and judgment of events as well as human actions. From time immemorial, African leaders, with little exemptions anyway, have endangered the corporate well-being of their people as well as dashed the collective hopes and aspirations of the entire black race by refusing to do what they ought to do. After going through this review article, one will be convinced that most African leaders have indeed sold out their conscience for a worthless price, all for the material things of this world.

Adebayo Faleti's *Başòrun Gáà* (1972) is a reflection on the old Oyo Empire. The historical play exposes and condemns the epitome of power abuse as demonstrated in the character traits of Başòrun Gáà, a paramount chief in the kingdom, who turns himself to a semi-God. Before 1793, a period between 1750 and 1789; the operations of this dreaded chieftain makes the Oyo kingdom hostile and unattractive to any form of socio-economic and political development as people live in fears. The man, Başòrun Gáà, single-handedly makes and removes several *Aláàfins* for flimsy excuses. "Ìwọ náà kiyesi i: Labisi, Awọnibioju, Agboluaje, Majẹogbe, nje gbogbo wọn náà ni o şeun?" (*Başòrun Gáà*, p. 11)

Gáà, in his characteristic manner victimized Samu, another traditional chief in Oyo for picking up Obe when the latter killed an innocent person. Because Obe is Gáà's nephew, he sees nothing indecent in what Obe has done. Whatever crime Obe could have committed, he must be left unpunished. According to Gáà; "Ìbáà ti ẹ run odidi ilu, ẹ gbọdọ f'iya j'omọ oloye..." (*Başòrun Gáà*, p.73). [Even if he had murdered a whole village, the child of a chieftain must not be punished or tortured]. At the peak of his wicked reign, Gáà murdered Agbonyin, the only child of Abiodun Adegoolu, the Alaafin of Oyo, at that time. This action of ritual killing marked the beginning of Gáà's disgraceful end. His house burnt and like the biblical story of David and Goliath, young Akinwumi, Agbonyin's suitor, attacked Gáà; charmed and crippled him. Then there was a communal war, which consumed Başòrun Gáà and his entire household. The evil that people do live with them; not just after them. "When key crystallizing political events caused people who had previously thought of themselves as mildly aware of their ethnic (or intra-group) identity to become dramatically defensive and passionately angered, precisely these people become the fulcrum of more radical brands of nationalism. Issues of leadership, land claims, historical grievances, refugees, national chauvinism, popular front strategy then become mixed to create a potentially incendiary interethnic dynamic", (Balzer, 1995, p. 139-159). By extension, even within a particular ethnic group or nationality, as demonstrated in the story of Başòrun Gáà, there can be intra-ethnic agitation and hatred which can encourage like-minds to brand themselves as freedom fighters to press home their demands and effect some positive changes.

Apart from the high-handedness of Başòrun Gáà and his family members, who commit crimes with impunity and go scot-free, Faleti confirms the corruption in the traditional African society of the 18th century. The king makers are not exempted in the bribery scandal of the era.

Let us consider Akinkunmi's comment: "Hẹẹ, nwọn fi i jẹ ẹ ná, b'ọmọ-ọba kan'o rọ'wo s'awọn ijọye l'ẹnu' kẹnu wọn o kun, nwọnni I fi I jọye?" (*BaşòrunGáà* p.11)

The story of BaşòrunGáà calls to mind some instances of self-imposed lords even in this new dispensation, who deliberately arrogated power to themselves. For example, it reminds Nigerians the case of one time *Aláàfin Málété* in the Oyo State political history. Between 1999 and 2010, this *gbègiri* and *àmàlà* politician until his demise, sees himself as the grand patron, the alpha and omega for the entire political class in the said State and whoever dares his superiority and power, pays dearly for his/her sin(s). Similarly, it is obvious that in most contemporary African countries, if not all, once someone belongs to the ruling party and he/she is in the good book of the power that be, his/her sins, crimes or excesses will be forgiven no matter how serious and proven such atrocities might be!

Satire is a common literary device through which the form and content of many African writers can be appreciated. Most of these writers elicit laughter in plays, poems and novels by enacting errant individuals and institutions in a humorous and witty way. "Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior", (Adeoti and Elegbeleye, 2005, p. 303-321). Satire offers some determinants of defense mechanism against shocks to which our playwright, Fatunde always faces as an active role-player, a social critics and a human rights fighter. It is evident through his creative works that Fatunde is a victim of anxiety and uncertainty emerging from bad governance in Nigeria, in particular and in African states generally since their perceived political independence.

As a writer and international journalist, Fatunde has been actively participated in the struggle for a reasonable and accountable governance in post-independence; Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. He is involved in public debates to expose and condemn the anomalies in African society. He is often disturbed by political dynamics which brings to power some African leaders like Idi Amin, Macias Nguema, and Jean Baptiste Bokassa, Mobutu SeseSeko, Sanni Abacha and other political aberrations and maladministration in Africa. But, as a means of coping with as well as surviving the anxiety-inducing contemporary realities, ironical views are practically displayed in his satiric play, *La Calebasse Cassée*. He directs our attention to the seemingly inadequacies of the society we live in; by rooting out the sober and the humorous, the grim and the witty.

La Calebasse Cassée depicts a dislocated African State ravaged by socio- political and economic trials and tribulations. The events in the play displayed jungle justice, epitome of power abuse and absolute exploitation of the system. The story is centered on the Eteki family.

Eteki, the head of the family collaborated with a foreigner, Pierre and other colleagues in government including the President of the imaginary African Republic to enrich themselves at the expense of the ordinary people and the country at large. Hypothetically, a National Conference which did not see the light of the day filled our hearts with the picture of African societies in search of a new order: socially, politically and economically with the attendance of all manners of dirty dealings. Truly speaking, we hear of cases where some African leaders drink themselves to stupor. Now, tell me, what manner of an organized and coordinated person a drunkard can be? Especially in matters which require a clear mind and accurate reasoning. Eteki is a bad example of African office holders, who are of course, the perceived egg-heads that are responsible for making crucial decisions for the development of their countries. Salimatou condemns this moral decadence thus; *Un chef alcoolique détruit la famille. Un directeur noyé dans l'alcool risque le vider les caisses de l'Etat dans l'achat effréné de choses inutiles* (*La Calebasse Cassée* p. 8). It is evident that a director, a minister, a governor or a president who lives in a drunken stupor stands the risk of spending recklessly the savings/resources of the state or country on irrelevant things. A drunkard destroys the family. And, once the family is destroyed, there is nothing left of any society because the family is the nucleus, the engine-room of every society. A society with a destroyed/damaged family is just like a university whose library is completely burnt. But surprisingly, Eteki boastfully demonstrates his stupidity when he claims his house is the Eldorado of the world: *Mon foyer est le meilleur du monde. Appelle-moi le boy pour qu'il nous donne du, whisky du vrai whisky...importé.* (*La CalebasseCassée*,p.22).

Njoya tells Eteki that he has facts and figures on the number of foreign accounts the President and Eteki operate and other dirty games they are involved in: *J'ai en ma possession les nombreux des comptes bancaires du President, ton ami, et de toi-même.J'ai aussi des vidéos montrant que Monsieur Pierre et toi*

êtes les financiers d'un réseau d'achat et d'envoi des fillettes dans des boîtes de nuit en Europe. Monsieur Kolinga est votre intermédiaire qui recrute ces filles et fillettes à partir de son église en leur promettant un paradis en Europe (La Calebasse Cassée p.34-35).

It is embarrassing that those who are supposed to be role model are indeed the real crooks, wolves in sheep's clothing. Who engage in illicit trades like child trafficking! Poor governance and static linear economic structure are the roots of Nigeria and indeed, Africa multi-dimensional problems. Validating the above assertion; Ezekwesili Oby (Ohai and Alasike, 2013 p. 19) remark thus:

Nigeria is perhaps the best known example of the African paradox. It is a country which has struggled with the development process over the last 53 years of her independence. As the 6th largest producer of oil in the world, it has earned more than half a trillion dollars in oil export since the discovery...Unfortunately, the massive revenue from oil has been a source of enormous sorrow to citizens due to poor government by our political elite over the many decades. The poor governance or its more virulent manifestation, public corruption, is of course the fundamental reason for Nigeria's poor economic performance despite our globally acknowledged economic potentials to have become not just one of the largest economies of the world, but in fact, one of those great countries.

From the above, it can be deduced that the fact that Nigeria is a country with land rich in natural resources, a large percentage of her citizens are poor as a result of bad leadership, which is characterized with unchecked corruption.

They explain further: "Nigeria has tragically failed to translate her rich resources endowment to improvement in the standard of living of her citizens hence we today have 69 percent of over 100 million of our citizens in poverty bracket, according to the latest data from the National Bureau of Statistics."

Wole Soyinka x-rays and condemns the corruption within the corridors of power in his political satire, *A Play of Giants*. This ugly trend called corruption is demonstrated by the actions of three ridiculous African leaders spearheaded by Kamini, who travels out of his country with the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank. He ignorantly yet proudly says; "When I travel, I take the Bank of Bugara with me, and then nobody can steal money behind Kamini's back..." (*A Play of Giants* p. 4). This same Kamini orders the Chairman to mint more money for him to waste. These irrational leaders squander their countries' treasuries on food and other irrelevant things. They are indeed a pack of gluttons! To accentuate the insensitivity of African rulers, Kamini commands his Chairman to accept any condition given by the World Bank in an attempt to secure a two hundred million dollars loan, without having a spelt out capital project which the loan is meant for. Surely the money will eventually end in their private accounts as it is often the case. Check out this conversation between Kamini and the Chairman to justify our position that African leaders are corrupt.

KAMINI: They don't give loan?

CHAIRMAN: Not exactly, Your Excellency. They simply insisted on certain condition...

KAMINI: What I care about conditions? Agree to any conditions just get the loan.

CHAIRMAN: It is not quite as easy as all that Your Excellency. They want to mortgage Bugara body and soul...

KAMINI: I say what I care about body and soul? If they can load Bugara the two hundred million dollars, I give them body and soul. Go back and agree to any condition they want.

(*A Play of Giants*, p. 4- 5)

It is clear that most African leaders have no mission, vision or plan for any form of national building. They are merely a bunch of self-centered idiots; Lilliputians calling themselves Giants. What an iron of situation! As we can see, the failure of these leaders in their constitutional responsibilities and social contracts to the people and the society at large rationalizes the fact that corruption accounts for the many forms of poverty, which terrorize African nations. While the citizens die in hunger and penury, the wicked leaders smile at all times as they accumulate wealth for themselves.

(Coates and Silbourn, 1983, p. 67) say: "Poverty is a common phenomenon in capitalistic societies or competitive economies. Poverty is the manifestation of the unequal distribution of wealth, income, power, and it epitomizes the structural inequalities in the societies." Consolidating this point of view, (Mohuddin,

1993, p. 48) defines poverty as “Households’ inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy the needs for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation.”

We also note the display of power drunkenness in these buffoons, who called themselves Giants. The 1st Russian is not economical with the truth. He describes Kamini as a vicious child so he offers him a doll to play with. These African leaders are really butchers, reactionary bastards. They punish or torture, promote and demote civil servants at will with no justification. They crush any opposition that tries to stand on their ways. It is indeed of show of shame that African leaders symbolize an epitome of corruption.

Leaders, who squander the resources of their countries and tactically milk their nations to a point of uselessness when the milk goes sour, most annoyingly corrupt leader like Kamini also laments about the corruption in the land. He says: “...But sometimes they bribe the guards and smuggle out the families. There is so much corruption. One man cannot supervise everything” (*A Play of Giants*, p. 26).

This is indeed a dramatic irony of the highest order. The bolded clauses are for the purpose of emphasis. Professor Batey speaks the mind of the playwright when he explains: “Bugara [Africa] has not only inherited a discredited economic system from its colonial history, she is still being exploited by a neo-colonial conspiracy of multi-national conglomerates which continue to prey on developing countries in the Third World. It is an outrageous and inhuman situation” (*A Play of Giants*, p. 23).

Since our stance in this paper is that literature should be a reflection of social dynamics, being a kind of art. The writer’s experiences are brought into his work to inform and educate his publics for the purpose of influencing the society at the end. “...literature is crucial in shaping the mentality of a people, it is crucial in shaping their identity. Literature therefore has a role to play in shaping people’s consciousness”, (Darah, 1987, p. 7). In other words, literature is expected to be an effective tool in the transformation of a given human society.

From all that we have said, it can be established that power abuse, corruption, favoritism, nepotism, insecurity and the culture of wastage have led to an unstable system, which is characterized with unemployment and abject poverty. As a matter of fact, insecurity, corruption, unemployment and years of abject poverty are the major social problems the African society confronts. Or better still, they are the highest common factors, which hinder socio-economic and political advancement. Lending her voice to the dialogue on socio-political realities in African society, (Bakare, 2013, p. 26) writes:

What seems to be more worrisome is the fact that the nation’s universities and polytechnics continue to churn out more than 150,000 graduates annually and available jobs remain inadequate to keep pace with the ever-expanding army of job seekers. Not long ago, a Federal Government agency put up an advertisement for recruitment and on the D-day, the mammoth crowd of applicants was so much that the officials of the agency could not control, resulting in the deaths of some of the applicants due to exhaustion and probably as a result of *hypoglycemia* arising from not taking any meal before leaving for the venue of the recruitment. Similarly, another agency of the Federal Government recently opted for recruitment through online registration, perhaps to prevent the kind of mayhem discussed above and probably to reduce the number of applicants, but the number of applicants they received was 120,000, jostling for the mere 25 vacant positions.

The most painful thing is that, this ugly trend of unemployment and of course poverty is a fall out of years of uncontrolled official corruption, mismanagement and mindless wastage of available resources, which eventually jeopardize economic growth, expansion and advancement in the country and the continent of Africa at large. Validating this state of social menace in Africa, (Olusegun-Joseph, 2006, p. 69-84) comments thus: “...the tragic disintegration of the African society of the post-independence era, marked by the malaise of official corruption, nepotism, mass unemployment, professional mediocrities, a prevailing lack of faith in the polity and the indifference of the ruling elite class.”

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the paradigm of hypocrisy of African leaders in both traditional and modern/contemporary African society through dark humor and, or ironical situations which characterized the three selected satirical plays. Radical or revolutionary artists “do not merely testify to the conditions of social crisis but offer a precise diagnosis [as well as remedies to cure the identified social ailments],” (Vazquez, 1973, p. 30). As militant social realists and, or social pathologists, our writers have enacted their experiences, identified social ordeals which work against meaningful developments of African society and they have suggested adequate solutions to those perceived problems/challenges. These playwrights have recommended that for a promising societal all-round advancement; power abuse, corruption, favoritism, nepotism, ethnicity, insecurity, gender inequality and the culture of resource wastage must be stopped and education must be taken seriously.

On our part as critics or social commentators, we have attempted to justify in this article that literature is without doubt a platform for socio-political debates on practical realities by observing the meeting points between this form of art and the human society, which produces it. Finally, by exposing and rooting out the hideous implications of poor governance, official corruption, male chauvinism and other socio-economic and political injustice; literature remains an instrument for positive social changes. In short, it is a panacea for human peaceful co-existence and sustainable developments.

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