ISSUES AND LITERARY MEDIATION IN AFRICA’S GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Africa is an integral part of the globe and so are her opportunities and challenges. Though the world could be said to be a global village, the aura of globalization is pervading and insidious in some respects. The role of the artist in mediating in the affairs of society is performed via Literature or the Art which are superstructures in their critical and universal modes. Literature remains the tool of illumination on the baleful or benevolent social trends in Africa’s onward march in the global spheres. This paper takes a look at the status and place of Africa in global spheres- politics, economy, religion and health. Using literary sociological tenets as the tool of appraisal, the paper x-rays the impact of literature in exploring Africa’s global opportunities and challenges. It submits that with the right attitude, Africa is in a global competition for development despite her colonial memories.

Introduction

Africa is part and parcel of the global village as a continent. Her global exposure and challenges began at the global experience as the now developed nations of Britain, Germany, France, Portugal and America scrambled for and partitioned her territories. Europeans and Americans had discovered in their economic and spiritual race a way to occupy the vast continent of Africa and convert her people into Christianity. Unfortunately, it was a moment of interruption, subjugation and displacement for a continent that was described as a jungle by Euro-centric writers. No thanks to Joseph Conrad and his warped narrative in Heart of Darkness.Perhaps Africa would have risen and leaped into global reckoning through her developmental pace and maneuvers but for her colonial encounter. The Europeans had added the political dimension in the name of colonization and so Africa’s fate was sealed. The slavery and Trans-Atlantic slave trade were epochal devastation on the human and material capacity building for a continent just discovering itself. The agony of slave trade perfected through America’s and European’s strange and more merchandising slave institution was captured by Olaudah Equiano in his pioneering masterpiece, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavus Olaudah Equiano popularly called Equiano’s Travels. Equiano was one of the early Africans sold into slavery, an Igbo by tribe from the modern day eastern part of Nigeria, a sub-west African country. He was captured along with his sister and sold into slavery. Such was the trend of slave trade that millions of able-bodied Africans were captured and forcefully sold into slavery. From his own account, Equiano had travelled many climes before he could finally purchase his freedom at the rate of forty pounds( Equiano’s Travels).

A more challenging moment was that of colonization which was pervasive and institutionalized. If slave trade was for economic purpose, colonization was all in all as it was tailored to undermine and plunder Africa’s resources in all ramifications. The colonial lords had seized the reins of power through which they perfected Africa’s political subjugation and oppression. In some places, wars were fought especially where Africans had resisted. In some other areas, divide and rule tactics were introduced. The French policy of Assimilation and the British Indirect Rule system were the colonial cobwebs with which Africans were submerged and pushed to the fringe of underdevelopment. Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart published in 1958 provides many answers to many calamities brought by colonialism. Africa had a system of governance, complete in itself and selfregulatory. Africa’s traditional system rewarded and punished heroes and villains whenever they upheld or transgressed the customs of the land. Even Okonkwo is not spared though he has risen to glory and communal acceptance as early as age seventeen. He is banished and fined whenever he violates traditions. Confusion sets in with the incursion of the colonial masters into Umofia and by extension, Igbo land. From then, things started to fall apart. Ola Rotimi’s OvoranwenNogbaisichronicles the British expedition to Benin Kingdom during which they clashed with the natives. There was a violation of the people’s customs and traditions. This they(the natives) had defended. The rest of the story is the capture and extradition of the powerful and influential Benin monarch, OvoranwenNogbaisi. His exile is a metaphor for the denigration of the sanctity of the Benin Stool, a symbol of traditional authority, communalism and freedom. The apartheid system in South Africa was another baleful foreign rule and domination experienced by the continent. Alex La Guma’sA Walk in the Night provides a scenic review of the dehumanizing and agonizing effects of apartheid on the black majority on their own soil. The novella captures scenes of brutal treatment of the blacks and especially the black youths in the hands of the white minority cops. Thus between the period of 4pm and 6am when Michael Adoni gropes through the streets in his confused state of mind trying to walk down home, his psychological composure as a human being deteriorates while his personality becomes smeared. This is as a result of the dehumanising condition or trial to which he is unlawfully subjected by the likes of Raalt, and other the white cops.

Aside the colonial experience of Africa which from literary and historical points of view has been baleful and dismal, literature has not been silent on postcolonial Africa. AbiolaIrele (1990:16), in providing a response, interprets the artistic assignment as new and realistic which he labels “New Realism”.

The African writer has begun to modify his stance and to adjust to angle of perception to take account of those political and social realities that began in the wake of African independence to impress themselves more closely upon the general attention through the entire continent.

A question now is what has been the experience of Africa since it gained freedom or independence from her colonial masters? How has Africa explored or frittered away global opportunities or coped with and surmounted global challenges that have engendered her political and economic development and growth? These questions can be answered via artistic mediation which is the focus of this paper.

Literature, Globalisation and the Third World Nations

The term ‘literature’ is from the latin word ‘litera’ meaning ‘a letter of the Alphabet’ (Encyclopaedia Britanica,1973). Literature is an imaginative writing which imitates and reconstructs everyday or societal experience for the purpose of instructing, informing, teaching and educating those concerned. Its purpose is didactic using aphorisms, metaphors and symbols as specialized registers. Literature, as a field of study and an educational discipline, is “second to none in its capacity to train and develop the qualities of observation, insight, imagination and creativity of which rapidly developing societies are in need” (Moody 1972: xiii) The suitable framework for the understanding of the impact of literature on global affairs is its sociology. In other words, literature is sociological in terms of impact and medium. Its language, which is censorious, is universal while its enunciations are axiomatic. Obafemi (2001:6) comments on the global theme of Literature:

Literature reflects, represents and refracts the reality of the world across age and time. It is not just a work of imagination aimed surely to give pleasure- pleasure and entertainment are crucial to human existence but literature contributes more concretely and more materially to the creation and appreciation of the human condition. Even though what qualifies Literature as literature (be it drama, poetry, prose, biographies and travelogues) is its fictionality, its imaginative derivation. By leading us into the inner recesses of man through symbols, images, concepts, intricate rhythms, emotions and mysteries, literature informs us of the potential energies of the human mind and his resourceful potentials for love, ambition, fulfilment, complex ranges of existent patterns - all of which supply the corporate cultures of man in his various communities and spheres of existence.

By literary sociology we mean an inter-relationship between literature and society. How and in what way does literature affect society and vice versa? Literary sociology stipulates an interdisciplinary relationship of literature and sociology as disciplines. The term, ‘sociology’, has to do with the relationship between literature and sociology which explores the relationship between society and literature. Sociology is the study of social relationships and institutions. It is about a profound study of social behaviour regarding its origin, development, organization and institutions.

Wikipedia defines sociology as

… a social science and various methods of empirical investigations and critical analysis to develop a body of knowledge about social order, social disorder and social change. A goal for many sociologists is to conduct research which may be applied directly to social policy and welfare, while focusing primarily on refining the theoretical understanding of social processes. Subject- matter ranges from micro level of individual agency and interaction to the macro level of systems and the social structure.

Sociology covers such aspects of human life as social stratification, social class, social mobility, religion, secularization, law, sexuality, health, education, security, scientific knowledge and activities.

On the other hand, Literature reflects societal patterns and evolution of mankind using imagination and creativity. Sociological researches inform politicians, government and policy makers, law makers, administrators, planners, educators, managers etc. about social issues. Literature transforms, transmits and preserves social values. Art is a social product and a social act (Lentricchia: 1983:19, Wolf 1904:108). Literature conditions society for didacticism and reconstruction. Amuta (1987:46) observes, “the writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it.’’ Literary critical tenets are deployed through investigation of the complex social practices of society. The strength of literature as Bodunde (1995:19) has rightly observed is not described in its reflective mode alone but also in the critical stance of literature on matters of political and social values which have become a body of dominant policy in a given epoch.

The thrust of sociology of literature lies in two schools of thought which are the liberal humanist and radical sociological criticism. Irele (1981:34-38) reflecting on the liberal school defines literary sociology as a reflection of societal experience in terms of culture, politics, and history through the artist’s mind and aesthetic portrayal. On the other hand, the radical school sees literature as capable of analysis and the offer of social change of the prevailing polity. While the liberal school emphasizes aesthetic ornament with which literature imitates crucial experience, the radical school explores Marxist tenets underlining the role of art as active and transforming consciousness. Society is a group of people involved in persistent interpersonal relationships, or a large social grouping sharing the same geographical or social territory. Human society is defined by culture and institution being shared by the sum total of its constituent members where stratification and dominance take centre stage. If literature is a superstructure impacting on society, what then is globalization?

The term ‘globalization’ can be seen from different perspectives but suffice it to say it involves the inter-relationship or interdependence among nations of the world. The term stems from the idea of the global village, the polarity or uniformity of the entire human race which shares certain attributes in common and operate on certain conditions which are universally imperative and necessary. Awonusi (2006:53-69) defines globalisation as the spread of issues, ideas, artefacts, movements, lifestyle, market, technology, information, human rights, cultures, democracy etc. across the globe. It is of cogent observation that globalisation may be positive when it is limited to values, peoples and cultures. It may be negative when it involves power relations. Another acceptable term for globalisation is universalisation which is related to values.

Aina (1997) captures globalisation as defining the transformation of relations between states, constitutions, groups and individuals. He maintains that it entails the global restructuring involving capitalist relations and the associated problems. Robertson (1997) views globalisation as a concept of the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole. Awonusi lists globalizing issues and areas to include: global culture, civilization, global economy, capitalism, global political order and global technology and information. Wikipedia’s definition sums up on globalisation as the process of international integration arising from the interchange of world views.

Africa has the largest group of third world nations. A question or a poser is where is the place of Africa or the third world nations in global scheming or in the advanced global village? In providing an answer to this question, this researcher turns to literary critical values as providing basis for understanding not just the rudiments of globalization but also for locating the place of Africa in the global village.

Literature remains an instrument of global consciousness often deployed as a revolutionary weapon and the language of education that impacts on society. Obafemi (2001:) provides a panoramic view of what Literature is capable of doing and what it has been used for over the ages :

Literature has been found and used as an important revolutionary weapon in national liberation movements all over the world such as Southern Africa, Latin America etc. The Chicago Movement and the Sandinisto Government of Nicaraguan made cultural politics an important aspect of their programme.

In a similar vein, the Nicaraguan Minister of Culture and poet, Ernesto Cardenal (1972) examining the symbiosis between art and politics concludes in the affirmation that literature, in fulfilling a purpose, should be at the service of mankind and more importantly, poetry should be political.

The above statement of Olu Obafemi and Ernesto Cardenal locate the very kernel of the global impact of Literature on the socio–political experience of Africa and her third world nations. Writers from the continent have taken up the colonial and post-colonial Africa for constructive and combative missions. This role is what literary scholars have termed social realism. Gikandi (2001:1) interprets the role as being critical of ‘compromised postcoloniality’ and disenchantment as “… writers and intellectuals still believe that their works and words have an innate and functional capacity to intervene in everyday life and to transform the tenor and vehicle of political discourse.”

Africa’s political trends, economy and leadership have come under literary artillery over the years. We have discussed some aspects of the colonial past of Africa vis a vis the role artists played in sowing the seed of consciousness in pushing for liberty, freedom and independence. If Africa had been confronted with the challenge of colonialism, apartheid and monarchy, her experience since gaining independence has been bad and unpalatable. The focal point of globalisation for a continent like Africa is politics. Politics has equally proved her greatest global challenge especially the continent’s democratic march. With wrong polity or bad politics come the disorientation of the citizenry, epidemic spread of HIV/AIDS, Ebola, environmental hazards, corruption, poverty, unemployment, rape, teenage pregnancy, low standard of education, etc.

There is the political instability occasioned by military misadventure in democratic exercise as well as hapless civilian missions. There is virtually no African country which has not experienced military unrest necessitating political instability. Chinua Achebe and AyiKwei Armah paint a not too dissimilar political scenario through their artistic works in two different sub-west Africa independent nations. In Nigeria, Achebe’s A Man of the People (1966) and No Longer at Ease,both political novels, critically present the profligacy of the first republic politicians and early elite clique whose misadventure, corruption, nepotism, favouritism and insensitivity were the decoy for the inevitability of the military coup of 1966 which sacked the train of the first set of political leaders and terminated the life of a democratic government. As it reflects in the narratives of Achebe’s A Man of the People, the height of this political misadventure was the violent eruptions at every campaign arena brought about by the clash between the old breed and the new breed politicians represented by OdiliSamaru and the people’s minister.

Ayikewi Armah, a Ghanaian polemic writer, in his satiric novel, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born responds to the prevailing social malaise in independent Ghana. It is a fictional painting of the tenure of late Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana as the first civilian indigenous regime after Ghana’s independence. The limiting forces for the major characters in the novel like the Man and the Teacher (a metaphorical reference to any diligent and upright African) are the politicians and their wanton or executive corrupt tendency symbolized by Koomson, the minister. The environment of filth and decay on one hand, and the atmosphere of a bleak future or disillusionment on the other brought to the front burner the political and cultural billboard of a young and independent nation . This is typical of Africa’s independent nations’ political experience. Wole Soyinka’s The Interpreters, formless and segmental in structure, attests to the bewilderment, disillusionment and despondency that pervaded the socio-political landscape of a young and upcoming nation like Nigeria. This classical novel chronicles the cultural, political, social and economic displacement of young African technocrats, intellectuals, and professionals, among others.

The Interpreters does not have a central plot, which could have been deliberate on the part of the author as symbolic representation of the rudderless or directionless young independent nation. The author bemoans the early ominous signal of an impending doom. His use of sequence of dramatic scenes and lyric descriptions and periodic flashbacks and recollections to provide chronological accounts of series of events that enrich the narratives gives a cautious hint to both the leaders and the citizenry as a whole. The characters who are supposed to be valid interpreters of their country’s situations, given their level of education, exposure and knowledge are themselves lost to the early morning deluge that pervades their nation. Rather, these individuals, despite their intellectual soundness are struggling to find their way through the labyrinth of politics and nationhood. Bandele, Egbo, Biodun Sagoe, Kola, and Sekoni are appalled by the level of confusion, insensitivity, social unrest and corruption. Their seeming salvation is their being aware of the situation and its likely consequence. The situation is as applicable to Nigerian citizens even now than it is to the interpreters in Wole Soyinka’s The Interpreters.

Other works of art providing relevance include Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat, Ouloguem’sBound to Violence, BodeSowande’sFarewell to Babylon, Ola Rotimi’sOur husband Has Gone Mad Again, etc. In A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi foregrounds the confusion the oppressed often grapple with more also when a people are under a colony. The native Kenyans under the British rule had a maxim and this is survival. As such not many natives want to die or suffocate protecting the rest. It becomes individuals for themselves while God for them all. The scenario soon snowballs into a movement and a bloody one at that even though the movement has different connotations to different natives hence, their approach to it with certain degree of commitment. The analogy or symbolism of the grain of wheat is that the grain of survival is collectivity, communalism and oneness. The movement is the brotherhood pointing to the fact that it is not all about patience as solution to the issue of oppression at all times. Whereas violence may not be panacea to all issues of survival, we have got to accommodate one another as fellow human beings. Thus from Mugo, Kihika, Karanja to Mumbi, the fact of colonialism be accepted while the new lease of freedom be spread and made strong. The past be retained interms of lessons but the future be enhanced for survival of all. It should be ‘Harambee’ or working together for the common good.

In Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again, Ola Rotimi presents a comic dramaturgy that provokes laughter but not without serious messages that border on politics, polygamy and corruption. This play is a farce that pictures Liza who surprisingly appears in Lejoka- Brown’s home beating the ex-military man to his wits. The planned seclusion of Liza from his other two wives provides an upset, an ominous hint at the downfall or disgrace of Major Lejoka Brown in the field of real politicking in partisan echoes. Like their ilk all over Africa, as an ex-military man, Lejoka Brown dabbles into politics without first learning the rules. His defeat and disappointment demonstrates the nature of partisan politics in Africa especially its turbulent and frustrating processes.

Even in poetry, African writers have highlighted challenges of development. TanureOjaide’sDelta Blues and Homesongs, the Fate of Vulturesand The Endless SongsorI want to Dancepaintthe wasted resources of oil with the devastation and avalanche of environmental challenges left in the trail of multinational oil prospecting companies. NiyiOsundare’sThe Eye of the Earth xrays the capitalist incursion into Africa in the name of colonial and neo-colonial lords of harvest. Jack Mapanje, a Malawian poet, satirises the corrupt tendencies of the indigenous government that took over from the colonial government. His bitterly censored collection of poems, Of Chameleons and Gods published in 1981 was critical of the government of Hastings Kamuzu Banda on the ground of large scale corruption amounting to ten turbulent years of political misadventure. The collection which is rich in imagery and oral tradition has four sections in its highly satirical in form and theme.

Above all, one other book I find not only interesting but timeless in its thematic appeal is ouloguem’sBound to Violence. Its four main parts capture the remote past, the intermediate time and the modern era and the cataphoric reference of these epochs in the history of Nakem and Nakem-Ziuko. Bound to Violence simply paints the dark ages precipitated by the rulership of Saifs. So heinous were the crimes perpetrated by the Saif’s administration against the weak and helpless natives. The intervening French colony did little to alleviate the suffering of the masses of Nakem –Ziuko. Although slavery was halted, the Saifs had found other avenues of perpetrating heinous crimes. Even the escape of Nakem’s weak natives to France under the cloak of the policy of Assimilation, to embrace education, such as Kassounmidid, could not completely help matter. The lessons from the horrible but highly political and didactic tales of Bound to Violence are that humanity is one continuum, whereas the evil visited on one person has implication on humanity as a whole. Though the Saifs hiding under the religion of Islam to perpetrate crimes in Nakem, the whole world catches fever for such crimes. It is the same Saifs who have spread to several parts of the world possible at present and causing mayhem and injuries to mankind. There can only be common interest and different approaches on the part of governments. Government is a network and the wielders of power are connected. Such is Kassounm’s experience upon his exposure and level of education. The activities of Saifs of YamboOuloguem’sBound to Violence are being replicated all over the world in the guise of religious terrorism and the world is indeed bound to violence because it is yet to know peace. The mediation of America and Israel in the global terrorism provides a respite just as the emergence of Abbey Henry and his Christian salvation frenzy or insurgency helps to prune and weaken the power and influence of the Saifs in Nakem.

Obafemi (2001:) captures the disillusionment pervading Africa and its agents when he posits that “next in the nature of the cultural nationalist theory is the growth of neo-colonialism of imperialism operating through the agency of the new comprador bourgeoisie, the nation ruling elite”. Africa’s global challenges remain her political profligacy and incongruity. Her democratic march has remained a futile experiment for several decades. With a politically disoriented polity which has been her lot, Africa’s opportunities lie in her preparedness to avail itself the benefits of the organized political system occasioned by the right political culture and best practices. Politics is at the bedrock of global advancement either to annex the opportunities provided or repel the pervasive aura. No meaningful development can be achieved in an atmosphere of political violence, insensitive and corrupt leadership.

Conclusion

Africa’s challenges have been traced to her political ineptitude and undemocratic trends since gaining independence. The intervention of Literature in national and international politics and global inter-relationships have been treated as apparatus of instilling national consciousness which is a sine qua non for democratic culture and good governance. Literature remains the conscience of the nation, the nexus between man and his environment. It is when Africans are conscious of their political responsibilities and are prepared to face the task that the Continent would be able to avail itself of many opportunities to advance in all spheres of global development.

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