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Literature as History: Cyclical History and Dystopian Literature in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The affinity between history and literature may initially appear tenuous. However, close scrutiny quickly reveals that both are disciplines that simultaneously entertain and attempt pedagogy. In essence they address the enduring complexness of human life, either via the certain experiences of the past, the shifting sands of the present or the assumed predictability of the future. If history deals with facts, a literary work is also anchored on a set historical time. This essay attempts to examine the catena extant between modern Nigerian Literature and modern Nigerian History. Since the latter appears to be undeniably moving between two poles – military dictatorship and pseudo-democratic government – literary works from the country also seem condemned to be reiteratively cyclical, a corollary of literary artists' regard for topical issues. The essay concludes that due to this topical complexion of Nigerian Literature, it is gradually becoming a veritable and alternative mine for the country's historical experience.

KEYWORDS

Nigerian Literature; History; Dystopia; Cycle.

Introduction

> *Literature does not grow in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. (Ngugi, Homecoming, 1972: xv).*

From the time of Aristotle apologists of literature have consistently assayed disputations of its interaction with history. Aristotle, apparently writing against the social moralism of Plato, vouches that far from simply imaginatively inventing or mimetically aping an actual incident or a situation as his whims direct, the poet (literary artist) modulates them in a manner that foregrounds and illumines the basic nub of that incident or situation. Daiches (1974:37) explicates further the Aristotelian attitude:

> *The poet works 'according to the law of probability or necessity', not according to some chance observation or random invention. He is thus more fundamentally scientific and serious than the historian, who must restrict himself to what happened to have occurred and cannot arrange or invent his facts in order to present what, in terms of human psychology and the nature of things, is more inherently probable. Because the poet invents or arranges his own story, he creates a self-sufficient world of his own, with its own compelling kind of probability, its own inevitability, and what happens in the poet's story is both 'probable' in terms of that world*

> *and, because that world is itself a formal construction based on elements in the real world, an illumination of an aspect of the world as it really is.*

Literature, however, its impressionistic character notwithstanding, as a discipline deliberately made pedagogical in aspect, has a close affinity with history. The literary artist, as it were, is no more or less concerned with the dialectics of history. He may elect to be influenced by certain slices of contemporary happenings in which case current historical experience furnishes the writer literary fodder for his artistry. To this end, the work does not mimetically transcend the dialectics of the immediate historical present it captures. Alternatively, the writer might choose to go anaphoristic by working on a past incident or situation, obviously to bring out or evince an aspect of human experience for contemporary pertinence.

A Literature of Praxis

It is axiomatic that a kind of parity exists in the historical experience of most Africans. As a consequence, the specific nature of African history makes her literature seem particularly and inescapably tendentious towards the political and social questions of the day. Writers ostensibly appear to be writing with a concern for timeliness. Since their responses to colonialism and its postcolonial upshot neo-colonialism invariably force social criticism into the available literary allotropes, their works acquire a remonstrating streak that is pedagogical, activist and antagonistic. Explicating the cause of this context sensitivity of African Literature, Ogunrotimi (2009:154) posits that:

> *The literary artist's unique sense of social, political and moral commitment that informs African literature is a corollary of a tradition that emphasises the social and political association of literature, more at the expense of the aesthetic value.*

Since independence, there has developed a prevalent attitude that a writer ought to write only out of a commitment to the moment, utilising his art to initiate a positive change in a society that has become nothing but dystopian. It is neither the dearth of thematic auxiliaries nor the lure of immediacy that serves as a centripetal force drawing writers toward issues of immediate, topical relevance, but the pressure on the writer to be socially responsible. His work in this period serves as his response or comment on history, a literature of opposition, protest or exposition, as the case may be. Such is unavoidable, since, according to Brutus (1969:100) 'a writer must write about what he sees around him'. Making a further claim for the relevance of topical themes in literature, Orwell (1957:10), concludes that albeit a 'novelist is not obliged to write directly about contemporary history, but a novelist who simply disregards the major public events of the moment is generally either a footler or a plain idiot'. Unlike in the Western world where literary artists' flight of fancy (called 'a fortuitous outgrowth of some irrational-inspirationalist anarchy' by Osundare 2007:6) and technical innovativeness have almost alienated and estranged their art from its social mimetic relevance, here in Africa, and in certain parts of the world,

> *The call at the moment seems to be more for a literature of praxis, a concrete, activist literature with a clamorous statement about the social situation. This call is most persistent among Third World writers, representatives of peoples for so long victims of capitalist exploitation and imperialism (Osundare ibid.8).*

In spite of Ogungbesan's (1978:18) counsel that the African writer 'must write as best as he could, (and) dedicate himself to 'a writer's morality', which includes holding allegiance to individual human beings

instead of race or cause', writers have become a combination of writer, teacher, priest, activist, and inevitably historian.

Condemned to exist in a land where a consistently unending vortex of oppression and poverty is prevalent, the writer cannot for long hold to a position of luxurious insouciant apathy. According to Achebe 'an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant …' (1975:98). Now if a writer has no choice but must always be in constant opposition to oppression, injustice, mis-governance and tyranny, he predictably becomes committed to using his artistry to combat these social ills by interweaving historical phenomena into the nub of his literary texts to foreground his protest and give it immediate and also historic relevance. However, the state of affairs is not as devoid of ambiguities as it appears. In Africa the writer is in a bizarre situation because, once part of the elite that utilised diverse weapons (literature in his case) against the evil that was colonialism, he now finds himself – an ironic denouement - undoubtedly resigned to perpetual opposition in a continent where leadership problem has become a sort of carbuncular execration. Odili, the central character in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People emphasises this:

> *We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in (37).*

Thus the writer has no alternative to being in unending conflict with oppressive dictators and pseudo-democrats, in fact, he may have developed a battlefront mentality with his radical social inclinations. So long as he is neither comfortable with the position of 'chronicler and post-mortem surgeon', (as stated by Soyinka 1968: 21), nor with the temporising socially impervious and thick-skinned Dadaism of 'art for art's sake', he must need be in the vanguard of social conscientisation. And, to achieve this, he weaves protest into the fabric of his work and gives it the thrust of satire in a unique kind of literary mimesis Kubayanda (1990) calls the 'new realism' in African Literature.

Literature as History

The Stages of Nigerian History / Literature

Despite the variety of the literary profuseness that occurred in Nigeria after independence, Nigerian literature seems irrevocably affixed to the tassel end of our historical experience' mortarboard. Virtually every stage of Nigeria's (modern) history has its counterpart literature. Albeit Osofisan (2007:22) laments that many African writers remain 'silent' 'about the neo-colonial exploitation of Africa' by towing the 'straight and narrow way of their art' (2007: 22), it is indeed apparent that African literature has frequently responded to the contemporary socio-political experience of the times. To exhibit the necessary interplay of African history and African literature, Ibitoye (1994) identifies three stages of the development of African literature/history:

1. The period of quiet acquiescence
2. The period of passive resistance
3. The revolutionary period

Albeit he cautions against perceiving the total exclusivity of one from the other as they all should be seen as 'movements or currents of ever-flowing and surging river' (1994:80), each of the stages is engendered by unique socio-political occurrences in the somatic world. If the period of quiet acquiescence highlights the nonchalance of indigenous Africans to the presence of the colonialist, the period of passive resistance foregrounds the awareness of the people to the evil nature of colonialism and the need for cultural renaissance. The third stage

accounts for the social protest and call for revolution as countermeasures against colonialism and its uglier and more fearsome and destructive corollary, neo-colonialism.

Basically because Nigeria in particular is the focus of this study and more stages have come by and gone, more periods can be appended to that given by Ibitoye:

4. The period of civil war
5. The period of military dictatorship
6. The period of pseudo-democracy

It is irrefutable that the Nigerian civil war and its concomitant horrors gave birth to a National Literature (Obafemi 1992). The war, which served as a kind of culmination to the myriads of the crises that preceded it, completely changed the thematic concerns of Nigerian writers. While before the war some (i.e. Christopher Okigbo, Elechi Amadi and J.P. Clark) barely had time to be involved in the happenings in the society and were only interested in the close confines of their art, the crises leading up to the war and the war proper shocked them to the marrows and blasted away from their pens the negritudinous penchant for wistfully eulogising the African 'pristine' past and the becalmed position of the luxurious individual inward-looking literary creator. It is quite remarkable that a few years preceding the war Achebe (1964:157) was saying:

> *…the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform the task unless he has a proper sense of history.*

Here he means historical past, and not the present which at the time occupied a minor sphere in his concerns as a literary artist. Also, Okigbo (cited by Whitelaw 1970:33), who in his last years put on a toga of combative commitment, was saying in 1965:

> *… the writer in Africa doesn't have any function. That is, personally I can only say what I conceive as my own function. I have no function as a writer. I think I merely express myself, and the public can use these things for anything they like … I don't, in fact, think that it is necessary for the writer to assume a particular function … I don't think that the fact that he's a writer should entitle him to assume a particular role as an educator. If he wants to educate people he should write textbooks.*

If Okigbo and others of similar mind were aping western literary ethos of 'art for art's sake' or artistic inward exploration, it really betrayed their inability to perceive the social functioning of literature and see themselves 'as the voice of vision in (their) own time' (Soyinka 1968:21). But they were not to remain aloof for long, for suddenly, as Achebe himself was to realise, '… the creative writer in independent Nigeria found himself with a new, terrifying problem on his hands' (1975:82) and as a 'human being with heightened sensibilities… he must (now) be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations' (1975:79). His concern now transcended the exhumation of Nigeria's precolonial past as he confronts contemporary and more disquieting evils.

With new commitment, Okigbo wrote 'Path of Thunder'. Now the poet was no longer enamoured of the liquescent phenomenon called Mother Idoto. In 'Labyrinths' he says:

> *The smell of blood already floats in the lavender-mist of the afternoon*
> *The death sentence lies in ambush along the corridors of power …*

A nebular immense and immeasurable, a night of deep waters …
The homesteads abandoned in this country's bush fire witness it …
Magic birds with the miracle of lightning flash in their feathers
The arrows of God tremble at the gates of light,
The drums of curfew pander to a dance of death (178).

And J.P. Clark, who had consistently advocated sustaining the integrity of art in the midst of social chaos and anarchy, could only now become a 'postmortem surgeon' in 'The Casualties':

The casualties are not only those who are dead;
They are well out of it.
The casualties are not only those who are wounded,
Though they await burial by instalment.173
The casualties are not only those who have lost
Persons or property, hard as it is
To grope for a touch that some
May not know is not there

The casualties are not only those led away by night
The cell is a cruel place, sometimes a haven,
Nowhere as absolute as the grave.
The casualties are not only those who started
A fire and now cannot put it out. Thousands
Are burning that had no say in the matter.
The casualties are not only those who escaping
The shattered shell becoming prisoners in
A fortress of falling walls.
The casualties are many, and a good number well … (95)

History always has an exacting way of presenting the experience of a people. As earlier said, it sticks to facts. Literature, albeit it too is concerned with 'making people more intensely aware of that which was already there' (wa Thiong'o 1998: 27), the focus here is more intensely aware. According to Nadine Gordimer (cited in Clingman 1981: 166):

> *If you want to know the facts of the retreat from Moscow in 1815, you may read a history book; if you want to know what war is like, and how people of certain time and background dealt with it as their personal situation, you must read War and Peace.*

The same can be said about the Nigerian Civil War. Albeit several historical accounts and polemics detailing the crisis abound, (see Uwechue 1971, Obasanjo 1980, Forsyth 1969, Kirk-Greene 1971, Gronje 1972, John 1972, and Madiebo 1980), one really has to read Isidore Okpewho's The Last Duty, Festus Iyayi's Heroes, Cyprian Ekwensi's Survive the Peace, Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy and The Man Died, Christopher Okigbo's 'Path of Thunder', J.P. Clark's Casualties and Chinua Achebe's Beware Soul Brother to get at the real grain and nitty-gritty and the psychological effect on the victims. This is because, according to Obafemi (1992: 3), these writers show a new direction in commitment and effort 'to make their work an organic function of their country's history'.

The Man of the People ends with a coup and announces the coming of the military into governance. With a rare kind of foresight Achebe seemed to have perceived the ultimate downfall of the political class. This view he confirmed when he said in an interview that 'the political machine had been so abused that whichever way you pressed it, it produced the same result and therefore you wanted another force, another force just had to come in' (1972:15). It goes without saying that the story continues in Anthills of the Savannah, where once again, to quote

Achebe (1975), writers found themselves confronted with a new terrifying problem none had anticipated.

Like every other Nigerian the military appear discontented and discomfited by the tribalism, nepotism, graft, decadence and corruption that bestride the rank of the political class. Hence whenever the coming of every military swashbuckler is announced, people troop out in grateful parties to welcome the liberators. Not surprisingly, what they have come to 'liberate' is money, and it means more graft, more corruption and more decadence. Not only these, but nuances of dictatorial excesses not witnessed under the political class also come into play. Now, it is no longer a case of either colonialism or neo-colonialism. The masquerade tormenting the people is unveiled and found to be home grown, without alien strings.

In Anthills of the Savannah President Sam, more than anything else, combines the worst of political leaders; corrupt, materialistic, insensitive, fearful of opposition, and brutal. Naturally, those who benefit from his misgovernance are his immediate family members and symbiotic sycophantic bootlickers, who as ubiquitous parasites are common not only on the Nigerian terrain. They are the collaborative residue from the overthrown political class and have become enduring fixities in every regime

Like his real-life counterparts President Sam establishes an organ of terror, the SRC to terrorise and annihilate actual and imagined opponents and enemies; he stifles the media, permits only favourable information to get to the people, and the demonstrating students and workers are shot. The country quickly becomes a land of chaos and unrest, a sort of a gigantic prison where neither prisoner nor guard will have the luxury of sleep.

Albeit Achebe names the country Kagan, the story in the novel fits perfectly Nigeria's historical experience under military dictatorship. It is the general psychological atmosphere that Achebe evokes in Anthills that links the story in the novel with preceding novels and directs the reader towards their historical significance. From the time of colonialism under the rule of aliens, to neo-colonialism under 'lucky and smart' brothers, and now under military opportunists, the same 'incubutic' oppression and exploitation of the suffering masses and wanton waste of public resources have become permanent incurable national ills ravaging the Nigerian landscape, and normative hallmarks of governance on the continent. Ordinary Nigerians have experienced this a million times if they have experienced it once. Although every government (military and democratic) at inception seems to come with good intentions and promises, but, according to Ikem in Anthills, 'amazing what even one month in office can do to a man's mind' (38). Consequently, the average Nigerian experience has become so brutalised that things have become extraordinarily surrealistic it has led to the debasement of our collective social value system. Attempting to explain this to the people is always unsuccessful, as Odili soon finds out:

> *Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you – as my father did – if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth. (A Man of the People, 2)*

Conclusion

As earlier discussed, writers' response to Nigerian history has been as varied as the historical experience has been varied. Sometimes, even, they have delved into the past to recreate a pre-independence pristine past. (The Great Ponds, The Concubine). This was required at a crucial stage in Nigerian history to 'teach … readers that their past … was not one long night of savagery from which the

first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them' as explicated by Achebe (1975:45). This sensitive response to historical data and writers' personal desire to educate their readers thus make the categorisation of most novels unarduous.

Obviously the use of coetaneous historical and social materials will for some time dominate Nigerian literature as literary artists continue to confront a never-ending and tragically unvariegated human experience. Much as the country continues to grapple with the anathema of corrupt leaders in military toga and in political 'agbada', writers will continue to approach their art from a primarily functionalist vista and expend their literary verve protesting against topical social evils that remain interminably inexorable.

Consequently, and perhaps because it is the most obvious weapon of choice, protest has always been embedded in the fabric of Nigerian literature. The socio-political and historical vein that permeates Nigerian literature is actually that of writers' protest against the ills and malaise that have come to characterise every epochal experience of the Nigerian.

However, the tragic corollary of all this is that there is a kind of historical freeze where the national collective historical experience is predicated on a cruel cycle of military cum civilian pseudo-democracy where the difference appears to reside in the attires their representatives are clothed in. Femi Osofisan (1998:4) refers to this cyclical characteristic when he says in Midnight Hotel:

> *When I wrote the play during the last days of Shagari's civilian government, the country was not bitter yet. Our politicians, coming, into government after decades of military rule, had betrayed us through their recklessness and greed, but still fresh elections were on the way, and hope was a budding light on the horizon. A new better dispensation, we believed, was coming, in which this gigantic country, so richly endowed in resources and talent and energy, would fulfill itself. However, we were wrong. Those Shagari days were only a prelude to something far more sinister, to a season of immeasurable pain. The soldiers came back to power, and since then it has been a steady descent into hell. Life has become precarious; death and violence stalk our every footstep. It has become a veritable struggle to stay alive, to remain human.*

However, this mimetic-biographical-historical function of literature, this artistic attachment to history, the literary artist's pandering to the desire and temptation to be inspired by the ephemeral present, one needs to ask, will it not make his work dated, a mere reconstruction of history, ergo making it only just relevant to the sociological historian? As writers continue to capture a predictable socio-historical experience and avoid literary pyrotechnics in favour of literary pragmatism, the view here is that they have elected to be socially relevant rather than be avant-garde, and that is a positive nevus in Nigerian literature. For, until our collective experiential experience presents our writers with new materials that are positive, we cannot afford to be captious: a writer can only write best about what he knows best.

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