

THE RELATIVITY OF SOCIAL HISTORY, ARTISTIC IMPULSE AND THE BACKGROUND OF THE WRITER IN THE INSCRIPTION OF THE AFRICAN NOVEL

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Abstract

This paper treats the issue of literary appreciation through focusing on three vital components of artistic creativity such as social history, artistic craftsmanship and the background of the writer. Most criticisms of the African novel have often dwelt on the technical craftsmanship of the works and the background of the author, without delineating the historical background of the novels. For this reason, the commentaries are lacking in their depth of treatment. This paper reveals the importance of the three components of creative writing with reference to the works of three leading Nigerian writers - Chinua Achebe, Timothy Aluko and Wole Soyinka. The paper concludes with the assertion that if the three components are articulated and encapsulated in the analysis of a novel, the appreciation will be full and rewarding at the end.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe, Timothy Aluko and Wole Soyinka are among the outstanding and prolific Nigerian novelists who have steeped their works in the discourse over African's postcolonial experience and social condition. As creative artists, the works of these writers articulate the view that the African writer is highly sensitive of the social situation around him:

...he is a human being with a heightened sensitivity, he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations ...the writer cannot therefore be unaware of the monumental injustice which his people suffer.... (Achebe, 1975:79).

What makes the writer a visionary artist is his ability to feel and to articulate the views of his society as well as his use of art to call the society to order if it goes wrong. It is this role of the writer that Mphahlele (1962), considered when he regarded the novelist as 'the sensitive point of his community'. Responding to his role as a writer in his book, *Task and Mask* (1988), Nkosi, asserts that 'the African writing is deeply circumscribed in the utilitarian or functional value of Art on the basis of which the writer acts as the voice of the oppressed and the conscience of the nation'. Similarly, Soyinka is quoted as opining that the vision and mission of the writer is located in his 'ability to save man from the fatality and horror that surrounds him' (Uka, 1975).

On the basis of the role of the writer in his society, this paper considers the works of Chinua Achebe, Timothy Aluko and Wole Soyinka from the perspective of the social history of their society, the writer's artistic creativity and his background. This last item (the writer's background) reflects the writer's

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view of art and what he intends to or does with it. For instance, Achebe sees art as an avenue to teach his society. To Aluko and Soyinka, art is used as a tool for satire to expose social miasma. Taken over all, these three artists employ art as a form of discourse or social commentary so as to deliver their society from 'the fatality and horror' that surround it.

Social History

'Literary, creativity does not operate in a vacuum. It emerges out of history or a combination of history and imagination' according to Finley (1986:31). This is to say that literature touches historical events which are creatively portrayed through the use of discursive paradigms and artistic craftsmanship. This concept has opened the avenue for the emergence of the literary trend known as Faction: a combination of facts with fiction. Facts therefore stand for historical events, while fiction is the dimension of imaginative creativity that the artist incorporates in his work.

In the works of Achebe, Aluko and Soyinka, the writers blend the historical facts with imaginative or fictional accounts in order to make the artistic creation less political, less contention or ideological, since it is intended to be seen as an art or an applied art.

In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for instance, Achebe uses the issue of colonialism and its resultant oppression of the colonized societies to expose the evils of colonialism, which are manifested in the denigration, distortion and destruction (three-d^s) of the culture and identities of colonized societies. *Things Fall Apart* is therefore, a novel that participates in postcolonial discourse whose aim is to decolonize the minds of Africans and to create for the societies the political and discursive impetus for re-creating, re-writing and re-asserting their humanity and self-determination. Like *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* (1964), is intended to expose the sufferings of the colonized people in the hands of the colonial powers. However, as a writer whose interest is on pedagogy, Achebe uses *Arrow of God* to teach the society about the need for flexibility rather than rigidity of the leadership in the affairs of the state. Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* and the old priest (Ezeudu) of *Arrow of God* perished due to their reckless attachment to pride and power and loss of rationality which constitutes reason. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe is attracted to the problems of modernization and independence in the modern African society - problems created by colonial legacies which are signifiers of the push and pull of the country's problematic entry into the world of modernity.

Aluko's works are effluences of his society's social history as in Achebe. Looking at Aluko's last three novels - *Chief the Honourable Minister* (1970), *His Worshipful Majesty* (1973) and *Wrong Ones in the Dock* (1983) Aluko deploys a historical episode for narrativisation of conflict in his society. *Chief the Honourable Minister* presents an intellectually backward society confronted with the problem of adjusting to modernism of democratic political system and its fall arising from the society's difficulties in absorbing Eurocentric ideas. This leads

to the tradition overwhelming the change agent - Alade Moses. As in *Chief the Honourable Minister, His Worshipful Majesty* also exposes the difficulty in social change because the change agent - Mr. Morrison, as in Alade Moses, fails to democratize the Aiyé Local Government according to government's reform agenda. In the bid to control and bring the despotic rule of the Alaiyé in shape with modern democratic reforms, Mr. Morrison dies, apparently as a result of the invocation of a traditional curse - "the curse of jelenke" which the Oba brings in to bear on him as a result of the schism between two of them. The background history of these two novels are part of the unpublished details of social history from which Aluko drew his background theme of tradition - modernity syndrome. *Wrong Ones in the Dock* reflects a tragic incident that occurred in the early eighties in the then capital of Nigeria, Lagos. In one incident, forty-three out of sixty-two prison suspects being conveyed to various courts in Lagos metropolis for interrogation, suffocated and died in a caged lorry known in Nigeria as 'Black - Maria'. Aluko used this unfortunate incident to expose and examine the loopholes in the country's judicial and law-enforcement systems. These point to maladjustment to the judicial system imported into the country and operated for more than a century, and which is yet to 'grow roots that will reach the ground waters of true justice' in Nigeria (*Wrong Ones in the Dock*: 182).

Soyinka has produced a lot of literary works employing the three art forms: poetry, prose and drama. As a literary artist, most of his productions have their base on his personal experience, as well as from history. One of his poems, for instance, the popular 'Telephone Conversation' is a reflection of his personal experience with a landlady in London in the days of his studentship in England. Here, he reflects on the racial discrimination where white landlords and landladies discriminate against the blacks and manifest great reluctance in letting out their apartments to the black people. Soyinka's prose works like *A Skittle in the Crypt*, *The Man Died* etc, reflect his prison experience during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 - 1970 when Soyinka was detained in Kaduna Prison. In the same vein, Soyinka's drama works, like *The Lion and the Jewel* (1972) and *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) are works through which Soyinka comments on the issue of social change. Aesthetically, Soyinka's concept of social change is defined in terms of its ambiguity in relation to the certainty of its occurrence as well as to the incomprehensibility of its nature and scope. The three writers therefore explore history through literary impulse and creativity, thereby, deploying art to comment on the nature of man and his society.

Specifically speaking, using the plot reference to *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka tries to rupture the euphoria that accompanied the prospects of independence in 1960 with the history of the 'great' empires of West Africa, to reveal the monumental corruption that plagued those empires. Soyinka links those corruption and blunders of the past to the current political misdeeds of the present day so as to logically illustrate that despite the lofty expectations of Nigerians, the future (with independence) holds little promise for the nation. Cynicism is therefore Soyinka's attitude to the society's euphoria because the perpetrators of heinous crimes of the past are the ancestors and re-incarnations of the present generation.

Artistic Creativity

Artistic creativity refers to the visionary capacity, artistic impulse and technical craftsmanship which the writer acquires as tools for his work, in

converting history and imagination into a discourse or commentary on the society. In this way, the pervasive muse or creative impulse combines creativity with forewarning insight to make clear postulations for the society and its future. This is fully expressed in Achebe's *A Man of the People* which prophetically ends in a military coup like the country that Achebe satirized in the novel.

Artistic impulse therefore, refers more to the creative instinct or the muse which the writer is naturally endowed with. It is therefore not everyone that is endowed with this creative spirit. Discussing further on the issue of the muse or the creative impulse, Anaso (1998), tried to establish the tripartite relationship between an artist, a lunatic and a lover. He asserts that there is a defined relationship between these three, based on the occasions when they are not in control of their minds. The creative artist is often led through a vision the artist catches and tries to express in his work. The lunatic has the time that he is shot off from the physical world by the spirit of madness. The lover on his own part is like the lunatic locked up physically and psychologically in the act. It is only when they are released by the spirit that possesses them that they become once again in touch with the physical world around them.

Artistic impulse is not a continuous process. It is like a reflex that comes on its own and at anytime that it chooses. It comes as a vision which the artist catches. Being a capricious, phenomenon, the muse or impulse may not manifest when the writer or the artist needs it. It is claimed by Olayinka (1985), Haruna (1987) and Richards (1974), that the muse can be evoked through the use of drugs (like steroids) or alcohol. They argue that in this way, consciousness or the imaginative spirit goes away and is replaced by the muse which surges in to take control over the artist.

Justifying this argument, Olayinka, gives an example with a popular Nigerian Afro-Beat musician known for his ingestion of heavy doses of marijuana before he goes up to the stage to perform. In his own example, Haruna describes a popular Hausa musician that takes his beer and cigarettes even on the performing stage, and who does not usually need to practice before performing, one he is in touch with the bottle. In the case of lovers, many are said to usually nerve themselves with strong alcohol or drugs before the act. In all these, Richards argue that the essence of using steroids or alcohol is to enhance performance by ushering in the creative spirit or the muse and push the conscious world down. This argument is in line with Shakespeare's assertion in *King Lear* that it is when one loses the consciousness of rationality that he sees clearer.

However, even if these enhancers do work, there is a limit to which they could be relied upon for creative purposes, beyond which it becomes counterproductive. Shakespeare, in his book, *Macbeth* (1974 rep.) notes that, alcohol is a controversial stimulant, provoking three things: lechery, nose-painting and sleep. According to Shakespeare, it provokes sexual urge but takes away the performance by giving the drunkard the lie (i.e. sleepiness). Creative impulse accentuates creativity anti it is very important if it comes naturally.

The Background of the Writer

This aspect of creative writing refers to the intellectual and the social identity of the writer because, as Afolayan (1975), puts it: 'the identity of the artist

finds expression in his creative work'. The artist's vision which, emanates from his pervasive identity continues to exude and impinge or be super-imposed on his production in the form of a signature tune. From this viewpoint, the background of the author is seen from two major perspectives. The first is his academic or intellectual standing, while the second one is the writer's social identity and with his psyche.

Intellectually, Achebe and Soyinka, both of them graduates of the former University College, Ibadan in the 1950s, read Literary Arts which has imbued in them a deep understanding of literary trends in Africa, Europe and America. They are able to combine their talents with the artistic commitment to social justice and equity in human interactions. As part of the commitment to the decolonization of African continent, Achebe and Soyinka are fully identified with their African names - Chinua and Oluwole (constricted to Wole). Earlier and as an infant and a child of the Anglican Church, Achebe was baptized with the name Albert, (after Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria of England) a name he dropped to establish his full humanity as an African, in the face of cultural imperialism of Europe which distorted African traditions and called the full humanity of the African to question. Soyinka, has always been known as Wole and has never been known to have much attachment to the Church.

Much as these two writers have adopted their African names, they are not anti-Church. Rather, this is a way of establishing their sole identity as Africans. Aluko himself is known by his first name, Timothy which stands for his dual-identity as African (by birth) and European (i.e. British by colonialism). This is why Aluko's standards for measuring his society are Eurocentric. He has been to England to study Public Health Engineering. It is suspected that Aluko must have been inducted into the colonial values of Eurocentric universality during those years of stay in Europe. For this reason, the major part of his works delineates his society's complete lack of (Eurocentric) standards owing to what he views as its intellectual backwardness. Aluko, sees the work of modernization of his society as agonizingly difficult because, the traditional ways of life are morally backward. For this portrayal of tradition as backward, Aluko's works are not considered in line with the postulations of the Pos-'colonial literature in Africa, whose contingency is to decolonize the African mind and thereby recreate and rewrite the history of Africa from the distortions of cultural imperialism, and in line with the view of Africans themselves.

Achebe and Soyink'a works are in the vanguard of decolonization and social criticism respectively. However, this division is not clear-cut; because both writers deploy satire in their writings.

From this discussion of the background of the writers, it is clear that a writer's background (historical and intellectual) cannot be divested from his artistic creativity or envisioned narrativisation of social events through which he comments artistically on man and his society. Since his concern is on man and society, the writer aestheticises the discourse of the tenets of liberal humanism such as individuality, choice moderation and the power of reason and the intellect' according to Anaso (2006:52). The knowledge of the background of the author therefore, is very important in assessing or appreciating an author's literary work.

Conclusion

The novel-form in Africa has its root in the traditional art forms such as folktales, proverbs, idioms, riddles, conundrums, ritual chants and others. Today, the novel has grown to become an avenue for social discourse over man and his society. For a literary work to be fully appreciated there is need to relate the topic of discourse in the work to the social history of the setting and the background of the author. This is partially what Oladele (1967:153), implies when he says that:

...for an investigation of the novelist's view of society to be fruitful, the critic must be willing to consider the method of presentation and the writer's background, illustrating the success or failures of these depictions by close reference to the text....

In this way, the appreciation of a literary work will be full and rewarding. This paper has therefore postulated that an understanding of the paradigms of social history, creative impulse and the background of the author (referring to the author's social identity and intellectual image) as *sine qua non* for fruitful study of African literary works.

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