

HIV-AIDS AS A CONTEMPORARY ISSUE IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper views literature as a social discourse in which the issues or problems of human society can be x-rayed and suggestions as to their solution proffered. The paper surveys the concern of African writers, especially with colonialism and its impact on the colonised, and other literary concerns of the African writers such as independence, equality, modernization and nationhood in the past. These were the immediate problems of the past. The immediate problem of the present is the HIV-AIDS, which this paper views as a matter of great concern for everyone, considering its ravaging effect on the society. The paper calls for the attention of writers to this social miasma and suggests the pattern of literary intervention for it to score the required point. The paper wraps up with the conclusion that the relentless advance of HIV-AIDS pandemic must be halted and calls on writers to see this as part of their service to society and humanity in general.

Introduction

Literature has been defined as a form of art, a social discourse that focuses on imaginary or real contemporary issues in textual form (Bayanta, 1997:36). The traditional literary art form in Africa was oral, in the form of folktales, which was regarded as oral tradition. This was owing to the fact that they were unwritten, according to Irele (1978). However, the introduction of literature in English in Africa in the early 20th century, and the emergence of early works like *Mudhi* (1930), inspired a new dimension to literature from Africa, although, late in eighteenth century, Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) had written what could be considered as original protest novel against the denigration of Africa by Europe. In his book, *'Equiano's Travels (1789)*, Equiano protests against the falsifications and distortion of African's image and history by European scholars' of his time.

During the early imperialist days or at the on-set of colonial domination of Africa, Africa was dominated by European writings about Africa; and the colonized people were made to read and unquestioningly, gulp down these malicious stories about African people and cultures. In these writings, Africa was presented as primitive and savage; a dark continent, which Europe, prompted by God, came to deliver from the darkness of ignorance and savagery (Keston, 1972:21).

African literary creators came up to challenge these European claims. Nkrumah (1957), devolves that:

the history of Africa as presented by European scholar's had been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people Such disparaging accounts had been given of African society and culture as to justify slavery, and slavery posed against such accounts seemed as positive deliverance of our ancestors .(p. 19).

African writers who wrote in the wake of independence aimed at 'decolonising' the African minds of colonialist denigration; a move described as 'postcolonial 'discourse'. Hence, postcolonial discourse are literary creations of African's described as the:

'...literary reaction of the colonised people against colonialism in all its manifestation; highlighting a way of talking about the political strategies of

the colonised people, generated by the realisation that the effect of colonising powers over individuals, societies and cultures ... was vast and produced consequences as complex as they were profound' (Ashcraft et al., 1998:89).

The reaction of black writers against colonialism is axiomatic of Achebe's assertion about the role and character of the Artist:

.... the artist is a human being with heightened sensitivities, he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relation. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice, which his people suffer(Achebe, 1975:79).

The Artist is very sensitive to situations around him. This is the reason for Mphahlele calling the artist or the writer 'the sensitive point of his society' He not only calls attention to the need of his society, he imbues into his art artistic sympathy for the society, according to Carter (1974:137).

...he (the writer) must exercise sympathy before he can exercise art. Sympathy is taken to be with suffering, though it would be absurd to suppose it withdrawn the moment there was joy or happiness.

Literary Arts, from the above perspectives have great potentials of addressing the needs of the society in line with Soyinka's view that the writer has the power to deliver his society from the precipice. Being the writer's society, these needs are bound to be depicted with sympathy for as it is often said, 'charity begins at home'. Nkosi (1988), in *Task and Masks* said that African writing is deeply circumscribed by the functional or utilitarian value of Art in which the writer acts as a voice of the oppressed and the conscience of the nation. Literary Art is therefore seen and used as a form of social commentary.

While shifting his attention away from anti-colonialist writings, Achebe feels that it is necessary to address contemporary issues of the society. This is why he argues that:

....without belittling the efforts so far of African writers, it is time they abandoned the pursuit of the shadow and grabbed the substance; it is time they tackled the disease, not its symptoms; it is this greater concern with the affairs of men, realised in a tough technically serious envisioned manner that I mean.... (Achebe, 1975:114).

African writers cannot afford, therefore, to chase rats while their home is on fire. There are urgent needs that African writers must address. The addressing of these needs is in line with W. G. Abraham's argument that:

....just as African scientists undertake to solve some of the scientific problems of Africa, African historians go into the history of Africa, African political scientists concern themselves with the political problems of Africa, why should the African literary creators be exempted from the services that they themselves consider as genuine.... (Abraham, 1964:46).

The genuine role of African creative writers to use their narrativity and texts to solve or address societal problems and malaise cannot, therefore, be over-emphasised.

HIV-AIDS as Social Malaise

The most monumental problem that Africa faces today is the HIV-AIDS pandemic. HIV-AIDS is a scourge, an infection that has ravaged the nations of mankind, especially the African continent, more than any other holocaust ever known in history.

What is HIV-AIDS?

HIV-AIDS means 'Humane Immune Virus' which causes the 'Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome' (AIDS) in human beings (Mbata, 2003:7). This is a 'viral infection that destroys the immune system of a human being, making him extremely vulnerable and susceptible to all kinds of infection, adds Mbata. This disease is transmitted through sexual contact with a victim or through infected blood transfusion; or through blood contact with infected tools, sharp surgical blades or needles from a victim.

AIDS has become a subject of political or racial propaganda - the Europeans alleging its origin

form Africa, while there are counter allegations of its origin from Europe and America. It is, in fact, claimed that the first ever-identified victim of AIDS about twenty years ago was an American. Hitherto, no such case was reported from Africa despite Africa's low healthcare delivery system, it is also alleged that this pandemic crossed to Africa from overseas, and that the high incidence of AIDS in Africa today results from poverty and low healthcare delivery system in Africa. WHO (2005), reported that over fourteen million (14 Million) people, mostly from tropical Africa were infected with HIV-AIDS and that over one and half (1.5 million) children in Africa have been orphaned by AIDS. WHO's report also indicated that the pandemic is still on the increase in African nations as a result of poor living conditions, lack of sufficient retro-viral drugs and concupiscence on the part of the populace?

The Role of Literature in the Control of AIDS Pandemic

Just as literature has been involved in all social needs in the continent, it is probably presently needed more in order to combat the problem that is currently ravaging mankind in Africa. As noted in the introduction to this paper, Achebe has indicated that 'the artist cannot be unaware of the monumental injustice which his society suffers from. Abraham, has also argued that the African literary creator cannot be exempted from contributing to the solution of the problem around him. In this way, Mphahlele also shows that the writer can only become the sensitive point of his society if he contributes to the solution of the society's problems.

Now, the role of the writer is not to engage in the polemics of who originated the disease -Europe or Africa. This would amount to chasing rats while one's house is on fire. The writer should adopt a definite attitude, which includes the following:

- + Create awareness of the disease (HIV-AIDS);
- * Educate the society on the causes and modes of transmission of the disease;
- f Educate the society on prevention and control methods; and finally; and
- * Call for interventions both from within and outside the continent.

Creating Awareness

In spite of the modest efforts of the press and mass media organisations, only a little part of the members of the African community are fully aware of the HIV-AIDS prevalence. Many, especially in the rural areas, are too poor to possess such electronic equipment as Radio and television sets; and are also too ignorant to read printed materials. Even among the so-called literate population, the awareness is not intense, either as a result of lack of interest in listening to news, or outright disbelief in AIDS stories. Some people among the enlightened group see the whole campaign on AIDS as a hoax to discourage population explosion in the third world; especially African nations. Literary creators should boot-up the efforts of medical practitioners and the media to create the awareness that AIDS is real; that it kills in large numbers; and that there is no known cure for it.

Secondly, the society should be educated on its preventive methods so as to reduce the incidence of its transmission. Third, the writer must also call for aid and other modes of assisting victims especially through supply of drugs so as to alleviate their suffering. This assistance should come both from within and outside the country. For instance, victims should have free access to retro-viral drugs. Even if the drugs would not be given free, government must be made to regard this as an emergency situation and to subsidize heavily the costs of such drugs. The power of the text must be displayed in this case.

Mode of Delivery

This section refers to the methods to be adopted by literary creators in their discourse on HIV-AIDS topic, which must be handled with sympathy for the suffering.

One, the mode should appear informal so as not to frighten or discourage readers who do not want to read about AIDS matters. This can be done by informally introducing the discussion not in isolation, but in discussing other social problems in the text. For instance, in watching the South African film, Sarafina, the issue of AIDS was perfectly slotted in when Sarafina declines the invitation by 'Crocodile' for an outing; giving her reason as 'AIDS scourge'. Also, one of the students, while suggesting the theme for their end of year concert said: 'AIDS comes to South Africa

but only the Boers have it'. All this is in the midst of the exploration of the theme of 'Apartheid' in the film. Such informal presentations or inclusions can be made in prose and drama texts.

Formally, poems about the incidence of AIDS need to be written and published in whole or as part of texts or in the dailies. The reader, seeing the names of celebrated writers in short stories or poems in the dailies, will surely want to read such pieces, and will become better sensitized than in listening to news tit-bits on AIDS on Radio or TV programmes.

Again, writers should not think that they render more social services to their country only when they publish satirical works. Their social service includes, educating the public on monumental issues like AIDS pandemic. It is difficult to estimate the impact of such writings on the life of the public, but it will make quite a positively appreciable impact on the welfare of the citizenry.

Conclusion

HIV-AIDS is the greatest ravager of human population today. The WHO report puts the spreading rate at 5% yearly in the developing countries; which is more than the annual population growth rate of 3.6%. Some countries in Europe have almost zero growth rates. In Norway and other Scandinavian countries, as well as parts of Europe like Holland and Netherlands, people are being encouraged to marry and are offered attractive incentives to bear children, owing to diminishing population growth rate. Also, since homosexuality is on the increase in Europe, population growth is hindered by this attitude of people.

In Africa, however, there is need to halt the decimation of human population by HIV-AIDS. All hands must be on the deck, and African writers must see in this area, an opportunity for them to render social service to halt the relentless march of HIV-AIDS in Africa. The Bible book of Hosea, chapter 4 verse 6 declares that 'my people perish for lack of knowledge'. This paper sees the writer who educates or warns his society against an impending doom as the sage. He must educate his people' so that they do not perish for lack of knowledge; and so that he does not die of condemnation for failure to warn his people against danger.

Recommendation

A few days ago, the Voice of America (VGA), quoted WHO sources which affirmed that between January and October 2006, 2.1 million people, mainly from Sub-Sahara Africa, have died of AIDS. A breakdown shows that 11,000 people die daily and that over 55% of this figure are youths. This unfortunate scenario calls for an intensification of anti HIV campaigns in which literary works should be made to play an aggressive role. Literature, as Art in general must be used as a social commentary to teach mankind or educate the nation about HIV prevalence so as to help the society and enhance human life.

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