

Literature as a Mirror-Image of Socio-Political Realities: An Examination of Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*

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Abstract

In view of the gradation of sameness between literature and humanities, one is swayed that literature is not a mere social construct which is ingrained in mere notions, imaginations, and imaginary conditions. Rather, it is seen as a social establishment, a kind of ritual, which has been in existence since time immemorial and has become an integral part of many societies. Therefore, this paper views literature as a replication of societal social realities. The paper examines and denounces the portrayal in a selected African play, of the hostile and punitive political and social realities that threaten our societies. Based on sociological literary theory, the article argues that literature is an appropriate instrument for national reconciliation and unity among the various peoples of the society. The paper will explore the portrayal of the themes of national political crisis, national reconciliation and national unity in a selected African play. The article will demonstrate the depiction of these themes and relate them to the happenings in our society presently.

Key Words: Socio-Political, Realities, Construct, Imaginary, Sameness, Demonstrate.

Introduction

Literature is a body of written literary works. It refers to writing as an art form. Literature serves as gateway to learning of the past and expanding the knowledge and understanding the world. To be candid, we do not criticize or oppose the proponents of art for art's sake in entirety. What we frown at is its nature of narrow mindedness, which sees arts as well as literature as a close entity of its own. Faulting the closeness and, or autonomy of arts as claimed by the advocates and the practitioners of the art for art's sake, (Berthoff, 1981, p. x-xi) states that: "... 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 correlation which cannot be divorced automatically. The essentials of fiction are found in non-fiction. Therefore, no work of fiction; poetry, drama, and prose can be entirely for its mere aesthetic value of beauty and just the purpose of

entertainment. Literature or any work of art generally is not closed, autonomous or self-sufficient on its own. Thus, there is indeed a distinct bond between literature and the society/environment where it is invented with the aim of performing some germane purposes its plays. Literature mirrors the society and its mannerism. It's a torch bearer that has helped civilizations to overcome darkness of savagery such as the different kinds of insecurity we are experiencing in Nigeria and other African countries. Without literature men would be like wild *beasts* because it endows an understanding of compassion in the reader.

Moreover, literature is uttered in a given language because language is the main tenet of communication and the most outstanding feature which differentiates man from animals. Language is the medium, or the context by which messages in any literature is been conveyed and disseminated to its audience. Therefore, literature and language, are two indivisible kinds. Wellek and Warren, (1968, p. 228) asserts that: "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”.

Meanwhile, Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984) provides corpus for this discussion. The playwright is 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 solutions to our societal problems. In whatever language it is presented; English, which is the official language, 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 regrettably bordered by the French speaking countries or vernacular/a native language; African literature has the potential to institutionalize the much desired positive social changes which will advance peace, unity and, sustainable developments.

This paper choose the famous sociological criticism in view of the fact that what its attempt to do is essentially focused on sociology of literature. In order to comprehend any literary work, one needs to investigate into the setting of the literary work as well as studying how the societal elements are represented in the literature itself because it is held that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral value re-orientation. And, of course, the 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).

Arguably, life is as well concerned with measurement, assessment, and judgment of events as well as human actions. Historically,

leaders in Africa, with slight exemptions anyway, have endangered the corporate well-being of their subjects as well as sacrificed the communal hopes and aspirations of the entire black race by mortgaging their nations and subjects by extension. It is the view of this paper, one will be persuaded that most African leaders have indeed sold out their conscience for a insignificant price, all for the material things of this world, at the detriment of their people and nations. They become tyrants and excessively corrupts. This is responsible for the state of underdevelopment, insecurity, etc of the African states.

In his political satire, *A Play of Giants*, Wole Soyinka portrays and condemns the corruption within the corridors of power in our society. This dreadful trend called corruption is demonstrated by the actions of three outlandish African leaders spearheaded by Kamini, who travels out of his country with the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank. He states rudely yet arrogantly that; “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).

Similarly, Kamini commands the Chairman to mint additional money for him to squander. These irrational leaders squander their countries’ lean resources on food and other extraneous things, while their subjects are left in abject poverty. Certainly, they are a bunch of gluttons! In order to heighten the thoughtlessness of African rulers, Kamini commands his Chairman to accept any condition given by the World Bank so as to acquire a two hundred million dollars foreign loan, without having a spelt out capital project which the loan will be spent on. Of course, the money will ultimately end in their personal bank accounts which have been the practice. Read the following conversation between Kamini and the Chairman of the Central bank to validate the 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 evident that most African leaders have no any developmental agenda; mission, vision or plan, for any form of national development. They are merely a horde of self-centered idiots. As portrayed, the failure of these leaders in discharging their constitutional responsibilities and social contracts to their subjects and the society at large rationalizes the fact that corruption accounts for the many forms of abject poverty, which threatens African nations leading to all forms of crimes such as insecurity that is threatening the peaceful coexistence of the entire continent. Although the citizens die in hunger and destitution and killing one another, while the impious leaders smile at all times as they accumulate ill-gotten wealth for themselves and their cronies.

According to Coates and Silbourn, (1983, p. 67), "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." Furthermore, Mohuddin, (1993, p. 48), defines poverty as "Households' inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy the needs for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation".

Likewise, there is the exhibition of power drunkenness by these so-called leaders, who see themselves as Giants. The 1st Russian is not economical with the truth. He describes Kamini as a ferocious child so he offers him a doll to play with. Thus, they are actually butchers, reactionary bastards and, wicked. They punish or torture, promote and demote civil servants at will with no justification. Any form of opposition against them is crush with impunity. It is indeed of show of shame that African leaders symbolize an epitome of corruption.

Any Leader, who lavishes the resources of his country and tactically exploits the nation's to a level of bankruptcy when the milk goes sour, most infuriatingly corrupt leader like Kamini as well laments about the corruption ravaging the country. As 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).

Definitely this is a dramatic irony at its peak. In other words, Professor Batey speaks the mind of the playwright when he says: "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).

It is position of this paper that literature ought to be a mirror image of societal dynamics, being a literary work of art. Thus, the literary writer share his experiences in his literary work, he entertains, informs, and educate his audience with aim 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). More so, literature is projected to be an effective tool in the transformation of a given human society.

From the foregone, it has been portrayed that abuse of power, corruption, favoritism, nepotism, insecurity and the culture of wastage have led to us to where we are today. This is responsible high rate of unemployment and abject poverty; leading to insecurity such as banditry, kidnapping among others. In fact, insecurity, corruption, unemployment and years of abject poverty are the major social problems bedeviling the African society states. Importantly, they are the main factors, which encumber socio-economic and political development of the continent. In a similar

vein, Bakare writes that:

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, (Bakare, 2013, p. 26).

Painfully, this dreadful trend of unemployment and of course poverty is a fall out of years of uninhibited official corruption, negligence and senseless wastage of available resources, which eventually jeopardize economic growth, development and advancement in the country and the continent of Africa at large. Olusegun-Joseph, (2006) corroborating this state of social hazard in Africa, asserts 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", (p. 69-84).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the article has demonstrated the archetype of hypocrisy of African leaders in both traditional and modern/contemporary African society humorously and, or through the use of ironical situations that characterized the selected satirical play. Typically, 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, writers have enacted their experiences, identified social ordeals which work against meaningful developments of African society and has suggested adequate solutions to those perceived problems/challenges. This renowned playwright has recommended that for a promising societal all-encompassing development; abuse of power, corruption, favoritism, nepotism, ethnicity, insecurity, gender inequality and the culture of resource depletion must be addressed and education must be given as place of priority.

On the other part, as a literary critic and public commentator, I have in this paper attempt to justify that literature is indeed a mirror-image and a viable podium for socio-political debates on realistic realities by examining the meeting points between this form of art and the human society, which produces it. Thus, its exposes and roots out the hideous implications of poor governance, official corruption, male chauvinism and other socio-economic and political injustices, which are responsible for the state of insecurity in our societies. Therefore, literature remains an instrument for positive social changes. In fact, it is a magic potion for human peaceful co-existence and sustainable developments. Indeed, if these issues portray by the playwright in the play are addressed by the African leaders the raging insecurity ravaging almost all the African countries wouldn't have been happening. Consequently, there is the need for African

leaders to see leadership as a task of servicing people diligently, finding solutions to societal problems (insecurity, unemployment, etc), providing services to the people for their well-being, and

development. Hence, literature as a mirror-image of the society beams the society for all to see what is happening and to adjust in order to make positive adjustment for the development of the people and the society.

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