

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (4), Serial No. 21, July, 2011

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Between New Challenges in African Literature and Contemporary Realities: the Case Study of Opanachi's *Eaters of the Living* (Pp. 342-353)

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Abstract

*The twenty-first century is observed to pose a number of challenges for the African writer, having scaled through many thorny decades producing works of art that has passed under diverse sledge hammers. Among which are derogatory names such as "defensive...literatures." More so, as the saga of Africa's hunger tops the list of the concerns of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of the United Nations; which asserts that the declared level of Africa's achievements might still be on paper. This challenge is coming barely a decade or two after cases of barbaric genocides in Africa alongside other socio-political unrests which may actually affect writers' pre-occupation in Africa. The continent is sadly besieged by horrible sights and shouts of fraud which has diverted all the likely prospects of re-orientation for a new creative hope to give artistic thrust to a new world order. This paper has therefore undertaken a case-study of Idris Opanachi's concerns in *Eaters of the living* which a commentator says, "Chronicles the consumptive defector, ravaging the land of promise" against calls for a new image of the African personality to relocate her for more feasible operations in the twenty-first century. It has further challenged Charles Nnolim's critical reception; as it broadens the debate concerning the literary and cultural importance of his overture by concentrating on the explication of relevant*

literary works that would rather respond to socio-political realities in its milieu. Furthermore, I have demonstrated by critical evaluation of the work of a selected Nigerian poet that the impulsive response of a writer in this age of technological innovations is not yet absolved of the traditional preoccupations of his predecessors.

Introduction

The twenty-first century poses a number of challenges to the African writer, just as it did to other national and continental literatures in the nineteenth, twentieth and of course many centuries past. History of course has in stock thorny periods through which such literatures existed, shedding on its path the consciousness of its time. It is apt to also admit that literature is dynamic, whether European, American or African. Modern African literature could most conveniently be traced to diverse intellectual movements in the twentieth century which are associated with the development of nationalistic consciousness of such times.

The harsh realities of Africa's development and her journey to an expected promised land could in retrospect be seen as a clog in the wheel of progress for most nations. Historical antecedents on the continent, as eloquently represented in our literature, actually fertilized the grounds and nurtured the raw materials for its development. This affirms G.C. Mutiso's assertion that all literatures in the African context tends to exist as a social commentary. It is also a fact that African literature is characterized by series of conflicts that tend to spread across different periods in the history of the continent.

The development of distinctive cultural and political consciousness of the African nations for instance, has been identified as adversely affected by the demoralizing effects of the slave trade and colonialism. Thus, slavery carried along with it racial inferiority as affirmed by many critics in line with Abiola Irele who avers that "There was not only the objective humiliation of the race- its subjugation and exploitation in the crudest possible manner, but also, more serious, ideological devaluation of the black man, the massive attack against his intimate subjective dignity" Irele (92).

Another factor recognized at the root of Africa's dilemma is the European imperialistic expansion of the nineteenth century, sealed at the Berlin conference by the partition of Africa in 1884. This is one of the historical landmarks that translated into multifaceted problems for Africa. It among others, led to the establishment of "political and socio-economic structures on

the continent along the lines dictated by European interests...” (93). The development snowballed into adverse transformation of the Africa’s erstwhile communal and egalitarian society reaping off such essences and world view for a process of strange acculturation.

The conflict could also be traced to the white and black colonial encounter. At that initial level, it could be termed “racial” because of its racial interests. While the white man struggled to maintain his hold on power economically, socio-politically and technologically, he hoped and strove to keep the black man in perpetual bondage arguable though, depending on the side assessing the impasse. The black elites on their part, wrestled to re-establish African dignity in both life and art as well as to regain self rule. This is what Ali Mazrui describes as “white folks and blacks folks fighting each other about who owns what” (2).

The state of disarray as created by the conflict of western and African cultures is what has pushed the African towards what Eustace Palmer calls “movement towards self- determination.” He conjectures further that “the emergence into prominence of a powerful, well educated and articulate elite” that derived their inspiration from traditional lore, indigenous customs and oral tradition, in a bid to demonstrate to their readers, Africans and non Africans alike, that Africa has a culture she could be proud of. (Palmer: 1982) Writers whose works express the strength, validity, and beauty of African life and culture include some of the earliest novelists- Tutuola, Camara Laye, and Chinua Achebe.

It also apt to recall the fact that African writers of the first generation who wrote before and after independence all contested the question of genuine Africa’s freedom with the hope of countering the raging exploitative structures instituted by what has been tagged “retreating /intruding west”. The emphasis on return to self rule and independence was a subject matter on which much ink was split- that gave room to nationalistic movements, political and cultural trends in Africa. This was the prevalent consciousness of the intellectual class in addressing their experiences. Among other consequences, it resulted into what Gakwandi identifies as a form of growth in three distinctive facades of African literature in different parts of the continent. “Most critics, however, have found it most convenient to divide African literature into various ‘traditions’ (7).

Post independence experiences unfortunately shifted these concerns into conflicts within the Africans themselves, between the rulers and the ruled.

The initial expectation that African independence was going to change the condition of Africa socio-politically, economically, dovetailed into a very dark cloud of disappointment and frustration which soon turned into disillusionment. This could be illustrated by an account of a poem written by a Nigerian in Britain about Nigeria two years before coming home. According to Gakwandi, the dreamy, euphoria of the author's nationalistic sentiments shows the erroneous belief that colonialism was the common enemy African nations had. Thus, they naively thought or rather believed that once independence was attained, all else would be well as illustrated in the following excerpts:

God bless our noble fatherland
Great land of sunshine bright,
Where brave men, choose the way of peace
To win their freedom fight.
May we preserve our purity
our zest for life and jollity (28).

Unarguable Africa's literature almost from the onset, has grappled with what has been tagged, illusion of progress (30). That is the subject of Chinua Achebe in *No Longer at Ease* because it depicts what great problem corruption is. Africa has, from the dawn of her literature battled with the fibrous fingers of corruption and injustice. More like an octopus it keeps moving from one level of decay to the other. That is why Gakwandi says "nepotism ... exists inseparably side by side with bribery"

In a critical assessment of past African literature therefore, Charles Nnolim describes it as "defensive...literatures". Exercising the same concern Thomas Hale on his part was quoted as questioning "whether or not studies of African literature can cast off Euro-blinders and adopt a longer diachronic view of the field. (10) These new challenges include the need for the African writer to "position himself as one at par, at least imaginatively with the white race" as opposed to the erstwhile inferior status she had battled against with for many decades already. In the face of such a bloated expectation and what may be seen as wild dreams; it apparently looks like wiping off tears with one hand, to enforce a smile. The journey could still be rough.

Discussion

In a proactive outlook the duo seek to advocate removal of retrogressive images that are rather redemptive and "negritudist" in African literatures. More so as the prospects of change (for the continent) are viewed in terms of

the technological advancement in the present globalized new world-order which certainly conveys a new spirit of hope and optimism. There is also the challenge to reframe African literature into broader contexts if we must fit into the current trends of advancement in a world technologically racing on a cruise speed. High-flown settings are some of the advocated components needed to achieve the much dreamed-of global outlook if we must have a neat break from the complexities of the past. This, they argued will surely give us a clean break from our ugly historical experiences with its adverse effects on African literature.

What Charles Nnolim expects is a startling “creative outlook” and an extended “new international phase and not limiting his canvas to the African soil” (11). This legitimacy of this noble demand is defended by recourse to a few internationally acclaimed nineteenth and twentieth century artists who include prominently, Henry James (an American novelist) whose novels and short stories critics believe invoke “international theme”. Books, they detect should be written exploring themes such as entrapped white tourists; or themes transcending the special expanses into the air and sea. Other themes they say should take the looks of Jules Verne’s science fiction titled, From the Earth to the Moon, or even Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea. Summarily, the challenge before the African writer includes the following mystery:

The twenty-first century beckons Africans to embrace new challenges in this epoch of globalization. If African literature in the twentieth century had suffered from imaginative timidity, it has no reason to be so confined in the twenty-first century. Europe invaded Africa and the world with their civilization, religion and technology and all of us have since then been transfixed. What prevents the African writer in the international theme of our literature? ... Why can’t Africans write about Europe or America (12)

In the face of such an overstuffed expectation, whose attainment in the present glare of socio-political and economic mishaps and meltdowns may still hang in the balance for a few more decades. A trial could be rougher than expected; perhaps it would be like dictating the tune of a people’s creativity. It would certainly fling the artist out of the realms of the well

asserted symbiotic relationships with societal realities and Art. More so as the tale of Africa's hunger is topping the list of the concerns of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of the United Nations.

Some declared levels of Africa's developmental achievements might still only be on paper. This assertions coming in barely a decade or two after the barbaric genocides in Rwanda, Liberia and now in the Sudan may only confirm the level of our ill preparedness. Africa's achievements for such dazzling escapade may actually have to wait for a relative or perfect peace in Africa. Therefore, the African writer may still be ill-equipped for in-depth involvement with science fiction or any of such dreamy proposals when adverse challenges literally infest his senses thus exerting on him a response in tandem with the said society's peculiarity. Unlike Albert Camus's inference that "Art, is of small importance in the face of suffering," the situation is more of an opposite in the African context.

The emergence of a deluge of new writers/poets all over the Nigeria the most populous black nation in the last two decades may overtly mean that writers most naturally respond to the realities that surrounds them. A larger majority address the objects or phenomenal of oppression in their milieu if arts for art's sake is staging a comeback in a new saddle. If "art" as Nnolim rightly asserts, is of a truth, "a conquest, a struggle between the artist and his world, an accusation against forces that hold humanity in servitude", then, it ought to respond to the socio-political realities as established in an earlier study. (Alu, 1-3)

However, the problem of application and implementation has always compounded seemingly noble calls or objectives in Africa/Nigeria. The first challenge before the African writer is the modality of skipping the complexes the past has shaded on the present which are actually rooted in the people's ways of life for an alternative that is not a pressing problem on him, his society or country. If what writers like Tanure Ojaide kept asserting is still tenable, that "a writer is not an air plant that hangs without roots, he is socially and politically situated..." then would the George Orwells produce allegories that address problems that bother on the cares of their age. Thus, would the assertion of the French philosopher Taine that "literature is the consequence of the time, the moment, the race and the milieu," goes to affirm the relevance of the symbiotic relationship of the Art, Society and Artist (ASA) (Alu, 2009). I have not found any luxury in the purely intrinsic study

of literature, at least not in the face of these sordid socio-political realities in Africa.

Since the older Nigerian writers are said to have dwelt long on the defensive literature or as playing the role of “a second class citizen of the world” a case study of a new poet Idris Opanachi’s award winning collection Eaters of the living is attempted here to see whether it bears the promise of the advertised vision. Does this collection of poems, show a new spiritual reorientation, a new creative hope, which could lead towards the new world order or does it take after the traditional pattern?

In a bold, militant voice, Opanachi in ‘Eater’s of the living’ (the title poem) chronicles the consumptive defector, ravaging the land. “They eat the flag/they munch the anthem/and chew the pledge/they masticate the constitution/they gobble the land/they devour the people/they gnaw at the country (28).

The linguist poet is articulate in the choice of verb, throughout the poem which gives it diverse forms of the abuse meted on its very form and frame. The “flag” the “anthem” and “pledge” are all marks and emblems of the nation’s existence and unity, which the poet perceives is unwinding Nigeria’s journey to nationhood.

If anyone thinks and believes that African literature, of the twentieth century suffered from what was called “imaginative timidity” as well as “cultural mooring”, the laurel is getting foggy-misted, and it is a recipe of disunity. In the poem ‘Dialogue’, the poet paints the image of two opposed forms, which is of a double-faced nation, ruled by “ill-accord”:

A dialogue spoken
In a voice of thunder
To children melted in fear
The Babel of double-talks
A dialogue between the blind
Hands over fire
And celebrates
With the champagne of blood
Between the clenched teeth of cannibals! (39)

The observed gab between the leaders and the lead is the bone of contention in the Nigerian polity today, the poet says. He knows that the so-called open door policies flagged by succeeding government’s (by which they) claim to

welcome dialogue is ill-conceived. The allusion to “Babel” is biblical which is synonymous with rebellion and confusion. But unlike, the Babel before God confounded their tongues; the later part was of “double-talk” tantamount to confusion. The point is, African leaders are unfaithful deliverers from who very little is expected for any meaningful progress, he submits.

In the face of an expected new image for the new African personality, the glaring realities may limit such prospects. In the poet’s armory, he wields images by the artful deployment of words, to didactically present the state of the nation/issue. The poem, ‘The concert of cannibals’, laments the unfortunate implications of the attitude of Nigerian leaders, whom he calls cannibals:

...

From the noise of cannibals
Their apparatus humming
The death songs in firework
Of computerised toys of power game
The grating gin jarred the ears
Splitting the earth
Where corpses sprouted
Into gravestones of memorial poetry (56)

The concert, either imagined or real is an interpretation of all pretentious political games as public show of “shame” laden with “pain” and “death”. The society, represented by its leadership cannot offer much now, still bearing their name-tag “cannibal”, they cause death and not life. The future is still bleak.

The folly of the age is caricatured in a short poem that juxtaposes the ideal and reality. It is true that wisdom comes with age, but in African polity their old men never retire, they have the spirit of rebelling against the senate to perpetrate themselves in power their ambition is likened to Caesar’s desired prolonged stay in Gaul: Old men wear/ Old sandals carry/Old staff/ But leaders /Wear the old skin/Of Caesar (57).

The game of selfishness is presented as a cancer of progress. The self-song that saturates the corridors of power is a defector, which drags into introspection and stagnation. In the poem, ‘My song’, Opanachi builds a metaphorical “mould” of “self” to sketch the Nigerian dilemma:

I am a bigger than the rest of you
I, first
Me, next
And myself, last
I am the monster
Guns are my props
And sycophants, my doctors
Conscience I hate
And future is my enemy
I breathe power, power (58)

This is the state of the political power-game that shows “the fall of man” from pursuing virtuous ideals for vices. The 21st century is particularly identified to have ushered in fathomless depth of moral corruption. It is a liberal world—a humanist world, where evil is applauded as heroism. This is what blindfolds man from any positive decision for any serious positive achievement. In a similar way, Opanachi ridicules these leaders as he presents them in their destructive regalia. He likens them to “weevils”, “maggots” and “hovering vultures” that wait like scavengers over the carcass of nations. “Progress” is like an optical illusion in both ‘Crush’, and ‘The Mice king’ where ruler-ship is allegorically featured in great folly and garbed in covetousness:

On a clay throne
Wielding a tail of gun
He holds a council
Of rats barking like dogs
His majesty meets committee
Of Jackals croaking like a frog
He dines with gluttons
Hiding his units in his beret

He orders ants in battle
Formulation staging mock wars
In market places (60)

At the centre of calls for change, Alvin Toffler’s “educating for change” or “preparing people for change”, the context below depicts Africa that is neck-deep in poverty and hunger which either completely stalls movement or slows it. In ‘Hunger’ the concern is unequal distribution of wealth and other national resources which create condition that is not conducive for learning.

The only change a hungry man knows is the availability of food to alleviate hunger:

No more milk
In our breasts
And babies die
With pitiful eyes
Pleading for a drop
Of the milk (23)

The land is plagued by the miserable sights of dying children. The land is still in an alimentative state as necessities for human welfare are not put in place at all. So, the poet is saddled with the task of mobilizing the people against the monster of oppression, sometimes in the face of hunger. His subject-matter has always incorporated various themes and pictures of pain and suffering: "Hunger has wrought havoc/While we watch/ Drained to the bone/ as the typhoon/ of greed sweep on .../Countrymen, patriots/ Let's not plead with the hunters/ For a throw of the crumbs.../Speaks to him/Let our sweat/ Cry to heaven. (62)

Using litotes, a kind of understatement; the poet comments on the ugly state of affairs in Africa/Nigeria. The poem, 'I am not tired' didactically exposes more landscapes of stagnation, oppressions and neglect:

I am not tired
Of traveling the same
Cul-de sac for the
Umpteenth time
...
I am not tired
Of the road without
The labourers to mend it
...
I am no tired
Of as sacred dome
Inhabited by infidels
I am not tired of a nation
Without a vision (25)

Conclusion

The twenty-first century expectations; diverse as they could be, have actually been in line with these calls by Charles Nnolim, Alvin Toffler and Akpan Ebong among others. The burden of care borne by Opanachi is the lot of many writers in Africa today. There is need to categorize and restructure the medium of communicating African minds; to rebrand and nurture them with the intent of inculcating in them virtues that would draw them away from their vices.

The continent is sadly plagued by horrible sights and shouts of corruption. This has diverted all the attention needed for startling exploits in both the arts and sciences. In Nigeria, for example, every discipline of human endeavour is swallowed up by the hydra of lust, greed and corruption. Newly acquired skills of corruption whittle any acquired dividend of technological achievements with ignominy. Inept politicians in Africa have dug deep pits of political instability. The “garbage” and “disorder” always addressed in African literature is none other than the flowering of the disease of “self”, the cancer of mismanagement which alters the type of revolution Ebong prescribes in the cited article. It will come but at a cost since the leadership will resist any prospect of radical change.

Opanachi’s *Eaters of the living* actually, reveals the power of the poet’s deployment of figures of speech for image building. The concept of the symbiotic relationship of Art, Society and the Artist (ASA) clearly spells out the interdependence of these three. All the English genres and the oral must convey the harsh realities of the environment that nurtures it. It is apt to state here that no advocacy for change apart from one that changes the people’s corrupt tendencies can affect Nigerian literature on a scale that can alter anything.

All calls for change in literary trends/focus would not accomplish much, unless the factors of operation vary for the better; before actual change will come. It is self regulatory. Now and in the next century, the revolutionary spirit of the masses cannot be broken nor will “quest for emancipation from bad leadership be jettisoned” without a corresponding change in attitude and the people’s welfare well enhanced. It is significant to note thus, that Opanachi has made a case for the people’s liberation from the activities of the “cannibals” instituted as leaders, just as Wole Soyinka, Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide have done and are still doing. In fact, this confirms the

Russian writer, Vladimir Zhdonor's affirmation that the poet (writer) is "inseparable from social life".

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