

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE AND HISTORY ON SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

The significant impact of literature and history on society cannot be overemphasized. The relationship among them has continued to attract critical attention since Plato. That affinity has been explored so much by African writers that it has assumed the status of a literary ideology peculiar to Africa. Though the debate on it is no longer as strident as it had been in the latter part of the last century, the socio-political conditions that engendered the corpus of African works suffused with historical and societal issues are still firmly entrenched in the continent. In spite of this, many new writers, perhaps too sensitive to some Western critics who condemn African literature as sociological studies bereft of artistic qualities, have begun to dwell on issues of little relevance to the immediate socio-political and cultural needs of the continent. In reappraising the views of some prominent literary scholars on the symbiotic relationship between literature and society, this paper reiterates that for literature to remain a veritable tool and agent of social change, it must continue to reflect the conflicts and crises thrown up by the society. By highlighting these views, it attempts to refocus the attention of contemporary writers, their readers and critics on the uncompleted task of arresting an African continent fast sinking in the rot of corruption, oppression and other social ills. One way to achieve this is through the production of a vibrant literature that not only identifies the source of the problems but also sensitizes its consumers to change the course of social development positively.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE AFFINITY AMONG LITERATURE, HISTORY AND SOCIETY

The study of the novel, many scholars believe, is the study of the society that produces it. There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between literature and society. In *The Republic*, Plato observes that literature can influence society. Though the subject of literature is infinite, the literary artist often reflects situations in the real world. The themes of literature are derivable from a myriad of sources such as myth, history and contemporary society, or the writer's imagination. However, the fabric of much literature remains largely influenced by experiences in the real world. This close relationship between literature and society has provided so much impetus for the artist that many critics believe that literature basically reflects contemporary social-political and historical conditions of the immediate environment from which it evolves.

Literary critics with diverse ideological leanings have defined the novel in various ways. Recurrent features in most of the definitions include first, that the novel is a work of fiction; second, it is written in prose; third, it involves extended narration; and fourth, it has characters whose behaviour, feelings and thoughts constitute its subject matter (Fraser 1953; Watt 1957 and 1981; Ezeigbo 1998). Having developed from pre-eighteenth century literary traditions, the novel became established as an art form through the realism and psychological experimentation in works of Daniel Defoe, Tobias Smollet, Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Laurence Sterne.

Though realism as a literary concept greatly influenced the development of the novel as a literary genre, it has no universally accepted definition. Hewitt (1972) affirms this position and points out the significance of realism to the novel by identifying it as one of the strongest elements that connects the novel to society. He defines the realistic novel as “that type whose . . . interest is in a society which we believe to be like that which [the writer and] a considerable number of his contemporaries know, and depicts this society by showing us the actions and describing the thoughts and feelings of plausible characters conceived at the level of daily life” (p.45). This fidelity to real experience is a common feature in many other critics’ definitions of the realistic novel (Brooks & Warren 687; Boulton 113; Halperin 213).

History is defined as “the process of development of humanity” (Engels, 1976, p.31). In other words, it is the study of events in the past considered significant in one way or another to situations either in the present or the past. Society on the other hand is defined in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2006) as “people in general living in communities.” Consequently, people in small communities or nations, or countries or continents like the people in Nigeria or Africa, or any other continent would constitute a society. A key factor that delineates a society as used in this paper is that the people share common cultural, historical and socio-political experiences.

Critics of different persuasion have commented on the role of the novel in the representation of society. While some espouse the view that the novel, like any other literary form, should focus on achieving aesthetic excellence (‘art for art’s sake’ critics); a more sociologically inclined group insists that any art that fails to address one or more aspects of social reality should be discountenanced. This view is very popular with African critics. Studies on the novel have therefore extended in scope to locating and analyzing social circumstances that inform the production of texts. Some scholars have also underscored the necessity for a historical location in time and space for events portrayed in the novel. Orr (1977) contends that there is a connection between the novel and the history and social environment of the society from which it emerges. He observes that:

No sociology of the novel can exist without a historical consciousness. For like its readership, every literary text has a historical location. Aesthetic sensibility is inseparable from the experience of life over time. What is read finds its aesthetic validity in what has been lived. The novel, especially, has an enduring relationship to history and society [because] there is no literary critic who can understand the novel by turning his back on society, and no social scientist who can understand modern society by turning his back on the novel. (p.4)

Lukàcs (1969) stresses the affinity between the novel and society because a discussion of one invariably involves the other. He asserts that “society is the principal subject of the novel, that is, man’s social life in its ceaseless interaction with surrounding nature which forms the basis of social activity and with the different social institutions of customs, which mediate the relations between individuals in social life” (p.6). Van Peer (1991) highlights further the connection between the novel and society. He contends that textual studies should not be limited to their aesthetic values. In other words, attention should also be directed at their sociological content in order to achieve a holistic appreciation of their meaning. To him therefore:

The production and consumption of text and discourse serve particular purposes. Apart from aesthetic ones, which are studied in poetics and stylistics, texts represent social values and traditions and relate to ideological positions [which] originate in extra-textual structures of reality and society. (p.15)

He concludes that literary texts embody the societal values and contradictions associated with them.

Rockwell (1974) appraises the novel from a slightly different perspective. She focuses on the novel as a medium of exploring societal norms and values. To her, “the novel...is concerned with social reality in a special sense. It describes and defines norms and values, and presents its characters as actors in the demonstration of them” (p.112). Her position tilts towards Marxism especially as she criticizes the realistic novel as Watt (1957) represented it in *The Rise of the Novel*. She argues that “realism is a convention” [of the novel made true to] “the norms of the bourgeois society which created it, read it, and creates it anew over and over again” (p.112). Also, Kaminsky (1974) recognizes the concern of the novel with what is real, which implies that the novel’s significance lies in its reflection of the society known to our everyday experiences. She notes that even where the novelist employs the medium of myth or symbolism, such a device should be used to enhance our understanding of the world we live in.

Achebe (1988) is of the view that literature should be a tool for education, reformation and social engineering. For him art and society are not mutually exclusive. Rather, art should be employed in the service of the society. He notes that “art is man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given him; an inspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence through his imagination” (p.96). This view aptly explains his mission in his novels. The world he creates in them is not intended to supplant the real one, but to complement it. Literature and society are therefore for him irretrievably interconnected. Elsewhere, Achebe (2002) restates his thesis by identifying the qualities a work should possess to contribute meaningfully to the society. He observes that “a literature which draws its sustenance from the life lived around it and develops imaginative identification with that life has a good chance of achieving the quality and the authority of prophetic utterance.” Carrol (1990) agrees with him because he shares the view that African writers are deeply engaged in re-educating their society; a re-education necessitated by the long period of colonialism and its attendant effect that have completely eroded the humanistic values that were traditional to the African. He concludes therefore that “African writers have employed literature in one of its traditional roles to explore and open up new or neglected areas of experience by clearing the ground of prejudice and preconception” (p.22).

Many critics acknowledge that in Africa the writer is basically a social reformer and his art is his weapon (Ngugi,1972; Killam, 1973; Dathorne, 1974; Soyika, 1976). Hence, African writers often shy away from the kind of abstractions explored in western literature because they believe that the socio-political realities of the West are significantly different from those of Africa. This view is espoused in Achebe’s “The Novelist as a Teacher” (1965); Mutiso’s *Socio-Political Thought in African Literature: Weusi?* (1974); Julien, Mortimer, and Schade’s *African Literature in its Social and Political Dimensions* (1986); and Gakwandi’s *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* (1977) to mention just a few. However, whether African works have explicitly socio-political themes seems not to be an issue; rather, it is the conscious concern in such works to embody materials and ideas that are derivable from their society. This is why the perennial political hiccups in Africa are often the focus of exploration in its literature. This state of affair clearly informs Theo Vincent’s assertion that “no other literature in contemporary times has been as influenced by politics in its production as African literature” (Yakubu, 2001, p.170).

Bayer (2001) holds a similar view. He argues that the trend that compels African writers to commit their art to political concerns will likely subsist for a long while. Thus to him, “with no end of

neo-colonialism in sight, post-colonial writing and criticism will retain a special responsibility for political involvement, which finds its cause in the specific political situation of the formerly colonized nations” (Yakubu, 2001, p.138). These views approximate those of Killam (1973) who argues that:

Most African writers have felt from the beginning, and especially since the early 1950s, a special obligation to the societies in which they function; they have determined that literature has a social function to interpret and educate society. . . . That is, African literature speaks primarily for and to the people of its own country, and expresses their hopes and fears and aspirations. (p.xii)

Julien, Mortimer and Schade (1986) in their study of the social and political dimensions of African literature highlight the inseparable connection between African literature and the socio-political realities in the continent. To them “literature and orature in Africa are acts of communication [that] reflect social and political values” (p.1). Folorunsho (1993) brings their argument closer home in his analysis of the social function of literature in Nigeria. He identifies several factors that contribute to the growth of Nigerian literature and what Nigerian artists have achieved through them. So he declares that, “Nigerian literature manifests the struggles of a people whose country is undergoing the painful process of transformation from colonial through neo-colonial to a wholly self-determining nation” (n.pag.).

Several other critics have acknowledged the interrelationship between not only the novel and society, but also the writer, the critic and the characters represented in the novels. The reality of the literary product is conceptualized within the environment from which it evolves and the aspects of society reflected in it. Even the critic’s work is no longer just to assess the aesthetic qualities of a work based on ideals of literary excellence; rather he becomes a social agent that guides his society to attain a fuller understanding of its literature than would have been possible if he were not there. Hence to Mutiso (1974), “all literature, to the extent that it deals with individuals in society, contains elements of social and political theory” (p.3). He believes that even where the artist writes with no intention of “propagating a particular idea,” he cannot “create in a vacuum” (p.3). What the artist achieves (whether consciously or unconsciously) is a revelation and re-evaluation of values through his depiction of character. To drive home his point, Mutiso declares that “all literature depicts the values of the people and the period. . . . However imaginative a writer may be; the framework of his writings must always be the society he knows” (p.3).

Ngugi (1972) proclaims that because the artist is a medium in the act of creation (in a Platonic sense), he cannot operate outside imbibed beliefs, interests and experiences in life. Such influences, he maintains, determine the social stand he takes in his work and ultimately his relevance to his society. To him therefore, “Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society” (p.xv). By implication, the artist should assume the role which Dathorne (1974) describes as “a spokesman for the society in which he lives” (p.3). Elsewhere, Ngugi (2003) reiterates that because language remains the most significant site of memory, writers will continue to play the role of the community’s griot; just like Gordimer, according to him, speaks of “the implicit role of writers supplying a critique of society for the greater understanding and enrichment of life there” (n.pag.).

Gakwandi (1977) argues that African literature is inevitably connected with nationalism and derives a degree of motivation from it. He identifies three perceptible traditions in the development of the modern novel. The first and second strands are connected with romance and realist novels. The third is where elements of the first two are fused to produce what he calls “metaphysical” works. The

ideal novel for him then is that type that focuses on the society that informs its production and its subject matter. It is such novel that contributes significantly to the quest for social and political emancipation of the continent because it “take[s] the whole breadth of society as its subject matter and examines how customs, conventions, social institutions and individuals interrelate” (p.126). This underscores the view that the novel is employed in the representation of society.

Cook (1977) observes that writers who are genuinely socially conscious set their works within the framework of the society to highlight the point that literature and society are interdependent. To Soyinka (1976), the idea that literature in whatever form could have an “objective existence” is alien to the African world. Yet, he argues that, “the reflection of experience is only one of the functions of literature” (p.64). This implies that literature can be directed toward the attainment of a variety of objectives. Hence, the engagement of literature with social experience becomes in a manner of perception, an “ideological projection,” a social vision which he is convinced “holds the most promise for strengthening the bond between experience and medium since it prevents the entrenchment of the habitual, [and] the petrification of the imaginative function by that past or present reality upon which it reflects” (p.64).

Ogude (1990) is emphatic about the connection between literature, history and society. He criticizes African writers who fail to make their works socially relevant and regrets the loss of what he calls Africa’s “authentic spirit” in such writers. He condemns their gross imitation of Western literary tradition in total disregard of their African roots “because the function of literature today is to explicate the condition of man in Africa in a historical sense” (p.11). Against the grain, Chapman (2002) questions African writers’ concern with societal issues and wonders whether their literary products could constitute a “literary culture” or even “art” for that matter. However, Achebe (1975) provides an appropriate response to the issues raised above. He declares it an exercise in futility to attempt to separate politics and art in Africa where art is often employed in the service of politics. Eghagha (2004) reiterates the view that the writer, literature, history and the society are all interconnected in Africa’s struggle to surmount the myriad of challenges that confront it. Thus he declares that the affinity between literature and history is most evident in the creative writer’s work. To him, creative writers (especially in Africa) possess “the capacity to record the history and experiences of a people in a truthful and universal manner . . . [because] society expects writers to serve as its conscience” (p.1). Balibar and Macherey (1978) contend from a Marxist perspective and declare that “literature and history are not each set up externally to each other but are in an intricate and connected relationship” (p.6).

CONCLUSION

In summary, it is vital for African artists to sustain the momentum initiated and vigorously maintained by major writers like Achebe, Ngugi, Armah, Ba, Abrahams, Head, and Sembene to mention just a few. Now is a very inauspicious point to redirect the thrust of African literature away from the task of reforming and repositioning the continent still in the firm grip of corruption, political violence, and endemic underdevelopment. Africa is in dire need of more conscientious and committed writers especially now that the continent’s indigenous cultures have been pummelled to near-oblivion by foreign ones. That flame of change ignited with the publication of *Things Fall Apart* over fifty years ago must be sustained through a deliberate deployment of literature in the service of society. Graciously, Festus Iyayi, Okey Ndibe, Ben

Okri, Helon Habila and Chimamanda Adichie are some contemporary novelists that have kept alight the flame. Others should follow suit.

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