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## **Commitment and the Nigerian Literary Artist: A Study of the Works of Soyinka and Osofisan**

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### **Introduction**

'Art for art's sake is good but the usefulness of art is most important in the present dispensation when the world seems 'no longer at ease' (Yeats 2004). This is where the concepts of Marxism and Commitment in literature become very important. Marxism according to the American Heritage Dictionary is 'a political and economic philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel in which the concept of class struggle plays a central role in understanding society's allegedly inevitable development from bourgeois oppression under capitalism to a socialist and ultimately classless society'

The import of this is that class struggle is necessary for the creation of change in the socio-economic structure of any society. A literary writer who achieves this is a committed one, and literature that accomplishes it is committed. This is the type of writer and literature described thus:

.....the conclusion a writer must draw from this position were set forth in 'Quest-Ceque la literature?' (What is literature?) Literature is no longer an activity for itself nor primarily descriptive of characters and situations, but is concerned with human freedom and its (and the author's) commitment. Literature is committed; artistic creation is a moral activity.....Salvation through art  
(Jean-Paul Sartre-Biography)

Therefore, a literary work must legislate, as well as enforce the necessary conditions that could give rise to a better socio-political environment.

### **Towards a Crisis-Free Society**

Literature focuses on man in society. Often writers write with the intention of correcting social ills among the people, or at least drawing the attention of the people to the ills going on around and among them. Athol Fugard in *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* examines the problems of apartheid in South Africa of the recent past primarily, and the problems of oppression within the human race. Some other writers who commented on these problems are Arthur Nortje, Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Dennis Brutus and Keorapetse Kgosiile. Other loud voices which have concerned themselves with societal evil are those of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo. In *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, there is a total condemnation of oppression and a call to arms to the masses. Among the techniques advocated by Ngugi and Micere is guerilla warfare. Two matters arise from this: one is that the oppressed must fight to free themselves; two is that since the oppressors are militarily stronger and superior, the oppressed must strike from behind and in a clandestine manner. Another writer whose statements are very much like those of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micene Githae Mugo is

Pepetela (pen name). In his novel *Mayombe*, we see resistance and guerilla warfare as the recommended technique. One way we see the warfare presented in the works referred to above as crises inducer. But we must not forget that turbulence cannot be eliminated in a peaceful manner where the forces of oppression remained doggedly in the pursuit of their mission to the detriment of the masses.

There are yet other writers that have commented on the ills that raged and are raging on in East Africa. Some of these writers include Taban Lo Liyong, Okot P Bitek, Richard Nturu and Jared Angira. The two regions referred to above attain the desires of the writers. Looking at the two sub-regions examined above (South and East Africa) respectively, one can say that literature has successfully educated the people on both the ills within the society and the ways of correcting those ills. The recommendations of literature, we can attest to today, have been effective. Therefore, one can conclude that literature could be and is truly an agent of mass mobilization towards the attainment of the desire of a people. Consequently, I make bold to recommend that we as Nigerians should turn to literature for the required enlightenment on what we should and should not do so as to achieve our desires as a nation. This recommendation is a two dimensional affair. One, writers should choose such themes and methods that should be able to motivate and enlighten our people to the demands of the present day world; and two, readers should try to live out the recommendations of our writers. Perhaps a review of some of our (Nigerian) writers will drive home the point.

Wole Soyinka in his play *The Strong Breed* (1977) while examining the culture of his people perhaps inadvertently recommends that there is a sacrificial caste within the society and that this sacrificial class must sacrifice their own so that the entire society might live on. But Femi Osofisan, a Marxist by orientation, is averse to this. As a result he replied Soyinka in *No More the Wasted Breed* (1999). In this play, Osofisan calls this sacrificial caste a 'Wasted Breed' saying that it is time we stopped wasting them. (Soyinka calls them the 'Strong Breed'). However, Osofisan applying the principles of existentialism, observes that our destiny (their destiny) lies in our hands. The gods, the priests and their acolytes are the privileged ones, the men in authority and power in our society today. So it is left to us to determine our fate, to take our destiny in our hands and free ourselves. The method proposed here is that of resistance. This is similar to the perception of the East and Southern Africa literary writers about the struggle for liberation.

Osofisan recommends this same attitude in his play *Red is the Freedom Road*. Here like in *The Wasted Breed* he encourages the oppressed to take their destiny in their hands and free themselves. Akanji, the Basorun heads a revolt which topples the king and frees the people. To Osofisan, no sacrifice is too much for the freedom of a people. Akanji loses his life as a result of injuries sustained during the war. Prior to this, he had lost his mother, killed by him, and his unborn child carried in the womb of his wife.

One may wonder here why these deaths, and ask what Osofisan means by them. He is saying that if one must regain his freedom, if he must achieve, he must be prepared to sacrifice; that success comes with a lot of hardwork, dedication, and sacrifice that may even involve human life. In the final analysis, Osofisan is telling us that if we must move forward in this country, if we must have peace, if we must have a crisis free nation, we must be ready to make sacrifices. .

Another work in which Osofisan comments on the social ills in our country Nigeria is *Altine's Wrath*. He, in *Altine's Wrath* states that corruption is bad. In this play, one sees how Lawal humiliates and maltreats his wife Altine simply because according to him Altine is, uneducated. However, he (Lawal) is wrong since Altine had secretly acquired education. To crown the immorality in the person of Lawal, he brings Mariam, his mistress, into his matrimonial home having ordered Altine into the boys quaters.

Another feature of corruption is manifested in the way Lawal, a permanent secretary in one of the State Ministries, abuses his position, using it to misappropriate government contracts and fund. Osofisan in this play is telling us what is happening in our country today. And the fact that Lawal's ministry is not named is an indication that Lawal could be and is any and all of the permanent secretaries and people in high places on the seat of government.

Further on corruption and man's inhumanity to man, we hear Osofisan decry the dispossession of farmers of their lands. Not only that, the compensation they were supposed to be paid gets lost in transit, and apparently into the pockets of Lawal. This is the plight of the less privileged in our society today. They are deprived and duped by those in power who are supposed to protect and provide for them.

But the consequence of all these is that at the end, Lawal loses everything he had amassed. Altine signs away the money deposited in the bank in her name and fingerprints. Perhaps Lawal would have been able to persuade her to return the money to him, but this is not to be since Altine dies of poisoned banana offered by the dispossessed masses.

What Osofisan is saying here is that the masses and lowly like Baba Audu, Mallam Omene and Altine should rise up to the challenges and break lose the shackles of oppression and bondage. It is only when this has happened that crises could be permanently managed. Some other Nigerian writers who have commented on the socio-political situations of the nation are Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi and J.P. Clarke. The rest are Bode Sowande, Nimmo Basse and others.

From the above, it becomes very clear that literature prescribes the codes upon which the society thrives. The implication of this is that literary artists determine to a large extent what should obtain in the society. In the face of this, one could therefore accept whole-heartedly the axiomatic statement made by P.B. Shirley that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. This being so, it follows that poetry is the legislation. This status I accord all forms of literature.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, I wish to state that literature is a veritable tool for the total empowerment of the people as well as crises management. Therefore, it could be used to the advantage of Nigeria and Nigerians. The implication of this is that writers should try to positively legislate for Nigerians. This should be done by projecting those views and attributes that are capable of enhancing the image of Nigeria as in addition to identifying those excesses of the rulers of our nation and promulgate those rules that could engineer the masses to act in such a manner as could ensure a stable and crises free or relatively crises free society. They should be able

to promote morality, transparency and fairness in their works. This I believe will go a long way towards ensuring that justice is done and as such reduce the level of crises and at the same time enhancing the image of Nigeria in our own eyes and in the eyes of the rest of the world. Secondly, literary artists should by means of their pieces of literature, be able to chart a new and better political as well as socio-economic course for Nigeria in their various creations. When these are done, we shall then derive great benefit from literature since we shall have a society with relatively low level of crises and high level of peace and as such socio-political and economic elevation.

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