

LITERATURE AS A RECONSTRUCTION MATERIAL FOR THE CULTURE OF A PEOPLE:
THE CASE FOR AFRICAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between literature and culture. It establishes that literature has a vital role to play in propagating the culture of a people. It further upholds that via this means, literature has the capacity to re-establish the identity and self esteem of tribes. The paper opines that it is important that literary artists from Africa, objectively and realistically, incorporate all aspects of our culture in their works; emphasising that objectivity and realism are very crucial so as to ensure that the culture is enticing, believable and acceptable: a kind of pas (oralism). The paper finally concludes that it is only in this state that a restoration of African identity and self esteem that could lead to unprecedented development could be achieved in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The issues raised here may have been discussed severally in academic, social and even political discourses. But there will be no end to their discussions until there is a total change of heart, or realignment in terms of moral attitude as well as approach to life by the third world generally, and Africa particularly. It becomes imperative that we continue to examine these issues because one has discovered that the gulf is widening by the seconds between the developed and developing - can we really talk of developing or "anti-developing" or degenerating? - worlds. These questions have become necessary because we (the so-called developing world) are deteriorating. It becomes much more disheartening when one realizes that at the same time when we seem to make every movement backwards, the developed worlds are moving forward almost at a supersonic speed. Therefore, there is a widening of the gulf. The Whites will not reduce this chasm; it is you and I who shall bridge the gap. Consequently, there is the dire need for a paradigmatic shift away from the gulf while closing it. Toward achieving this goal, arts generally and literature particularly could be a veritable tool. But literature must not operate in a vacuum. It must focus on something, re-establishing a mode that can give us a new sense of direction or a sense of where we come from, and so a flagpole to where we are going. This is where our culture becomes very important.

Cultural Imperatives in Literary Works

Culture has been defined by John H. Bodley (2008) as "... the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in a social group learn, create, and share." (1) Therefore, it is a mark of identify for a people; it sets them apart from others. Being an integral part of a peoples' life, it becomes very important that culture must be propagated to ensure that the people develop with a sense of dignity and personality. It might be important to point out here that the current spate of human degradation and under-development is directly and proportionately related to the degree of abandonment of our cultural values. Nations the world over which have made tremendous progress in the areas of development have charted the courses of their cultures and developed along the channels. America, Britain, France, Germany and, not top long ago, China under Chairman Mao are all examples. These countries identified their cultural traits with their peculiarities, and focused on them in determining their developmental programmes. Nature that endowed each tribe with a set of features knows why. Today, it is saddening to know that Africa abandoned her root and so has virtually become dependent. To right this course, the African literary artist has a major role to play. Chinua Achebe (1978) once entitled an article "The Novelist as Teacher". (1) This assumes fully, and rightly so, that the literary artist is a teacher. The question therefore is, "what shall he teach?" He has to teach among the numerous subjects available to him, most importantly, his culture. And in the case of the African literary artist, he has to teach the culture of our people. For in propagating it rests our cultural recovery and ultimately the restoration of the African identity. Again, Achebe (1978) in "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" asserts that "we must begin to correct the prejudices which generations of detractors created about the Negro." (7-8) We, here refers to writers from African extractions. And I must add that the detractors are the imperialists. It is painful to note that even the educated and supposed enlightened Europeans (Whites) subscribe to the denigrating picture of the Negro. For example, according to Achebe in "The Role of the Writer...", Thomas Jefferson, the great theoretician of American freedom, believed - at least in his active

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years - that Negroes have a lower grade of talent than whites." (8) Jefferson was not alone in this. African literature must therefore reassert the African personality. This is a view shared by Achebe in "The Role of the Writer..." where he says, "the writer's duty is to help them [Africans] regain it [dignity and self respect] by showing them in human terms what happened, what they lost." (8) Let us not dwell on what happened, it is well known. But the greatest they lost is their culture which is the cradle of their personality and identity. We Africans lost these to varying degrees, depending on our colonizers and the policies employed by them. It is in line with these that the degrees of responses differ. Ali Mazrui (1978) captures this in the statement, "National assertion is sometimes a response to prior national humiliation." (73) What I do not like much is his "sometimes". The extent of belligerence and force exhibited in the assertion of individual or national identity is and should be, directly proportional to the level of dehumanization received. It is against this backdrop that we find our French West African brothers (and sisters), who went through the French policies of assimilation and association dealing profusely with the theme of Negritude, which to my mind occupies the most intense extreme of cultural propaganda. Credit must be given to the African literary artist for performing this duty of restoring our dignity and self esteem. Solomon Iyasere (1982) while examining literature and its function in modern West African culture has said that "... they do share the belief that West African Literature is a vital human activity that reflects, explores and shapes West African culture and values..." (202) "They" at the beginning of this quotation refers to such erudite scholars, academics and critics as E.N. Obiechina, Kolawole Ogungbesan, D.I. Nwoga and R.N. Egedu. Some practitioners in the art of literary creativity that have furthered the course of African cultural revival, and as such Negro national identity include, but not limited to, such literary artists as Chinua Achebe, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ousmane Sembene, Ngugi Wa-Thiongo, Okot p'Bitek and Ola Rotimi. These are serious minded African writers who have presented objective pictures of African culture. Objective, because the African culture has been presented as it is, with all its imperfections. Achebe (1985) in Things Fall Apart presents us with the traditional African village in an all round manner. We see the religious, social, as well as economic background of the Igbo race. Their value system is thus presented that no one is left in doubt as to what should be, as well as the appropriate penalty, in the event of a default by anyone. We see Okonkwo grow from an "agbala" background into an "Ozo". He becomes the greatest title holder, one of the richest men and the strongest man in Umuofia. But when he commits offences (beats his wife, Ekwuefi during the week of peace; inadvertently kills a son of the soil when his gun exploded during a burial ceremony; and kills Ikemefuna), he is adequately punished by both the people and the gods. The African laws of coexistence, which is cultural - a ritual of sort - forbids any form crime as none would be overlooked. The cultural harmony and brotherliness emanating from this cultural bond and manifesting in a communal life style, is disrupted by the colonial masters - the agencies of disintegration. Such is it that the so called modernity severs the bond that hitherto held the Igbo community together. This theme is adequately examined by Achebe (1982) in No Longer at Ease where corruption is overtly displayed in the discharge of one's national duties. Obi, the hero, fails in the discharge of his duties as he accepts gratifications to induce him. This is a serious crime for which the gods, if not the people, would have inflicted a curse on him in the pre-colonial Igbo society had he dared to commit it. What he got as a reprimand is a pat on the back compared to what the Igbo culture would have dished out. The tempo of the disruptive tendencies initiated by the Whites as presented in Things Fall Apart and furthered in No Longer at Ease reached a crescendo in Achebe's (1964) Arrow of God where family ties were freely and overtly broken (the effect of westernization); hence things are "no longer at ease." A return to the dictates of the cultural values of the Igbos as projected by Achebe could right the wrongs and translate the African identity into one of elegance. Wole Soyinka (1977) in The Strong Breed and Femi Osofisan (1999) in his retort No More the Wasted Breed present a situation where annually, a carrier has the suicidal role of taking on all the evils of the land upon himself and conveying them away, leaving the people free to start a new life. Agreed that this practice has its attendant callousness and danger, the fact remains that it keeps the people closely knit. The awareness that somebody will be made to atone for all the atrocities in the land will not only deter the people from committing such evils, it will also create a very strong bond among the people and imbue them with a common identity. Soyinka (1977), while making Social commentary on the Nigerian situation employs cultural materials learning heavily on the ancestors in A Dance of the Forest. Although the ancestors proved calamitous to the living, one fact remains: that the dead interact with the living, blessing or punishing them as their actions and/or inactions determine. The implication of this is that the people must act with restraints and care so as not to invite the wrath of the ancestors. The people's actions must be morally upright. Another example of how a deviation from the culturally and morally right actions could be punished could be found in the infliction of "Xala" (impotence) on an erring person. Although attention is overtly focused on the physical in Ousmane Sembene's (1976) Xala, the psychology and social "Xalas" apply. One

may ask the question, "what are the wrongs committed by El Hadji? They are the desecration of African norms, just as his masters - the colonialists -had done before him and are still doing. The exposition of the degradation of African norms (cultural, social and moral) is more fully examine by Okot p'Bitek (1984) through Lawino in Song of Lawino. Ocol is presented as "uprooting the pumpkin" which must not be. The pumpkin is presented as an image of Africa and everything African. Further, we hear Lawino lament the state of abandonment which Ocol has subjected African culture to; and the level of individual emasculation of the African as a result of that at the cultural pedestal. In the present circumstance, there is no hope for the African, except he retraces his steps back to his root as Lawino advocates. Behavioural facet examined, let me devote this little portion to the tangible aspect of culture. We must point out that there are the artefacts, by which we mean those paraphernalia of living identifiable with Africans. From Royalty through the middle class to workers, there are marks of identification. The crown, sceptre, bead, drum, maracas, gong, cutlass, hoe, spear, etc, all have their different places in the lives of Africans. But these have more-or-less lost their places in the lives of our people. And European articles have taken over. Such is it that majority of Africans today feel a sense of shame and humiliation at the thought of handling of or being associated with such as African talking drum, for example, which has been marked as an article of heathen worship and, as such, evil. The prestigious treatment of these items in the works of literary artists from Africa will be a way of drawing attention to them. Persistently portraying them as marks of authority and respect will rouse nostalgic feelings in our people towards them. This will ultimately translate into self esteem for Africans.

CONCLUSION

Literature and culture are Siamese twins. They could be separated. Only, in this case one will be in dire danger and the other badly affected. Literature may survive a battered being but the "real" cultural values may die permanently, never to be revived. The case of culture will certainly be that of the individuals and societies of the affected culture. Consequently, literature should be employed to help the individual, and by implication, the whole society, regain his personality and dignity by infusing cultural studies into it. This is what Achebe (1978) in "The Novelist as Teacher" meant when he resolved "to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement." (3) So, the duty of literature is not only to help individuals and societies restore their dignity and identity, but also as Achebe (1978) in "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" affirms of artists and writers of today: "to take up the good work and by doing it to enrich not only our own lives but the *life of the world*"(13)(Emphasis mine). Therefore, I wish to conclude this paper by stating that literature has the capacity to re-establish the identity and self esteem of tribes, and that it is very important that literary artists from Africa, objectively and realistically, incorporate all aspects of our culture in their works. I also wish to emphasise that objectivity and realism are very crucial as they will ensure that the culture is enticing, believable and acceptable, invoking a sense of a kind of pastoralism. I wish to finally conclude that it is only in this state that a restoration of African identity and self esteem that could lead to unprecedented development could be achieved in Africa.

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