



EXCURSION INTO LITERATURE AND POLITICS

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Abstract

This paper examines literature and politics. It reconsiders the basic assumptions made by exponents of theories in these fields vis-à-vis the modus operandi of practitioners of imaginative writing and of criticism in the West, and particularly those in Africa who almost invariably try to represent others from Third World nations with an identical experience of colonialism and imperialism. It opines that young scholars ought to know who the initial champions of literary artifacts and principles of delight are, what they have to say, and how far the "moderns" agree with their points of view in fundamental areas like moral vision and aesthetic beauty. Amongst others, it agrees that western cultures and society in the twentieth suggests that the values of literary/artistic genius flourish best under democracies and regimes with the list fascist arrangement in power relations.

Introduction

At the beginning of another millennium, nobody in the humanities is really in doubt as regards the useful place of literary art in human society, or the relevance of critical theory and practice to world culture and civilization. Yet, among intellectuals throughout the ages, opinions are divided on several matters such as the genesis and development of creative writing, the writer and audience relationship, the impact of science and technology on literary consciousness, and so forth, (Babalola 1999). Besides we are constantly reminded that African literature and politics of decolonization since the twentieth century have remained inseparably bond together. The examples of fiction, poetry and drama in apartheid South Africa cannot but be singled out for special emphasis here. Many scholars would argue further that the appreciation of African authors, therefore may never follow the direction of a Greco-Roman school of thought with its various theories of literature and criticism in Western Europe and North America.

It is important to reconsider some basic assumptions made by exponents of these theories vis-à-vis the *modus operandi* of practitioners of imaginative writing and of criticism in the West, and particularly those in Africa who almost invariably try to represent others from Third World nations with an identical experience of colonialism and imperialism. My belief is that young scholars ought to know who the initial champions of literary artifacts and principles of delight are, what they have to say, and how far the "moderns" agree with their points of view in fundamental areas like moral vision and aesthetic beauty. Talking about a successful work of art in the three main genres of poetry, drama and prose narrative, do we still expect a simple and neat dichotomy between art and reality as the people in ancient times defined it for their own socio-cultural environment? To what extent are the men and women of letters in African society today innocent of the perennially biased and Eurocentric values underlying the conception of good creative writing as well as literary theory and judgment, either here in Nigeria or in the rest of the world?

One may hardly offer exhaustive answers to the above questions in a brief essay. Instead the present occasion demands a rethink of the two antithetical theories of literary creation and evaluation: the Classical and the Romantic. The first ideal has always necessitated minimum involvement with a prevailing social code by the creative artist, while the second enjoins him or her not to stay aloof from society but rather to become fully subjectively attached to the realities of existence. Two clear-cut

Eliot seems to have made a distinction between art and cheap propaganda. As a classicist in literature, he defined his main goal as the provision of "a superior amusement" for the generation of W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound who were his beloved contemporaries doing more or less the same poetic exercise. Yet in reply to his dogmatic generation, W.B. Yeats argued against the futility or attempting to separate literature from politics or morals or religion. He asked whether it could be intelligent and realistic to remove the dancer from the dance. Of course, Eliot himself was not suggesting absolute withdrawal and neutrality. We can see the character of a writer and his society in the work he often creates in a tragic-comic style. It is indeed part of Eliot's purpose to show an act unbecoming of heroes except Gerontion (Gk. "Little old man"), who tried to confess glibly his slum and mean existence. Being an Anglo-Catholic in religion and a Tory in politics, Eliot may now ridicule that tenant as a decadent counterpart to his Hollow men:

*I am an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces,
(Eliot 1974:39)*

It is true that the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948 has repeatedly disclaimed the connection of modernist writers with politics and statesmen, in his effort to establish the integrity of his profession. Nevertheless we are directed by Eliot to the shocking plight of some aged people that bad management of human or material resources by politicians and civil servants is responsibly for. Long before the First World War in Europe (1914-1018), the impact of economic disaster on inhabitants of great industrial cities had been the subject of much writing by Karl Marx and later on the members of the celebrated Fabian Society to which H.G. Wells and others belonged. Without his saying so openly, Eliot the author of "Gerontion" is therefore questioning the worth of a new European city civilization since eighteenth century.

On the deeper level, then, both literature and politics have a lot to do with the condition of human beings. They are created by a class of people in the city, and in turn reflect its diverse preoccupations. Traditionally, to talk of politics is to allude to all the affairs of citizens and not just the system of administration. The same thing is true of "letters" (Latin, *litterae*) that refers to any script either historical, literary or legal for preservation of knowledge. As far as we know, the narrow definition of literature which has occurred since the emergence of London guilds in eighteenth-century England is well understood. Nowadays a man of letters is not the anthropologist, scientist or historian but the creative writer. The Greeks and Romans originally called him "a poet" or muse and, as we may have noted in the above quotation from Eliot's essays, "Poetry" is another Greek name for the entire field of literary creation.

Literature and politics are in short two sides of the tablet consumed and produced by civilized humanity. We may also notice a slight distinction between written and oral aspects of our national literature. Oral performance, like *Ozidi* of Ijaw people of Delta State of Nigeria, is popular especially in the pre-industrial and pre-literate culture that has no sign of dependence on the art of communication by writing (Ezeliora 1998). Again, oral texts tend not to be deeply involved in current affairs since the use of myth, fable and allegory is all-pervasive in the epic or any other form of orature. And of course, we must bear in mind the fact that all types of the literacy practice are records of human ideas, manners, feelings, and aspirations which the politicians or social activists may have no interest in keeping abreast of personally.

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Like statesmen, the writers of imaginative literature are heterogeneous in the sense that they have factions or separate group identities. This diversity invariably always results from the prejudice of any social class they espouse in their works. For example, authors from the working classes often profess a Marxist/Socialist ideology and direct their own creative energy towards the ruthless criticism of prevalent evils in their immediate locality. The example of George Bernard Shaw, George Orwell, and W.H. Auden in Britain throws into a sharp focus the work of Femi Osafisan and Festus Iyayi in Nigeria. Elsewhere in Senegal the career of Sembene Ousmane is well known. Some authors get into a serious trouble with political authorities because of elements of defiance or malicious propaganda in their creative writings. The names of such literary artists as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Mongo Beti, from Kenya and Cameroun respectively, strike us in a vivid way here. Other persecuted dissident writers in the former Soviet Union, in China, and more so in all fascist-oriented nations of the Third World are legion.

Writers from the upper middle-class and aristocratic cultural background in Britain are less committed than their counterparts from the poor working-class society they refuse to embrace a radical application of literary art to the goals of politics and social reform. T.S. Eliot once declared to the whole world that he was a Tory, an Anglo-Catholic, and a Classicist. The implication of this declaration came out in his illiberal attitude towards the people of the Semitic stock.

Eliot undoubtedly upheld the comic entertainment, the circle of English authors known as the Metaphysical poets and the ancient Greco-Roman champions of heroic verse drama. He still reminds us of what Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo and others in the first generation of Nigerian writers have done to earn the contempt of their successors. For these authors, political commitment is an aberration and it has deserved no pardon from the outset (Chinweizu et al, 1981).

The modern African and foreign critics of literature, except some believers in a Marxist/Socialist doctrine, reinforce the

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position of those anti-colonial writers who subscribe to an educative role for themselves. Commencing on the situation which they had faced up to the sixties, G.D. Killam wrote:

Nigerian writing to date has been concerned exclusively with the reality of Nigerian life (as contrasted, say, with India or West India writing and no Nigerian novelist to date has sought his thematic material in a larger and more cosmopolitan culture. Nigerian novelists have not turned their backs on their own culture; rather, they have faced up to cultural problems and sought solutions for them in imaginative form. Their fiction is a literary echo of a general cultural reality. (King 1971:78).

This was said in the context of what Chinua Achebe has repeated on many occasions, that the African writer is not a politician but an instructor:

I believe that the writer should be concerned with the question of human values. One of the most distressing ills which afflict new nations is a confusion of values. We sometimes make the mistakes of talking about values as though they were fixed and eternal-the monology of Western civilization and the so-called higher religions. Of course, values are relative and in a constant state of flux. (78).

But perhaps more interesting is Achebe's emphasis on epic vision of life to displace the comic or satiric one:

The writer's duty is not to beat this morning's headlines in topicality, it is to explore the depth of the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history (78).

The readers of Nigerian literature at home and overseas continue to reject, as a matter of principle, the polemical author such as Cyprian Ekwensi or T.M. Aluko. Literary art in Achebe's view is allied with philosophy: "...it is to explore the depth of the human condition". And let us note that the master craftsman, Chinua Achebe, admitted this at the very commencement of his long career. But he has since modified the heroic style of writing in a way that cannot yet appeal to foreigners like M.M. Mahood, Gerald Moore, Ulli Beier, Douglas Killam and Bernth Lindfors. I am aware that almost every high-brow non-African critic pronounces Achebe's *No Longer At Ease* an artistic failure.

Leaving E.D Jones and Eustace Palmer aside, how many Africans and outsiders can really admire Soyinka's achievement in *The Interpreters*? Recently, Professor Lindfors published an essay on how Lagos University students and other people responded unenthusiastically to the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature won by Soyinka (Lindfors et al. 1993:341-352). And during his July/August 1997 visit to the Akoka-Yaba Campus, Lindfors gave a lecture in the English Department seminar room where he recalled his being misunderstood once (in the early 1970s) after asking an indirect question on Soyinka's obscure literary method (Lindfors 1997).

To escape from their involvement with politicians and current affairs, therefore, most writers of imaginative literature make their works deliberately complicated and refined and by implication too unapproachable for ordinary readers. They dabble into history, or mythology, or fantasy. Those who have enjoyed Achebe in his initial writing now complain about his latest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe's use of wit, irony, allusion, and other literary devices may do much to hide the political message of his work. He is not disposed to indulge in open flattery of any fool or madman in the Nigerian corridors of power. Major Samsonite in *Anthills* is a fascist ruler of "Kangan" or New Nigeria re-named in accordance with the sophisticated satirical purpose. Young Samson has the mind and brain of his biblical original; he takes Beatrice Okoh away from Christopher Oriko as his former classmate, and seduces her at "Abichi" or Abuja in the half-gloomy premises of the Presidential Villa. Achebe's figure have historical parallels which not even C.L. Innes, despite her British academic education and deep familiarity with Nigerian political and literary traditions, may have had enough insight into and ability to reveal their meanings fully (Innes 1990).

Literature and politics have different shapes or characters in different societies and cultures. Hence a literary champion could belong to any of the various "schools" or departments of creative writing. If he/she finally appears uncommitted, this is understandable and his/her productions would still be of quality. This is true of authors of science fictions in my judgment, when all these are placed not in the category of "literature of commitment". The Marist writers' camp apparently shuns myth as it falsifies the revolutionary spirit of ethics which Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sembene Ousmane symbolize.

Ngugi's *The Devil on the Cross* and Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* are acknowledged literary masterpieces. Yet some readers may object to this or that work of art since criticism itself is more often than inspired by an ideology or a subjective viewpoint. Literary appreciation tries to aim at absolute objectivity, which some readers say is impossible. Ultimately the eye of the beholder will to a large extent determine what is aesthetically perfect and most satisfactory. We Nigerians in particular cannot forget the statement of one eminent British Poet called Alexander pope, to dispel any rumour that there is one way alone to literary creation and its enjoyment; that all writers see reality through the same looking glass; and that if human depravity is not curable it should be over-looked (Spacks 1971).

Conclusions/Recommendations

A literary artist may choose to review reality in the light of his/her own age and private aspiration. Reality can be distorted, re-shaped, and made available to a section but not the whole of humanity. The question of why an author adopts this and not that medium of writing and communication is relevant, therefore, only when its subjective aspect can be clearly observed.

Politics agents do not and must not dictate to the writer what he or she is to say for himself or herself and for the rest of human community. Politics lives for today and Art survives till eternity. That is the opinion of the Polish writer Joseph Conrad, and he too has merely re-stated the position of others in antiquity. Everybody knows the greatest of them all, William Shakespeare, not just because of his involvement in Elizabethan politics but because of his deliberate artistry or craftsmanship in writing. Throughout man's recorded history, we have observed that a literary artist remains outside the corruption in partisan politics, that he reconciles the aim of giving aesthetic delight with the urge for a neat and suitable perspective on morality. He will be unable to serve his fellow if society withholds from him the values of liberty, candour, truthfulness and self-development. When he cannot find these values at home the option for him is to go into exile or commit suicide, like Empedocles on Mount Etna and the Lady of Shalott in Tennyson's poem of the title. Moreover, it is hard to predict a creative writer's disposition in both secular and religious contexts, although western culture and society in the twentieth century can suggest that the values of literary/artistic genius flourish best under democracies and regimes with the least fascist arrangement in power relations. Politicians as aristocrats may not have ceased to patronize authors but the latter are relatively free and comfortable in their pluralistic social milieu. Critical intelligence too follows more or less the same line of the creative forces that inspire its diversity and periodic characteristics.

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