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LITERATURE AT THE SERVICE OF A CAUSE: THE AFRICAN CANONICAL EXAMPLE

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Abstract
Given the realities of its history, modern African literature has swum against the Western currents of the philosophy of Aestheticism. African literature espouses an artistic vision that is peculiar to the needs of the continent and is primarily attuned to the service of its society of provenance. Considering the doctrine of art for art's sake an aberration, twentieth century African writers had passionately advanced the cause of cultural and political nationalism. Unlike her Western counterpart, in the African context, literary aesthetics fully embraces the utilitarian value of art. Here, literature is applied to perform some noble and specific functions. Consequently, this (African) literature is functional, relevant and responsive, and has indeed developed in response to "the predatory presence of Western intrusion into Africa" (Onoge 96). African literary aesthetics rests on the assumptions that art has a purpose and that it is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. This paper interrogates the literary aesthetics of some iconic African literary forebears. The essay submits that these iconic African writers successfully apply their art to the particular needs and the specific experiences of their society, and concludes that these features distinguish African literature from the literatures of other worlds.

Keywords: **African Literature, Art, Iconic African Writers, Aesthetics, Utilitarian Value.**

Introduction

Generally speaking, all over the globe, and at one time or the other, art has been attuned to the service of man and his society. Though some Western writers and a few writers from African clime may oppose this utilitarian vision of art, it does not alter such vision. African literature has come a long way, evolving through the continent's oral tradition exemplified in her: folk tales, story-telling, songs, myths, legends and more, and through her adaptation to the English literary tradition to its current position. However, one thing is certain in all her

stages of metamorphosis, and this is the fact that African art is functional. This is a feature that sets it apart from other literatures.

There are, nevertheless, a few African writers who find it comfortable to deny the functionality of African art by pandering to Western concept of art as being self-existing. Not only are they in the minority, but theirs, by all intent and purpose, is an effort to achieve what we choose to call "an unpopular popularity" because the utilitarian nature of African literature is too evident to be ignored. This submission will be revealed shortly through the exploration of the literary aesthetics of selected iconic writers of the continent undertaken in this discourse.

African Writers on the Opposing Side

Some African writers have brazenly opposed the notion of applying art in the service of society. They repudiate the concept, choosing rather to practise their art in self-isolation. This crop of African writers among whom are Kolawole Ogungbesan and Lewis Nkosi, are of the view that art is neither obliged to man nor the society as it is not bound to perform any social function. To such writers, art self-exists and far removed from the call of duty. To Ogungbesan and some others, art occupies its exalted space and is not answerable to man. Their opinion is encapsulated in this proclamation of his: "It is a betrayal of art for the writer to put his writing at the service of a cause, even if it is such a laudable and uncontroversial cause as the education of the people" (Ogungbesan 7).

In the above quotation, Ogungbesan derails from the norms of African literary aesthetics, and aligns with the assumption that art serves no purpose and does not address itself to any other reality other than itself, and that art exists for its own sake. To him, art is art and nothing more! This is the doctrine of Aestheticism which is a philosophy of life and literary movement that came up in the nineteenth century to view the creative writer as an autonomous genius.

Given the realities of its history, modern African literature has swum against the currents of such a tide, and has gone out to espouse an artistic vision that is attuned to the service of the society. Thus, in the African context, literary aesthetics has fully embraced the utilitarian function of art as a socially relevant tool to the point that literature has been applied to a cause, and has developed in response to "the predatory presence of Western intrusion into Africa" (Onoge 96). Ogungbesan and some African scholars have been attracted to the philosophy of Aestheticism, known as art for art's sake, the love of art for its own sake.

Roger Fowler (2) in the following excerpt explains what the whole idea of art for art's sake entails:

> The life of art or the art of life … is ideally a form of purified ecstasy that flourishes only when removed from the roughness of the stereotyped world of actuality and the orthodoxy of philosophical systems and fixed points of view. The quest of unadulterated beauty is recommended as the finest occupation man can find for himself during the 'indefinite reprieve' from death which his life is.

In line with this aesthetic philosophy, art is "selfishly occupied with her own perfection only" and has 'no desire to teach". It presumes the "disinterestedness of the aesthetical judgment, and the irrelevance of concepts to intrusions of imagination," and it leads to the devaluation of the subject in favour of personal innovatory techniques and the subtleties of exquisite execution" (Fowler 2-3). Following this theory, art is to be seen as an end in itself, and never as a means to an end. Art is seen as non-moral and as non-utilitarian, having no purpose outside itself: art is, therefore, useless apart from itself.

This had not always been the practice of art from the very beginning even in Europe where the philosophy originated, with its roots going back to the eighteenth century when Immanuel Kant postulated "the autonomy of aesthetic standards, setting them apart from considerations of morality, utility, or pleasure" ("Aestheticism/Art Movement"). The term l'art pour l'art (art for art's sake) was coined in France in 1818, and then Aestheticism gained a full sway as a European art movement in the nineteenth century, standing on the doctrine that art exists for the sake of its beauty alone, and, therefore, need serve no political, didactic or other purpose. The "aesthetic style", therefore, tends towards providing "refined sensuous pleasure" instead of conveying "moral or sentimental messages", and the main characteristics of the style include: suggestion rather than statement, sensuality, great use of symbols, and craftsmanship that is both careful and self-conscious ("Aesthetic Literature").

It is necessary to explain the concept of Aestheticism to enable one appreciate the context from which Kolawole Ogungbesan has made the statement quoted above, and in which he has taken exception to Chinua Achebe's artistic manifesto of employing the platform of fiction to the service of educating his society as underlined in his popular essay "The Novelist as Teacher".

Aestheticism and the African Position on the Role of the Artist

Many writers and critics have espoused the role of the writer in Africa. For Chinua Achebe, it has been the educatory role as seen in his statement below:

> I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one of long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two be mutually exclusive. ("The Novelist as Teacher" 105)

In another of his essays, Achebe calls for the writers' commitment to the big social and political issues of the time:

> It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. ("The African Writer and the Biafran Cause" 115)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o fully endorses Achebe's position, arguing that writers should be concerned with the historical vision of struggle and the social and political realities. Wole Soyinka at the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference held in Stockholm in 1967 had also pointed the direction to follow. He recommends that African writers should, as "the conscience of the society" dwell on the pressing problems of the present, following in the footprints of the traditional artist:

> When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon. But there can be no further distractions with universal concerns whose balm is spread on abstract wounds, not on gaping yaws of black inhumanity. … The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. (Quoted in Ogungbesan 7-8)

Ogungbesan (17) disagrees with the position of Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngugi, and rather adopts Lewis Nkosi's view, which upholds that writers are not absolutely necessary because "there is not very much they can do about real direction of society" and that a writer's special commitment is to craftsmanship, a commitment "to language and its renewal and to the making of a better instrument for the delineation of human character." This perspective undoubtedly is in consonance with the doctrine of Aestheticism in its refusal to acknowledge the utilitarian value of the writer to the society as well as in its particular insistence on craftsmanship and self-conscious artistry. Ogugbesan (17-18) further states:

> In conclusion and for emphasis, one must repeat that the African writer must accept that his role need not be the same as that of the politician. As a citizen he must discharge social obligations…. If he feels more committed to politics, he should go into politics or write political tracts. As a writer, he must write as best as he could, dedicate himself to a 'writer's morality,' which includes holding allegiance to individual human beings instead of race or cause.

Thus, added to his earlier quotation above, Ogungbesan leaves no one in doubt that he is rather pandering to the principles of Aestheticism, and moving on a tangent different from that of the many icons of modern African literature who have engaged literary practice in the full conviction that art has functional values. With comments from the likes of Nkosi and Ogungbesan, a minority perspective as it is, though, we are confronted with two opposing views of art and of the role of the artist within the practice of African literary art.

To think of art as having no "cause" or purpose, very much in line with the theory of art for art's sake, is to fail to understand the nature and value of art. From antiquity to the present, literature has served mankind in diverse ways. Going beyond the nature and the role of art in class societies to the primary question of the origin of art in human evolution, Ernst Fischer posits that "Art in the dawn of humanity has little to do with 'beauty' and nothing at all to do with any aesthetic desire: it was a magic tool or weapon of the human collective in its struggle

for survival" (quoted in Onoge 95-96). Aestheticism or devotion to artistic purity that has no relevance beyond itself is, therefore, a corruption of art in its original essence. Achebe in his essay "Africa and Her Writers" (25-26), therefore, scorns the doctrine of art for art's sake as "just another piece of deodorized dog shit" and goes on to comment further:

> In the beginning art was good and useful; it always had its airy and magical qualities, of course; but even the magic was often intended to minister to a basic human need. … But somewhere in the history of European civilization the idea that art should be accountable to no one, and needed to justify itself to nobody except itself, began to emerge. In the end it became a minor god and its devotees became priests urging all who are desirous to approach its altar to banish entirely from their hearts and minds such doubts and questions as *What use is this to me*? as the ultimate irreverence and profanation. Words like *use*, *purpose*, *value* are beneath the concerns of this Art, and so are we, the vulgarians craving the message and the morality. This Art exists independently of us, of all mankind.

One may then ask: Where is the place of art or beauty in literature? As an art of word, as a verbal communication with emphasis on imagination and style, literature says something to us in a beautiful, artistic manner. Before a writer chooses to write, there must be something burning in him that he wants to share with others. Literature unites subject-matter with art. Hence, literature is an artistic composition designed to tell a story or situation, to convey emotions, idea and experience in a way that reveals some personal vision or some interesting outlook or attitude. Literature no doubt belongs to aesthetic arts, which entails conscious artistry, but not in the sense of art for art's sake. The artistic elements could be in the emotions evoked, in the choice of language, the organization and selection of events and narrative substance, in the characterization or in the thoughts and ideas subtly revealed. The artistry in literature does not serve as an end in itself, but rather it is art speaking to us in indirect and subtle ways – entertaining, pleasing us and at the same time speaking knowledge and wisdom to us. Thus, literature offers us both pleasure and instruction, comprising the useful (utile) and the sweet (dulce) in Horace's terms.

In Africa, aesthetics has its place. Traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from education. An object becomes beautiful because of its truth value and because of the services it offers. R. N. Egudu (35-36) sheds more light on the two elements of entertainment and social functionality that are often present in oral literature:

> In traditional Igbo society literature is always generally a purposeful affair, in the sense that it is not meant merely to satisfy some aesthetic craving or to engender intellectual appeal. The purpose ranges from ritual, through demonstration of accepted values, to simple moral or ethical education. In these dimension of the purpose, emphasis is consistently placed on the relationship between man and man, which, if it is healthy becomes instrumental to the growth of a harmonious society.

Most certainly, therefore, in different ages and places, literature has done or been expected to do different things for the society.

Literary Creativity as Responses to Conditions in Society and Service to Humanity

Literature has a relationship with society in a way that is tangible, and not abstract. Literature has an origin in society, and as Ngugi (477) says, "the writer as a human being is a product of history, of time and space." This is what Hippolyte Taine in his *History of English Literature* (1863) refers to as "race, moment, and milieu" (Abrams and Harpham 298). In effect, literature is not abstract but exists in the specific reality of a people. It deals with the totality of human experience in history and within a given environment. And that is why we can talk about the different literatures of the world – African, European, French, English, and so on– in fact, the different literatures of the world arising from the diverse and peculiar experiences of the different peoples. Literary periods are organized around what the writers of a given time and spaces have been concerned with.

The issue of commitment is an old one and has warranted a "periodizing" of literature. Each epoch underlines a certain kind of commitment. Taking the familiar example of the English literature, the Augustan age had a commitment that was different from the Romantic age; and then the Victorian age pursued a commitment to realism and to a moral purpose, namely: "to sweep away error and to reveal the underlying truth of human life" (Long 455). Writers of a given epoch channel their art to the pressing situation of their time. To underscore the importance of literature and commitment, Jane Austen, in spite of the elegance of her art, was chastised for ignoring the big issues of the moment in her time to dwell on the commonplace experiences of the middle class gentry. Such an instance indeed raises the problem about commitment, which is what Donatus Nwoga (vi) cautions against: "It is oppressive to demand of writers that they produce to the prescription of ideological or national theories. We do this at the risk of stifling the interior vision which is the mark of great literature."

All the same, literary theories and movements have tried to determine the role of writers in their contexts even if one must concede that there is no one perfect theory that can generally apply to literature. What is sauce for the goose may not be sauce for the gander. Thus, rightly does T. S. Eliot state:

> Each age demands different things from poetry, though its demands are modified from time to time …. So our criticism, from age to age, will reflect the things that the age demands and the criticism of no one man and of no one age can be expected to embrace the whole nature of poetry or exhaust all of its uses. Our contemporary critics, like their predecessors, are making particular responses to particular situations. (141)

In the light of this remark, the modern African writer has, obviously used his art to make "particular responses to particular situations". His art has been applied to a cause with great success. Much of modern African literature, including its classics, has been a response to the encounter with the external world. African writers have used their art as tool in their struggle for the survival of their people against White domination. Life is a struggle and the writer has tried to capture the social and political dimensions of this struggle.

Tracing the African connection with Harlem Renaissance, Lloyd Brown (1) rightly points out that there is "a well thought-out, carefully designed expression of these psychological realities which are inherent in the relationship between the writers and their cultural roots." Writing itself is a commitment; it all depends on what sort of commitment. We shall not forget that, paradoxically, literature is propaganda but propaganda is not literature. Many black artists are concerned with the socio-historical, economic and political subjugation of blacks by whites. Black writers at home and in the Diaspora seem to be pursuing or committed to a cohesive project, sharing a unified sensibility as S. E. Ogude (12-13) explains:

> Black writers are essentially preoccupied with the historical implications of the contact between black and white …. And we all learnt that to be black and to think is to be constantly aware of the heritage of humiliation. This awareness, this constant identification with the slave colonial-neo-colonial experience has given to the black people a kind of unified sensibility. Ultimately the black artist concedes that Frantz Fanon has a point: the wretched of the earth is not a mere postulation of pseudo-philosophical dialectics but the painful grasp of historical reality of black experience for the past five hundred years.

Literature has been successfully put at the service of varied causes not only by writers of African descent but also by those of other races even before them. What may we say of literary pieces by some writers acclaimed for their artistic competence, like Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary, for example? With all their artistic competence and commitment to aesthetics, they have put their art at the service of imperialism. On this particular point, Omafume Onoge (93) aptly says that for Africans, "there would still be the disturbing element that the image of Africans and Africa in this body of imaginative literature was contrived to legitimize Western colonial adventure". This is the very reason Achebe takes Conrad to task in his paper "Images of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." Achebe protests against the inclusion of Conrad, whom he describes as a "thoroughgoing racist", in the canon of English literature on the grounds that his fiction fails in moral purpose for consciously dehumanizing the African race:

> The real question is dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. (8-9)

Achebe, therefore, in his essay "The Truth of Fiction" talks about malignant and beneficent fiction: the fiction that hinders and the fiction that helps; and between the two types, the writer must choose the one that helps his people (109). Recommending that the writer be committed to both his art and society, Emmanuel Obiechina describes the artist in the following words:

> He is not like Robinson Crusoe, living out his life in a lonely island. He is first and foremost a man living among men, feeling the same needs as other men, sharing other men's joys and sorrows, their fears and hopes. He is a man who

> feels the pulse and the heart-beat of his contemporaries because he is one with his contemporaries; his deepest inspiration may well derive from his commonly shared humanity with all his contemporaries. He is a man who speaks to his contemporaries about those matters of weight and movement which define their destiny as living and loving and dying creatures. (1)

The writer is at the service of his society through his art. That has been in the nature of art since the dawn of civilization. The concept of art for art's sake is an aberration. Writers in Africa, particularly in the twentieth century, have advanced the cause of cultural and political nationalism. Thinking of what the writers have contributed to national development in Africa, Charles Nnolim (244) has come to perceive writers as patriots. The writer, therefore, does not have to shrink from the idea of commitment, commitment being in the sense of "a total, all-level involvement by the individual with the circumstances of his being, his country and his personality" (Kalu Uka 21). No doubt, the meaning of the commitment and the sort of commitment keep shifting. Rather than the functionless, non-moral, non-utilitarian concept of art, there is much that goes for art at the service of humanity. The modern writer has actually learned a lesson from the traditional artist:

> But one may take liberties to think that if the traditional artist has been able to comprehend within the aegis of his art both aesthetic appeal and social relevance, the modern writer can look upon him as a great grandfather who had a legacy to bequeath. That is to say that at his own level of perception and imaginative resourcefulness, the modern artist can effect a harmonious unification of artistic excellence and social commitment of his work. (Egudu 47)

In modern Africa, the literary art has tended towards socio-political issues. Politics, indeed, has taken the centre stage in the writers' concern, as the Nigerian example proves. Soyinka has committed not only his art, but also himself to the cause of political justice. His autobiography *The Man Died* tells us that the man dies in all who keep silence in the face of tyranny. He was imprisoned for his political stance on the Civil War. Achebe himself abandoned the luxury of writing novels and did with poetry which was more suitable to the urgent need of the war crisis. He also was involved in the Biafran cause. Christopher Okigbo had to jettison his purely artistic, elitist, intellectual kind of work to something more accessible, evidenced in *The Path of Thunder*. He did not only address his art to the people, but he also went to the war field, which claimed his life. The large corpus of civil war literature in Nigeria testifies to the direction of the writers' commitment – a commitment to struggle within the perspective of history, a commitment to cultural and social values, a commitment to finding a way to placate a people's embittered sense of history. The protest nature of South African literature gives us another insight into the writer's role, into the use of art in the service of a cause. With the end of apartheid, writers in the South African enclave have sought to re-assess their situation, as Njabulo S. Ndabele observes in his essay "Redefining Relevance".

Conclusion

Writers in Africa took up writing as an anti-racist racism, in Achebe's idiom. Underlying such a step is the understanding that a writer has a role to play in his society. Hence, we have seen

the writer use his art to fight for his society against an external aggressor – White Europe. From within, the writer has equally engaged the socio-political malaise of his time in all its manifold dimensions. Developments in African literature cannot deny the impact of history. Literature has always evolved and developed in response to social changes, with Nigeria providing useful examples. The relationship that exists between literature and its society compelled the earlier need for pursuing counter discourses to the colonial mission in Africa, which later on changed to the theme of disillusionment and the betrayal of the nationalist struggle, progressing to socially-relevant, highly critical works written in accessible language, and now in the contemporary epoch, shifting again from grand to little narratives and to stories containing large canvas with global, transnational frame of reference.

Without doubt, literature has pursued worthwhile causes in virtually every human society. As a word art, literature stands on the conviction that language can move the world, that language is so powerful that the writer can use it to achieve whatever means he sets himself. With the power of word, writers have put their art at the service of vast and varied causes, and with outstanding results. Literature is, therefore, not innocent of underlying causes. In the African context, literary aesthetics has taken into consideration the utilitarian function of art as a socially relevant tool and has kept a distance from the cult of art for art's sake.

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