

African Writer As Mediator: A Study of Ayo Dada's *The King's Clarion Call*

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Abstract

Writers in Africa have different roles to play depending on their ideologies, environments and maturity. From preoccupation with the oral backgrounds of Africa, most writers have matured towards representing global issues in their themes. From Amos Tutuola to Ayo Dada, the quests of African writers are sociological and may not be removed from the amplification of the challenges in their environments. The challenges of African writers are dynamic as they are confronted by different realities within the resolution of one socio-political problem and the emergence of another. Writers are, therefore, social crusaders, teachers and preachers.

Keywords: Africa, writing, fiction, social, crusader, socio-political, mediation, creativity.)

Introduction:

Different epochs may be associated with the evolvement of the literature of African folk as well as the place of writers operating from the milieu. From the mythical past to the dawn and dismantling of slavery and slave trade infused with colonial realities, the quest for self-rule to military adventure in politics and the era of miasma characterised by corrupt leadership, the themes of writers from the continent change with the evolvement of the realities of the people of the continent. Every epoch determines the direction of the writer. The paper has divided these into four: the era of originality finding expression in pastoral complacency, the era of infiltration and corruption of values through culture-contact and culture-conflict and the era of indiscretion simply tagged that of miasma. The fourth era is that of an endless search for harmony between the innocence that permeated the pantheistic view of existence and the emerging trend of technology and the attendant globalisation and deregulation. Equally salient to the writers of the future is the quest to shield the folk from the devastating virus of globalisation finding expression in individuality, HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, militancy and the general atmosphere of materialism that the younger folk have imbibed without being conscious of the corrosive effects on their sensibilities.

A writer operating within the fabrics of the milieu, has a moral duty to represent the glorious past prelude to colonisation of Africa when decorum was the order of the day just as the golden rule permeated every transaction that no one ever negated. It is to be expected that Achebe and his contemporaries in Nigeria and some West African countries fall into this category. It was the era of pastoral complacency when the quest of humankind was limited to food, shelter and harmonious relationship with nature. The attachment to the umbilical cord of nature was not totally severed and the blood of the mother earth was still oozing unable to heal totally from fierce injury sustained during the release to the milieu. The level of departure from the gregarious innocence was not much. The human mind was not totally corrupted from the strains and stains of misalliance through conquest, warfare and diplomatic ties. Thus, myths were still very much sacrosanct and the fear of severance from mother earth permeated the enclave.

The sociological nature of creativity may be apprehended when viewed against the backdrop of social being and the milieu being instrumental in social thought and by extension-social expression. This singular axiom conditioned the literature of the South African enclave towards protest. To Nadine Gordimer (2007) therefore, writing is a way of making 'sense of life as I know it and observe it and experience it (121).' In this regard the expression of an African writer may be tied to his imaginative perception of reality. This perception may be empirical and could be subject to parochial amplification of values that are peculiar to him.

Art is a tool that has no affiliation to race, colour or religion. It is an instrument that could be employed by all, irrespective of cooked up pride or rejection arising from exhibited condescension. Naguib Mahfouz (2007) captures the essence of art in his speech:

Fortunately, art is generous and sympathetic. In the same way that it dwells with the happy ones, it does not desert the wretched. It offers both alike the convenient means for expressing what swells up in their bosom (124).

The preceding claim makes art a veritable tool for the expression of the glorious state as well as the pathetic conditions of humanity. The subject matter of a work of fiction may also exhibit the contradictions in the immediate or global society. This depends on the level of consciousness and exposure of the writer to global issues that affect the immediate environments. Naguib Mahfouz (2007) echoes what could be considered a

rupture in the psychological state of the writer being drawn from three opposing civilisations: Pharaonic, Islamic and the global or digital age.

I come from a world labouring under the burden of debts, whose paying back exposes it to starvation or very close to it. Some of its people perish in Asia from floods; others do so in Africa from famine. In South Africa, millions have been undone with rejection and with deprivation of all human rights in the age of human rights, as though they were not counted among humans (124).

The global sensitivity of a mature writer like Naguib Mahfouz exposes him to a transcendental bridging of racial and cultural barriers in his creativity. Ayo Dada's latest publication entitled: *The King's Clarion Call* (2011) provides a springboard for the study of the preoccupation of African writers in their creative endeavours. The themes of Dada's book are in tandem with what constituted the hallmarks of writers from Amos Tutuola to the modern era. Chinua Achebe highlights the focus of what he considered to be the preoccupation of African writers immediately after independence from colonialists: 'This theme--put quite simply--is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain.'

If the preoccupation of writers in the sixties was the chronicling of the beauty of African art, the new century demands a new objective or set of objectives that can highlight the challenges of modern era. It would not take eternity to project the beauty of a damsel. New and debilitating issues such as materialism and insecurities have replaced the complacency and innocuous relationship that characterised society in the sixties and beyond; ranging from bad leadership to economic pillage of the continent. The destruction of the erstwhile vibrant economy of Nigeria by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) must take a centre stage in the creativity of the century. Unemployment and the attendant social ills like civil unrest, militancy and kidnapping pose great challenges that take the lead burner in the discourse of the affairs of the continent. It is to be expected that the revolution in North Africa, though belated, will constitute a major issue in the creative efforts of writers. Added to this is the revelation of the deception that characterise the relationship between the governors and the governed especially in Libya. After all, it is now clear to the supporters of the purported revolution that they are mere 'rats and cockroaches to the leadership' that could be flushed away from their sights.

Thus every era is synonymous with a challenge, usually a consequence of a bad policy, neo-colonialism and other social ills that may beset society through its march from pastoral complacency to materialism and the recent hybridity with the attendant confusion. The enormous goals of African writers should transcend the quest for beauty or art for art's sake in the desperate task of redeeming the continent from the culture of bestiality and gun-totting. While not recommending a return to the innocuous past, (for what else could that be equated other than retrogression) as that was the conclusion of Rushing and Frenz that '...humankind's only chance will be to rid itself of all technology and start over at a tribal level', new myths that could take society beyond the confines of technology should be given a consideration.

Let me on with the tirade. The era of originality was replaced with the notion that destiny was the sole responsibility of humankind without recourse to the divine, real or imagined and that it could be manipulated. The infiltration of the abode of innocence by greed and desperation and thus a total severance from the original order were witnessed. The associated desperation brought about materialism and the displacement of brotherhood in the place of selfish aggrandisement, with many untoward consequences.

The era of miasma took the form of adulteration of values especially the misconception that arose from the mixture of western and traditional values. The result was a grope in the darkness of indecision without a palpable way out of the labyrinth. Achebe's illuminating hints on the task confronting African writers may be considered in that light: 'the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all, the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality; it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa, he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history.'

The Era of Originality:

The acclaimed originality of the secular-sacred beginning of African writers was characterised by series of allusions to the crude imaginations of artists, finding expression in verbal art. Orality was the pedagogic springboard for these writers through unhindered reliance on oral scripts for the provision of folktales and mythical inspiration in the composition of their creative endeavours. The mine of inspiration, therefore, provided symbols that every creative writer could harness. From Amos Tutuola to Ben Okri, such crude allusions were creative strategies that enriched the thoughts and contents of creative scripts. Even when African writers pretend

to be preoccupied with the present, a metaphor for contemporary issues, a significant part of that involvement tends towards the past. They are first of all, conditioned by their environments, that no doubt, dictate the language, informed their thoughts and fashioned the exhibited conflicts in their endeavours. As much as they try to be universal in their outlooks, a significant part of their preoccupation tends towards a representation of the indigenous settings from which they cannot successfully detach themselves. Wole Soyinka too in his critical endeavour entitled: *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976) availed himself of the oral background of the Yoruba society to establish the nexus between myths in Africa and their equivalents in the western world. The milieu was Soyinka's launch-pad to renown; a metaphor for the non-severance of the umbilical cord of writers from their indigenous environments.

The Era of Infiltration:

The era was characterised by sordid deception, as there was an attempt to wrestle the land and economy from the folk by the imperialists. The confidence of the people in their culture was rattled as a result of the confusion arising from the denigration of the people. The attendant psychological trauma could better be imagined. An onslaught on the sensibility of a people may remove humanity totally from them and it may take conscious efforts to regain the loss. That was the exact picture of the catastrophe that greeted the people immediately after slavery and slave trade; colonisation and the dehumanisation of Africans in different dimensions.

The era of miasma was synonymous with the struggle to justify the humanity of Africans in the face of the abuse that was the lot of the people. The climate was permeated by confusion, a grope in the abyss of darkness as one form of despotism was replaced with another finding expression in local lords and their insatiable appetite for power. Writers of the era could not but represent the series of challenges such as the revolt against domination that was the theme of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*, *Weep Not Child* (1964), and *The River Between* (1965).

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) are based on the native environment of the writer. They are a mixture of laudatory and didactic remarks about the home country, Nigeria. Abrahams' *Peter's Mine Boy* is based on the relationship between black and white natives of South Africa. Coetzee, J(ohn) M(ichael) *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) is a reflection of the situation in the apartheid enclave. Fugard, Athol's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) is equally based on the subject of apartheid.

Dada's *The King's Clarion Call* shows that writers also echo prophetic innuendoes. While allegorically chronicling the travails of a King who arrived with his retinue of servants, who though were thoroughly equipped and prepared to fulfil certain promises and pledges earlier undertaken, it captures actual experiences that divine envoys have to experience while hoping to salvage the human spirit. It also highlights the sad plight of the human spirit who has so degenerated that he no longer can recognise his lofty origins.

Writers are commentators on issues in obvious attempt at pointing out human frailties. *The King's Clarion Call* is both a sad commentary on, and an indictment of humanity's failings to submit humbly to the dictate of a wiser higher ordering, the neglect of which unfortunately leads the hapless to ruin and failed opportunities. As manipulators of indigenous style of artistic delivery, African writers assume the role of purists and attempt to reconcile the folk with some mores in the milieu. They attempt to retrieve the beauty of indigenous art from the dungeon of irrelevance. It may as well be considered an act of cultural retrieval that unapologetically echoes the beauty of the Yoruba culture by using their poetry, music, dance and song to unearth the beauty of a people that is gradually going into extinction. The Yoruba native dialect is used extensively and translated where appropriate.

As teachers of best standards, writers attempt to purify society of its ills. As a moral tale, Dada's *The Kings Clarion Call* offers much reflection to the reader or theatre audience, but the challenge posed to us all is considerably more. How many will indeed hear the King's Call and heed it at the moment of truth? Allegory, as life in all its deepest ramifications is, confronts everyone who cares to see. Achebe provides what may be considered authorial sanction of the place of a writer as a teacher: 'the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done...because he is the sensitive point of his community' (105).

Search for the Missing Link:

African writers are the link between the folk and some conventions, creeds and beliefs. *The King's Clarion Call* is an inspired didactic work written primarily to re-establish the spiritual purpose of human being on earth who is recognised as having been pre-natally prepared for a life's mission. The preoccupation may be an apprehension of the need for a change in the existing line of action and thus an appeal or sermon for the desirable best standard the world over. Naguib Mahfouz (2007) reveals this thrust in his speech.

In this decisive moment in the history of civilisation, it is inconceivable and unacceptable that the moans of mankind should die out in the void. There is no doubt that mankind has at last come of age and our era carries the expectations of entente between the superpowers. The human mind now assumes the task of eliminating all causes of destruction and annihilation (124).

It would be a great surprise that the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa should be associated with a problem among writers in the former enclave. This truth is contained in Njabulo Ndebele (2007) as he conceives the problems within the quest for a new mindset, especially from the tainted one that was bedevilled by oppression, victimisation and deprivation while the apartheid policy lasted.

The greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression, structures which can severely compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself (126).

It is to be expected that the walls of prejudice from the racists to the black majority and growing suspicion from the oppressed to the racists would take several years of cooperation to yield to the bulwark of demolition. The task confronting writers in the post-apartheid era is to fashion alliance between the oppressed and the oppressors. This propaganda will form the contents of many creative endeavours in the years ahead. Simply put, the task means freedom from 'the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid' (126).

Achebe (2007) situates the writer within the link between heroism and cowardice: 'it helps us to locate again the line between the heroic and the cowardly when it seems most shadowy and elusive, and it does this by focusing us to encounter the heroic and the cowardly in our psyche' (111). This role is fundamental to the calling of a writer. Achebe (2007) posits that the writer is morally bound to provide rudders for the folk to find their ways in the maze called society. In this task, it is the responsibility of the writer to provide further assurances to the folk about their humanity and equality with other races: 'Here, then, is an adequate revolution for me to espouse--to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our souls' (105).

Conclusion:

The education of the society becomes a salient responsibility of the writer. As the eye-among-the-blind, the business of a writer is to provide direction for the rudderless ship of society. 'Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who care? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive' (Achebe, 2007: 105). As the global community is the enclave of the writer, it behoves that he goes beyond the positive in order to draw attention to the negative as well.

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