

Trans-Border Poverty: A Reading of Seven African Literary Works

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Abstract

This paper is centered on a social set back, which is symbolic to the continent of Africa. Some African literary works, which are randomly selected, are used as our sources of data collection for the survey. Anchored on sociological literary theory, this paper has as its purpose; the mission to wake-up the sleeping and docile masses of Africa from their slumber. It's high time to put an end to passive followership in the affairs of state management or governance, which determines the pace and, or degree of our collective advancement and social well-being as a people on the surface of the earth. The study is also aimed at rationalizing the validity of the proposition that Africa is a rich continent full of poor people.

Keywords: Africa, beggars, leadership, neo-colonialism, poverty, selfishness, underdevelopment

Introduction

Africa is naturally blessed with all kinds of human and mineral resources. But, there are two silent salient killer diseases in Africa. First, that African leaders are corrupt is obvious. One sees the practical manifestations of leadership madness everywhere. Their power drunkenness has no boundary. Second, Africa is suffering from material/structural poverty occasioned by neo-colonial imperialism. Not just the mental slavery but also the misplacement of priority by myopic and selfish leaders.

African literary works across the three major literary genres; drama (plays), poetry (poems) and prose (novels), have seen poverty as a must discussed societal issue. Whether the text is written by an Anglophone writer or his Francophone counterpart, writers have set their lens of this common enemy which has eroded the much needed development in Africa. With the use of protest writing, militant but reasonable African creative writers condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material development in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence.

In scholarly studies over the years, the inter-relationship between literature and society has been strongly attested. The writer or artist is an individual subject to emotions and feelings and he/she is a product of certain social make-ups w which literary work is potentially a response. Sartre (1948: 24) observes thus; "The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it." Most African social realists derive joy in the practice of making fun of human actions with a view to correcting the excessiveness or weakness in a given society.

Mohuddin(1993: 48) defines poverty as "Households' inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy the needs for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation." Joining his voice to this perception of what poverty is; Adesanya (1998: 87) sees poverty thus; "The state of living with less than the smallest income necessary for life. We can also say it is an inability to attain the minimum standard of living."

Satire is a major literary technique employed by radical writers to present the image of African society. Adeoti and Elegbeleye (2005: 303 -321) say, "Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior". Satire is an attack on follies and, or vices demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or unacceptable behavior It is used to achieve a reaction of contempt.

Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on *faction*, an aspect of sociology of literature; that is, sociological approach to the study of literature, which holds that literature and other forms of creative arts, should be examined in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received. This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society.

To better understand a writer's literary work(s), it may probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since

this critical approach or theory is believed to be “the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature” because it (the approach) takes into consideration “everything within our society which has informed the work”, Abiola Irele (1971: 9 - 24).

The term “faction” in the words of Emenyonu (1991) is the art of “juxtaposing real and identifiable facts with fiction”. Cuddon (1998) attests that faction originated around 1970 in United States to describe fictions which are blended with facts. He argued further by citing Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1996) and Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968) as examples of faction. In Nigerian literary palace, Kole Omotosho’s *Just before Dawn* (1988), Wole Soyinka’s *Isara* (1989) and Uche Mowah’s *Eating by the Flesh* (1995) are categorized as faction. Cuddon upholds that faction as a literary genre might easily apply to historical novels which fictionalize a great deal of periods, facts or novels incorporating actual living personalities in a narrative that deals with recent events pertaining to historical facts. Tulloch also agrees with the view of Cuddon by painting faction as a blend of fact and fiction.

According to Tulloch (2002), the word, faction is morphologically derived by telescoping the terms “fact” and “fiction”. It is believed that faction offers a more direct critic on events and personalities in a given human society and can therefore be used to positively reform the society. Faction fills the existing gaps in our knowledge as regards the private lives of great men and women and even nations that history has refused to cover. This blend of fact and fiction meets a serious need for authenticity in works of arts; especially literature. Faction or if you like, call it historical fiction starts with songs and epic poems. It can be argued that history is the “fact” while the blanks filled by novelists or playwrights are described as “fiction”. Literature as a product of a particular place and period has become the most useful instrument to address events which are too large or vast for a perfect digestion in seriously historic form; the base of literature no doubt is history; as fiction emanates from fact. Even in the documentation of real events, creation unavoidably plays a role; the entire story does not merit telling, there are often selections and emphasis on the most striking events and synthesis. Fiction can teach and edify us apart from providing us with new objects for social feeling and knowledge. Hence, through literature, we are able to make up for the deficiencies in real life; with adventures, one is able to participate imaginatively and can arrive at new ideas, innovations or knowledge.

Discussion

Reacting to the relationship between fiction and fact, Joan Rockwell (1974) comments thus: “A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, the Law, Religion, Epic, Poetry, the novel, the Drama and the statements of politicians and journalists”. What Joan Rockwell affirms is that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality since it is handed down by people in a given human society. Consolidating the aforementioned position, Ogundokun (2013: 11 - 16) observes that: “Decolonization in African states is achieved in part through African literature. At independence and in the post-independence, the realities of human condition and, or contemporary realities are the basis for African literature be it poetry, drama or prose.” The main purpose of this trend is to awake the required consciousness in fellow Africans for positive changes, which will keep the continent alive.

Sembène Ousmane’s *Le Mandat (Money Order)* is a post-Independence work, which x-rays African realities of that political period. As a matter of fact, it is obvious that polygamy, unemployment, poverty, corruption, effect of bureaucracy, illiteracy and blind attachment to cultural and religious beliefs are major social realities in Africa during the period under review in the novel, Sembène Ousmane’s *Le Mandat* and of course to date. Among other social ills presented in the novel, poverty is a striking challenge. The imagery of ugly houses, long list of debtors recorded by Mbarka and the heavy presence of beggars on the several streets in the novel rationalize the fact that African society is truly ravaged by poverty. People are portrayed as being hungry-looking; they dressed in tattered clothes and gathered about idly. The novelist informs us that it was unemployment that sent away Abdou to France. And, of course unemployment is closely related to poverty which has taken over the land. Ibrahima Dieng, the protagonist and the mason who returned from Mauritania are victims of a suffering African state, entangled with abject poverty because they are not gainfully employed. Painting poverty in African society in another novel of his titled; *God’s Bits of Wood*, Ousmane (1962) talks about; “Constantly hungry, naked children, with sunken chests and swollen bellies...” (p. 13).

Wole Soyinka x-rays the corruption within the corridors of power in his political satire, *A Play of Giants* as the cause of poverty in African society. This ugly trend called corruption is demonstrated by the actions of three ridiculous African leaders spearheaded by Kamini, who travels out of his country with the Chairman of Bugara Central Bank. He ignorantly yet proudly says; “When I travel, I take the Bank of Bugara with me, then nobody can steal money behind Kamini’s back...” (*A Play of Giants*, p. 4). This same Kamini orders the Chairman to mint more money for him to waste. These irrational leaders squander their countries’ treasuries on food and other irrelevant things. They are indeed a pack of gluttons! To accentuate the insensitivity

of African rulers, Kamini commands his Chairman to accept any condition given by the World Bank in an attempt to secure a two hundred million dollars loan, without having a spelt out capital project which the loan is meant for. Surely the money will eventually end in their private accounts as it is often the case. To illustrate that poverty fellowships with Africa and it follows its people everywhere they go, let us consider the words of the Ambassador. She reveals: “But, if er...if I may make bold to remind Your Excellency, the reason why the post of First and Second Secretaries, plus that of Commercial Attaché have been vacant is that, well, according to the Foreign Affairs Minister, **there are no funds to pay anyone in those grades**” (p. 14).

Also, let us look at this conversation between the Ambassador and Kamini to consolidate our position about poverty in African states.

AMBASSADOR: Your Gracious Excellency, I was about to suggest that I run over to a friendly embassy and use their telex.

KAMINI: Why a friendly embassy? Why not our own telex?

AMBASSADOR: **It was cut off months ago.** Your Excellency. **We...could not pay...we had no funds to settle our bills.** (p. 16).

The underlined clauses are for emphasis and Professor Batey articulates the true condition of African society. He sums up the entire thing thus: “The problems of Bugara [which symbolizes the whole of Africa] were purely economic – as a sociologist, I saw that only too clearly. Bugara has not only inherited a discredited economic system from its colonial history, she is still being exploited by a neo-colonial conspiracy of multi-national conglomerates which continue to prey on developing countries in the Third world. It is an outrageous and inhuman situation.” (p. 23).

Both material and moral poverty are discussed in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*. Material poverty can be measured in the lack of basic structural amenities, which hinders developments and reduces the standard of living. On the other hand, lack of will, interest, purpose or attitudinal disposition, which can bring development, is translated to mean moral poverty. Better living condition means good roads, decent houses, and potable water as well as functional hospitals, adequate food supply, security of lives and property, good schools and employment opportunities for all among other things.

Commenting on social services in African states, Mariama Bâ (1979) observes: “Even though the primary schools are rapidly increasing, access to them has not become any easier. They leave out in the streets an impressive number of children because of the lack of places...Apprenticeship to traditional crafts seems degrading to whoever has the slightest book learning. The dream is to become a clerk. The trowel is spurned. The horde of the jobless swells the flood of delinquency.” The condition of the clinic where the young Nabou works in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* is a reflection of poverty in the black continent. Let us take a look at young Nabou: “She would come back from work railing at the lack of beds led to the discharge, too early in her opinion, of the mothers; worried about the lack of staff, inadequate instruments, medicines. She would say, with deep concern, fragile baby is let loose too quickly into a hygienically unsound social environment. She thought of the great rate of infant mortality, which of course and devotion cannot decrease...” (p. 47). The root cause of this poverty in Africa is corrupt practices and bad governance.

Validating all that we have seen or heard about the sordid human conditions in African states; Fafowora (2001: 248) remarks: “But without controlling its birth rate, Africa will be facing a decade in which social services and public utilities will decline.

Already under Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), the gains of the 70s in health, education, and other public utilities, have been badly eroded. In the case of Nigeria, per capita income has dropped from US\$800 in the 1970s to less than US\$300 in the 1980s.”

In the story, Ifeoma Okoye’s *Chimere*, we see frail bodies and tired, furrowed faces which confirm the poverty in Africa. Mental pictures of African society are captured in the following extract: “A blind alley at the outskirts of Aba Township, Oyati Lane was lined on both sides with ramshackle shanties the walls of which were mostly made of mud but later plastered with cement. In many cases, the plaster was beginning to come off, leaving irregular and ugly patches here and there on the walls. The zinc roofs of the buildings had turned to a rusty brown. Children were playing undisturbed along the lane as vehicles never plied the narrow and badly maintained road. Some of the children were stark naked while some wore undersized or oversized pants, their poor torsos covered with grime and sweat.” (p. 49).

Stating her predicament, Chimere, the heroine whose name provides title to the novel tells the Managing Director of the brewery where she took up a vacation job thus: “I’m a student in a university. My mother has been paying my fees single-handed and right now she’s hard up. I want to work and be able to help her as much as I can. I’ve been to several establishments **but there were no vacancies.**” (p. 75). The clause, but there were no vacancies indicates unemployment in African states, which of course is one of the possibilities for poverty.

Poverty is indeed causing regional and trans-national misunderstanding especially in Africa. Olusegun-Joseph (2006: 69 -84) observes that: “...the tragic disintegration of the African society of the post-independence

era, marked by the malaise of official corruption, nepotism, mass unemployment, professional mediocrities, a prevailing lack of faith in the polity and the indifference of the ruling elite class.”

In the poem, Sola Owonibi’s “*Homeless Not Hopeless*” there is a clear mood of sympathy and a choked up emotion as a result of the suffering and rejection the less privileged, who are the victims of circumstance experienced in the poem. We see the imagery of homeless but hopeful and courageous beggars.

“We are the natives of the street
holed-up under bridges...
embrace the cozy
cardboard beds laid on stinks
as the night injects us with cool breeze
and endurance.”

There is horror of poverty in African society.

Without doubt, the theme of poverty is an identical element in African literature. Garba (2010: 53 - 70) calls our attention to the fact that: “Identity, generally, could be likened to a quest: the search for a loose, ambiguous point of transcendence and metaphysical permanence. Therefore, one’s affirmation and confirmation of a specific identity constitutes an image of the self as it is interspersed with others. But since the affirmed identity is almost always contested, identity has to be constantly redefined and re-imaged with dire consequence for the stability of the self or of a polity, as the history of the twentieth century has powerfully attested.”

Sly Cheney-Coker presents the sordid human condition of the poor peasant farmers in his poem titled; “*Myopia*”. There are mental pictures of despair, poverty, malnutrition and hardship. Readers are presented with horrible images of suffering with words like “emaciated bones”, “misery”, “hunger”, “skeletons”, “bomb” and “train of anguish”. All these words that represent negativism validate the sadness and disgusting state in which the entire continent is found as a result of poverty principally caused by the insensitivity of neo-colonial tendencies.

According to Coates and Silbourn (1983), “Poverty is a common phenomenon in capitalistic societies or competitive economies. Poverty is the manifestation of the unequal distribution of wealth, income, power, and it epitomizes the structural inequalities in the societies.” Situating this point of view to African context, Henry Barlow’s “*Building the Nation*” expresses the hypocrisy of our so-called public holders at the expense of the suffering masses. The PS represents the ruling class everywhere in Africa who move about living in the lap of luxury in the name of developing their countries. On the other hand, the driver symbolizes the citizens who are rotten away in abject poverty as a result of imbalances in the distribution of the wealth of a given nation, which has paved the way for a class society.

In African society, the drivers, domestic servants, messengers, gardeners only to mention a few, of the elite rise very early in the morning on empty stomach to carry out their duty with little pay, which cannot take care of their needs. The driver in the poem, “*Building the Nation*”, laments:

“My ulcers I think are equally painful
Only they are caused by hunger...”

Sentiments apart, the selected African writers have been able to acknowledge the plight of their fellow Africans. They identify with them and provide a platform to showcase the problems with a view to rectifying the problems.

We believe strongly that African writers are buying into the view of Balzer (1995:139 - 159) who says: “When key crystallizing political events cause people who had previously thought of themselves as mildly aware of their ethnic identity to become dramatically defensive and passionately angered, precisely these people become the fulcrum of more radical brands of nationalism. Issues of leadership, land claims, historical grievances, refugees, national chauvinism, and popular front strategy then become mixed to create a potentially incendiary interethnic dynamic.”

It is evident that archetypal motif of denial is common in African literature of the colonial and post-colonial periods. In fact, there is a link between the two periods of time in Africa history. The crises which ravage African states in the post-colonial era are basically the consequences of the class society crafted and planted by colonial imperialism. However, with the motive of eradicating these social vices, activist writers pick tent with the oppressed and accept their viability.

So far, we have attempted to survey the African literature to underscore the fact that poverty is a cross-border issue in Africa. Through the selected literary works; plays, novels and poems, we see the sorry state of human living conditions in African society. People live in poorly built houses, roads are not maintained, hospitals are crying for drugs and equipment, education is poorly funded, unemployment is at its peak, hunger kicks men and women on their faces, beggars litter everywhere. They have become popular decorative ornaments on the streets of Africa. African foreign missions are in shamble s; unable to perform their constitutional responsibilities.

Indeed, African problem is not that of unavailability of resources but that of leadership. We have

therefore come to a conviction that “Writers are surgeons of the heart and souls of a community” (Wa Thiong’O, 1981: ix).

Conclusion

From this study, it can be established that for African states to develop in all ramifications, the issue of bad leadership must be addressed. Poverty, occasioned by the problem of unemployment, dilapidation of social infrastructures and proliferation of small arms and destructive weapons can be traced back to wishy-washy governance.

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