

The African Novel and Insecurity in Africa In The 21st Century

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Abstract

If Literature aims at educating, conscientising and arousing national consciousness among other functions, then the novel is an important vehicle for communicating such ideals. This paper therefore, examines the global problem of insecurity with particular emphasis on Africa in the 21st century. It explores what African Literature is, especially the novel and the relevance of the African novel to global peace-building, paying particular attention to the pre-colonial African novel alongside the colonial and contemporary African novels. This is to establish a link with the pre-occupation of African novelists in charting new fronts in combating Africa's socio-political challenges. The paper emphasises that Africa should learn lessons from the past through stories, myths, legends and pre-colonial status quo that abound in African novels in order to shape the future through peaceful co-existence and respect for societal norms. This will help eradicate insecurity.

Introduction

Ever since the creation of the world, man has grappled with natural and man-made phenomena which have negative effects on man's peaceful existence on earth. In doing this, he has adopted various responses to such phenomena especially those that had negative and destructive consequences on his being, especially as people multiplied on earth, resulting in formations of various and

diverse communities. In such instances, relationships and interactions are bound to generate crises and conflicts since the thoughts of man are continually evil. The Bible clearly affirms this:

When men began to multiply on the face of the ground... the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen. 6:1-5)

From the foregoing therefore, it means that when societies or communities expand and attitudes are negatively constructed towards conflicts, they can sharpen the instincts for violence thereby generating its associating consequence of insecurity.

Africa has had her fair share of insecurity ranging from wars to terrorism, kidnapping and general insecurity that threaten peaceful co-existence of numerous communities and nationalities who think and act along ethnic lines. Today, global peace is being threatened by North Korea's atomic might, crises in the Far East, Syria, Iraq and isolated attacks on individuals on a daily basis. Africa, one of the poorest continents, has had her share of these turbulent times which have given rise to massive unemployment, hunger, poor economies, rape, and destruction of infrastructural facilities that would have been useful and beneficial to the teeming populace. For example, Nigeria is still suffering from the scars of the civil war of 1967-1970 and the present Boko-Haram menace which has claimed many lives. Liberia had her share of internal war between 1989 and 2003 while the Cote 'd Ivoire crises of 2002-2004 are still fresh in the minds of Africans, just to mention but a few. Countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan and Somalia are currently struggling to survive as independent nations because of conflicts. All these confrontations and crises have rendered these states poor and insecure thereby hampering productive development. These events, therefore, have severe consequences on the continent of Africa and the global society.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is Marxism and mythological perspective. As a political and social theory, Marxism seeks to explain the course of human history and the structure of past, present and future society. It provides a

unifying set of values both for the description of the present and for the prescription of the future. This means there is an important and vital link between Literature and History. Mythology is a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin once believed to be true by a particular group of people. Myths serve to explain why things happen the way they do and why the world is as it is. They provide a rationale for social customs and rules by which people conduct themselves.

African Literature

Literary works are works of imagination, most of which are products of life experiences. They reflect society by showing the developments within it. A creative writer therefore, uses his imaginative art to portray his intention by conveniently criticizing, educating, instructing and entertaining. Such works do not fail to embody or include experiences that are already lived and those that are on-going in his society. Ngugi affirms this fact that:

Literature does not grow in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even areas of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. (*Homecoming*, xv)

Viewed from the above therefore, African Literature can be described as that Literature that is written by Africans and non-Africans alike which portrays authentic African historical, cultural, economic and socio-political experiences.

The African Novel

African novelists respond urgently to the needs of the citizenry by trying at all times to expose and condemn the subtle and indigenized forms which oppressive power has taken in the post-colonial era. They also respond to happenings that

grossly affect the social and political wellbeing of the people. In doing this, the African novelist fits Tirop Simatei's claim that:

The novelist's relevance to society is attained through a conscious intervention in the unfolding of history; an intervention which, as a kind of artistic mission, is already over-determined by the inhuman politics of both colonial and post-colonial epoch. (10)

It is therefore, important to note that Literature, and the novel in particular, is an important tool in formulating national consciousness for peaceful co-existence which is vital in achieving national security for the citizenry, especially in this 21st century that is bedeviled with numerous security challenges. This, on the other hand, hampers meaningful development being orchestrated by corrupt leaders and the political elites. They are the ones that benefit from this instability which is to the detriment of the teaming masses.

The African novel which is fiction in prose, even though a borrowed form from Europe, seems to be the most effective medium of communication between the writer and his audience in Africa today. It is said to be a response or reaction to the consequences of imperial conquest and exploitation of Africa by Europe through colonialism. This is a historical experience that can be divided into three historical phases. First, there is the period of imperial conquest of the African continent by Europe which led to the gradual but effective erosion of African cultural values. The second historical phase is the people's reaction to this intrusion by way of armed struggle in various parts of the continent like the Aba Women's Riot of 1928 in Nigeria, the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya and the Maji-Maji uprising in Tanzania, just to mention but a few. Thirdly, there is the period of independence, nation-building and re-adjustment to rekindle those aesthetic values that were eroded during colonialism. All these phases have been discussed by many African writers, especially novelists, in numerous literary works at different times, under different perspectives and with different thematic concerns. The novelist in Africa, acts as a historian, a teacher and a nationalist, all in one. It is therefore right to assert that socio-political evolutionary trends have always influenced development all over the world. This is also evident in the Literature of Africa and her people.

Africa has a wide variety of traditional beliefs and practices which are sometimes shared by many societies. Such beliefs and practices are derived from the people's cherished heritage that connects the past with the present. Africa has a large reserve of folklores, myths, legends, etc, which African writers use as sources of materials for their creative arts. Art, therefore, is generally affected by society and its politics. The history of the Black man's experience has been most decisive in delineating the phases of African Literature, particularly the novel. One can clearly distinguish five thematic phases but for the purpose of this paper, only three will be considered – the pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary African novels.

The Pre-Colonial African Novel

The pre-colonial African novel is pre-occupied with the exploration of the authentic African issues. The interest of writers in this phase is to examine what is unique in the African rural community. Here, Africa is presented as a serene society of rich vegetation and a unique culture which is exemplified by religious and other mythical rituals. This culture includes farming, wrestling, dancing, supernatural forces, superstition, wars, witchcraft, etc. At this time, there was no corrupt influence of the colonialists. Ngugi's succinct words attest to that fact thus:

In the past, before colonialism, we had a system of age-grade, of extended families, of sub-clans and clans. In those days, we had many people's organizations. We had Ujamaa Wa Mwafrika, for example in English, African socialism (Devil. 67).

The excerpt above shows that Africa, before colonialism, had her way of solving problems and administration. To Ngugi, this was the time when Africa was egalitarian, a period before external exploitation set in. This was when everyone was his brother's keeper and injustice to one was injustice on all. This was when land and the means of production and the profits accruing from it belonged to the people and not individuals; a period of communality. To Ngugi again, "In those days, there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers

and no insect-flies feeding on the fat and blood of unsuspecting toilers” (*Petals*. 120). Then suddenly, these vultures came in the form of colonialism to disrupt the hitherto existing serene society. Examples of novels in this phase include the part one of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*, Suemo Chia’s *The Story of Adam-Wade*, Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*, part of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*, etc.

Olawale Awosika, commenting on the pre-colonial portrayal of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, has this to say:

Moonlit nights provide occasion for joy, laughter and singing among the children and youngsters. These find elaborations in the numerous festivals which are celebrated at the Ilo for both young and old. The village wrestling matches are typical and Achebe makes a point of capturing the prevailing mood. (55)

The above statement appraises Achebe’s portrayal of pre-colonial African set-up where happiness, joy, oneness, and beauty prevailed all evenings. This clearly shows that the relationship between the young and old was communal and cherished, where both considered the other simply as a human being. Evenings provided such platforms for entertainment, exhibition and display of exceptional heroic deeds of characters as well as deterrence. It is in such set-ups that heroes emerged. Okonkwo is well known in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* through such displays. Emenike and Ekwueme stand out clearly for their display of good characters and close association with the elders of Omokachia village in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*. These are just few examples among others.

The drums rose to a frenzy. The people surged forward. The young men who kept order flow around, waving their palm fronds. Old men nodded to the beat of the drums and remembered the days when they wrestled to its intoxicating rhythm. (43)

Then, governance and leadership were responsibilities vested on an individual by the community. Anyone saddled with such responsibility first of all thought of the community, his clan and family before himself. No one wanted to tarnish his reputation by soiling the family or clan’s image and name. In the words of Suemo Chia:

Elders were the foundation to good governance and order in society; they would teach the youth handy world views that would someday help them avoid disasters. The young on the other hand were the strength of the elders and listened well to their teaching. None sought to be above his clansmen in any way. The clan was the shelter of all and so nobody was unduly afraid of it (The Story of Adan-Wade, 243).

To these novelists, such was the harmony, respect for all and the well co-ordinated nature of African society before colonialism.

Today, the radio, T.V, urban life, money, politics, the social media, etc, are seriously driving people (Africans) away from their traditional way of life like sitting together and exchanging news after the day's tiring work or telling stories in the evenings to children, stories that contain moral instructions to the younger ones. These changes have brought in their wake influences that are detrimental and negative to societal development. This statement by Ngugi Wa Thiongo'o is illustrative of what traditional African society was:

I can vividly recall those evening of storytelling around the fireside. It was mostly the grownups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would retell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields (www.glpinc.org).

These illustrations are some of the missing links between Africa and her past that need to be re-visited for equity and discipline in order to do away with the present challenges of insecurity.

Pre-colonial Africa was a communal society and no single individual was above the community or his kinsmen. Suemo Chia portrays this in Nor's caution to his friend, Wade, who is accused of killing his brother through witchcraft:

Nor realized how naïve his friend was regarding the relationship between the wishes of clansmen and how the 'kor' test functioned. He then cautioned him in telling comparison: clansmen are like a rabid dog, to which no sane person exposes himself unduly. (18)

The 'Kor' test in the above statement is administered on culprits or suspects in a crime by the Tiv people. It will kill only the guilty or someone his clansmen point out. In the context above, Wade is an individualistic person who assumes himself above his clansmen so they point him out. He drinks the 'Kor' mixture and does not vomit it so he dies. This shows that pre-colonial Africa had a way of checking both individual and community excesses and this instilled fear, discipline and self-respect in individuals. It also shows that Africans lived a communal life where everybody was his brother's keeper. This line of oneness was only broken with the advent of colonialism which introduced individualism, corruption, greed, nepotism, exploitation, etc. These in turn introduced mutual suspicion, hunger, poverty, insecurity and other forms of criminality that ravage modern society today.

It, therefore, means that Africa and the global society can do themselves good if they fall back on their novelists to see how it was like before the coming of the whiteman.

The Colonial African Novel

To most African novelists, Africa's contact with the whiteman has been the source of her present woes. The issues of kidnapping, rape, bombings and rampant killings of innocent human beings are all traceable to this contact.

The pre-occupation of the colonial novel has been the exploration or examination of cultural conflicts as a result of intrusion of western culture on the African continent thereby undermining tradition. This was skillfully done through activities of the church missionaries and the colonial police. Such novels like Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Oyono's *Houseboy* and Mongo Beti's *Poor Christ of Bomba* illustrate this theme. African literary artists, especially novelists, have continued to blame Africa's political elites who took over power after the dethronement of colonialism. Ngugi says:

The African bourgeoisie that inherited the flag from the departing colonial powers was created within the cultural womb of imperialism. That is, it was a bourgeoisie with a mentality, an outlook which was in harmony with the outlook of the bourgeoisie in the colonizing countries. So even after they inherited the flag, their mental outlook, their attitudes

towards their own societies, towards their own history, towards their own languages, towards anything national, tended to be foreign, they saw things through eyeglasses given them by their European bourgeois mentors. (Lindfors, 10)

All these are the effects of colonialism on the African psyche.

The Contemporary African Novel

The contemporary African novel does not rely heavily on the bitterness of independence but on the human jungle which modern Africa has become. Here, Africa is now portrayed as a society of economic hardship, insecurity, social discomfiture and political crisis. Illustrative works in this phase are Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, *Petals of Blood*, *Wizard of the Crow*, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Fatima Pam's *The Tender in the Fury*, Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, etc. In these and many more novels, the authors attempt to recapture the oral narrative form of the African literary tradition. The essence is to make comparism between then and now. The comparison has become necessary because in the words of Barth Oshionebo:

African countries from post-colonial times have continued to suffer in the hands of the ruling elites who dish out wretched salaries (if at all) that can't provide the everyday needs of the masses whereas, a select set of individuals within the polity enjoy maximum luxury paid from the excruciating taxes and deductions from the wages of the masses. (2)

The African novelist must continue to point out the negative effects of bad governance in Africa until a credible political society is enthroned through equity, justice and peaceful co-existence by all. In doing this, African novelists will be affirming Kathleen Greenfield's words that:

Our pens should be used to increase the anxieties of all oppressive regimes. At the very least the pen should be used to "murder their sleep" by constantly reminding them of their crimes against the people, and making them know that they are being seen. The pen may not always be

mightier than the sword, but used in the service of truth, it can be a mighty force. (27)

From the above, one is right to assume, in the words of Simon Gikandi, that “The (African) novel’s primary function is to interpret, judge and pattern the ever changing African reality”. (147)

The Relevance of African Novels in the 21st Century

African novels, especially those of the pre-colonial phase of African Literature, are full of myths, legends, folktales, songs, rituals and other traditional forms which are beneficial to modern society. For example, myths are stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular group. They served to explain why the world is as it is and why things happen the way they do to provide a rationale for social customs and observances. They also help to establish the sanctions for rules by which people conduct their lives. Some of these myths relate to social rituals which are set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies. Awolalu attests to the importance and centrality of myths in Africa that these beliefs are printed in the people’s minds and hearts, oral history or customs, temples and in their religious functions which have become the people’s way of life and does not need the written form. To him, they are shared beliefs, customs and practices that have become part of Africa (www.wikipedia).

To solve the problem of insecurity, violence and other social vices that have continued to stare the world and Africa in particular in the face, Africa will do herself good to fall back on her literary novelists to learn lessons from the past and bring those lessons to bear on the prevailing situations of the present. This is important because these writers are continuously tracing and painting a glorious picture of pre-colonial Africa, reminding their teeming readership of how peaceful and organized Africa was before the whiteman came to destroy it. This will go a long way in instilling discipline in both the young and the old. It will also change the psyche of Africa’s political elites who are the perpetrators of this ugly trend because of their greed.

Even when those stories were told in the past using animal characters, they were meant for humans to learn lessons from them. The stories mirror society and

created solidarity among the children with the characters in the story as they struggled towards victory. Ngugi explains it further:

Hare being small, weak but full of innovative wits, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard and hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparent weak can outwit the strong (www.glpinc.org).

Such lessons got from the large reserve of knowledge through literary texts can be positively channelled into effecting a social change in the general masses of Africa and her leaders. To these novelists, African leaders bear the blame because they cannot forge any meaningful ideology that is geared towards development to change the worth of African masses long after independence. To the artist, this is largely why Africa is still where she is – crippled with social problems of violence, insecurity, kidnapping, starvation, unemployment, etc. It is, therefore, clear that only a re-visitation of the past through history can bring about the desired change in Africa especially in the 21st century.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the African novelist has at all times been charting new ways of conscientising the African populace on the need for a change of attitude towards nationhood by learning from the past. This accounts for the pre-colonial thematic phase of the African novel. To this end, the novelists always focus on themes that deal with the exploration of authentic African issues. Their argument is that Africa is suffering from her present challenges because of failed governance by the political elites. This failure is as a result of their shift from African traditional and cultural norms which bound society in the pre-colonial days.

Until Africa learn lessons from the past and moves her steps towards what is right, she will continue to suffer societal problems like corruption, instability, insecurity and thus remained underdeveloped. Used properly, African novels can

guarantee the desired peaceful co-existence that is needed for a stable and responsible society of peace for all.

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