

African Dramatists and the Burden of Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The theatre artiste, as a member of a society, should be aware of the enormous responsibility placed on him as a committed artiste so that the society will not perish. Though some critics believe that the theatre artiste should not be committed, that art should be for art's sake, from all indications this may spell doom for man and his society. This paper argues that art must be committed for it to be relevant and for society to become a better place for all. Hence, the playwright/theatre artiste is not excused in his duty to intimate the people with the pros and cons of life. This paper also examined some works of Femi Osofisan to juxtapose them with works of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi, to show how those works reflect high level of commitment, especially towards the less privileged and the society. It is hoped that this paper will provide the needed inspiration for African playwrights, dramatists and theatricians to play their roles as committed artistes.

Keywords: African Dramatists, creative writers, commitment, Marxist aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

The exigency and precarious situation of our time have bestowed huge responsibility on creative artistes in the three genres of literature, namely: Poetry, Prose and Drama. This paper dwells more on drama, dramatists and theatricians because of the two dimensional functions of drama, that is, drama as text and drama as performance. All art works, be it drawing, sculpture, creative writing and other vocations, are created for a purpose. Expectedly, such works must meet the yearnings and aspirations of individuals that see them. Therefore, it is important for such art to clearly depict or reflect what it is created for and why such art matters in a disjointed world like ours. Such art should duly reflect our strong points, weaknesses, desires, fears, needs, hopes and finally help resolve troubles of inner life. The work could be about "political change, to comment on an aspect of the society, to convey a specific emotion or, to address psychology, to illustrate another discipline ..." (Macaulay, 2016: 65). If art satisfies these needs, then it is unequivocal to state that it is committed to the plight of the people and society as well as serving as pointer to the direction which the society should move. This paper serves as this researcher's humble contribution to the seeming long debate on whether art should be committed

or not. Commitment in this regard is tantamount to the burden of responsibility placed on the creative artiste which is also tantamount to the relevance of the writer to his/her society. Any committed artiste will always see it as a call to duty to unveil the social problems of his/her society in writing or other means available. Zulu Sofola posits (1994:7) that, "the artist, by this fact, occupies a vital place in the life of his community as a mediator between his people and their divine reality, and as a motivator for the well-being of his people". Even when the writers are not vocal, "it is common knowledge that they hold strong views when it comes to issues of politics, culture, economy and society" (2017: 197). Akinyemi and Falola's position is apt here, that:

The relevance of a writer is determined by the useful role he or she plays in the portrayal of the social reality of the time. The committed writer is the conscience of society and it falls on him or her to make the audience aware of the social, economic, and political problems and the causes and possible cure of such problems (Akinyemi and Falola, 2009: 5).

Commitment is basically providing necessary change to the status quo, hitherto negating peace and impeding development. Obiora (2014:83) also toes this line of argument that:

Theatre scholars and practitioners ... played an active role in bringing the desired change required in the society by writing and producing works that confronted the economic, ethno-cultural and social heart of the key issues.

From the above, it is obvious that literature is a combination of “both instructive reflection and political vision” (Izevbaye, 2014: 47). Thus commitment, to a large extent, is not negotiable.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The dramatist or Theatre Artiste refers to theatre practitioners in a range of professions. These include acting, dance and choreography, creative writing, set design and lighting and others. In this paper, theatre artiste specifically refers to the creative endeavour in the realm of playwriting. Africa is blessed with great playwrights who have used their works to reflect the temper of African societies in the area of culture, tradition, religion and politics. Such great playwrights include Wole Soyinka, the 1986 Nobel Prize winner in Literature, Ola Rotimi, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Zulu Sofola, Athol Fugard, Kole Omotoso, Olu Obafemi, Femi Osofisan, Efuwa Sutherland, Tewfik Al-Hakim and very many others. Others include contemporary playwrights and those that are just coming up. Many of these playwrights are also the actors because of their knowledge of and constant interaction with the stage, especially before publishing their plays.

Creative writing is “any writing that goes outside the bounds of normal professional, journalistic, academic, or technical forms of literature, typically identified by an emphasis on narrative, craft, character development, and the use of literary tropes or with various traditions of poetry and poetics”. Creative writing is also defined as “any form of writing which is written with the creativity of mind: fiction writing, poetry writing, creative nonfiction writing and more. The purpose is to express something, whether it be feelings, thoughts, or emotions” (Wikipedia, 03/05/2016). This definition shares affinity with the view of Aliu (2001: 353) that:

Creative writing as a process of producing works of literature has always been concerned, in the main, with passions and ideas. It is concerned, among other things with love, hatred, ambition, complacency, laziness, kindness, wickedness, greed, humanness, envy, jealousy, the sense of justice and perhaps injustice and the idea of duty, responsibility, pity, fear, devotion, courage, vanity,

selflessness, pride, struggle, success and failure etc. The end of creativity is to throw light on issues that affect man and his environment. (my emphasis).

The point from the above is that every serious-minded creative writer creates something that bears relevance and significance to his society. This is why Aliu (2001: 351) declares that:

Every society in our present day world needs writers of all categories for its survival and orderly progress. Writing is one of the most satisfying and rewarding endeavours anywhere, especially when one looks beyond its transient material returns to the much more enduring contributions and impact the successful writer makes within and beyond his immediate society. It can be said that the writer’s role is rooted in the overall problem and aspirations of his society.

Ako and Ikyagh’s comment (2018: 145) on the importance of playwright’s commitment is more apt at this point:

A playwright’s commitment usually denotes the purpose for writing as well as situating one’s work within a given context. This suggests commitment as integral to developing plays which emanates from a particular environment that respond to the needs of the people as conditioned by the realities within such environment.

Having succinctly established the fundamental roles of creative artistes in the society, it is pertinent to state that this paper examines the basic impact of creative writing on Africa and its people. Creative writing then is aimed at “recreating the African experience for the purpose of entertainment, instruction, re-awakening, re-orientation and social re-engineering” (Adeseke, 2008: 15).

Creative Writing: The Issue of Commitment and Obscurantism

There is no gainsaying the fact that the essence of any work of art is for such work to have an impact or influence on the readers. We also believe that the primary audience that African writers write for is the African audience, and so, should address the audience in a way the audience can decipher the meaning of such work and where and how the African experience affects them. The important question raised by the troika is “why bother writing about such experiences if they are intrinsically

incommunicable in word?'. (Chinweizu et al, 1980: 249).

The answer would be that it amounts to dissipation of time and energy if a work of art fails to communicate to its target audience. The troika feels strongly that "the writer's language should not be tuned to some idiosyncratic perpetual matrix which observes it for the public" (Chinweizu et al, 1980: 251). Therefore, as regards commitment, "the writer is expected to pay attention to his craft, that he does not burden his public with unfinished or indecipherable works" (Chinweizu et al, 1980: 252). It is a strong part of the writer's commitment to be discernible by his audience. He should explore all the themes that are germane to the existence of his society. Such themes could be topical, scientific, philosophical, matrimony, sociological or historical. He must participate in the most important work of educating his audience and if possible direct his work towards effecting a change in his society. For such education and change to be attained, the writer's vision must be clear to his audience. The writer's input to this laudable but herculean task is essential if his society must survive. This is important because "the writer contributes to this input by the strength and clarity of his vision, his power of perceptual projection, his social apprehension of reality" (Niyi Osundare, 2007:12).

The writer equally has the culture and tradition of his society to tap from. This he or she can do extensively since the quarry of culture and tradition in Africa is enormous that every writer has more than enough to execute his or her presentation. Such a recourse to our culture should equally be tread with caution so that writers are not culpable of romanticizing with the past or "salve their wounds (probably from colonialism) with extravagant nostalgia for a vaguely conceived past" (Chinweizu et al, 1980: 257) (emphasis and addition mine). What we think would be the ideal is to systematize or consolidate a vital, useful and retrievable part of the past with the present to achieve a better future. Writers can also tap from foreign cultures, as may be found useful, to make their writing strong and to have international outlook or for comparative studies, as the case may be. The troika feels this is apt as stated in the following words:

This cultural task demands a deliberate and calculated process of syncretism: one which, above all emphasizes valuable continuities with

our pre-colonial culture, and exercises inventive genius in making a healthy and distinguished synthesis from them all (Chinweizu et al, 1980: 239).

It is possible, though not compulsory, for a writer to be politically engaged as a dramatist or theatrician. Such engagement will mean that the writer takes side with either the government or the governed. Whichever side he supports in his work, he needs not be castigated. Suppose the writer supports the governed or the downtrodden against the government or the ruler, he may write to lampoon, cast aspersions or attack the latter to show his preference and to achieve a change in the treatment of the former by the latter.

It is obvious that all writers will not be activists or apolitical. For those who choose to, they receive our commendation and admiration and for those who choose a different course, we also commend them. All writers cannot be political activists and there is a ready example of this in Athens, those days. Euripides was a radical reformer while Aristophanes was a conservative and both were great and renowned dramatists in their own rights. Their works were very engaging and helped to provide a balanced literary scale for their society. In their works, "they engaged in social battle, took sides, represented the views of factions, persuasively ridiculed their opponents" (Chinweizu et al, 1980: 255). No doubt such dramas must have provided outstanding education, tiptop discourse and lots of entertainment for that society. This is exactly what is expected in every African society.

Philosophical Background to African Literary Aesthetics

African literary aesthetics is polarized into two opposing parts with each side of the dichotomy supported with the philosophical tenets of either Marxist or non-Marxist philosophy and aesthetics. Each of the dichotomies, as expected anyway, has its adherent dramatists, who through their writings have shown where they belong. This dichotomy is adequately attended to by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, with the first view representing the non-Marxist view and the latter, Marxist view of dramatic expressions. The non-Marxist view is pointed out thus:

Throughout history, there have been two conflicting worldviews. The first view sees the world of nature and man as static and fixed. Or if it moves at all, it is in cycles, repetitions of the

same motion. Any concession to evidence of demonstration of previous movement in history is twisted to prove that the logic in all the previous movements was to arrive at the present fixed status quo. This is the world view of all the ruling classes in all hitherto class-structured societies (wa Thiong'o, 1983: 60).

The above is essentially the view of the idealist or bourgeoisie, which is in sharp contrast with materialist and Marxist view point as represented in the following words:

The second view sees that movement (or change) is inherent in nature and society. In this view, nature and society are in perpetual motion; that nothing is really static, fixed, final. Life is motion and motion is life. In this view, no social system is really final and fixed but each contains the germs of a future society. But motion involves contradictions for as Blake once stated without contrariness there is no progression. This broadly is the world view of the downtrodden of the oppressed of the dominated: change is inevitable even if it does not necessarily occur in a smooth line from one state to the other (wa Thiong'o, 1983: 60).

The above views cannot be divorced from the political, social and economic experience of Africa in general (many African countries like Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and others have a good dose of such experience), and Nigeria in particular. This is evident in how the Western imperialism has maintained its hegemony over Africans and their consciences. This is quite pronounced on the elites who swarmed on the imperialists with protests from the cultural and political spheres, which later resulted into independence for most African countries in the sixties and for Nigeria, precisely in 1960.

The euphoria of the independence, which is expected to usher in rapid development for Africa and its people, did not last. As the African elites were just replacements of the imperialists; unfortunately to a devastating and exploitative level. This is evident in the words of Egharevba worth quoting in full:

The euphoria of independence gives way to the frustration of the people due to the perpetuation of exploitation of the masses by the privileged class. The focus shifts from cultural assertion to the question of economic survival. As a result, the essence of cultural values gives way to a demand for an end to exploitation, an end to the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, and end to crass governmental neglect of the

masses, an end to oppression and mismanagement by governmental functionaries such social vices cannot but create in a sensitive and committed writer, a radical spirit different from the age when the essential issue was cultural. (Egharevba, 1987: 26). (my emphasis).

Once we believe without mincing words that the above scenario is a pathetic one, a particular 'ism' in colonialism gave birth to another 'ism' in neo-colonialism and imperialism. This resulted in different political, socio-economic structures and superstructures that tremendously increased the gap between the few haves and the majority have-nots, that is, between the bourgeoisie (capitalists) and the poor masses (proletariat). The resultant effect of this is the impoverishment of the African nations due to the siphoning of their hard-earned wealth and resources by the African petty bourgeoisie and their foreign masters. Little wonder then, why African nations are even at present (regardless of the number of years of independence) dependent politically and economically on foreign countries, especially Britain.

The burden of releasing the continent from the deadly chains of imperialism and the unrepentant bourgeoisie rests entirely on the writers, especially the dramatists. It would have been out of place for any writer at that time to continue to romanticize with the African past. The duty was as stated - Africans must be freed from the shackles of imperialism.

Foremost amongst such writers was Wole Soyinka who has without doubt contributed in no small measure to the emergence and the development of literature, not only in African drama and theatre but in the world as a whole. This earned him the Nobel Laurel price in 1986. Wole Soyinka, through his works, has been an apostle of idealist philosophy and aesthetics or a drama of bourgeois aesthetics that usually project a cyclical view of history, which is steeped in the traditional African 'aesthetics of transcendentalism'. This type of aesthetics is described by Uji thus:

With lavish abundance the ontological system of traditional philosophy with quantum gods, spirits, the unborn, etc, mingling with humans within the same time-space otology. The themes, action and characters of these dramas are firmly locked within the clutches of fatalism and metaphysics and have a penchant for mythic interpretation of socio-economic and political issues (Uji, 1989: 68).

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In this version of drama, the gods are in full control of the fate of everyone. No matter how the individual struggles, his chance of becoming successful is locked within the fate bestowed on him by the gods. It is quite obvious, therefore, that the masses do not stand any chance in this type of atmospheric condition.

The few traits highlighted thus far align with the precepts of bourgeoisie art and this also reflects in the oblique technique employed in some of Soyinka's plays. This strongly shows that Soyinka's writings reflect metaphysical, and individualistic outlook, which is identical with bourgeoisie aesthetics. Example of such plays is *A Dance of the Forest* (1960)

Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* exemplifies thematic preoccupation, plot and character of an idealist philosophy. Fatalism which happens to be a thematic preoccupation of the bourgeoisie drama serves as the pivot on which the drama rotates. In the drama, Odewale has been predestined right from birth to kill his father and marry his mother. The opening lines by the Narrator make this clear and categorical;

Narrator

- The struggles of man begin at birth.
- It is meet then that our play begins with birth of a child.
- The place is the land of Kutuje.
- A baby has just been born to King Adetusa and his wife Ojuola, the King and Queen of this land of Kutuje (p.1)

Baba Fakunle

This boy, he will kill his own father and then marry his own mother. (p. 3)

One wonders what atrocity the child who arrives the world sinless has committed to warrant such fate. This means that fates are doled out to individuals atrociously and indiscriminately. How can one survive in such a world, where no matter how hard one strives, he or she cannot change such fate? To forestall Odewale from carrying out the dastardly act, he is committed to die in the evil grove. But Gbonka pities the child and gives him to Alaka (who intends to give the baby to his childless masters, Ogundele and Mobike from Ijekun – Yemoja, a very far village from Kutuje) believing that the farther the boy is to his village the better.

Unfortunately, Odewale runs away from Ijekun - Yemoja when a herbalist tells him that he will

kill his father and marry his mother. Believing that Ogundele and Mobike are his true parents, he runs away from home but unfortunately the more he runs away from home, the closer he is to the trouble spot.

He finally kills his father due to a little disagreement at a crossroads and flees into Kutuje where he is made the king after assisting them to win the war against the people of Ikolu. As tradition demands, he becomes the husband of former king's wife, who incidentally is his mother. When finally the bubble bursts, Queen Ojuola, Odewale's mother commits suicide, Odewale himself removes his two eyes and goes into the evil grove with the four children produced by the unholy marriage. They will undoubtedly perish in the evil grove.

One begins to wonder what the gods have gained in such an evil machination and such total control of human life. Such situation where everything depends on the whims and caprices of the cannibal gods is static, inhuman, uninteresting and unacceptable. The outlook is completely pessimistic without any hope of survival for the mass of the people.

Although Rotimi's view in *The gods are not to blame* represents a world where everything is 'fixed', where 'previous movements in history is twisted to prove that the logic in all the previous movements was to arrive at the present fixed status quo', he refrained from such negative outlook in his later works. This is evident in his other plays such as *Hopes of the Living Dead* where the lepers survive against all odds through the collective will which is a symbol for African continent whose refusal to develop economically and politically due to embezzlement and corruption could be likened to the disease of leprosy. Other plays by Rotimi which represent the collective will outlook are *If... the Tragedy of the Ruled*, *Kurunmi*, *When Criminals Turn Judges*, *Who Is A Patriot?* and many others.

The underlying thought of the idealist philosophy, with its metaphysical outlook is that the society is unchangeable and this runs contrary to the Marxist philosophy which with its materialist outlook agrees that the world is changeable for the benefit of everybody in a classless society. Now let us give attention to some attempts made by Africans to 'decolonize the minds' of Africans and their literary works from the whims and caprices of colonialism.

Attempt by Africans to Decolonize Africa

The colonial experience left a blister on the consciousness and mental attitude of Africans and many writers and critics, especially foreigners with the belief that Africa will not regain its consciousness. One of such critics is Richard Wright who laments thus:

The gold can be replaced, the timber can grow again, but there is no power on earth that can rebuild the mental habits and restore that former vision of life that once gave significance to the lives of the people. Nothing can give back to them that pride in themselves, that capacity to make decision, that organic view of existence that made them want to live on this earth and derive from that living a sweet even if said meaning... eroded personalities loom here for those who have psychological eyes to see (in Osofisan 2001:201) (my emphasis).

Wright's perception of Africa when he visited Ghana, which represents his view about Africa as a continent, is quite unfortunate, frivolous and untrue. Reducing a vibrant continent with dynamic and intelligent peoples to a group of nonentity is not only pessimistic but wicked. It is important to point out that Wright in his statement acknowledged the fact that Africans formally had a 'vision of life that once gave significance to their lives', but failed to realize that the capacity for the resurgence of such significant activities in the lives of the people lies within them. One important way to regain such consciousness is to make available to them a well driven orientation and education to edify them and reposition them for regaining their lost pride and personalities. That should be our mission:

It is African mission to intensify its decolonization and pursue it into liberation. The cultural task in hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality, to clear the bushes and stake out new foundations for a liberated African modernity (Chinweizu et al, 1980:1).

A group of people that can serve in that capacity optimally are the artistes and writers. This agrees with the idea of 'indoctrination' mentioned by Osofisan thus:

Here is where the artiste and particularly the theatre artiste is most relevant. For the artiste is the great surgeon of the mind. We can repair our historical blight, re-establish a belief in ourselves, create new and positive identity, and become controllers of our own future, if we

allow the artiste a central place, henceforth, in all our strategies of planning (Osofisan, 2001:201).

To infuse such consciousness and education in the minds of our people, African writers, and critics have come up with different postulations and ideologies that would serve that purpose such as revealed in Negritude, art-for-art's idea, critical and socialist realist approaches. These ideologies are explained as follows:

Negritude

The negritude movement was founded by Aime Cesaire and championed in Africa by Leopold Sedar Senghor. Negritude was a "political reaction to the French policy of assimilation and European devaluation of African tradition" (Gbilekaa, 1997:52). To Osofisan (2001:175), "Negritude in many ways is fixated on an exotic part in which essentially obsolete traditions ... eternally immutable and sacred". Negritude essentially glorifies the past.

According to Onoge and Gbilekaa, Negritude has two forms: the revolutionary that belongs to Cesaire and the mystical that belongs to Senghor. The mystical affirmation mode of Negritude "romanticized everything Africa, attacking the arrogance of Europe as the sole proprietor and vendor of culture" (Gbilekaa, 1997: 52). Senghor believed that Africa's glorious past provides the perfect solution to Africa's myriad of problems. He felt that colonialism would have been just and applauded, "had the colonialists acknowledged the validity of African values" (Onoge, 1978:393).

Negritude in this stead resorts to mystification, "which means shrouding reality in mystery" (Fischer, 1963:956). Mystification and myth making was an attempt to exchange reality for the politics of identity. This in itself, that is, eschewing reality, is anonymous with bourgeoisie art, which glorifies class divisions. Senghor emphasizes and hinges Africa's problems on the cultural encounter between Africa and Europe and discountenanced the effect that contact had on Africa - capitalism, political imperialism and stark exploitation.

Let us state here therefore, that Senghor's conception of negritude did not grasp the trend of Africa's problems and likely to delude Africans. It lacks the necessary bite, education and optimism that is needed to liberate Africa. At variance with Senghor's metaphysical posture of negritude is that of Cesaire with its

revolutionary undertone. The triad that informed the vision is summarized by Onoge (1978: 388) as follows:

Thesis (sovereignty, harmony and glory of colonial Africa), antithesis (colonial alienation, political, economic and cultural oppression because of colonialism), synthesis (acceptance of precolonial heritage, removal of colonialism).

The above in a concise form represents the intentions of Césaire proclaimed in his *Return to My Native Land* in 1939. In essence, it highlighted three major issues; first, that Africa's past is not that of savagery (as wrongly conceived by foreign critics), though not to be romanticized, it was a past that cannot be divulged from our present and even future. Second, that Africa was oppressed by the colonial masters and her culture relegated to the background, probably due to the ignorance of the colonialists and, third, that the removal of colonialism with its strands was possible.

Without mincing words, it is obvious that Césaire believed that "colonialism visited concrete disabilities on the black man" (Onoge, 1978:388) and also believed that a change was possible through the collective will of the people. Therefore, the onus is on the artiste to prepare the people mentally and psychologically through adequate and genuine orientation and education. In Africa, the likes of Ferdinand Leopold Oyono, Mongo Beti, David Mandessi Diop have championed this cause.

Césaire's wish after independence was that of peaceful and abundant community of men, women and children who are engaged in gainful labour:

All that I would wish is to answer the universal hunger, the universal thirst to prescribe at last this unique race free, to produce from its tight intimacies the succulence of fruit (Césaire, 1969:75).

Despite the serious criticisms that trail negritude, accusing it of promoting racism, there is no doubt that if properly harnessed, especially from the perspective of the Césaire school, it portends brighter future for Africa and ultimately, her freedom from all whims and caprices of capitalism. Its principles have a lot in common with Marxism, Brechtian mode, Surrealism and the African heritage.

THE ART-FOR-ART'S SCHOOL

The art-for-art's school is spearheaded by few artistes who believe that the artiste should be

absolved of any social commitments. They argue that the responsibility of the artist should be "to his art and that if he chooses to react to situation in his society, he does it as a man and not as an artiste" (Gbilekaa, 1997:38). A major proponent of this school is John Nagenda whose strong individualistic stance is captured in the following long quotation worth quoting in full:

I want to suggest that dealing with the individual in society is the primary consideration: as far as I am concerned, my part in society is not necessarily to make the society better than I found it. If I can help to make the world a better place than I found it, that is a good bonus, but essentially all I care about as an individual, as a writer, as this thing that is sitting at this table, is that I have an individual capacity, an individual possibility, to live my life in this world before I die. And anything, whether it be to stop other people being shot or whether it be something less than that, anything that stands in the way of myself having this experience of what is around me I must consider to be a buffer between myself and the spontaneous enjoyment of life. And if it came to a point at which all the rest of the world was being murdered and I could escape to a little cave and still manage to find a private 'explosion', I would do that, and to hell with the rest of the world! Therefore, in conclusion, I want to say that, whether we react to situations outside ourselves or not, finally our only responsibility is to ourselves. For myself, my own work must stem from this understanding and be judged by it (Nagenda in Onoge, 1978: 398).

There is no gainsaying that the posture of Nagenda concerning the responsibility of a writer is myopic and individualistic. What, why and for who does the writer writes? Presumably, aside entertainment, the writer essentially writes to educate the people and to get involved in the struggle for liberation. It leaves much to be desired if a writer is only bothered about his 'escape' in this century where Africa is entangled in serious nepotism, corruption and clamour for its survival.

Another observation of this stance is that the adherents felt that justification for social concerns has ended when African countries got their independence. They felt that for literature to mature, "it must move from the artist" (Onoge, 1978: 398). This point is better articulated by a foremost Nigerian critic, Dan Izevbaye as follows:

With this new emphasis in criticism, that is the suppression of the social reference of literature is a significant influence in criticism, it may be easier for critics to pay greater attention to the literary work... As the literature becomes less preoccupied with social or national problems and more concerned with the problems of man as individual in an African society, the critical reference will be human beings rather than society, and the considerations which influence critical judgment will be human and literary rather than social ones (Izevbaye in Onoge, 1978: 398).

One wonders that if the responsibility of a writer is towards man and not society, where does he live, presumably within a society. The fact is that men make-up the society and they affect the society through their attitude and actions. For its existence, the society needs man. What could have been responsible for such outlook according to Onoge was the ambition of African artistes to attract foreign publishers. They attempt inoffensive works solely for commercial purposes. Adjectives such as 'committed', 'reformist', 'radical' are neither attractive nor appealing to them at all.

Even Soyinka's declared position against the notion of 'art for art sake' is noteworthy and his insistence that writers must have a social function is an incontestable fact. We cannot but wonder how effective the writer will be if he estranges himself from his society which advertently provides the raw materials for his works. Taciturnity, commitment and radicalism are *sine qua non* to liberation.

Critical Realism

The most common approach to the African experience today by African writers is the critical realist approach. These group of writers "advocate a literature that is engaged with the contemporary reality in a critical way" (Onoge, 1978: 400). Just like their traditional artiste counterparts, they present the strengths and weaknesses of African past in stark light, disrobing Africa of its glorious pasts. They portray, most of the time, Africa as an uncivilized, shrewd, crude and Dark Continent. They saddle themselves with the sole responsibility of criticizing the ills of their societies without proffering any way out of such quagmire.

One thing that unites the critical realists is that they eschew ideology. They advocate that literature should be devoid of ideology. A

prominent apostle of this school is Wole Soyinka who dislikes being categorized under any ideology. He posits that:

... asked recently whether or not I accept the necessity for a literary ideology, I found myself predictably examining the problem from the inside, that is, from within the consciousness of the artist in the process of creating ... my response was a social vision, yes, but not a literary ideology (Soyinka, 1976:61).

The point here is that having no literary ideology in itself is an ideology. Every writer has social vision and this in itself is a literary ideology. In contrast to Soyinka's view that literary ideology is prescriptive and restrictive, Kyalo Motivo observes that literary ideology is not out of place, in fact very relevant and essential. Motivo (in Gbilekaa, 1997:61) explains that:

...literary ideology implies ideology belonging to literature, that is, ideology as an integral feature of literature. In this case a precedent has been established to assign to other ideologies as determined by the academic branch in question. The correct formulation, 'ideology in Literature', meaning, just as we can talk of ideology in philosophy, science, music etc' relates ideology to its purveyors while making them impossible to escape class belonging for ideology is a property of an economic class expressed in different areas of mental pursuit by members of that class.

Most critical realist works are written in satire and are praised by foreign bourgeoisie critics for letting the West 'off the hook', so to speak. One important fact is that the issue of commitment for a writer is not negotiable because the circumstance and milieu of the writer changes over the time and he needs to reflect these in his works appropriately. It could be consequential for the writer to claim to be neutral in the face of serious social issues begging for attention.

Socialist Realism

Socialist realism, a coinage of Maxim Gorky, incorporates and surpasses critical realism. According to Ernst Fischer (1963:108), "socialist realism implies the artist's or writer's fundamental agreement with the aims of the working class and the emerging socialist world". What distinguishes socialist realism from critical realism is that it sees the world as changeable. This is further highlighted by Fischer, that "socialist realist – or rather, socialist art – anticipates the future. Not only

what has preceded a particular historical moment but also what will succeed it, is woven into its fabric” (Fischer, 1963: 111). Socialist realism possesses bright visions for a better tomorrow by bringing to the fore today’s problems to actualize a better tomorrow. Fischer (1963:112) further says that, “socialist art cannot content itself with blurred visions. Its task is, rather, to depict the birth of ‘tomorrow’ out of today, with all the attendant problems”.

Socialists are not only satisfied by pointing to the problems militating against the survival of Africa. They not only identified the problems but equally identified the cause, capitalism - with all its tentacles of corruption, racism, political upheavals, and importantly, the adverse effect on the proletariats. In furthering the scope of socialist art or literature, Balogun (2015: 222) posits that, “the socialist ideology identifies alienation as the major factor responsible for the inherent inhuman society”. He goes further to mention that class struggle is an integral part of socialist literature, where the individual is expected to articulate the common cause of the class struggle, where revolutionary violence is a strong element. It is believed that through such violence, the masses can free themselves from all kinds of oppression. Therefore, such violence is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Dmitry Mancov (in Balogun, 2015: 223) gives a detailed features of what socialist literature tries to examine and resolve as follows:

the principle of class commitment in art, the harm of decadent literary theories, the roles of a progressive world outlook in artistic creation, the unity of content and form, the historical inevitability of the emergence of a new socialist literature.

Critics and writers such as Sembene Ousmane, Biodun Jeyifo, Omafume Onoge, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Mongo Beti, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso and many others have lent their voices to this struggle through derobing the European modes of bourgeoisie writing and criticism and amassing their literary *weapons* under African Marxist sociological aesthetics. It is through this that they have shown themselves committed to raising the consciousness of the people against all forms of oppression and slavery.

Social realists are very optimistic that since they have the largest constituency, that is the masses; overriding capitalism will not pose much difficulty. They do not write in obscure language, therefore, their message can reach the

largest number of people and in this number lies their strength.

Soyinka’s view of this group in an interview with Jeyifo provides more light on their level of commitment, expected outcome of their struggle, and how successful such struggle could be. The view is worth quoting in full:

I happen to believe and accept implicitly what goes under the broad umbrella of socialist ideology, a secular socialist ideology, believing this to be the logical principle of communal organization and true human equality. What this means for me are varied. They include: the eradication of the very policy of wealth accumulation at the expense of any sector of society: eradication of the mere possibility of tyrannization by one class of society over other; the eradication of class distinction within society where class implies a category of privilege or superiority or advantage. The other logical processes can be assured; state ownership of all land and production means: equal education opportunities etc (1973:62).

Without mincing words, the above encapsulates all that socialist realism stands for. It stands for justice, truth, logicity, classless and egalitarian society. All these subsume in the Marxist literary aesthetics.

Marxist Aesthetics Subsumed in Socialist Realism

Marxist literature is a “promoter of the level of consciousness of the working masses posits a materialist argument and analyses the process through which the underprivileged in the society are exploited and oppressed” (Aliu, 2001: 330).

There is a strong connection so to speak between Marxist aesthetics and socialist realism. In our discussion of socialist realism, it was pointed out that apart from identifying Africa’s problem as capitalism, it goes beyond to recommend a process that will lead to change, thereby presenting the world as changeable. This agrees with Marxist methodology of the changeability of the world and attaining such change through revolution. Hence, the quest for a better society is an uncompromisable part of the writer’s responsibility which is expected to be the end result of his creative endeavour (Abubakar, 2017: 184 & 192).

Bertolt Brecht, George Lukacs and Femi Osofisan on the Issue of Commitment

To Brecht, the function of literature is to “become outspoken, militant, committed and

should use whatever is useful, modernist and/or realist, experimentation or its opposite, if it is successful in promoting the struggle for change” (1985:9). This must be the reason why he advocated a popular art (literature), devoid of esotericism. His definition of popular art is worth quoting here:

Popular means intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression/assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it/representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well/relation to traditions and developing them/communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation (Brecht, 1985:10).

The above is in line with the view of Amiri Baraka, who turned away from nationalism and Islam, changed to Marxism, came up with populist modernism as answer to literary critical problems of our period. This is an idea that runs through his collection of political poems, “Hard Facts”:

we aim at an art that serves the great majority of people, the working masses of people ... we should try to make a poetry, an art that speaks to, after first learning from, these same dynamic working masses. We learn from the omnied, multinational mass, the scattered, raw, unsystematized, and even refined, and reorganize, reintensify, dynamize, make gigantic and give back what we have learned... To take the popular and combine it with the advanced. Not to compromise, but to synthesize. To raise and to popularize... the question of the audience is key, is central to the work, ‘For Whom’ is the problem as Mao Tse Tung sounded it. For whom does one write, the audience standing there as you compose, to whom, for whom it is directed (Baraka, 1979:236).

What modernism (concerned with mysticism and occultism) presented is transition from life to art while post-modernism (with an over emphasis on aesthetics pointed on the production rather than the final product) stresses a shift from art to life. But in ‘populist modernism’, we have an incorporation of the two main ideas, that is, a consummation of ‘critical’ and ‘socialist’, that is Brechtian realism. This synthesis is vibrant, to use the words of Gulgerberg (1985:16) as a “clearly defined teleology ... to change the status quo, to

improve, to abolish classes, to end exploitation, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonization”.

Femi Osofisan’s theatre shares some affinity with the theatres of Derek Walcott, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal and others. His theatre is strictly that of commitment to the downtrodden masses and for a better society. He longs to see that the society is ridden of corruption, insecurity, discrimination against women and all sorts of vices. Akinyemi and Falola’s (2009: 5) description of Osofisan’s theatre is quoted as follows:

Osofisan’s commitment to the struggle of the masses is further demonstrated in his works, where he has taken upon himself the primary responsibility of educating and orientating the downtrodden in his society (my emphasis).

The above is evident in some of Osofisan’s plays. For example, in *One Legend, Many Seasons*, Osofisan shows how the elite formed alliance with the military to impoverish the land to the detriment of the poor. Such complicity has led most African countries from prosperity to poverty and misery. Another example is *Once Upon Four Robbers* where Osofisan poses the question whether it is justifiable to execute four robbers, who stole peanuts, while those who serve as judges and watch their execution are using their positions to steal billions at the detriment of the poor masses. The question is, is there any moral justification for that?

Akinyemi and Falola (2009: 4) further mention what Osofisan’s theatre is out to achieve:

A careful study of Osofisan’s works reveals a strong persuasion about the potency of literature in addressing contemporary Africa’s multi-layered problems. Consequently, he devotes many of his works to championing the masses’ revolt against oppressive structures. In several of his works, he charges the poor and the downtrodden to shake off the shackles of docile acceptance of the tyranny of authority, and rebuff the oppressors and all their agents.

Osofisan’s theatre is characterized with revolutionary aesthetics. This theatre aesthetics is geared towards liberating the poor masses from the shackles of oppression and marginalization. When asked recently by Chima Osakwe (2013: 153-154) if he agrees his drama is revolutionary, Osofisan says the following:

A lot of people are suffering, and the largest parts of the population are victims. I cannot but be against this state of affairs. I want a society

where there is equitable distribution of resources, where people are not in want, or are not being deprived and made to suffer merely because of the greed of a few powerful ones among us. I will try to speak on behalf of those whom I consider marginalized, those who are oppressed through no fault of theirs, and who are the victims of our parasitic ruling class, particularly the women. So, if that is what you mean by revolutionary, I say yes, of course.

On the issue of whether Osofisan supports violence as an antidote to oppression, he says the following:

I don't believe in violence as an end in itself. No. I think it is too easy to fetishise, to romanticize violence, especially by people who merely want to carry the aura of radicalism; they preach empty violence adopt that kind of flaming rhetoric, and that way, they believe they are carrying out a revolution I don't believe in gratuitous violence, in violence as an end itself. So I don't preach it. But violence is inevitable in certain situations, to displace oppression and assert one's freedom. Because oppressors and rulers never just surrender their hegemony without a fight. That is the sad fact of history. Violence in such circumstances, that is, in the struggle for liberation, becomes a necessary weapon. Although only as a means to an end; and that end always has to be the struggle for more humane society. Violence by, and for itself, can only lead to brutality, inhumanity and horror (Osakwe, 2013: 162) (my emphasis).

The inevitable violence is what Osofisan expresses in *Red is the Freedom Road* where Akanji organizes a revolutionary violence against the ruling hegemony and crushes it to liberate the people from the shackles of slavery.

CONCLUSION

It has been shown clearly what commitment means and what it is all about in relation to literature, especially drama. It has also been established that literature may end up not making any effect on the society if it fails to engage itself with happenings within the society, that is, serving as barometer to gauge the pulse of the society, pitching its tent with the downtrodden, working out a modality to liberate the poor from the shackles of poverty and squalor, and navigating the way for making the society a better place, in the overall.

The paper pays attention to drama and theatre due to its potency in the here and now, that is,

its immediate impact on its audience. This genre of literature, drama, reflects the conflicts and contradictions within the society in words and action, thereby serving as a great tool for making the people discover themselves, their problems and be jolted to striving to overcome obstacles to freedom and prosperity. It is expected, therefore, that theatricians and playwrights see it as a responsibility to employ their vocations to reflect in their works the weaknesses, strong points, grey areas, vices, morals and expectations of their societies for the betterment of such societies. It is when this is done that they can be absolved of sitting on the fence. Even after this, society still fails to heed the warnings, at least, it would be said that they played their part well.

Academic theatricians should train prospective theatre practitioners to be committed writers. Academics should see the university as a training ground where commitment to one's society should be inculcated in the students. Artistic directors handling performances should highlight aspects of their performances that encourage virtue and commitment to one's society. These could be achieved through line delivery, exaggerated actions, songs, dances that will sustain the interest of the audience in what is happening on the stage. With the introduction of playwriting in the university curriculum, students should be helped on how to conquer the fear of writing. Recycling plays of established playwrights does not augur well for the academia. Expectedly, those plays are to provide the needed impetus for upcoming playwrights, university undergraduates in consummate departments should be taught how to write plays for the stage. After all, some of the established writers wrote their first few classics when they were undergraduates.

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