

Peace Literature As An Alternative Reality: The Challenge Of Contemporary African Writer

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ABSTRACT : *The African continent is embroiled in a multiplexity of socio-political problems which have continued to drag her deeper into the quagmire of chronic underdevelopment. These problems have re-shaped the communalistic outlook and psychological make-up which used to define the traditional African person of old. Our lullabies, moon-light tales, folk-lores, and sundry virtue-infuse oral arts which promoted peaceful co-existence, camaraderie which promote good living have been replaced by tales of tension, suspicion and treachery of diverse shades. All these have collectively created ethno-religious fratricides actively promoted by greedy and self-seeking political elites in modern African states. Presently, our literature is replete with tales of guns, blood-bath, and violent crimes and unbelievable kleptomania manipulations at various levels of our government in African. The result of this is that literature that is supposed to provide a therapeutic alternative to the traumas of existence has also been violated. This therefore necessitates an advocacy for peace literature for the provision of the much needed balm for the African traumatized psyche. This paper therefore proposes a halt to literary tradition of violence through conscious efforts on the part of our writers, even while embarking on the creative reflections of our contemporary times, to infuse the literary enterprise with message of hope harmonious existence, religious tolerance, and allied themes which will ultimately promote peace. This is what we tag redemptive literature in an inverted human community. The paper benefits from the Aristotelian Cathartic theory located with the tragic drama which produces a magical personage or situation that intervenes at a very critical juncture to avert a waiting tragedy. This intervention saves either the protagonist from the jaws of a prancing lion, or the entire community from the brink of an annihilating catastrophe. It is in this connection that the proposed alternative literature seeks to intervene to redeem various African societies from the throes of escalating destructive tension. The study then concludes that writers of children literature have an onerous task in this direction as this will assist in creating new humanity in our children whose sensibilities have been violated through exposure to literary materials replete with violence treachery and duplicity.*

KEY-WORDS: *Underdevelopment, Communalistic, Aristotelian, Catharsis, Children-literature*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fractured humanity, physically and psychologically sieged communities, populated by an absolutely traumatised people in an unbroken theatre of guns and violently spilled blood are unfortunately emerging as the defining essence of most African States in the contemporary times. The optimism that greeted the full transition from military absolutism to democratic rule in most African States at the turn of the 21st century has turned out to be a mere illusionary optimism. Ethro-religion crises, violent insurgency, upsurge of militant cultivities, terrorism, blood-chilling human rituals, etc have remained sad emblems of misrule and inhuman engagement currently witnessed in many parts of our continent. Within the context of our contemporary experiences, the pristine African cultural essence, which, according to Isidore Okpewho (1991;67), is “characterised by optimism, peaceable cheer, and a humane regard for womanhood” are now kept in abeyance to our collective chagrin. The gradual loss of our distinct African Cultural essence sadly signposts a corresponding disappearance of our humanity as a cultured people. The ‘optimism’ and ‘peaceable cheer’ hinted at by Okpewho above have now receded to distant brink of our daily existence in most contemporary African communities. Literature, in keeping with its age long tradition of fidelity to fact cannot but reflect the totality of human conditions at every facet of existence. This dictates the tones, tropes and temper that are reflected in the literary outputs of any human and social epoch. It is within the compass of this consideration that most of our literary outputs in the contemporary times have been suffused not only with the themes of war, blood bath, treachery, prostitution, and other sundry social malaise, but also that of psychological disillusionment and large-scale despair for the individual and collective survival. While one concedes that the violence and crime are issues of global concerns, they are however compounded in Africa by challenges of chronic underdevelopment, mass unemployment, endemic bad governance and deliberate manipulation of the generality of the people by the political elites in various parts of

the continent. The situation depicted here has consequently created a new humanity that is generally and mentally attuned to our new culture of violence and crime. In the process, all the reminiscences of our cultural communalism with its attendant ethos of peaceful co-existence, and respect for the sanctity of life are now like fairy tales in the ears of the so-called modern African youths. For example, to most of African elites and youths, the phrases “*honesty of means*” translates to “*paucity of tricks*” to get to the fast lane of opulence. This is a clear manifestation of our tragic disconnect with our cultural essence and values. Areoye Oyebola (2002:142) aptly summarizes this scenario as follows; ‘in some of the new states, local cultural originality is dead and buried. It is replaced by the culture of the mother country.’ The mother country here refers to the countries of our colonial masters, the effects of whose cultural imperialism we are still grappling with in the African continent. Also lamenting this state of African experience, Ayo Kehinde (2005: 301 – 302) offers;

The present day African society is one that has the dominance of western influence in almost all areas of her socio-political life. The indigenous traditions that existed before western civilization have now been relegated to the backstage, and their popularity even in rural communities which naturally ought to be ‘home’ of tradition has waned significantly.

The above summaries the gross effect of the cultural alienation foisted on the African continent during the colonial period. It signaled the process of the gradual death of our cultural values and orientation, the effect of which we still grapple with till date. It is an all- encapsulating phenomenon which is reflected in every aspect of our being, as demonstrated in both the material and immaterial reflectors of culture ie, dressing, culinary habits, social relation, arts, language, etc. In an apparent acknowledgement of this fact, Abiola Irele(1981:69), looking at our literary scene offers;

In the new literature of Africa expressed in the European languages, the correspondents is a direct one between the themes and preoccupations that have governed the direction of the creative imagination.

The above summarizes the nature and direction of our literature even till the contemporary times. Social events, actively driven by the west-dictated philosophy of globalization have continued to shape literary and scholarly strides in African even where the continent continues to remain a junior particular in the global order. In an attempt to align with the culture of the global village, what most young Africans are fed with and grow up to know and appreciate are the so called popular cultures with all their cosmopolitan values of selfishness, vulgar affluence, treachery, drug addiction and other related indices of violence actively encouraged by blind pursuits of personally aggrandizing values. Unfortunately, most of our literatures today in an attempt to keep faith with the social realities of the contemporary times have been replete with tales of violence, blood-letting, betrayal of public trust, and general disillusionment, all painting a gloomy picture of the present and a fore-boarding of a hopeless future. This is the crux of the matter which creates an urgent responsibility for the African writer if our continent will be saved from throes of threatening tragedy. The kind of literary intervention being proposed here is not new in our creative enterprise. For example, the war literature find their relevance in a humanity whose existence was threatened by wars and their attendant loss of lives and values. The sad realities of violence and the attendant deep sense of insecurity in modern African states is compounded by the philosophy and spirit of globalization which has encouraged, nay unwittingly, the importation of violent ethnic and sectarian insurgent activities into an already volatile socio-political environment in the African continent.

II. THE INTERVENTION LITERATURE

Literature is a highly emotive art. Even while relating the realities of existence, literature has a way of touching the emotional cord of the reader such that one is nudged into reacting or behaving in certain ways and in various salvation. This explains why revolutionary literatures have been known to galvanize people into popular actions. Indeed, this is the purview of committed literature. This study aligns itself with Okpewhos (1991: 68) position regarding the “cardinal goals” of literature which he describes as “edification”. He explain;

By edification..., I mean that from such an experience we are able to learn certain lessons of life, to have our prejudices either confirmed or corrected, and to be so morally touched that we are better disposed to improve our lives and the lives of our fellows whether in our own society or in the world at large.

It is in this connection that this paper proposes a positive and edificatory role for literature that is doggedly committed to the pursuit of peace in our continent presently sieged by multiplexity of crises and the challenge of chronic underdevelopment.

Theoretical framework : This discussion is anchored on the functionalist theory of literary engagement which sees literature as an instrument of social engineering not only for commenting on the unfolding events of the society it reflects, but the one that envision a better social order and the possibility of achieving it. For the purpose of this paper, since the continent is gripped in the throes of elite socio-political crises which have sired violence insurgent activities, crimes and criminality of diverse nature, most of our contemporary literary outputs have been replete with the imageries of horror, hopelessness and endemic despair. Our literary artists now have a challenge of using their art to redirect the society that is treading the path of peril and create a desirable alternative of peace. They must strive to create an art that is irrevocably committed to peace. This is where the Aristotelian theory of catharsis derives its relevance. For our purpose here, we adopt Olu Obafemi's (1992) adaptation of the theory to his critical work on the Nigerian Civil War literature. As he explains;

'I have chosen the cathartic notion because of its recuperative and regenerative prescription.' One cannot agree less with Obafemi because, if literature must function as a healer of a fractured humanity, it must approach its themes with healing and redemptive prescriptions as an alternative to the tortured psyche of the traumatized society. In his appropriation of the cathartic theory his work cited above, Olu Obafemi explains; Our main locus in deriving the cathartic notion hinges squarely on the essentially social functioning of art (literature) as an efficient tool for the correction of men capable of modifying society.

The sociological application of literature hinted at by Obafemi here places a great social responsibility on the literary artist to pin-point the ills of the society and also point a way out of those social quagmire which, if left unattended to, can spell doom for that community. For our purpose here, we propose the injection of resources from our disappearing oral literary corpus into the contemporary literary outputs at least for the younger generations to know that there exists an alternative to the culture of violence which are reproduced in most of our contemporary literature. This effort will serve as cathartic breaks even in narratives replete with violence, trending and bloodletting. The point has been hinted at earlier on that for the contemporary African person, there is no escape from the tragic ensemble of the tear-compelling realities dictated by the totality of the sordid mess which has become the sine-qua-non ration of our daily encounters. The constant buffet of war tales, avoidable carnage, blood-cuddling violence, ethnocidal insurgents and other related tales of human tragedies are taken up in the fictional world of our literature. In this situation, the African person is left with no escape from the all-enveloping tragic reality that has taken over our lives as a people. This constitutes a major violation of the therapeutic role of literature as an avenue of escape from the "maddening crowd" of daily existence. To achieve this, certain sanitizing resources are proposed for injection into our literature even while relaying the social realities of our contemporary times.

The content of peace literature : Our oral literary traditions are replete with positive resources like proverbs, wise-cracks, anecdotes, myths, legends, etc. which African writers can explore as sanitizing doses for the healing of some of the social ills currently bedeviling most African nations. These oral literary resources are invaluable treasure houses for moral regeneration and ultimate edification of our humanity. Our writers can also go for whole sale adaptation of existing myths and legends to contemporary issues. This, apart from blunting the sharp edges of a gory incident of day, their use will also assist in re-educating our children on the fast disappearing but ennobling cultural values of the African communities. This no doubt will be a welcome alternative to the unmitigated narratives of strife and violence on the African literary scene. Writers of children literature have a greater role to play in this regard.

We also propose the creation and use of the messianic hero even while reflecting the not so pleasant realities which our communities at present confront us with. The messianic hero is a positive personality who stands out both in conducts and character in a situation of compelling moral degeneration. Even, when he is compelled to take some violent actions, such are dictated by the righteous anger against ethically and morally reprehensible acts of men especially those in position of power who turn such power against the people. Ngugiwa Thiongo uses this type of messianic character profiling effectively in his *Matigari* (1989) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2007). Furthermore, African writers should engage in conscious identification and active understanding of those divisive factors that have been exploited to set us against ourselves. The most prominent of these being religion, ethnicity and the selfish activities of our political elites. This is beautifully summed up by Abdullahi Yalwa (2013:311) who contends that;

Ethnicity and religion-two fundamental factors supposed to bless the society-turned out to be its destroyers in case of Nigeria. This was either orchestrated by the elite or was in their interest. So the three thorns in the

national flesh-religion, ethnically and elite-remain at the heart of the crises we face.

Since we are able to identify these as the active contributory factors to our predicament, our writers should inject into their writings themes and creative strategies to subvert these villainous trilogy found at the centre of the crises which the contemporary African states are grappling with. Now is the time for African writers to evolve a new literary tradition devoted to a dogged pursuit of peace through careful espousal of themes committed to the edification of human values of harmonious living and fellow-feelings. This is the only way to lift the continent from the crucible of violence-induced despair and despondently that are threatening to overwhelm us. This **brand** of literature can come under the collective literary nomenclature tagged **literature for peace (LFP)** or **literature for development (LFD)** in line with what obtains in the theatrical art called Theater for Development (TFD).

The cardinal contention of this paper is that literature is expected to be able to create an oasis of sanity in a world driven insane by the violent realities which dominates the socio-political atmosphere of our contemporary times. This is where the literary art steps in as a redemptive force for pulling our humanity away from the brick of collective disaster. This is the central principle of the Aristotelian principle of catharsis, where peace literature affords the people the opportunity of occasional sighs of relief. These relieving sighs assist in preserving the sanity of our society and assuring our humanity of the possibility of hope even in the face of overwhelming moral, ethical and social depression. This is an urgently desired literary medicine for the healing of the ailing humanity of our contemporary African communities.

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