

The Writer and the Quest for Democratic Governance in Nigeria: Transcending Post-Independence Disillusionment

by

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Abstract

African writers have a deepening susceptibility for social and political commitment as their texts depict socio-political events in their societies. Markedly, modern African literature arose to become part of the larger universal literary space; a weapon for re-establishing the cruelly denigrated African personality, and an effective slingshot against colonialism. Now, it is being employed as virus-resistant software; reflecting and refracting postcolonial disillusionment. Thus, African literature becomes an encyclopedic containment of the experiences of the people of the continent. It is within this space that we fixated on Nigerian literature. Tellingly, this paper tries to locate and establish the possibilities of unerring democratic ideals and good governance as the locus of postcolonial texts. Through pseudo-textual analysis practice, this essay seeks to contextualize post-independence pains and frustration. Finally, the paper offers a beacon of hope by calling on the people to transcend the post-independence of disillusionment, cynicism, fatalism, ethnicity etcetera, and to erect democratic governance based on positivist – oriented leaders.

Nigeria's ride into democratic government at the twilight of 21st century, like the dawn of independence into neo-colonialism, no doubt needs to be reflected on. Thus, the motivating direction for this discourse comes with the view that "in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward" (Osundare 1986: XII). And by examining what was/were will afford us the stratagems for the future; and by retracing ones footpaths will make us know where and when "rain began to beat us", and it is with this conviction that this paper wishes to examine the writers crave for democratic governance at the very heart of disillusionment.

Nature sometimes may be capricious, thus, it often promises false peace, just as the dawn of independence was quickly transformed into the nightmare of neo-colonialism: in Nigeria's dawn of despair, a culprit has been manipulating our people into believing in his lies. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to harvest ideas and sing songs that would not lull the masses into self complacency and give room for the manipulating forces that may allow history to repeat itself.

Nigeria: A Colonial Amalgam

Of all the contacts with the Europeans, the most decisive of them all is the evolution of the modern Nigerian state as a colonized entity in the late 19th century (Falola 1998, Awogu 1975 etc). The malleable system of administering the colonial amalgam was the "denationalization policy" (Ogundowole 1994: viii), that is, "divide and rule". The import of this arbitrary administrative stratagem of the colonialists was to establish a complete domination and control over their subjects and the colonized territory even long after their departure (see Falola and Ihonvbre 1987; Claude 1981, Chinwezu 1978, Rodney 1972). Ogundowole (ibid: viii) thus, asserts that:

It was a deliberate policy of the colonial authority not to allow a full concentration of a single large nationality within a territory so as to reduce the cohesiveness of the people as a way of rendering nil or to reduce to the barest minimum the power to resist and challenge the colonial rule by the nationalities.

This, among other considerations, necessitated the grafting of different 'twigs' and 'branches' in the most improbable manner; the nationalities were not intended to have potentials for any creative force (either for growth or development). Not even a collective resistance against the colonial enemy.

At independence what was once the white man's burden became the white man's haven (Kukah 1999:15). The political leaders and leaders of the economy who were the appointed stooges, misinformed uninformed as they were mismanaged the economy and corrupted institutions. Thus, the Nigerian political system was (is) characterized by extensive and intensive corruption, excessive arbitrariness and abuse of power (Ibrahim: 2003).

The aftermath of drifting away of the nation from the fundamentals and the ideals of independence is the socio-historical reality, which the writer's imaginative lens reflects and refracts on to form the tenor and vehicle of political discourse. Hence, many of his/her verbal configurations give full portrayal of independence as a fraud, a betrayal, an unfulfilled promise. This is because it has not only failed to heal the hurt of history, but has also subverted and left in abeyance all hopes of exorcising our bereft continent, by heralding an age of tyranny and unreason; an age teeming with swarms of plagues (Bestman: 1998).

Indeed, the tensions and absurdities of our unending tunneling beneath the earth can no longer be sustained by our lachrymose blaming of the white man for our political and economic failures or woes. Other abnormalities, like the military, point at the need for us to break aesthetic fetters and learn to accept responsibility. Standing in the full glare of the new colonial masters, the military have proved to be far more profligate, rapacious and tyrannical than the colonial masters that we excoriated.

Post-Independence Chaos: The Military Factor

The theory of military intervention in politics in Africa and other third world countries is a catalytic post-colonial discourse. In Nigeria, the inability of the political elite to give the young nation the needed creative force to move forward and the employment of political institutions to serve the whims and boisterous accumulative urge of sectional leaders created the chasm that heralded the first military coup in 1966. Thus, in the wake of the first coup d'état and counter-coups in Nigeria (nay Africa), the men in uniform had at various times, unimaginatively harped on the same tune as the motivation for their over-throw of legitimate governments, that is, 'the love for country'. Unfortunately, the soldiers have never achieved the litany of objectives that brought them to power. Some of the social decadence that they sought to eliminate, according to Olurode (2004:5), includes corruption and outright embezzlement, the quest for genuine federalism, the promise of more inclusive arrangement, political stability, reduction of poverty level, safety and security of life, and better health facility.

The military by nature rules by command and obedience; thus no room for opposition that would have guaranteed checks and balances of any sort, and the gulf they tried to fill, by and large, encouraged unrestricted access to the national resources which they expended so unsparingly, irresponsibly and inefficiently. Thus, the mottled gangsters' circuit show became a centrifugal force which drew the whole military institution from its lofty ideals of professionalism, national security and loyalty; and the military's longing for stable polity became a chimera in an induced culture of violence which became a nucleus of incoherence with the embezzlement of public funds heightened only by degree as the Nigerian military produced a nest of millionaire and multi-millionaire generals. Thus this economic war of looting waged on Nigeria plundered its resources while the impoverished citizens live in squalor and abject poverty and the purportedly 'redemptive missions' led to 'ruinous mission' as the military grew into a mildew and ominous albatross on the political terrain, emphasizing only its oppressive endowments; the archetypal characterization and role possessed at the early morning of colonial irruption on the continent (Olurode 2004; Kukah 1999 and Awogu 1975).

Some theorists and politicians have however carved a specious argument and an Alice-in-Wonderland theory of a northern oligarchy of the Hausa/Fulani, whose nomenclature changes according to the fancy and degree of mystifications and political bruise sustained by lachrymal scholars and political victims. Thus the Kaduna mafia is thought to be the manipulating force behind military rule in Nigeria in a votary of castigated hegemonic philosophy of the caste, Maitama Sule Dan Masani Kano, which nearly lent credence to this myth when he freely uncovered a clandestine enterprise in one of his numerous interviews, stating that:

a directive was issued to all the ministers in Sardauna's cabinet, that each time any of them, was on tour they were to ensure that they visit schools and recruited people into the military...

(Ogundowole 1994:17)

The occasion and motivation for this surreptitious gang up, was the bestial treatment meted to political elite in Iraq at the dawn of the country's first coup. In the words of Maitama Sule:

the Prime Minister was killed and tied to a vehicle and driven on the streets of Baghdad; Sardanna for days became restless.... reasoned that it was important that we contained this type of development, right now by fixing our boys in the military.... But for his foresight our situation would have been worse...

(Ogundowole 1994:18)

Maitama Sule's confessions like the legendary confessions of a prodigal acolyte before mother "Idoto" in Okigbo's poem, a necessary ritual for his baptism into statesmanship seems to me wild, narrow and arrogant, seeing the ruinous consequence of the perverse vision on Nigerian political and economic epistemological space: one discovers an oppositional algebraic sum that only points at the "narrowness of vision" of some self-seeking and self-opinionated bunch of ethnic chauvinists who laundered themselves to power through their surrogates and thus violently and relentlessly maintained a vertical network of personal and patron-client relations.

Thus the military's troublous (mis)adventure in politics drew Nigeria to the fringes with the dubious regimes of Babangida and Abacha (1985-1998) as the worst period of crisis and military dictatorship in the entire post-independence period and as the time tickled away, the juntas and the whole military institution drifted and lost their sense of direction. And second, the greed of the military dragged the nation by degrees, slowly but surely away from the project of nationhood, and thus by the end of almost forty years of military rule, Nigeria was far more fragmented than it was in January 1966, when they first seized power.

This view only confirms Manivuzzan's (1992: 248) position that 'military leaders only aggravate the problems of nation building after taking over power from the civilian political leaders'. And consequently, the pains and frustration of military rule equally foregrounded the textuality of some post-colonial literary texts in (African) Nigeria, whose grains include anguish, privation, fatalism and cynicism.

Who is the Writer?

A writer may be protean in nature, depending on the perception and context of his/her conception or cognition. Within general academic province, she/he is an intellectual in a field of knowledge. But significantly, she/he is a member of society. More specifically, however, the writer in this context as a member of society and like any member of society partakes of the observable experience(s) of the society (Dasylva 2003:201). In the universe of this discourse, the writer, unlike other members, is conceived as one who portrays and examines these experiences in:

a specialized creative manner and with the sole aim of sourcing for relevant materials from the pool of experiences. The selected materials (experiences) he/she interprets, recreates imaginatively, and reflects or refracts, depending on his/her level of consciousness and degree of commitment (Dasylva ibid:201).

The writer is therefore a true artist, always wanting to create works answering the most urgent questions engaging the contemporary mind. Thus, to him/her:

...the world appears exactly as he has depicted it in his work. The author calls on the reader to see the world and judge events within his (the former's) own frame of reference, in terms of his own truth. In his work, the writer impresses the reader with the emotional quality of his thoughts and imagery and seeks to influence his thoughts and feelings, subjecting them to his own will and to his own ideals...(Novikov 1982:12).

One significant feature of the writer in this context is not only his/her cognition of life but also an aesthetic interpretation and artistic revelation of cultural environment to yield the link between art and life that queries the mode or medium of transmission. Thus the writer uses a medium or a combination of media that is/are within the domain of his/her field for creative knowledge-production and 'fullness of portrayal'. And indeed, the medium may be written or oral or via any of the new electromagnetic/cinematographic media (Dasylva 2003:201) which African creative writers use to transmit cultural experience.

Post-Independence Disillusionment Narration: An Overview

African writers and literary critics have accepted their social responsibilities to their society. Thus, in breadth and variety, their texts and intellection, reflect the realities of the continent, opening the warehouse of debate and discourse on art in Africa to uncover a robust intellection in support of art never created in a vacuum wherein the critic is interested in understanding the social milieu and extent the writer responds to it (Kehinde 2005:87). In effect, for any literary text to merit meaningful consideration, it is necessary that it bears relevance, explicitly or implicitly to the social milieu in which it is set. In furtherance of this view, Amuta (1988) asserts that “social experience is the primary source of literature” (85). Dasyuva (2003), writing about the involvement of the writer in politics makes reference to Achebe who similarly avers that such task is “a self-imposed responsibility hoisted on the writer by the realities of his existence”. Specifically, Achebe according to Dasyuva conceives and warns:

...any African who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary African will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (Dasyuva 2003:209).

Hence, the obvious collapse of hope and excitement of the independence project into disappointment and despair; disillusionment and alienation by the political elite (neo-colonialists), who exhibited ‘rapacity, greed, myopia and corrupt tendencies (Nnolim 2006:2) are what engendered the breaking of the seeming pact between the writer and the politicians. It is this real experience that dissolved into the rich texture of literary text. Achebe posits again that:

...having fought with the nationalist movement and had been on the side of the politicians, I realized after independence, that they and I were now on different sides, because they were not doing what we had agreed they should do. So I had to become a critic...(Simon Gikandi 1992: 381).

The post-colonial or post-independence literary production thus represents a category of diachronically grouped African literature (Nigerian) in the literature of national experience, neo-colonialism and post-colonial disillusionment (David Ker 2003; Ayo Kehinde 2005), characterized as social realist/socialist realist texts, because the writer of this mode makes use of events in his/her society as objectifying artistic truths to reveal absurdities just as she/he encourages profound ethos from his/her cultural environment that contributes to universal experience or ideals.

In this connection, recent Africa writings are reflections of realities of post-independence inherent cultural contradictions, political and economic turmoil, corruption, sexual promiscuity, rape, the ravaging HIV/AIDS scourge and the influences of Breton Woods' institutions (IMF/World Bank) on the continent. The texts of this vision, in diversity and scope include: Achebe's *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, *The Trial of Brother Jero*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Madmen and Specialists*. "A Shuttle in the Crypt", *A play of Giant*, *From Zia, with Love*; Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Why Are we so Blest*, Ngugu Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari*, Oulougum's *Bound to Violence*, Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth my Brother*, Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, Femi Olugbile's *Botolica*, Bode Osanyin's *Ogedengbe* etcetera.

These texts are allusive to the groaning of the people who suffered social injustice and economic deprivations, which informed the vision of dislocation, alienation, cynicism, fatalism, depression and deprivation. To Ahmad Aijaz, however, "all third world texts are necessarily national allegories" (as quoted in Ayo Kehinde 2003:229). Burdened by the "disillusionment syndrome", the writers in the texts above (and many more) created a literary tradition that is confrontational, declamatory and generally protesting in tone (Jude Agho 1995: 25). In sum, however, masquerading as fiction, the texts therefore take on not only a psycho-therapeutic or cathartic value, but more importantly a subversive force.

The Quest for Democratic Governance in Nigeria: A Contest of Text and Context

African writer's nostalgia for purposeful and democratic governance has been unwavering and unalloyed. In fact at the heart of disillusionment enactment is the yearning for the political elite to tow the path of rectitude and institute popular government. This allows the solidity of imagery of failed leadership and alienation and disenchanting followership. One literary mode that has yielded itself as a formidable tool in the realization of this ambition is the novel. This literary form allows the writer the latitude of fullness of portrayal that is very realistic. Thus, the trail blazer of disillusionment literature, Chinua Achebe baring his mind on the motivation for writing one of his classics, *A Man of the People*, said "within six years of independence, Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth...., this was the situation in which I wrote *A Man of the People*" (Jude Agho 1995: 27 – 28).

Thus, Forty-seven years of independence and forty-one years after the publication of the novel, Malam Nuhu Ribadu, the executive director of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission at the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) national policy retreat for elected party members in Abuja on May, 19 2007 states that:

...the major challenge that Nigeria faces is corruption... one of the major barriers to democratic development in the country... a country that has made about half a trillion dollars from oil in less than five decades....battling with the most basic challenge of offering its citizens a decent life... (The Punch, May, 23 2007).

To Adebayo (1995), a novelist is considered relevant if there is “a close relationship between his writing and his world, his society and life” (Kehinde 2005:88); hence the dialogic interface between text and context. Achebe and other writers under this searchlight fulfill this social critic role of the writer. The fictive universe of *A Man of the People* is thus a realistic world of Achebe and the Nigerian state in the 21st century as vividly captured by Malam Nuhu Ribadu. It is the same sordid situation. The “man of the people” is the perverted chief Nanga, the minister of culture in the PDP - controlled government. Chief Nanga is a realistic cast of “Nigerian politicians”, he reminds us too strongly of our revulsion of them, the haunting pain they cause us through their abuse of office and large scale corruption; the governors, the ministers, the (dis)honourables, etc. those who left the psychic quiet of the rural area with virtually nothing to their names but come home periodically paranoid. The fictive break-away of Odili Samalu from his god-father Chief Nanga becomes a live recast in Anambra state between Chris Uba and Chris Ngige and in Oyo State: Lamidi Adedibu and Rasheed Ladoja and the climacteric is the embarrassing love lost between the former President Olusegun Obasanjo and his Vice President Atiku Abubakar, while in office.

The fictive canvas pictures in *A Man of the People* is a rich texture of life; mediocrity, corruption, cynicism, immorality, ignorance, innocence, poverty etc. A similar novel of depth of vision in the illumination of disillusionment is *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* where the writer satirizes certain aspects of the Ghanaian life. Armah portrays the emergent ruling class as people who rule with scorpion where the colonizer had ruled with whip. This also attests to the Nigerian situation. Much as these writers value democratic governance, they take a swipe at the antics of the politicians who consider democracy to mean license to enrich the few and impoverish the majority. In his poem “Millionairing Campaign”, Bestman condemns the “matured dullness” in the Nigerian politicians who during their electioneering campaign in 1979 wore garb of lies, deceits and grandeur of power. The poem is thus a metaphor for cyclic journey as the military eventually struck in 1983. “*The Fate of the Vultures*” is another allusive lyric. In his lyricism, Ojaide asks the legendary god, “Aridon” to bring back what the politicians have stolen from their foreign banks.

The poet laments and condemns the abuse of democratic norms and the life of disdainful waste which the politicians lived before they were overthrown. The two poems, inlaid of imagery poignantly satirize the life of waste and arrogance in Nigerian politicians. Olugbile's *Batolica* intersects the possibility of a people's republic through a radical shift. He however, finds the Nigerian people incapable of effecting a change of *status quo*, thus his pessimistic vision of life. Denouncing military rule in Africa and showing his aversion for dictatorial government, Bode Osanyin in *Ogedengbe* uses the legendary figure, Ogedengbe to declare equivocally thus: "A soldier has no business on the throne" (p. 70).

The writers' cluttered minds are reflected in their works, no doubt; hence, their disillusioned and pessimistic vision of life. Interestingly, however, the pains, frustration and dislocation which they express and the figurative rousing of people from anesthetic deadening have put some of them at logger heads with their heads of governments. Some African governments employ state power and paid columnists to harass and hound writers about. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's predicament in the hands of his home government is a classic example. Carol Sicherman (1992) claims that "Ngugi...remains the subject of the Kenya government's fantasies of subversion: the mythologizer mythologised..."(259). The basis of attack and campaign of calumny against Ngugi is the enactment of post-colonial alienation in his two novels: *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*, thus Sicherman reveals:

...the Kenyan press and politicians reputedly compared Ngugi and his fellows in exile to 'people who abuse their mothers', and such people according to African custom....always stand condemned...(p. 268).

Soyinka's fierce dramaturgy has also caused him personal loss in the hands of the military. He was at one time declared wanted for treasonable felony by the Abacha junta. Yet, he remains consistent and outspoken as he declares his missions as a social critic thus:

We haven't begun actually using words to punch holes inside people. But let us do our best to use words and style when we have the opportunity, to arrest the ears of normally complacent people; we must make sure we explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness, which they ignore outside (Edde M. Iji 1991:71).

Writing out of disillusionment through portrayal of victims of dehumanization and gross exploitation, is thus, a stratagem of negotiating space for democratic discourse. In transcending disenchantment however, the writer makes conscious efforts through the verisimilitude of his art to mobilize the people and wake them up out of their lethal old habits of needless hysteria, political cynicism and economic cannibalism to create a healthy and enduring national ethos (Femi Osofisan 2001:36). He thus illustrates their inertia, ignorance, and the danger in recurrent withdrawal to ethnic sentiments with granite imagery so that the writer would not be the only one to sing his song; because the community's regeneration must be collective.

In this task Sefi Atta in her novel *Everything Good will Come* emphasizes that when she employs bonding as a technique for achieving communal nirvana. Through bonding, characters in the novel are able to share their burden and fought tightly to resist their oppressors and sought freedom for their loved ones. The tearing this veil of disillusionment becomes a text-type for the survival of democratic governance. In "*The Beautiful Ones Were Born*", an obvious response to Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the poet sees hope in Africa's rebirth through marriage and cooperation. The poet is convinced that the beautiful ones were born as Africa's children engaged in the long struggle for freedom (Femi Ojo –Ade 1996:66). Thus through the writer's imaginative lens, in chapter and verse, it reveals that democracy should not be used as insidious software in the quest for blind, naked power and the drive towards primitive accumulation.

Conclusion

If governance, according to "Global Human Development Report 2002", assumes that institutions, rules and political processes play a big role in whether economies grow, children go to school, and whether human development moves forward or backward (Anifowose and Aiyede 2004). Thus, this perspective is in consonance with the writer's vision when he/she moves through enormous materials to organize and orchestrate in order to open a window to prospective horizons as his/her art reflects reality. And conclusively, the writer caves for the deepening of democratic governance in Nigeria to ensure that the use of power in public affairs gives premium to human development and political accountability to argue for good governance as essentially, democratic governance.

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