

Creative Writing as a Driving Force in The Making of a Society*

G. U. Saleh

ABSTRACT

Creative writing in Nigeria and indeed Africa has gone on actively for over half a century and has passed several stages. The themes treated however, range from cultural conflict at the early stage to economic and social problems at the later stage. Considering the rate at which the world is changing rapidly there is need for a corresponding change in creative writing. This study is a result of my personal experience of several years of studying the subject both as a student and a lecturer from the mid-eighties to the present day. The work highlights the role a writer should play in the making of a society; it essentially reflects writing in the past, the present and juxtaposes the two with a view to focusing on the future. The work proposes that whatever positions a writer may take or the class he may belong to, his writing should serve as a spring board for moving the society forward. This should be commensurate to the period, place and circumstances in which the society finds itself.

Keywords: *Creative writing, cultural conflict,*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a symbol of man's creativity, historical being and becoming. It shapes our attitude to life, to the daily struggle with nature, the daily struggle within a community and daily struggle within our individual souls and selves. Creative writing in Nigeria and indeed Africa has gone on actively for over half a century and has passed through several stages. At the early stage, for historical reasons, writing mainly was on culture conflict. From the mid-sixties social and economic problems have been the subject of writing. The purpose of this work is to highlight the role of creative writing in the making of a society; it essentially reflects the past and the present and juxtaposes the two with a view to focusing in at the future. It aims at proffering some suggestions, which may not necessarily be new, on what should remain the pre-occupation of creative writers for many years to come, particularly in a society like ours bedeviled by serious,

G. U. Saleh is a Lecturer, Department of European Languages, Yusuf Bala Usman College of Legal and General Studies, Daura, Katsina State, Nigeria. *This paper first appeared as **Readings in Education, Development and Globalization, 2011 edition**



political and economic problems. It is hoped that this work will serve as a spring board for renewed research and discussion on the topic as what it has said is just a tip of the iceberg.

Creative Writing and The Making of a Society

Creativity, the ability to create something new, is a human activity which is ideally done for other people to appreciate and draw judgmental conclusions. Writing, therefore, as a creative activity is meant for people to read and appreciate. Creative writing therefore is the ability of a person to manipulate words such that it conveys new ideas without unnecessary complexity. Both the writer and his readers have one thing in common- looking for talents, looking into different powers, such as the power to love, speak softly but powerfully. The relationship between them is similar to that of a speaker and his audience or a sportsman and sport fans. Just as fans always see how well a footballer should have played, the critic sees how well the writer should have written. It follows therefore, that writing as a creative process and as an end is conditioned by historical, social forces and pressures (Ngugi, 1981). It does not stand above or go beyond economics, politics, class, race or what Achebe calls “the burning issues of the day”. Readers can always judge whether a write is honest, dubious, arrogant, and indifferent and the like. The writer however, should be remembered that he is a product of an actual process-eating, drinking, learning, loving, hating and as Ngugi (1981) puts it: ‘has developed a class attitude to all those activities, themselves class conditioned.

THE CHANGING POSITION OF THE WRITER

Every writer aims at persuading his/her readers, making them view not only a certain kind of reality, but also from a certain position, often his class, race, nation or even religion. To illustrate this further Ngugi (1981) submits: All arts aim to evoke, to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotions and impulses or opposition. He further added that:

The writer unfolds these forces in the service either of a ruler whether despot or monarch or of particular community, rank in society or financial; of a state or church, of an association or party, or spokesman of a form of government, a system of conventions and norms.

However, whatever the writers write in most cases responds to social environment which changes all the time. Time, place and need are therefore important determinants of what he writes. The role of the writer in the last century for example, should normally



be different from the role he plays in the present century. Similarly, what an African writes may be completely out of place in Europe.

In fact the opinions expressed by the writer today may go very well to contradict in mood sentiment, degree of optimism and indeed world view, what he writes at a later time. David Rubadiri's Novel *No Bride Price* in which he expresses his detest of post independence era contradicts his poem *Stanley Meets Mutesa* in which he laments the fatal encounter of Africa and Europe, written fourteen years earlier. This kind of disillusionment with ruling elite after independence periods pre-occupied later works of most African writers. In Nigeria, for example, writers in the 50s engaged in what Achebe calls re-education and re-generation. This was because of what the society was then made to believe about their past. Achebe who undoubtedly championed this says:

The worst that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self respect. The writer's duty is to help them in human terms what happened to them - what they lost [Achebe 1962].

Thus, the main pre-occupation of his early novels such as *Things Fall Apart* was educating and re-generating his society out of their acceptance of racial inferiority.

Similarly in his *No Longer at Ease* in which the African is seen by the Whiteman as corrupt "through and through" shows Achebe's reaction to the European presence and naïve view of Africa. In his post - independence novel, *A Man of the People*, Achebe condemns the very society, though with compassion and zest, he hitherto glorified. He accuses that complicity, indifference and cynicism have beset the society. It is worse mentioning however that, whatever the subject matter, every writer belongs to one social class or another. Perhaps in a capitalist society they occupy the middle class. Nonetheless, one finds writers who conform to the dominant class and those who oppose it. It is however interesting to note that a particular writer may have certain personal goals different from the class he belongs. It is equally important to note that a writer may do something particular to reach the entire universe. Writing is then seen as a tool used to describe events, portrays characters, generate situations which reflect universal concern. This undoubtedly has been admirably achieved by many African writers.

For example, in Amadi's *The Concubine*, the reader is convinced in the end that tragedy is inevitable, consequent upon the formidable forces against which Ekweme and Ihuoma have had to contend with that given similar forces, no marriage could be expected to survive anywhere anytime. Thus, given the necessary inspiration and creative energy a writer can successfully write about his contemporary world. The danger, however, is that in a situation where the writer is carried away by personal goals

different from the class to which he belongs, he is likely to indulge in arts for propaganda instead of arts for art's sake. George Orwell is a case in point. Oladele (1986) expresses this fear:

Unless the writer succeeds in achieving some degree of detachment from the events he describes, he may intrude into them in a manner capable of destroying the basis of art.

Achebe in 'A man of the people' has to a very large extent demonstrated arts for arts sake. In this novel, Achebe views the society for the most part through Odili's eyes. In this way Achebe satirizes political institutions and the people with sustained subtlety. Again like Oladele (1986) says:

The writer when trying to explain the dilemmas of his contemporary world, should stand aside from popular judgments, free himself from the hysteria reactions of his society and avoid empty slogani sing.

CONTEMPORARY WRITING

In Shakespaerian period, writing mainly focused on the upper class and what they represented. Thus one finds that in most of Shakespeare's plays, actors are drawn from the upper class. In Africa also we find writers who are influenced by this philosophy, Ola Rotimi readily comes to one's mind. This is shown in most of his works such as *Kurumi*, *The Gods are not to blame* and others.

Today in a rapidly changing society like ours, art may not be complete if based on such principles as 'monkey de work baboon de chop'. The writer must make heroes out of the workers and the peasants and what they represent. Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinje Ketile* is a good example. Unlike the conservative and reactionary playwrights like Ola Rotimi, whose heroes such as *Kurumi*, *Oba Ovoranmwun* who is parasite to the society, Hussein is very cautious in the treatment of his characters. In the play, the masses are accorded their proper merits on their roles in the struggle. *Kinje Kitile* and *Kitunda* are leaders more by accident than by divine arrangement. They are both poor labourers and had more than their fair share of the brutalities of the Germans. The people accept them and acknowledge their leadership because of their individual merits rather than by right of birth.

In the present circumstances writers in our society should reflect in their writings their anger to such things as poverty, sufferings, diseases, oppression, fears, ungodliness to mention a few, all of which stop people from performing or using their talent well. Creative writing should in this modern age cease to be a ritual or celebration of life but its caricature. The artist, though not the only one capable of perceiving the discrepancy

in the society, yet is the only one who expresses it. He should not just be a recorder of the life experience of his society. Ngugi (1972) puts it more succinctly when he says, what we need to do is to look back and try to find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us. To quote Soyinka, the writer should be “the voice of vision within his own time” He should be the voice of the collective conscience of his people ; his role is primarily as Ngugi puts it “that of denouncing the alienating super structure”. What he writes should become an instrument of a desirable change. Soyinka, I must say, follows this course in his writing. He is essentially a satirist according to Ngugi (1972):

Sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. He invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to pour derision and ridicule on society's feelings.

Soyinka's works are in most cases pre-occupied with attacking the social system [inadequate to cope with the modern world] of his society and even beyond. This is well illustrated in *The Trials of Brother Jero* in which he attacks the hypocrisy of religious leaders and the ineffectuality and sheer apathy of the intellectuals. Similar theme is treated in *Swamp Dwellers*, *Dance of the Forest*, *The Lion and the Jewel* among others. In an answer to why he chose social criticism, he says:

Where the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post mortem surgeon (Bamidele 1985).

Ngugi Wa Thiong, in a lecture he delivered at Makerere University College in November 1968, asserted the need for a literature of a social conscience and commitment in Africa. The important thing however is that whatever is written should have the force of driving the society forward. The corrupt atmosphere exposed in Arma's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* could not have been of any significance to the society since as Ata Adoo rightly pointed out “killed a patient instead of performing a surgery” . One cannot say precisely what Arma is proposing unlike what obtains in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*. To Ngugi there is no standing on the fence.

One is either on the side of the society's parasite or on the side of the peasants and workers. For him, the independence movement has been betrayed and workers for whom the war was fought have been betrayed. Ngugi is of the belief that the struggle is far from being over and is strongly optimistic of achieving success. The concluding part of his novel *Petals of Blood* calls for 'la luta continua. This, of course, does not mean that a writer must be ideologically committed.



Social concern should therefore not be confused with socialism. According to Priebe et al (1977) socialism is almost by definition socially concerned all the time, liberalism is socially concerned only part of the time (Bamidele, 1985). Soyinka, for instance, is a writer who is seen by many as one whose ideology is still unidentified. Yet he always expresses his anger at our social system and suggests solutions. However, this does not manifest clearly as this is hidden by his unequal linguistic mastery. Ngugi cannot hide this fact as he laments:

Confronted with the impotence of the elite, the corruption of those steering the ship of state and those looking after its organs of justice, Wole Soyinka does not know where to turn. Often the characters held up for our admiration are cynics or sheer tribal reactionaries like Baroka. The cynicism is hidden in the language (Ngugi 1972: p65).

I want to note that recent Nigerian writers though have maintained the status quo of treating themes bordering on politics and the economy of the nation, they write on topical issues. Dankano's *Petrol Station* (2004) readily comes to mind. The novel shows petrol station as a microcosm of the Nigerian situation. It satirically mimics the never-ending petroleum scarcity that has bedeviled Nigeria for over a half century and the attendant suffering inflicted on the people. All the dirty practices that take place on everyday basis from the refineries to the filling stations and the road sides are vividly exposed.

Jenkwe (2008) observes that the key notion about development is 'the improvement in the lives of the majority of the people. An Anthology of Poems from Northern Nigeria (2008) pre-occupies itself with this line of argument. The poems mirror the reality in present day Nigeria. The poets capture the beauty and the glory of a people and the vast resources now blighted by fake modernization, multifaceted corruption and underdevelopment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a society like ours, a writer can be of profit to us by writing to educate and enlighten people of the need for self discipline, co-operation, love for one another, sincerity and the need to be diligent and conscious in whatever we do. Writers can encourage all these by themselves taking pain to pursue excellence in their work. The writer should always remember that he is writing for the public and not for those who once taught him how to write. The writer should write in such a way that can be read. This can be done but not only by using the language most befitting to his readers but by writing



fewer pages so that the cost can be relatively low, affordable by the majority. He should in addition write the literature that is not only beautiful to read but of topical interest and capable of moving the society forward.

More importantly in this age of modern technology, science writers should adopt new approach to writing in both themes and style. They should for example begin to write fictions about science. A recent development in this direction is a novel which touches on the wonders of science (*The Punch*) written in Arabic by a North African. Days are gone when writers write to mourn the beautiful past but as Munzali Jibril, in his essay: *Should proceed thirty years forward and explore relatively virgin areas like the ugly past and the ugly present from which we may learn to construct a truly beautiful future* (Jibril 1990).

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