

THE ISSUE OF COMMITMENT IN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF OLAFIOYE'S SELECTED POEMS

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ABSTRACT

The African public has always demanded that the work of their writers be committed to some socio-political cause bothering on the citizens. In this paper, attempt is made at trying to explain what is meant by commitment in literature. This will enable African writers to discover the term commitment, or how an artist gets committed. In Nigeria today, a category of poetry which is combative in its questioning of the socio-political and economic structures is becoming increasingly popular. When compared with independence poets, the poets in this category are more aggressive in their criticism of their society. There is a high degree of commitment to the search for a well ordered society where there is a reasonable level of social justice and progress in society. Tayo Olafioye belongs to this new generation of poets. Some of his poems in parliament of idiots will be used to establish the thematic concern of this work.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the issue of commitment in literature is about the most debated literary phenomenon. For instance, Udoeyop (1975: 29) describes it as the magic world of African writing today while Mphahlele (1979) believes that 'commitment need not give rise to propaganda', he further insists that "every writer is committed to something beyond his art, to a statement of value not purely aesthetic, to a

criticism of life”. Gnat Kamenju (1967:156-157) strongly supports commitment as it applies to African writing. In what seems to be echo of Jean-Paul Sartre, Kamenju believes that the committed artist should be in advance of his time. He recommends commitment in art as a vital social obligation which the writer must fulfill. For Kamenju, art should be used to project a peaceful but genuine socialist revolution. He stresses that the writer must be committed to this ideological stance if he wishes to participate in the peaceful creation of a genuinely free and peaceful human society in which men will no longer exploit and oppress one another but instead, cooperate with each other in the interest of all.

Closely related to Kamenju’s idea of commitment is the view expressed by Charles Nagende (1963:137) that poetry should reflect “over times, over struggle, over labours and over march onward”. He maintains that the explosive socio-political situation in Africa does not permit..... the luxury of poets who are strangers to commitment, who are locked up in their introspections, in their narcissism, in their monologues between black values and white values. Stylistically, their poetry aligned with the metric pattern of Victorian poetry.

Following these pioneers were those with a modernist consciousness, and who were operating under a different socio-political climate. Consequently, the nature of their commitment had differed from that of the early poets. With colonization gone and independence gained, there was front or objective that these writers would have written or addressed. The problems that followed after independence were many and tend to affect each society differently. This explains their different perceptions of the public issues that they want to address. Okara, for instance, addressed the possibility of bringing the past value with the present ones. Similarly, Okigbo explored the spiritual return in the attempt to return to the traditional sources of religious belief.

Soyinka on his part is committed to a lot of themes, such as the mystery of life and death, the problem of human evil and wickedness and the nature of destiny. The nature of the commitment of these set of writers who wrote after the independence of their countries appear to be of condemnation of the corruption and misgovernance perpetuated by the politicians, situations which culminated in attempts to bring themselves in power and attempts to continue were repressed which eventually led to civil war in Nigeria.

The poetic orientation among African poets of the nineteen seventies, eighties and nineties is again, different from those of their predecessors and so is the nature of their commitment. The poets that fall into this era include: Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun and Tayo Olafioye whose poems are under study for this paper.

THE ISSUE OF COMMITMENT IN TAYO OLAFIOYE'S SLECTED POEMS

Every writer has his own unique or distinct way of writing and expressing his concern for the society. This shows a source of commitment of such writer. Some writers choose to use their work as instruments to propagate and advance the cause of a political hegemony, others make their work to criticize or condemn the political ideals of such hegemony. Igili (2008) quoting Osundare Niyi in his essay titled "The writer said No to Oppressions" has this to say:

Should he (the writer) make himself the knight of an unjust establishment and receive the tinsel accolades of a court poet or should he pitch the issue of commitment; Peter Nazareth 1965:5 appears to stand in the middle of the apolitical view of Mphahlele and the ideological perspective of Kamenju and Nagende. Peter Nazareth acknowledges that certain areas of human experiences are personal and individual.

He maintains that in order to explore these experiences, the artist should remain committed only to the truth of his vision. He stresses, however, that when the writer explores individuals in a changing present day society, the African writer must be committed unless he feels that the “new society is ordered in the best possible way and change is not desirable; He concludes by arguing that the writer who feels that the social system is basically wrong and must be improved is committed whether explicitly or implicitly. In fact, Oripeloye (2008:14-15) quoting Mather Calisnescui’s idea opines that “writers should commit themselves politically and use the aesthetic means at their disposal for the achievement of a political goal”.

These observations tend to point out that commitment is the view that seems to prevail among African writers and critics. The issue of commitment is particularly strong among the new generation of poets in Nigeria.

THE ISSUE OF COMMITMENT IN LITERATURE

The society has always wanted the work of their artists to be committed to some socio-political cause plaguing their citizens. Nwoga (1973:36) for example, observes that:

Much of the criticism of African
Literature by Africans has demanded
That the writers show the same
Sense of seriousness, a sense
Of responsibility towards finding
Solution to the internal and external
Problems of Africa, a sense of

Commitment.

Thus, it is demanded that that artist utilizes his act in such a way that it helps in the social, political and cultural development of his nation by using issue of common concern. There is no room for “art for art’s sake”.

In the case of modern African poetry, we can observe that the pioneer poets revealed in the adoption of public posture revolving around nationalism and colonialism. They also functioned as spokesman for their society since they were the proto-elite. The issue that were committed to were therefore dedicated by the socio-political problems of the time, namely; colonialism, the quest for independent, and the problems of culture-conflict camp with the oppressed, shaming the joys and tribulation of their identified struggle, daring to say without tricky equivocation that the king is naked? (33)

A close look at Olafioye’s poetry suggests that he focused his attention towards addressing the yearnings and concerns of the oppressed. This paper, in an attempt to establish this position, undertakes an explicatory study of some of his poems for the collection titled the Parliament of idiots. The titles close for the study are the poems “minimum wage: maximum wahala,” “Christmas bonus; in the songhai sinafe, “The conclave of Hyenas “impeachment and credentials.

Taking a critical look at the poem “minimum wage: maximum wahala Olafioye reflects on the plight of the Nigeria workers. The title brings back the memory when the salaries of workers were pegged at 7,000 naira minimum. What seems then as enhancing the lot of workers turned bad because of the attendant and untold hardship it brought upon them. There was unexpected rise in the prices of essential commodities, which at the end made the workers worse than before. By “Songhai labourers”, the poet refers to Nigeria workers. A labourer is always at the

mercy of who ever engages his services at any given time. Judging by the trend of events the poet noticed that the Nigerian worker “will never climb out of the crypt of misery” the Nigeria workers seem to be buried in the crypt of misery, poverty and lack with hope of reprieve. They are under a curse “they are “reined in by those they close to lift them; The leaders chosen by the people to improve their lot have, quite contrarily, imprisoned or “reined” them in.

In another poem “Christmas bonus in the Songhai sinate”. Olafioye reveals further the result of ultimate corruption:

They gave “Christmas bonus” in
 Million to themselves for no
 Justifiable rationale, poverties
 And for that, intractable poverties
 And for that, a bullet each to their
 Throats....they have created an
 Epicenter of stress in an already
 Decimated society, through the
 Tremors of military are maniacal.
 Visitation and ruination in the dungeon
 Airs of the equatorial heat. (90)

In this passage, Olafioye hints at the spiritual death experienced by those who flock about corrupt leaders to benefit from spoils of their leader’s corrupt practices.

Implicitly, Olafioye hints both at the resultant death of spirit these hangers-on must experience. Darkly, he also implies that those who follow such duplicitous leaders must also beware for their own lives, for leaders such as these cannot be trusted, and “a bullet in the throat” may be the final reward for those who follow them.

“The Conclave of Hyenas” serves as a diagnosis of corruption in Nigeria. Oripeloye(2008). The rulers subject the national resources, denoted as “the elephant, to various forms of manipulation. The imagery of animal of prey-foxes, dogs wolves-points to the seemingly fatal demise that befalls the nation. The politicians simply shave among themselves whatever is in the nation treasury at the expense of the electorate;

The sheared the elephant

Arms, legs, and limbs

Flesh, carcass, and tusks

Its head gulped in a flash (24)

Olafioye’s commitment against neo-imperialising is also noticed in this poem. He recounted that colonialism was the bane of the society in years gone by, but now with independence achieved, the despoilers are no longer aliens but our own people:

Once aliens devastated our shores

There bones lay in our soil

Formed the divers of ashes underneath

Now, the internal antagonist

Are the locusts that ruin the crops

This evil is carried through odious means, such as the award of contract to a non-existent firm, inflation of contract sums, looting of the treasury and other financial crookery.

In “impeachment”, Olafioye turns back to a peculiar orgy in the Nigeria political arena when the Senate leader is impeached for corruption. He represents a ruling elite that is bereft of any definite vision for the country’s future, hence, they conduct the affairs of the new democratic dispensation mercilessly. It becomes their mode of operation in the running of the state affairs that the poet brings to note in his poem. We experience a protest against the politicians that dominates the polity. Olafioye believes that the Senate leader is responsible for his fate as he lists his crimes:

Awards to selves and cronies

Irregularities in accounts

Unregistered bed fellows

Mostly ghost precipitate

Contract award without clearance (38)

The bad aspect or effect of this is “looting of the national cake prodigalisation of the national projects, and prostitution of country assets (38).

Finally in “credentials” Olafioye laments the lost of value and integrity, in our educational and social life. A noble but distasteful phenomenon was introduced to the Nigerian political system through certificate forgery. There was a particular case that involved the House of representative leader one Mr. Salisu Buhari, who

claimed he graduated from the University Toronto, Canada, but he was later blown open to be false in a national daily as a crime which he later confessed. The poet sees this as a rot that detracts from whatever effort is being made at nation building. He states, “how do you get diamond or gold/in the midst of rots” (45)

In conclusion, Olafioye captures the Nigeria national maladies in parliament where he uses poetry to point out a genuine socio political project where the people come to bear on the projections of the political class. Olafioye sets out to exposes and condemn political attitudes that put the masses at a dangerous arena. He believes that the moral principles are essential in the contemplation of a people’s paradise, which he finds lacking in the social and political climate where politicians are scavenging for the spoil of politics.

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