

The Modern African Raconteur: A Friend or Foe?

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Abstract

Literature influences our mode of thinking, manner of handling challenges and self realization for national development. This paper discusses the pedagogical activities that exist between the modern raconteur and his audience for individual growth and national development. It also explores how the story told by the modern poet became a teaching material for the individual and the society at large. The paper also discusses the need to domesticate foreign languages and how the age long linguistic problem between the modern writer and his audience can be ameliorated to make his work meaningful to the masses.

Key words:

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INTRODUCTION

The work of art is designed to motivate a reader to a particular action. For instance, the writing of Aristotle, Shakespeare, Donne etc. may move the reader to action through the conveyed experience that is intrinsically valuable, enriching and pleasurable to his being.

Every work of literature has a message about life, the stories told become teaching materials in the society, to bring out a change in the individual and the society as a whole and the achievement of self-realization and understanding to become more creative, intelligent and more tolerant to new dimensions and different ideas for societal development (Obaje, 2007). Therefore, one can say categorically that there is no objection to the popular axiom that literature is life. Through literature, our mode of thinking can be changed and new ideas of meeting challenges discovered. The moral aspect of any society is one of the concerns of literature. Hence, the objective analysis of the stories or tales offered by the raconteur can be extracted and interpreted for societal use.

In our society, one experiences the vicissitudes of war, religious intolerance, tribal sentiments, corruption etc., if the literary artist must find the causes of these problems and find solution to them, then, he must narrate his stories in the languages that his audience are familiar with. Because, what is fundamental about literature is that, its expression must be based on the exploration and manifestation of the right language medium, its values, aesthetics concept and belief of the community from which it emanates. The misapplication of this fact may result to mere communicating instead of communicating meaning. In other words, if the raconteur's imagery, themes symbolisms etc are drawn from a communally accessible pool, he will definitely be communicating meaning to his audience. But, if it's on the principle of "Modern" and foreign elevated language, mysticism becomes the case and if he goes further than that, he becomes an orphic messengers. This will not be too good for his society, audience. It is on this note that the researcher tend to explore the modern African raconteur (poet) either as a friend or foe to the individual and the entire society.

THE CONTRAST OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN AFRICAN POETRY

The traditional poetry was an oral poetry that belongs to the whole community. It is a collective responsibility of the whole community rendered and appreciated by all. It is composed extemporaneously at the occasion to which its performance is rendered. It has no authorship; it is a communal pride because the message, symbolism, imagery and form are drawn from a communally accessible pool. This makes such poetry to be sensible and meaningful to the audience since they are at home with the repertoire of the poetry and its performance.

At this stage, African poetry unites the various societies of the continent. In some societies, the communal approach to poetry enhances the achievement of its aesthetics; Songs, chants are composed and rendered extemporaneously and audience hums choruses and claps to the performance as determined by the occasion. This communal and “we feelings” of the community denied the existence of a single authorship of oral poetry. Its performance was unique and interesting.

Literacy or western education brought by the colonial masters gave birth to modern poetry. The poetry of printed words of a foreign language hence, the oralness of traditional poetry was trampled upon by few Nigerians who could read and write. This kind of poetry lacks the collective experience and the artistic creation of a group because the language used in the writings bars the writer from speaking to his readers the way he ought to. Modern poetry simply means poetry that is not oral but written. In other words, it is a poetry that is written down to be read and kept by a particular class of people known as the literate i.e. ability to read and write. This kind of poetry differs from Traditional/oral poetry in many ways such as the targeted audience. The whole community is the audience of the later while the formal is only for the educated few who can read or write. The later has no singular authorship, because it is for all, by all while the former has an author known as the poet. The style of presentation of the later is more real creative and extemporal while the former is sacrosanct and abstract in nature. The former is always through a representation of artistic versions of the real experiences they tend to present while the later is a real life situation through performance.

THE CONCEPT OF MODERN POETRY

In poetry, the term may refer to break from indigenous modes of poetic expression in Africa. That is, the form and language of a poetry that x-ray the rejection of African forms or modes of poetic expression. The concept emphasizes private mysticism and orphic messengers in African poetry. It is designed to encourage writers to

write in western accepted standards (a particular modern manner). It is a matter of the poet’s awareness of the modern idiom in European and American poetry. Above all, it is used as a yardstick for the poet’s work to get a place in their anthology.

It should be noted that, considering the above, even if an African experiences is been articulated and African poetic devices are employed, in an attempt to sound “modern” it will result into a privatist manner. This is because, words may be put together to make beautiful pictures and patterns of imagery, but may carry no special conversational meaning (abstract verse or obscurity). If the essence of the story told (the work of art) is to teach lessons, then the irony is that, an obscure or abstract work of art will teach nothing, rather it will discourage the audience the more especially the poetry genre (most dreaded genre). This means, the genre needs more interesting and appealing ways to be taught and to encourage more audience to the genre rather than discouraging the few audience it has through abstract and obscure manner of narrating or writing in a “modern” stringent confinement. This is because one can only teach and learn in a pleasant and friendly environment.

The literary artist is a teacher and his works must teach his student (audience/society) who must be willing to learn from him. Achebe 1975, is of this opinion:

I would be quite satisfied if my novel (especially the ones I set in the past) did not more than teach my readers that.... (p.45)

A writer must believe in the pedagogical activities his work, audience and himself entered into. Hence, he must take into consideration his students (the society/audience) that his work is meant for. His work must be simple and easy for his audience to read, listen to and understand. Hence, if the writer really want to sensitize his audience toward societal development, he must consider the masses in the society who will also read and understand easily without obscurism. Since the masses forms the largest population of any society.

LANGUAGE AS A CONTENDING ISSUE

Language is a carrier of people’s culture while culture is the custodian of people’s values and values are the bases of a people’s self-definition-the basis of their consciousness of their environment. I want to believe that the best way to enslave or destroy a man is to destroy his language. This will automatically destroy his heritage. According to Ngugi, in history, economic and political control has never been complete without cultural and mental control. The suppression of people’s language means the suppression of their culture, values, songs, infact the suppression of the whole area of what is now called oral literature or orature. The imposition of foreign language in Africa as the language of communication created a lot of problems for African literature. If one

need to go by what Osuketan (2004, p. 309) says, that literature knowledge is one of the means of presenting and enriching a people's culture, and social values that are much needed for effective national development, then definitely speaking or writing in borrowed rob is not the best choice. This linguistic issue has become a great problem in African literature. Osundare 2000 says:

Nigeria has so many languages: my own language is Yoruba. My father, my mother, my immediate family never speak English. When I go home I had to drop that code and pick up another one. It was a very complex system of code switching. This language control led to a kind of linguistic schizophrenia for some people. Many people were not able to switch that easily and it led to problem. (p.196)

The poet must understand that the development of the society should be a collective one through a crusade for achieving progress for the society. And being the pathfinder to national development, he has to make his work the medium of achieving this, which means, his work must be assessable and understandable to the majority if not the entire society since he is a member of the committee for nation building, he needs to champion the course for the sustenance of nation building. In other words, he needs to write for his society and not just write, he must communicate meaning to them in the language and manner they will understand. Because, the truth of the matter is no matter how hard he tries to communicate and carry his people along for a common cause in a borrowed language, the language problem will still persist. Howard Sergent 1973, explores the danger inherent in an African writer speaking in a borrowed robe. He foresaw the danger of his own language going into extinction and also lost in communication. Furthermore, he says:

Certainly- the problem of language is still a dominant one, and it will no doubt continue to be..... If the African poet chooses to write his poem in English or French, rather than Yoruba, Hausa, Swahili or whatever his own language happens to be, he will certainly have a wider audience..... (p. xiv)

What one can deduce from the above opinion of Sergent is that, if the African poet chooses to write in a foreign language at the expense of his own language, it will definitely lead his society to what Ngugi called cultural sterility and death. But, if he choose to write in whatever his own language happens to be, he will communicate meaning to the majority in the society and this will lead to cultural regeneration, strength and nation building.

THE WAY FORWARD

Modern African writers should note that a language is capable of doing whatever a people want it to do. In other words, every language has the potentiality of developing and coping with whatever it users want it to talk about. Some modern African writers seem to be tackling this language problem in a realistic and effective manner.

The likes of Chinua Achebe, Niyi Osundare, Ola Rotimi etc seems to tackle the problem from the angle of what seem to be an agreement that many elements of the traditional African culture are relevant to the articulation and panacea to contemporary problems. They, (modern Nigerian Writers) believe that the only way to carry their audience/society along with their works in a foreign language is to jettison esotericism or total neglect of the linguistic legacies of the indigenous tradition. Thus they need to incorporate aspects of traditional oral and communal accessible pool in the forms of their writing, as topical subjects with the stretch of the linguistic resources of both the indigenous and foreign languages. They have no doubt that, this new synthesis will assures them both local acceptability and international recognition especially for foreigners that have interest in African culture and oral tradition. This idea I believe will further promote mutuality between the two languages. It is obvious that some African poets have submitted themselves consciously to the influence of foreign poets. This either directly or indirectly led to what one can call neo-colonialism of African poetry. The poetry of Soyinka and Okigbo are similar to this and too far removed from indigenous mode of poetic expression in Africa. This completely leads to abstract verse and obscurity. It is not that they did not employ African poetic devices at all, but in an attempt to sound modern, they became privates in manner and in mode.

African literature, reading materials are either modeled on or chosen from alien western examples, and Africans are tutored in this foreign literature to the extent that they know nothing about the writings of their fellow African writers. The African poet should know that, this foreign language lacks the ability as a literary medium to shoulder the weight of an African experience. (Nwahunanya 2007, p. 64). But if the two cultural experiences are symbiotically fused, used and allowed to accommodate each other, there will be an unavoidable mutuality between them. This is typical of Niyi Osundare, a writer of socialist ideology with a genuine concern for the plight of the masses. Osundare uses traditional symbols, myths, local images and proverbs to Africanize the experience even within the framework of the English language and to make the experience vivid i.e. Replicate story telling tradition in oral art and encourage participation via repetition invocation and incantory poetry (Yoruba paregoric poetry).

CONCLUSION

In modern times, however, the audience of traditional artist has been reduced by linguistic problem or literacy. Because, most of his audience are the rural folk who have not had the opportunity provided by western education and therefore still operate in the same linguistic system with him. This is the more reason why, the modern

African poet must work in line with the vision and aim of Chinwezu *et al.* 1980, That is, to destabilize all the vestiges of colonialism in African literature. They say:

If Africa literature is not to become a transplanted fossil of European literature, it needs... to find more ways of incorporating forms, treatments and devices taken from the African oral tradition. The demand for such incorporation is not mere matter of antiquarianism... it has to do with the function of literature in its society (pp. 239-40).

The modern African poet in all cases must be relevant to his local audience though his work. Therefore, he must bear in mind the African audience first, and choose the appropriate idiom to clearly articulate his poetic vision. Wherefore he does not do this but veer off into obscure poetry, he is subjecting himself to intellectual neo-colonialism. This is anti Africa and will not enhance national development.

Finally, this paper has discussed extensively the importance of literature to individual and to the nation at large. It has also explored the pedagogical activities that exist between the poet and his society and how the analysis offered are interpreted for societal use. It also discussed and suggests the need for the modern African

poet to domesticate foreign languages and a symbiotic relationship between the poet's local and foreign languages to enhance his audience understanding of his works for their development and that of the society.

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