



FUNCTIONAL LITERATURE AND ELITIST CONSERVATISM: A CASE FOR THE EMERGING FILM INDUSTRY

Rapheal O. Oga

Department of Language Studies,
Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu

Samuel C. Udemba

Department of Language Studies,
Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu

Abstract

Literature from the very beginning is perceived as an art. But over time, its role as a catalyst for change, a tool for social consciousness has brought to the fore the characteristic functionalism that belies it as a phenomenon. Art was paramount because of the entertaining essence of such literature. Initially, oral in nature, it was functional in that it constituted part of an overall process that forged the youth in facing the challenge of adult life. In Nigeria, the burst of the film industry has created a populist currency that has left the elitist literary scholars lost for words and action. Worst still, despite its popularity, the huge lack of literariness in most of the films has continued to shrink the possibility of elitist acceptance and development of the phenomenon and this should not be so. The paper therefore recommends that members of academia and graduates of literature should explore and exploit our social, economic and political realities to create great works of literary experience that are relevant to the society.

Introduction

The perception of literature as an art has an intuitive immediacy. Art, however, is more encompassing and ranges from music, song, dance, and drama to paintings and architecture. In fact, art is a synthesis of life involving almost all aspects of human essence. According to Courtney (1968) “art is a method whereby human beings can relieve tension and gratify wishes. The artist therefore moulds life into a new kind of reality, which others consider justifiable as a valuable reflection of actual life.”

Literature is one of those generic subdivisions of art. Literature primarily confines itself to the art of writing and storytelling. The story-telling may come in the form of drama, prose and even poetry. All these have to do with man’s expression of his perception of reality. It is

these differences in the perception that gave rise to different movements in the history of literature such as expressionism, realism, naturalism, absurdism, existentialism and Dadaism. The purpose of this write-up, however is not necessarily to discuss literature as an academic exercise, but to take on literature from the point of view of functionalism and examine the extent of its impact on the modern Nigerian society.

Scholars are almost unanimous on the fact that literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, arranging words in pleasing patterns, and expression in words some special aspect of our human experiences (Moody, 1968). Literature uses three major media – the book, the stage and the electronic medium.

In an attempt to reflect life, literature draws a parallel from which we then learn of life and of course this gives literature the propensity as a very effective means of education. It takes one through the ‘manufactured’ experiences that are faithful to true life. In the process it broadens our perception of man and humanity. It draws us close to the limits and possibilities of human nature both for good and for evil. All these then help us to develop sound philosophies about life that will inevitably assist us in exercising the responsibilities that come with everyday life.

These facts, these philosophies are usually subsumed in the themes and sub themes of most literary works. Let us examine some of the very powerful themes in some very popular European and African literary works. First, in *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare. Julius Caesar never believed that Brutus will ever partake in plotting against him. But the unbelievable do happen. And when Brutus stabbed him, Julius Caesar turned and made the famous expression *et tu Brute*. William Shakespeare the great literary craftsman deliberately wrote this famous expression in Latin. Why? Because he wanted the issue of trust to sink in the minds of his audience. The exotic nature of the expression will make his audience to pause and ponder – betrayal. Again in *Macbeth* by the same William Shakespeare, Banquo advised Macbeth in the course of his being dazzled and deceived by the witches. But Macbeth would not heed to the advice. Banquo actually noted that the instruments of darkness tell as truths; win us with honest trifles to betray us in deepest consequence.

Back here in Africa we still can recollect how curiosity killed the cat in the *Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. Sidi in a bid to satisfy her curiosity got entrapped. Even in our traditional folklores we could still recollect several whys: why the dog barks at the moon, why the snake crawls on its belly, why the tortoise has a broken back. The listener to some of these folklores is expected to draw some lessons from these whys. In case of the tortoise he borrowed feathers from the birds to enable him travel to the sky for a feast. He

shortchanged those that helped him and paid dearly for it, after they angrily collected their feathers there in the sky. He fell and broke his back. A parallel could be drawn against fraudsters that try to shortchange their partners in crime. Their fates are almost always predictable.

Traditional Literature in Pre-colonial Nigeria

A regular feature of the traditional literature is its combination of song, music and sometimes dance. However, generic divisions can also be made, giving rise to traditional drama, poetry and even prose (story-telling) that usually feature legends and folklores.

While the West could easily appreciate legends, folklores and recitations as forms of oral literature, doubts have always been expressed as to the existence of traditional drama. Scholars like J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Ossie Enekwe and some foreign anthropologists like Ruth Finnegan have made some valid contributions in this regard. The problem with traditional drama is in its mix-up with rituals in most cases. As Brocket (1964) rightly observed that primitive people do not distinguish among the various aspects of their lives (work, religion and theatre) as clearly as most advanced societies do. Transition to specialized and separate activities comes about only gradually.

Again writing on the origin of rituals in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, Ogunbiyi (1981) expressed the tenuous link between ritual and drama, stating that the primitive man perceived a relationship between the seasonal cycles and his food supply, believing that his domination of that relationship through dramatization in rites, ensured some form of control over forces that determine his existence.

Enekwe (1987) conceives ritual as a display of efforts to activate the supernatural powers. Rotimi (1981) however, insists that some African ritual displays reveal instances of imitations either of an experience in life or the behaviour patterns of some powers, while others merely re-present certain powers without the mimetic impulse to recreate the ways and details of these powers. What could be and has frequently been mistaken for drama in most African traditional display appear when the later type of non-imitative ceremonial activities with movement, rhythm and spectacle beyond the ordinary occur.

There are however, instances whereby there is a shift in aim and purpose of certain ritual performances. The *Takai* performance in Northern Nigeria, for example, was once performed as a holy ritual in commemoration of the birth of Prophet Mohammed, but the performance is now used as a satirical dance. It is used now as a means of social control. The performance engages in the burlesque of persons involved in scandals.

Functionalism in Traditional African Literature

The traditional African Literature is a communal experience that entertains the audience and also raises the consciousness of both the community and the individual. It helps to mould the society by ensuring conformity and emphasizing on the need to stick to the minimum social standard. It is all about man and his society, his God and ancestors and the influence of both on him. It ensures social cohesion and most importantly, reaffirms communal values. A Nobel Laureate, Soyinka (1976) affirms these facts when he states that “a concern with culture strengthens society. The artist has always functioned in the African society as the recorder of mores and experiences of his society and the visioner in his own time.”

With the coming of the Europeans, the form, nature and in some cases themes of our literary culture changed. First, it was the change from the oral to the written form. Plots became more complex and stories gained length and sophistication. Characters changed from mainly animals to man leading to the gradual disappearance of allegorical elements. And of course the language and the medium also changed from vernacular to English. The emerging writers rose to the challenge of colonialism, highlighted African culture, and tried to preserve the African heritage, which led in some cases to the translation and writing down of the folklores and legends in English. The emerging class of newly and sometimes barely educated Africans became a veritable audience and was influenced by these works in the struggle for independence. Some of the writers of this period were Ferdinand Oyono the author of – *Houseboy* and *The Old Man and the Medal*, Mongo Beti, Camara Laye, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe. Others like Pita Nwana wrote what one may term as ‘unbranded’ African literature, since their works were neither classified as orature nor modern African literature, because they wrote in vernacular. The world has been denied access to some of these great works because of the language (vernacular) they were written in. Translating such works requires a thorough insight into the nature, form and dynamics of both the vernacular and foreign language. This is very essential because the richness and beauty of communication like in the Igbo language lies in the proverbs, and of course Achebe (1958) was right when he described the role of proverbs (in communication in the Igbo language) as the palm oil with which words are eaten.

In the English language, however, the simile, the metaphor, and the figurative expressions remain the hallmark of its beauty. The translator has to be aware of these to effectively retain the beauty of the original language. Incidentally the above period also marked the beginning of what might be rightly described as literature of exclusion. If in the past, literature has been an all-inclusive communal affair, the new movement excluded non-literate members of the

society and the old form also failed to reflect the new cultural experiences. However, the Yoruba's responded through their organized theatrical performances in vernacular some of which are: *Yoruba Ronu* and *Bread and Bullet*. The plays were produced by Hubert Ogunde and his theatre group. This trend continued through the various movements, such as Negritude, Eurocentricism and Tigritude.

The televisions and radios did not help matters much, since most of them for a very long time until recently were owned by government and the performances were most of the times mere extension of government propaganda and this denied literature its vitality, vibrance and creativity. Of course there were very popular ones like *the Masquerade* with Zeburudaya as the Patriach; *Cock Crow at Dawn*, *Egwuragwu Ndu Ehuwa* and *Tales by the Moonlight* are very creative attempts to rejuvenate the traditional folklores and legends in a new language.

In 1992, something happened in our literary world that passed almost unnoticed in the academic circles. It was the reception by the Nigerian audience of *Living in Bondage* – a home video that gave the people what they have been expecting from literature without knowing it. It also marked the beginning of a new literary culture and outbursts. Between 1992 and 1996 the market became flooded with these 'home videos' as they were popularly called. Meanwhile to the academia it was a madness they could not understand. They were more preoccupied with analyzing and staging the Soyinkas, the Ola Rotimis, Femi Osofisans, Bode Sowandes and numerous other foreign writers within the university walls.

They also continued the bitter complaints of poor readership culture among Nigerians and poor quality modern literary works until perhaps the coming on board of *The Purple Hibiscus*. So while the academia was wondering what has hit them in the world of literature, the producers of home videos were smiling their ways to the banks and thousands were scrambling for their products in the markets.

Many scholars of literature would not touch the home videos with a ten-foot pole. Yet the same scholars defined African literature. The same scholars carried out studies at PhD levels on oral literature and traditional African drama and impressed it on the Western scholars that they have a literary heritage. Our Nollywood today ranks No. 3 in the world and about the fastest growing industry in Nigeria today. The Nollywood or the Nigeria film industry exports their products to different parts of the world. It is now a means of international cohesion and unification of Nigerians in the Diaspora. They can see home while abroad. Their children can now proudly tell their classmates, that their grandparents no longer live on treetops. They can now feel home, feel their roots, and feel Nigeria, think Nigeria and talk Nigeria. They now have a practical sense of common identity – Functionalism in literature.

Yet the universities seem not interested, and have continued to restrict themselves to the stage and the texts as the only medium of literary experience. The taste of the audience seems not to matter to the academia that should have been the engine room of the literary revolution.

All that the academia has therefore succeeded in doing is the sustained practice of literature of exclusion by down playing on the issue of communication, medium and language, when it comes to reaching out. They end up sacrificing these essential and fundamental aspects of literature on the altar of questionable elitism. Some literature graduates that left the universities in the late 80s developed the home video to satisfy the yawning gap in our literature and the society paid them back with patronage. Literary history has tutored us that they were right. Sophocles one of the classical Greek writers wrote for the stage. Aristotle wrote his literary criticism based on performance. In his criticism he was more concerned on the impact the performances will make on the Greek audience. In fact, Aristotle in his six parts of a tragedy specifically mentioned spectacle and actually meant that tragedy should make a powerful visual impression.

William Shakespeare whom we now regard as one of the world's greatest playwrights was rather a renowned actor and producer during his time and made his fortune by reaching to the hearts of his English audience through his plays. It was a communal experience that catered for the tastes of the Elizabethan Englishman and they paid back with patronage and made Shakespeare very wealthy and he enriched their souls.

If literature should be reduced to an academic exercise what happens to its functions to the society. It is at this point that we have the missing link. If the average Nigerian is unwilling to read a literary text, are there no other alternative means through which he could be reached? Most of the literary works of the Western writers such as *Oliver Twist*, *Gulliver's Travels* the Shakespearean plays are in films, but here in Nigeria most works of writers are still in prints, even when we are aware of the readership culture. Besides, do these works really cater for the taste of the people?

Those in the arts and literature may take a cue from their co-travelers in the field of knowledge in the areas of science and technology. Does the engineer design and build cars in which only he and his colleagues can operate? Are the pharmacists only interested in those drugs concerned with only the ailment that he suffers? Should the architect design buildings that cater for his taste and that of his fellow architects only? So why must the literary artist not care about his medium and the relevance of his communication mode as it concerns his audience? Creativity of course lies in his ability to make his arts acceptable to the different segments of the society. The academia must therefore not perpetually blame the readership,

but should also re-examine the medium and communication potentials of their works not just for a specialized audience, but also for a general audience, if literature must make its impact.

Conclusion

Literature has a fundamental function in the society and whoever has taken to literature owes the society a duty. There should therefore be a synergy between the academia and what we may now aptly describe as the popular literary culture. The academia will continue to serve as the engine room for research and improvement and must join hands in establishing literature as a communal activity. The popular literature needs the academia as the power house and research center for growth. Our education be it in science or arts must be relevant to the societal needs and cater for their tastes. Graduates of literature must not only impress the academics but must also impress the wider society by being functional. They must explore and exploit our social, economic and political realities and contradictions to create great works of literary experience that are relevant to the society. The vicious circle of graduates of literature going back to the classroom to teach literature or jettison their areas of specialization is no longer in tune with our current literary cultural realities.

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