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POETRY AS DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL COMMITMENT: A STUDY OF SAMUEL ADEWUMI'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract
Poetry is a form of literary art in which language is used for its aesthetic and evocative qualities in addition to or in place of its apparent meaning. Poetry, since the 20th century, has become more loosely defined as central to creative art which uses language. It often uses particular forms and conventions to suggest alternative meanings in words or to evoke emotional or sensual responses. However, this aspect of literature has helped many writers in Africa to committedly lampoon and criticize the state of bad governance, dictatorship, corruption, cronyism, gender inequality, racism and oppression in the African continent. Therefore, this paper looks at how Samuel Adewumi was able to use this genre of literature to challenge and satirize the state of bad governance in Nigeria through his selected poems: "House of Scandals", "Lame duck Democracy", "Not yet Uhuru" and "The Stolen Mandate".

Keywords: Poetry, Social Commitment, Cronyism, Corruption, Samuel Adewumi

Introduction

Enright and Chikera (1962) as cited by Omojugo (2012), poetry is a literary genre which, like other forms of literature (drama and prose), is identified by its exploration of the resources of language. Poetry, as an art, predates literacy. It is, therefore, not easy to determine how long poetry has existed. Suffice it to say that, it is as old as man. This is premised on the fact that poetry is a medium of communication. Poetry portrays through imagination, the culture of a people in a more economical manner than either drama or prose fiction. Its concern is the world, its beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood, its splendour and degradation. It is a medium of cultural transmission. So, well that knit are language and poetry that it is sometimes felt that language itself is poetry since the poet apprehends the 'true and beauty in a word.

Morton and Charles (1989), assert that poetry creates a medium for people in society to connect themselves through written words. They equally opine that poetry in its seamless effort can render therapeutic obligations for those suffering from one mental degradation to another, and even, it can provide an escape route for those expressing their feelings, emotions, desires, opinions etc on the present state of their respective societies in a way that such will not affect the personalities of the poets. They continue to say that poems may be ascribed to a particular society, place and time. In doing this, poets, present their confrontational mindsets in a more seamless way that will not be offensive to their targets, that is, their societies. Primarily, poetic artists set in motion in their societies to dislodge any negative impacts they observe at a particular time or the other. It is a known fact that the greatest portion of global literature from time immemorial till the present time is still didactic, hence, poetry as a critical genre of literature is seen as a critical medium of teaching. Early poets were teachers, diviners, prophets and preservers of the societal norms, values, traditions etc. What poets did in early society in the past was to admonish and sound warnings rulers and

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their subjects. To achieve this responsibility of what poetry does in society, the poets' recourse to the potency of verbal magic by soporifically engrossing the utilisation of words to achieve their didactic functions in their societies.

Nwahunanya (2007) reminds us of how the artist has always functioned in African societies as the recorder of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his time. He recalls that the pre-colonial society was a close-knit one where foreign influences did not affect traditional social structures to any appreciable degree. Continuing, he notes that the oral literary artists in such societies were vested with enormous social responsibilities, especially concerning his position as an entertainer and regulator of social behaviour. This was the era when poetry was, in all its entirety, oral with all the glamour and appurtenances of naturalness. Egya (2005) notes that poets in Nigeria since the emergence of modern poets, have come to see themselves as socially committed and so their poetries are concerned with socio-political issues that affect ordinary people in the society.

Achebe (1982) as cited by Omojugo (2012) emphasizes the importance of the role the artist is called upon to play as he declares:

> It is dear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social issues of contemporary African will end up being completely irrelevant, like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.

Egya (2005), remarks that the essence of the writers' commitment is predicated on the socio-political instability and economic backwardness in many African nations of which Nigeria is one. He notes that backwardness in the case of Nigeria, results from the oppression and arbitrary brutalities unleashed on Nigerians by the dictatorship of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and the late General Sanni Abacha and their many cohorts during their times. Tsaaior (2005) defined what authentic African poetry should do. He says it should draw its afflatus, sensibility and vision as well as themes, imagery, tropes and entire worldview from the quotidian realities and experiences of Africa's historical continuum.

> African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry above all, they had dignity.

Poetry is endowed with specific characters whose attributes have given the genre a unique mark. The patriarchal basis of poetry in the family of the literary arts has given it the status of what Edge prefers to call in Latin "*primes inter pares*". The word patriarchal here refers to the fact that before now poetic art has remained both a sound and linear structure tempered by the disposition of an antithesis. Poetry has been used by literary artists to mirror the society, the government structure, its values, tensions and struggles, thereby making ita historical and political document which reveals the political condition and societal structures of the period. Brutus" "*Letter to Martha*" is an example of such poetry.

The attitude of Western critics does not seem to accept the fact that poetry is universal. Mowah (1990) as cited by Omojugo (2012) notes that the attitude of Ruth Finnegan's "*Oral Literature in Africa"* and Nwoga's "*The Limitations of Universal Criticism*" seem to affirm the feeling that poetry is a Western art which African poets utilize to explicate African issues. Achebe as cited by Omojugo (2012) stated:

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> African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry above all, they had dignity.

A host of pioneer critics like Gerald Dathorne and others, have in their lofty positions, felt obliged to advocate accepted or non-accepted standards. It is to this that Abiola Irele (1971), in an essay "*The Criticism of Modern African Literature*" is constrained to state "that these commentators on African Literature need some adjustment of their sight". However, Osakwe (1992) as cited by Omojugo (2012) noted that the relationship between poetry and politics is occasionally mediated through religion, but concludes that they meet simply within the structure of society. In the Niger Delta, writers, and poets inclusive, vehemently express their dissatisfactions and criticize the agents that have marginalized the people of their God's given resources. This situation can also be extended to include the agitation for crude oil in the Niger Delta. However, since the criticism of Abiola Irele, more African critics have come on board and in one way or another other reacted to the attitude of Western critics. Their reactions have thus formed a starting point in the study of African poetry.

Mowah (1990) as cited by Omojugo (2012) notes that Izevbaye is inspired by the misconceptions as well as patronizing attitude in the work of Gerald Moore, Ulli Beier, Magaret Lawrence, and Adrian Boscoe. However, Nwoga's (1976) "*The Limitations of Universal Critical Criteria*" is geared towards establishing an African critical standard for Western and African critics alike. Thus, African critics have seized the bull by the horns and have taken responsibility in line with Nwoga's suggestion in "*The Limitation of Universal Critical Criteria*". He posits that African critics should be at the forefront as a show of understanding of their background and recognition of the fact that they are trying to do something new and authentic to the background, both in the historical fact of their society and the independence of a literary tradition.

Textual Analysis of Social Commitment in Samuel Adewumi's Selected Poems

Adewumi Samuel is one of the contemporary critical realist poets in Nigeria. His works lampoon and criticize those corrupt leaders whose major ideologies and policies were to loot the nation's treasure and render it incapacitated by their kleptomaniac sense of stealing and squandering. However, the poet has made poetry a discourse of social commitment, which is vitally clear in his poems: "Not Yet Uhuru", "House of Scandals", "Lame duck Democracy" and "The Stolen Mandate".

Not Yet Uhuru

The poem "*Not Yet Uhuru*" was written by the poet in 2007 to challenge those corrupt leaders in the corridors of power. The poet realistically criticizes how the masses including the children are wallowing with sunken eyes in poverty and hopelessness in the middle of plenty. He states:

> It is heart-sickening
> To note that the teeming masses
> Wallow in abject poverty in the midst of plenty
> In a country heavily endowed with abundant human/natural resources.
> Children are seen with sunken eyes swallow bellies
> Kwashiorkor reigning high in the land.

The poet further challenged the leaders in the corridors of power concerning their refusal to wipe away the tears of the masses rather than looting the nation's treasury by building magnificent mansions, and buying

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exotic cars while rendering the masses hopeless and helpless. He states:

Those at the corridors of power
Mind not the cause of the masses
Their welfares not in their programmes.
What they are always after
Is how to loot the treasury to feather their nests.
Always seen swollen cheeks, fat bellies, living in posh building,
chauffeur-driven posh cars.
The masses are nothing in their presence.

However, the poet rhetorically asks when the messiah will come and wipe away the tears of the masses. He states:

When will the Messiah come?
When will the tears be wiped off the masses' faces?
When will there be light at the end of the tunnel?
When will the masses hope to emerge?
To put smiles on their faces.
Only God can tell.

In addition, the above stanza describes the expectation of the masses, which can only be determined by God.

House of Scandals

The poem "*House of Scandals*" was written by the poet in 2007 to criticize how democracy which ought to provide adequate care for the masses has become a system where corruption has eaten the fabric of the legislature. He states:

Democracy
Globally best-acclaimed system of government
Taking adequate care of the masses
A system of government
Through which masses have succour
The elected leaders
Into the various political offices
Riding on the masses crest
Statutorily elected.
To carry out legislative dealings
-Corruption is proudly taking over.

The poet further criticizes how greediness and disorderliness have taken over the legislative house. A house which ought to legislate on how to bring development in all facets of the nation's sectors. He states:

Greed is the order of the day
Legislative debates
Widely thrown into the thin air
Commotion and disorderliness
Taking over the house
Decency into oblivion sent …

However, the poet re-emphasized how corruption and greediness are seen everywhere in the nation. And there, he poses a question of when these social pandemics cease in the country. He states:

Green, greed, greed
Everywhere
When will an end be put?
To the spurious spate
The corrupted land of Nigeria
Weeps, for the sins of the
[dis] honourable for your
Re-birth
Sooner or later will surely come.

The poet, however, concluded that Nigeria should weep not for the sins of the dishonourable who are lawmakers in the country, that sooner or later rebirth will surely come.

Lame duck Democracy

The poem "*Lame duck Democracy*" was written by the poet in 2007. The poet uses this poem to satirize how democracy in Nigeria has been slaughtered on the slab of election in the country. He states:

Democracy has been slaughtered
Slaughtered on the slab of elections

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Elections that were bedevilled with unprecedented riggings
Politicians struggling to outrig one another.
In an effort to cling to power.
Power that is transient.
Power that 'solely' belongs to God.

The poet continues to criticize how various critics were put into place by politicians to cling to corridors of power. He states:

Various antics were put to the test
Hired hoodlums brandishing weapons to war.
Shooting sporadically to scare
Away innocent electorates
Thousands were prevented from exercising their franchise
At electing people of their choice
To govern them in the new political dispensation.

The poet further criticizes how the state agents were made to harass and intimidate the electorates. He states;

State agents made use of
To harass and intimidate innocent voters
State agents providing security
For the political barons.
Who are out to mortgage
The future of the masses
And generations yet unborn.

However, the poet criticizes how transitory democracy is being Lame duck and doctored by outwitting vibrant contestants. He states;

The transitory democracy is Lame duck.
Transiting to a perceived Lame duck democracy

Whose passage to power had been doctored
By outwitting vibrant contestants.

The poet finally concludes that only time will tell whether the new Lame duck Democracy will stand the test of time in Nigeria. He states:

Only time will tell
Whether the new Lame duck democracy
Will stand the test of time.

The Stolen Mandate

The poem "The Stolen Mandate was written by the poet in 2007. The poet uses the poem to criticize how the 2007 General Elections were rigged and doctored by the government-appointed electoral mafias in support of the militocractic goons. He states:

What a nation Nigeria is?
Tension in the land is high in the name of transition
Transition from civilian to civilian
14-05-07 elections flawed paving way for protest nationwide
Election results daylight rigged
Doctored by the government-appointed mafias.
People mandate hijacked
By the milito-cracy goons.

The poet further states how the election had been declared as do or die affair before the election. The masses were defenceless and those who ought to protect and secure the masses were the ones rigging and hijacking the ballot boxes. He states:

Before the election
The goons have declared it
As a do-or-die affair
Do-or-die affair
Over who?
The defenceless masses?
The opposition parties are in disarray.
Their voices cannot be heard.
Like the ranting of an ant.

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The poet opines that, unless there are true electoral structures, election rigging, maiming, acrimony, hijacking of ballot boxes, burning of properties and excessive looting will continue to hunt the masses. He concludes that the electorates can heave a sigh of relief if there are no electoral crises. He states:

> …Except the true structures are
> put in place
> Elections devoid of killing
> Maiming and acrimony
> Hijacking of ballot boxes
> Burning of properties and
> Excessive looting
> Then
> The masses can heave a sigh of
> relief
> Of having a true democracy of
> their earthy dream.

Conclusion

Africa as a continent has been bedevilled with bad leadership, corruption, cronyism, gender inequality, racism and nepotism. However, African writers (poets) are committed to using their pen to challenge and criticize various anomalies for their people to be free, and live in a continent that is free from various social vices. However, this paper had x-rayed Samuel Adewumi as a committed poet whose works had challenged and criticized Nigeria's state of governance.

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