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OF HEADACHES AND SPECTACLES : The Writer and African Reconstruction on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century

bY
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A highly placed government official once remarked tNo nation was ever built on poetry’. If I had been given the opportunity to respond to the official’s remark I would have probably asked him to cite one great nation, past or present, that did not have a great literature. I dare say he would have had a problem in responding to that challenge. But this government official is by no means atypical of people who hold public office in Africa today. For many politicians, policy makers and development experts, including those who represent international organisations, there are two major determinants of development, and these are science and technology. Culture may be necessary as a curiosity for foreign dignitaries who are wont to being treated to traditional dancing and music every time they visit an African nation. In this way literature and the arts are reduced to the status of decorations that adorn our houses but have no intrinsic value in themselves.

If there is any merit in the observation I have just made it consists in suggesting that before we discuss the role of literature in the process of reconstruction in Africa we need to pause and ask ourselves what is the function of literature in

society? Indeed it is not inappropriate to ask whether literature has any role in nation building.
, shelter and
clothing. This attitude to literature developed during the age of the enlightenment in Europe when thinkers like Isaac Newton

emphasized the primacy of reason and scientific thought and derided the arts as effeminate. This brought about a dichotomy between science and the arts, with the arts being considered to have no role in the development process. The latter school, on the other hand, maintains that art is for enjoyment as well as for the strengthening of the cultural and ideological aspect of human life and is an effective tool in sharpening people's consciousness. The second school argues that implements of work have a purely utilitarian function - they are used in the process of production. For example, a hoe is used in cultivation and a pen in the production of ideas. Literature, on the other hand, has a function and a value beyond such utilitarian norms. Over and above its utilitarian function it has a spiritual value in that it provides aesthetic pleasure; it gives delight.

The difference between the two schools was summed up by G. V. Plekhanov when he delivered a lecture on art and social life in Paris way back in 1912. This, in part, is what Plekhanov has to say:

Some say: man is not made for the sabbath, but the sabbath for man; society is not made for the artist, but the artist for society. The function of art is to assist the development of man's consciousness, to improve the social system.

Others emphatically reject this view. In their opinion art is an gig in itself; to convert it into a means of achieving any extraneous aim, even the most noble, is to lower the dignity of a work of art.2

Plekhanov goes on to explain that Chernyshevsky believed that the function of art was to ireproduce life and to pass judgement on the phenomena of life.’ This
function of improving the welfare of humankind by promoting consciousness, and that art does this by ipassing judgement on the phenomena of life’. 3
The notion of art for art’s sake has been roundly rejected by the greater majority of African writers. Achebe, for example, has politics, class, race, or what Achebe calls ithe burning issues of the day’ because those very burning issues with which it deals take place within an economic, political, class and race context. Again because of its social involvement, because of its thoroughly social character, literature is partisang literature takes sides, and more so le a class society.

characterized the development process in the West in the last few hundred years has been costly to humanity. As the emphasis on science and technology became the order of the day nature was forgotten and, in consequence, our whole environment, including the ozone layer, has been endangered by pollution and other forms of environmental degradation. But now that environmentalists have begun to remind us about the importance of nature, there is a growing consciousness of the need to once again bring about a marriage between science, technology and the arts. There is therefore an increasing realization that the arts have a place in the development process.

In the case of Africa there is no doubt that writers have made an effort to contribute to the political, economic and social life of the continent. Political and economic issues have featured prominently in twentieth century African literature. The writer was part and parcel of the political reawakening that swept the continent in the 19505 and the 19605 when the whole philosophy of colonialism was roundly rejected and former colonies gradually attained independence from European powers. In the southern part of the continent some writers were actively involved in the political struggles of their countries, particularly in Angola, Mozambique and South Africa where senior political cadres did not only dedicate their lives to the struggle but used literature as part of the machinery arrayed against the oppressor. Writing on South African liberation poetry I have had occasion to make the

comment that created under apartheid conditions, it issues from the dialectic between domination and resistance, between the repression characteristic of the South African social formation and the struggle of the majority to break the system. In consequence every poem is a negation of apartheid and an assertion of the ideals of freedom, equality and social justice.6 Some of these poems successfully explore the psychological response of the oppressed citizens of South Africa to the brazen ugliness of apartheid, as is the case with some of Dennis Brutus's poetry. I believe some of the poetry has contributed to the world's understanding of the ugliness of apartheid, especially the poetry of political activists like Dennis Brutus, Lindiwe Mabuza and Wally Serote.

The foregoing suggests that a perceptive reading of Southern African liberation poetry will show that issues of human rights, freedom and democracy have been at the centre of the writer's concern for to fight for the demise of apartheid is to fight for a democratic South Africa and a free and peaceful Southern Africa. However, experience in the independent countries further north has shown that the attainment of independence or majority rule does not necessarily lead to democratic rule, neither does it necessarily bring about national development as the end of classical colonialism only signified the beginning of neocolonialism. Writers who, prior to the attainment of nationhood by their respective countries believed, like the rest of the politically conscious population, that with the coming of independence a new

ethos would be created, a new kingdom where Africans were free, corruption, social injustice, lack of development and political instability characterized by countless coups. A typical reaction was to produce what have been referred to as the novels of disillusionment such as Achebe’s A Man of the People, Ayi Kwei Armah’s The Beautxful Ones Are Not Yet Born and Ngugi’s A Grain of HQEQE- That was in the 19605. In the next decade which falls within the last twenty-five to thirty years of the twentieth century, there was a new development. Writers were no longer content to express disappointment and disillusionment with the new state of affairs. The writer, as part of the conscience of the In other words writers were now proposing solutions to the socio - political problems of Africa. Thus such novels as Ayi KWei Armah’s Two Thousand Seasons, Wole Soyinka’s Season of Anomx and assault on the dignity of the African people. This new thrust was accompanied by a pronounced ideological fervour. For one thing, these novels were more strident in their depiction of the African predicament than the novels of the 1950s and 19605 with some of the writers adopting a more radical stance than previously. For example, Armah clearly projects the image of a radical pan-

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Africanist in Two Thousand Seasons, much more so than the author
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, and in that way
she demonstrates that a woman does not have to be attached to a man
to live a fulfilling life.
ideology to the extent of accepting the
chauvinistic view that only male children are valuable. As

iHer (Nnu’s) life story is an
indictment of a system in which a woman has importance only as a
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wife or as a mother of sons, never as herself’.
The encouraging thing is that it is not only women writers who
raise these issues.
5 characters, Wanja and
Jacinta Wariinga and Festus Iyayi’s characters in Violence tell a
similar story,
But at this point in time, at the beginning
new winds of change
are blowing across Africa while at the same time some fundamental

again in February 1992 he or she would not be able to recognise our work: as the world that was three years ago. What with the unification of Germany, the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and, most miraculous of all, the disappearance of the Soviet Union from the face of the earth! Africa is caught in this whirlpool, and for this continent certain issues come to the fore - the emergence of multi-party democracy as opposed to the one-party state philosophy that dominated African political practice for more than two decades; talk of a return to civilian rule although military coups continue to occur unabated; the issue of human rights; the impending demise of apartheid in South Africa; and the adoption of structural adjustment programmes leading to the abandonment of the idea of the socialist path to development. Much of this is taking place partly as a result of external pressure. Nevertheless the changes seem to me fundamental and as we approach the eclipse of the twentieth century and the dawn of the next Africa seems to be entering a new phase of independence. Whether this is definitely for the better one cannot say for certain. On the positive side the end of apartheid seems to be in sight; there are prospects of peace in a number of war torn countries and there is an indication that a few more African states are now prepared to grant their citizens their democratic right to choose their own leaders or oppressors as the case may be. On the negative side drought continues to plague many an African country resulting in large scale starvation and hunger and exacerbating the ever threatening problem of environmental degradation. New economic, political and

military alliances are being forged by the countries of the No
leaving the weak and poor countries of the South completely at the
mercy of powerful nations. As structural adjustment programmes are
percentage of each country’s
put in place one wonders what
population will manage to cope with the rising cost of essential
goods. And in the effort to revamp the economy by adopting
structural adjustment programmes are all issues of ideology and
How, for instance, is the
cturally
adjust our economies?
nation has to contend with the phenomenon of AIDS which is already
making substantial inroads into the human resource development
efforts of our nations.
e these are some of the issues that should exercise the
I believ
mind of the writer in our time whatever his or her ideological
persuasion. And while we contemplate on these issues it may be
salutary to revisit the optimism of the 19705 as reflected in such
works as Armah’s Two Thousand Seasons, Alex La Guma’s In the Fog
of the Seasons’ End and Ngugi’s Petals of Blood. In Ngugi’s novel,
for instance, we are given a wonderful vision of a new Kenyan
society, a socialist society free from all forms of exploitation.
assages in
rkers and the peasants leading the
to overturn the system and all its

y gods and gnomic angels, bringing to an
end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking
blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then would the
kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joying and loving
in creative labour --- (p 344).
contradictions have been resolved. This is where some authors who
are guided by what one may refer to as lthe new realism' will give
us some food for thought. I wish to cite three works characterised
by this form of realism. TWO of the books present a Marxist
interpretation of society and the third is by a social democrat.
I refer here to Sahle Sellassie's Firebrands (1979),lO Pepetela's
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Ma ombe (1980) and Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah
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(1987). Pepetela wrote his novel as a senior member of a
rule, but he presents a refreshing analysis of the problems of
building a socialist society. Among other things he warns the
reader that the vanguard Party itself, the main instrument of
liberation, may create a new bureaucracy that becomes lord and
master obliging everybody to conform. He warns against a
simplistic belief in the dictatorship of the proletariat. As the
character Fearless says, iThe lie begins with saying that the
proletariat has taken power'. The worker who becomes part of the

leadership is no longer a proletarian, Fearless argues, as such a worker has become an intellectual (p 80). Writing about the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 which brought to an end centuries of feudalism Sellassie aptly notes:

Ama, who represents hope that springs eternal. Hope there must be in any meaningful social struggle for without hope there can be no

permanently maintain the upper hand.
What I find even more fascinating and perhaps more relevant to the concerns of this conference is Achebe’s theory of literary creativity which he propounds through the ideas and statements made by Ikem Osodi, especially in Chapter 12 where Ikem addresses university students. Ikem gives what are obviously Achebe’s views on the functions of the writer. As a writer Ikem wants ito excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the conditions of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living’ (pp 145-6). I couldn’t agree

values. But both as a reader and a budding writer I am compelled to disagree with some of Ikem’s views on the role of the writer. The writer does not provide solutions to problems, Ikem contends; a writer does not give answers but asks questions. Writers do not give prescriptions, they give headaches. I agree and disagree. Yes, it is the function of the writer to give headaches (provided, of course, the headaches are characterised by both pain and pleasure). I admit the writer should not seek to give prescriptions and to perform miracles. If I am short sighted the writer should not pretend to be capable of finding a permanent cure for my myopia, but he or she should at least provide me with a pair of spectacles so that I can see further than my nose. I believe the writer who only seeks to cause headaches and never suggests what possible directions there are for society to take runs the risk of becoming sanctimonious, adopting the holier-than-thou attitude which smacks of self-righteousness and deprives the artist of the opportunity to engage in constructive criticism. If I were a political leader, a member of the oppressed class or a young radical burning with the desire to change the world, I would not demand miracles from any writer because it is not in the nature of literature to perform miracles. All I would say is: Look, I am at a crossroads, caught in this whirlpool of political, economic and social problems. I am myopic; please give me a pair of spectacles and lead me gently by the hand so that I can see my way out or the whirlpool. This, I think, is the first challenge to the African writer on the threshold of the twenty-first century. As writers

we can only give what we have. If the spectacles we provide are not good enough our readers will continue to grope in darkness failing to see beyond their noses.

But there are other challenges to the writer of imaginative literature in our time, especially those who wish to contribute to the reconstruction of society by inculcating new values. In order people read that kind of literature. Reading newspapers and magazines is relatively inexpensive from the point of view of both time and financial outlay. It has been observed that with the rising cost of publishing in Africa inews and entertainment to wade through a novel or to read a poem. If this is true of those of us whose vocation is to deal with books, what more of those who have to attend to important matters of state? Do they have the time to read the writer’s revelations about the dream of a better society? And what of the peasants and workers on whose behalf many writers seek to speak? Do they have the time to read

This leads to the
question whether the African writer is only assured of the
opportunity to preach to the converted,
In conclusion,
approaches the African

literature help the African people to acquire :3 more profound appreciation of their predicament and assist in the cultivation of new values that lead the continent to higher levels of development? And is literature going to be read by people who matter, or are we heading for an era where, in the poor countries at least, literature is read about but not read? If the latter is true what then is the role of the African writer on the threshold of the twenty-first century? In short, it seems to ’me that African writers should find painkillers for their own headaches before they give headaches to others. Hopefully, they will be able to find painkillers for their headaches and give their readers both headaches and spectacles.

Notes

See St Matthew’s Gospel, 12, 38-42.

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