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WITHIN AND BEYOND PROLITERIAN PHILOSOPHY: OLU OBAFEMI AND THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL ORDER OF MERIT (NNOM) AWARD

Abdullahi, Kadir Ayinde
Department of English
Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin
Abdullahi.ka@unilorin.edu.ng

Abstract

Obafemi won the Nigerian National Order of Merit Award in Humanities for the year 2018. The award was in recognition of his tremendous contributions to the intellectual development of Nigeria and indeed his deep entrenchment of proliterian philosophy that canvasses the core values of justice, equality, fairness and freedom as moral ideals for promoting meaningful lives and peaceful co-existence. In view of this accomplishment, this paper examined the literature of Obafemi in the episteme of an ideological philosophy of art and society. Obafemi's ideological persuasion in its forms, dimensions and styles seek to arouse consciousness among the African masses, who are the victims of the neo-colonial oppression and exploitation. His literature appears to be a potent catalyst for the nation's development because it instructs the readers as it mirrors society. The paper concludes that in spite of the enormous energies that Obafemi and his other humanist/socialist writers have invested in literature and theatre, African masses are still grappling with challenges of poverty, marginalization, exploitation and endemic backwardness. The revolutionary import in their works is yet to take root in the consciousness of the masses as to engender the social change envisioned.

Key words: Obafemi, Order of Merit, Humanities, Ideology, Theatre

Introduction

This edition of Ilorin Journal of English Studies aptly coincided with the conferment of the 2018 Nigerian National Order of Merit (NNOM) award in the Humanities on our amiable Editor-in-Chief, the distinguished Professor Olu Obafemi of the Department of English, University of Ilorin. The National Order of Merit is the highest academic award in Nigeria mostly conferred on distinguished academia and intellectuals who have made outstanding contributions to the academic growth and development of various disciplines in Sciences, Technology, Medicine, Arts, Humanities and Cultural Studies. The award is often conferred on the recipient by the Federal Government following a nomination and approval of the Governing Board of the Nigerian National Order of Merit Award. Recipients of this award have the legal right to use the postnominal title: NNOM.

The award was instituted in 1979 and it has so far been conferred on only 76 distinguished academia among whom were Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Mabel Segun, Abiola Irele, Isidore Okpewho as well as Olu obafemi among others. Other distinguished Nigerians who have equally been honoured in specialisations outside literature include Adiele Afigbo, Alexandra Animalu, David Aradeon, Seth Sunday Ajayi, Lazarus Ekwueme, Teslim Olawale Elias, Etim Moses Essien, Akpanolou Ikpong Ette, Francis Idachaba, Ladi Kwali, Andrew Jonathan Nok, Chukwuedu

Nwokolo, Lateef Akinola Salako, Oye Gureje, Peter Onyekwere Ebigbo, Oyawale Tomori, Bruce Olukayode Odugbemi, Adesoji Adesina, etc. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria_national_order_of_merit_award). The award was given to these deserving citizens of Nigeria at various times in their lives for their intellectual and academic attainment which had remarkably impacted on national endeavour in many important ramifications.

In conferring the award on Professor Olu Obafemi on 6th December, 2018 at the Presidential Villa, Abuja, President Muhammadu Buhari made it eloquently clear that Obafemi and the likes of him who had been so honoured in the past would fondly serve as motivation and encouragement for the future generation of Nigerians. The President says further that Nigeria as a nation needs the knowledge, expertise and contribution of these rare breed of thinkers to boost and improve her intellectual development and capacity building in its transformational drive to an egalitarian society among the comity of nations globally. By this honour, Professor Obafemi is admitted into an enviable, respected, admirable and distinguished class of eminent scholars and academia in Nigeria whom the budding generation of researchers must strive to emulate.

In his remarks, the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Nigerian National Order of Merit Award, Professor Shekarau Aku described Obafemi as the 76th recipient of the award, who by his distinguished research work and service to humanity, had undoubtedly printed his name in gold. He established that Obafemi's effort will endure and continue to blaze a new trail for sustainable development and academic excellence desirable for the progress of Nigeria. In his acceptance speech, Professor Obafemi made a compelling statement that he did not take the award for granted considering the number of nominees from among whom he had emerged the winner. He says "the story of my life's journey provides instruction on the value of merit in the attainment of possibilities for individuals, groups and societies" (2018, p.3). Obafemi, thus, affirmed his conviction that merit is a veritable credo of governance and proposed that it is forever good to stick to what is just and right. (<http://www.promptnewsonline.com/buhari-confers-nnom-award.on-obafemi>, p.p 2-5).

Profile of Olu Obafemi

Born on April 4, 1950 in Akutupa-Bunu town of Kogi State, Obafemi was educated at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Sheffield and the University of Leed in UK, where he earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Dramatic Literature in 1981(<http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/index.php/fnews>). Obafemi started his career as a Graduate Assistant in the then Department of Modern European Languages, University of Ilorin on September 13, 1976. He was among the first twenty academics employed in the University and later sent abroad for the doctoral degree. He served in the Department along side prominent academics as Professor David Cook, Professor Samuel Adewoye, Professor Efurosibina Adegbija, Dr. Bayo Ogunjimi, Professor Matiu Nnoruka, Professor Tunde Ajiboye, Dr. Gabriel Ajadi, Dr. Baa Mensa and host of others. Obafemi rose progressively to the rank of Professor of English and Dramatic Literature on 1st October, 1990. He was Head, Department of Modern European Languages (1990-1993), Dean, Student Affairs (1993-1997), and Member of the Governing Council of the University of Ilorin (1990-1998), Member of the Governing Board of the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (2000-2008) among other several academic and administrative responsibilities. He has been External Examiner to over twenty Nigerian Universities and Visiting Professor to many universities in Nigeria and abroad including

Universities of Lagos, Leeds, Cambridge, Oxford, Hull (UK), Bayreuth (Germany), Tennessee Technology University, Cookeville, USA and Western Illinois University, Macombe, USA.

In his doctoral dissertation entitled *Cultural Heritage and Social Vision in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre* submitted to Leed University in 1981, Obafemi cited in Raji (2000, p.18) maintains that “ the only real way we can be true to ourselves is by keeping our date with destiny”(p.52). Today, in consonance with his philosophical postulation, Obafemi’s destiny as reflected in his mastery of words and theatrical acumen had yielded fourteen scholarly books, fifteen creative plays, over seventy journal papers in national and international publishing outlets as well as thoughtful essays in several national dailies. It was in recognition of his tremendous contributions to scholarship in terms of teaching and research that at his fifty birthday anniversary, a festschrift, *Larger Than His Frame* was written in his honour in 2000. In the same vein, an international conference titled ‘Obafconfab’ was convened at the University of Ilorin in April, 2010 to mark his sixty birthday in a grand style.

Obafemi was a former Chairman of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), University of Ilorin. He is a Fellow and former President of Nigeria Academy of Letters (NAL). He is also a Fellow of the former Nigeria English Studies Association, now Nigeria English Scholars’ Association, Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists, and the Association of Nigerian Authors. Obafemi was formerly the Director of Research at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, (NIPSS), Kuru, Jos. He was one-time the Chairman of the Governing Board of the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM), former President of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), former President of Society of Nigerian Theatre Atrists (SONTA). He was also the Chair of the Intellectual Property Organisation, the Reproductive Rights Society of Nigeria and a member of the International Federation of the Reproductive Rights Organisation (IFRRO). He served as a member of the Editorial Board of several newspapers including *The Nigerian Herald*, *Comet*, *Post Express* and *The Sun*. He has been Editorial Consultant and feature writer for eight Nigerian newspapers. Obafemi has served as the editor and editorial adviser for several national and international books and journal outlets including *Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Okun Studies*, *Journal of African Theatre*, *Journal of Centre for Black and African Civilization*, *Omo-Okun journal*, *Journal of the Society of Theatre Artists* among others. (<https://femiosofisan.wordpress.com/2016/06/05/olu-obafemi-deliver...>)

Obafemi is a playwright, theatre director, poet, novelist, translator, essayist, literary and social critic, cultural historian and newspaper columnist. Among his several literary publications for the theatre include *Naira Has No Gender*, *Night of a Mystical Beast and the New Dawn*, *Suicide Syndrome*, *Sacred Cow*, *Ogidi Mandate*, which won ANA/John Pepper Clark Prize for Drama in 2010. Other plays are *Running Dreams*, *Dark Times Are Over* and *Pestle on the Mortal*. His fictional narrative/novel is ‘*Wheels*. Obafemi’s anthologies of poetry are *Songs of Hopes* as well as *Illuminations: Songs and Dances from Belly of Time*. Apart from literary publications, Obafemi has equally translated and published D.O. Fagunwa’s *Adittu Olodunmare* as *The Mysteries of Gods* in 2012. His seminar works and critical essays on contemporary African literature and theatre include, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre (1996)*, *Politics and Aesthetics: Essays in Drama, Theatre and Performance*, *Public Discourse in Humanities, Cultural Studies: Theories, Concepts and Practice*, *ideology and stagecraft* (the last two with Ahmed Yerima), *New Introduction to Literature, Nigerian Writers on the Nigerian Civil War: Anguish, Commitment and Catharsis*, *Character is Beauty: Redefining Yoruba Culture and Identity*.(http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1469139.olu_obafemi), His inaugural lecture

entitled *Literature at the Border of Discourse in the Service of Humanity* is an outstanding summation of Obafemi's achievement as a teacher and humanist writer. Obafemi recently wrote and published the *Biography of Olusegun Mimiko*, former Governor of Ondo whom he describes as unsung hero in modern Nigerian politics. As a biographer, Obafemi showed interest in the personality of upcoming, middle strata administrators like Mimiko who is emerging to shape the destinies of Nigerians. This biography is a story of an individual who is yet to attain his height but has created enough evidence that human society can learn from. In a nation that is fraught with dearth of heroism, the biographer considers Mimiko a daredevilry whose personal achievements constitute a subject of good literature.

Proliterian Philosophy and Ideology in the Literature of Olu Obafemi

What appears to one as the authorial ideology and philosophical basis of Obafemi's literature and theatre is considerably well articulated in his critical essay entitled "The Faculty at African Universities in the Age of Globalisation: Postcolonialism and the Scholar/Writer in the 21st Century" published in 2005. Obafemi echoes his social commitment to art, ideology and society in the following words:

The African intellectuals, including those in the universities need to mediate the tools of perception, which the politicians have blunted. As I said earlier, among our educated elite, there is a plethora but un-systemized body of ideas, theories and concepts pulsating with aggression and verse, that are essential for mediating, illuminating and transforming society and its perception within and outside the continent. In the ivory tower in Africa, some of these ideologies and theories are frustrated because of the pervasive feeling of alienation from the political mainstream of the intellectual by the people in politics. In the globalizing world, the African civilization is beset with a real danger of marginalization-or at least abnegation and renunciation, when what is required is re-affirmation and revalidation (p.31)

This declaration is borne out the circumstances of the post-independence disillusionment. For nearly a century, Africa was under colonial rule. Following a series of political agitations, it was believed that the nationalists and political elites were the crucial transformative process that would fashion a modern postcolonial society. With the independence, the widespread complaint is that politics has been taken over by mobs and criminals. Instead of a progressive society, what eventually emerged is the entrenchment of the disorderly, corrupt and irrational practices that rob the masses of social justice and even distribution of wealth. It is for this reason that Obafemi emerges as one of the most engaging men of culture among the wave of contemporary authors in Africa. His writings and deep understanding of the challenges facing the postcolonial African nations impacted greatly in defining what should form the fulcrum of Africans' self-determination. His literature takes the form of revolutionary and ideological philosophy that reflects the capacity and potential of the down trodden masses to herald a social change. In the face of unbearable moral pervasity, Obafemi portrays a postcolonial African society as a political space where certain forces arrogantly pride themselves implacable as well as appearing as brutal enemies of a progressive society. This is a social malady that Obafemi and his literature not merely castigate for his teeming readers, but also for humanity in general.

The socio-political and historical realities of the Nigerian nation and the search for social redemption, therefore, constitute the thematic preoccupations of Obafemi's literature. From his theatre to poetry and fiction, the image that emerged about Obafemi is that of an artist who identifies himself unambiguously with the crisis of political evolution of Nigeria. Through various dramaturgies associated with Brechtian theatre aesthetics and traditional philosophy of 'Ajon', he aesthetically deployed his works for the sole purpose of seeking social redemption in a society riddled with political corruption, massive exploitation and social injustice. The mission of transforming society through the depiction of the neo-colonial predicaments and the search for an alternative tradition largely dominated the thinking and writing of Obafemi. So vigorously had Obafemi aligned his theatre to the crisis of political evolution of Nigeria that it closely mirrored the social praxis that had informed his reformatory literature. As a playwright and dramatist, Obafemi believes that it is an integral part of the universal heritage of literature that it should seek to explore the conflicts and vices that burden mankind. Writing on a writer's commitment to society, Achebe (1978, p.117) declares that

When we speak of a writer's commitment, we mean his attachment to particular social aims and the use of his writing to advance those social aims. This, of course, implies a belief that literature can and should be used as a force for social change and a writer has a responsibility to do so.

In tandem with Achebe's clarion call, Obafemi emerges as a multi-talented and many sided personality who employs literature as a medium for articulating the ideas and ideologies that can reform society. His literary productions are aesthetically constructed to promote egalitarian society. His works across all the genres have also built a bridge of understanding among contentious gulfs of class, culture and race. As a humanist writer, Obafemi is literarily engaged with the ultimate restoration of humanity. His literature is consistently relevant to the growth of human civilization. As a postcolonial African creative artist, he has shown that the recent history of Africa politics is one in which the crisis of nation building has been allowed to decay leading to all round predicament of governability. This, perhaps, explains why his art has been framed largely within the confines of a modernization narrative, a Marxist type which operates within the conceptual domain of state and society. The Marxist critics are recognized for their conviction that all past history is a struggle between the antagonist and opposing economic classes in a state of change. Marxist criticism in literature aims largely to divulge in the content of a work-its explicit and implicit assumptions and values on matters of culture, race, class and power. The Marxist ideology is fundamentally intended not only to reveal and clarify issues of capitalist economy; it also worked against class stratification and economic oppression. The Marxist ideology, thus, focuses on depicting class conflict as well as reinforcing the class distinction through the medium of literature.

Literature and politics are symbiotically related. Politics comes into literature when a writer's concern with the public welfare is predominant. Obafemi's commitment to political expression found evidence in his consistent preoccupation with the state of Nigerians after the independence. The core value of Obafemi's theatre from the start has been politics. Therefore, his essay, *Politics of Theatre and The Theatre of Politics in Nigeria*, published by the Department of Theatre at the University of Illinois in USA in 2007 provides the core value of his social responsibility as a writer and advocate of change. This is where Obafemi declares that his numerous works of literature including critical essays are intended as intellectual engagement in the dialectics within the relationship and interactions between politics and theatre. The ultimate

objective of his revolutionary and aesthetic ideology is the mobilisation and conscientisation of the masses with emotion, bathos, pathos and empathy in a form of mass/mob action against the conspirators, i.e the haves and elites who perpetuate corruptions and other unethical practices. Hence, Obafemi's theatre and the Nigerian experience have a veritable symbiosis. Obafemi (2007, p.14) states that

...protest theatre of the first generation Nigerian dramatists and the theatre of political engagement/radical theatre of the second generation, including the recent theatre tradition of performances addressing contemporary issues aimed at raising mass and community awareness and consciousness toward social transformation as well as providing radical, popular and reformist alternatives to the decadent governance of the state.

Apparently, theatre and politics in Nigeria as postulated by Obafemi seeks to articulate the proletarian philosophy of society. Several of his theatrical works are guided by aesthetic schism anchored on a radical cum ideological persuasion in their forms, styles and presentations. The dramatic thrust of his work is firmly established on the principle of social awareness and struggle for alternative tradition. This is what Gbilekaa (1997, p.51-52) intends when he asserts that "the committed writer preaches the changeability of the old institutions, demystifies capitalist myth by attacking the *status quo*, educates the people, creates hope in them in such a way that they become confident of making changes".

In a way similar to the role of bards in traditional society, Obafemi carries the burden of an interventionist, of projecting a vision of modernizing the pattern of governance and mitigate the pressures of the prevailing socio-economic imbalance. Obafemi's public lecture in honour of Femi Osofisan entitled "Trauma and Curative Metaphor: The many Fascinating paths of Osofisan's Journey" reviewed by Soladeyemi (2006), makes it clear that bad governance refers to the inability of leaders to synthesis the various component of a government machinery to perform meaningfully and creditably. The paper reveals how the Postcolonial Africa is bedeviled with a myriad of crisis ranging from election frauds, corruption and poor governance. These are 'big issues' raised by African emergent writers. This thematic focus forms the crux of attention of many post- independence narratives because the problem constitutes the clog in the wheel of progress of many African nations. The popularity of Obafemi's literature must be, in a large measure, attributed to his relentless engagement with African politics over the last three decades or so, specifically the political sphere which has been defined by repression and intolerance. Obafemi (2019, p.2) insists that

We need a sense of direction. We need committed leadership. We need visionaries who can look beyond this moment. Our problems are so obvious, so we have to create envisioned structures, economic structures, political structures, and who can get policies there that can help galvanise the abundant potentials of our nation to the betterment and improvement of the human condition-leaders who are tolerant, leaders who are above board in terms of sectarianism, leaders who are Nigerians to the core, who are concerned about destiny of Nigeria. In specific terms, Nigerians, for good or ill.

The interest of this essay is not limited to Obafemi's achievement as a literary writer; it is particularly concerned with his literature as an act of intervention in the public sphere where a writer is involved in making meaning and willing into being new possibilities of defining self in a socio-political scape that sets the limits for freedom and self-determination. The paper is also interested in Obafemi's literature as a political act which works through specific symbolic structure, decoding the political unconscious of performance. The high point of the essay's argument is that Obafemi's literature is not only about its narrative structure, its rhythmic styles, although this important, it is also about what his narrative is able to tell us about ourselves, that in fact, art is a mode of self-assessment capable of revealing the complex layers of our being and society. Obafemi's engagement with literature has, in a very remarkable way, reflected his search for an appropriate response to the political event of the neo-colonial Nigeria. His corpus is essentially an aesthetic form with which he interpreted contemporary political realities and proposed a vision of change. Amuta cited in Marshall (2007, p.2) declares that

African literature is predicated on the challenges posed by the reality of neo-colonialism. Awareness of the impact of colonialism and the contradiction of neo-colonialism and commitment to their negation has informed the utterances of key African nationalists and men of culture over the year.

This assumption is well illustrative in his novel, *Wheels*. This novel, for instance, is a constructed narrative that defines human as an agent of change. It also offers a pathway to resolving inherent contradiction in the body-polity. In Africa today, the socio-economic debacle and political disorder are products of the erosion of social justice, equity, liberty and fair play. Ododo (2010, p.i) argues that "prevalent everywhere, even in unsuspecting guises, are cultures of oppression, exploitation, corruption, agony and the tyranny of exclusion-marginalisation. All of these are inimical to peace". It is against this background that *Wheels* locates its relevance to contemporary realities in Africa. This critical assertion constitutes an ideological approach to the criticism of African literature as a poetics of the oppressed. Literature constitutes a veritable weapon of ideology in the struggle for liberation against the various forms of domination and oppression. *Wheels* is not only concerned with social injustice and flawed nationalism, but also with a broad ideological issue of nation-building. One significant theme that permeates the novel, which positions itself as a dissident voice, is that it provides a platform for those classes of people excluded from mainstream politics to think about the question of power. Evidently, *Wheels* provides an imaginative space for debating the issue of politics and governance. The novel also acts as a site for integration, of re-constituting wholeness for those dislocated by authority, and a site of redemption, of change and national longing for a society where human value reigns- a community where good governance becomes the axial of national politics. Protest through the medium of art and idea-provoking satire is the thematic preoccupation of Obafemi's *Wheels*.

Politics and societal issues constitute the basis of Obafemi's creative literature. His novel is directed at a return to fundamental humanism that has been dislocated through socio-political corruption. Obafemi is an embodiment of the vision of his own time. He believes that his novel will have a therapeutic effect which will not only transform the people's way of thinking and perceiving, but also will mobilize them to participate in revolution. Rather than painting the

historical past in a way that does nothing to solve the present neocolonial problems, Obafemi's *Wheels* seeks a massive, society- involved solutions towards the hydra-headed problems besetting Nigeria. The novel, through incitement, aims at conscientizing the ordinary people who will rise to break the chains of oppression and exploitation with which the oppressive capitalists have tied them. As a revolutionary artist, Obafemi seeks to pursue the enlightenment of the masses about the causes of their poverty so as to liberate them from the tenacious believe in heaven made inequality syndrome in which they are trapped. This process of conscientization must come first before people can rise to fight for their rights.

In spite of the enormous works on politics and theatre and their revolutionary imperative, African nations are still far from the ideal envisioned by the reformers like Obafemi and others. Apparently, the level of poverty and unemployment are still too high. One problem that is apparent in the ideological literature whether within the confines of a Marxist or Weberian social philosophy is lack of its total relevance to Africa. Religion, culture and ethnicity came under the sway of this transformative project in a major way. These norms made it impossible for African masses to form a formidable opposition to the ruling elites. One is not persuaded that there exists a revolutionary instinct among the targeted African masses. Africa is a disenchanted and incoherent political space where mass action is usually employed for insignificant purpose. Africa is a place where revolution is becoming more and more difficult to be perceived as a legitimate instrument to achieve the transcendently established moral goals. In his '*Issues in African Literature*', Nnolim (2010) argues that Marxist/socialist fulmination hardly led to the new nationalities in the African literary domain and by extension the society that it tends to transform. "The failure of the Marxist/socialist ideologues to move African literature forward was resounding. The ultimate aim of the Marxist oriented literature was utopia"(p. 92). Okunoye (2008, p.17) shares a similar view when he states that

Marxists critics generally exaggerate the relevance of their method and down play the fact that it is not indigenous to Africa...Even though Marxist critics would always labour hard to make a case for the anti-imperialist orientation of their method, their critical project cannot be said to represent an authentic tool for the appraisal of African poetry.

The import of this critical assertion is that many African scholars embraced Marxists' perspective of art and society without a critical evaluation of its relevance to their society. The lack of potency and dynamism in African Marxist critical practice can, therefore, be accounted for in its irrelevance to the sensibility of African masses.

In conclusion, this paper x-rayed the contributions of Obafemi to the Marxist scholarship through his numerous works of literature over the last three decades. His literature has long recognised that class hierarchy and inequality are fundamental features of the post African nations. The dominant interest and thematic preoccupation of his works is to improve the lives of the African masses. African leaders are yet to understand the value of sacrifice, value of envisioning society beyond personal interest. Obafemi believes that a leader must be a man of vision, compassionate, a man who not only wishes to lead people to where they desired but also where they ought to be. Leaders must be such individuals with empathy, passion, self-sacrifice, industry and patriotism. The combinations of these lofty qualities define a good leader.

Members of the Editorial Committee as well as the contributors heartily felicitate with Professor Olu Obafemi over this distinguished recognition. The award is a clear testimony of his exemplary accomplishment as a scholar, researcher and mentor and indeed his priceless contributions to credible scholarship. We wish him more and more enduring years of prosperous service to humanity. His imprints in the world of letter and arts will forever remain inspirational and indelible. Cheers!

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