

Literature and democratic reforms in Nigeria

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This paper is on the impact of literature on the democratic reforms process in Nigeria. It explains democracy as an alternative political system that involves the freedom of human relationships in the acquisition and exercise of power to the benefit of the people. Literature, by its nature does not thrive in the oblivion, it emanates and develops from the conscious act of me in the society. These are preceded by the definitions of literature, democracy and reform to the foreground understanding of the works. It concludes by urging literary writers to, with deep sense of commitment, be painstaking in weeding the garden of democracy.

Introduction

National development is attained through a well-defined, articulated and systematic input into the political, educational and economic life of a nation. The necessity to identify the areas of weakness in the various sectors for regeneration and to strengthen the encouraging and viable ones to enhance efficiency and effectiveness cannot be overemphasized. The nation's political system, a democratic one, has to be carried along in the ongoing reform programme for holistic achievement. Hence, the need for increased innovations and conscious constructive restructuring of judiciary, electoral process, etc. to meet up the challenges of the moment and posterity.

In the pursuance of the democratic reform process, literature, a veritable aspect of the suspect structure has immeasurable impact to make. It has to situate itself to depict the society as it is. It has to create a semblance of the political realities and the possible alternative patterns.

Democracy: Its origins and models

Many of the elements of modern democracy are usually taken to have originated in ancient Greece, particularly the city state of Athens. Indeed, the word, 'democracy' derives from two Greek words, 'demos' which means 'the people' and 'kratein' which means 'rule of or by'. The term democracy, therefore, literally means 'rule by the people'. In addition to its Greek antecedents, modern democracy is also taken to have evolved from such medieval institutions as

the British Parliament and the jury and from the political theories of the seventeenth century such as equality of men, natural rights, and sovereignty.’

However, it is now being widely understood that democracy is not an exclusively Greek or Western value. Recent historical and archaeological research has shown that some of the basic principles of democracy existed in other civilizations. For instance, the principles of accountability, consensus building and popular participation were important features of many pre-colonial systems of government in Africa. Democracy therefore consists of principles that have universal relevance and multiple sources.

However, as practised in ancient Athens, democracy was characterized by three distinguishing features. First, supreme power was vested in the ‘ekidesia’, the assembly of all male citizens, at which each was entitled to participate by discussion and voting. Second, the system permitted freedom of speech and, third, it made all political offices open to all citizens, who were chosen by lot.

Checks and controls were put in place to prevent any individual or group from acquiring excessive power. For instance, there was no permanent civil service. An Administrative Council of Five Hundred was constituted each year and all the members accounted for their actions at the end of their tenure.

In effect, democracy in ancient Greece meant direct and active participation of the citizens in the affairs of the polls or city-state. The citizens were therefore citizen governors’ who at one and the same time subjects of political authority and the creators of public rules and regulations. This arrangement was feasible because citizenship was restricted to free-born adult males - women, children, slaves and resident aliens were excluded. Egalitarian decision-making was therefore possible. The system was also facilitated by the slave mode of production on which the society was based. Athenian citizens owned slaves who engaged in direct production on their behalf. The citizens therefore had the time to concentrate on political debates and activities.

The socioeconomic conditions under which Athenian democracy thrived have long since disappeared. The city-state has been replaced by the modern nation-state as the unit of political identification. The slave mode of production has been supplanted by the feudal system which, in turn, was superseded by the capitalist system. Prolonged and grim struggles among the social classes within feudalism and early capitalism led to re-formulations of democracy.

According to Held, the contending views on democracy reflect ‘deeply rooted’ conflict about whether democracy should mean some kind of popular power in which citizens are directly engaged in self-government and self-regulation or be conceived as a means of conferring authority on those periodically voted into office’. The author notes further that this disagreement has given rise to ‘three basic variants or models of democracy. He names these as, first, ‘the direct or participatory democracy’, in which citizen’s are involved, as in ancient Athens. The second model is the ‘Liberal or representative democracy’. This model views democracy as a system of rule embracing elected ‘officials’ who undertake to ‘represent’ the interest and views of the citizens within the framework of ‘rule of law’.

The third model of democracy identified by Held is the ‘Marxist tradition’. This model is also sometimes referred to as ‘people’s democracy’. The Marxist theory of democracy seeks to extend equality of all citizens from the political to the social and economic spheres of life. At the economic level this is achieved by allowing equality in the ownership of the means of production through the nationalization of major enterprises. Equality in the social sphere was achieved through the institutionalization of rights to education, pension, medical services, insurance, employment, mother and child care, and in the enjoyment of leisure.

Liberal democracy or representative democracy has emerged as the dominant model of democracy. It is usually what people mean when they now speak of democracy. Direct, popular participation in day-to-day governance is impossible in modern nation-states all of which consist of millions of citizens and not a few thousands - as was the case in the ancient Greek polls. Direct, popular democracy has therefore, become an ideal which may not be feasible in modern states.

Whether the Marxist model should be regarded as a valid model of democracy has always been a subject of contention among scholars. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe all of which were based on Marxist ideology have greatly undermined the arguments of Marxist democracy as a feasible alternative to liberal democracy. It is to be noted, however, that advocates of the foremost liberal democratic model often draw from the elements of direct democracy and the arguments of the Marxian tradition.

Literature and democratic reforms

Literature has been defined variously as those attempting to describe it. This paper, however, will restrict itself to few technical perspectives of literature: as a mirror of man's experience (Godspower: 2006:64), human culture committed to writing (Ahmed 2002:)) and "a form of human expression" not primarily works that are informative or scholarly (New Encyclopedia Britannica 1988:87).

According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995:364), Democracy is

The belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves.

The germ of the concept of democracy, though very subtle can be traced to the early life of the Athenians at the end of 7th and during the 6th centuries. That was the time when the Athenians unlike the Spartans, had a shift of focus from military training to the civil aspects of life and culture. Then, the free citizens would gather at a common center to discuss and take important discussions (History of Education, PDE 101 NTI). That seed of democracy sown by the Athenians has undergone and is still undergoing transformations and reforms. Thus, a widely believed notion of democracy is that it is of the people by the people for the general well being of the society that adopts it. Democracy encompasses transparency and accountability of the governors to the governed (Azeez 1996: 10). It involves the interplay of understanding, trust and rule of law between the legislators, executives, judicial arms and the electorates to foster a tranquil society.

- i. A change intended to correct a situation that is wrong more effectively.
- ii. To improve a situation by correcting things that are wrong or unfair, or make a system work more effectively.

The place of literature in the democratic reforms calls writer commitment to the cause of the general. Literature should capture the realities in the socio-political structures that are conterminous

with the colonial traditions. It should measure realities against the deals. A writer's political commitment should be unwavering. Unless he is perfectly satisfied with the status quo, unless he thinks the new society is ordered in the best possible way and change is not desirable way and change is not desirable (Nazareth 1965:6).

The point of view of Nazareth (1965) is that a writer should not believe that democracy is synonymous with good governance. To draw from Ogude (1996:11), he dwells exhaustively on the ill-formed impression of the white man against an African. He makes reference to Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* where Mr. Pilkings visits the Elesin behind the iron curtain and told him that Elesin's son, Olunde, will visit him with his (Mr. Pilkings) advice. By implication, Pilkings wants us to believe that Africans have no positive direction except with the white man's "advice" and guidance. This can by extension, be applied to the unfounded impression that believe the Whiteman's belief that:

Africans were beastly strangers to the ideas of society and good governance before the arrival of the White men on the African continent sometime in the 15th century, European propaganda has continued to equate good governance with European form of government.

The writer's knowledge of the concept of democracy and dialectics of African's pre-colonial through colonial to post-colonial life is significant to foreground his analysis of realities. Democracy is a political system introduced by the colonizers to the colonized at the eve of their departure to sustain their hegemony in spirit (from outside the physical boundaries of African nations). Instance of this West minister-style democracy was instituted in Hong Kong where Britain ruled for over 150 years (Ogude 1996:11). Africans have uncritically accepted and equated democracy with good governance so much that:

For some strange reasons, enlightened and quite intelligent Africans have not learnt to swear by democracy, a system of government which the great English politician, Edmund Burke,

dismissed as the most dangerous thing in the world and which Winston Churchill characterized as perhaps the worst form of government (Gunned 1996:11).

Democracy, regardless of its origin and practice, is all about electorates, candidates for elective offices and their programmes (Manifestation), their eligibility and credibility and the electoral processes to produce them. It goes further to the conduct of actual election (including valid and invalid votes cast), announcement of results, protest by aggrieved individuals or parties, electoral laws, etc.

The bottom line of democracy is the acquisition of power and how it is exercised in favour of the masses not at their detriment. In the quest for democratic reforms, what types of leaders are credible as the custodians of the people's fancy? Shehu (2003:12) provides an answer:

We need political leaders with an economic think tank,
world
view and foresight that will not only sell our assets and
common
patrimony but must give us sensible, sufficient, tangible
and tenable reasons why they must be sold.

Our democratic leaders are however contrariwise to Shehu's leadership qualities. They busy themselves with spending billions of naira borrowed from International Monetary Fund (IMF) and, those belonging to the innocent tax payers on white elephant projects and programmes that have no bearing to the drab and desolate living condition of the patiently waiting masses. Such projects include building of stadia, hosting of games and meeting of commonwealth instead of providing jobs for the teeming unemployed, improve on food production, funding of education, provision of potable drinking water, health care delivery service, etc.

The effect of the indifferent attitude of the leaders to the yearnings of the people has pauperized them into the desire to indulge in prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction, impersonation, cultism, juvenile delinquency, loss of moral rectitude, etc.

For the fact that “democracy is a remarkable difficult form of government to create and sustain” (Held cited in Azeez 1996:10), it is important in its reform therefore to note that

At the level of the individual artist, the art of writing implies a

social relationship; one is writing about somebody for somebody. At a collective level literature as a product of man’s intellectual and imaginative activity embodies in words and images, the tendencies, conflict, contradictions at the heart of a community’s being and the process of becoming (Ngudi 1981.5).

The indispensable role of literature in the democratic reform is imperative as it emanates from the conscious act of men in a society. According to (Godspower 2006:64) — “Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum but it is given impetus, shape and dimension by social, political religious and economic forces in a particular society”.

There was cultural coherence in Africa before its contact with the West. African writers have been influenced by the social, political, cultural and economic life of their societies. For the fact the nationalist sentiment had dominated their ideological inspiration, they tend to share common values. Suffice to say that, it was a difficult task for an African writer to choose a stand point from where to interpret his experience before the growth of nationalism. Therefore, nationalist stance has facilitated the works of modern African writers to assess and comment on his contemporary experience.

Ngara (1985:37) acknowledges that Ngudi felt disenchanted with African writers in 1967 for failing to tilt their focus away from nationalist writing to capture the post colonial evils. He felt that writers should be committed to the restoration of some inevitable values: justice, freedom and human dignity in the society. Themes that border on these values are *Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*; Awoonor’s *This Earth, My Brother*. . . , Achebe’s *Girls at War*, etc.

The writer’s role in the democratic reform is to analyze society and interpret the opposing realities which form the essential beauty of democracy and thus, depict alternative patterns. The ills of the society are depicted in clear terms in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, etc.

Literature in a democratic reform also appeals to the emotions of leader and the led. The reactions so evoked in the reader have to do with the positive thinking of their political ambition to create a good society. The belief of Plato (cited in Chiegeonu 1999:1) “literature is capable of inducing the appropriate emotions or feelings in the rulers” reminds us of this onerous function of literature in the democratic reforms process, the senses of humanity in leader. The leader’s innate tendency of imitation if explored to possibly change for the good and the betterment of the generality.

In the bid for literature to partake decisively in the democratic reforms, it should be visionary in its outlook of the political situation as it is a long term process. A writer should see himself as a “redeemer” who is endowed with an inner light that is not at the disposal of the people. Hence, he is charged to use such inspiration and foresight for the guidance and development of his society.

In the pursuance of this, writers are to be true to themselves and be original and independent so as to gain their vision from experience, more so, the writer needs adequate sense of history of his people to be able to explore deeply the extent of human condition in the democratic reforms. A writer should embrace the dialectics of the social obligations of his ingenuity and sought through the medium of writing to enable the people remake the insight as their own.

A good number of African literature has celebrated the undoings of our political leaders. A case in point is Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* which is satirical of injustice. Brother Jero is a false prophet whom people look up to as emulative of good virtue. However, he is later found to be deceitful, an attitude common with our political leaders who break promises to our anticipation.

Though social realism, writers have raised issues which go beyond private conduct to problems of morality in public affairs. Literature evokes the whole ways of life of a people at a given time. It does this through a selection of interrelated aspects of life and analyzing the basic structure of a given society and shows how the total of the people is affected by the conditions in which they live. The reader is, in turn, made to evaluate these conditions of life the way they affect individuals. The emphasis of literature is to put on the search for the basis of a sense of community as precedent to individual’s feeling about the business of life with a sense of certainty. The writer’s posture is that it is a detribalized class.

A writer can therefore be seen as an embodiment of rebellion against undemocratic tendencies of the contemporary political system. He uses different approaches to depict the complex and painful adjustments that each an individual has been called upon to effect in response to the great democratic reform challenges the society is undergoing. By the way of analogy, political democracy is seen as an unwedded garden; the very art of writing is seen as constructive towards the weeding of this garden.

Conclusion

The need to re-engineer the various institutions of the society to meet up the challenges of the moment and the future is very important. This has prompted the reform in our political system. Literature, by its nature, cannot be separated from the social world. Hence, it repositions itself to register and interpret the tension, conflict and progress in the democratic reforms exercise. Since the indispensable impact or role of literature in the democratic reforms has been defined, literary writers are not to rest on their oars until the Utopian democratic reforms are achieved.

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