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### **Literati as Social Gadflies: Soyinka's "Idanre" and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah***

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*C. Okoye (Ph.D)*

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#### ***Abstract***

Literature has been with mankind in different forms and manifestations, playing different roles in addition to mirroring life. Its relevance varies according to society and context; and in extension the social commitment of specific writers who produce utilitarian literature. This paper examines 'Idanre' and *Anthills of the Savannah* by Soyinka and Achebe respectively. It finds them prophetically relevant and critical as per the ills inherent in their immediate society; underscoring the relevance and societal function of literature and the literati.

Keywords: Literature, Idanre, Literati, Achebe, Soyinka

#### **Introduction**

The role of literature especially in the society has been a dynamic one albeit with abstracted natures, roles and critiques. Right from Plato's stance in his ideal republic in his *The Republic*, the role of literature and its practitioners have been mired in different and varied forms of controversy. Situated betwixt the anti-podal extremities of relevance and utilitarianism is the concept of "*dulce et utile*"- pleasing while instructing; a somewhat safe zone of sorts for the "warring" schools of thought: benign proponents of "arts for art sake" and the almost belligerent adherents of the creed that literature is fundamentally useful; and must be put to use for a constructively better society. However one might take it,

the art is never too far away from the artist. Meanwhile, while we might have a notion of the archetypal occidental literati or artist, according to Achebe as one "... (who) lives on the fringe of society-wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way"(42), his counterpart in the third or developing world (with especially Africa in mind), may in addition to the aforementioned proclivities, be seen as an ardent believer in the changes, if any, he is advocating in his society.

This need and nature of the literati in Africa especially Nigeria, is what forms the crux of this paper. Writers like Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe have through most of their works espoused the need and role of the writer as a custodian, prophet, guide and guardian of sorts, armed with literary myths, stories and probable possibilities, all thinly cloaked as entertainment and ultimately aimed at the society in order to correct anomalies perceived in their milieus. In these writers, one can easily detect varying degrees of the revolutionary. Nevertheless, the writers feel a strong affinity with, and a burning desire to be constructively relevant in their societies.

### ***Idanre***

Wole Soyinka's "Idanre", a long poem centered on the myth surrounding the Yoruba god, Ogun was actually written in the first half of Nigeria's independence decade. And it concerned in reality, topical and turbulent affairs of the Nigerian political terrain of the times. It was a warning to the Nigerian polity. It was a prophecy speaking of the violence and political upheavals to come. It was Soyinka's testament for the future. True to credible prophetic fashion, it did not take long for the ugly events to unfold. In Soyinka's words:

"Idanre" lost its mystification early enough. As events gathered pace and unreason around me I recognized it as part of a pattern of awareness which began when I wrote *A Dance of the Forests*. In detail, in the human content of my society, "Idanre" has made abundant sense. And since then, the bloody origin of Ogun's pilgrimage has been, in true cyclic manner most bloodily re-enacted. (58)

Ogun, among other things is known for violence – bloody violence; and

Soyinka the literati has employed the myth and symbol of Ogun's blood-lust and "carnage-mania" to project the possibilities of the times. Those times of immediate post-independence Nigeria were fraught with mismanagement of power; and the attendant civil war a few years later was caused for the most part by the same said mismanagement of power. According to Okey Umeh, " 'Idanre' is Soyinka's parable that mismanagement of power has always been attended by revolts and crises, and all-engulfing suffering" (55). The new leaders of the government like Ogun were entrusted with power to lead the people, but unfortunately they got power-drunk like Ogun who in the poem was called to assist his people in battle but turned in frenzy to butcher his own people; hence their desperate cries of:

Lust-blind god, gore-drunk Hunter  
Monster deity, you destroy your men!

Umeh continues:

This in fact, is the case of Nigerian political leaders who are supposed to use their political positions to help the masses, but who, instead, use their positions of authority to exploit the less-privileged, and even deprive them of their...rights. The wanton bloodshed in "Idanre" is the bloodshed Nigeria experienced in thirty months of bloody war as a result of misuse of political power.

In fact, most of "Idanre" is a critique of the political power structure of post-independence Nigeria period, a period of violent political conflicts. (56)

Nothing more needs to be said. As a social gadfly, Soyinka through his myth-laden poem about Ogun successfully commented on and prophesied about future gory events which the survivors of the attendant bloody carnage of the war shudder at flinch from and wince at when the sad memories with importunate rudeness awaken us today; made more painful because it could have been avoided – if we had heeded the warnings of one literary 'seer'. The visions, comments and prophecies continue with Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*.

## **Anthills of the Savannah**

In this novel written in the eighties, Achebe sets his story in the fictional country of Kangan where a military dictator called “His Excellency” is in power. The writer here has in mind to deal with power, its mismanagement and excesses and the vile nature of dictatorship. But his treatment of the misuse of power unlike Soyinka's “Idanre” does not end with the ruling elite. Achebe extends it to everybody in possession of power to lord over another. This is seen in the killing of Chris Oriko by a policeman because he tries to prevent a rape by the cop. According to Achebe in the novel: “teasing the Kangan Mobile Police is worse than challenging a hungry Alsatian” (173). Again, utter abuse of power at all levels is seen with the soldier-driver who nearly kills a young man and abuses him: “if I kill you I kill dog.” (48)

Many a time, people who find themselves in apex positions of power are often not prepared; they get there by accident, and always at a loss for how to cope, only to later feel good at what they wield and ultimately abuse it. Achebe was reflecting military dictatorships of the eighties in Nigeria just as Soyinka was echoing the political misfits of the sixties. Achebe through the character Oriko says this of the military upstarts and misfits of the eighties:

His Excellency came to power without any preparation for political leadership – a fact which he being a very intelligent person knew perfectly well and which, furthermore, should not have surprised anyone. Sandhurst after all did not set about training officers to take over Her Majesty's throne but rather in the high tradition of proud aloofness from politics and public affairs. Therefore when our civilian politicians finally get what they had coming to them and landed unloved and unmourned on the rubbish heap and the young Army commander was invited by the even younger coup makers to become His Excellency, the Head of State he had pretty few ideas about what to do. (12)

According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto, "This issue of unpreparedness and lack of

ideas is at the core of exercise of power by His Excellency because ignorance compounds his leadership problems." (19) Apart from traversing the spectrum of power mismanagement and abuse, indicting the high and low, Achebe had earlier elsewhere blamed leadership for Nigeria's problems (Kangan's). Therefore, the portrayal above is a representation of this earlier view in *The Trouble with Nigeria*.

...the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land... or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. (Achebe, 1)

Achebe's warnings and visions were in line with the times. Unexplained deaths, assassinations, abductions, flagrant abuses of power, gross maltreatment from the military, dictatorships, coups and counter-coups, etc, were rampant in Nigeria. The attendant ruptures and disintegration in the fabric and psyche of the society would have been avoided if we had heeded the warnings in the book. Nevertheless, we still learn lessons from the literati Achebe as his work gives us a second handle on reality.

### **Conclusion**

Whether we like it or not and however reluctant we are in accepting the fact does not really matter: the fact remains that consciously relevant literary writers (the literati) especially in our present society, remain and function as guides and guards of sorts; helping us steer through the dark and treacherously murky quagmires of meaningful existence, positive development, societal responsibility, acceptable ethics and good governance. As gadflies we might detest and be irritated by their pestering and hounding, but their visions and stances have for the most part remained uncannily accurate. It is our duty to enjoy the delights in their works but not to ever fail to heed their warnings and contemplate their ideals and advice. All these are particularly important if we want to build and sustain good and qualitative governance in our society. Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe in "Idanre" and *Anthills of the Savannah*

respectively, have provided us with clues on how to steer the society clear of danger. In paraphrasing Umeh, writers like these try in some cases to alert people of approaching danger and in other cases criticize what could not be avoided so as to serve as deterrents for future occurrences. In other words, they present sordidness in the political society so that Nigerians will avoid them in future and look for better ideals for meaningful existence.

Finally, every citizen or groups of citizens, have their roles: writers, soldiers, clergymen, workers, etc. We have dealt with one aspect of writers' roles and we understand the importance. This paper will end with a pertinent reiteration from Achebe in *Anthills*:

...to some of us the owner of the world has apportioned the gift to tell their fellows that the time to get up has finally come. To others He gives the eagerness to rise when they hear the call to rise with racing blood and put on their garbs of war and go to the boundary of their town to engage the invading enemy boldly in battle. And then there are those others whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount its story. (123)

The role of literati is that of the social gadfly; and they perform it remarkably well.

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