
***SOCIAL REALISM IN NIGERIAN NOVELS: A DUAL
NOVEL EXPLORATION OF WALE OKEDIRAN'S 'THE
BOYS AT THE BORDER AND NGOZI CHUMA-UDEH'S
'TEACHERS ON STRIKE' TOWARDS ECONOMIC
GROWTH***

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Abstract

The concept of social realism in literature is concerned with the social, economic, political, issues prevalent in a society; where literature is used as a tool for tackling those issues. Wale Okediran's 'The Boys at the Border' and Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's 'Teachers on Strike' therefore delved into the issues of corruption among the ruling class and its reflection in the society. The novelists mirrored a society reeking in bribery and corruption, tribalism, greed, prostitution, oppression, exploitation, while frowning at how these flaws have become the bane of the society. In Wale Okediran's 'The Boys at the Border', the writer creates a picture of a system filled with corrupt leaders who consciously loot and engage in illicit practices with little or no concern for the consequences of their actions. In Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's 'Teachers on Strike', the insensitivity and lack of regard for the lives of teachers by the political leader, was succinctly addressed; teachers faced hardship and his excellency rather than pay them the salary being owed, chose to try to bribe the union leaders while stacking up money for his re-election plans. This paper therefore evaluates the role of literature in combating the issues that impede national development and negatively affect the lives of the people while addressing those issues in order to bring about positive change and development.

Keywords: Social Realism, Literature, Bribery And Corruption, Leaders.

Introduction

Social realism as a concept in the Nigerian literature is aimed at reflecting real life

experiences. It is a generally accepted principle that challenges the accuracy of an existing social order and if found lacking, proffers a revolutionary alternative. It is a doctrine for change which aims at reconstructing and reengineering the society through the medium of literature. In analysing a work of art as an embodiment of social realism, literature is looked upon as a product of certain forces at work in the society. These forces hinges on the social realities or situations which a particular society experiences, at a particular period. Social realism as an ideology has been used by many scholars to x-ray the society; its cultural, political and economic issue as it affects the lives of the people. Social realism is dependent on culture because culture brings forth those issues which societies deal with. Every society has a literature, and their literature concerns itself with those situations obtainable in that society, and so writers express social realities through it (literature). With this, literature cannot be studied in isolation, rather, it should be related to the society which gives it its form, shape and focus. Any attempt to discuss and analyse a work of art, removing it from society, will seem like effort in futility. This is because if it is taken away from the society, it (literature) ceases to play one of its major roles of being a mirror through which society sees itself.

The role played by literature is tilted towards creating social awareness as part of its effects to usher in change. Pioneer Nigerian writers were greatly influenced by their urge to tackle the issue of colonialism. Their literature served as a cry towards the adverse effects of colonization. As a result of this, their subject matters were based on the exploitation and dehumanization occasioned by slavery and imperialism as meted on the blacks by the white men. Social realism is therefore used by Nigerian writers as a tool for addressing social issues as it affects the lives of Nigerians. This also portrays literature as a reflection of the society. Michael Perry Kweku in his article 'Social Realism in the sun by Night' averred that "literature is a society's sublime means of self-expression that expresses its make-up and is thus essentially sociological." This means that writers, including Nigerian writers, represent the social, economic, political, experiences of the society. Thus Achebe (in Trends and Issues in Nigerian Literature) posited that "art has always functioned in the African (Nigerian) society as the record of the lore and experiences of his society and the voice and vision in his own time...(158)." This assertion shows that he advocates a socially and politically motivated literature as a way of depicting social reality. Literature therefore, is a tool

that reflects the collective experience of society with the aim of sensitizing and changing the ideological perceptions of the masses. It therefore becomes easy to find the various social, political and economic situations which affect a society by reading through the various works of writers of that society. Thus, literature and the society are interwoven and cannot be discussed as separate entities. This agrees with the concept of “art for art sake” and allows literature to be used for the purpose of addressing problems related to man and his immediate environment. Literary works therefore, are nothing but mere reflections of “the economic, family relationships, climate and landscape, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion of the society that produced the text.” (Albrecht)

Aspects of Social Realism in Wale Okediran’s ‘The boys at the border’.

‘The boys at the border ‘ is one of the novels written by Wale Okediran in his bid to explore, satirize and expose leadership problems in the post-independent Nigeria, by bringing to the forefront, its negative repercussions to the life and economy of a Nigerian man. Wale Okediran displayed the activities of the custom officials as they associate with smugglers. The novel is a narrative that exposes the vile, despicable

and greedy nature of our tyrannical and irresponsible political leaders when they find themselves wielding the mantle of leadership. “The Boys at the Border” uncovers the rotten underbelly of the border town’s officialdom. It is a narrative that explores the human intrigues of bribery and corruption, tribalism, autocracy and dictatorship, man’s inhumanity to man, promiscuity and immorality. This paper therefore traces the social evils obtainable in most Nigerian institutions using the fictional Nigerian custom as a case study.

The issue of bribery is one of the many issues impeding the growth of Nigeria as a nation. Most people who are opportune to be in the realm of affairs of the nation, rather than work for the improvement of the nation, go on a personal quest to get richer and delve into unlawful practices such as bribery. This issue was properly exposed by the writer using various characters and incidents in the novel. The novel commenced with the writer using an incident where a custom officer named Samuel Adigwe was shot dead by a smuggler as a result of the disagreement over the amount to be paid as bribe before they are allowed to cross with their goods. This expounds how bad, vile, vicious, evil and rotten our country has become; one is killed in his attempt to extort money from

another. The writer painted the picture of how these custom men engage themselves in bribery; they levy a tax on the smugglers and grant them the license to bring in their contraband goods. This was made open to the readers in a discussion between Lati Baba and Peter Ikoku on the murder of Samuel Adigwe, one of the custom men;

“Sam, so it was Sam who was killed? But why? None of my boys could have done it. We have no problem with you and we had already agreed on what to give you. I personally handed over the money to you last night...”(10)

The extract above reveals that these customs officers work side by side these smugglers. This goes a long way in answering the questions garnering on why they are so many fake/smuggled goods in our Nigerian markets and how these goods made it into the country when we have customer officials in every border across the nation. The novel is a strong political satire that stresses on the breakdown of law and order by people in the position of power; we see Alhaji Jibo and Controller Arobo who were expected to be an embodiment of good traits and maintaining the law towards national development of the country, engage in bribery when after Lati Baba’s truck was seized by Peter Ikoku, rather than punish

him according to the law, started negotiating terms with him if he would be willing to forfeit a certain percentage of the money realised after auctioning the goods.

In the novel, Wale mocked and ridiculed the circumstances where highly placed government officials like Alhaji Jibo and Controller Arobo, who were supposed to protect the interest of the nation and its citizens in Nigeria, decided to degrade themselves and their esteemed offices by aiding and assisting a notorious smuggler and his gang in their illegal activities. This is what is obtainable in our country today, where notorious touts enjoy the protection of powerful people in high places. “Connection” has become the order of the day and people act anyhow and actually get away with it simply because they are “connected” and “pay their dues”. In the novel, when the illegal operation between Alhaji Jibo, the director of customs and Lati Baba was revealed to the public, and an investigation panel put up to probe the issue, Controller Arobo sent Bayo Adeli to instruct Lati Baba to stay hidden until the case was resolved, to avoid further complications. This brings up the question of how and when Nigeria will move forward for positive results while entangled with corruption cases; this because everybody including the lawmakers engage themselves

in bribery and corruption. Also, the issue of the possession of fake currencies, by some citizens including our leaders, was portrayed by the writer. When Mrs. Emodi threatened to release the video clip of Alhaji Jibo in the act of committing the crime of bribery and corruption, if she wasn't paid the sum of twenty thousand naira, Alhaji Jibo paid her using fake currencies which were in his possession. The writer also showed how most government officials are involved in corruption. This can be deduced from the letter written by Emeka Emodi to the President:

"I have irrefutable reports from my intelligence unit that certain members of the armed forces are colluding with the smugglers in the nefarious activities. We even have cases of diplomats using diplomatic bags to smuggle... into the country."

After Mr. Emodi levied these allegations against the soldiers, instead of the president to carry out a proper investigation, took offence and blazed in anger and only ended up dismissing Mr. Emodi from civil service.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation and as a result of this, marginalization and tribalism has become the order of the day and has been found to pose a big problem especially as it hinders the growth and development of

Nigeria as a nation. Every ethnic group feels a sense of loyalty to their tribe before to Nigeria and therefore relegates other tribes to lower limit while promoting their tribe. In the novel, Mr. Emeka Emodi was betrayed by his colleague, that were supposed to stand in as witnesses, after he levied some allegations against the military, simply because he wasn't from the same ethnic group with them. After he was betrayed his colleagues, the president (who was also a military man) failed to look into what he said but only sacked him from his office simply because they were not from the same tribe. This is similar to what is obtainable in our society today, where full potentials are being wasted simply because they are not from a certain tribe or in some cases because they belong to a particular ethnic group or have no affiliation with one oga at the top. Mr. Emodi was later replaced by Alhaji Jibo who had no qualification to hold the post; he was able to get the position because he was from Hausa tribe. Wale also exposed the extent of tribalism and nepotism has eaten deep into the fabrics of our society in how the corruption case against Alhaji jibo was handled because of his ethnic group; after Mrs Emodi exposed Alhaji Jibo's involvement in bribery with the notorious smuggler Lati Baba, the president instead of out-rightly sacking him, like he did Mr

Emodi, gave him forty-eight hours to resign from office, which gave him the opportunity to collect all his entitlements. This was confirmed by Alhaji Jibo's statement:

“If you think that by setting me up and publishing what happened, you can get me out of the way, you're mistaken. For your information, the president's father and mine were classmates at school and there's nothing he can do about the newspaper reports. If you like, you can go and announce it on the radio and television. Nothing will happen.”

The writer is filled with contempt and disgust because of the way the affairs of the country is run especially as it sets the country backward, and impedes national development; Mr Emodi, a hardworking and honest man was disgracefully removed from office and the office handed over to Alhaji Jibo, a very corrupt and lazy man just because the latter was from the same ethnic group with the president and commander-in-chief. Wale through the medium of his novel, opened our eyes to the sad truth that Nigeria as a nation can never experience good governance if it continues to toll the part it is on. Change can only occur when the political procedure can allow honest

individuals and political experts who have authentic political ideologies, to come into power.

The issue of promiscuity on the side of men is also explored by the author in the novel especially married men who patronize the company of single unmarried and younger ladies. This has almost become the norm in our contemporary society. In the novel, we see how married men willingly patronize brothel houses all in the quest to satisfy their sexual urges and desires. This is evident in how well Mrs Gladys' "Crossroad hotel" flourished upon its opening simply because men sensed she'd avail call girls whom Lati Baba referred to as "take aways". Also, the writer created the scenario of where some of these men go as far as patronizing these ladies during office hour; we see a situation where official work hours are used for their sex escapades. Alhaji Jibo takes a break during work hour and asks not to be disturbed because he wished to spend the time cuddling with one of his small girls. The writer mocks men, especially government officials, who condescend so low as to use their offices as a place of adultery thereby ridiculing themselves, their offices, and the Nigerian society at large.

Aspects of Social Realism in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's "Teachers on strike"

'Teachers on strike' written by Ngozi Chuma –Udeh revolves round the experiences of teachers and their struggle to survive in a harsh and unjust society. It tells a great deal about what it meant to be a teacher living in a society that has little or no value for education. She used her prowess as a writer to explore and expose the corrupt and malignant activities of the Nigerian political leader Chinwoke Mbadinju, when he was the governor of Anambra State (1999 - 2003) and his refusal to pay workers for nine months, which led to the long strike that lasted from December 2001 till October 2002. In her novel, Chuma-Udeh in her novel also lays emphasis on the ruling class and how they amass great wealth through the embezzlement of public fund to the detriment of the masses. The novel as a political satire, delved into various issues such as bribery and corruption, embezzlement, greed, disenchantment and disillusionment, moral decadence, and poverty. The main characters in the novel show what it means to be a government worker under the government of Mbadinju the then governor of Anambra state, Nigeria, by re-enacting a fictional account of the catastrophe which befell the state under the guise of an autocratic democracy.

The author consciously depicted the tragedy and emotional ordeal of teachers in a society with little or no value for both the welfare of teachers and for education at large. It painted a pure picture of the life of a teacher, as it was in Anambra, under the leadership of Mbadinju. In the novel, His Excellency invites the committee members from the teachers union under the guise of being willing to come to an agreement with them but instead went ahead to try to bribe them, if they call off the strike at the expense of their colleague, rather than pay them their salary;

“...two hundred thousand for each of you... four cool hundred thousand naira for each one of you ... let me humbly offer you one million naira each. Your problems will be over forever. I am not asking you to do much, just ask the teachers to go back to the classroom. I am paying six million naira just for a single announcement.”(41)

The extraction above goes a long way in exposing the level of insensitiveness of some of our political leaders; his Excellency is more than willing to engage in the crime of bribery rather than take the high road and do the right thing by paying his workers. Owing his workers salary for months isn't because there isn't money in the state

treasury, but a result of greed and wickedness. The impoverished teachers are in disbelief and teacher Nebe expressed his disgust when he spoke thus:

“Deal indeed Mr. Excellency. Have you forgotten you are talking to teachers? We do not do deals His Excellency, we do teach our students morals. I am shocked at your propositions. Let the milk of human kindness flow in your vein, sir. The teachers have taken to the streets as harlots and robbers and you are talking about deals...”

Teacher Nebe in his speech summed up the level of degeneration which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the society; a situation where some of these political leaders have no iota of loyalty or respect for the common man. They willingly engage in corrupt practices and are rather disgusted by upright citizens who try to call them to order. To the president, the committee’s rejection of his offer was sheer foolishness and so they deserved whatever was happening to them. The teachers on the other hand displayed a high sense of loyalty and discipline by rejecting the huge sum offered to them by his Excellency. This goes a long way to show that despite the level of moral decay in the country, upright and honest men still exist in our society. The writer also

portrayed the issue of people being ridiculed in the society for trying to be modest in a corrupt society. After H.E’s attempt to bribe the committee didn’t work, he became vexed and began to mock them saying:

“Imagine this hungry ‘things’, wretches throwing his offer of a million in his face. What did God create in teachers? Eight good months of hunger and starvation and they still had the audacity to refuse being made millionaires... wretched fools, stiff necked idiots.”

The president had the mind to mock the situation of the teachers despite being the reason why they are in their current predicament. Rather than learn from the modesty of the teachers, he rebuked their uprightness and still refused to bat an eye and pay them what was being owed them.

Ngozi also exposed the adverse effects of the strike on the life of the teachers and on the society as a whole. The teachers who have not been paid their salary for eight months are unable to take proper care of themselves and their families. This can be seen on the character of Irukwe who lost his pregnant wife to the cold hands of death as a result of improper care. According to the writer:

“There was no money to send the woman to a good private hospital. The general hospital like every other sector of the society had been adversely affected by the heartlessness of this regime. The ‘out of stock’ syndrome was the watchword of the hospital’s dispensary.”

Irukwe had watched his pregnant wife Nkiru die of starvation simply because of the callousness and insensitive nature of the government, to the plight of the people. We also see a situation where the teachers had painfully forsaken all the training they had acquired as teachers, in order to survive the harsh realities thrown to them by life; these teachers lived in abject squalor and misery and forced to take up menial jobs in order to survive, some took to arms while some went into prostitution and the students weren’t left out in this ordeal. They too got entangled in different petty crimes. During one of teacher Nebe’s evening stroll, he encountered four hefty men, whom reeked of alcohol and hemp, whom he referred to as “messengers of the dark” and whose intentions were to steal from him until one of them recognized him and called him “teacher”. That was when teacher Nebe realised they were once his students. The ladies too were not left out; the level of

poverty also made some of them engage in prostitution all in the bid to make a few naira notes to survive with. We see the case of Adaora, teacher Dife’s only daughter, a class two student in the post primary school who had turned into a prostitute as a way of making money to support her family.

The issue of monetary misappropriation was also criticized by the writer. This is based on the fact that the mind set and ideology of those who find themselves in the corridor of power is channelled towards using the nation’s economy and wealth to enrich their private pockets and make their bank accounts grow fatter. This is a situation we can all relate to, where most political leaders see it as their sole duty and right to share the proverbial national cake amongst themselves. This is one of the factors that breed a class conscious society, where the rich keeps getting richer, and the poor, poorer. In the novel, H.E keeps getting richer through looting of public funds, while the teachers kept falling deeper into poverty as a result of bad governance.

The issue of injustice was also frowned upon by the writer. She looked at various instances of injustice being meted out on the people. Injustice as we all know is one of the core factors that shaped Nigeria into what it is today and in the novel, the writer condemns the obvious injustices against the

poor. There are various cases of injustice in the novel include: the teachers' eight months salary that were unjustly seized by the government in power for selfish reasons; the students who had to stay home were forced to stay home unjustly; the injustice meted on the teachers also led to the death of Ireka's two sons.

The novel 'Teachers on Strike' is evident of the fact that literature plays a sociological function of connecting people to various incidents taking place in their society. In this case, the writer through the medium of literature re-enacted a fictional story of real situations that took place in the past thereby educating its readers on the said topic and reminding those in the realm of affairs of the consequences of bad governance and why it shouldn't be allowed to see the light of the day.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the writers of the two novels under study; Wale Okediran and Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, in their respective works 'The Boys at the Border' and 'Teachers on Strike' depicts succinctly, social realities obtainable in our modern day Nigeria, which ranges the issue of bribery and corruption, tribalism, injustice, embezzlement etc. These social issues presented in the novel are real life situations which people pass through in our

contemporary social. Literature through the exposition of these issues, aids in national development by drawing the attention of the masses to sublime and sensitive issues that impede growth and development of Nigeria as a nation.

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