

The Creative Arts and Inevitability of Social Commitment

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Abstract: Right from the inception of the creative arts in every human society, the issue of their commitment or non-commitment has been a concomitant fact. Since the creative arts are borne out of the creative skills and imagination of human beings, and Art is never created in a vacuum, the fact remains that artists are committed to one issue or the other as a leitmotif of their endeavour into creativity, be it in the Literary, the Visual or the Performing Arts.

In modern arts, the issue of commitment came into vogue in terms of political utilizations of art and use of art for concrete, functional purposes rather than for mere aesthetics. X-raying contributions of eminent scholars, this paper traces the issue of the purpose of art from the primordial to modern times and shows why commitment is inevitable in every artistry. Since aesthetic functions have been known to engender psychotherapy, emotional balance and stability in human relations and cognition, it could be said that every art is committed to one ideal or the other either at a main, primary level or at a secondary level. There is therefore nothing like Non-Committed art. The paper therefore advocates the use of the arts at various levels, to make human societies better places to live in.

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I. Introduction

Either from the perspective of ritual performance for sympathetic magic, or that of mimesis, the performing arts originate out of man's natural propensity to act, to imitate, and to deploy artistry towards making human life assume a level of stability and excitement through entertainment and education. The human progenitors who evoked "sympathetic magic" through ritual performances (from where drama eventually developed) did so to ensure unity between man and (through appeals to the transcendental order) nature. This was to ensure that nature smiled, rather than frowned on humanity. A frown of nature has attendant discomfitures, discomfort and even calamities, whereas a smile generates comfort, relief and peace. To ensure the later, primordial man engaged in dramatic, often sacred rituals to appease the forces of nature. With time, profane elements permeated the sacred rituals, led to more human participation and eventually led to various dramatic forms.

As attested to by the great Greek philosopher – Aristotle, in *The Poetics* – drama also developed as a result of the natural imitative tendency and instinct in human beings. This he called "mimesis". This is the ingrained human instinct to imitate things that exist and are seen. Drama and theatre are largely imitative, and together with other strands of the performing arts, are deployed in human societies for the purposes of entertainment, education, cultural revivalism, propaganda and psychotherapy. Thus it could be seen that from its rustic origins, the performing arts have been deployed for specific purposes in the human society. At a primordial and rustic level, this is the genesis of commitment in art – art engaged in, for specific purposes and benefits to humanity.

It was after profane elements infiltrated the sacred drama of the primordial period that other strands of the performing arts developed and turned full-fledged. These include music, dance, drumming and other forms of instrumentation. More modern trends engendered the likes of circus shows, choreography and the media arts – arts on radio, television, video and film production. More recent developments include the Stand Up comedy.

II. Commitment in Arts

Although committed art generally refers to artistic works that are concerned with life in human society (Art for life sake), all artistic works are committed to one ideal or the other. It may be concerned with aesthetic purity of

arts as we have in the school of Aesthetics (Art for Art's sake), in which case its purpose is largely to entertain audiences by portraying the beauty of art. This engenders relaxation, psychological relief and aesthetic appreciation. It may also come in the functionalist form, in which case the work is directed towards attaining specific socio-political effects in a human society. Functionalist art seeks to correct existing anomalies and errors in human society, to serve society in various ways to make it a better place to live in. It seeks to "right" those things that are wrong in society. In the words of Africa's iconic poet and committed writer Niyi Osundare, the "writer" should be a "righter" (Osundare, 2007).

Even if cursorily, it should be mentioned that there are two strands of the functionalist school that engage in art for life's sake. These are the School of Critical Realism and the School of Socialist Realism. These two schools both identify problems in society and criticize same. However, whereas writers in the critical Realist school merely identify and criticize the problems without necessarily suggesting or proffering solutions to them, those in the Socialist Realist group go further to suggest and project artistically, pragmatic solutions to the problems so identified. The name Socialist Realism is so coined because the solutions proffered are usually socialist in nature, that is in line with socialist revolution. Many of such works are what Jill Mann regards as "Estates Literature" or Literature of the social classes. (Jill Mann, 1973). They often identify the causative factor of problems in human societies as the class system, that is, a polarization of citizens in terms of the Proletarians and the Bourgeoisie, the Rich and the Poor, the "Haves" and the "Have nots".

It is a socialist conviction that for as long as class bifurcation exists in a society, there will always be crisis. This is because the rich people will always seek to oppress the poor, while the poor will naturally want to resist their being oppressed. Socialist Realist arts therefore advocate that oppressed people should not mourn, but mobilize together to fight their oppressors. They are to counter the reactionary violence of the oppressors with the revolutionary violence of the oppressed masses, in order to break their shackles and be free!

The disgust with which "committed" artists view their counterparts in the School of Aesthetics (Art for Art's sake) is best articulated in Niyi Osundare's symbolic orchestration of "Art for Art's sake" as "Art for Ass sake". According to him

Art, shorn of the human touch
Is Art for Ass sake

(Osundare, 1986)

It is Osundare's euphemistic way of saying art that is not concerned with the realities of life is a stupid art (note the symbolism of Ass). Not only Osundare feels this way. Odia Ofeimun in a dramatic poesy "How Can I Sing?" portrays a very powerful, graphic and picturesque imagery of the massacre of Biafrans (his people) during the Nigerian Civil war of 1967 to 1970. Being civilians Ofeimun says they were massacred in a "market place" and not on any of the many war fronts!

I cannot blind myself
To putrefying carcasses in the marketplace
Pulling giant vultures
From the sky

(Ofeimun, 1980)

He asks rhetorically "How Can I Sing?" when his people were so massacred. This is the pattern of committed writers. He obviously could not afford the luxury of romantic aesthetics, while his people suffered!

The sociological nexus that connects creative art works (either literary, visual or performing arts) and the human society is such that there is perpetual inextricability between them. Art and society are like the two tongs of a pair of scissors. Without one, the other is ineffective. The reasons are not too far-fetched: the artist is a sensible and sensitive member of a human society. He is naturally affected like others, by ongoing events in the society. Being a sensitive individual (it is his sensitivity that makes him or her an artist in the first place), he naturally reacts to those things through his creative endeavor. This is how society provides the raw materials with which artists create their works.

In order to be relevant to his fellow human beings, the artist has to present what appeals to his or her compatriots and audiences. An audience will respond positively to those things it is conversant with, and not just any ethereal mumbo-jumbo, strange concatenation of events concocted in the whims and caprices of an artist! To enhance plausibility therefore, the artist portrays those things the audience believe in, or has experienced. These may be things that have happened in the past (history), contemporary social realities/issues, or prognostically, what is likely to happen in future. As a purveyor of his/her art, the artist needs to appeal to the potential consumers of his

art. The latter are normally interested in works that reflect their states of life, that educates, entertains and gives them psychological relief and balance.

Osundare foregrounds his thesis that an artist has responsibilities and commitments to the human society – a moral obligation to correct anomalies, to show how the quality of life could be heightened and the world made a better place to live in. Emblemizing the persona of the artist in the character of the writer, he pontificates

So the writer...has a duty to relate not only how things are, but how they could or should be. He must not only lead the people to the top of the mountain and point out the promisedland; he also shows them how to get there. (Osundare 2007: 12)

The East African literary Colossus – NgugiWaThiong’o, a socialist realist who is an ardent believer in the social functionality of art sees artists as moral upholders of truth in human societies, prophets of justice and revealers of atrocious secrets that are concealed in darkness. In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi emblemized the committed artist in the personality of the Gicaandi player who is strategically positioned on the roof top where he sees all hidden things and reveals them openly. This figurative height is indicative of the average artist’s exalted and privileged position, as a result of his education, high sensibility, exalted sensitivity and social responsibility.

In *Writers in Politics* Ngugi sees artists as “surgeons of the hearts and souls of a community” (p. ix). LanreBamidele in *Literature and Sociology* asserts that literature is instructive and closely related to the moral life of man, an art that should be devoted to the task of inspiring virtue or purifying manner. (Bamidele,2000: 2)

In *The Moral and the Story*, Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas assert that plays and novels are basically concerned with two things – the moral and the story. The moral aspect refers to an artist’s relationship with society, while the story refers to his relationship with his art. (Bamidele 2000:2)

Wole Soyinka in *Transition* (1976), comments on the moral responsibility of writers. He avers that writers should have the courage to determine what can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity. (p.2)

AliuSeiza (2002: 18) sees drama as

...an enlightenment forum through which social awareness is promoted. It is functional in terms of arousing the consciousness of the masses in order to affect a change for a better society through collective action.

Friedrich Schiller (1994) in an article titled “The stage as a moral institution” regards the stage as a moral force that normalizes all anomalies when society tends to go haywire.

Chinua Achebe (2007) too, in an essay titled “Novelist as Teacher” talks about the pedagogical responsibilities of artists, averaging that artists are naturally saddled with the task of re-education and re-generation of society – a task in which they should be pioneers.

Over the ages, with the exception of Shakespeare and a few other performing artists, it has always been the works of committed artists that become ever-green, ever-appealing and perpetually relevant to the needs, yearnings and aspirations of the human society at all times. No matter the height of aesthetics ingrained in a work of art, its aesthetic values diminish with time and continual availability/presentation to connoisseurs. This is because beauty, unless touched from time to time, remains the same, and familiarity with it tends to breed non-challance and less appreciation over time. This is the reason why highly invaluable works of visual arts are not put in general public museums, but are placed in exclusive ones and brought out for public appreciation intermittently. That seems to be the fate of works that are mainly based on aesthetics.

Works based on social realities on the other hand have greater and longer appeal to humanity. Since every human society is dynamic and changes from time to time according to prevalent socio-economic and political factors, the committed artist has a wider scope and leverage to operate. The best art works, the most enduring ones, are those that serve as imprints, trademarks of their society and time: that faithfully record the most important events, norms and values of their time. Though they are creative endeavours that are often based on the imaginative or fictive realism composed by artists, they yet could be regarded as historical artefacts and index markers, through which the quality of life and social milieu of societies at particular periods could be evaluated. Since the social realities projected in functionalist arts are recurrent issues in every human society irrespective of time, functionalist works continue to find relevance, across continental boundaries even centuries after their production.

To know about the operations of the apartheid policy in South Africa for instance an inquirer may need to read or watch the performance of art works written during the apartheid years: that were set in the South African enclave, with thematic projections that focus on apartheid. Through such works, the social milieu, the quality of life during the period and other realities are exposed. The same goes for other settings and historical realities such as the era of slavery, the colonial periods, racism in western societies and so on.

A reasonable preparation and fore-knowledge for an intending traveler to a new area more than a travelogue is to acquaint himself or herself with artistic expressions of the area to be visited. To such a traveler, the social realities inherent in the work, and not the aesthetic elements, are most useful.

III. The Aesthetics – Functionality Fulcrum

A work of art that not only entertains, but also educates, that promotes accepted norms and values, serve as a kind of psychotherapy, seeks to identify and solve problems prevalent in human society, is bound to be invaluable, evergreen and perpetually relevant. Such works are ideal for enhancing national integration and protection of national and human ideals. It needs be stated therefore that the best art works are those that combine aesthetics with functionality. The former ensures a soft padding/landing for the numerous and often harsh thematic preoccupations of the latter. In a mellifluous complementarity and synergy of commitment and aesthetics therefore, the best of art is made plausible and compulsively relevant to humanity.

Inaugural contributions to the debate on commitment.

Ola Rotimi, late professor of dramatic arts, one of Nigeria's greatest playwrights and theatre directors, in his 1991 inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Port Harcourt Nigeria titled *African Dramatic Literature: To Be or To Become*, identifies four major thematic concerns of African literature. According to him, these concerns have appropriately been in response to the socio-historical traumas of the African peoples. According to him, during the colonial era, African Literature's passion was for the redemption of the integrity of the Black man. This crystalized into the theme of Negritude. He identified the next epoch as that which marked the collapse of colonialism with an attendant state of flux caused by an encounter between old and new lifestyles, thus engendering the theme of culture conflict. Rotimi identifies a third theme as commencing with Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and other similar plays which show that African political independence has failed the African people, as the new African leaders have proved to be worse than the colonialists. In consequence of this disillusionment, anger was engendered in the people. Many writers took to protest, to express their discontent. The dominant theme then was angst. Originally a German word, angst is a derivation or confluence of the first three letters of anger (ang) and the last two of protest (st).

A fourth thematic preoccupation, according to Rotimi is the search for Utopian models. From the forgone analysis, it is obvious that all the four major thematic preoccupations identified in African literature by this erudite scholar are linked and intertwined with social realities of the African continent. Ola Rotimi quotes William Shakespeare who sees the ultimate purpose of drama as a fixation to

...hold as 't were
The mirror up to nature. (Hamlet 3. sc3, L 16)

That is, art is supposed to be a reflection of nature and the realities of life. It is unarguable that in order to achieve verisimilitude (a semblance of reality) and plausibility (conviction) a creative artist must present what he sees as reality in the human society that has been chosen as base or setting for his or her creative endeavor. Corroborating this idea, Gbemisola Adeoti, a performer, creative writer and Professor of Literature in English in his 2015 Inaugural lecture at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria pontificates that the artist is naturally endowed and equipped to x-ray society, identify problems and suggest in different forms, cures for the ailments discovered in society. According to him,

...the writer is endowed with unseen binoculars, in addition to the natural eyes, through which s/he sees far into the horizon of the past, the present and the future of the society. The writer sees aberrations of social norms and creatively addresses them. Sometimes in his/her perception of the direction in which the affairs of the state is heading, s/he in overt or coded tones, offer criticism. But s/he may point out alternatives which may involve reform or revolution, depending on his/her ideological preferences. The writer also possesses inner ears that find audible, the secret and hidden deals transacted in hushed tones at the corridors of power. In line with the social responsibility of the arts, not only does the artist blow it like a trumpet, loud enough for citizens to hear, s/he may also rally the people round in appropriate idioms and polemics to tackle the problems (p. 3 - 4).

Thus it is obvious that there is a natural nexus, a silent policy of perpetual inextricability between the arts and the society that produces them, that is very much akin to that between the two tongs of a pair of scissors; useful when connected, almost useless when separated. It is therefore expedient that any artist that is serious-minded and wants

to be committed to the socio-political realities in the human society should strive through the arts, to make society a better place than it is.

Over the ages, the arts have been used to make the human society a better place. This is done through a presentation of ideals and models; the quintessence of how humanity should live together, thereby bringing ideas that are invaluable to society.

AkanjiNasiru, erudite professor of the performing arts and a pioneer academic staff of the Department of Performing Arts, University of Ilorin Nigeria in his Inaugural lecture (the 145th edition) at the University of Ilorin that held on Thursday 20th June, 2013, corroborates the facts on the inextricability of theatre and the human society. In the lecture titled *The Future Has Long Arrived: New Vistas of the Role of Theatre in a Developing Nation*, he underscores the significant role theatre plays in the development of any society, stating that the history of any nation is incomplete without due recognition to the theatre.

Akanji notes that although the efforts of the theatre artist to develop society or nation may not be very visible because there are no indices to gauge such in absolute terms, the stage has become an engine room that motivates the rest of society into necessary and desirable action. According to him

Our predilection for quick and easy solution to complex and long-accumulated problems makes us look up to something or someone to rescue us. For a while we may accept the make-belief world created by the artist because it holds out to us a desirable ideal; eventually, hard reality sets in, and we cannot see any concrete results arising from the artist's honest effort to change society.

This according to the eminent professor is because clear symptoms of the same ills criticized still abound, sometimes in greater numbers and more frightening proportions. He refers cursorily to some of the developments, using his country Nigeria as a case study. Crimes are being committed with the most sophisticated guns and bombs, there is a prevalent culture of impunity that makes influential criminals go scot-free, criminals are being celebrated because of their ill-gotten wealth and there seems to be no hope, not only for the marginalized hoi polloi, but also for the entire nation since wickedness, terrorism, brutality and devaluation of human lives has become the order of the day. Nasiru is of the opinion that

On the surface therefore it may seem as if nothing is changing, and that the committed artist's effort is yielding no fruit. (P.17)

Alluding to the biblical Parable of the Sower, Nasiru maintains that the committed artist as an incurable optimist can only go to work in the hope that some of the proportion of the seeds that he disperses are successful. He challenges artists to ensure that works produced by them are put to socially useful ends, rather than solely for aesthetic considerations. He advocates for strong financial backing from dependable sources for artists, without which many good ideas that could have made significant impact on society may not be translated into concrete action, and thus end up being forgotten.

Nasiru goes on to show his audience how he has used theatre to transform people in rural communities in different states in Nigeria. An expert in Theatre for Development and Community Theatre, Nasiru's efforts are truly worthy of commendation. Ingrained in him is a great passion for theatre practice and an unshakeable belief in what practical theatre could be used to achieve in human societies. As far back as the 1980s, he established a private theatre outfit that engaged in Theatre for Development through community theatres. The troupe moved from community to community in Kwara state in Nigeria, staging plays that educated people about such issues as the need for national unity, cooperation, and community health development. The theatre also engaged in political education through the "outside in" and "inside out" methods of casting, and under the theatre management capabilities of a professionally trained theatre business manager (SegunOyewo), the theatre was able to develop artistic skills and interest in the inhabitants of the communities, and to enhance enlightenment and sociological transformation in them. AkanjiNasiru's *IrepodunPlays* are geared towards social redemption and transformation. This thematic projection could be seen in such plays by him as *Our Survival*, *The Bold Choice*, and *The Rally*. (New Art Publishers 2005)

AkanjiNasiru in our modest and honest estimation is a highly disciplined, highly cerebral and committed performing artists and scholar. This researcher had the opportunity to work closely with him towards his last two years to retirement from University of Ilorin's Department of Performing Arts. We co-taught a number of undergraduates and postgraduate courses, with me as a junior colleague on sabbatical and accumulated leave in the department. During the period in question, I saw this unsung titan direct plays, lecture students with invaluable academic materials, perform as a disc-jockey, dexterously play the saxophone, the last two acts at the highly prestigious International Tobacco Company Club Ilorin, where he was a distinguished member. A quintessential actor, Nasiru is endowed with a tall, handsome body frame (a great asset in the Acting profession) and a rich, deep baritone voice that naturally engenders immediate audience attention.

He is a highly principled personality and a pragmatic idealist with a commitment to ameliorating or even obliterating social dysfunctions, through theatrical performances. With a zero tolerance for laziness, imbecility and petty mindedness, he is ready to suffer, even die, to protect his convictions. A quad-cored patriot, Nasiru fights injustice and misrule through his plays, raining literary fires on reigning fouters, mobilizing the oppressed, pauperized and pathetically marginalized masses of his nation, to move them from acritical states to states of critical consciousness, all in a bid to make their lives better. Nasiru's artistic endeavor commensurates with Paulo Freire's submissions on education for critical consciousness. He is a model of Niyi Osundare's "writer" as "righter", having used (still using?) the unseen binoculars of Gbemisola Adeoti, (2015:3) to see far, near and wide; to warn and prepare society for future survival.

IV. Conclusion

In pragmatic terms, much of modern arts especially the literary and performing arts have been geared towards serving society in one capacity or the other. Aside entertainment, their other roles include education, mental re-orientation, information, culture revival and medical rehabilitation (psychodrama). Community theatres and Theatre for Development projects have been deployed to do this. Institutional theatres are front liners in making arts to serve society. Governments, mobile telecommunication companies, banks and other corporate establishments in Africa have for instance found the theatre arts to be effective and formidable tools for propagating policies and advertising products. In Nigeria, the practice of Art for Art's sake at institutional level is only still rampant in the national theatre and the various state arts councils, where traditional/cultural dances and festivals of the areas in which the councils are located often dominate their repertoire. Individual efforts at enhancing social responsibility of arts include that of Akanji Nasiru and other titans like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Ngugi WaThiong'o, Rasaki Ojo Bakare, Ahmed Yerima and a host of others. From the foregoing analysis, it is obvious that consciously or unconsciously, whether an artist likes it or not, commitment has come over the years to stay, as an integral part of artistic creativity, synergizing Art and the human society.

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