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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE SCIENCES AND THE HUMANITIES IN NIGERIA; THE WALE OKEDIRAN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

Contemporary studies in humanistic traditions have revealed that there are certain negative attitudes to humanistic studies in third world countries. The relevance of the humanities, especially literature, to the socio – political and economic challenges of the 21st century remain controversial. The assumption is that literature and indeed other disciplines in the humanities should be classified as ‘recreational studies’.

This article examines the place of the humanities, especially literature, within the humanistic tradition. The works of Wale Okediran, a physician, politician and novelist are selected for this study. Okediran’s writings are exemplary in that they are marked with a distinct quality of having been produced by a completely humanized mind.

Introduction

Scholars who have studied aspects of the humanities have tended to avoid giving specific definitions to the term and the concept. However, Molara Ogundipe shrewdly describes the humanities as the totality of ‘mental and liberal education befitting a person; such education as prepares for one being in control of one’s reality.’ ‘It is liberal education’, she continues, and ‘which makes one aware of ones total environment, which comprises of nature and society...’ (1983:38).

Studies in the humanities are expected to produce, promote and procure forms of knowledge which conditions and influences the society. Sogolo (1981) observes that the humanities may be difficult to define in terms of specific objectives, but notes that :

This is because their concerns permeate the man as whole and not just some aspects of him. The humanities seek to discover and preserve those unique characteristics of man, which define his humanity (112).

John Stuart Mill (1964:147) aptly puts the picture in perspective when he says that 'men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians or merchants, or manufacturers ...'Therefore subjects in the in the humanities ought to cultivate certain traits that reveal the personality of a truly well educated person.

The intellectual movement that characterized the birth and the growth of humanism started in the Middle Ages. The movement focused on the dignity of man and his perfectibility .It considered the world a legitimate object of interest and love; it also placed reason above revelation laying emphasis on education (for both genders).It upheld the fact that the goal of education is a well-balanced individual whose capabilities are fully developed (Hornstein *et al* 1973:255).

It is of great interest that what consisted of the humanists curriculum were studies in the '...languages, literature and thought of ancient Greece and Rome ...'At that point in intellectual evolution these civilizations exemplified the ideals of humanism (255). The principles and thoughts of 'humanitas' were used by scholars like Cicero, Erasmus, Petrarch and Bocaccio to extend the purpose of a moral and intellectual culture befitting mankind.The 14th, 15th and 16th centuries therefore witnessed a wave of humanistic studies and approaches all over Europe.The early eighties in Nigeria witnessed discourses on the problems faced by the humanities. Major voices in the Nigerian academia include Kujore (1980), Osofisan (1981) and Sogolo (1981) who led debates on the future of the humanities in Nigeria.

An examination of the searching questions Osofisan (1981) asks on the relevance of the humanities is germane to this study, given the state of inertia into which the humanistic tradition has fallen in Nigeria. Furthermore it will facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between the humanities and the sciences, particularly between literature and medicine.

'Do the Humanities humanize?' enquires a concerned Osofisan. It is evident, especially within the Nigerian context that the humanities have failed, particularly when its contribution to humanizing the society is evaluated. It is a little wonder then that the humanities are marginalized in all spheres of life and particularly in the sciences.

Said Osofisan on the occasion of the January 1981 Faculty of Arts lecture:

Look at history very closely, and you will be forced to turn away by the startling discovery that, at every stage in the unfolding story of anarchy that we have just narrated, at virtually all the ignition points of violence and disorder in our midst, some of the most outstanding actors of the drama have been the alumni of this or other universities. Recent history in many decisive instances, has been the torrid creation of the scripts prepared, managed and executed by the graduates who passed through the gates of UCI, UCH or the later UI, some of these actors being among the most brilliant of our products (1981:9).

Taking the ancient, University of Ibadan, the first university college in Nigeria, as a metaphorical kernel of the Nigerian university culture, Osofisan concludes that the failure of the graduates of the institution in arresting the anarchic movement of the nation towards doom is the failure of the institution. The institution, in his words, '...is looked upon by the community to provide a way out of its fumbling, but it became a part of that fumbling itself (11).

The sciences on the other hand have assumed the peak in order of relevance largely because of its relevance, which according to Sogolo (1981:106) is determined 'by the rise of modern technology which increasingly is becoming 'the measure of all things' in place of man.'

Kujore (1981:2) corroborates this statement in claiming that the issues that have earned the sciences its place and priority in the society is the persistent effort of man to direct his energy towards his material well being, and to achieve a better understanding as well as to wield control over the world of nature. Science is described as 'systematic study of anything that can be tested and verified' (Encarta 2007) the field of study has consistently grown and has become a paramount field of human endeavour. Science therefore conditions global understanding and the perception of the entire universe and its inhabitants.

According to Sogolo (1981) the sciences are 'defined in terms of specificity of goals and methods'. They '...are defined in terms of their strict concern with the description and explanation of phenomena. Kujore (1981:1) laments the lack of intercourse amongst disciplines on the pretext of what he describes as the era of an age that 'specializes more and more at an almost incredible pace in the division and distribution of labour ... an injudicious fragmentation and demarcation of human knowledge .' The contributions and the procedures of the humanities, or so it seems to Kujore, appears to have local application while the sciences by reason of great demand for technologists and scientists enjoy great patronage by the national stake holders this includes endowments and other such privileges.

Hostility, and at best, prejudice marks the relationship between the humanities and the sciences. C. P Snow, on the occasion of the 1959 Rede Lecture, describes it thus,

...Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension-(particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a distorted image of each other ... The non- scientists have a rooted impression that the scientist are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man's condition. On the other hand, the scientists believe that the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their brother men, in a

deep sense anti- intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential movement ...

The lives and intellectual efforts of two worthy predecessors of Wale Okediran in medical practice, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, confirms Kujore's assertion in his (1977) inaugural lecture:

...there is nothing to be gained in creating an unnecessary gap between the sciences and the humanities and in regarding both as implacable rivals ;the sciences can and should, be studied in a humanistic spirit, and the humanities can and should, be cultivated in a scientific spirit (Kujore 1981:11).

Popular ideas and postulates upon which the humanities are assessed and by which the society perceives its relevance includes the following statements:

- '...the humanities do not ,cannot humanize. Education cannot alter man'(Osofisan,1981:11).
- 'The Humanities humanize, but NOT black men. Because of some particular genetic error, some intrinsic racial perversity...such as an underdeveloped mental structure-'(13) The third is a sociological postulation that ,
- Sociologically, '...the Humanities cannot humanize, wherever there is dislocation between their context and content.
- Correspondingly the Humanities will humanise, where care has been taken to harmonize their content with their context (13).

Debunking the first two, Osofisan holds that the right response to the third postulate is pertinent to the survival and reawakening of the humanities. The original concepts that underlie the humanistic studies need to be examined. Defining the purpose will be the only way forward as all who are involved in the field need not to be hazy about the end result of the humanistic endeavours. Acknowledging that the goal of all disciplines is to create the ideal man in an ideal society, the focus of the humanities should be the essence of knowledge. When this

is motivated by a definite collective struggle to build a society, it will enrich and expand our moral horizons. This certainly is not limited to any discipline or specific field of study

There is no way our communities can succeed or survive, without an accepted ideal of human values this it seems ... is all we can teach, all we can strive to reach for, behind the mural 'superfluity' of our multiple disciplines. Research will be meaningless; will indeed translate into a betrayal without a blueprint of humanism towards which to direct our findings (24).

For the humanities to achieve this, there would be rigorous expulsions of pseudo-scholars as well as pseudo-research methods that promote in-explainable lapses in ideology, ethics, historiography, political history, biographical studies, literary writings and religious studies which continue to subvert the history, culture, and the very essence of a people to foreign culture and domination. It perhaps may be unnecessary to state the consequences of these pseudo cultures on students who have imbibed such education as we have many examples in history and in contemporary times.

The contemporary Nigerian student of the humanities, pure, social and applied sciences tend to equate the essence of learning with that of a reified commodity. The idea of education as an economic passport to a better living is the bane of Nigeria's educated illiterates. Sogolo identifies certain social forces as the bane of the life of the humanities. Certainly, the virtues embraced by the Greeks and the Romans between the 14th and 16th centuries no longer appeal to the modern society. The ancient Greeks, we are told, valued the power of eloquent speech, intellectual excellence, courage and extolled moral virtues (1981). In his words, the modern society

...has become one in which material forces take precedence over the values. Eloquence or rhetoric for instance, is only of value to modern man in so far as it is conceived a

source of power or the acquisition of material benefit (Sogolo 1981; 112).

Consequently, the overwhelming change in the value system and the posture of the stake holders - these include the policy makers and the politicians - have fostered the view that studies in the management sciences, the sciences and technology are the only means by which the growth and development of a people can be guaranteed or accelerated. Any discipline that is not seen in the light of contributing positively and practically to the resolution of social problems, or meeting economic and technological needs of the age is regarded as a luxury. The popular opinion therefore, is that the

...study of the arts, literature music poetry, philosophy, history, language and so forth in their traditional forms do not and, it is not supposed to render any solution to these problems. No matter what other values these studies might have, it is thought that such could wait for some future times when they can be afforded (1981:116).

An unfortunate syndrome in developing countries, especially those that have had colonial experiences and whose cultures have undergone diverse forms of imperialism, is the adoption of policies that further erode the dignity of man and dehumanize mankind.

Historically, restoration in most developed countries all over the world is heralded with cultural renaissance. Examples of nations that have had cultural, economic and social rebirths are Japan, France, Italy, and Spain. All four countries strategically intensified studies in the humanities, knowledge of their local and native languages, and engaged in deeper studies in philosophy, history and indigenous literature. The discoveries from their histories and culture brought about the genuine spirit of nationalism, which invariably culminates in the successes the nations continue to record in every facet of their national existence.

To a humanized intellectual community the emphasis ought not to be in turning out graduates ‘...the focus of our endeavour should be on creating citizens, men and women who would steer this ship of state and our collective longings towards utopia’ (Osofisan, 1981:28). It is not until the humanities rededicate and review the goals and methodology in humanistic pursuits that the other fields of study that have become prejudiced can consider it an agent fit for social and national change.

Physicians, Writers and Humanists

The concern of this paper, as earlier stated, is to reconstruct the broken-down-bridge between literature and science especially medicine. Dr. Adesegun Fatusi’s article, ‘The Beauty and the Beast: Transforming the Relationship between Medicine and The Humanities in the Nigerian Environment’, inspired the title of this article which amongst other issues, examines the relevance of medicine to literature and vice versa.

Adewumi establishes the fact that medicine as a field of study in the sciences takes its root from philosophy, history as well as literature and that minimising the values of these fields has had adverse effects on the medical practice which in many cases goes beyond the scientific to procure treatment from historical, philosophical and psychological perspectives. The contributions made by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung to medicine and literature may be the most relevant illustrations in this case.

Freud started his career in medicine as an anatomist and physiologist. He directed his research efforts to psychology when he was thirty years of age. Ten years later, his cumulative efforts resulted in psychoanalysis. He sought to treat neurotic patients by probing into their minds and the data he collected developed into a vast pool of knowledge about the workings of the human mind in general (Freud 1990).

Freud’s ideas have not only made impact on literature but on several disciplines and indeed on the entire intellectual climate of the Twentieth Century. His outstanding works on *Art and Literature* include: ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ (1908), a biography of Leonardo Da Vinci (1910) and several other essays. In ‘Delusions and Dream in Jensen’s *Gradiva*’ (1906), He

carried out an explicit analytical study of Wilhelm Jensen's short tale *Gradiva; A Pompeian Phantasy*. Here, he examines delusions, dreams and phantasy created by the author through the characters he portrays. 'Some Characters met with in Psychoanalytic Work' (1916) takes as reference characters, dialogues and soliloquy from William Shakespeare's plays *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, and Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*.

Freud's assessment of Shakespeare's writing and character-types is summed up in this statement

I will take this opportunity of pointing to a figure created by the greatest poet - a figure in whose character the claim to be an exception is closely bound with and is motivated by the circumstances of congenital disadvantage (Freud 1990:296).

He says Freud's analysis of King Richard's opening soliloquy is that it is shrouded with underlying meaning which the reader is expected to figure out, in his words:

It merely gives a hint, and leaves us to fill in what it hints at. When we do so... the appearance of frivolity vanishes, the bitterness in the minuteness with which Richard has depicted his deformity make there full effect and we clearly perceive the fellow-feeling which compels our sympathy on a villain like him(297).

He therefore considers King Richard an 'exception' amongst character-types. Amongst his analysis of 'Characters Wrecked by Success' Freud gives a detailed analysis of Lady Macbeth, the 'ambitious wife who instigates her husband to murder in order that she may become queen'(305). Freud describes the couple as '... two disunited parts of a single psychical individuality... copied from a single prototype ...' (308). Freud is able to draw a conclusion from the collapse of Lady Macbeth after her successful quest by comparing her character with the creation of Henrik Ibsen's Rebecca Gamvik in *Rosmersholm*.

Rebecca succeeds in getting rid of her mistress with the intention of fulfilling her 'wild and uncontrollable passion' for her husband. Just like in the case of Lady Macbeth, she is taken over by guilt, having become ennobled by Johannes Rosmer, her master's values. She rejects his offer of marriage and confesses her mischief instead. Freud diagnoses the root of her remorse and eventual collapse as an awakened conscience, her later knowledge of her incest with her biological father who had adopted her as foster child and the Oedipus complex which replays itself in her relationship with her master. Freud's inference to literature and medicine is therefore instructive, he states:

After this long digression into literature, let us return to clinical experience- but only to establish in a few words the complete agreement between them (316).

Freud's influence on other physicians remain significant. Carl Jung, one of his closest associates and mentee was greatly influenced by his discoveries, his career, however took a different turn after their intellectual disagreement and after which he developed his own theories known as Analytical Psychology. Jung's works developed the theories of the creative unconscious, psychotherapy, the Classical Jungian School, as well as the Archetypal School.

A remarkable effort in Jung's career is his 1,876 page publication on the Nietzsche Seminar (Bilsker,2002:38). This commentary on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* exceeds the original text by 1,726 pages. Nietzsche, like his predecessor, Schopenhauer portrayed the functioning of the human mind beyond the 'reach of consciousness' but Jung, we are told, found much pleasure and intellectual stirring in their works such that his doctoral thesis contains analogies from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.

Zarathustra, a biographical work on the life and style of a religious Greek leader called Zoroaster (Bilsker,2002:39). Nietzsche in this work parodies a scriptural style with the platonic style, while portraying Zarathustra as a tragic hero who always fails. Two of this doctrines which pertain to Doctrine of

Eternal Recurrence and the idea of the future humanity of man are also reflected in this work.

Jung's analysis of *Zarathustra* takes on a different approach to that of its earlier and other critics. Jung approaches the work as way of reading the author; he neither separates the author from the hero nor treats the hero as the vehicle for his plot structure or tool for Nietzsche's character portraiture. He treats the figure as a part of Nietzsche's psychology. In his seminar he concludes that much of the work reads like a vision and is prophetic of '... the unmistakable anticipation of the final catastrophe, his madness'(40).

Jung here refers to Nietzsche's mental collapse when in 1889 he 'succumbed to madness that kept him from normal functioning until his death in 1900' (40). Through this work Jung is able to ascertain that the author was blinded to his needs and was dishonest with him. He extracts Archetypal figures, ideologies, images and motifs from the work and they include, the archetype of the wise old man, the self and the persona, inflation and individuation, psychoanalytic discussions on religion, and moral psychology.

Wale Okediran, is a physician who is well versed in the humanities and whose approach to creative writing reveals his understanding of the cultural, philosophical, religious, social and traditional system of Nigeria. Apart from his involvement in literary activities, his commitment to the humanities is evident in his activities amongst the Association of Nigerian Authors where he currently serves as president. He has also served his nation as a member of the House of Representatives.

He claims that most of his inspiration and motivation to write comes as from his exposure and experience as a physician. In his words :

Medicine taught me how to write. When I tell people that medicine taught me how to write, some people feel that I am too romantic about it. As a general practitioner... I meet a lot of people (patients) whose experiences, ailments

among others serve as raw materials...(Oyegbile, 1996:33).

One observes that Okediran's treatment of themes and development of characters reflects his vision, born out of conviction 'to heal his society through his art' (Omobowale 2006:92). His monopoly over the characters he creates is absolute and consequently he plays the god and the judge of his creative world on the basis of his own philosophy of life and psychology of living, confirming this, he writes,

I direct my characters the way I like. I could burden them with sorrows and disasters, fill them with joy and love, destroy them or make them live in short, I was playing God (Okediran, 1987:7).

Okediran's humanistic vision is evident his writing and evident in some of his recent works, two of which have been selected for this analysis.

Valuating a Physician's Narratives

The Deal is preoccupied with themes of greed and evil and the weight and repercussion of such vices in a modern society. It also explicates the motivation behind several mysterious killings especially ritual killings within the setting portrayed. The story, set in a hospital morgue, begins with an omniscient narrator introducing Linus Ette, a mortuary attendant. Linus goes about his job with expertise, laying out cadavers for an anatomy demonstration class in a university teaching hospital. It is queer that Linus finds the task enjoyable, perhaps because of his twenty years experience at the job, he stops to admire the tasks he just completes with relish:

...he glanced round the mortuary and for the umpteenth time, was captivated by the beauty of the cadavers under the fluorescent lights. It was as if the bodies were actually alive only sleeping away the afternoon (2002:63).

The narrator draws the reader's attention to the attendant's greed as he meditates with excitement on 'a deal,' which he has just entered into. The details have been unclear to him for a friend of his has negotiated on his behalf, but he is indifferent to the terms since he has been reassured of a handsome reward. Now and again,

...a little smile would cross the mortuary attendant's face as he thought of the various nice things he would do with the money... (64).

Linus's love for his job, we are now made to understand, is motivated by the excessive profit he makes through other avenues apart from his salary. This makes the unpleasant experiences he has had, like inhaling formalin fumes, or taking formalin baths when cadavers slipped uncontrollably into the formalin tanks, bearable. Not heeding the several admonitions from his wife, and warnings from the electronic media against trafficking corpses, Linus continues in the lucrative trade. The covetousness has undoubtedly taken complete possession of him. Okediran lets us into Linus's negotiation with the body-sellers:

We shall be supplying you an average of three corpses every week until you don't want any more. The bodies would be supplied to you at the cost of one thousand per body payable in advance(68).

Linus refuses to think about the deaths but the money, he is neither concerned about the lives that will be lost for such a deal to run smoothly. 'Three corpses a week?' He thought, 'with this kind of supply, he would soon be able to meet the demands of his clients. Linus, crazy with excitement, thought, 'if he bought a body at a thousand Naira, and sold it at five thousand, then he would make a clean profit of four thousand per body! With ten bodies that would come to forty thousand Naira!' (68).

The attendant, carried away with the calculation of his anticipated profit, misses out most of what the man says. He simply blurts out 'I hope I can have one or two child corpses in

the consignment' (68). To seal the deal, the man promises to deliver a child corpse with every consignment. Linus becomes breathless as 'his fevered mind made further calculation "that will fetch me a cool six thousand"(69).

Nemesis catches up with Linus that same evening. He joyfully returns home to discover that his seven-year-old son, Alfred, has been missing. The older sibling of the child runs in about the same time to say that the boy has been seen entering a cab an hour earlier with a man whose description fits the leader of the body-sellers with whom he has held a meeting earlier. Linus knows where to find his son. He rushes back to the morgue to find the corpse of his son in one of the three blood-soaked sacks lying by a door. Okediran in this horrific narrative portrays a dominant social anomaly of our times.

The Weaving Looms examines themes such as sibling rivalry, wife inheritance, widowhood dispossession, cultural conflicts, religious conflicts, conflicts that arise between traditional methods of healing and the western practice of medicine. Okediran sets the work in Eleyin, a fictional town where weaving of the traditional *asooke* is a source of livelihood and an industry. The conflict in the work arises from the death of Chief Bature the owner of the looms. Bature involves two of his sons, Matthew and Peter, in the loom business while he sends his eldest son, Cletus, to school and to town to acquire the skills that will eventually establish the weaving looms as a modern day factory and industry. Cletus is nowhere near acquiring the required skills and competence, but the father has unknowingly created a sense of rivalry, a fact which rears up its ugly head shortly after his father's death.

The first set of conflicts arises when Chief Bature, a member of the *Ogboni* secret and sacred cult, is taken to hospital for treatment when he goes into coma. Chief Bature is taken to hospital against the wish of his mother and the dictates of the fraternity to which he belongs, for it is a taboo for an *Ogboni* chief to die in a hospital. Okediran creates an atmosphere of the hospital setting by employing his experience as a physician in the dialogue of two of the characters:

'I've never seen a typhoid case as bad as that. The temperature just kept swinging like hell, And despite the large volume of I.V fluids we've been giving him, the man is still very much dehydrated'. 'It must be the fever' Mrs Dixon added are those nurses tepid-sponging him properly?' (2005:18).

Bature, however, dies in hospital. The *Ogboni* insist that the sons must be severely punished, for allowing their father to die in hospital, according to the dictates of the cult. The son's zeal and attempt to bury their father without the *Ogboni* completing the necessary rites brings about a major crisis. Cletus Bature runs down one of the chiefs who attempts to stop the forceful removal of the corpse from the *Ogboni* custody by leaping in front of the moving vehicle. There arises the second set of conflicts.

Josiah Bature's youngest wife, Arike, a 27 year old woman with a young male child, faces the dilemma of having to live without her husband, and with her hostile mother-in-law who holds her responsible for her favourite son's death. She soon learns that she has to be inherited by her husband's elder brother, Kasali. While the family continues to quarrel over the rightful ownership of the weaving looms. Her friend, Agbeke, encourages her to seduce Cletus so as to escape being married to Kasali, the mean, old man. Arike succeeds, although her joy will be short lived. She gets pregnant according to her plans and the word goes around.

Agbeke's mother rebukes her daughter sharply for encouraging Arike to break the tradition and for her involvement in the chaos in Bature's family. She advises her to put a portion in Arike's food that can abort the pregnancy. Agbeke's compliance with her mother's counsel leads to the abortion of the pregnancy and Arike bleeds to death. Agbeke thus betrays Arike but her betrayal does resolve the Bature's long standing and multiple crises. The brothers reconcile, and the situation delivers Cletus from the guilt, shame and psychological torture and impending doom Arike's pregnancy promises.

Much more than bland narration of interesting events, these works bring to the fore the social vices present in the daily activities of people. For instance, the conventional posture

towards certain traditional practices such as wife inheritance that leads to the frantic moves which eventually cost Arike her life, the refusal of some members of the society to take advantage of the western form of treatment is still responsible for the loss of several lives. All these are issues carefully explored in *The Weaving Looms*.

Conclusion

The language, style and thematic preoccupation of Okediran's works reveals a personality of a physician who empathizes with his patients and his society at large. In keeping with his ideology, he tries to teach as well as heal his society by reflecting the pain and throes of the people he relates closely with in his work.

Okediran's philosophy and literary style present him as a writer who is adequately equipped to communicate his ideas, as effectively as any celebrated novelist. At a recent literary colloquium convened by him, he was quoted saying that as an undergraduate, he was one of those who gathered for book readings, poetry readings and performances at the then University of Ife.

His experiences in the humanities, as in the case of Freud and Jung, have doubtlessly made him a more distinguished member of the society. By examining the works of this writer-physician vis a vis that of physicians and humanists like Freud and Jung, this work hopes to reconstruct the broken down bridges between the humanities and other fields of study particularly the sciences and redeem intellectualism from the limitations of the partitioning that has overtaken the values of true learning.

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