Reflection on Literature as a Mirror and a Didactic Mode to Society: A Mini-review of Multi-genres

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Author’s contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This essay is concerned with genres of Literature and their relevance to society. The author carries out a mini review of various literary works showing how many authors or critics have stake in human life at socio-cultural, economic and political levels. The author uses mainly interpretive literary analysis with particular emphasis on some literary generic elements viz characters and themes affecting them in each genre. Going through a section of authors from both African and Western cultures, the author brings the reader to understand how Literature and society are intertwined as they need each other.

Keywords: Reflection of reality; sacrifice and heroism; literature and society; social and cultural values; human life journey; literary genres; art performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature and human life cannot be distanced totally as one produces another. Literary genres are mirrors through which human beings worldwide perceive their picture, their ills and mores. These genres reflect reality, what is currently happening in many parts of the globe as it happened and will always take place in a better or worse way. Human depiction on earth is
2. AIM, SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Through a literary work, readers can know about how other people in other settings lived coping with the ills of life. In this vein, the overarching aim of this essay is to demonstrate that literary genres depict human beings and the world around them. The author wants to explain how through literature people can perceive themselves and correct if affected by the message conveyed in a literary work. Further, he wants to carry out a mini-review of various authors across different cultures and times; by showing that despite differences in styles; their common goal is to teach society. Thus, the work aims to showing how literature is a mirror of society.

3. METHODOLOGY

The author uses mainly interpretive literary analysis with particular emphasis on some literary generic elements viz characters and themes affecting them in each genre. Going across a section of authors from both African and western cultures, the author brings the reader to understand how Literature and society are intertwined as one needs another to survive. Discussion bases on various literary works from across different periods, from ancient to contemporary times. Very recent critical papers by different authors are used to cement the discussion where the author deems it necessary. The reason to include these recent literary studies lies in that they deal with literature and society as two elements that cannot be distanced.

4. DISCUSSION

According to Bazimaziki [5], art performance focuses on people’s life experience and cannot be distanced from society. Film and drama cannot be distanced totally from literature genres as they both depict societal issues through realistic settings and characters having conflicts with themselves, with others or with the forces of nature. Literature imitates human deeds on earth, depicting human life better than they are or worse than they really are. As one of the oldest forms of Literature, Epic is one of these genres concerned with imitation of nature. In his Poetics, Aristotle calls Epics - and many other literary forms, modes of imitation of human experience from his childhood. In similar view, Frye [6] explains that poetry imitates human action as total ritual, and so imitates the action of an omnipotent human society that contains all the powers of nature within itself. The same author posits that a critic seems a better judge of a poem than its author. Most of the literary genres fit this statement in the sense that all what the authors of literature want to convey bases on human action on earth or in the worlds they live.
Using Okot [7] dramatic long poem, for example, it is important to show that literary genres are very didactic to society. In Song of Lawino, Okot provides Lawino’s monologue addressing her clansmen after her husband’s rejection. In many parts of the globe, particularly in many African cultures, daughters-in-law cry to their fathers-in-law hoping that the latter would intervene and advise their sons. Sometimes, women accuse their husbands of oppression while they had left their places hoping to gain a successful living where they come to. Of course, this reflects marriage and related matters as one culture aspect among people of a given place. Bazimaziki [8] discusses literature as a tool to depict contemporary human manners. The study reveals how human society is paved with temptations and traps coupled with attractions that may lead to family destruction by the outsiders depicted in the image of Clementine as a modern beautiful wife. In the same study, the reader is provided with the picture of the current human society reflected in the behaviours of an overcivilised man who rejected his wife as the latter sticks firmly to her culture, her tradition. One will think that she was rejected as a result of failure to civilize or modernise but on the other hand, some readers may question why a man can forget his identity, his origin while the saying goes that “there is no best place like home” which translates in other words that there should not be any best culture like one’s. In fact, Okot’s poem is a good mirror to reflect what is happening here and there; where conflicts among couples have become a rampant issue. Okot successfully draws attention to society by teaching them the way Clementine, the outsider, is destruction. Clementine depicts the ill doers, be they women and/or men taken as family destroyers. Bazimaziki [8] concludes that though she is a symbol of Western culture to Africans - the modernity which is pushing people to reject their tradition, their culture, identity, originality and their home values, she mirrors many people in human society today. From this situation, dramatic poetry as part of literature reflects reality.

Exploring the drama film Mugisha, Bazimaziki [5] asserts that films allow the audience to have a critical mind and their reaction may probably cope with the ills reflected in what they have already watched, on the one hand, and copy the mores from what they learnt through film watching. The same author agrees with a view that “Films encourage feedback from watchers who suggested that film can be a powerful teaching tool if utilized appropriately” and many people believe that movies that receive favorable reviews cannot be received negatively by audiences. The author concludes that dramatic films are relevant in dealing with human challenges to a certain extent. They are pedagogical materials which teach about the current challenges among relatives, the wickedness and hatred among fellows, thus they reflect the current human society.

Following closely, Bazimaziki et al. [4] say that proverbial literary forms reveal how literature and society cannot be disconnected. They play a multifunctional role as they help people to sustain their cultures, human life and values. They are therefore pedagogical tools that serve for the transmission of knowledge, wisdom and life experience from a generation to the next. According to the same authors, saying “One good turn deserves another” embodies the message that a – give – and - take culture among people is an important value that one could be equipped with for a harmonious society. From this example, one will learn that proverbs are good teaching materials which can strengthen solidarity among people who live together.

In their discussion, Bazimaziki et al. [9] contend that Peter Abrahams’ Mine Boy and Alex La Guma’s A Walk in the Night are the tools used to depict and mirror human violence over his fellow(s) human beings in general, and South African society during Apartheid in particular. Using the protagonist Xuma, Abrahams successfully explains well that literature teaches people to know that “A man is man first and colour comes after”. In the similar regard, using Michael Adonis’ behaviours, la Guma literally explains well how one is not born violent but nature teaches them violence. In fact, Adonis’ violent behaviours are a result of being fired by his boss from his job when he [Adonis] reacted back to his master’s words. This is not a fair decision in a situation of employee-employer context. In the view of Bazimaziki et al. [9]; Adonis is a victim of “darkness” and seeks revenge as he is led by the anger resulted from his being expelled from his job in a sheet metal factory. Unlikely, Xuma fights for “light” and “human right” as two militating factors in tandem to drive out darkness and vicious violence. The two authors’ literary works congruently depict the picture of human society where people become victims of some unfair decisions due to human weaknesses of not putting their foot into the victims’ shoes.
Through literature, readers will discover that human life journey is paved with challenges and trials which he must overcome for survival. For example, the epic heroes’ journey - often time historical figures, is often time depicted in two worlds: the ordinary world and the special world. In these two worlds, especially the unusual world, the heroes face challenges and trials which they have to overcome with or without assistance. In case they perform successfully these difficult tasks and trials, they become triumphant and seize the boon which leads them when returning to the ordinary world, where challenges are also waiting them. Of course, it is a tool that will help them perform successfully the difficult tasks in the rest of their lives. Niane [10] and Kunene [11] are two good literary works falling into this category of literature. In each of the two, the protagonist faces such difficult journey but later becomes triumphant. These are two historical figures whose heroic deeds are still important to Africans. Sundiata’s name is still remembered in the history of Old Mali Empire much as Shaka’s deeds and reign in South Africa are still important to Africans, South Africans in particular. The two literary works are good teachers of history and patriotism, culture and social values. They successfully convey the message that ‘challenges are part of life, that hurdles are good trainers that transform human beings into more experienced men who may stand and overcome difficult tasks whatsoever’. One will learn from the two epics how sacrifice and heroism are the leading values among human beings. According to Bazimaziki [12], the two epics depict human society whereby some act against others’ chance while there are others who are always ready to support the rejected ones or those in difficult situations. They teach that brothers should not kill among themselves for power. This happened to Shaka who was betrayed by his relatives as he says, “So my brothers, you are killing me? You think you shall rule Zululand after my death? No, you shall never rule. Only the swallowers shall rule over it.” Kunene [11].

With literature, the ups and downs of human beings are well reflected in the world they live. One may also know about how people in some places are conservatists while others are ready to change with time. Achebe [13] is one example. Using the protagonist Okonkwo, the author clearly shows human holding the flat position and refuses to change his views, his stand and his belief. Not everybody will admire Okonkwo’s conservatism, his strong attachment to his tradition until he chooses to commit suicide instead of changing his stand. It is similar to what happens in Kunene [11]. The author shows how Shaka - the epic hero, raised to fame, achieved high rank and became a greater general than his peers; and later a consummate leader and finally underwent a gradual fall which culminated into a tragic death. While Okonkwo was born in a poor family, from a very lazy father, the most indebted and drunkard; he worked hard and proved that the common saying that “like son like father” sometimes bears exceptions. Having raised to fame and won popularity in his village, he was now among the influential men of the village and could bring any change in his village. However, the crime he committed made him to be sent to exile for seven years and this situation led him to his progressive fall of power and his influence on his clansmen dwindled drastically. As such, when Bazimaziki [14] explores the tragic fall of Okonkwo and Shaka, he posits that both protagonists’ deaths were connected with their error of judgment for each. The author concludes that they are tragic heroes who, according to Aristotle, die a tragic death, having fallen from great heights and having made an irreversible mistake, and courageously accept their death with honour. Many great figures from various times and cultures undergo or have experienced the similar situation, which implies in that regard, that literature reflects reality and teaches society to correct themselves basing on what happened to others, great figures in particular.

Ngugi [15] depicts not only the conflict between two sides, one embracing the traditional cultural values - the African tradition on the one hand, another embracing Christianity on the other hand, but also the power of modernity to make traditional local people’s progress. The author brings to the readers a situation of intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. Readers are revealed the human weaknesses of conflicting among themselves while there are more things that tie them than those distancing them from one another. We are told that Kameno and Makuyu ridges share the River Honia which divides them but also, according to Shahwan [16], is symbolically a cure for the two villages and a symbol of unity between them. The author conveys the message that when human beings share at least one important thing, this should create in them more harmony than unfounded conflict which sometimesleads to destruction. Initially, the two ridges’ conflict is rooted in the outsider’s belief intoxicated in them an idea of western religion as opposed to tradition; a means
to “divide them”. Fortunately, the love between Nyambura and Waiyaki comes as a factor of mediation which leads to uniting the two. As such, their conflicts culminated into reconciliation, a positive value among children who are quenching from the same river implying that they are children of the same nation. Doubtlessly, The River Between depicts human society and mirrors human beings to look into what unite them rather than the little difference between them.

Related to this situation is brought in Shakespeare’s tragedy [17]. We are told that the conflict between the two wealthy families - the Montagues and the Capulets, led to the death of their two children Romeo on the one hand and Juliet on the other side, but such event led to reconciliation. One would ask why people wait for a tragic event to reconcile. They should have done it before the deaths of the two innocent young lovers. Should the two families be blamed or applauded for what happened? He who personally dares to point any finger to any of the two will contradict the aphorism that “None is perfect” on this earth. Rather, should we learn from the romantic tale of a young man [Romeo Montague] and woman [Juliet Capulet] who showed what true love is; despite their two warring feudal families; probably we can build from now on a better lovely society. Although the play was originally published in 1597, about five centuries ago, that tragic genre reflects the power of art as it is still mirroring human society and is still referred to as a teaching material to unite the conflicting sides while they all were created in the same image.

Elsewhere, the play Everyman [18] gives a good picture of human beings and how they act, the way they come to their fellow’s help one another. In this anonymous play, characters represent humankind behaviours on earth. When Everyman was called for judgment, many of his trusted fellows first declared to accompany him but later refused. They forsook him except his “Good Deeds” who never quit him. It is a reflection of what happens nowadays when human beings fail to be friends in trouble while a “trouble shared should be a trouble halved”. Although the play dated in the dim past, it is still teaching society that only good deeds will accompany them and remain at the end of their life. Conversely, Achebe [13] teaches society about the common social saying that “A Friend in need is a friend indeed” as reflected in what Obierka did to his closer friend Okonkwo, sent to exile for seven years after the crime he had committed in his tribe. Readers will learn from this context that a true friend is known not in happiness but in trouble.

The Epic of Savitri, MariamaBâ’s epistolary novel So long a Letter and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, and Simone de Beauvoir’s feminism work The Second Sex depict women oppression and related issues in many different cultures and times. For example, in Indian Literature, Aurobindo [19] tells a legend of Savitri, a daughter and the only child of a long time childless king, Aswapathy. Readers are told that when the daughter has now grown up, her father sends her to find a partner. The author reveals that her intelligence, wisdom and beauty are so exceptional that young men fear to ask her hand. Undertaking such a quest reflects a difficulty life journey, of trials, pain and suffering during that mission she has to accomplish, a difficult task resulted from a parent’s impatience to live with her already mature daughter. Beyond the epic hero’s fate, one would learn that this epic heroin, Savitri, undergoes the ills of domestic violence because it is not always fair to chase a daughter from home to find their partners. In similar line, Bâ [20] chronicles the bitter conditions experienced by Ramatoulaye. The author draws readers into a presentation of the female difficult conditions resulted from rejection and widowhood and Walker [21] depicts the ills suffered by women in society. She symbolically depicts human transformation seeking for new life. Using the protagonist Celie, the author carries readers on domestic violence where women are deprived of their rights. In fact, Walker successfully portrays Celie’s experience of a painful struggle including her being raped by her own father. Many bad things happened to her and she now wonders why. This led her to trusting nobody except God whom she trusts loves her. She addresses her sorrow and painful in a series of letters that she even does not sign, symbolically reflecting the extent to which she feels she is worthless. In spite of the horrors she suffered, Celie will later mature into a brave and confident woman who is now able to stand on her own. Thus, the novel is a didactic mode not only to any patriarchal society to free women and cease their domestic violence but also for women to learn that despite challenges, they should not cut moral. Rather, they should cope and show that they are able as De Beauvoir [22] reveals them that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one”; calling the reader’s attention that women should get rid of a disease of the
complex of inferiority and fight the ideology that women are the “Other”. Currently, in some parts of the globe, in Rwanda for example, women are being emancipated and their voice is heard thanks to the leaders’ keen eye to ban and eradicate domestic violence. All of these authors’ works depict the women treatment over the time. It is a reflection of reality about domestic violence through fiction well discussed in Pravasini [23] showing how in many patriarchal societies women are subjected to discrimination and marginalization both socially, economically and emotionally as well. This view is also shared by Maina [1]. Using a little boy in Darko’s Faceless, the author demonstrates the extent to which a female does not have space or position of her own. The two authors thus depict the unhappy women undergoing a lot of restrictions. By suggesting a change of people’s mind to eradicate this rampant oppression, the authors mirror human society.

When Achebe [13] writes “He came with a knife that cut the thing which held us together and we have fallen apart”, he wanted to show that if no critical analysis is done for any situation, unity of people is destroyed. Symbolically, Obierka’s words imply the “Divide and Rule” weapon often time used by the colonialists as shown in the African past. While people were traditionally well organized, sharing the ups and downs of life, the colonialists initially used Christianity to separate them.

Ngugi [24] conveys the biblical message as found in the Holy Bible, John 12: 24 that “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” These words as used by the author in that novel teach sacrifice for others. In the book, many people died for others’ survival. The author successfully conveys the message of sacrifice as reflected in the character of Kihika who was hung on a tree as he lost all his family. There is nobody to care for him while others refuse and insult him wandering on street begging from place to place, some support him but he does not cut moral. Wandering on the ground, he has become a victim of much pain. The author thus depicts the human deeds in a two binary opposition, sacrifice as opposed to betrayal. The book draws a good lesson to teach society to uphold heroism and sacrifice rather than betray among them. In the same token, Imbuga [25] discusses contemporary human issues and wickedness characterized by corruption and greed, nepotism, betrayal and impunity that have become a rampant problem in many independent states. Although we generally know that money is life, the author critically uses Doga to question “what is in money that is more precious than life?” Later, he shows the way and why betrayers are also betrayed as a pay to what they did. The idea of “Do as you would like to be done by” is reflected in what happened to Mulili and Boss who betrayed others and were later betrayed too. Therefore, drama depicts human deeds and the effects of these deeds. Added to this, Orwell [26], Achebe [27] and Armah [28] draw similar post-colonial societies and states whereby people are not free. The two authors are good teachers of how human beings are tempted and how many become victims of bribe. The two authors reflect how people are neither treated equally nor are they happy about not enjoying the fruits of their sweat. Human behaviour, selfishness and his “Don’t care attitude” are reflected in each of these authors’ novels. They address the ills done to human being(s) on their fellow human being(s), thus showing the unfairness of humankind.

The place of Short Stories in literature cycle cannot be undermined for human society to look how they are acting one another. Chekov [29] and Achebe [30] draw a good picture of contemporary humankind. Although written many centuries ago, Chekov’s Short Story Misery exhibits some moral lessons to contemporary human beings. Chekov draws a picture of human patience despite the hell one has suffered. Using the protagonist Iona, the author depicts human suffering and troubles; and the environment’s perceptions of these ills. Despite his huge horse hunchback, Iona is a hard working old man but without success. He is alone as he lost all his family. There is nobody to care for him but he does not cut moral. Wandering on street begging from place to place, some support him while others refuse and insult him while he is not the author of what happened to him. This is why wonders saying “to whom shall I tell my grief?” Should he cut moral, commit suicide? He is the only one who could decide. There are people of the same kind but they still resist such pains. Achebe [30] depicts the class conflict
where the rich want to exploit the poor servants and deny them their rights. Using the character Emenike, the author shows a “Don’t care attitude” of the middle class and the rich towards the majority poor to enjoy the free or cheap services of the government such as water supply, education for their children or the like. Related with this situation, Naik [31] demonstrates well how women in many societies are in inferior position performing heavy chores and difficult tasks. Using the protagonist Ravi, Ranjithkumar [32] refers to Indian society to demonstrate how unemployment and lack of accommodation have become rampant issues resulting from a rapid population growth. All these are good illustrations that short stories cannot be expelled from literary didactic tools to society.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This essay is a reflection of Literature not only as a mirror to society but also as a didactic material to human beings in the world they live. The discussion bases on genres of Literature and their relevance to society. Using literary works from not only African cultures but also Western, the author demonstrates the power of literature as it teaches society who produces it. He shows how literary critics have stake in human life at socio-cultural, economic and political levels. The author uses mainly interpretive literary analysis with particular emphasis on some literary generic elements, characters and themes affecting them in each genre in particular. The reader is revealed how literary genres exhibit various lessons and how many civilisations and cultures are depicted with violence and oppression, social conflict, discrimination and marginalization, dictatorship and good governance, corruption and embezzlement, poverty and riches, effects of unemployment and conflicts of generations, love and marriage, sacrifice, heroism and patriotism, betrayal and reconciliation, tradition versus modernity, colonisation and independence, war and peace among other life issues as perceived at socio – cultural and politico-economic levels. Should then readers copy where necessary and reject or blame what is not benefitting society.

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