

ZEGUAGBESI'S *ABRAHAPOKOU*: A CTALYST TO SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

All the nations of Africa are at present passing through the crucibles of democratization which is in consonance with good governance, enthronement of rule of law, justice and fair play, respect for human rights. These and many other social virtues that needed for our society to move to greater heights. In this regard, all efforts must be geared towards ensuring a change of attitude not only on the part of government but also on the part of the citizenry. This paper therefore seeks to provide an answer as to what role the African artist (novelist) can play in the socio-political transformation of his dear nation. In doing this, we have chosen to make a survey of ZegouaGbessi's dramatic novel *AbrahaPokou* (a French text) with a view to highlighting the main themes of the novel and determining their relevance to the socio-economic development of his poor Ivorian society. A brief biography of the author in question and a brief summary of the text were given. This discourse posits that the African novelist should use the medium of his text to bring about the desired social change in his society

INTRODUCTION

For literature to play its fundamental role in society, it must take a revolutionary, dimension. According to Larousse Encyclopedia (2001) revolutionary literature implies that the writer must be able to openly confront very serious matters of political or social concern, which many would ordinarily prefer to avoid. For Wikipedia, free online encyclopedia (2008), revolutionary literature has to do with militant writing which is traceable to the philosophy of existentialism and humanism which are evocative of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Michael Antoine (1982) while citing Jean Paul Sartre (1948) explains that the revolutionary artist knows fully well that speech is action. He as well knows that to denounce is to change and that one cannot denounce except if he intends to make a change. More so, he knows that words are like the gun, for when he chooses to speak it is like releasing gun shots. For a militant writing, the writer should be able to reflect critically on the society and more so on its political actions. On the other hand, it also refers to a writer who is committed to the task of social transformation by way of denouncing all forms of social and political injustices bedeviling his people. His writing is therefore considered as a weapon for struggle and for revolution against all forms of socio-economic and socio-political dispossessions. It should not be a literature that alienates itself from the people. It presupposes that this form of literature should be tailored towards fighting a course, be it ideological or otherwise for the transformation of mankind. Sartre (1948) concludes by saying that every writer should approach his business from the perspective of functional reality with a view to ameliorating the condition of man in his environment. For him, this should be the yard stick for measuring literary works

From the fore goings several African writers such as Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye, Sembene Ousmane, Chinua Achebe, right from colonial to the present have always been involved in the struggle for transforming the condition of the oppressed. ZegouGbessi is one of such African writers who have proved their mettle in this regard. His novel *AbrahaPokou* is a vivid testimony of the author's involvement in this all important struggle.

We shall here-under discuss the work taking first and foremost the biography of the author, the resume of the novel. After that, we shall proceed to analyze the themes of the novel taking into account their relevance to national development. For the fact that our main text (*AbrahaPokou*) is written in French, efforts shall be made to translate relevant quotes into English so as to suit the purpose of this work.

ZegouGbessi's biography

ZegouGbessi Nokan was born in the year 1936 at Yamoussoukro, the capital city of Cote d'Ivoire. ZegouGbessi often called Charles ZegouGbessi prefers to be called Nokan, a name he got from his grandfather. He holds a doctorate degree in philosophy and teaches at the University of Abidjan. Being a renowned, militant author, he often portrays revolutionary themes in his literary works. He has authored several books such as: *Le soleil noir point*, 1962, *Violent était le vent*, 1966, *Les petites rivieres*, 1983, his dramatic works include: *Les malheurs de Tchako*, 1968, *AbrahaPokou*, 1970, *Les Affres de l'existence*, 2000 and poems such as "Les voix de tous les purples", 1984, "l'Être, le desêtre et le non être", 2000. Being a political activist, he is currently a member of several international organizations for human rights in Africa.

Summary of the text

AbrahaPokou is no doubt one of the most sensitive political dramas written by ZegouaGbessi. This revolutionary dramatic novel was written and published in 1984 in Dakar. ZegouaGbessi via his satirical novel intends sensitizing the hitherto apolitical masses of Ivory Coast on the injustices and the undemocratic post independent Ivorian government. The novel while revealing the atrocities of the government in power urges the people to unite for a common fight against the forces that oppress them and against other forms of social vices prevalent in their society. The novel starts with, the tragic event of denying a young hero (Dakon) the right to marry a woman of his choice on the bases of his noble origin. The embattled young lad was left with the option of renouncing his right of inheritance to the throne and that of violating the long standing custom. This happens to be just one instance of the social divide between the so called ruling class and the common masses that had over the years been marginalized and discriminated upon.

Consequent upon this, the masses saw the need for a revolt against the tyrants. They had to embark on a self exile from where they would launch a possible attack on the ruling government. A very painstaking journey it was, they finally settled in a very far away virgin land.

The people for once were happy under the throne of AbrahaPokou, a woman who initiated and led the revolt. This woman led her people on the part of justice and latter be quitted the throne to Bassa instead of her son Djassa who was over ambitions to succeed his mother.

The story ends painting a picture of a democratic society where justice, equity and rule of law obtains.

THE THEMES OF THE NOVEL AND THEIR IMPORT TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Absolute Dictatorship

Dictatorial government is a form of government in which political power is often monopolized by a single person or a political party. It is an authoritarian form of government. The authoritarian head governs without the consent of those being governed. This is the type of government which characterized the Ivorian society of the 1980s. ZegouGbessi showed no mercy in denouncing the wrongs of this undemocratic government. He exposed among others the problems of social inequality which constituted a serious threat to peace and harmony of his people.

Going by the novel, the author purposely highlighted the king of Dankyira Kingdom's blatant refusal to let his legitimate son (Dakon) marry (Talounah) a woman of his choice on the ground that the said woman has no royal blood in her. All effort by the prince to convince his family on this marriage proved abortive as he was left with the choice of forfeiting his inheritance or marrying the unoble woman. The episode is presented in the following translated manner.

Dakon: I would want the beautiful Talounah to be my wife.

Maternal Grand father: A prince must have to marry princesses. Talounah is a slave

An Elder: Dakon: Your uncle is very old, when his strength eludes him, you shall mount the throne and besides it is forbidden for a king to mingle with a slave.

Another Elder: The people of Dankyira count on you choose the throne in place of the love.

His Father: You shall marry the young woman proposed to you by the council of elders.(1984:18)

The author's desire to present the above episode is rooted in his quest for an egalitarian society for he recognizes, just as contained in the united Nation's charter, article 1 that all men are born equal and as such are equal before the law.

The author also denounced other social ills of the government in power such as disregard for the people, torture, lack of freedom of speech. All these constitute problems to national development.

Patriarchal problem:

Despite encouraging policies and programmes addressing gender discrimination, women and girls in Cote d' Ivoire and of course in Africa face numerous disadvantages and violence from personal to institutional levels. Cultures of masculinity have proven hard to change. There is increasing need to engage all and sundry to end this violence so as to enable women contribute their quota to socio-economic and socio-political development of their society. Decrying this ugly phenomenon in Senegal, SembeneOusmane made the following revelation of a Senegalese woman.

Since yesterday and even since the day before Ngone War Thiandum has not stepped beyond the frontiers of her kitchen. She has lived like a prisoner fighting against all moral constraints and nursing the desire to revolt. (Vehi-Ciosane,1964:28/29).

Nnamani (2008:133) lamenting on the traditional role of women in Nigeria affirms thus: “The traditional role of women is limited to housekeeping, child bearing and child up-bringing. Traditionally they are supposed to be humble, patient, submissive and take all commands from their husbands without questions” while Ocho (2002) asserts that tradition makes political affairs a man’s business.

ZegouaGbessi vivified this problem in his text,*AbrahaPokou*. The author tells us the story of how the said AbrahPokou convoked a reunion of the elders to sensitize them on the need to revolt against the evils in their land. For her, woman in Dankyira kingdom were like slaves. He puts the situation thus.

The condition of woman in our society is not different from that of slaves. We therefore, must fight for that course. You know what I have always done for everybody. From my child-hood, I have always upheld that slavery should not exist and that men should not exploit their neighbors. (1984:20)

From the above citation, one realizes the author’s resolve to use the medium of his write up to fight for women’s socio-political rights. This he believes will contribute to national growth and development.

Poor electoral system

According to Wikipedia, online encyclopedia, electoral system refers to a method by which voters make a choice between options in an election or on a policy referendum. A proper election enthrones the choice of the majority and a representative government. In Africa, the inability of incumbent leaders to cede power to their political opponents, has always resulted in violent conflicts during power transition. AsifFarouq (2012) points out that Cote d’Ivoire has

always experienced conflict, during power transition in the past, starting from Gen. Robert Guei to Laurent Gbagbo resulting in years of civil war. A similar cycle of violence ensued when Gbagbo refused to relinquish power to Alassane Ouathara, winner of 2010 election. In Nigeria the situation is not different when General Ibrahim Babangida annulled a presidential election that was to usher in the SDP presidential candidate in the person of MoshoodAbiola.

The problem of power shift in Cote d'Ivoire is well captured in AbrahaPokou of ZegouaGbessi. The omniscient writer presents us with the scenario of an undemocratic government of Dankyira Kingdom. He paints a picture of two brothers, Dakon and Quare who had to engage themselves in a two man fight so that the winner would succeed an uncle who had ruled Dankyira kingdom for several years. Unfortunately, the most cruel of the two brothers, (Quare) won the fight by poisoning his opponent.

From the above narrative, the author brings to ridicule the government of Cote d'Ivoire which was not prepared to cede power to political opponents. The author is as well advocating for a proper electoral process which can user in a popular candidate. In his view, elections, should not be a do or die affair. Quare was told in the novel was over ambitions for the throne and so he poisoned his brother. Justice and fair play are vital ingredients for societal development.

Patriotic leadership

According to Marian (2014) Webster Dictionary, patriotism refers to love and support for one's country. It also means unflinching loyalty for one's father land. Today in Africa and more so in Cote d'Ivoire, erosion of national consciousness, ethnic clashes, religious violence, electoral violence, bad governance, looting of public property and other forms of unpatriotic acts

are prevalent. No nation can experience any form of growth and development given the above instances. To this end, efforts should be intensified for the revival of nationalistic culture and sentiment in the individual citizens.

ZegouaGbessi conscious of this societal scourge presents us via his novel with the picture of a patriotic leadership of AbrahaPokou, queen of Baoula kingdom. This queen ran a very open government that gave a listening ear to all. In her regime, there was no distinction between the leader and the led. She saw herself as the servant of the people. Unfortunately, her son Djassa was opposed to this style of governance and sort every means to usurp the throne. Abrahapokou knowing the cruelty of her son never wanted to hand over power to him. She rather organized an open election which brought Bassa into power rather than her son. She was happy to be quit the throne to a popular candidate whom she hopes would lead the people on the part of justice.

The above narrative is an indication that the author wants to conscientise the people to place national interest first and above selfish gains. He as well recognized that patriotic acts should be encouraged for effective national transformation

From the above instances therefore, one can safely say that the Ivorian novelist has greatly contributed his own quota in the struggle for societal development

Recommendations

We recommend that African leaders should lead by example as demonstrated in the novel by *AbrahaPokou* the queen of Baoule kingdom.

We also recommend that political elections should not be fraudulent so as to avert electoral violence. More so, it should not be a do or die affair as is shown in the fight between Quare and Dakon.

We as well enjoin African writers to always embark on the kind of literature capable of addressing Africa's numerous developmental challenges.

Conclusion

We have in the course of this work examined the role of the African novelist in nation building. Our choice of ZegouaGbesi's text *AbrahaPokou* is guided by the author's aptness in dealing with African's major developmental problems. This is evidenced in his careful selection of themes of his novel.

The African novelists spared no effort in tackling the injustices of the ruling government. He denounced political intolerance and electoral violence. He was critical of African leaders for not wanting to cede political powers and blamed them for organizing fraudulent elections so as to recycle themselves in offices.

The writer is as well critical of women marginalization and recommends the abolition of laws and institutional practices in favor of gender discrimination. From the above viewpoints therefore, one can safely say that the African novelist occupies a paramount position in the struggle for societal development.

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