

The Power in the writer and the Writer in power

By Mwalimu George Ngwane

T*he ultimate mission of every writer is to liberate both the minds of the oppressed and the oppressors in order to cultivate a harmonious society. How this mission is attained may be a subject of controversy, but make no mistake about it, the message for every credible writer is the same; it is the style that may make the difference.*

Ben Okri, the young London based Nigerian writer and winner of the 1991 Booker Prize once said “if you want to know what is happening to a nation, find out what is happening to the writer.” He ventures into combining the artistic creativity and the prophetic prowess of divinity when he further says, “the inklings of writers are the forgotten adventures of God”. In other words whenever power mongers become lost in the journey of personality cult, when the politician’s ship is drowning in the ocean of dictatorship, it is the writer who serves as the compass pointing the ship of state to the shores of sanity.

The social role of the writer has not only been a desire to lodge a claim for artistic leadership but to lay emphasis on democratic entitlement viz “bringing the greatest good to the greatest number”. Wole Soyinka makes the point when he writes,

“when the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon”.

The writer had always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his time. This urge and conviction to liberate their societies have sometimes motivated writers to embark on to political leadership either through constitutional means like the poets Augustino Neto of Angola, and Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal and the essayists Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria or through unconstitutional means like the poet Christopher Okigbo was killed fighting for

Biafra during the Nigerian civil war or the poet-playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged for defending the rights of the Ogoni people in Nigeria.

With the introduction of multiparty politics, writers have sought to have their visions engraved in party manifestoes like Chinua Achebe who became Vice President of the *Peoples' Redemption Party* in the 80s, Mongo Beti who militated for the *Social Democratic Front*, Ferdinand Oyono and Mbella Sone Dipoko who are apologists of the *Rassemblement Democratique du Peuple Camerounais*. So there has always been a smooth relationship between writers and politics maybe because both require the weapon of words as a medium of liberation even if one uses the weapon of words for self-defence and the other for the defence of society.

There is an assumption that the writer and the power elite are concerned with the welfare of humanity but in the exercise of their duties, this assumption gradually degenerates to an erroneous philosophy- therein lies the perception of a writer as a nuisance. A writer provides in his writings a certain articulate vision, which must order his society because otherwise social life will be a very sterile and very futile exercise. Jean Paul Satre says, "Literature must be made to serve a political purpose, since literature, Truth, democracy and other human values are bound up in kind of program". Any writer who therefore believes in the assertion of human values will not fail to speak when humanity is betrayed and mutilated. In Africa, most especially, the denial of some basic social amenities and the exclusion of more than 80% of the population from decision-making have become the trademark of leadership. It has become so entrenched that all but the writer regard it as the norm.

Therefore back to the question why politicians consider writer as nuisances? Simple - writers have the courage to tell the king he is naked when the emasculated power elite fool him (king) that his invisible dress is beautiful. In other words the writer is the voice of truth but how does he voice this truth? To answer this question, let me attempt a not too rigid classification of three kinds of writers and speculate how their writing styles can influence political reaction. The classes are the Writer-Activist, Writer-Statesman, and Writer-Politician.

Writer-activist

He keeps reminding the politician of his promises to the people; he, like the housefly settles on the wounds of society; he generally ignores the strength of the politician and dwells essentially on his weaknesses. More often than not, writers in this class are never involved in government or party politics fearing to be infected by the virus of unbridled power. Instead these writers would be found in the rank of pressure groups and people-centred organizations. In politics they have neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies only permanent interest – the interest of the people. It is therefore not strange to find them having problems with every government in power. It is this class that politicians are wont to regard as nuisance but I think one quality of this class and arguably the quality that leads them to trouble is their writing style. Most of them use a protest style, the language is one of bitterness and anger, the diction is one of invectives; the approach, confrontational; the spirit, crusading and the mood indicting. The writer matches his outrage with the level of the politician's betrayal. Because of this, the politician shifts his focus from the pertinent message of the writer to the confrontational style of the writer. The politician judges the writer's work to be a call for incitement, revolt and rebellion.

Then there is a clash of egos; a conflict of authority, - the writer maintaining his authority of principles and vision; the politician imposing his authority of legitimacy and legality. Some writers in this class include Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, Ngugi wa Thiongo of Kenya and Bate Besong of Cameroon. Bate Besong has never failed to portray the frustration of the masses against what he considers an oppressive system whether in the 1st or in the 2nd Republics. Be it in his earlier works like Beast of no nation or in his recent play called Change Waka and his man Sawaboy, his head-on style with corrupt Kaisers has not changed. Hear him in an old poem

“a leadership which had sworn fealty to their Masonic lodges and to each other, to bankrupt our national coffers. The curse on the heads of the corrupt banditti. There is evidence that evil survives absolutely and the only good is a cripple chained to a dungeon of mockery and dust. But their champagne party will end”

Hear him in his new play “Look left or right to see if the camion is coming before you cross the red sea of election fool. You are suffering too, aren't you? Those who put their trust in sous – prefets and sons of kangaroos have stories of woe to tell”. Hear him again but this time in non-fiction:

“We are in the season of harrowing self-analysis. We are the products of an age of profound discontent. We are an embattled people under the cancerous embrace of national integration fighting against titanic odds. And yet there was a time when people had faith, implicit faith in this union – without making any investigation. But I ask you where is the faith now? It has vanished. So utterly! The bonds have snapped. We carry the scars of brotherhood in a country so unaccustomed to candour.”

Not doubt Bate has had several unpleasant encounters with the Police. First when he wrote a fiercer review of my book The Mungo Bridge in 1990, he was subjected to 12 hrs of interrogation. Then the following year he staged his play Beasts of no nation in the University of Yaounde. Hours after the play, a report was sent to Security Agents accusing the playwright of trying to stir a revolt among students. As if that was not enough he was invited to CRTV Yaounde for an interview only to be picked up by the Police. In all his writings Bate has consistently and frontally challenged the Cameroonian Project of nation building.

Another example in this class is Ngugi wa thiongo. Ngugi’s publisher Mr. Henry Chakava once said: “it is not for me to tell you Ngugi’s style has kept him suffering. In spite of the problems, my association with Ngugi has been dreadfully rewarding both intellectually and commercially. Further there is not a single Ngugi book I have published that has not been an instant bestseller”. Yes, if there is any African writer who has been so disillusioned by the fruits of Independence it is Ngugi; he feels betrayed by the bourgeoisie class that has come to assimilate the trappings of the colonialist. – Hence his concept of the barrel of the pen.

My last example is Wole Soyinka. His life as a writer has been one of detentions, assassination attempts and exile. He has become the paragon of frontal collision of Nigerian leadership. In his play The Swamp Dwellers Wole Soyinka brings the visionary Igwezu into confrontation with the corrupt leader Kadive with the following question, “why are you so fat, Kadiye? You lie upon the land and choke it in folds of a serpent”. His most recent books The beautiful area boy and Nigeria, the open sore of the continent are arguably the most confrontational works on bad governance incarnated by the late Sani Abacha. Hear Soyinka:

“I know that Abacha has a bunch of killers in Nigeria. Let me tell you: torture of the most vile unimaginable kind, has become instutionalised in Nigeria. The world must forgive Nigerians if her despots instead of acknowledging the

eruption of flames around them, fiddle like the decadent emperors of ancient Rome, organizing circuses of ostentations emptiness, dispense a people's largesse to the simpering elite of the continent and burn resources that are critically needed by a decaying empire."

Because these writers have a strong message couched in 'hostile' style, politicians easily misunderstand them. Yet we all know the positive changes a writer like Soyinka has brought to his country. Apparently writer activists derive their greater authority from the confrontation of their political antagonists.

Writer-statesman

The main principle of this class is to pass a message to the politicians in a direct yet subtle manner. The writer's style is pedagogic, full of innuendoes and euphemism. The writer uses what a South African author calls artful words – words that appeal to reason. The writer assumes the role of a teacher or preacher. Read Chinua Achebe's The trouble with Nigeria and compare it with Soyinka's earlier work cited above. It is one of the most authoritative political non-fictional works in recent times. Because of their appealing approach members of this class have at one time or the other been invited to join political power. Here the writer gets in power with the purpose of fulfilling the aspirations of the people and not necessarily that of the leader. Within political power, the writer remains as a guide but sometimes opts out when his ideas are not welcome. An example is the Cameroonian essayist Bernard Fonlon. Fonlon was lured into power by Prime Minister John Ngu Foncha where he served as Vice Minister of transport. Even as a member of the *Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP)*, Fonlon never spared any effort to pick on the bad policies of his party as seen in his essay called The task today. As Minister he wrote essays on the corrupt nature of his colleagues and even refused a Mercedes Benz car preferring to ride in a less expensive *Volkswagen*. His argument was "why use 4 million francs on a Mercedes Benz when it can be used for something more productive?"

As presidential aide from 1961 – 1964, he wrote one of the best essays on the loopholes of the Federal system, which he called "Upon a Rock or Upon Sand?" An essay whose content would have probably solved the Anglophone/Francophone divide. He warned,

“ there must be permanent dialogue between the two parties else the stronger party will usurp the enterprise and reduce the weaker partner to a passive onlooker and when this happens, there can be no other outcome but discontent and frustration”

Fonlon's pedagogic style made him a partner not a collaborator of the politician. He remained independent to his vision to the point where when there was a cabinet impasse the then President of Cameroon Amadou Ahidjo would turn to him and ask "Monsieur le Philosophe, quel est votre avis?"

Each time a writer is invited to power or given a post of responsibility it is to draw from his deepermost fountain of ideas; he is called as a guide to translate his giant vision into consensual reality. A post of responsibility is not a favour or privilege conferred on a writer and while honoring this call, the writer must also fulfill the tenets of his vision. Whether it is the poet Kofi Awoonor who served as Ghanian Ambassador or the meticulous poet–novelist Mbella Sonne Dipoko who served as Mayor for Tiko, (and the inhabitants still remember a modest, soft-spoken politician who went to work on a bicycle) the writer should not die in the statesman. In all, this class cohabits easily with politicians not out of compromise; not because their message is different from the first but I think because of style,-yet it is not unusual to find members of this class join the ranks of the first.

Writer – politician

This is a class of neither nuisances nor guides; they are mere opportunists. Their messages may be illuminating; their style may be confrontational or pedagogic but at the end of the day they are not on the side of the people. For indeed to go back to the crux of this essay, my position is that the writer must have a social function whether he is loved, ignored or antagonized by political authorities. He must remain the conscience of the people; the agent of change, whatever the odds. But this writer-politician class is one of collaborators, lackeys and stooges who by joining any political system blur even the little vision left of the politician.

Example No. 1 Leopold Sedar Senghor (first President of Senegal). For all his artistic finesse and aesthetic superiority about negritude and black consciousness the poet-president was the epitome of French culture and civilisation. I choose to talk about his Pan African side because that was the one ideal he so much espoused in his writing and yet one that was so greatly betrayed. The betrayal was so severe that he found himself antagonising a real advocate of the black race Cheick Anta Diop. Did Senghor use his black consciousness poems just to position himself in the decolonisation process that was rocking Africa in the late 50s?

Example No. 2; writers who have held or are holding lesser Presidential positions in African governments and who see in these positions a juicy reward for years of artistic solitude. Our continent is replete with writers who have transformed themselves into syndicated chroniclers of predatory “motions of support” at a time this continent needs patriotic “actions of service”. Their torch-bearing flame eclipses into a moribund sycophancy. Their sweet sources of inspiration quickly dissipate into shrinking spaces of prebendalism. But time and history are never on their side. Time quickly catches on half – truths and history is fast at exposing half baked political clichés. Any writer who considers maintaining his authority and vision should make a wise choice between the first two classes for better or for worse. For indeed there is a writer in every politician and a politician in every writer; but on whose side is the writer/politician?

Conclusion

There is no controversy about a writer’s mission. Our mission is clear: to help the political leadership to safely pilot all of us to the tarmac of development, equitable economic sharing, political stability and greater African Unity. This mission was further echoed by the Chairman of the African Union, Alpha Oumar Konare during a Conference of Intellectuals from Africa and the Diaspora held in Dakar – Senegal from 7th to 9th October 2004.

Konare appealed to African leaders

“to join forces with their academic communities to determine a new direction for the continent and find lasting solutions to its problems”. Konare urged African leaders to “open their doors to African intellectuals and give them the attention they deserve so they could help in the transformation of our countries into lands of freedom and transparency”.

I have heard of something called Consultancy- a job I am told is quite lucrative but which writers have been doing, albeit unconsciously, for free. We have been misunderstood, tortured, humiliated, imprisoned, exiled and hanged yet the problems for which we stake our lives continue to harass the citizenry by day and haunt the leadership by night. I see writers as shadow cabinet politician, not suspicious partners, scheming rivals or sworn enemies. Any political leadership that is people-centered, development-oriented and enjoys popular support can never see any of the class of writers as nuisances. It is those who are scared of reality, of their own truths, of their own histories, those who look at the

mirror and are alarmed by the strange mask-like faces that peer back at them; it is they who resist the writer.

Indeed at the height of a scandal that rocked his government to its very foundations, Mr. Harold Macmillan, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, was asked at a Press Conference, which he thought was the wisest government. His answer came quickly and clear: “it is that government which knows how to use both thinkers and doers”.