

Review Article

Criticising the Critic: A Review of Selected Works of Bassey Oben

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Abstract: The domain of literary criticism is a vast field in search of cultivators. In this field of study, old canons are usually broken with the speed of light and new paradigms of literary appreciation are constructed. Literature itself being a mirror of the society and a reflection of daily life offers the perfect canvas upon which writers, researchers and critics work together in a complex but symbiotic milieu, as they seek to interpret knowledge, each in his own way, in a bid to explain the phenomenon called life. Whereas the writer seeks to sell his imaginative ideas to the world, the critic on the other hand, subjects the ideas to various analyses and interpretations in order to enrich and expand the world view of the writer. One contemporary Nigerian scholar whose many works in the field of literary criticism have elicited interest and deserves close scrutiny is Bassey Oben, a research scholar, journalist and social critic, presently plying his trade at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. The present study is an attempt at analysing and interrogating selected critiques of the researcher, with a view to inviting and promoting further interest and research in the works of this indigenous scholar. A review of these works, we hope, should reveal the critic's style, literary viewpoint and life philosophy.

Keywords: Literary criticism, literary appreciation, literary theories, literary canons, literary paradigms, indigenous literary scholars.

Introduction

Writers and critics are artists who can create a universe of their own through their fertile fictive imaginations. This work is an attempt to decipher the mindset and literary philosophy of Bassey Oben, an unsung literary expert, using four of his critical works as a template. Oben, who is presently Associate Professor of Francophone African Literature and Development Studies, teaches at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. The selected works which are all harvested from online sources include:

- (i) "The African mind and globalization: rethinking the causes of Africa's underdevelopment" (*LWATI – A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 11/3 (2014): 20-27),
- (ii) "African literary perspectives – between activism and realism: A reflection on selected African works (*IJSER-International Journal of Engineering and Scientific Research*, 9/10 (2018): 2178-2196),
- (iii) "Politique, Amour et nostalgie dans la poésie d'Unimna Angrey: Réflexions sur sursauts" (*IJCIAR – International Journal of Current Innovations in Advanced Research*, 1/7(2018): 72-77) and
- (iv) "From quest to self-discovery – the return of the prodigal son in search of his identity: a reflection on Etienne Goyémidé's *Le silence de la forêt*" (*LWATI – 13/1(2015): 75-88*).

A review of the above works is an interrogation of issues in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, that have left huge question marks on the lips of many post-independence scholars from the continent. For example, after several years of flag independence from colonial rule, why have the various African nation-states not achieved sustainable economic growth and socio-political development? Are there inherent socio-cultural factors responsible for this? Again, why have our moral standards and general civilisation not improved? Why is there so much insincerity in governance, public corruption, nepotism, ethnicity, social inequalities and injustices? And why have African women not achieved as much progress as they should several decades after independence? What are the factors inhibiting the African female folk from realising their full potentials? Why is there so much restiveness, militancy, violent crimes and religious exploitation in our society today? These are the salient issues that Oben's writings interrogate against the backdrop of the four selected works.

A cursory look at the papers reveals three major domains of analysis: these are political and social dilemma, moral dilemma and the dilemma of the African woman. But before taking on the three sub sects, let us first consider an overview of the four critical works under consideration. In the work titled: *The African mind and globalization: rethinking the causes of Africa's underdevelopment*, the critic explores the underlying factors that have been the bane of veritable sustainable economic development in Africa. According to Oben, adherence to inherited traditional intellectual and moral categories is the cankerworm that has affected the mindset of Africans in the quest to imbibe the new world order that guarantees rapid socio-political transformation of the African continent. In other words, the belief system in the African mindset that trenches tradition, but considers innovation as taboo, is what is responsible for Africa's backwardness.

Going through "From quest to self-discovery: the return of the prodigal son in search of his identity: A reflection on Etienne Goyemide's *Le silence de la Forêt*", the critic underscores the fallacy and presumptuous representation of the Black African as having neither values nor moral code to guide his socio-political, economic and religious life. Rather, the paper argues, it was the colonialists who exploited the innocence, honesty and naivety of the Black African; and having plundered her natural resources and raped her institutional structures, labeled her as savage and uncivilised. In an unusual social experiment, Gonaba, the protagonist in the source text, summoned courage and abandoned all his western education and acquisitions to retrace his roots, in order to be at peace with himself in the equatorial forest of Central African Republic. The next paper titled: "Politique, amour et nostalgie dans la poésie d' Unimna Angrey: réflexions sur sursaut", is an appreciation of a collection of poems where the authors (Bassey Oben & Anthony Eyang) speak on Africa's disenchantment with post-colonial regimes, the poet's expressed love for his fatherland, regrets and lamentations about the non-realisation of the dreams of his native land and Africa in general. In the fourth paper titled: "Conflit idéologique, calvaire de la maternité ou le dilemme de la femme africaine dans un monde postmoderne: réflexions sur Vie de femme, vie de sang d'Azaratou Baboni", Oben and Letitia Egege lament the helplessness of the African womenfolk in the hands of a patriarchal society, where the woman is negatively profiled, objectified and stigmatised as being unequal to man, and consequently subjected to systemic oppression and abuse.

Political and Social Dilemma

Extensive studies from historians and writers have concluded that colonisers of Africa did more harm than good on the continent. Coming under the guise of a religious civilisation and economic mission, they ended up plundering the continent to develop Europe, as revealed in the words of Franz Fanon quoted by Oben: "L'Europe est littéralement la création du Tier-

monde. Les richesses qui l'étouffent sont celles qui ont été volées aux peuples sous-développés". (Europe is literally a creation of the third world; the resources she swims in were stolen from the underdeveloped peoples). (Our translation).

The immediate consequence of this plunder was the widespread agitations for independence by writers and African and Caribbean students, notable among whom were: Mongo Beti in his famous book *Ville Cruelle* (1954), Ferdinand Oyono in *Une vie de Boy* (1956) and *Le Vieux Nègre et la Médaille* (1956), Ousman Sembene denounced economic exploitation in his novel *Le Docker Noir*. Earlier in Paris, the agitation had started with the combination of Caribbean and African students, among whom were: Aimé Césaire, Leon Gontran Damas, René Maran, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Birago Diop. Their mission was the independence of their dear nations and the emancipation of their citizens.

After independence, Africa entered the post-colonial era with new challenges, ranging from bad governance, inability of the African governments to institute viable and sustainable economic programmes thereby leading to military interventions in most post-independent African states. According to Oben in some of the works under review, there has been dishonesty among the African leaders which have led to the collapse of our social values and structures.

Going through the paper « Politique, amour et nostalgie dans la poésie d'Unimna Angrey: Réflexions sur sursauts », Oben and Eyang surmise that these poems are an anthology of the post-independent grief and disenchantment of the Africans against the inefficient political order in most of the nations of Africa. Drawing inspiration from their environment, they lament the abundant natural endowments of the continent that have remained untapped. They equally observe in the collection, the metaphorical killing of the value system of the continent as well as the symbol of sadness and disappointment, which is also depicted in the collection, signifying that the joy of independence was short-lived. In other words, the people are being betrayed by their leaders, which according to the critics, explains the nonchalant attitude of the elite whom they observe, have no plans for the future of the continent. The discourse on "From quest to self-discovery-the return of the prodigal son in search of his identity: A reflection on Etienne Goyémidé's *Le Silence de la Forêt*", interprets the self-realisation of an African bureaucrat who, initially initiated into the values of the colonialists, decides to find his roots among the supposed "uncivilised" "savages", barbarians and retrogrades whose abode is in the equatorial forest lands of the Central African Republic. The critics explain Gonaba's decision to abandon his career, money, wealth, property and the city, where he enjoyed his privileges as an early educated elite to seek his identity with the forest people, the Babinga. They uphold Gonaba's courage and honesty to return home but denounce the polarisation of the city into two, with the so-called civilised people on the one side and the native savages on the other side. The critics condemn the false image of Africa portrayed by the colonialists, refuting the allegation that the natives do not have a defined central form of social organisation, whereas it was evident that they had an organised hierarchical administration charged with the resolution of conflicts. The critics observed that the Babinga also have their own economic model by which their needs are met, supported by a sound communal life, a hospitable disposition toward strangers and a rich cultural heritage.

Marriage among the Babinga compels a sense of respect as it is considered an inestimable institution whether it is contracted in the traditional way or by the Christian or Islamic tradition. It is held in honour to promote and preserve the social values of procreation among them. The continuous application of these marital values fosters peace and fulfillment in the

life of the Babinga. Perhaps, this assertion by Oben et al sums up the concreteness of the marital lores of the Babinga:

Dans certaines sociétés africaines, par exemple, le succès ou l'échec dans la vie d'un homme est souvent pesé avec le mariage. Un homme qui a tout achevé mais qui n'a pas d'épouse devient la risée de tout le monde dans la communauté. C'est le même jugement qu'on donne à une dame non-mariée.

In certain African societies for instance, the success or failure in life of man is often measured by marriage. A man who has attained everything in life but who is not married is often the laughing stock of the community. The same fate is reserved for an unmarried woman. (Our translation).

Furthermore, the critics discountenance the white man's derogatory profiling of Blacks as savages and barbarians. On the contrary, they recognize and believe in the supreme creator, God. They add that in Africa, there are sorcerers, fetish priests and marabouts gifted in predictions and clairvoyance. They are also endowed with the supernatural powers to reverse curses and evil occurrences from clients who seek their assistance.

In the paper "The African Mind and globalisation: rethinking the causes of Africa's underdevelopment", Oben observes that one of the greatest ills that is responsible for Africa's non-responsiveness to sustainable development is her dogged adherence to what he terms "intellectual and moral categories inherited from traditional system". According to him, this system is a mischievous sociological theory that impedes the Africans from adapting to the modern system that engineer's sustainable development. The dilemma of the Africans is the fact that this belief system thrives on the manipulative power of the unseen spirits of their ancestors. Oben asserts that these spirits determine the future of men. In his words:

An ancestor-oriented world, on the other hand, is essentially a conservative world, a world in which the past is canonized and where customs are sacrosanct. It is a world which cannot tolerate innovation; a world in which creativity is taboo or at best, suspicious and non-conformity sin. (P.24)

It is Oben's view that this belief system has the propensity to breed laziness, inefficiency and a conservative lifestyle that inhibits progress. Therefore, he condemns the maintenance of the status quo and predestination. He believes in hard work and the paradox of the modern world where men are responsible for the outcomes of their lives. In his words, "men should be creative agents for an improvement on the old". He denounces impatience and the belief in instant solution and miracles because according to him, "men can build enduring legacies and come to the knowledge of the truth only by patient labour. The demand for immediate result is fatal" (P. 25).

Moral Dilemma of Africa

Morals are principles and beliefs which guide right and wrong behaviours and practices. Moral standards vary from one society to another, but there exists a general principle worldwide that is acceptable as right or wrong conduct. For example, stealing, killing, telling lies and sleeping with another man's wife or husband are morally reprehensible behaviours, whereas giving, greeting, appreciation are good morals. When the good values are no longer practicable in an environment, one can conclude that the moral standard is eroded and has attained a state of dilemma.

In the paper “the African mind and globalization” rethinking the causes of Africa’s underdevelopment” (2014), Oben believes that “the concept of neighbor is ideally accepted in principle by all societies. The scope however, varies”. He points out that whereas “professionals in the West, in spite of some occasional lapses, recognise that they owe obligation to everyone in the society”, Africans’ posture to this attitude is contrary. As Oben would put it: “to favour a kinsman at the expense of other people is a fundamental duty and a changing social situation cannot turn it into sin over night” (p. 23). This observation implies that public service rendered to a relative in the African context at the expense of a non-relative is a good moral conduct; while it is considered nepotism in the western culture. “Conversely, rendering service to a stranger at the expense of a kinsman in the African setting is a sin which can attract the wrath of the ancestors. This preferential obligation is expected of an African towards his or her relative in politics and in government, even if the beneficiary of the favour is not qualified for it”. To all these paradoxes, Oben sees the trend as “a near perfect recapitulation of the African mindset which, unfortunately, is a root cause of Africa’s underdevelopment.” (p. 24). Without a doubt, as earlier held by Oben in this paper, the root causes of Africa’s moral dilemma and by extension, underdevelopment is her being tied to intellectual and moral categories inherited from the traditional system which are at variance with modern ideas of development.

The Dilemma of the African Woman

One of the human conditions that have attracted so much literary discourse among writers and critics in recent times is the deplorable condition and portrayal of the African woman in a patriarchal society. The campaign to improve the lot of the womenfolk and halt negative profiling against them has won many disciples and critics alike. Indeed, feminist criticism has a great convert in the critical world of Bassey Oben.

According to *Hutchinson Encyclopedia*, feminism is the “active belief in women having equal rights and opportunities as men”. It also refers to women’s movement crusading for the rights of women, including social, political and economic equality with men. This movement has attracted many contributions from writers such as: Mongo Béti in *Perpétue et l’habitude de Malheur* (1958), Sembene Ousmane in *Xala* (1993), Aminata Sow Fall in *La Grève des Battus* (1979), Mariama Ba in *Une Si Longue Lettre* (1980), Houévi Georgette Tomede in *Eve et l’Enfer* (2010), Calixthe Beyala in *Le Petit Prince de Belleville* (1992) and *Maman a un Amant* (1993), Mary Lee Martin-Kone in *Pain Sucré* (1983) and Azaratou Baboni in *Vie de Femme, Vie de Sang* (2011), just to mention a few. The agitation by women for equal rights and privileges, as well as redress and injustice against the dehumanising treatment meted out to them, informs the desire to carry out a criticism on the subject. In the paper “Conflit idéologique, calvaire de la maternité ou le dilemme de la femme africaine dans un monde postmoderne: réflexions sur *Vie de femme, vie de sang* d’Azaratu Baboni », Oben and Letitia Egege (2018) observed that the weakness and helplessness of African women is the reason for their vulnerability to maltreatment by the men. We are informed that the protagonist, Ambroise is not only a deceiver; he is also a lazy man, a liar, an exploiter a chronic womaniser and a con man. We are also informed that she had her first child with him outside wedlock. All these should have been enough signs for a rational woman to back out. However, forces stronger than her compel her indulgence to continue with him. This explains why she is easily swayed by what she hears, rather than by the evidence before her: “s’il tu plait je voudrais que tu me donne une autre chance. Permet au petit de vivre avec son père et de pouvoir connaître le bonheur d’un foyer » (p.4). (Please, give me another chance. Allow the children to live with their father in order to experience the joy of a home) - (Our translation).

Another factor which the critics advanced to explain the vulnerability of African women, is the spell in the act of love. Fatou confesses love for her man in these words: “j’étais amoureuse de lui et cela me rendait aveugle” (p.4). (I was in love with him and that made me blind) - (Our translation). From this confession, it is clear that a woman in love can hardly see the injustices, the wickedness, the lies and the deceit done to her. She may feel it but the word “blind” means she would often wink at it as though it never happened. This is what Oben seeks to explain in this work. Children in a relationship between a man and a woman constitute a potent force that tames the woman’s rebellious instincts and may kind of imprison her in a clearly unworkable relationship, as in the extant case Oben and Egege highlight. Even when Ambroise abandoned Fatou and their children and began to live with another woman in the village, the thought of her children growing up without a father in the home constrained Fatou from backing out of the relationship.

A passionate follower of Oben’s critical works is left in no doubt that the researcher is a feminist. It is his conviction that the plight of the woman in the African setting may not be surmounted easily until what he calls the “intellectual and moral categories” inherited from the traditional system are rebranded. We may also add that financial autonomy and feminine solidarity can, to a large extent, curb the unsavory conditions that limit the woman in a patriarchal society that Africa is presently. Oben always employs a simple style technique to convey his analysis of the various themes in the works he criticizes. Although some terms like “intellectual and moral categories” and “mischievous sociological theories”, as well as “the paradox of the modern world” are technical terms often employed in his works, they are usually far and in-between and so do not subtract from the scholar’s unique style. Keeping it simple, straightforward and concise allows him the latitude to convey his viewpoints across, even to the layman on the street who reads his critiques.

Conclusion

The plight of the African woman of not having a voice in the scheme of things in her home and in the society has been brought to the fore by critics and writers. We have seen that the role and importance given to man in a patriarchal society portends evil for the feeble but altruistic woman whose innocence is exploited by some egocentric men. The fate of the woman but also of the ordinary man on the street is the central issue that dominates the critical works of Basse Oben. The case of Fatou and Ambroise is one example of the numerous cases of failed relationships that abound in Africa. This explains why concerned writers and critics have taken the challenge to join the crusade for the liberation of the African woman. Oben is one critic who holds the view that the enormous role of the woman as mother of the society deserves the appreciation of men, and not humiliation or condemnation. Man must come to the realisation of the treasures that lie in the woman and appreciate her for what she is in order for the society to strike a balance. Beyond the plight of the woman, however, the hopeless living conditions of the poor ordinary masses of Africans is the adrenaline that fires up the critic in Oben. In public as in private, Oben never ceases in his lamentation of the structural and systemic dysfunction that has become the recycled story of failed African nation-states several decades after flag independence. He believes that the ordinary man in streets of Africa has not had value for the enormous natural endowments and treasures in his backyard. The reason for this, he believes, is squarely a failure of leadership. One can therefore safely conclude that Oben’s critical works aptly portray him as a humanist who concerns himself with the lot of the common man.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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