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Abstract

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THE PROBLEMS OF COMMITMENT IN LITERATURE

The committed writer is one who consciously uses his writing as an instrument for furthering the cause he believes in. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines commitment as among other things, 'engagement that restricts freedom of action'. I will examine in this paper what these restrictions are for the committed writer.

Examples of commitment in literature abound. In 1984, George Orwell paints a vivid fearsome picture of a thorough-going militarized state where human freedom is severely curtailed, privacy is absent, and the belief in an imaginary foe is preached to keep the populace in a

constant state of alert which leaves them no time to contemplate their enslavement. Orwell shows his commitment to human freedom and his fear, that judging from the trend of events at the time he was writing, the world might get to the 1984 nightmare. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Kwei Armah concentrates with nauseating intensity on corruption. One can virtually smell the filth. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Alan Paton hits at apartheid in South Africa while in *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison lays bare the more subtle forms of racial discrimination in the U.S. Solzhenitsyn exposes the inhuman conditions in Soviet prison camps in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* while Omotosho attempts to ridicule the Nigerian Civil War in *The Combat*. Rene Maran attacks French colonialism in *Batouala*. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe decries corruption and sharp political practices. In traditional African literature comparable cases cannot be cited since the novel does not exist in that literature. However, in ballads and songs, singers often attack bad behaviour for sheer fun and mischief and as a deterrent. This fact has led Leopold Senghor to comment:

Thus in Africa, art for art's sake does not exist. All art is social. The minstrel who sings the noble into battle gives him strength and shares his victory. When he intones the deeds of a legendary hero, he is writing the history of his people with his tongue, restoring to them the divine profundity of the myth. And so down to the fables which beyond the laughter and the tears serve for our instruction.¹

Apart from Senghor, commitment in literature has many illustrious supporters. In his essay 'The Novelist as Teacher', Achebe is quoted as saying:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must now be done in Nigeria. In fact the writer must walk right in front, for he is, after all, the sensitive point in his community.²

Ngugi prescribes more than mere writing:

It is not enough for the African artist, standing aloof to view society and highlight its weaknesses. He must try to go beyond this, to seek out the sources, the causes and the trends.³

No one can deny that the literature of commitment is necessary. How can a writer just look on placidly while the struggle for sheer survival rages around him? We are all familiar with sensational newspaper reports of people fighting with bibles and chairs in churches or with trumpets and drums in nightclubs. Truly, in an emergency a man fights with whatever he has in hand.

Naturally, then, one should expect a writer, when suddenly confronted, to fight with what he has in hand which is his pen. Writing in the journal *Présence Africaine* Arthur Maimane, a South African author and journalist, puts it quite bluntly:

In South Africa if you are black there can only be one thing you feel very strongly about: apartheid. And you do not have to be an artist either ... so the first thing those of us who can write want to write about — feel impelled to write about — is the effect of this supremacist ethos on ourselves and on the supremacists themselves.⁴

The question confronting us, therefore, is not whether writers ought or ought not to be committed, for that is dictated by circumstances. The question is whether the effect of commitment on literary quality is salutary. In a lecture I delivered at the University of Iowa in 1974, I described commitment as a prostitution of literature. There were violent and angry rebuttals from some of my friends. I have not recanted yet. What should be understood, however, is that decrying prostitution is not the same thing as denying that up to a point it is unavoidable in most societies. I still think that the committed writer is a literary nightsoiler who is called upon to do an ugly but sometimes absolutely necessary job. Indeed it is doubtful whether aloofness is possible in a setting like apartheid. In writing *Dancer of Johannesburg*, a short play whose plot is based on the conflict in South Africa, I made up my mind to be as dispassionate as possible and to concentrate on the dramatic aspects of the work. But eventually I found myself preaching here and there. I was committed.

Is the literature of commitment good literature? I shrink from launching into a direct full-scale definition of good and bad literature. The hazards in such a venture are too fearsome to contemplate. Instead let us take a look at the various effects of commitment on writing. Thereafter we can all draw our own conclusions.

Firstly, the committed writer loses much of his objectivity and the reader cannot trust him because he knows he has taken a stand which he is out to defend come what may. When he describes a situation or character as beautiful or ugly, the accuracy of his observation becomes questionable. Although he may, and indeed usually does evoke a high intensity of feeling, an inherent falsehood often bedevils any pathos he may conjure up. But some may ask: is absolute objectivity desirable in creative writing? The answer is no. The absolutely objective creative writer does not exist. Subjectivity is a vital ingredient of fiction. Most novelists are partial to freedom, justice, fairplay and other virtues and in their writing they uphold them: But this is not the type of commitment about which we are concerned here. The commitment in question is

narrower and more pointed than mere adherence to the universal virtues we all yearn for. The committed writer is not out to make a general statement; he is out to change a particular situation, or to initiate, reverse, or modify a mode of thinking. His preoccupation is intense and his subject looms so large in his field of view that he sees little else. So he comes up with distorted, if powerfully drawn images. For a reader, especially one not committed to the same cause, such distortion, even though intended to correct a grievous social ill, can be very boring, even irritating. As Wayne Booth points out in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

There is this much truth to the demand for objectivity in the author: signs of the real author's untransformed loves and hates are almost always fatal.⁵

Let us take a few examples. In *Batouala*, Rene Maran, a West Indian educated in France, who worked as a colonial administrative officer in the then Ubangi-Shari (now Central African Republic) attacks the French colonial system. He makes his intentions quite clear in his preface to the book:

I shall speak in my name and not in the name of another; I shall expound my ideas and not those of another. And I know in advance that the Europeans whom I shall paint are so cowardly that I am sure that not a one will dare give me the slightest argument. For if one could know on what continuous evil the great colonial life is based, it would be spoken of less — indeed it would be spoken of no more.⁶

Accordingly, Maran goes to work. Here is a typical passage which he puts in the mouth of his hero Batouala:

I will never tire of telling of the wickedness of the boundjous! Until my last breath I will reproach them for their cruelty, their duplicity, their greed. What haven't they promised us since we have had the misfortune of knowing them! 'You'll thank us later,' they tell us. 'It is for your own good that we force you to work. We only take from you a small part of the money we force you to earn. We use it to build your villages, roads, bridges and machines which move by fire on iron rails.' The roads, the bridges, those extraordinary machines, so where are they! Mata! Nini! Nothing, nothing! Moreover, instead of taking only a part of our gains, they steal even our last sou from us! (p.75)

In passages like this Maran castigates the French. So far so good. But apparently, attacks on the colonial system itself are not enough to dispel the intensity of his feelings. He launches into non-political attacks. Here he focuses on the hygiene of the whites:

Traditions are worth what they are worth. Some are definitely disagreeable. Others like personal cleanliness are quite desirable. Only the whites pay no heed to it. Perhaps they despise it! In any case, the least washing horrifies them. They do it as little as possible. That is doubtless why they always smell like corpses. (p.50)

He attacks the virtues of white women: 'As loose as black women, but more hypocritical and more mercenary, they were full of vices which the latter hadn't know about until then.' (p.76)

Surely, as Wayne Booth would say, the author's untransformed hates and prejudices are clear in these passages which detract from the literary worth of the book. Maran was aware that no French publisher could publish such abuses against the whites. So he had to paint the blacks in sufficiently lurid colours to placate his publishers. Also I suspect that Maran, who was an assimilated black Frenchman, had a securely veiled contempt for his fellow blacks. So he ensures that his hero Batouala is much worse than even the noble savage of European imagination. Although Batouala is supposed to be the great 'Mokoundji', the chief of many villages, his gestures are brutish and he makes love to his favourite wife Yassigui'ndja without any emotion:

And by a very natural association of ideas he wanted to fulfil his male desires, because, up to now, he had never missed doing so each morning before getting up for good. As Yassigui'ndja had always been accustomed to these daily liberties, even though she was still asleep, there was no need at all to wake her up. (p.24)

His nine wives are shown as completely immodest. While Yassigui'nja, his favourite wife, prepares him breakfast, 'her eight female companions proceeded to wash their sexual parts, each one with her back leaning against the wall of her own hut' (p.45). This scene of simultaneous public ablution is hard to believe. And finally, here is a circumcision orgy which surely embodies most of the fantasies which the untravelled white man has of Africa:

A strange madness suddenly seized the confused human throng surrounding the dancers. The men tore off the pieces of fabric which served as loinclothes; the women also removed the rest of their clothes. The breasts of the women bounced. A heavy odour of genitals, urine, sweat and alcohol pervaded the air, more acrid than the smoke. Couples paired off. (p.87)

The book was of course published and promptly awarded one of the highest French literary honours, the Prix Goncourt. What redeems *Batouala* somewhat is the vivid and poetic description of the countryside.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Kwei Armah, in a desperate bid to expose the corruption of his country, Ghana, describes the soiled walls of a lavatory with extraordinary attention to detail:

There must have been people who did not just forget to bring their (toilet) paper, but who also did not bother to drop their loads, for the wall has marks that are not mere afterpieces but large chunks of various shit.⁷

I apologize for this quotation but it shows that corruption looms so large in Armah's vision that he is forced to descend to this level of vulgarity to make his point. This is not to say that the book is not successful. Quite the contrary. The *New York Times* described it as being 'in the first rank of recent novels anywhere'.

However, the passages all show how coloured the vision of the committed writer with a missionary zeal can be and why his description or choice of detail cannot always be trusted.

Secondly, the writing of a good novel demands concentration and a singleness of purpose. A mind torn between the desire to transmit a message and the normal demands of literary creativity is bound to wobble a little. The author may intrude blatantly, dialogue may become twisted and in extreme cases logic and moral balance may suffer. Almost invariably the author preaches. Here is Orwell in 1984.

The aims of these three groups are entirely irreconcilable. The aim of the High is to remain where they are. The aim of the Middle is to change places with the High. The aim of the Low when they have an aim — for it is an abiding characteristic of the Low that they are too much crushed by drudgery to be more than intermittently conscious of anything outside their daily lives — is to abolish all distinctions and create a society in which all men shall be equal. Thus throughout history a struggle which is the same in its main outlines recurs over and over again. For long periods the High seem to be securely in power, but sooner or later there always comes a moment when they lose either their belief in themselves or their capacity to govern efficiently or both. They are then over-thrown by the Middle who enlist the Low on their side by pretending to them that they are fighting for liberty and justice.⁸

This piece which reads like a dissertation on the Marxian concept of class struggle goes on without a break for eleven pages. For a reader who is out to enjoy the author's creativity this sermon is indeed trying.

Thirdly, quite often the literature of commitment depends for its success on matters of the moment. That being so, it is sometimes difficult to judge whether say a satire derives its popularity from the sheer relevance of its theme or from the author's craftsmanship. My charge of literary prostitution arises when political or other opinions loosely held together in a poorly written story are blatantly put up for sale to the

public in the name of creative writing. Even while recognising the need for commitment we must draw the line somewhere. Orwell's *1984* is a very absorbing book. Its success depends in part on the immediate relevance of the socio-political situation it portrays. In it three power blocks: Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia seek one another's annihilation, a cold war is fanned by continual propaganda, loss of liberty is institutionalized and so on. When these political realities cease to cause world concern the survival of *1984* will then hang on the brilliance with which it has been executed. Clive Wake makes the point clearly:

Literature of any kind, no matter how great, inevitably dates in certain respects, but much of it, perhaps most of it, dates very quickly and sinks into oblivion because it depends too much on the external features of the historical moments.⁹

Fortunately, Orwell has succeeded in weaving a touching tale of human suffering which should stand on its own without the socio-political props in the book. Also his plea for freedom is for all humanity and this fact commands our sympathy.

All this is not to say that authors should always strive after so-called deathless prose. In the literature of any people there can hardly be more than a handful of books that can be so classified. Even they cannot last for all time. At best, 'deathless' can only be interpreted to mean lasting for a couple of hundred years. So it is true that we need much much more than deathless prose. But even so we must recognise the paradox that the more immediately relevant to society a work of art is, the more quickly it becomes irrelevant.

Apart from the depreciation in worth of committed writing when the relevant historical moment is past, there is, I think, yet another reason why such writing often fails to pass for good quality literature. This reason has to do more with human psychology than with anything else. It is this: aesthetics and utilitarianism do not often make good bed-fellows. A work of commitment is too much like an advertisement. Readers generally resent being taken for a ride or being used as target for propaganda no matter how mild or how well motivated. This is true also of other forms of art. For instance any painting used for an advertisement, no matter how well executed, is rejected out of hand in any serious consideration of art. If *Mona Lisa*, the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci, had in the first place been put up as an advertisement for, say, a brand of toothpaste, it almost certainly would never have been noticed. As an advert *Mona Lisa* would lose her mystery; her famous smile would turn into an avaricious grin. I believe it is for the same reason that hymns have generally not passed for great poetry. Many hymns are great, but

only as hymns. Why is this? It is because hymns are poems of commitment to this god or that.

Now and then a committed author surmounts the difficulties discussed above and produces a beautiful work. When this happens I submit that it is in spite, not because, of the author's commitment. Somewhere, somehow, he has struck a human chord which vibrates in resonance with ours. It may be noted here that a work may arouse a lot of public interest without being successful in the literary sense. Such a work is little more than a socio-political tract. Indeed, if sociologists and political analysts show more interest in a piece of creative writing than literary critics, then the author has cause to worry if he is interested in pure literary merit. For instance, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* aroused considerable public interest when it was published in 1726. Swift was highly praised, viciously attacked, and pronounced insane in turns. Here is a case of a satirist pinching the sensitive socio-political nerve centres of his society. Swift attacked psychologists, scientists, medical practitioners, politicians, artists, the lot. Sometimes his attack degenerated to the personal level. He praised his friends and decried his foes. No wonder then he aroused such violent reactions. Here is what sounds like a political attack:

There was a man born blind who had several apprentices in his own condition, their employment was to mix colours for painters, which their masters taught them to distinguish by feeling and smelling.¹⁰

And a literary attack:

We next went to the School of Languages, where three professors sat in consultation upon improving that of their own country. The first project was to shorten discourse by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because in reality all things imaginable are but nouns.¹¹

Today such passages would be considered silly and less than witty, but then it is not fair to make comparisons across different literary epochs over two centuries apart. However, in my view what keeps *Gulliver's Travels* alive today is the appeal to our undying love of fairy tales and the sheer grotesqueness of the entire write-up. If the big-men-little-men contrivance was removed much of the popularity of the book, especially with children, would die. But then one may argue that no work, no matter how great, could stand if its centre props were removed. There is some merit in that argument.

There are some who hold that uncommitted writers simply do not exist. There is always a point of view, or a way of life which is uppermost

in an author's mind and which he wants to project. Is Flora Nwapa not committed to womanhood and its delicate problems in *Efuru*? Is John Munonye not concerned with the grimness of the daily struggle for existence in *The Oil Man of Obange*? And how about Elechi Amadi and his obsessions with the supernatural and traditional rural life? Well, there is a difference between describing a given background faithfully and actively pursuing a cause. Of course, poignancy may be achieved and strong emotions aroused whenever an author tells a story well but these efforts cannot by themselves prove commitment. Admittedly, it may be hard to draw the line, especially in works by cunning authors, but most cases of commitment are easy enough to identify if only because the authors do not usually hide the fact — and they do not have to.

I am aware that critics are often in a dilemma in assessing works of commitment. How much literary merit is there? How much politics, ideology or dogma? A way out is to regard the literature of commitment as a distinct genre and to proceed to evolve appropriate criteria for appreciating it. This should eliminate much of the confusion which arises when works of commitment are compared with other works. It is no use comparing Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* with *1984* or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* with *Gulliver's Travels*. These works are worlds apart.

What then? Is the literature of commitment good literature? My view is that commitment seriously impairs literary quality. Should purists haughtily write them off as bad literature? Hardly. Yet there is something disturbing, even lamentable, in the novelist who squanders his art in decrying a bad government or ushering in an untried political system, when it is realized that armies of journalists are doing just this in countless newspapers and magazines all over the globe. The committed novelist should know that as a propaganda tool, the novel is at best inefficient and expensive. It is like sweeping the streets with brooms of gold.

NOTES

1. Leopold Senghor, *Prose and Fiction*, ed. Reed and Wake (Heinemann, London, 1976), p. 82.
2. Chinua Achebe, 'The Novelist as Teacher' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Heinemann, 1975), p.45.

3. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Satire in Nigeria' in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, ed. Pieterse and Munro (Heinemann, 1969), p.69.
 4. Arthur Maimane, 'Can't you write about anything else?' in *Présence Africaine*, No 80, 1971, 124-5.
 5. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1961), p.86.
 6. Rene Maran, Preface to *Batouala* (Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1973), p.10. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
 7. Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1969), p.124.
 8. George Orwell, *1984* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1973), p. 162.
 9. Clive Wake, 'The Political and Cultural Revolution' in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature* (Heinemann, 1969), p.50.
 10. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Penguin English Library, 1967), p.224.
 11. *Ibid.*, p.230.
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