

LITERATURE, HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF CHIGOZIE OBIOMA'S *THE FISHERMEN*

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Abstract

Literature reflects the society and so is a tool for historical discourse. Literary artists in Nigeria have used this means to bring up issues which seem forgotten in the nation's history. These issues are presented to their readers to enlighten them so as to enable them solve contemporary problems such as poor leadership because Nigeria as a nation has yet to grapple with the problem of poor leadership since independence. This problem has been a great concern to literary artists as they portray the masses' expectations and disappointments. The annulment of 1993 presidential election in Nigeria is one of them. This massive disappointment has been recreated by Chigozie Obioma in *The Fishermen* where he tells of the shattered hope of a proud father of six who wishes his sons to be great men in the society. He also presents the torn hope and peace of these brothers as he tells the story of the symbolic meeting of the brothers with Chief M.K.O. Abiola which metaphorically alludes to the struggle of Nigeria's failed leadership. With the use of sociological critical approach to literary analysis, the dashed hope of the Nigerian masses and its effects on the populace are discussed.

Keywords: Literature, History, Contemporary Development, Failed Leadership

Introduction

History can be recreated through literature. Because literature mirrors the society, literary artists bring back to the present those events that had taken place in the society at one point in time or the other. This move is not merely for the sake of art but to help in redirecting the present for a positive change. African writers, as Ezeigbo puts it, “grapple with the reality of African past for the purpose of illuminating and interpreting the present and directing the future” (11). The contemporary development of every nation must begin with the correction of past mistakes and with the reenactment of these past mistakes and their consequences; the writer is hopeful that a new society will emerge. One particular problem which Nigeria has been facing as a country is poor leadership and that has slowed down the pace of the country’s development. Leadership entails the capability of successfully managing an entity or an organization. It involves the ability to give meaningful direction to collective effects through locating and solving the problems of an organization. The importance of leadership in government is affirmed by Masciulli, Mikhail and Knight who have it that “leadership is an essential feature of all government and governance: weak leadership contributes to government failures, and strong leadership is indispensable if the government is to succeed” (3). This, therefore, means that there could be a government without leadership because it is just a characteristic of government, and that its presence may not be felt in a particular government or governance. In this case, it is the weak form of leadership which may eventually bring about a disaster. Leadership implies empathy and commitment to the populace. A leader needs to possess a deep understanding about the feelings and thoughts of those whom he leads so as to be able to really consider their perspectives. He should also be committed to the

growth of the people and the nation at large and should lead by example. By so doing, a leader displays a sense of responsibility.

The Nigerian masses, the common people in the country, have lost hope and trust in the government because of the insensitivity of those who occupy various leadership positions in the country. These leaders have continued to exhibit and protect selfish interests in their course of governing the nation. Achebe in *The Trouble with Nigeria* succinctly posits that “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership... the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of the leadership” (1). Since her independence in 1960, Nigeria as a nation has been facing a lot of leadership problems. The unsteady leadership forms which began to fluctuate between the civilian and the military immediately after independence coupled with other glaring effects of the nation’s contact with the colonial masters have left the Nigerian masses in a pitiable state. Between 1963 when Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe took over the leadership of Nigeria from the westerners and this present day, the military rule was on ground for about twenty one years. As recorded by Ogbeidi, it was General Muhammadu Buhari who ousted power from Alhaji Shehu Shagari in 1983 when the Nigeria populace tasted democracy once again after the civilian administration of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe between 1963 and 1966. Then, came General Ibrahim Babangida in 1985, who in 1993 promised the Nigeria nation of handing over the steering of the nation’s affairs to a democratically elected president. And also, election process was planned and the masses went to the polls with the hope of returning to democracy. It was a kind of battle against the military regime for Nigerians who were so determined to take the bull by the horns. Votes were cast between Chief M.K.O. Abiola of Social Democratic Party and

the National Republican Convention candidate, Alhaji Bashir Tofa. The Nigerian masses had their hope held high, but then, it crashed. As asserted by Salawu and Hassan, “it was the hope of good governance that Nigerians expected from MKO Abiola that made them vote for him across the nation irrespective of ethnic and religious affiliations” (32). Writing about the election, Reuben Abati, a renowned Nigerian journalist puts it in his article, “June 12 and M. K. O. Abiola” that the election was adjudged to be free and fair, and peaceful. But the Ibrahim Babangida-led military government had been playing games with the transition – to – civil rule, and so it chose not to announce the final results of the election, and later on June 23, 1993, the presidential election was annulled. It was a torn-hope for the Nigeria masses as power returned again to the military when Chief Ernest Shonekan’s interim government was ousted and General Sani Abacha took over the mantle of leadership.

This disappointment has been metaphorically recreated by Chigozie Obioma in his first novel, *The Fishermen*, a novel shortlisted for the 2015 Man Booker Prize and the winner of the inaugural FT/Oppenheimer award for fiction. This is one of the problems that have emanated after independence and writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Mongo Beti, Ayi Kwei Armah, Femi Osofisan, etc. have presented these problems in one way or the other. In the words of Ugwuanyi, “Most African writers have tended to draw their materials from past and continuing history of their people and have been showing their concern for or commitment to the aspirations of their people (73). This is the case with Obioma in this novel, for writers, by diagnosing the ills of the society make the people aware of the follies of man. In criticizing the shortcomings of the government and the people’s attitude to life, they are hopeful that meaningful changes will eventually take place. This

confirms the assertion made by Amodu that “literature become a vital tool in exposing various societal shortcomings. It instructs the mind of the reader, it serves as a window to the world and an effective instrument for national consciousness, integration and development” (123).

Brief Background Information on Obioma’s *The Fishermen*

Set in Akure, the capital city of the present Ondo State in the ‘90s between the electioneering period of the 1993 presidential election and the military regime of General Sani Abacha, *The Fishermen* is a story of four brothers Ikenna, Boja, Obembe and Benjamin whose father works with the Central Bank of Nigeria and, at the commencement of the story, is transferred to Yola, a town in the northern Nigeria. Their father’s dream is to see his children as great men as he maps out various professions for them. When their father eventually leaves for Yola, the boys, against their parents’ desire decide to fish in Omi-Ala River, a river where terrible incidents take place. It is on one of the days when they are at this dangerous Omi-Ala River that the brothers have an encounter with Abulu, a madman whose prophesy that one of the brothers will kill the eldest, tears down the hope and expectation of their father who, on his own part, has failed in his responsibility as a father to intervene at an appropriate time.

This family story of four brothers is fused with the Nigeria story of the electioneering and annulment of the 1993 presidential election and its effects on the populace as well as the plights of the people during the Abacha regime. As the stories intertwine, the brothers meet one of the presidential candidates, M.K.O. Abiola, when he comes to Akure on a campaign tour and he gifts them a calendar which they cherish so much. It is their hope that “if he becomes the president after the election, we’d be able to always brag that we’ve met the president of Nigeria!” (*The Fishermen* 73), and “when M.K.O. becomes president, we could

go to Abuja, Nigeria's seat of government, and we would be let in by just showing the calendar" (*The Fishermen* 80). It is, therefore, a devastating situation when Ikenna, during his period of metamorphosis, tears the calendar to pieces. As Helon Habila puts it in his review of the novel, *The Fishermen* embodies "a metaphorical allusion to the struggles of Nigeria's failed leaders... an elegy to lost promise, to a golden age squandered". Nigeria, indeed, "has been less than fortunate in its leadership" (Achebe 11).

With the use of sociological approach to literary criticism, the relationship between the writer and the society is explored. A critic explores the circumstances of the social and cultural period in which the writer lives and the relation of a literary work to the audience toward which the work is addressed. Ogene puts it that "the basis for this approach to literature is the conviction that art is not created in a vacuum: it is a work not simply of a person, but as an author fixed in time and space answering to a community of which he is an important member" (33). The writer's environment helps to explain social attitudes and opinions that appear in a literary work. Literature, therefore, becomes a product of time, place, culture, and an individual, and therefore, capable of affecting, and perhaps changing the society into which they are introduced.

Sociological approach is considered appropriate for this study because the novel under study deals with a family, the smallest unit of the society, alongside Nigeria leadership of the 1990s where the political, economic and culture milieu are woven.

Failed Leadership as Portrayed in *The Fishermen*

Nigerian leaders, at the time in which this novel is set – President Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha – have been acknowledged as authors of pain on the Nigeria populace.

The Babangida administration, according to Olayiwola, “promulgated many decrees to curb political communication and gag the press. Despite the administration’s euphoria and attempts to wear a human face, journalists were imprisoned, newspapers/magazines were proscribed, university teachers were sacked, social critics were arrested and jailed, students were massacred and a press council was established” (*The Fishermen* 38). The reasons made the masses eagerly await the transition from military rule to the civilian, but eventually, the 1993 election was cancelled. It was, indeed, a coup against the Nigerian people.

The Abacha regime, on the same hand, let loose of terror on the nation. Abati, in his article “June 12 and MKO Abiola” asserts that during the Abacha-led government, media houses were attacked, journalists were jailed, bombed, beaten, civil society activists were hauled to detention, and when, on June 11, 1994, Chief M.K.O Abiola the undeclared winner of the 1993 presidential election, requested that his mandate be duly recognized, he was arrested for treasonable felony and eventually died in detention on 7th July 1998.

Obioma, in *The Fishermen*, recreates the disappointment by the leaders using a first person point of view. Just as Yakubu puts it, “African writers are social crusaders. They have used their literary works to express their concern over bad governance in their various societies” (77). The failure in leadership is metaphorically portrayed in *The Fishermen* through the character of Mr. Eme James Agwu whose departure from his home tears his family apart. When the story commences, the reader grasps the fact that he has been transferred to a branch of Central Bank of Nigeria situated Yola - “a town in the north that was a camel distance of more than one thousand kilometers away” (9). This becomes a big blow to his wife and children. His

sons -Ikenna, Boja, Obembe and Ben - begin to live a life coated with freedom. The eldest of the brothers, Ikenna, a fifteen - year old boy, becomes the head of the house and he, at a point, becomes so defiant to his mother's instructions. The narrator, Ben keeps emphasizing the effect of their father's absence on the family. That home of his which he rules with great strength and unity becomes vulnerable due to his absence. His sons who he has wished to become great men - pilot, lawyer, doctor and professor - decide to take up fishing without their parents' knowledge. Fishing in a dreadful Omi-Ala River shows the boys' level of vulnerability as their encounter with Abulu the madman and his prophesy that Ikenna will be killed by one of his brothers set the plot of the novel in full motion.

Eme's initial intervention when he becomes aware of his sons' adventure at the Omi-Ala River would have nipped the problem in the bud because his presence around his house, and his principle of Guerdon - "a word with which he emphasized a warning or highlighted the retribution for a wrong act" (*The Fishermen* 11) – keep the boys' behaviour in check. In his absence, Ikenna enveloped by fear due to Abulu's prophesy, not only talks back at their mother, but also isolates himself, skips breakfasts to avoid going to school with his brother Boja, and skips lunches and dinners when they are meals that are eaten together from the same bowl as his brothers. He, as a result of these, begins to emaciate and his sclera – the whites of his eyes turns pale yellow; he actually becomes sick. It is only a threat of contacting his father about his health condition that forced Ikenna to seek medical attention. It is only when the damage has been done; when his two sons have lost their lives that Eme returns home and settles with his family in Akure even as the consequences of his absence linger on and his dream of having great men as sons becomes shattered.

Obioma metaphorically uses this story to expose the failure of the Nigerian leaders who are so irresponsive to the plight of the masses. Just as Eme's lack of readiness in reacting to the breakdown of his family's unity and his initial irresponsive attitude towards his wife's emotional breakdown, the condition of the masses also received lack of concern from the powers that be. The economy of 1990s Nigeria is described by the narrator as 'biting' (*The Fishermen* 31). The narrator equally describes the conversation which his parents have on his father's first visit from Yola "about the depletion of the naira under the rotten polity that is this current administration... The Central Bank was heading for doom. He bemoaned the poor health facilities in the country. He swore at Abacha, the dictator, and railed on about the marginalization of Igbos in Nigeria. Then he complained about the monster the British had created by forming Nigeria as a whole" (*The Fishermen* 34).

With this, Obioma indicts the British for these problems. Ikenna's blood which flows into some spilt palm oil in Mama's kitchen when he is stabbed by Boja his brother is also likened to "the river Niger and Benue whose confluence at Lokoja birthed a broken and mucky nation" (*The Fishermen* 149). The author apparently objects to the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates of Nigeria by Sir Fredrick Lugard in 1914. The depletion of naira, the Central Bank heading for doom and the 'biting' economy all point towards the state of poverty which engulfs the masses. The return of the queues at the petrol stations which is attributed to "the nation's daily output [which] has now been cut by fifteen thousand barrels a day" (*The Fishermen* 237) and the "rutted and dilapidated highway "death traps" called road" (*The Fishermen* 296), where people die everyday, all depict a failure in leadership.

The Portrayal of the Masses' Response to Failed Leadership in Nigeria

The leaders' inability to synthesize the nation's resources so as to perform creditably and acceptably and their unscrupulous manifestation of their superior strength, and behaving more like savage tyrants than partners and friends greatly affects the masses who respond to some of these actions in various ways such as riots. Obiomarecreates the people's response at the annulment of the 1993 presidential election. Riots broke out in some parts of the nation as the situation becomes a tribal issue. This situation and many other incidence before it confirms Achebe's assertion that "Nigeria was called "a mere geographical expression" not only by the British who had an interest in keeping it so, but even by our "nationalists" when it suited them to retreat into tribe to check their more successful rivals from other parts of the country" (*The Fishermen* 5).

Ben, the novel's narrator tells of his experience during the uprising. At this point, his father's irresponsible attitude is buttressed. When the commotion begins while they are at school, "I sat there, waiting for the moment when father, like other fathers who had come to pick up their children, would come. But instead of him, Boja appeared in my classroom's door calling my name... "Daddy isn't coming, "he said..." (*The Fishermen* 123). He leaves with his brothers and they run for safety. Their contact with M.K.O. Abiola gives them great concern as they assume that that will give them away as M.K.O. supporters and so the enemies' targets. The narrator captures the incidence as a tribal war thus:

A group of men, armed with clubs and machetes, trooped past, casting furtive glances about and chanting, "death to Babangida, Abiola must rule"... we crawled behind one of the houses and found a van with a dead man in it

parked just across from the backyard, its front door left open. We could tell from the man's attire – a long, flowing Senegalese robe – that he was a northerner: the main targets of the onslaught by M.K.O. Abiola supporters, who'd hijacked the riot as a struggle between his west, and the north, where the military president, General Babangida, belonged. (*The Fishermen* 126)

Consequently, there is a mass exit of the northerners from the south and vice versa. Again, the masses, who have seemingly lost hope in the government on ground, resort to every means to avert suffering. And so, corruption becomes the order of the day. Ben, the narrator, puts it that corruption... had eaten the entrails of the nation" (*The Fishermen* 219). This is not only the case of a corrupt government but the masses in the public offices who apparently receive meagre salaries indulge in the act so as to make ends meet. They too become insensitive to one another's plights. The constable whom Mr. Agwu meets at the police station obviously demands for some bribe from him before he carries out his responsibility not minding that the man before him is a father of a missing child.

Secondly, the narrator's as well as his brothers' hope to migrate to Canada is as a result of the condition which the family at that point is stuck in. The news of their travel to Canada is received with utmost joy and portrays the move as a step into a more comfortable life. The narrator puts it thus: "Mr. Bayo, father continued, had promised to take my brother and me with him to Canada. The news exploded over the table like a grenade, scattering shrapnel of joy all across the room. Mother shouted "Hallelujah!" and, rising from her chair, burst into singing. I, too, was elated and my body was suddenly charged with wanton joy" (*The Fishermen* 219).

Stylistically, Obioma in *The Fishermen* exhibits a degree of expertise. Having keyed into the style of such writers as Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Camara Laye, Ferdinand Oyono, Chimamanda Adichie, Tsitsi Dangaremba and other bildungsroman writers, Obioma presents a narrator who “moves from innocence through mock-sophistication to wisdom” (Dobie 409). Just like Laye, the narrator in Camara Laye’s *The African Child* or Kambili in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, the reader meets a narrator who presents his story through more than one perspective. There is a primary vantage point which is that of the young boy but it is, at some points, being modified by the viewpoints of a man, reflecting on his childhood. With retrospection narration, the narrator gives a recall of events from a distance of many years where he looks back on time when he was younger. He tells us, “Wherever I think of our story, how that morning would mark the last time we’d live together, all of us, as the family we’d always been, I begin – even these two decades later – to wish he hadn’t left, that he had never received that transfer letter” (*The Fishermen* 12). By this, the reader deduces the fact that the story is being recalled after twenty years, at a time when the narrator who is nine years old at the commencement of the events has become an adult.

The choice of a first-person point of view in this novel is a great move in engaging the reader’s emotional sympathy completely. It is also a means through which the author is able to tell the story of the Agwu family alongside that of 1990’s Nigeria. The narrator’s relay of his father’s absence from the house and his irresponsiveness as well as their consequences aptly captures the actions and inactions of the government and their effects on the Nigerian masses. A family which has ample resources and intelligent and brave children crashes due to father’s failure in

his expected responsibilities just as it is with Nigeria with all the mineral resources.

The use of metaphoric expressions in the novel is quite captivating. The titles of almost all the chapters are used metaphorically. Mr. Agwu who is the father in this novel is described as an eagle – “a mighty bird that planted his nest high above the rest of his peers, hovering and watching over his young eagles, the way a king guards his throne” (*The Fishermen* 31). The author, in this comparison, shows the ambition, strength and responsibilities of a leader. The narrator, in making this comparison, emphasizes that their “home would not have become vulnerable in the first place, and that the kind of adversity that befell us would not have happened” (*The Fishermen* 31). Ikenna, the first of the brothers is said to be “a python: A wild snake that became a monstrous serpent living on trees, on plains above other snakes” (*The Fishermen* 47). This description portrays Ikenna as dangerous and this transformation into a monstrous being remains as a result of his father’s absence from home which gives him and his brothers the freedom of fishing at Omi-Ala River where they encounter Abulu the madman who gives a prophesy that he will be killed by one of his brothers. Mother’s inability to checkmate her sons’ behaviour even when she attempts to bring the situation under control is compared to that of a falconer. Boja, the second of the brothers is compared to a fungus that “hides in the body of an ignorant host” (*The Fishermen* 161) when his body remains in the well where he drowns himself after stabbing and killing his elder brother. Hatred is likened to a leech while hope is metaphorically compared with “a tadpole : The thing you caught and brought home with you in a can, but which, despite being kept in the right water, soon died” (*The Fishermen* 245). This metaphoric expression aptly captures the situation in which the

narrator and indeed every member of his family finds themselves – and, by extension, the Nigerian masses’ fate too. The narrator sees himself as a moth after the death of his brothers who since his life have been his best companion; and his younger siblings as egrets who remain unscathed in the midst of storm.

Symbolically, there are other incidences that point to the dashed hope of the Nigerian masses as a result of failed leadership. The narrator tells of “father’s treasured portrait” which is shattered into pieces when Ikenna kicks his sister’s plastic chair and it plunged into the shelf on which the glass - covered portrait is. Another symbolic incidence is the darkness which, the narrator observes, has descended heavily around them as Abulu, the madman sings on after prophesing about Ikenna’s death. “Even the Nigerian flag that hovered over the police station two hundred metres away had darkened” (*The Fishermen* 91). This obviously does not signify positivity. It suggests doom and this is what the masses are yet to grapple with. Ikenna’s passport which his brother tears and throws into a well and the drowning of Boja in that same well, the boys’ desire and plan to leave the country for Canada which is stalled by their killing of Abulu and the eventual disappearance of Obembe and imprisonment of Ben, the narrator, all symbolize the fact that Nigerian masses are mired in failed leadership. Obioma’s use of simple language is probably intentional as that enables him to get his message across to his audience. As Ogwude puts it, “the question of language use is of primary importance to every committed writer since he or she aims first and foremost to achieve a wide and relevance readership” (*The Fishermen* 74).

Conclusion

Nigeria, as a nation, has been so unfortunate when it comes to leadership as an aspect of human existence and literary artists

have continued to use their works to portray the various ways where the government of the nation has failed the masses. This is what Chigozie Obioma has done in *The Fishermen*, where the irresponsible attitude of a father as well as that of our leaders mar the hope and future of those they are meant to serve and protect. This recreation of history is meant to serve as a redirection to the present leaders who will redirect their steps towards working for the development of the country.

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