

Social Commitment in African Popular Art: A Study of Kole Omotoso's Fiction

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Abstract: The fiction of Kole Omotoso pervades with motifs of African popular art and appears to be representative of definite social classes and trends, and therefore of definite ideas of its characters' time. This paper examines among other things, the extent to which Omotoso's materialistic ideology impacts on his social commitment and artistic sensibilities, and how these, in turn, foregrounds his choice of form and other prosaic devices in accentuating the socioeconomic reality of post-colonial Nigeria. It concludes that the social commitment or uniqueness of Kole Omotoso's fiction does not lie in the narrative or the choice of form, but in the topicality and relevance of his work, which paves the way for revolutionary social changes in any postcolonial African setting.

Résumé : La fiction de Kole Omotoso regorge de motifs inspirés de l'art populaire africain et se révèle représentative de certaines classes et tendances sociales, et donc d'idées précises sur l'époque de ses personnages. Cet article explore, entre autres, l'impact de l'idéologie matérialiste d'Omotoso sur son engagement social et ses sensibilités artistiques, et comment celles-ci, à leur tour, sont mises en avant dans ses choix stylistiques et autres artifices prosaïques qui accentuent la réalité socio-économique du Nigeria postcolonial. Il conclut que l'engagement social ou le caractère unique de la fiction de Kole Omotoso ne réside ni dans le récit, ni dans le choix du style, mais dans l'actualité et la pertinence de son œuvre, qui jette les bases de changements sociaux révolutionnaires dans n'importe quel contexte africain postcolonial.

Introduction

A common feature of society-literature dialectic is that each society normally produces a literature that quite reflects that society's historical experience(s), aspirations, and struggles. In order for the writer to be fully committed, Sartre urges him/her to embrace the human condition wholesomely and, in exploring a situation, to unite the specific with the absolute. Literature, in this regard, must of necessity, assist its audience to be complete and free men in and through history. The literary tradition of "art-for-art-sake" while it aims at reconciling man with his environment, and the Romantists encourage man to escape from the reality of life, thereby making literature a sedative, literature of commitment is an irritant, a catalyst aimed at provoking men to change the world they live in and thereby changing themselves.

The degree of commitment however, varies from one writer to the other, depending on the profoundness of the writer's perception and conception of social reality, which in turn dictate his/her, social consciousness as well as his/her vision. It is in this regard that a writer can be said to be of either high or low commitment.

My main task in this research work is to examine the degree of Omotoso's social commitment as it relates to popular art. This paper attempts to map out the scope of Omotoso's social commitment whose cornerstone is to explore and give meaning to the African image. Consequently, it helps in determining the author's level of social commitment, and specifically finding the characters' motives not in individual lusts, but in the historical streams, which are carrying them along.

In this regard, therefore, the fiction of Omotoso is to be construed from a theoretical perspective, which may differ on the extent to which the cultural superstructure is determined by the socio-economic base: the Marxist literary criticism. The study will rely to a considerable extent, on the assumption that popular writers can never completely escape social commitment and their social background so that the social reality of the popular writer will always be part of the text. Accordingly, the format I shall adopt is simple. I begin my paper with a brief description of Omotoso's social class stand. I then focus on the different dimensions of his social commitment as depicted in his fiction in order to understand the attitudes the characters had towards the others, as well as the time and space settings.

1. On Determining the Writer's Social Class Stand

Mao Tse Tung, at the Yenam Forum on Literature and Art, in 1942, declared: "The purpose... is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attracting and destroying the enemy with one heart and one mind"¹. Mao then furthered with a poser: "What are the problems that must be solved to achieve this objective?"² The problems according to Mao include those of the class stand of the writers and artists, their attitude, their audience, their work and their study.

Mao's submission above is significantly relevant to this paper, which is concerned with Omotoso's social commitment, on two principal grounds. First, is the need of positive

¹ Mao Tse Tung, "Yenam Forum on Literature and Art", *Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung. III*, Peking : Foreign Languages Press, 1967, p. 70

² *Ibid.*, p.70

commitment as a writer and second is the fact that such commitment can only be determined through the writer's class stand.

From my analysis of Mao's premises, it is possible to draw a similarity between Omotoso's social commitment and Mao's stand on "populist" literature. The operative clauses in Mao's submission are as follows:

- a) to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part;
- b) that they (literature and art) operate as the powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people;
- c) for attracting and destroying the enemy;
- d) that they (literature and art) help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.

On (a) above, Omotoso like Mao equally believes not only in the efficacy of literature per se, but that since there is no perfect political system, it is mandatory for literature as the collective conscience of the community to be "integrated along with other cogs that make up the revolutionary wheel in order to enhance the advancement of the frontiers of freedom for humanity"³. Omotoso explains further as follows: "In the process of Literature being also concerned with human welfare, it finds itself side by side with progressive and revolutionary elements"⁴.

Omotoso quickly warns, lest he be misunderstood, that literature transcends revolutionary struggle. He emphasises: "... Literature does not and cannot afford to consider its war won at the end of the successful prosecution of the revolutionary struggle, this is merely one battle in the process of its being of service to human welfare"⁵.

On (b) above, Omotoso's aesthetics, if I must deduce from (a) above, is "populist". His intentions in effect, include awakening of social consciousness in his audience through the exposition of societal ills, such as the exploiters and the exploited, and by highlighting both the situation and the awful condition of the highly atomised and pauperised masses of the people with whom he pitches his tent. In Omotoso's opinion, such step is capable of paving

³ Mao Tse Tung, Op. Cit. p. 70

⁴ Kole Omotoso, Producing Literature for the Masses in a Developing Nation : The Nigerian Experience, A Seminar paper. pp. 1 & 2.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1

way for a positive and definite change. In this regard, Omotoso's "populism" as a writer stems from his knowledge and understanding of the need of the masses. Hence, he attempts in his art, to provide only such materials and information as are deemed acceptable and helpful to the masses' struggle.

In *Fella's Choice*, Omotoso's intention in the novel, being part of the educative role of his art is, specifically, to awaken his audience's consciousness as Africans and to stir the conscience of those who for centuries have exploited us economically. Similarly, in regards to Literature as a powerful weapon for uniting people, Omotoso is particularly of the view that literature be made to serve the purpose of uniting the masses for progress. This will, in turn, enable the masses to press ahead as a body, repudiating that, which is reactionary and backward, and developing that, which is revolutionary and progressive⁶. In his clarion call for a total rejection of that which is reactionary, Omotoso's art often assumes a satirical mode, climaxing at times into a much more complex allegory from rather trivialised issues. His main intentions in such satire are primarily to entertain and educate his audience.

Omotoso's diagnosis and identification of the ills and vices of his people (Africans) are shown through Fella's greatest concern in *Fella's Choice*. The author, through Fella, first tackles the question of leadership as he:

began to fear that his greatest task might be that of facing his own people and convincing them of their stupidity, especially the so-called leaders. They were usually of two categories: there were those who had 'fought' for independence and now think that the country is theirs as an inheritance from the colonial overlord... Then they go on to identify their personal safety with the safety of the country. Whatever threatened their hold on power threatened their great and noble country and so must be destroyed root, branch and trunk. Did they ever ask themselves whether their plans for the country were really for the good of the country?... And the second category, the fire-spitter, the Christ risen, rending the skies with British and American made, obsolete weapons of the two world wars...⁷

Apart from recognising the problem of ineffectual leadership facing Africa, Omotoso does not hesitate to chastise the masses of Africa, the led. At Blacklock's reception, the picture of the Africans presented is that of a sheepishly passive people, so gullible and therefore, easily fooled. Omotoso's concern here is to show both the passivity as well as the reactivity posture that must be rejected. The author is equally conscious enough, not to paint

⁶ Odun Balogun, "Populist Fiction : Omotoso's Novels", *African Literature Today* 13, New York : African Publishing Company, 1982, p. 102

⁷ Kole Omosoto, *Fella's Choice*, Benin-City : Ethipe Publishing Corporation, 1974, p. 81

such ugly picture in the absolute term. To this effect he provides exceptions; the Fourth Division personnel are Africans, and they are deceived. Similarly, at the Press Conference that followed the reception the most vocal and perhaps most radical of the journalists present and who was thrown out for being “too loud-mouthed”, is presented as an enlightened individual. Omotoso’s other intention for presenting that scene is to criticise how democracy that guarantees free expression of personal views, and press freedom, is being violated by the Powers-that-be.

Unity of the highly marginalised masses is achieved through committed literature used to educate the people on the significance of presenting a common front “for attacking and destroying the enemy” once it is identified. This brings me to item (c) of Mao’s submission above. It is though, easy to identify the enemy but where, when, and how to launch the attack capable of destroying such enemy completely require a decisively profound scientific approach. Omotoso is aware of the immense task of a total overhauling of the system, thus he presents his worries in the “bribery scene” in *Fella’s choice*. The law enforcement agents are believed, in many quarters, to be highly corrupt at the expense of national security. The author, in the scene, reinforces this allegation by presenting us a police officer charged with the duty of providing tight security on the country’s border highways:

He (Fella) went out holding a five shilling note in his right hand. He met the policeman who was coming to check his booth to see if he had any contraband goods halfway and stretched his hand to shake the law officer. When he was withdrawing his hand the note was no longer there... At the beginning he (Fella) used to wonder, where one had to start if one wished to clean out corruption (one of our many enemies) in Nigeria. From the top or from the bottom?⁸ (*parenthesis and emphasis mine*)

The above question has a serious social commitment implication, and the answer to same is provided by Omotoso in *Fella’s choice*, *The scales* and *Sacrifice*. I shall now attempt to, through a concise textual analysis, relate the relevance of the three novels to Omotoso’s social commitment, as an identification of the social implication raised in the above question.

2. On Determining the Writer’s Social Commitment Through his Art

⁸ Kole Omotoso, *Fella’s Choice*, Benin-City : Ethipe Publishing Corporation, 1974, p. 103

A revolutionary literature as an ideological form, according to Mao, is a product of the reflection of the life of the people in the psyche of revolutionary writers. Ropo Sekoni in an almost similar vein, comments on a revolutionary (refractionist) writer's view of fiction as:

...though selecting his images from an actual space-time continuum, often organises his Images not with a view to reproduce the form and texture of life in his society but with an aim of confronting some aspects of the content and structure of experience in the world that informs his fictive world⁹.

Furthermore, on the all-embracing operational posture of revolutionary writer, Sekoni comments further:

Such confrontations may not only explore and explain sources of tension in the actual world of the writer but may also attempt to evoke behaviour capable of terminating such tension. In such attempt, the counter-factual world of the novel may also produce an organisation that subverts the existing syntax of action and reaction in the actual world of the writer and thus suggests not only a new ethos but also a new mode of representation and cognition¹⁰.

Omotoso in *Fella's Choice*, *The Scales*, and *Sacrifice*, not only identifies the enemy of Africa, the enemy of the masses, but also classifies the enemy into two broad categories. First is the external enemy, the foreign powers and their nefarious activities, continuously calculated against all attempts made by Africa to progress. The external (enemy) forces are identified by Omotoso to be responsible for the greater part of the problems of Africa. The immediacy calls for a decisive, progressive, counteraction capable of bringing about a lasting solution to the devilish role of the foreign powers to whose apron, Africa is supposedly tied. In *The Combat*, we see the "clever" manipulations by the foreign powers who, capitalising on the gross ignorance of the self-seeking Nigerian leaders, as well as the passive, non-challenge of the entire Nigerian society, fuelled a petty misunderstanding between two brothers. The fire of misunderstanding was thus allowed to grow wild beyond what could easily be contained. The result spelt disaster and tragedy for Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general; while the economy of the foreign powers improved greatly.

In *Fella's Choice*, Fella Dandogo, the protagonist, identifies the foreign powers, the external (enemy) forces as the "hawks" that often wears masks of friendship. Omotoso in this novel, exposes the evil intent of foreign powers as represented by the South African

⁹ Ropo Sekoni, "From Chaos to Cosmos : Trends in African Political Novel" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Literature Association Urbana, Illinois. April 6-10 1983) p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2

Government sponsored BOSS (International). The intended plan is geared towards total subjugation or, if possible, liquidation of Africans with the aim of re-acquiring the continent of Africa. This plan is to be systematically pursued starting with Nigeria. Nigeria is to be flooded with counterfeit Naira notes with a view to render the country's economy worthless. At the same time, poisonous drugs are to be illegally imported into Africans markets to complete the work of a gradual liquidation of Africans. Exposed also are the tricks, deceits and subterfuge of the racist white-world; from impersonation, to smuggling. For example: "When Col. Peter Blacklock stepped off the plane at Lagos (Ikeja) International Airport he was no longer Col. Blacklock of the Euro-Africa Cultural Organisation"¹¹.

We are, in addition, made to see the racist attitude of the average white man as represented in Blacklock as opposed to the master-servant warmth of Africans, given full realisation in the welcome ceremony galore organised to honour Mr. Blacklock¹².

Omotoso considers the external (enemy) forces as the more dangerous of the two-pronged problems facing Africa, hence the need to attack and destroy it before descending on the enemy from within – the internal forces, which intend to consider later in this paper. Fella Dandogo's primary task is to: "...Drive away the hawk (external forces) that threatened the chicks. Then help bullet some ideas into the heads of the leaders"¹³ (*Parenthesis mine*). Fella intends to scare the foreign powers off the chicks (Africans Society) permanently, by giving them a good fight. Omotoso in addition, identifies some of the numerous problems facing the Organisation of Africa Unity, now referred to as African Union (A.U.). Most Francophone countries in Africa, Omotoso remarks, still prefer to serve their former colonial masters for economic reasons. To this effect, every honest effort made by the Union is often thwarted by these countries referred to, by the author, as "Dialogue Countries"¹⁴. In addition, the African Society is full of socio-political, economic, psychological and spiritual problems as a result of faulty leadership. Perhaps the foreign powers would not have been wolves, had Africans refused to play the sheep.

Omotoso social commitment is brought to bear on his suggested solutions to the perennial menaces of the foreign powers. His solutions include the need for a high-powered

¹¹ Ropo Sekoni, "From Chaos to Cosmos : Trends in African Political Novel" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Literature Association Urbana, Illinois. April 6-10 1983) p. 2.

¹² Kole Omosoto, *Fella's Choice*, Benin-City : Ethipe Publishing Corporation, 1974, p.p. 34-38

¹³ Kole Omosoto, *Fella's Choice*, Benin-City : Ethipe Publishing Corporation, 1974, p. 82

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17

Detective Division solely financed by the Organisation of African Unity/African Union and with branches in each member-country. The Detective Division is to be filled with people of high integrity, fully committed youths who are ready to bring a true and total liberation to Africa. The Division's main functions include, monitoring of the activities of foreign countries; dislodging, attacking and destroying any activity suspected to be detrimental to the survival of Africa as a whole. The success of this suggested solution to Africa's external problems can only be guaranteed through a combined effort of the entire member-states of the Organisation of African Unity/African Union at the general level, and in each African, as particularised in Fella and Joko.

The vision of an Intelligence Agency with the right calibre of personnel is given a full representation in *Fella's Choice* as witnessed in the activities of the Nigerian chapter of The Fourth Division, a secret intelligence agency solely financed by the Organisation of African Unity/African Union. The conscious feelings, attitude and duty of every African in this task of total liberation is similarly given full realisation in the conscious feelings, attitude and commitments of Fella and Joko. While Fella is poised to give the external forces, the foreign powers a good fight, Joko also nurses the hope of providing the right leadership that her society lacks. As Joko puts it: "I have some pet ideas about setting examples and all that. I think our problem is that no leader is ready to give good example"¹⁵.

The complex implication of the direct confrontation with the enemy is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's statement on the rough road to true liberation:

People who take up arms in order to win freedom are under no illusion. They know it will mean suffering and sacrifice. But they also know that it will end suffering, if not for them, at least for future generations... the people record the huge gaps made in their ranks as a sort of necessary evil. Since they have decided to reply by violence, they are therefore ready to take all its consequences¹⁶. (*emphasis mine*).

In a similar vein, Regis Debray stresses further: "For a revolutionary, failure is a springboard. As a source of theory it is richer than victory: it accumulates experience and knowledge"¹⁷. The views represented in the above excerpts have a parallel in Omotoso's belief. While he recognises the value of true freedom and liberation of Africa from the claws of the foreign

¹⁵ Kole Omosoto, *Fella's Choice*, Benin-City : Ethipe Publishing Corporation, 1974, p.p. 65-66

¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, "Panaf Great Lives Series", London : Panf Books Ltd., 1975 p. 84

¹⁷ Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution ? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, New York, Grove Press Inc. 1967 p. 23

powers and societal ills and vices, which can only be realised through violence and not “dialogue”, he also recognises the real cost of true freedom. Fella’s positive consciousness, his political awareness and his spirit of total commitment, coupled with the combined efforts of the Fourth Division and the vigilant assistance of the unusually daring Joko – all guaranteed the success of this important mission (assignment) on which the absolute survival of Africa rests. Fella’s success, and indeed Africa’s as a whole, is certainly not without a price. It costs Fella, not only the agony of the ordeals he passes through, but also the invaluable loss of his dear love, Joko: “...the huge gaps made in their ranks...a sort of necessary evil.”¹⁸

Similarly Africa’s internal problems which we have identified earlier as constituting her enemy from within, is the second and the broader of the two categories of her dilemma. These internal enemies and problems are further divided into three. First is the ghost of Africa’s past continually haunts, and encroaches on Africa’s present situation. This makes “Africa - present” unfulfilling, unsecured and with a blurred future. The second subset borders on the people at the top of the social ladder, the so-called leaders, the exploiters of the masses. The third which is also the final of the three subsets is the passive self-resignation (to fate) of the exploited and grossly marginalised masses of the people. To each of these internal problems facing Africa, Omotoso readily provides solution in his art.

In *Sacrifice*, Omotoso emphasises on the need for Africa to shed-off her ugly past and prevent such a past from encroaching on her present. And in *The Scales*, the author calls for a true revolution aimed at a total extermination of the corrupt leaders, exploiters of the masses of the people. Omotoso’s message for the revolutionary fighters is that they need to fight the enemy from outside the structure (that is, outside the prevailing social system). For the people at the bottom of the social ladder, the exploited, Omotoso calls for a redefinition of societal values and of socio-economic vision through a reorientation of the entire masses of the people. This in essence, will help to promote the spirit of communalism instead of individualism, for progress and true freedom to reign supreme.

In the textual analysis to follow, I hope to relate how Omotoso’s commitment and populist ideology are brought to bear on his art in *Sacrifice* and *The Scales* and how the novels readily serve as Omotoso’s solutions to the external problems facing Africa. It is reductionistic for any literary critic to hastily dismiss *Sacrifice* as merely a novel about: “The ungrateful son

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon Op. Cit. p. 84

who has been educated and grown rich on his mother's prostitution", or one that – “represents the elite of Africa whom Omotoso says have been ‘educated at public expense and have refused to acknowledge what they owe society’”¹⁹.

This writer believes that there is more to *Sacrifice* than above critic has highlighted. This, however, does not suggest that the critic is completely wrong, but that Omotoso is much more preoccupied in *Sacrifice* with a more serious, and rather philosophically inclined concern that borders the social dynamics of a nation.

The author, in the novel, attempts to probe such intricate issues as the dynamics of existence: the Past versus the Present and, what constitutes the future of a nation and, or Africa. Strictly speaking, *Sacrifice* shows a concrete, progressive and definite image for both the present and consequently the future of Africa. The novel, in addition, shows the author's primary concern to explain Africa's present and why it has had it so bad.

In *The Scales*, Omotoso shows a conscious effort to resolve the partiality completed task begun in *Fella's Choice*. While *Fella's Choice* tackles the problems of external forces, the foreign powers, *The Scales* handles the internal (the agents within) forces. Meanwhile in *Fella's choice*, the menace of the foreign powers has finally been checked, and nailed to the coffin. There is, now, the need to tackle the internal forces responsible for the problems facing Africa in a more realistic and decisive manner. Omotoso recognises one significant fact, this fact is given prominence in the words of Che Guevara in his essay titled “La guerre de guerrilla, une methode,” “What is decisive is the determination to struggle which is maturing daily, the awareness of the need for revolutionary change and the certainty of its possibility”²⁰.

It is in *The Scales* that Omotoso finally settles this ideologically imposed task of how best true freedom can be achieved in Africa and for Africa.

One of the revelations made by the author in *The Scales* is the fact that there are villains like Chief Daniran here in Africa who are indeed more repugnant than Shakespeare's Iago and more repulsive than King Richard III. The most unfortunate thing about Africa is that, it is such people that have always found their way to the top. A position that often affords them the opportunity of wreaking more and more havoc on their own society. Their goal is to keep their

¹⁹ Peter Nazareth, *The Third World Writer : His Social Responsibility*, Nairobi : Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978 p.p. 76-77

²⁰ Che Guevara, “La guerre de guerrilla, une methode” in *Souvenirs de la guerre revolutionnaire*, Maspero, Paris, 1967.

fellow Africans perpetually down, while they, the socio-economic “Draculas,” keep sucking the very life out of the passive majority. This picture is, of course, not new in itself. Yambo Ouologuem’s *Bound to Violence*, Armah’s *Two Thousand seasons*, Soyinka’s *A Dance of The Forest*, and *Madmen and Specialists*, have similarly expressed the same idea. What however provides for the newness and the “shocking” effect in *The Scales*, is that, while the other writers present such characters, events and ideas as something mythical, extant and general, Omotoso’s presentation is particularly not only realistic but also immediate.

There are two distinct dimensions to the approach and, or interpretation of this novel; the particular, and the general. On the particular, the author’s presentation of African problems caused by internal forces assumes a different dimension from what used to obtain in other African novels of similar thematic concern. Consequently, the tension that emanates from the political, economic and social milieu affords the opportunity to deal with question of good and evil in his fiction, especially *The Scales*. This the author does by equating good with that side of the conflict that he favours, and evil with the opposite side. The subsequent victory of good over evil is allegorically celebrated in the victory of Barri Jogunde and his “Gentlemen of Courage and Conviction” over the forces of (Chief Daniran’s mercenaries) evil as represented in the total destruction of the latter. This is unlike what obtains in Soyinka’s lament over an almost irredeemable society inordinate pessimism as externalised in *Madmen and Specialists*. Soyinka’s philosophy of “AS” is a philosophy of despair in the cyclic movement of the “ominous carrion” in which true progress for humanity is impossible. It is, in essence, a philosophy that celebrates the inescapability of man from his self-made woes.

On the general approach to the interpretation of the novel, Omotoso deals simultaneously with two issues; condemnation on the one hand, and recommendation on the other. He not only exposes but condemns the ills and vices of Africa as embodied in Chief Daniran. Chief Daniran epitomises not only the evils that can be identified with Africa, but also serves as the epitaph of the decaying African society. At the same time, the author recommends a more realistic and scientific solution to bring about total elimination of such evils. It is in this light that we are able to draw a similarity in the functions of both Fella Dandogo of *Fella’s Choice*, and Barri Jogunde of *The Scales* within their respective milieus in which each of them operates. To this end, Barri Jogunde is to the internal evils (forces) what Fella Dandogo is, to the (external forces) foreign powers. Since the entire society cannot possibly be wiped out, at least, an individual can be. Thus Barri Jogunde resolves on selective elimination of the heartless cheats and obnoxious exploiters like Chief Daniran. Rather than be regarded as “one

of such comments” on the degree to which callous acquisitiveness and unrestrained corruption have come to dominate Nigeria life as is the case in *A Man of the People*²¹, *The Scales*, is an attempt to explore and give meaning to the African image which is the corner stone of Omotoso’s commitment. This exploration this time, is grounded in the social realism which almost assumes a mystical plane. Chief Daniran, for instance, masterminds the murky social conditions which create his kind up to the grandeur of myth.

Omotoso’s position in the task of forging an entirely new and progressive image for the country, or the continent from its decadent present, is made more vivid in *The Scales*. There is the need to recognise the ugliness that is identified with African present as Barri observes:

Behind each house, right in the darkness of these houses...some form of violence or other was being done to an individual, to a group, to the whole society and yet nobody spoke. Nobody talked. Such must not be mentioned. The naivety of some of us could be really laughable. This was a violent society...in secret. Outside... some normal way of life, the results of negotiated violence in the dark comes out and nobody questions the method of arriving at such conclusions²².

It is such self-deceit and wickedness, which mark the present decadent African society that prompt Barri’s determination to – “...rip open the walls that covered the hypocrisy of the country and expose the lie behind our lives...”²³ And like the biblical Samson, Barri is poised to “...shake the pillars of this society until he destroyed them...”²⁴, this is absolutely necessary now because, “It was no longer possible to compromise to live the lie prepared in the dark”²⁵.

Barri Jogunde is not only enthusiastic but he is equally optimistic of his success in this dangerous task he sets for himself. While he works for The Third Division, Barri realises that to work from within the system could be frustrating. Femi, Chief Daniran’s go-between, in absolute despair comments on the grossly corrupt system: “...I have despaired of any form of justice. This is a jungle. The bigger animals kill small animals for their support”²⁶. It is only in such a decadent system that a corrupt and rich person like Chief Daniran can have the Press, or the law enforcement agents at his back-and-call, and in addition be heaped with chieftaincy titles – a man of the people that he is. Furthermore, it is only in such a dehumanised and dehumanising system that the crowd would merely “gather”, “gape” and “shuffle off,” instead

²¹ G. D. Killiam, *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, London : H. E. B., 1965, p. 88

²² Kole Omotoso, *The Scales*, Onibonjo Press & Book Ind. (Nig.) Ltd., 1976 p. 39

²³ Ibid., p. 39

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53

²⁵ Ibid., p. 44

²⁶ Ibid., p. 31

of providing immediate assistance to the helpless, the needy. It is in such a corrupt society that the Bar-man would want a tip, and that the judiciary could waive justice in favour of die-hard criminals, as was the case with Chief Daniran.

Barri's narrow escape from Chief Daniran's hired killers, and the assault suffered, provided him an opportunity to undergo a purgatorial experience capable of purging Barri of whatever folly left in him. Such a singular confrontation or encounter with forces of oppression does not, in the words of Debray, "suffer from the lack of boldness" among men like Barri. Debray states further: "Quite to the contrary, it frequently suffers from a profusion of admirable sacrifices, or wasted heroism leading nowhere..."²⁷ No sooner than Barri recognises the futility of singular act of heroism than he becomes an entirely different man, the true picture of Omotoso's revolutionary figure. As the author puts it: "He (Barri) felt a different person not a new person but some other being other than the one who went to the house of Chief Daniran six weeks or so before"²⁸.

At this point, Barri reaches a full consciousness and in his self-realisation, "He was not only sorry for himself that he had ever hoped to work inside the system, to fight from within. To join them hadn't sounded as foul as it would have if this aim of fighting from within, this hope of being able to effect change from inside the house..."²⁹

For Omotoso (in the mask of Barri) it was "naivety," and "ego-centric stupidity." Barri then draws a simple analogy to show the extent of such folly: "You couldn't complain of the foundation of a house as being weak, improperly laid, badly put together and then watch the walls being built on that foundation. Then you move with them into the house telling everyone that you were going into the house to put it right"³⁰. This is where Omotoso's social commitment comes in; the need to combat the erection of wrong social structure strictly from without, if the few committed ones like Barri means to achieve anything positive.

In another instance the ills plaguing Africa are symbolically presented in a picture similar to Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*. Like Soyinka's mendicants presented in amoeboid varieties and representing the hyper-infectious internal problems plaguing Nigerian

²⁷ Regis Debray, *Revolution in The Revolution ? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, New-York, Grove Press Inc. 1967, p. 29

²⁸ Kole Omotoso, *The Scales*, Onibonjo Press & Book Ind. (Nig.) Ltd., 1976 p. 75

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74

society, so is Barri made to inspect Chief Daniran's Laboratory and to observe the extent of havoc and damage wreaked by certain individuals (and in this case, Chief Daniran) on the (African) society. This pseudo-epic journey by Barri equally affords him the opportunity of assessing the extent of the task ahead of him.

Like a devoted medical doctor having a dying patient (Africa) before him, there is need for caution, accurate calculation and decisiveness in the course of diagnosis, this precisely is what Barri has done. Barri then goes into action. He resigns his appointment and gathers some forty-seven young men. Debray's assertion as to the composition of "a revolutionary force" is important and relevant here: "...if it is to triumph militarily, must politically assemble around it the majority of the exploited classes"³¹.

Barri's choice of forty-seven "house-helpers" is intentional more so in keeping with the spirit of his kind of revolution. He takes them outside, far into the jungle where he re-orientates them and gives them para-military training. His choice of the jungle is significant on two major grounds. First, we are reminded of Debray's description of the revolutionary force which according to him, "is clandestine." He explains further: "It is born and develops secretly. The fighters themselves use pseudonyms. At the beginning, they keep out of sight, and when they allow themselves to be seen, it is at a time and place chosen by their chief"³².

The second major ground of Barri's choice of the "jungle" as training venue provides for an "Alpha experience" – a new society created from the beginning. His target at this point is to groom his "Gentlemen of Courage" to be adequate for the task ahead. Like a competent doctor, he, Barri refuses to be deceived by mere symptoms of the Canker worm – he must root out the very causative agents as well as the vectors. Chief Daniran is responsible for the entire paralysis that is plaguing the African Society. Barri, at the most opportuned and favourable moment, launches his attack along with his "G.C.C" against Chief Daniran and had him completely destroyed along with the "vectors" his mercenaries, and in addition, his estate.

Some critics have tried to mellow the seriousness of Barri Jogunde's total commitment and consequently, Omotoso's. In their appraisal of the scene of confrontation between Barri and Chief Daniran at the tail-end of the novel, Barri is said to be a man of conscience, and that is full of compassion for the heartless chief, to the extent that he could not shoot him directly.

³¹ Regis Debray, *Revolution in The Revolution ? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, New-York, Grove Press Inc. 1967, p. 108

³² *Ibid.*, p. 41

The contention of the writer is on the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the author's intention. Barri is a man of conscience no doubt, but rather than have any compassion for an irredeemable criminal like Chief Daniran, his sympathy is on the side of Chief's victims. His reluctance to shoot the Chief stems from utter disgust and the fact that the Chief deserves a penalty far worse than an instant death, and "burning" readily provides an alternative for slow death. As Ibitokun rightly puts it, God of nature readily blesses the purge and washes away all traces of abomination and corruption with the heavy down pour that immediately follows Barri's victory over Chief Daniran.

Omotoso appears to tackle in *The Scales* as well as *Fella's Choice*, the issue of redemptive violence which the author considers an essential ingredient to his ideology of total commitment. In a meaningful revolution that is aimed at a total purge in order to give room for a complete "rebirth" of an otherwise, lost society, "violence" is imminent and along with this, is some measure of "corruption." In effect, Omotoso does not believe in sheer violence that is geared towards selfish ends as typified in Chief Daniran, but he blesses the highly organised redemptive violence geared towards the improvement and, or salvation of the entire society. This kind of violence can even afford the loss of a few lives, it can equally be instrumental to a deliberate destruction of a few lives out of necessity, so long as this brings the desired socio-economic change to the suffering majority. Barri and his "G.C.C." could therefore, afford to unleash violence on the Military Post to steal necessary arms for their operation.

There are, in our contemporary historical experience of liberation struggles, reports of freedom fighters breaking into Banks in order to generate fund necessary to aid their arms – struggle. Similarly we witness an aspect of "corruption" in the scene where Chief Daniran bribes Barri. Barri, like Achebe's Max Cool, is realistic in demanding and taking money from the Chief. Barri knows the task ahead of him and he knows the important role money has to play in such a task. Omotoso presents the scene as follows: "He (Barri) had also got one million naira from him (Chief Daniran)"³³. Before anyone could raise any eye-brow, the author offers an explanation for Barri's action:

What was he going to do with the money? He knew from the beginning that he was not going to keep his mouth shut at all. Rather than that, he was going to pursue more rigorously his aim of bringing the Chief to justice, put him on the scales. He would need money for this and there was no reason why the chief shouldn't pay for the petrol to burn him... he wouldn't touch a kobo of the money himself, whatever of the money was left after he had handed him (Chief Daniran) to the court, he would use in founding a

³³ Kole Omotoso, *The Scales*, Onibonjo Press & Book Ind. (Nig.) Ltd., 1976 p. 103

rehabilitation centre for those human wrecks created by our society through their Chief Danirans³⁴.

Barri is a man of great foresight, a revolutionary who gets his bearing correct. He has a goal and knows how to come by it. He is unlike Achebe's Odili the young, idealistic graduate who refuses to take the money Chief Nanga offers him. Odili lacks a clear ideology and therefore could not possibly be the right material for any positive societal change. Odili wins Edna, but his society remains unchanged. A significant divergence between Achebe and Omotoso's visions, concerns their resolutions in the two novels, *A Man of the People* and *The Scales* respectively. While Achebe appears to vest the salvation of the society on the "Military boys" who are essentially products of the same corrupt system, Omotoso sees a plausible true salvation only in the hands of progressive youths who by the virtue of their "training" and "ideological re-orientation," are no longer products of the corrupt system and society.

On Mao's submission in regard to the need for literature (and art) to help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind, Omotoso believes that it is through this communal spirit of universal comradeship coupled with a sense of belonging that people can successfully "fight the enemy with one heart and one mind."³⁵ In effect, in the words of Ropo Sekoni, "integrative heroism"³⁶ is consummated in both *Fella's Choice* and *The Scales*. Integrative heroism is graphically illustrated with the activities of Fella Dandogo, Joko Adeyemi and The Fourth Division in *Fella's Choice*, as well as Barri Jogunde and his "Gentlemen of Courage and Conviction" in *The Scales*.

Conclusion

What I have tried to show is that Omotoso's social commitment in the struggle for revolutionary social change does not go beyond the traditional role of the artist in a country like Nigeria. Through his fictional writing, he has shown that the artist must, particularly monitor, direct and continue to extend the frontier of the struggle for total freedom for humanity. According to Mao, literature no doubt, is, though subordinate to politics, but in turn, still

³⁴ Ibid., p. 67

³⁵ Mao Tse Tung, "Yenam Forum on Literature and Art", *Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung. III*, Peking : Foreign Languages Press, 1967, p. 70

³⁶ Ropo Sekoni, "From Chaos to Cosmos : Trends in African Political Novel" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Literature Association Urbana, Illinois. April 6-10 1983) p. 11

capable of exerting a great influence on politics³⁷. It is in this light that literature in general and Omotoso's fiction in particular continues to remain an indispensable weapon in the societal revolutionary process.

Omotoso's choice of audience – the masses of the people, with whom and from where the true revolution must begin through their conscious re-orientation, has become a matter of duty to be carried to its logical conclusion in his art. It is for this reason that he opts for "Popular" fiction. All of the popularised fiction works are aimed at the raising of standards as meets the needs of the broad masses of the people. Omotoso aims at no less an intention in his fictional works. The few socially committed works by Africans might be considered as rather too elitist in form. This reason may, among other things, be responsible for the poor effect of such works on the masses of the people. The above realisation probably prompted Sembene Ousmane (an accomplished writer) to take to cinematography, in the attempt to reach a much larger sector of the society. Cinematography is a more sophisticated and more expensive venture, but more effective than any other medium. In an interview held with Omotoso, he has claimed to opt for "popular" art to bring literature up to the doorstep of the lowest cadre of the masses.

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