

Between Collateral Criticism and Critical Marginalia: Portrait of the Artist as a Critic in Labo Yari's *Man of the Moment*

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Abstract---Metafiction suggests the discursiveness of a given work of fiction to assess the artistic, not to say paradigmatic, significance of another work or other works of fiction with the multifarious possibilities of generating more critical discourse. It works here at the level of deceptively uncomplicated critical discourse, portrayed in a linear or even simplistic narrative, the while foregrounding issues of theory and criticism which the reader is made to apprehend without going through the linguistic contraptions of critical marginalia. In this sense metafiction, metatheatre and to some limited degree even metapoetics have something in common. Metacriticism on the other hand is usually wide of the mark as it consciously discusses issues of theory and criticism with embellishment and grandeur, sometimes even deliberate obfuscation, which only the literary discipline can call on itself. This paper discusses the constant referencing of art and the artist in Labo Yari's *Man of the Moment* as a deliberate ploy to discuss literature and literary criticism in a creative way in a fictional text, which even the uninitiated can appreciate. It debunks the notion of some critics who see this constant referencing in the novel as mere adolescent name-dropping in critical discourse.

Keywords---Collateral Criticism, Critical Marginalia, Intratextuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE discourse on collateral criticism at once suggests the inadvertent critical interrogation bestowed on one subject while another issue is at the centre of the debate. Critical marginalia on the other hand is the unofficial notation penned down usually beside the text or at the margin to instantly capture the reader's opinion on any given issue raised in the text. Ayn Rand is perhaps the world's most renowned marginalia critic in literature. In his introduction to the book, [1] *Ayn Rand's Critical Marginalia: Her Critical Comments on the Writings of over 20 Authors*, Robert Mayhew (1995) observes that she stands out as one of the most incisive and scathing of critics in this regard. Without doubt her comments on C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, may not be accommodated in the introductory class of literary criticism but they are nonetheless revealing, and definitely emotive. And more importantly, the comments have widened the reader's horizon of perception when it comes to appreciating content

and style of C. S. Lewis himself. This paper places Labo Yari's *Man of the Moment* between the continuum of collateral criticism and critical marginalia with the view to bringing out the not so obvious issues of critical discourse as portrayed in this work of fiction.

II. THE AUTHOR AS A CRITIC

In his famous essay, "The Novelist as a Teacher", written in 1965 and wholly reproduced in *African Literature: An Anthology and Theory*, Chinua Achebe upholds that the writer has a responsibility to his art as indeed he has a responsibility to his society. [2] The pleasure of jettisoning his social responsibility in favour of artistic experimentation however ill-behooves the African artist especially when there are more pressing issues of social and international relevance that need to be addressed by him. Says he

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (p.104)

At this level, therefore, as a social commentator or social critic, the author feels the singular responsibility of educating his people and setting the cultural records straight by at least dislodging the unchallenged negative portrayal of African culture by the colonialists. At the tail end of colonialism this was what preoccupied the commitment of most creative artists. Chinua Achebe from the above excerpt may himself have missed the ambivalence of the situation; is he the one as author educating his readers or is it his novels that are doing the education? The dividing line between romantic expressionism and structuralism is wide but bridging the gap at this level of our discussion is not the chief concern of the paper. It is pertinent to observe in passing that both outlooks exert their own influence on the reader largely depending on the reader's disposition. Again, in this the tedious argument of Wimsatt and Beardsley on affective fallacy would be discountenanced.

As a self-appointed raconteur of his people's story, the author has a duty to recount things according to his perception with the view to influencing the reader. It is this intended influence, whether openly acknowledged or deliberately submerged in images and allegories of creative composition that exposes his role as a social critic of sorts. The text, the writer's creation as it were therefore is the vehicle through

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which this criticism takes place. In accessing this vehicle, it may not be necessary to acknowledge the critic. That is why Chinua Achebe here arrogates the teaching directly to the text – “if my novels did no more than teach my readers...” the author has willingly opted out of the education chain. The text now speaks to the reader directly. It must however be pointed out the apparent irrelevance of the author is only after the composition of the text has taken place. In other words his transience is in a manner of speaking permanent unless he is creating another text. In this case he has to be alive again to finish the composition after which he would have to disappear again so that he or his history would not interfere with the business of interpretation of what he has produced.

What Labo Yari has produced in *Man of the Moment*, which is the focus of this paper, is at once a critique of the social life as it is lived in Lagos, the then Nigeria's capital and also provide a style of critical assessment of other artistic creation particularly painting, poetry and music as they are appreciated within the context of the Nigerian society. In this sense it is the writer himself that we see as the social critic of his society. The other dimension which this paper is concerned about is the role of the artist as a critic. This is what is contained in Labo Yari's novel. But there is the need to first understand the novel in its own context.

III. CONTEXTUALIZING THE TEXT

The contextualist conception of literature suggests that “the literary work is essentially embedded in the historical context of its creation: without that context it would not be the work it is. Strong version of contextualism tie a work to its author: different author, different work, even in cases where two texts are identical.” [3] (*Philosophy of Literature*, 85). What Peter Lamarque is suggesting here is that contextualism fundamentally considers the literary text first and foremost as a byproduct of its society's history since its author is also one. There seems to be no point of contention here. The problem begins when meaning and textual interpretations are unreasonably linked to the author or his professed intentions as the romantic expressivists are wont to do.

All fictions are created within a given milieu be that social, intellectual or academic. The author cannot determine the ultimate reception of his work within the social context. But he is the sole determinant of the text's intratextuality, its stylistics and content. It is the sum total of this intratextuality that makes social commentary. What follows is the discussion of this social commentary as it relates to the state and condition of the artist in the society.

The narration begins with the protagonist caught in the midst of Lagos famous traffic jam which is captured succinctly thus:

Yes, today is Monday, a dreadful day for Lagosians. As usual, the traffic is like a solid wall of stones, and motorists are on edge, swearing at whoever dares cross them. Their countenances do not encourage either the hawkers or beggars to approach them, yet the undaunted ones are surrounding their Peugeot, Mercedes, Hondas and Bettles. (p.1)

The experience of chaos and confusion which characterizes Lagos's daily commuting experience puts Amadu Baduku in state of somber curiosity which in no way affects his desire to see that he succeeds in the realization of his dreams. This

dream borders on getting published or getting employed. When he goes to the bank to get a job he is told he cannot get a job the way he is – shabbily dressed and all. The surrealistic paradox here is almost directly reminiscent of the proles in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious. [4]

In the case of Amadu Baduku [5] the maxim can only be mildly adjusted:

Until he dresses well he will never get employed; and until after he is employed he will never dress well.

Interestingly this condition does not come with the frustration one would have expected. Instead the protagonist harbours some incongruous sense of elation:

After the incident in the bank I kept on walking with my head up, feeling the surge of creating energy. I felt like going back home to empty on paper all the sonnets, odes and epics which were struggling to come out of my congested brain. (11)

Already therefore the vocation of the central character is established. He is an artist who views and interprets issues with the deep sense of perception as it behoves an artist. Writing about *Man of the Moment* in her copiously researched and authoritative seminal work, *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers and the Novel in Nigeria*, Wendy Griswold, [6] observes that

Yari presents a highly individualistic view of artistic achievement. For example, Anyanwu assures Amadu that his poetry will survive him if only he can get it published, but great artists suffer rejection of their works at the beginning. One of his later poems is called “Epic of Transcendental Ego”, suggesting the romantic image of individual art rising above its social context...The social context of the would-be writer is far from insignificant, however.” (216)

Since the writer is the sum total of his society's experiences it is only natural to assume that he cannot rise above the social and artistic demands of that society. It is in this regard that Labo Yari excels as a social critic. Elsewhere [7] we have argued that the author's commitment to the role of the artist in the society nearly leads him to an autobiographical representation in the text. This is only avoided with the conscious veering off to the issues that concern the protagonist's preoccupation not with social issues but with artistic discourse which some of his critics summarily consign to the critical hip of undergraduate name-dropping (*Bearing Witness*, 216). More than this however this paper postulates that the constant references to art and the artist in this novel is by no means accidental. It provides us with what we may call collateral criticism since the initial focus is social while the secondary concern is artistic. But because the central character is an artist, this makes his portrayal as a critic of the arts not only relevant but germane.

IV. THE STATE OF THE ARTIST

It is safe to argue that nobody is as sensitive to the business of criticism as the artist is. And it may even be further suggested that the lesser the success recorded in his creative endeavor, the greater the venom of his pen when it comes to

critical pontification over some perceived error. In the words of Alexander Pope [8] in his *Essay on Criticism*,

Some have at first for Wits, then Poets past,
Turned criticks next, and proved plain Fools at last (3)

Amadu Baduku's case is not similar to the failed-writer-turned-critic described here. But there is no gainsaying the fact that the critical erudition he displays in the assessment of other works and his own is born out of genuine desire to place criticism in its secondary position to creative endeavor. And the source of the creative endeavor itself is foregrounded in reading. There is a form of altruism in this which essentially is the point the text is making. Early in life the protagonist is introduced to the world of books where he learnt that to be a successful writer one has necessarily to be voracious reader. He is taken to the village library where he is "introduced to good and suitable books" (23) from which experience his creative disposition was sharpened even as his critical inclination is unconsciously honed. But his primary calling is that of a poet and he intends to pursue this calling whatever the frustration. His trials and tribulations on the path of becoming a published poet have been foreshadowed by the admonition he received from his mentor from the very early pages of the narration.

Many good books were rejected several times before a publisher ventured to publish them. You've got to persevere and never give up. That's the only way you can get published. (26)

He is thus very much aware from the outset that as a beginner and yet unpublished author he should expect very little sympathy, not to say empathy, from the publishing world. He does not but he is never deterred. He confesses elsewhere that the true sense of value is known through sorrow, suffering and striving. (50) His humility and sense of romance denies him the sense of sentimental sensationalism common to authors when they are in love. He broods and becomes almost oppressively self-effacing. When his girlfriend declares her love for him he feels he is inadequate for such magnanimity:

How could you love me Anyanwu? A tramp who has been looking for a home. No, my poems did not make you feel adequate. Not if the poetry of my masters couldn't do the task. (41)

What comes out clearly even from this humble submission and self-denial is that Amadu Baduku may have his faults but when it comes to his vocation he is very thorough. He acknowledges his masters and laments that even they cannot influence his lover. His exchange with Anyanwu at the restaurant foregrounds the age old argument of Plato that writers who create out of emotional frenzy are but mad people. They should therefore not be trusted.

"As soon as I sat in the bucket seat of her car, she threw a quizzical look at me, wondering whether I was some sort of writer. Without waiting for my reply, she said she had not seen anybody whose life was being threatened for the sake of books and manuscripts. You must be one of those mad people, she said to me. Yes, writers, those are what I mean." (42)

Baduku is not the least put out by this observation. Nor indeed is he when she suggests that societal problems cannot be solved by the sentimental outbursts of writers no matter

how great they might be. Anyanwu submits that problems bedeviling the society can only be solved by politicians. Indeed at some point she looks at writers as compounding instead of alleviating the problems. To all these Amadu just agrees and only responds when he feels she is a trifle hard on the writer's role and position in the society. The following exchange about a given writer exemplifies this assertion:

The writer is compounding our political problems by turning his literary talent to an area about which he knows little. Instead of concentrating on his fiction, he is now becoming a political analyst, claiming to have solutions to our problems. Moreover, all the time he writes he is doing nothing but sharpening our ethnic differences. That is why I still maintain that his type of literature, and to a large extent most of our writers, are not helping us to build the nation. They are merely sowing the seeds of discord in the name of literature. In fact literature of any sort or any kind of art for that matter is only for a few. I don't know why writers want to exaggerate their role in country with a preponderance of illiterates.

"All the same our country needs writers," I asserted. "A writer should write for a thousand years, not for the recent. A person like you could have been a great writer because you are a perfect representative of your time. You have not lost your cultural values and you appreciate those of the Western world thereby succeeding in transcending your times. (49)

The novel devotes ample space to showcase the role and relevance of the writer in an argumentative discourse reminiscent of the ancient styles of Plato, Dryden Philip Sidney and Horace. One of the most alluring treatises in the text is the unabashed statement about the state of the writer in the developing world captured in the words of Baduku thus:

I have met writers like myself who have published nothing and were blaming publishers for their failures. Among these writers some regarded themselves as the most gifted artists in the world and were considering their fame as a means of dictating the mode of living to Nigerians. Others were simply ambitious to enjoy all the material things of life; to have big houses, beautiful cars and pretty girls around them. (66)

What this suggests is that apart from his calling as a creative writer, the artist is not fundamentally different from the next man on the street. There is a form of sincerity in this portrayal. And it is this kind of academic sincerity that is brought to bear whenever the artist finds himself in the business of literary criticism.

V. THE ARTIST AS A CRITIC

Even though the emphasis of *Man of the Moment* is on the role and state of the artist in the society, his role as a critic of other arts is also investigated. This is what brings the concept of collateral criticism. The artist, represented consistently by the aspiring poet Amadu Baduku in the novel is not simply an encapsulation of social observatory, he is also a literary expert imbued with vast knowledge of criticism and theory.

When they visit Duro's painting exhibition, Baduku at once portrays himself as critic extracted from the school of romantic expressionism. He surveys the sketches and painting of a particular girl in the gallery and confesses that he is unable to unravel the motif.

I think I need more background information on Duro, otherwise I will not be able to fully understand these paintings. (76)

Without knowing, the text is lending its voice to the critical debate about whether the opinions, intention or history of an author is relevant to the interpretation of his works. The stance here seems to be that such extraneous information are indeed relevant. Because it is only after Anyanwu has furnished Amadu Baduku with the personal information of the painter that the painting holds any serious meaning. He understands that women play a very important role in the life of the painter hence the motif of love, despair and death. (76) To use Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument

The meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or state of soul rather than a physical object like an apple. But even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker (no matter how abstractly conceived) to a situation (no matter how universalized). We ought to impute thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic speaker, and if to the author at all, only by an act of biographical inference. (*Intentional Fallacy*, 5) [9]

If the biographical inference helps the reader in arriving at a meaning (no matter how contrived) then such inferences are relevant to the critical exigency. But Labo Yari's text does not stop there. Its focus may not have been wholly literary criticism, still it devotes some space to it and some aspects of theory. In an attempt to explain aspects of Duro's painting to Baduku, Anyanwu makes the following submission

Well, as it is with every work of art, people see it from their own point of view. Just like books, readers have different meanings for them, depending on their background. (80)

This is saying that just as the writer is the sum total of his societal experience, so indeed is the reader. Therefore, the way a work of art is seen and interpreted is largely dependent on the readers' competence. This also suggests that a given work of art can have as many interpretations as there are readers. And since there is no clear cut meaning of a text, meaning is as it is perceived and understood by the critic. Alexander Pope explains this when he says,

'Tis with our Judgments as our Watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own. (Essay, 3)

A general consensus is never possible on a given text. Indeed, for every additional time a reader studies a text, the meaning gets enriched, different. All through the text however the reader is made to understand that art speaks to its recipient more effectively if a little knowledge of the artist's life or his work is known. Even in music, it appears, knowledge of the musician may increase the level of our enjoyment of it. "In music, an ideal relationship between the listener and the music is necessary. You need to know about the work or the musician performing it." (90) Yet in the next breadth there appears what amounts to be contradiction for the Anyanwu now says, "It is difficult to explain a work of art from historical connotation."

The fact is that whatever critical postulations or theoretical suppositions the text is presenting is not fully thought out, nor is it comprehensively presented. But then the task is not to write a treatise on literary theory. The task is to tell the story of an aspiring author in a society where his creativity is hardly

acknowledged. In other words the critical discussion in the novel is tangential to the story of the artist being told. The success of the book lies in the fact it brings to fore aspects of literary criticism which the reader may find useful without the tedium of deciphering some impossible linguistic meanderings of high-sounding text on theory and criticism.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to analyse Labo Yari's *Man of the Moment* as a text emblematic of collateral criticism in which a poet is portrayed as a literary critic even though the initial outlook is to depict him as solitary figure lacking his society's understanding and support. Aspects of sociological criticism and expressionism are discerned and even though the text is devoid of detailed discussion of any given theory, which is not and should not be its concern in the first place, the reader comes out with the grasp of an idea of what criticism may entail. When in one deadly sentence Wendy Griswold dismisses the book thus "its episodes are melodramatic and unconnected, the ending deus ex machine, and the long artsy conversation sound like undergraduate name-dropping" (216), she misses the point that literary discourse can and does take this format if only to instil in the reader the need for erudition and versatility in creativity. Wole Soyinka does it in *The Interpreters* and Dambuzo Marachera does it in *House of Hunger*. Indeed the gloom at the end of these two novels contrasts sharply with the hope at the end of *Man of the Moment*. The tone of despair that dogs the creative artist throughout the story when he seeks his poetry collection to get published turns to cheer when in the end he gets acceptance. It may be contrived, but the novel will surely give hope to aspiring artists or poets whose lives and experiences would find parallel with that of the protagonist, Amadu Baduku.

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