

SATIRE AS TYPIFIED IN RAMONU SANUSI'S *LE BISTOURI DES LARMES*

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Abstract: *Literature is an essential weapon for socio-political, cultural and economic struggles among other things. This art called literature is a source of dialogue, debate, exchange and innovation. A form of creativity which allows transfer of culture and knowledge that are useful for coping with societal challenges In other words, it paints life with a view to share human experiences, feelings, imaginations, observations, findings, predictions and suggestions for practical realities. In this paper, we attempt to examine "Satire as exemplified in Ramonu Sanusi's Le Bistouri des larmes."The purpose is to enhance the decoding/understanding of African Literature of French expression. Our review is premised on sociological approach, which holds that literature and other forms of creative arts should be examined in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received. This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society. To better understand a writer's literarywork(s), it may probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behaviour re-orientation. The paper concludes that satire is an essential mechanism in the hands of many African writers to achieve their motives.*

Keywords: Literature, creativity, satire, fiction, non-fiction, society, social transformation

INTRODUCTION

The practice of making fun of a human action with a decision to correcting the character excessiveness or weakness is known as satire. "Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior" (Adeoti, 1994). Hence, satire is an attack on folly or vice demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or unacceptable behaviour. From listeners, viewers and, or readers, satire is used to achieve a reaction of contempt. Creative art or simply creativity is any man-made successful effort in production or fabrication of things whether visible or invisible; tangible or intangible for the purpose of human usage, enjoyment and development. . Our adoption of the sociological approach is informed by the fact that whether verbal or non-verbal, literature is socially constructed or established. Wellek and Warren (1968) affirm thus: "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation...Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the

natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation”.

Fictional entities are “principally those entities originating in and defined by myths, legends, fairy tales, novels, dramas and other works of fiction,” (Peter Lamarque, 2000). He holds that philosophical interest in fictional entities thus covers a surprisingly wide range of the subject such as ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and aesthetics.

“A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists”, (Joan Rockwell, 1974). From Rockwell argument, it can be deduced that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality.

“Works of literary non-fiction may be defined as those that aspire to be factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true. On the other hand, work of fact can distort the truth... By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary non-fiction.” (John Warnock 1989). As a matter of fact, it is strongly difficult to separate fiction from non-fiction because the two are essentially co-extensive. They have interlocking relationships which cannot be automatically deconstructed. The elements of fiction can be found in non-fiction. Hence, no work of narration; drama, poetry or prose is totally fictional/imaginative or non-fictional/true.

Anchored on the ideologies of the formalism and/or structuralisms, literature is words or the writer’s expressions and that art is for the purpose of itself. “. . . A literary work is relatively closed. It creates a world which insists on being taken on its own terms and when those terms are violated by inappropriate questions, the result is a palpable sense of absurdity,” (Douglas Jefferson and Graham Martin, 1982). This view presents text as self-sufficient and independent. Meaning is seen as “a continual shifting back and forth between the language of the work and a network of contexts which are not in the work but are essential for its realization,” (Robert, Scholes, 1976). Scholes sees meaning as something which is present in dialectical interaction between the text and its informing context.

“... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture,” (Warner Berthoff, 1981). Hence, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced.

“The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it,” (Sartre, 1948). Society means an association of people,

which comprises people that have rules of behavior such as beliefs, customs, traditions, conventions, social values and norms by which the society can change and protect the trade unions of a given society. Society is “a particular community of people who share the same customs, laws, etc” while development stands for “the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc”, (Hornby, 2000).

Through protest writing, militant but reasonable African creative writers condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material development in Africa and the world at large.

The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence.

In scholarly studies over the years, the inter-relationship between literature and psychology has been strongly attested. The writer or artist is an individual subject to emotions and feelings and he/she is a product of certain social make-ups which literary work is potentially a response. Since the aim of criticism is to examine the text and to give a perspective by which audience can access the core of its meaning, it is worthy to make effort in considering the psychological drive or personal motivation of the writer or artist overtly and/or covertly as embedded in the text.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

In Ramonu Sanusi’s *Le Bistouri des larmes*, many issues on contemporary realities of African states are discussed and criticized. The novel is practically militant and combative both in its diction and tone. This is so because the author does not shy away from socio-cultural and political elements of his environment. Indeed, the novel is influenced by the novelist personal experience and the need to write a novel, which would capture and expose his social transformation stance or ideology and his hatred of the dictatorial tendencies of the military rule in his country, Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Satire is a common literary device through which the form and content of many African writers can be appreciated. Most of these writers elicit laughter in plays, poems and novels when enacting errant individuals and institutions. Satire offers some indices of defense mechanism against shocks to which our writer, Ramonu Sanusi often confronts as an informed participant, a social crusader and a human rights activist. It is obvious that Sanusi is a victim of anxiety emerging from the failure of governance in Nigeria since independence. Through his writing, at least with *Le Bistouri des larmes*, he has been involved actively in the struggle for a responsive and an accountable governance in post-independence; Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The case of Late General Sanni Abacha and other political aberrations in Africa set the pace for discussion in Ramonu Sanusi’s *Le Bistouri des larmes*. However, as a means of coping with anxiety-inducing contemporary realities, ironical views are practically displayed in his satiric writing, *Le Bistouri des larmes*. He calls our attention to the perceived inadequacies of the

society we live-in combing the sober and the humorous, the grim and the witty. “It is evident today; the rural communities have been cut off from the urban areas because their roads have become impassable. Most, if not all our communities, are smarting from their rustic eerie darkness. The people of our hinterland are hungry for development, and desirous of the opening up of their villages to beat back the forays of want, deprivation, poverty, primitivism, superstition. Generally, they long for better living conditions and the benefits of science and technology,” (Okey, D. Ebele, 1998).

It is therefore not surprising, when Sanusi lashes out on his people; the Africans that instead of marching on with primitive killing cultural practices, Africans should think of fixing the system and prevent it from collapsing. As it were, the economy is meltdown, occasioned by bad governance, repressive policies, corruption and docile followership. African countries are in bad state of indebtedness, flat broke up to their ears, even with cuts in government expenditures like the removal of subsidy on basic daily commodities. « L’argent de l’or noir du Nigara, considéré par les Nigariens comme un gâteau national, est éparpillé dans les banques suisses alors que le peuple n’arrive pas à manger deux fois par jours. . . » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p. 183). While our people cannot afford two meals daily, our leaders (neo-colonialist imperialists) stock money in foreign accounts without any impunity. Corruption is all over the land; it has become a canker worm, which has eaten deep into the bone marrow of Africa polity. «Tout était donc sens dessus dessous au Nigara; l’insécurité était à l’ordre du jour. Les policiers, les soldats et autres agents de sécurité en tenue civile remplissaient les rues de Lago et menaçaient le petit peuple. La souffrance devint éternelle, les enfants mouraient de faim, les adultes n’arrivaient pas à gérer leurs maisons. Les femmes abandonnaient les nouveau-nés, les enfants n’avaient plus de parents, les parents n’avaient plus d’enfants. Les pères de famille quittaient leurs foyers et ne revenaient plus. » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, pp. 137 - 138). The novelist further adds to the decay in the system with this revelation on the activities of our corrupt security officers, who have turned the country into a real mess instead of defending and, or protecting the people against both internal and external aggressions; they make life miserable for them by exploiting the defenseless citizenry: «Les policiers qui travaillaient à l’aéroport de Lago, eux au moins, étaient propres; c’étaient des gens qui se faisaient beaucoup d’argent là-bas. Certains parmi eux étaient à l’aéroport de Lago depuis dix ans et continuaient d’y travailler; d’autres venaient d’y être mutés là et c’était la même chose pour les agents de l’immigration et de la police. Ces agents de sécurité qui travaillaient à l’aéroport de Lago n’étaient pas arrivés là accidentellement. Ils **avaient le bras long**; c’est-à-dire qu’ils avaient des oncles qui étaient ministres ou travaillaient au ministère de l’intérieur.

Beaucoup étaient envoyés directement à l’aéroport par leurs patrons pour qu’ils travaillent pour eux. À vrai dire, ces agents de sécurité remettaient, chaque soir après le travail à l’aéroport de Lago, une assez importante somme d’argent à leurs patrons qui les avaient placés là. Ils travaillaient donc pour ces patrons, raison pour laquelle ils y restaient éternellement. » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, pp. 143 - 144). From the underlined clause; Ils **avaient le bras long** (. . .had long leg), one can see clearly the corrupt system leading towards eruption and of course, self-destruction. Here, corruption is even coupled with nepotism and favouritism of the highest order. However, we should not forget that both nepotism and favouritism are serious factors of retrogression in any human society.

The writer also captures the egocentricity of our so-called political rulers especially during the military invasion of our dear country, Nigeria. Personal interests and gains take prominence over national interest and social well-being of the citizenry. Brothers become arch rivals when it comes to the issue of politics; political powers and power sharing; L'égoïsme du Général qui passa neuf ans au pouvoir avait donc mis fin au régime du Général que les Nigariens aimaient, et c'était ainsi que les pauvres avaient tout perdu. Leur rêve s'était dissout comme le sucre dans l'eau et leur galère avait aussitôt recommencé. Ils ne mangeaient plus d'œufs, ne buvaient plus de lait et le pain disparaissait de leur table à manger. Peu à peu, le pays commençait à s'effondrer. Mais quelle ironie du sort pour ces deux Généraux car ils étaient tous du Nord. Le pouvoir est bien bizarre ! L'ennemi de l'homme est l'homme lui-même et c'était ainsi que des frères s'étaient vendus. En politique ou en matière de pouvoir, il n'y avait donc pas de frères au Nigara ; c'était comme une affaire où deux frères se disputaient la même femme. » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p 120). If not for personal advantages, why should people take politics **as a do or die thing?**

Examining Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes* as a satire, the author also condemns primitive cruel traditions particularly the female genital mutilation, which if it does not kill our innocent young girls, they are rendered biologically unproductive for life. The writer uses the case of one Yétoundé/Abibatou, his main character to press home his view on circumcision and female genital mutilation as a barbaric practice, which must be stopped. From the day of her circumcision, Yétoundé carries a stigma which lasts throughout her life time. Brahim, the native surgeon's knife destroys a very important tissue in the girl's sex organ and this makes her barren for life. Brahim's surgical knife was indeed "Knife of tears". The baby, Yétoundé, her mother, Rahina and sympathizers, especially women cried ceaselessly but the said knife had committed the greatest crime of destroying the future of a woman. Brahim invited Bala, Yétoundé's father pleaded for forgiveness for the mistake he made in the process of circumcising his daughter. However, all that was useless because the damage would remain till the kingdom comes. Knowingly or unknowingly; by error or by omission, the young baby, Yétoundé carries the stigma from the day of her circumcision to the day she will die.

« C'est le destin qu'ont choisi ces enfants, leur dirait Brahim comme d'habitude. Tant de fillettes excisées à Mandibou en étaient mortes et d'autres que Brahim avait scarifiées, portaient de grosses boules sur les joues. Les balafres étaient devenues des plaies qui avaient fini par guérir de longues années plus tard, mais qui avaient laissé des marques indélébiles.

Brahim présenta ses excuses à ces parents réunis chez lui. Mais que pouvaient régler ces excuses ? L'irréparable était déjà fait! » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p.81). It is evident that this cultural practice does not offer anything good. It has done more harm than good. Many of the children died in the process of getting them circumcised and others got their sex organ mutilated and destroyed. Brahim, the local surgeon is an archetype of the apostle of male chauvinism. He treated the issue so trivially by describing it as the children's destiny. What a wicked thinking and unfounded passing of blame!

There are a lot of implications on this: Yétoundé suffers serious cases of psychological trauma. Each time she is addressed as a childless woman, she breaks down emotionally. « Toi, femme qui ne peut pas avoir d'enfants, que fais-tu avec cet Anglais qui a fait tuer mon frère ? »

(*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p. 153). This statement is shocking and it has a psychological effect on the addressee. Yétoundé fainted and was rushed to the clinic at the air port when she gained her consciousness. « Yétoundé, aussitôt tomba et s'évanouit. Elle ne revint à elle qu'à la clinique de l'aéroport ; . . . » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p. 153).

Again, Yétoundé lost track with her profession and attempted to avenge. One fateful day, she was armed with a pistol and headed to Ali's house, one of the boys who were present and played active role the day Brahima circumcised Yétoundé and some other young girls because this time Brahima, the local surgeon had died. On getting there, she met him preparing for another round of circumcision of innocent young girls, without asking him any question she opened fire at him. « Yétoundé s'arrêta d'abord chez Ali. Il s'apprêtait à exciser d'autres enfants quand elle surgit en tonnant de colère. Ali n'en crut pas ses yeux lorsque Yétoundé sortit le pistolet de son sac à main et le brandit sur lui. Avant qu'il ne puisse s'échapper, celle-ci tira sur lui. . . » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p. 162). Unsuccessful in the revenge attempt, Yétoundé is arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned. The cause of Yétoundé's sadness is not farfetched. In Africa, the joy of every woman is to have a child and be called a mother. There is nothing as sad and embarrassing as not having a child and this is the main reason why Yétoundé, the protagonist in Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes* (*Knife of Tears*) cries any time she remembers her condition of bareness or when she is directly addressed as a woman without a child.

The position of the novelist however, is that we should do away with traditions which do not contribute meaningfully to our social well-being whether as individuals, groups or communities: « L'excision était comme un fétiche qui ne pouvait pas (nous) aider: mais à quoi sert donc un fétiche qui ne peut pas (nous) aider? Si un fétiche ne peut pas aider une personne, il doit la laisser telle qu'il l'a trouvée au lieu de la détruire. L'excision était donc comme ce fétiche et avait détruit la vie d'Abibatou (Yétoundé) » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p. 81).

Exposing these ugly trends with an intention to correct them and not just to mock them makes Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes* a typical social satire. The novel, *Le Bistouri des larmes* is a committed literature; **un roman engagé et au même temps un roman enragé**. The novelist is therefore seen as the mouthpiece (porte-parole) of the masses as demonstrated by his main character, Yétoundé: « Yétoundé profitait de ces occasions pour sensibiliser les parents d'élèves aux dangers de l'excision, du mariage forcé et d'autres questions. Elle avait rigoureusement organisé des campagnes contre l'excision et même la circoncision. Elle avait formé un comité qui persuada le vieil Amza, le chasseur Ahmad et quelques femmes du village d'un certain âge, de veiller au bien-être des enfants du village et des femmes aussi. » (*Le Bistouri des larmes*, p. 202). However, it is important to state that the author demonstrated his being objective in his ideological stance of transforming the society by allowing his main character, Yétoundé to serve her prison term for taking the laws of the land into her hand.

Apart from the journalistic style of narration, which the author employed, the apt use of simple literary devices like simile, metaphor, personification and proverbs makes Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes* picturesque, which enhances its aesthetic value and makes it an interesting piece of writing for a good reading. Take a look at these expressions from Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes*: « Le vent de l'harmattan soufflait et soulevait la poussière qui couvrait le visage et les torsos nus des travailleurs. » (p. 28). « Les lutteurs de Mandibou qui, entre-temps,

s'étaient lances dans des compétitions, dansaient comme des serpents. » (p.38). « Yétoundé avait rapidement grandi comme un bananier » (p.96). « . . . les fideles qui piaillaient comme des oiseaux devenaient silencieux » (p.96). « . . . les hautes maisons et les gens qui se déplaçaient comme des mouches » (p.102). « La charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même » (p.117).

« . . . le sang est plus épais que l'eau » (p. 120/121). « Effectivement c'étaient des cris face au danger, aux jours sombres ou plutôt aux jours noirs qui attendaient la république bananière du Nigara » (p. 125). The proverbs as elements of tradition give local colour to the work while most of the other artistic devices call our attention for sober reflection and, or make us laugh to reduce the tension, which normally associated with satirical writings. In other words, some of the literary devices create room for a sort of comic relief in a serious story.

At this juncture, it is obvious that it has been justified that "...The storyteller takes what he tells from experience; his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale (*or those who read the story and/or view it as the case may be*).The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual," (Benjamin, Walter, 1969}. Our writer, Ramonu Sanusi has reflected well on his society as a storyteller using *Le Bistouri des larmes* as an example by recounting his experiences and observations in an African context. The base of this discussion is that the adoption of sociological approach is not shortage/poverty of imagination, rather it is a means of providing solutions to the modern desire to learn and be entertained in this fast-changing global village and to fill the existing gaps in our knowledge as regards the secret lives of men and women that history has refused to cover. This blend of fact and fiction, which sociological approach allows eventually paves the way for authenticity in works of narration. Sociological criticism therefore has consequences which should be acknowledged, appreciated and discussed.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that satire stands out as a literary technique in exposing the ills in a given human society with a view to combat such ugly trends. This essential literary tool has been effectively applied in Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes*. The novelist, a lecturer with a Marxist cum feminist posture has redesigned the image, the role and the psychological being of women differently from the common and primitive order of ordinary things. In *Le Bistouri des larmes*, he has identified bad governance, repressive policies, corruption, selfishness and dreaded cultural practices as the bane of underdevelopment and the unending brouhaha among people in different communities; which make up Africa. As an instrument for social mobilization, integration, development and global advancement, literature is believed can fix or mend those collapsed sectors of human social system. There is a definite dialectical relationship between art/literature and social class and indeed, Ramonu Sanusi's *Le Bistouri des larmes* is a social satire preaching for socio-cultural, political and economic transformations having revealed the imperfections of man.

We have also, as a matter of fact, tried in this study to depict and underscore that Sanusi is genuinely active in the events of his society via his artistic creation(s) particularly the novel under review, *Le Bistouri des larmes*. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism has been justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be "the

most apt to render a full account of modern African literature” because it (the approach) takes into consideration “everything within our society which has informed the work”, Abiola Irele (1971). While benefiting from the pleasure of narration, which enables a writer to create a new world, Ramonu Sanusi is able to fictionalize real people and events in his novel, *Le Bistouri des larmes*, without stepping on dangerous toes.

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