The Great Divide: Classicism and Pulp Fiction in Hausa Novels

Abdalla Uba Adamu
Department of Education
Bayero University, Kano

Introduction

Generally the novel is an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals *imaginatively with human experience* usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting. Within its broad framework, the genre of the novel has encompassed an extensive range of types and styles: picaresque, epistolary, Gothic, romantic, realist, historical--to name only some of the more important ones.

A partial explanation of the novel's popularity is to be found in the scope it gave writers to explore areas of human experience that had previously lain outside the province of literature. For the first time, the minutiae of daily life became a fit subject for the writer's attention. The heroes and heroines of this new genre were as likely to be servants as courtiers. Their lives did not have to display preeminent virtue or vice; there needed be nothing epic in their destinies. Inevitably, this shift in emphasis was helped or hindered by the social and historical context in any given country.

When all the exceptions have been counted, however, it remains the case that the mainstream of the *contemporary* Hausa novel has based its appeal on the claim to provide a more faithful image of everyday reality than can be achieved by any other literary form. In European fiction, even the extravagant fantasies of the Gothic novel or the modern novel of science fiction depend for their impact on the detailed rendering of surface reality. Thus the history of the novel is in part a history of the changes in conventions established to achieve this virtual reality. I hope to demonstrate this argument through a consideration of the status of the contemporary Hausa novel. My conceptual framework would be the *realist* function of the novel where I argue that the Hausa novel, like European, Arabic and African novels, is largely a social photography and therefore reflects the values of its operating society. I will use two specific analytical frameworks to buttress these arguments: *classical antecedents* of the Hausa novel, and *spirit of the age* of the writer.

Classical Antecedents of the Hausa Novel

In Western literature, a “classic” is usually the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. However, the term is also used for the literature of any language in a period notable for the excellence and enduring quality of its writers' works. In ancient Greece such a period extended from about 500 to 320 BC; the Golden Age of Rome ran from about 70 BC to AD 18. French literature of the second half of the 17th century is considered classical, as is English literature of 1660-1714; the works produced and the critical standards that prevailed in both eras emulated those of the classical periods in Greek and Latin, although this criterion is not an essential characteristic of a classical literature.

Thus classicism is used to refer to archetypal literary works produced with a certain period in mind. It is of course possible that a thousand years or so from now, works adjudged "contemporary" now would be considered "classics" in the period. In Hausa fiction, the classical period is typically 1930s; indeed, 1933 when the Translation Bureau was established by the British colonial administration.

In Europe, perhaps because of the novel's realist bias, its greatest period is usually held to be the mid- to late-19th century, a time when improved literacy rates had increased the size of the potential audience and the modern mass media had not yet arrived to diminish it. In the Northern Nigerian literary scene, this period can be approximated to the decade of the 1980s when the present crop of writers emerged: writers motivated by the desire to capture the essence of their society in a literary celluloid.

Prior to this literary liberation, the reading audience were enslaved by the stale literary irredentism of Hausa classics. Thus *Ruwan Bagaja*, *Gandoki*, *Shehu Umar*, *Idon Matambayi*, *Jiki Magayi* all written within the moral morass of Hausa society, circa late 1920s/early 1930s became the Hausa literary reference points. Critics standing on their moral high ground, singing their soapbox symphonies, ecstatically refer to these classics as icons of unbridled literary excellence. They might have been. For the 1930s. Not for the 1990s. And certainly of doubtful relevance in the new millennium.

What was conveniently ignored by the Hausa literary purists was that the 1933 classics published in Hausaland were products of the *mallam* class; and as such, must reflect the moral precept of the class. Their acceptance in the Hausa literary *Weltanschauung* thus led to the Hausa critical paradigm that an acceptable literature is judged by the correctness of its message; i.e. whether it inculcates the right moral. Aimed at sermonizing to predominantly younger, elementary school audience, they thus conveyed a philosophy of life very characteristic of their emergent society: a condescending colonial Hausaland of 1920s and 1930s. But perhaps most significantly, they did reflect a society steeped in moral consciousness and "politically correct" acceptable social behaviors.

The pioneer Hausa classics became necessary as there were no books that can be used as text in primary schools of the era. Indeed the paucity of suitable primers for school pupils made the Hausa literary Svengali, Dr. Rupert East, encourage virtual whole scale translation of Arabian/Asian works into Hausa language, on the logic that such social contexts were nearest to what obtained in the Hausaland of the era, and therefore the moral meters might be more acceptable than say translating Charles Dickens or Jane Austen. In this way, one of the most vividly salacious books ever written in the Middle East, *One Thousand and One Nights* (translated from Arabic, itself translated from Persian, *Alfu Laila Wa Laila* as *Dare Dubu Da Daya*) became an acclaimed, accepted, absorbed "Hausa classic" — complete and replete with all its sordid details. Other classic Arab adaptations included *Saiful Muluki*, *Abdulbadi Tanimuddari*, *Tauraruwa Mai Wutsiya*, among others.

And yet even the Hausa classics needed to operate within the medium of reality. *Gandoki*, for instance, was based on heroic resistance to British invasion of Nupeland

(although the narrative later wanders off into the realm of fantasy). It is this reality that gives soul and essence to any novel in any socio-cultural setting. The writer, operating within the society, merely alters the scenes, the characters and the plot; but the essence of the story, by and large remains entrenched on happenings in the society.

Generally Nigerian writings — considered also in classical references — are characterized by immense stylistic vigor, a powerful realism, and, often, a satirical candor unseduced by the claims of the new nationalism. Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease,* renders remarkably the tones of Umuaro speech and thought, and exhibits, as also in *Arrow of God,* a concern for that rich native culture whose extirpation is threatened by imported Western patterns of life and government. His *Man of the People* deals sharply with corruption and personality cult in a newly independent Nigeria. In *Jagua Nana* Cyprian Ekwensi provides a wry study of the impact of the new materialism (symbolized by the "Jagua" car of the title) on a pure mind. Onuora Nzekwu, in *Blade Among the Boys,* has a graver theme: conflict between Ibo religion and imported Christianity in the upbringing of a sensitive and confused young man. Amos Tutuola gained an international reputation with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* — a richly humorous novel permeated with the spirit of folklore — in a similar way Abubakar Imam's *Ruwan Bagaja* (The Healing Waters) did. Trenchant comment on political corruption is featured in Sulaiman Ibrahim Katsina's *Turmin Danya* (Hog-Plum Mortar).

Indeed world literature is replete with occurrences as to suggest that realism is a universal phenomena. For instance, *Durub al-hijrah* (Ways of Migration), written by Lebanese Iskandar Najjar's recorded the tribulations of the country's European minority. Hasan Dawud's *Sanat al-utumatik* (The Automated Year) and Muhammad Abi-Samra's *Al-Rajul as-sabiq* (The Previous Man) are notable especially for their precision, narrative structure, and exploration of new experience. Sahar Khalife's *Al-Subar* (Wild Thorns) provides a haunting chronicle of life in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Thus literature, like all other human activities, necessarily reflects current social and economic conditions. Class stratification was reflected in literature as soon as it had appeared in life. For instance, the chants and incantations of the Hausa *Bori* shamans differ from the secret, personal songs of the individual, and these likewise differ from the group songs of ritual or entertainment sung in community. The story-telling competition between Hazique and Waziri Aku as relayed in *Magana Jari Ce*, Vol I (1937) replayed epic tales of kings and chiefs that differed from the folktales that were told in peasant cottages.

The more cohesive a society, the more the elements — and even attitudes —evolved in the different class strata are interchangeable at all levels. But where class divisions are unbridgeable, elite literature is liable to be totally separated from popular culture. An extreme example is the classic literature of the Roman Empire. Its forms and its sources were largely Greek and most of the sophisticated works of the major Latin authors were completely closed to the overwhelming majority of people of the Roman Empire.

Classical writings, however, were by no means the only prism of interpreting the world available to the novelist. Anchored in the classical quagmire, the Hausa novelist seeks a firmer ground to base his craft. The early crop of Hausa writers, being the pioneers of the political elite, soon migrated into mainstream liberation struggles, creating a vacuum that was only filled by latter Hausa writers who, instead of seeing the opportunities to be free from classicist morass created by the pioneer writers, chose instead to base their craft on fulfilling WAEC Hausa syllabus requirements.

Filtered through the classicist world-view, the Hausa literary scene stagnated into narrating safe, sound and acceptable stories of a simple society, living a simple, if humorous life, in neatly simple thatched country cottages. It took the wake-up call of the new generation of writers, starting from 1980s, the jolt the Hausa literary elite from its self-induced lethargy and start reflecting on the real issues of current society.

Expression of the spirit of its age

The novelist, like the poet, can make the inchoate thoughts and feelings of a society come to articulation through the exact and imaginative use of language and symbol. In this sense, his work seems to precede the diffusion of new ideas and attitudes and to be the agent of change.

In European literature printing has made all the difference in the negotiability of ideas. The writings of the 18th-century French writers Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot were produced from and for almost as narrow a caste as the Roman elite, but they were printed. Within a generation they had penetrated the entire society and were of vital importance in revolutionizing it.

Similarly in Hausa literature, the availability of the IBM Personal Computer in large northern urban clusters, especially Kano, from mid 1980s created a flood of Hausa writings. Prior to the availability of cheap typesetting and printing facilities, getting publishers to accept works by budding Hausa authors was a Herculean task. Publishers, naturally, would prefer more established "names" writing "safe" topics that have a ready-made market (preferably a mass-market such as elementary school). Thus the early and mid-period Hausa classics were locked out for many people quite simply because many of them were written with specific audiences and markets in mind. This tended to provide a forum for the only few who could successfully negotiate access to the big name publishers which makes such authors literary "spokesmen" of the Hausa literary pursuit.

In this way, printing has elevated the novel from its class niche to the masses. However, it should be pointed out that class distinctions in the literature of modern times exist more in the works themselves than in their audience. For instance, although Henry James wrote about the upper classes and Émile Zola about workingmen, both were, in fact, members of an elite and were read by members of an elite. The ordinary people, if they read at all, preferred sentimental romances. Popular literature had already become commercially produced entertainment literature, a type which today is also provided by television scripts.

The elite who read serious literature are not necessarily members of a social or economic upper class. It has been said of the most ethereal French poet, Stéphane

Mallarmé, that in every French small town there was a youth who carried his poems in his heart. These poems are perhaps the most "elite" product of western European civilization, but the "youths" referred to were hardly the sons of dukes or millionaires. In this way, the availability of novels made possible by Hausa writers, has created a vibrant reading culture in all the nooks and corners of Kano. I know currently of at least three commercial libraries in the metropolitan, where boys and girls pay N5.00 to rent a book for a day! Reading is therefore no longer the exclusive preserve of the *mallam* class who wrote the books initially.

The new trend that is emerging now in the Hausa novel is changing the medium from Hausa to English. The early to mid 1980s saw the virtual explosion of the Hausanized English novels of Macmillan's Pacesetter series (spearheaded by M. Sule's *The Undesirable Element*). However they seemed to have been a passing pad, and were certainly abandoned when the authors run out ideas and Macmillan run out of interest when it became clear that they could not be milked anymore. Further, copycat writers started appearing on the scene, making it difficult to separate the "men" from the "boys".

Contemporary Hausa novelists employ English as a second language, and one of the charms of their novels lies in a creative tension between the adopted language and the native vernacular (needless to say, this is usually self-consciously exploited--often for poetic, but more frequently for comic, effect). Thus the Pacesetter genre is being revived by young Hausa authors such as Mairo Muhammad Mudi, in *Sins of Parents* (1996) which deals with the inner struggles of a young girl who resisted temptation of her flesh; while *When the Wall Cracks* (1997) by the same author deals with poor parenting leading to a main character ending up being HIV+. A male version of similar events is provided by Aliyu Sani in *Blood Enemy* (1998). *Rabiat* (1999) also written in English by Aisha Gidado Idris is a chronicle of forced married and the sheer misery of a protagonist caught in such socially-sanctioned trap.

It is clear that other world novelists operating through the medium of second language nevertheless use the language effectively in painting the social landscapes of their societies. For instance, of Indian novelists, R.K. Narayan, in works like *The English Teacher* and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi,* exhibits an individual combination of tenderness and humor, as well as a sharp eye for Indian foibles. Of younger Indian novelists, Balachandra Rajan is notable, in *The Dark Dancer* and *Too Long in the West,* for an ability to satirize the Anglo-American way of life with the same suave elegance that informs his tragicomic view of the East. Khushwant Singh presents, in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale,* a powerful chronicle of Sikh life during that period of imperial dissolution that began with World War II.

The novelist, in whatever social circumstance, is an interpreter of the society. The Hausa society has had to rely for year on classical works to provide an interpretation of a society no longer in tune with current social realities. If the novelist is seen also as moral interpreter of the society, then he must operate within his natural medium, unhampered by cloying and suffocating classicist references.

For the Hausa contemporary novelist it is this interpretation of reality that causes the problem. This is because the fiction painted in the contemporary Hausa novel is too

unpleasantly close to reality. It reveals, vividly and graphically the abdication of parental responsibilities, abuse of parental privileges, betrayal of trust and the high regard for materialism characteristic of the current society. Exposing these realities in a narrative form touches a raw nerve. The howls of derision often aimed at the writers were uneasy pearls of laughter at the fear of an innermost secret acknowledged, a closeted skeleton rattled, ready for exposure.

The only way to redeem the society is to listen to these New Age Interpreters, learn their lessons and reflect on our activities and behaviors as parents, guardians, husbands, wives and ordinary folk. Far from eroding the moral fiber of the conservative Hausa society, the Hausa novelist emerges as a moral crusader, using language as his jousting lance to probe the innermost fears and hypocrisy that is prevalent in the current society.

Incidentally, the Hausa contemporary novel has been well documented in *Bibliography of Hausa Popular Fiction*, 1987-2002 by Graham Furniss, Malami Buba and William Burgess, and published by Rodiger Koppe, Köln. The book has just been released (2005) to international market. The book's publishing had some financial input from the British Academy. So while here in Nigeria we are busy condemning this literary phenomena, it is being acknowledged as a vital slice of popular culture in other parts of the world. So Hausa contemporary novel is alike and kicking!