Idols of the Marketplace: Literary History, Literary Criticism and the Contemporary Hausa Novel

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Abdalla Uba Adamu
Department of Education
Bayero University, Kano

I was delighted to read the reaction of Dr. Ibrahim Malumfashi — a literary historian — to my essay ("Hausa Literature in the 1990s", *New Nigerian Weekly*, April 24 and May 1, 1999) in *New Nigerian Weekly* of May 15, 1999 as well as the *Weekly Trust* of May 28, 1999. I am happy I have achieved one main objective, *provoking reaction*, and have thus snapped Ibrahim out of his critic's lethargy so that he can bounce back into the main arena. Criticism is the essence of the growth of knowledge. We must not dive undercover in revulsion and disgust simply because a trend is odious to us.

It is not my intention to engage in further debates —or, as the typical Nigerian saying goes, *join issues* — but for anyone following the trend of Hausa novels — both the critics, the writers, the protagonists and the interested by-stander — there is a need to provide continuity in the arguments. It is for this reason that I wish to provide a fodder for further chewing on the literary criticism to clarify a few points about my original essay.

His main problem was that I was not an expert on literary history, but an *educationist*. This is a label I accept with total humility. Education, as the act or process of educating or being educated, is indeed the "mother of all" disciplines, and it by this entrance gate that I entered the arena of literary criticism. True, I am also a scientist. And yet recourse to scientific authority and method is the outstanding trait of 20th century criticism. Indeed by labeling his critique of my essay *Beyond the Market Criticism*, Ibrahim pays a tribute to Francis Bacon, an outstanding apostle of Renaissance Empiricism as well as an advocate of a vast new program for the advancement of learning and the reformation of scientific method. It was Bacon who, in *Novum Organum; or, Indications Respecting the Interpretation of Nature* (1620), maintained that all prejudices and preconceived attitudes, which he called *idols*, must be abandoned, whether they be the common property of the race due to common modes of thought ("idols of the tribe"), or the peculiar possession of the individual ("idols of the cave"); whether they arise from too great a dependence on language ("*idols of the marketplace*"), or from tradition ("idols of the theater"). Thus a philosopher of natural science became a literary critic!

It is precisely for this reason that I provided a distinct analytical framework in my essay: objectivification of methodology. I had expected Ibrahim to find faults and weakness in my *analytical framework*, and consequently, the faulty nature of my subsequent interpretation. My framework outlined the categories of uses of a novel in any society, and I argued that many of the contemporary Hausa novels can fit in one of the categories, thus serving the purpose of educating the society in one way or other.

To my surprise all I saw were accusations of encroachment of an area that is not (by birthright?) mine — the word used is "mercenary" — simply because I had to rely on a series of "experts" (who, ironically enough, are themselves scientists!) to obtain faulty information about the Translation Bureau and the Literature Bureau. The accurate information, by the way is easily available in Neil Skinner's *Anthology of Hausa Literature* (Zaria, 1980) at only _40.00 (yes forty Naira, less than the cost of a newspaper!) in ABU Bookshop!

I wrote my essay essentially as a protagonist of any *educational activity* engaged by the Hausa people which will serve to enrich our literary antecedents. Although the Northern Nigerian Muslim had the most enduring and well established literary antecedent (going back to early to mid-1300s) of *any* group in this country, yet we have not been able to generalize our literary mechanism to secular knowledge. This has resulted in a massive pool of professorial class *mallams* and scholars who are scorned by the secular establishment as being retrogressive and illiterate. Further, a fallacy perpetuated by the likes of Professor Babs Fafunwa (*History of Education in Nigeria*) gave secular authority to the belief that Islam was responsible for the "educational backwardness" of Northern Nigeria. How can a group who had universities and professors as early as 1380 be "backward" if not with a secular meter?

Indeed my primordial concern was to support any activity that encourages reading culture among Hausa youth. Reading is certainly an educational activity, by that fact, any writer, whether of *Nuclear Physics*, *Ethnomathemtics*, or *Badariyya*, becomes my concern (now you see what connects a science educator and Hausa novelists!).

Ibrahim Malumfashi says I am not an expert in Hausa literary history. He himself admitted that with regards to *soyayya* genre, he did not regard himself "…as an expert in this field, but I believe I am reasonably well-read on the subject matter…" So how many books does it take to read to be an expert in genre? What does it take to be an expert in Hausa literary history? Chains of degrees from Wisconsin and SOAS, with tutelage under Neil Skinner and Graham Furniss? A significant argument of Ibrahim Malumfashi could be a clear conceptualization of expertise (sans the sarcasm!) of Hausa literary history. That should give us accepted, agreed upon and universal constants like "correct" (as opposed to wrong, though not necessarily, right) judgmental barometers (as scientists are wont to demand to further objectivize knowledge). Ibrahim's concept structure would then be (after being tested against established traditions) used as a parameter for judging what constitutes expertise in Hausa literary history.

Let us extend the search for the expert and see how far we can stretch it. Is the roadside mechanic, adept at repairing your car, less of an expert due to lack of academic qualifications? Should we really read any of Shakespeare's works knowing full well that he did not attend any university, and had *no degree* in anything (and there were universities awarding degree in his period!) and therefore could not really be an expert in writing since he was not *properly* trained? And are we to stop reading Abubakar Gimba's novels and ask him to write treatises on Economics instead?

But I digress. Now let me see if I can present my own, layman's understanding of literary criticism, so that my methodology (outlined in the original essay) would be a bit clearer.

Literary Criticism

If I understand it correctly, literary criticism asks what literature is, what it does, and what it is worth. Any literary critic is concerned with two main issues: the *moral worth* of literature and the nature of its *relationship with reality*. And that was precisely my point. I did not see any expectation to being an expert to ask these questions. Let us see how these critical frameworks evolved.

The Western critical tradition began with Plato in the 4th century BC. In his *Republic* he attacked poets on two fronts: their art was merely imitative, and it appealed to the worst rather than to the best in human nature. These are the charges that his student, Aristotle, countered a generation later in his ***Poetics*** by claiming for literature a level of imaginative truth that transcends that of imitation, and by arguing that it excited the emotions simply in order to allay them. These antagonists set the entire literary critical framework in any categorization of literary criticism.

European literary criticism from the Renaissance on has for the most part focused on the same two issues that underlie the debate between Plato and Aristotle: the moral worth of literature and the nature of its relationship with reality. At the end of the 16th century **Sir Philip Sidney** in his ***Defence of Poesie***, argued that it was the special property of literature to express moral and philosophical truths in a way that rescued them from abstraction and made them immediately graspable.

A century later, **John Dryden**, in ***Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay*** (1668), put forward the less idealistic view that the business of literature was primarily to offer an accurate representation of the world "for the delight and instruction of mankind." This remains the assumption of the great critical works of 18th-century England, underlying both Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) and the extensive work of Samuel Johnson.

Especially in modern Europe, literary criticism has occupied a central place in debate about cultural and political issues. Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (1947) is typical in its wide-ranging attempt to prescribe the literary intellectual's ideal relation to the development of his society and to literature as a manifestation of human freedom. Similarly, some prominent American critics, including Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, Kenneth Burke, Philip Rahv, and Irving Howe, began as political radicals in the 1930s and sharpened their concern for literature on the dilemmas and disillusionments of that era. Trilling's seminal ***The Liberal Imagination*** (1950) is simultaneously a collection of literary essays and an attempt to reconcile the claims of politics and art.

In a fragmented and narcissist medium, schools of literary practice, such as Imagism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, have found no want of defenders and explicators. Literary creators themselves have continued to write illuminating commentary on their own principles and aims. In poetry, Paul Valéry, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens; and in fiction, Marcel Proust, D.H. Lawrence, and Thomas Mann have contributed to criticism in the act of justifying their art.

Issues of Literary Criticism

Most of the issues debated in 20th-century criticism appear to be strictly empirical, even technical, in nature. By what means can the most precise and complete knowledge of a literary work be arrived at? Should its social and biographical context be studied or only the words themselves as an aesthetic structure? Should the author's avowed intention be trusted, or merely taken into account, or disregarded as irrelevant? How is conscious irony to be distinguished from mere ambivalence, or allusiveness from allegory? Which among many approaches--linguistic, generic, formal, sociological, psychoanalytic, and so forth--is best adapted to making full sense of a text? Would a synthesis of all these methods yield a total theory of literature? Such questions presuppose that literature is valuable and that objective knowledge of its workings is a desirable end. These assumptions are, indeed, so deeply buried in most critical discourse that they customarily remain hidden from critics themselves, who imagine that they are merely solving problems of intrinsic interest.

The literary critic, therefore, seemed to be someone with an enhanced interest in the development of literature. Are we to assume, following Ibrahim Malumfashi's paradigm, that to enjoy Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*, or Mamman Shata's epic *Bakandamiya*, we need to be experts in musical theory (with the appropriate degrees)? Should the appreciation and commentary on visual arts such as the stunning studio works of Jerry Buhari of the Zaria School be limited only to Fine Arts graduates? Are we incapable of appreciating the Art Noveau architectural works of Victor Horta's *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*, or classical structuralism of Hausaland's Bala Gwani's masterpieces, without being Architecture graduates?

Beyond the Idols of the Marketplace

Ibrahim Malumfashi seemed to be ambivalent regarding what Yusuf Adamu called Contemporary Hausa Novel (but this categorization does not count, because Yusuf Adamu is an "expert", not an expert, in Hausa literature!). They are variously described as pamphlets, Kano Market Literature (cf. Onitsha Market Literature and the infamous Macmillan Pacesetter series), and most interesting of all, chapbooks. Again this categorization of literature is not without a specific analytical framework which will help us determine the universality of such methodology (again, the scientist in me speaking!). Can the instruction manual which comes with a newly acquired pressing iron be literature? Or do we need the wrist-breaking epic of Lev Nikolayevich, aka Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to categorize literature? If Ibrahim Malumfashi categorizes Hausa novels as chapbooks, how ignoble is the genre?

Generally, chapbooks contained tales of popular heroes, legend and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly crude and anonymous, but they formed the major part of secular reading and now *serve as a guide* to the manners and morals of their times.

From 15th Century France and Germany the chapbooks satisfied the needs for light literature in European societies, and their success was indicated by the longevity; it was only in the early 19th century that they disappeared, hastened by the appearance of more sophisticated reading materials made possible by better technology. Thus

even in European literature, the great increase in available reading matter — championed by the chapbooks — after about 1650 both resulted from, and promoted the spread of *education* to the middle classes, especially to women.

Their magic persisted even in the 20th century. For instance, in 1980 Rita Frances Dove, an African-American writer published her chapbook, *The Yellow House on the Corner*. That did not stand in her way of winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 with *Thomas and Beulah*. Earlier in 1915 Barnes Djuna was quite successful with another chapbook, *The Book of Repulsive Women: 8 Rhythms and 5 Drawings*. Indeed so potential was the chapbook phenomena that in 1922 Hugh MacDiarmid founded the monthly *Scottish Chapbook,* in which he advocated a Scottish literary revival and published the lyrics of "Hugh MacDiarmid," later collected as *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926).

Subsequently for four hundred years chapbooks have served to contribute to European enlightenment. If they can do the same magic in Hausaland, and take us beyond the market criticism, then the more the merrier!

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We began with twin precepts of literary criticism: the *moral worth* of literature and the nature of its *relationship with reality*. The novelist, in whatever social circumstances, is an interpreter of the society. The Hausa society has had to rely for years on classical works to provide an interpretation of a society no longer in tune with current social realities. And yes, Bala Anas Babinlata's *Zinaru* is far more relevant in analyzing today's problems than *Shehu Umar*. If the novelist is seen as moral interpreter of the society, then he must operate within his natural medium, unhampered by cloying and suffocating classicist paradigmatic shackles. If we have to have literary moral guardians, then we need to know the degree of *their* morality, as well the *criteria* for their appointment.

For the Hausa contemporary novelist, it is the 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 premium placed on materialism characteristic of the current society. Exposing these realities in a narrative form and making them available to the victims, 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.

Of Runaway Brides and Commercial Libraries

And yes, I am aware of the numerous phone calls Ado Ahmad receives regularly from distraught girls pouring out stories of sorrow about their marriages (the scripts of which could easily form the basis of a series of stories). But wait a minute. These girls have access to *phones*, which reveals something about their social status. They are entrapped in miserable and unhappy relationships, which reveals something about their parents. They *read* Ado Ahmad (and others) and suddenly they see salvation of a sort, which reveals something about their *need* for information. For Ado Ahmad and others write so sensitively that these victims feel that only the authors can *understand*

them: that is why they turn to them. Have we considered the alternatives for those who have no access to Ado Ahmad as social interpreter to drive home the misery in their lives? Have we considered what happens to those who run away from miserable matrimonial homes — right into the arms of a *magajiya* or a local neighborhood pimp? So is Ado Ahmad committing a crime by providing a medium through which these girls are counseled, rehabilitated and an agreement reached with their parents? SAP and Abachanomics? Bah! That is the concern for adults with jobs, kids, homes, mortgages and lemony cars.

A final fall-out of the Hausa novel is that it stimulates *reading culture* — a process through which youth are now focusing their attention in learning things from the books; in other words, gaining incidental education: that is my forte, and that gave me the right to comment on the trend. Right now in Kano I know of three, what I call *Commercial Libraries* (more information on this in future) where kids (and youth) pay a fee of five Naira to borrow a book, read it and return it, pay for another and so on. Who says it is only *soyayya* books they borrow? These Commercial Libraries contain books on all subjects — thus giving some the opportunity to do their homework with books not available in their school libraries. The fact is that Hausa novelists in Kano have provided a facility through which youth can acquire love for books and reading; certainly a primary objective for any literate society. We hope there would be more of these Commercial Libraries that will help to turn away kids from drugs, crimes, juvenile delinquency, gangism and destructive idleness.

By the way, I was also critical of the corrosive intrusion of Kallywood into literary activities in Kano, as was made clear in my original essay. If, in ten years' time, Kallywood stifled the contemporary Hausa novel (regular usage, not Yusuf Adamu's!), then I and my protagonist friends (demented, but comfortable, capitalists that they are!) will be shedding tears — of sadness, not joy — at the remaining 390 years of literary success of Kano chapbooks that have been eroded.

Incidentally, there is a proposed *Conference on Hausa Literature in the New Millennium* (proposed by lay experts with varying degrees of irrelevancy), as well as an *International Conference on Hausa People and Culture* (proposed by proper experts with relevant degrees!) which will provide a neat arena for antagonist *Undertakers* to slug it out with protagonist *Ultimate Warriors*! Meet you all there!

Abdalla Uba Adamu
Department of Education
Bayero University Kano
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