

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Humanities As Curative Prognosis for the Nigerian State: Culture and Communication, Literature, Theatre, Dance and Film*

Author: Olu Obafemi

Publishers: Etchwise Consulting Limited

Pages: 338

Reviewer: Gbemisola Adeoti

Quite a lot has been written by, and on Olu Obafemi as a scholar, critic and culture administrator. However, he has been mostly celebrated as a creative writer who occupies a notable space in the clan of African letters. He represents the essential spirits of second generation of Nigerian playwrights alongside Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Esiaba Irobi, Tess Onwueme, and Tunde Fatunde among others. He is identified, like his colleagues, with a radical theatrical aesthetics that is inspired by the need for revolutionary socio-political changes in the nation. Obafemi's plays (*Nights of a Mystical Beast*, *The New Dawn*, *Suicide Syndrome*, *Naira has no Gender*, *Dark Times are Over?* and *Ogidi Mandate* attest his belief in human capacity to mend a world that is fiercely fragmented by violence, oppression, war, terrorism and inequality (of race, religion, gender and class). To him, in Humanities lies the hand that can straighten the crooked legs of postcolonial Nigeria in its descent into disorder. In creative writings especially the plays, he offers clear hope about Nigeria overcoming its rating as a third world nation in a dark continent. This overarching objective finds a more resonant articulation in his new book: *Humanities As Curative Prognosis for the Nigerian State: Culture and Communication, Literature, Theatre, Dance and Film*.

In each of the book's eleven chapters, Obafemi reflects on arts, culture and national development. He also considers cultural productions like theatre, film and literature, with due attention to the challenges of daily social life as projected by the artiste who is widely regarded as an avatar; a path finder in the dense forests of contemporary political economy. The book is a product of public lectures, keynote addresses, commissioned papers and tributes carefully selected out of a wide array of his thought provoking and sometimes

provocative interventions in public discourse. They were presented at local and international fora. From available indications, these public discourses were well received by their respective audiences, comprising academics, creative writers, bureaucrats, security experts, members of royalty and traditional institutions, professional associations, culture enthusiasts and development experts. The essence of the book, therefore, is to make the lectures available to a wider audience beyond the audience of the primary platform that inspired each lecture.

Though the themes addressed in each chapter vary, there is an organic link that runs through them, as evident in the author's radical perspectives and innovative diagnosis offered on issues in discourse. He writes with candour of a participant observer or first-hand witness in matters of Nigerian literature, culture, politics and education. From chapter to chapter, he reflects on the daunting tasks before African writers and Humanities scholars as purveyors of change that Africa needs to change its fate from that of perpetual margin dwelling and spectatorship to that of central player to be reckoned with in the new global order.

Humanities as Curative Prognosis for the Nigerian State reminds us of Wole Soyinka's *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Achebe's *Morning yet on Creation Day*, Femi Osofisan's *Literature and the Pressure of Freedom* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Globalectics* among other collections of essays by African writers. Each essay bears a mark of scholarly introspection, couched in a language style that is free of theoretical befuddling.

Among vexing matters addressed in the book is the role of Humanities in a developing nation. Humanities disciplines suffer much marginalisation in the nation's academy, compared to other branches of knowledge like science, technology and management sciences. This discrimination is brazenly registered in the government's admission policy, fund allocation, staff recruitment and overall condescending attitude by the general public against Humanities. However, at every opportunity, Obafemi affirms the infinite capacities of Humanities to contribute to national rediscovery and recovery. He also writes in defense of the arts and culture industry as humanistic disciplines, in a manner reminiscent of Philip Sidney, the Elizabethan poet and his much celebrated work, "The Defense Poesy". Like Sidney, he believes that Humanities open up several vistas of the human mind and generate actions that can "rouse humanity to virtue". To him, arts and other

cultural productions are tools for human development. This is the kernel of his submission in most of the chapters of the book, especially from the first to the fifth chapter: “Language and Literature for National Development in the New Age”, “Effective and Functional Skills”, “Nigeria, A Postcolonial State at the Fringes: Humanities to the Rescue?”, “Humanities, Governance and National Development”, and “Politics of Theatre and the Theatre of Politics in Nigeria”.

Obafemi stresses the importance of language as a Humanistic discipline and as a cultural product for communication. In this regard, language is seen as a catalyst of national cohesion, national integration and national development. Literature (oral or written) is one of the products of language; yet, both are inextricably linked in representing and shaping human realities. They are vital in the search for positive transformation in people's lives as well as their habits and ways of getting things done. No nation can ignore them without untoward consequences. The author, therefore, advocates for a greater valuation of these tools of advancing human civilisation. Competent and effective usage of English language, which has remained the official language of communication in official circles since the inception of colonialism in Nigeria, is crucial to this objective as he argues in Chapter two. In the face of unending postcolonial anomy, Obafemi stands on Humanities with unbending belief about their potentials to save a sinking nation from its life-threatening turbulence. That is why they are reiterated in the fourth chapter as strong corner stone in nation building. They should lead the way in the search for “societal recuperation, social rescue and curative prognosis” (95) so that the nation can be freed from the “stranglehold of its comatose neocolonial social economy” (96). He demonstrates how such humanistic engagements like theatre, film, literature, music and dance can address political aspiration of the people and strengthen their economic base. According to him, “Humanities must be the leading light of idea generation for societal advance” (119). Through their devotion to critical reasoning, debate and idea evaluation, Humanities are held aloft as “the best honer, sharper and nourisher of democracy in the world”.

Central to his concern is the question: “What is the place and role of Humanities in the whole process of resuscitating the African and Nigerian project from its present location at the edge of the precipice”? (123). He stresses the position further in Chapter 5 “Politics of the Theatre and the Theatre of Politics in Nigeria”. The essay offers a dialectical interrogation of

the intersections of theatre and social landscape. Both theatre and politics are shown to be united in their veneration of binaries of “illusion and reality”. From the stage of scripting to the stage of staging, Obafemi argues that theatre engages politics as subject just as the realm of politics also make do with a lot of theatricals – conflict, conflict resolution, resources management, plot and plans of events, action, persuasion and suspense. No reader is left in doubt about the symbiotic relationship between the state and the stage. This is amply illustrated with indigenous performance traditions like *Ajon* festival of the Kiri land, *Okura* ensemble of the Okun people, *Gelede* and *Etiyeri* performance among the Oyo people. The trajectory of political theatre is identified from the traditional beginning to the folk theatre of Hubert Ogunde and other pioneers of the travelling theatre to the literary drama of James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, and Ola Rotimi who are classified as dramatists of the first generation. They are followed by dramatists of the second generation whose works nurture a dramaturgy that offers the society a weapon for combating evils of an exploitative and oppressive political system.

Though an area where he confesses to have the least competence, the author's treatise on the dance art in Chapter six is as perceptive as other essays on dramatic aesthetics and criticism. What he lacks in dancing skills, he makes up for it in his informed exposition on dance as an art and its fate in the curriculum of theatre education in Nigeria. According to Obafemi, dance incorporates social and metaphysical realities with curative and therapeutic purposes. It is a kinetic mode of communication that represents human values, cultural beliefs and worldviews. Unfortunately, it is yet to be accorded its rightful place in the academia like its cousins- drama and music. He, therefore, proffers solutions to the marginality of dance in arts education, cultural policy and national development.

Like the dance art in search of its rightful place in social space, traditional royal institution is also in search of constitutional recognition and appropriate roles in contemporary governance. Whereas, traditional rulers enjoyed some recognition and prestige in the pre-colonial and colonial era, the institution suffers a gradual reversal of fortune from the moment of the military's incursion into politics as its uncentric notion of power undermines civil authority represented by traditional rulers. The recognition that royalty has during the colonial era up to the independence period and later, second republic, has been withdrawn by the 1999 constitution. Obafemi submits that

culture is a viable agent of social change and traditional rulers as the repository of culture, should be part of the process of political redemption, that will widen the democratic space and strengthen people's participation in governance.

The same tone of lamentation of marginality runs through the last chapter on Museums and Monuments in Nigeria. In other climes, Museums as domains of cultural heritage are valued for their vital role in preservation of memory in humanity's march from savagery to civilisation. They are also revenue mobilisers and boosters of national economy, even though they are non-profit making organisations. Indeed, museums connect the past with the present for the benefit of the future through their assemblage of cultural objects and artifacts of enduring historical values (315). As Chairman of the Governing Board of the National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Obafemi highlights various challenges facing the institution from its inception during the colonial era. These include illegal dealings in artifacts by European felons and their native collaborators, inadequate security for museum holdings, poor and inconsistent implementation of policies guiding museum establishments, and poor funding which makes acquiring new objects and equipment a herculean task. The Commission also contends regularly with inadequate staffing and lack of incentives for available hands.

However, in this and other chapters, Obafemi is not content with identifying problems. Rather, he prescribes practicable solutions. For instance, in order to sustain literary creativity in Northern Nigeria, he recommends that Writers' Associations in partnership with government establishments, individuals and corporate organisations should collaborate to institute literary competitions and literary prizes covering all genres in English and indigenous languages. Public reading of award winning writings should be organised to sensitise the public about them. Writing fellowships and workshops should be organised to train and motivate new talents. He also advocates for improvement in the conditions of libraries and subsidy for publications.

By far the longest chapter in the book, Chapter nine is a tribute to Professor Femi Osofisan written by Obafemi to mark the 70th birthday of his friend and soul mate in muse whom he describes as “the oracle of words and the Alchemist of Cognition” (288). The tribute is entitled “Traumas and Curative Metaphors: The many paths of Osofisan's Journey”. He describes Osofisan's

radical intervention in Nigerian theatre through his culturally informed dramatic aesthetics as “theatre of illumination, enlightenment and commitment”. In his words, “Osofisan is the most persistent, indeed consistent, among African writers, ... in devoting a substantial part of his life and work to reflecting, pondering and refracting on the power of deprivation, anarchy, chaos, violence and dystopia, and indeed, traumatizing experiences to produce qualitative literature” (247). With over 50 plays, Osofisan is adjudged to be the most prolific dramatist among the second generation of Nigerian dramatists who has found an alternative voice for representing the plight of the ordinary people.

By the nature of their origin in the context of performance in public space, there is a discernible performative structure that runs through each essay. It begins with a preamble that introduces the subject of the public discourse, the occasion of delivery, the organisers, historical and literary background to the subject, the current state of discourse, as well as Obafemi's original contributions to the issue through research and analysis. These are followed by diagnosis of problems and recommendation of solutions where appropriate. In the end, the readers are left enriched with more information than they had at their disposal before encountering the text.

Because of the tenacity of his conviction as expressed from forum to forum, there is bound to be repetition and truly, ideas are repeated in Chapters three and four. Besides, the discourse in Chapter nine, tribute to Femi Osofisan, moves in a concentric circle, between passionate tribute to a friend and critical interrogation of his literary creations, in a manner that strains smooth sequence.

On the whole, Obafemi's constant position is that of a patriot who is irritated by the absurdity of a nation with vast potentials but feeble steps towards their realisation. Notwithstanding the setback, he clearly articulates his high hopes that the dark cloud of dictatorship, oppression, exploitation, banditry, corruption, nepotism, religious and ethnic hostilities will one day soon vaporise from the African skies. To him, they are man-made problems that warrant practical human solutions.

The book, therefore, holds important data for scholars of different fields who are interrogating the predicament of Nigeria as a post colony. Culture workers, functionaries of royal institutions, practicing artistes who adopt the

stage and the screen, managers of arts education and politicians will find the book useful. However, other general readers who take more than passing interests in Humanities, culture and their modes of representation will find keen affirmation of their indispensability to national rebirth. The chapters are full of workable ideas on how to wake up a sleeping giant from his long slumber so that he can set forth at dawn towards the direction of new possibilities.

Title of Book:	<i>We're Fish</i>
Genre:	Poetry
Author:	Ahmed Maiwada
Publishers:	Image Books
Place of Publication:	Yaba, Lagos
Date of Publication:	2017
Pages:	i-vi + 78
ISBN:	978 978 952 122 7
Reviewer:	David Ekanem Udoinwang, PhD

In contemporary age where humanity is being tossed by the winds of power hegemony, socio-economic and political fragmented along prejudiced divides, pushed to the fringes and assailed by the threats of self-inflicted extinction, the undeclared war between the weak and the powerful has continued to rage on. The pursuit of knowledge, wealth and power continues ironically to push the wheel of invention and ambition to the edge of ecological anarchy, and writers conscious of the drift continue to bring their artistic energy and creative vision to bear on the dangers that humanity daily live by. Environmental writers and activists, eco-centric scholars and critics in the multidisciplinary arena have deployed various means at their disposals to engage with the multifarious dangers posed by the toxic activities of man towards fellow man, and towards the environment, in the bids to re-create a consciousness of the common embryogenesis or common source that ties all life to a common destiny and shared fate. The concerns for global harmoniousness and survival of life on the planet Earth inform the recurrent eco-centric themes in the bulk of environmental narratives of the postmodern universe. Ahmed Maiwada's poetry in *We're Fish* draws on the dialectic of universal connection of all things to celebrate the heritage of our common humanity, and by so doing explores the paradoxical footages of human progress and development. *We're Fish* is one book that is likely to hold any lover of poetry that stumbles upon it in suspense until the last line is read.