

LARGER THAN HIS FRAME II



Further Critical Studies and Reflections on
Olu Obafemi

Edited by:
Duro Oni
Sunday Enesi Ododo

IMAGINING OBAFEMI'S RUNNING DREAMS AS WORLD LITERATURE

By
Foluke Aliyu-Ibrahim, Ph.D

Introduction

Categorization is a normal human activity arising from the act of organising and this is done to aid understanding of that which is being compartmentalized. The construct African Literature is one of such acts of categorization. However, this does not imply an understanding or even, for that matter, general acceptance of the term African Literature. Another term that has become controversial is 'world literature' which attempts to blur the lines between regional/national categorisations. Our purpose in this chapter is to examine Olu Obafemi's *Running Dreams* with the view of determining the playwright's stance in the controversy generated by the terms African literature and world literature.

African Literature – The controversy

The nature of African Literature and what it constitutes has long generated controversy in literary circles. In a speech delivered to the 1962 gathering of writers in Makerere, Uganda, Chinua Achebe (1997) laments the failure of that gathering to give a definition of African literature. However, he makes an attempt when he she proffered that, "You cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition. I do not see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units – in fact the sum total of all the *national* and *ethnic* literatures of Africa" (56). Achebe insists that the complexities of Africa must be taken into consideration in any such definition. Vincent Mudimbe (2007) calls for an urgent investigation into the existence of African literature. However, according to him, arriving at the nature of African literature in relation to other literatures without thinking of it as a poor imitation of non-distinct ideas from the West would be difficult. He avers that only new ways of interpreting such a body of literature can do this as both traditional methods of literary criticism such as structuralism and deconstruction and even Afrocentric perspectives have failed to define the nature of African literature.

Arguing for the perspective of literature as universal, Taiye Selasi (2013) insists that the category African Literature does not exist. The writer sees the term as a disregard of the complexities of African cultures and of the creativity of its authors. Categorizing literature based on racial distinction, she insists, is outdated (53). Rather than using the writer to categorize the work, Selasi suggests that the work be employed to classify literature. This, she adds, would restore attention to the intention of the author (56).

Selasi seems to contradict herself in places. For instance, while insisting that the only way to define African literature is to overlook its complexities (of cultures), she, in the same breadth hinges her conclusion of the non-existence of African literature on the fact that it disregards these same complexities. Again, her insistence of a raceless categorization, while being commendable, is also rather utopian, idealistic and, thus, unrealistic. Race has been and continues to be a topical issue in the world; no doubt, this will ensure that regional literatures do not die. Recent events in every aspect of human life all over the world – from politics to sports – attest to this. Importantly also, her suggestion seems to place subject matter over form.

In addressing this issue of form, Achebe (1997) offers that “I have indicted somewhat offhandedly that the national literature of Nigeria and many other countries of Africa is, or will be, English” and then goes on to justify reasons for his supposition. This emphasis on language continues with Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2005) who, while commenting on the same Makerere conference, condemns this “unassailable position of English in our literature” (147). However, this is not to say other aspects of form have not been discussed. A quick example would be Negritude, which focused on the presentation of images of blackness. Nonetheless, not much discussion exists on other aspects of form especially as it relates to drama and the discourse on definition, nature, existence and non-existence of African literature.

World Literature

A simple definition of world literature would be writings from across the world; world literature gives a picture of a specific region at a specific time. However, the concept of World Literature originally refers to the international circulation of literature to the world (Eckermann, 1835/1994). The borders of national literature are broadened and such imaginative writings become available outside the shores of their countries of origin to readers in other parts of the world. Naturally, this results from globalization and from the emergence of new technologies that aid information transfer and interactions. For a work to be termed world literature, it should be available to a wider audience through translation into languages other

than the original language in which it was produced; Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for instance may be categorised as world literature because of the translations into several other languages. This chapter is using this definition to read the possibilities inherent in Olu Obafemi's *Running Dreams* as world literature.

World literature is more about circulation and reception. Generally, translation is considered the major tool of the accessibility of literary works to readers outside national borders. According to David Damrosch (2003), a work that is considered as world literature gains in translation, although he also takes as world literature works that can circulate in their original language. Consequently, when a text is successfully translated or goes beyond the borders of its culture of origin, its culture and language interact, across time and space, with those of the receiving culture(s). This enables shared knowledge that improves the dialogue and interactions between cultures and enables the understanding of other societies' points of view (i.e. the point of view of the culture of the original text) with the aim of a proper understanding of the values, philosophies and struggles of the receiving society. This becomes useful when the discourse is on how works from poor countries (minority areas politically and economically) may be made available to societies that are considered politically and economically empowered.

In summarising Damrosch's *What is World Literature*, Heather O'Dea (n.d.) observes that Damrosch develops three points concerning world literature and translation. The first is that the focus of a literary work is two-pronged – one is located in the original country, the other is in the host country. This ensures an on-going dialogue between the two cultures. The second point is lined to the difficulty of translating literary texts; some lose their meanings when translated; however, world literature, according to Damrosch is gains in translation and becomes open to a wider audience. The last point is that texts considered as world literature should be considered more as ways of connecting to cultures and times other than ours, rather than as a set of canon of texts.

The disadvantage of translation has been mentioned by critics of world literature such as Gayatri Spivak (2003). Spivak is of the view that world literature threatens the culture and language of the original texts. The critic then stresses the concern for the diversity of cultures and languages in the study of world literature. Emily Apter (2013) fears that world literature will institutionalise a monoculture; the developed world would appropriate and drive into extinction the literary traditions of developing countries. Echoing Spivak's concern about the homogenising nature of world literature, Apter insists that in translation, there are bound to be the untranslatability of certain ideas; that is, there those things that serve as barriers in

translation which according to her include language and culture. She also insists that these could mar understanding of the translated text. However, Apter sees these barriers in translations as agents against the colonising nature of world literature.

As noted by Gregory Jusdanis (2013), Apter (2013) calls attention to the pitfalls evident in translating ideas from one language to another. However, one point that Jusdanis raises against Apter seems worthy of mention. This point is that critics of world literature like Apter (2013) who celebrate difference and diversity of literary traditions fail "to describe how these traditions could communicate with one another" (81), more so in a world that is increasingly shrinking as a result of technology. Jusdanis contends that most critics in the discourse on world literature deify difference and thus block from discussion other possibilities. That there are diversities cannot be contested but "there are common elements shared by human beings... which permit their social and cultural interactions" (Jusdanis, 2013: 81). Consider his words:

But we would like to know how the scholar of Chinese art could talk with the Nigerian counterpart? What language are they going to use? How will they understand each other's concepts? In short, we need to think about our relationship with the Other beyond asserting the gaps between us yet another time... today's criticism has exhausted itself, having reached the boundaries of its development, still waving the banners of incommensurability and difference, still searching for a purpose. We require manifestoes for change. We need something new. (83-84)

The second of the two approaches Jusdanis proposes towards a movement forward after the recognition of the disparities in human communication is of interest here. This is the adoption of the theory of anthropophagy by Oswald de Andrade which is opposed to the tendencies of postcolonial nations in their interactions with the West through nationalist isolation or through traditional emulation (83). Rather what he advocates is "the assimilation of Otherness through a system of symbolic ingestion" (83). He explains further:

It urges that people incorporate the Other creatively into their identity, to make it part of their self fashioning. It proposes the critical devouring of global cultural heritage, as a "dialogic movement of difference." In other words, it assumes difference without worshipping at its altar. (pp. 83-84)

Jusdanis in his proposal advises postcolonial nations to adopt de Andrade's theory of anthropophagy; in other words, this theory is to be used by those from developing nations as a coping strategy against the threats identified by the concept,

world literature. While not discountenancing these threats that confront developing nations with the evolution of world literature, the question must be asked, 'How safe are the cultures and languages of the developed world themselves from the threats identified with the advent of world literature?' As Jusdanis avers in the first approach he proposes, "The more contact we have with each other, the more we risk our own physical existence" (82).

Running Dreams is a play text written in English but by a man from a postcolonial, developing nation. Our intention is to examine the cultural and linguistic features of *Running Dreams* so that translation into languages from different nations, whether developed or developing, would be easier and thus make the plat text accessible to a wider audience and consequently be categorised as world literature.

Imagining *Running Dreams* as world literature

Theme

One feature of Obafemi's *Running Dreams* (2015; subsequent page references refer to this edition) that would make it easily translatable across cultures is the pre-text for the play. The economic oppression of countries of the developing countries of the Third world by the Western world through their institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank forms the background for events in the play. Indeed, the playwright lends more credence to his art by borrowing, extensively, the ideas that are contained in Perkins' *Confessions of an Economic Hit man* (2005). According to the author, Perkins' book which Obafemi refers to as "rebellious" (5) assisted in characterization and dramatic narrative. This constant tension caused primarily by economic reasons between the developing and developed worlds is material that could be easily translated into other cultures. It has been an unresolved tension since the meeting of the nations that make up both civilisations. This tension is graphically represented in Yohanna, the main character who as a Nigerian educated in the West, becomes a product of both worlds. The psychological conflict he experiences as dream sequences in the play is symbolic of the conflict between the developing and the developed nations.

Perkin's book also enables the relocation of the Marxist leaning of the playwright which is quite evident in his earlier works. Works of his published before *Running Dreams* such as *Suicide Syndrome* (1993), *Naira has no Gender* (1993), and *Wheels* (1997) advocate alternatives to capitalism such as socialism and communism. However, with the breakup of the USSR in 1989, these alternatives are no longer tenable. With the issue discussed in *Running Dreams*, Obafemi is still able to discuss and criticize the capitalist system without necessarily having to advance alternatives. What the play text demands is rather a change in attitude in both

integral to action, but these could also be dispensed with without jeopardizing meaning. In the first of these instances, i.e. the Prologue (11), the scene is a universal one which depicts a scene of politicians campaigning for votes. Here the notes say 'songs accompany politicians'; no specific songs are indicated and so this aspect could be removed in translation. The second instance (15) also occurs with the arrival of the ghosts of politicians of the First Republic of Nigeria's history, namely Obafemi Awolowo; Ahmadu Bello; Aminu Kano and Nnamdi Azikiwe dressed as masquerades. This part of the scene, where 'masquerades emerge wearing the figure of' (15) each of the politicians mentioned may be dispensed with in translation. In the third instance, music and songs are used to create setting (the Incas festivity rites) and mood. This also may be dispensed with in translation as it will not affect meaning. What is important here is to establish that the Incas setting and this can be realized in Yohanna's monologue and the subsequent dialogue he has with Roludo who is the ghost of Jaime Roldos Aguilera of Ecuador.

Use of Language

The language used in *Running Dreams* is significantly less complicated than in earlier works of Obafemi. Thus, the use of pidgin, the mixture of English with other (Nigerian) languages or the use of proverbs that suffuse some of his earlier works which could have made translation of *Running dreams* difficult are minimised. Meanings are provided in several ways in the few instances where these occur in the play text. The translations of the words "talakawa" (16); "Jami'iyyar" (15), "Ayanmo" (20); "gbomogbomo" (22) are immediately provided by the playwright in the dialogues wherein they occur. The translations of the expressions "Rankadede" (18); "Ekabo" (20); and "Nna yi, kedu" (24) although not provided, can be gleaned from the context as greetings. Other expressions such as "Allah sarki" (18) and "O kare" (22) which not translated and are mere expressions of sympathy and sarcasm respectively, are not crucial to meaning in the play text.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Running Dreams* has shown that the culture and language used by Obafemi in *Running Dreams* will not constitute impediments to translation. The reason for this has been adduced to the subject matter and to the dramatic technique of employed. The subject matter is informed by a theme common to our world, that the developed world is culpable in the under-development of nations in the African, South American and Middle East regions of the world. Expressionism, the major technique deployed in the play text is based on a universal activity. In addition, the playwright's use of language has been identified as devoid of features that could make translation difficult. These make the text amenable not only to translation into other cultures and languages but could also ease the understanding

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