
Ideology and Radical Dimension of Olu Obafemi's Wheels

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Introduction

The core of Obafemi's revolutionary vision is premised on Marxists' perception of society in terms of class structure. Revolutionary vision is a perception of life which aims at changing a prevailing situation and which presents an artistic work for the purpose of achieving the changes envisioned. The notion of revolutionary vision pre-supposes that a particular condition needs a change. In this context, vision refers to "the ability to clearly discern the pathway through the chaos of social malaise to a better life for society" (Bamikunle 103). The revolutionary vision of Obafemi's *Wheels* shares broadly the idea of the radical groups of the 1980s. Their idea of radicalism leads to a focus on governance and the deprivations that it visited on the masses, which Obafemi's radical vision hoped to change through art. This paper is an exploration into the ideology and radical dimension of Olu Obafemi's *Wheels*.

Transformational Vision in Olu Obafemi's *Wheels*

Wheels (1997) provides insight into Obafemi's ideological leaning. His interpretation of the society is based on the postulation of Karl Marx's perception of society in terms of class stratification. The novel aspires to "remould a more humane society from amidst the twisted inheritance of misplaced and misused power, the ruthless power of the gun and even more the callous power of cash" (Osofisan 2). The infusion of revolutionary ideas and ideals energized the novel by effecting a radical alternative in both its concept and practice. The condemnation of injustice and man's bestiality towards his fellow men is revealed through an ideological juxtaposition of families, the exposure of the suffering of the down-trodden and the opulence of the bourgeois. *Wheels* espouses radical vision about the economic and material conditions of contemporary Nigeria society to show that the masses are impoverished and stratified amidst plenty. The writer's radicalization of consciousness is linked up with the post civil war experience and its attendant social, economic and political dislocation. The wastage of the wealth accruing from the oil boom and the resultant moral atrophy that permeated all strata of society was an open invitation to a literature that is unabashedly revolutionary in an ideological sense

Right from the onset, Obafemi pitches tent with the oppressed

masses by employing literature for utilitarian value. Leiva in Akuso emphasizes the role of art when he asserts that:

Art cannot be abstract. It must carry a message, must be utilitarian and actual and human, must create an immediate reality, the inevitable fusion of which is action. Any art without human content, without a message, has for me the value of a white sheet of paper that no one can read. Poetry is a weapon. The poets of our era ought to employ it not only for defence but also for attack (2).

Leiva's assertion captures aptly the revolutionary vision of Obafemi's art. As a postcolonial novelist, his novel is a potent instrument against oppression as well as a medium for articulating ideological struggle. *Wheels* is not only concerned with social injustice and flawed nationalism, but also with a broad ideological issue of nation-building. One significant theme that permeates the novel, which positions itself as a dissident voice, is that it provides a platform for those classes of people excluded from mainstream politics to think about the question of power.

Evidently, *Wheels* provide an imaginative space for debating issue of politics and governance. The novel also acts as a site for integration, of re-constituting wholeness for those dislocated by authority, and a site of redemption, of change and national longing for a society where human value reigns- a community where good governance becomes the axial of national politics. The pursuit of power as an end in itself predominates the thematic focus of postcolonial novels. Central to the pursuit of power is the struggle to control the state and the spoils that come with it. The postcolonial states in Africa are a class organization whose function is to mobilize its various institutional arms for political gain. There were restricted opportunities for capital accumulation under foreign domination, then, those who inherited the levers of the state power first consolidate their rule and then moved to transform their political power into economic wealth. Since the control of state power is the gate way to riches, it is understandable why politics rather than economic arena become one of the most contested spaces in Nigeria.

Protest through the medium of art and idea-provoking satire is the core of Obafemi's *Wheels*. Politics and societal issues constitute the basis of his creative literature. His novel is directed at a return to fundamental humanism that has been dislocated through socio-political corruption. Obafemi is an embodiment of the vision of his own time. He believes that his novel will have a therapeutic effect which will not only transform the

people's way of thinking and perceiving, but also will mobilize them to participate in revolution. Rather than painting the historical past in a way that does nothing to solve the present neocolonial problems, Obafemi's *Wheels* seeks a massive, society involved solutions towards the hydra-headed problems besetting Nigeria. The novel aims at conscientizing the ordinary people who will rise to break the chains of oppression and exploitation with which the oppressive capitalists have tied them. As a revolutionary artist, Obafemi seeks to pursue the enlightenment of the masses about the causes of their poverty so as to liberate them from the tenacious believe in heaven made inequality syndrome in which they are trapped. This process of conscientization must come first before people can rise to fight for their rights.

For this reason, *Wheels* shows the plight of Nigerians in their transition from rich to abjection, from boom to doom, and from tranquility to criminal violence (Omoniyi 2008). The novel portrays the neo-colonial capitalist order in contemporary Nigerian society and its attendant social decadence and rot in the body-polity. The novel emphasizes physical and mental mass struggle as the potent instrument of liberation against socio-economic and political woes bedeviling Nigeria since 1960s. The overwhelming pre-occupation of Obafemi's fiction is condemnation of injustice, corruption, exploitation, maladministration, poverty, oppression, obsession of power, stealing, hunger and similar other forms of social vices that have dominated the postcolonial African nations. The novel, thus, reveals what the critical mind needs to win in order to experience a genuine spiritual regeneration in an increasingly morally degenerated society.

More so, the concern for revolution and the place of art in revolution becomes the thematic preoccupation of Obafemi's literary iconoclast. In his interview with Dare, Obafemi states that:

I started writing as a response to the existence of injustice in the society When I find people being unjustly treated. I see the ultimate search for justice as a result of my theoretical exposure as opposed to the capitalist mode of existence; prey-predator system which is a legacy of colonial system at independence. So my reference is for creative vision that is collective. (51)

His words reflect his dedication to the elimination of oppression. In his effort to construct a society that exposes the pathetic circumstances of the masses, Obafemi weaves together opposing situations and characters. His novel employs contrast as a narrative mode. *Wheels* (1997) is set in the post

civil war era. This period was characterized by joblessness, poverty, total disregard for vital public infrastructure and flagrant disregard for ethical conduct. The text mirrors the social, political and economic problems in Nigeria. As a moral fable, the thrust of the novel is social imbalances, inequality and the bitterness that emerged from various negative situations. Through two narrators: Musa Sonja and his son, Kofo Ebaji, the novel attacks the capitalist economic formation which produces an inhuman society that condemns the masses to perpetual dehumanization and repression. The hopelessness of the reality that stares Sonja in the face is impressed upon the readers by the perpetuity of the state of repression and oppression which he and others like him operates in (Oyebanji 2000). The exploitation that is being precipitated by the privileged class in the society is poignantly exposed.

From the two narrators who represent the past and the present generations, Obafemi exposes the exploitative attitude of the wealthy class represented by retired army generals and their collaborators. The small community of Giro is engulfed in social chaos, disintegration and disharmony. Wheels reveals the attitude of the affluent and privileged few and laments the squalor and high degree of poverty among the masses. The social chaos in society is of grave concern to Obafemi as he narrates the experience of Sonja. The narrator recalls how the colonels and generals issued order in the comfort of their hotels while the ordinary soldiers face the enemies' fire. Sonja recalls that:

As we protected them with our skins, they stayed in their furnished hotels, sometimes fighting the war on the maps in the midst of red wines and in the company of fat assed girls. They drink all the brandies and whiskies and the champagnes available in the hotels. As we died in our hundreds, and thousands they increased their own salaries with the money saved from our death. (26)

This narration epitomizes Obafemi's shocked reaction to the evils of Nigerian civil war. It reveals the novelist's aspersion of a society which fails to acknowledge the need for equity and social justice, a criticism against the society where those who thrive are clearly those who lack conscience. His anger seems to be directed not only against depraved leaders but also against the colonial heritage whose neo-colonial culture represents a suppression of truth. The task that Obafemi explicitly sets himself in *Wheels* as seen from Sonja's experience has much in common with that of the radical historian: to expose the ideological bias of bourgeois historiography,

and by adopting the perspective of the exploited majority, to reveal the class interests that are the motive force of history (Chreachain 1996). Nwachukwu Agada cited in Ogède strongly affirms thus:

The anger of the post-war Nigerian poet stems not only from the failure of the elite but also from the negative correlates of the civil war, the oil wealth euphoria, the ideology of capitalistic economic formation tyranny and oppression, corruption, suffering and persecution, ineffective public utility network, military intervention and military leadership the new but crude cut-throat values of excessive materialism, pagan opulence and competition, armed robbery, ignorance. (63)

The war provides an avenue for Obafemi to examine class interest which he regards as the real motive force of Nigerian history. For Obafemi, the army is the society microcosm, and the generals are just one group in a long list of exploiters, which also includes the politicians and businessmen (Chreachain 1996). The dichotomy seen in the lives of the officers for whom the benefits of the war accrue unjustly and those who suffer deprivation is clearly brought into focus Obafemi is preoccupied with the contemporary socio-political reality in Nigeria and the question of power. The world of the novel is a polemical site for reasons for action and inaction in the heart of a deeply diseased society (Badejo 2009). This narrative text chronicles the spate of violence in Nigeria and its attendant disequilibrium in the quest for sustainable governance. The question of power is thus, the very core of the plot of this novel. According to Joseph:

Power is used to amass fortunes and to protect the hoard from the envious and prying eyes and hands of ill-disposed opponents, to create access to property in the midst of pervasive poverty and propertylessness, to establish oases of wealth and opulence in a desert of squalor and destitution, to make accessible consumer durables and exotic foods in lands where the masses cannot afford three meals of basic foodstuff. (6)

The depiction of misused power and failed leadership induces an ideological desire to question the essence of political power and its deployment. Fundamentally, Obafemi expresses the disappointment of ordinary people with the leadership style of ruling. The postcolonial Nigeria

becomes more enervating as the political space appears turbulent and unbearable to the people. The masses are at the mercy of tyrant leaders. The ruling class becomes corrupt and it seems nothing is working. When the oil boom came, the politicians enriched themselves with much money that was meant for the country at the detriment of the masses wants, penury and hunger. Ogude asserts that:

Behind this façade of regime and nation-building was the naked spectre of crude accumulation of wealth by a class that had inherited a state whose chief function was to serve its class interests; a class whose rhetoric was nation building while the idea of the nation was sold to the rest of the populace as a 'cake' or a bull buffalo as Okot p'Bitek would have it. All responsible citizens and communities had to sharpen their knives in order to partake of this cake.
(5)

Ogude affirms that primitive accumulation of wealth devastates the nation's economy and gives a vivid image of the oppressors as callous. The aggravated corruption drastically hinders the ideal of mutual co-existence. The problems of hatred, hostility, oppression are apparent between the parties involved in conflict such that Kofo, a young child could clearly explain the horrible situation of Giroland, a metaphor for Nigeria and puts things bluntly, "we are young, but we are neither blind nor dumb to the realities of life, for bad condition never favours beauty, our town is not as peaceful as it can be" (p. 162). The outburst comes during a meeting called to intimate the Giro people with the white man's willingness to "turn out fertile land into an inexhaustible harvest of crops- rice, millet, maize and so on" (p. 107). Pa Garuba who seems to be the people's mouthpiece declares:

Some of us are ready to fight to protect the land of our fathers. It is the only thing we have left (108).

This assertion seeks to address the emotional trauma, psychological distress and socio-economic adversity of the under privileged. The narration serves a useful political purpose that draws the attention to the inherent revolutionary instinct of the masses. The critical posture is based on a prescriptive theory of change through violence as a powerful force in society. This is true of revolutionary thinker's idea that there can never be a change without violence. When the crowd departs at the closure of the meeting, Kofo makes a significant comment thus:

I fear this manner of departing. It leaves a deep gulf, like a wide fissure in a piece of furniture. I fear the something unpleasant, something sad, lurks in the clouds (109)

The tone of animosity and hatred here is unmistakably miserable, indicating imminent violent reaction from the marginalized masses. Obafemi describes the men of power and shows clear terms that social injustice and inequality are evils that must be checked in every society. This measure is important to avert a general feeling of anger, bitterness, hatred which can lead to permanent conflict and even a total disintegration of the society. Pa Garba makes it clear that:

Our land bleeds with poverty, but our rich ones look the other way and pretend that they cannot see..... truth is the hallmark of good culture. Only on this basis will a future freed of betrayal, deceit and oppression be assured on our land (153).

The fact remains that Obafemi's vision of the Nigerian society decries any form of corruption and associated evils, social injustice, man's inhumanity to man, and the exploitation of the people even where the exploiters are only taking advantage of the cracks in the solidarity of the people (Ashaolu 1986). This is why Bamikunle (2008) adjudges Obafemi's creative work as:

laden with optimism about future revolution. Obafemi's taste for revolution implies that in a socially contaminated society like ours only revolution turns the key to transformation (204).

Through the youths, Obafemi exposes social evils and sets to dispel the apathy and sense of hopelessness of the masses. He introduces dialogue as revolutionary ideals by effecting a radical alternative in both its concept and practice. He brings literature in the service of the people's mental and spiritual delectation as well as its social and political liberation. Wheels shows that the era of injustice and inequalities can end through reformation of individual's conscience. In this context, Obafemi creates a situation in which the two wheels in the society meet to resolve their differences amicably:

...this is the time and age when the truth like smoke must rise to the sky. Let us air the truth out for the future. Let us

uncover the sore and prescribe a cure. Truth is like splash of muddy water. If it splashes on you, please check yourself(123).

This narration shows Obafemi's preference for dialogue as a basis for resolving conflict rather than violence. The youths acknowledge that a situation where a class of the society indulges in wanton waste, destruction and total megalomaniac tendencies at the expense of a majority class in a society where poverty, sickness, helplessness is the order of the day, then such society needs a rethink. The need for mutual affection is thus stressed. The novel ends on such a positive note despite its bitter opening. It shows how the author aims to reconstruct a society in a way that ensures social justice and equitable access to national resources.

Wheels is not only structured to show the social imbalances and injustice, it is also designed to underscore how progressive society can be achieved. According to Bamikunle (2000) the premise on which Obafemi's creative works is built is the assumption that in every generation, there is a conflict between a ruling class and the governed that needs a social change. Obafemi keeps to this tradition in his treatment of the socio-political and economic inequality in the neo-colonial systems of Nigeria. *Wheels* is a novel that searches for a way out of endemic backwardness through a systematic exploration of stages of history and resolving at each stage the contradictions that made changes difficult. Thus, at each stage there is futuristic projection of a vision that holds promise in youths. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the artistic sensitivity of Obafemi as a radical Africa writer is linked inextricably to a commitment to change.

It is pertinent to state that the combative literature of African writers is radically ideological. The Postcolonial politics demands much from the contemporary African creative writers. The situation left them with no alternative other than giving their voice to the decadence and endemic corruptions that have threaten the foundation of their societies. In keeping with this tradition, Obafemi sees himself as the spokesman of a people whom through his fiction, seeks to conscientise and liberate. Obafemi's commitment to radical ideology is conveyed through appropriate dictions, use of proverbs, expressions and exclamations that are uniquely traditional. He creates images and imageries through diction that foreground the dominance of African culture. One of such images is wheels. Apart from global imagery seen in the novel's title and the technique of narration, *Wheels* is replete with many isolated, vibrant images that make the story come alive, the scenes vivid and the characters real. From the beginning, the reader appreciates Obafemi's unique creative power to

manipulate language in a diverse way to elicit divergent feelings, moods, and impression as well as produce appropriate responses. Specifically, the novelist's descriptive ability is remarkable. He describes scenes, people and events with such clarity, precision and vividness that give issue a clear perspective. For instance the hardship of the less-privileged members of the Giro community is shown through a series of images. This instance can be seen thus:

It is obvious that those who eat lean meat forget, but those who crack the left-over bones meant for the dogs continue to feel the aches on their molars and premolars long after (155).

The degree of dehumanization depicted here is biting. Obafemi's target here is the society and the men that make it up. The novel's indictment is directed at the privileged class for their indifference to human suffering. It attacks the elites for indulging in excesses and greed. Obafemi believes strongly that Nigeria is dire need of social and economic reforms with a view to ushering the desired socio political and economic prosperity. The novel shows that Nigeria is certainly dominated by tensions, contradictions and conflicting experiences and his vision for social reform is well captured. Wheels espouses radical vision about the economic and material conditions of contemporary Nigeria society to show that the masses are impoverished and stratified amidst plenty.

Conclusion

The study suggests that Obafemi, as a social critic and reformer, may have achieved the desired authorial ideology in his work, but that a good deal of work remains to be done. The writer's solution through a resort to moral reformation of characters is deliberately facile and simplistic. The fact is that even where the youths have the opportunity to function positively with result, the challenges before them are enormous. In a situation where the novel apparently suggests that the capitalist system with its numerous fangs of exploitation and economic oppression has intricate interconnecting links to facilitate its operation, then, it does not seem realistic to dethrone the system through the strategy of quiet reformation that Obafemi proposes.

Controversial as Obafemi's strategy of reformation may have been in *Wheels*, his vision of society remains well defined and uncompromisingly articulated. Obafemi emphasizes the politics of reformation as a premise to influence the individual's conscience to his responsibility. The theme focuses on a revolution without bloodshed.

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