

Alàgbà Adébáyò Fálétí as a Yorùbá Novelist

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Introduction

In their introduction to a book entitled: *Yorùbá creativity, fiction, language, life, and songs*, Falola and Genova (2005) assert that creativity among the Yorùbá has a long history and the traditions of oral histories, storytelling, performances and dramas are parts of fundamental habit of their civilization. In the pre-colonial era, the authorship of the stories in the folktales and in some poetic genres could not be claimed by any particular artist/artiste, but due to the influence of colonial rule, western literary traditions, among others, storytellers can claim authorship of their works today. The Yorùbá make no distinction between myth, legend and history. They all come under *itàn* (Ogunsina, 1992). One Yorùbá novelist that has distinguished himself in the effective use of *itàn* (story) in novel writing is Adébáyò Fálétí. He is not only a storyteller, he is a literary historian. Every creative writer in Yorùbá society is admired and judged as competent or otherwise not only by writing in the medium of the language but by having captivating story line and on the basis of his/her use of ‘quality’ Yorùbá language (i.e. language full of proverbs and other rhetoric devices). An average Yorùbá reader of Fálétí’s novels, poetry, plays and viewer of his films usually responds with delight because of his powerful use of Yorùbá language and captivating story lines, plot construct, narrative techniques and thematic contents.

Iṣọla (1998) classifies all other Yorùbá major novelists apart from Fágúnwà into three groups on their use of language and creative pedigree (190). According to him, “some are mere story tellers” who use mainly casual language;

there are others with mixed styles and there are a few of them who creatively exploit the genius of the language. He identifies Adébáyò Fálétí among few others as belonging to the genius category. Ogunṣina (1992) groups Fálétí as a prominent historical novelist who incorporates historical materials into novel writing. I agree with Ogunṣina that Fálétí's effective transfer of historical materials into fiction is a revelation of the novel's eclectic quality and also a manifestation of Fálétí's creative genius. Fálétí's love of *itàn* (story) is reflected in all his literary works, be it poetry, play or novel. However, our focus in this study is to examine Adébáyò Fálétí as a Yorùbá novelist through his literary lens.

Brief Biography of Adébáyò Fálétí

Fálétí was born on December 26, 1930 to the family of Pa Joseph Àkànbí and Madam Dúrówadé Àyíńké of the Idódẹ, Pàràkòyí, Ọyọ, in Ọyọ state. He lived his early life in villages such as Agbóóyẹ, Ọbanànkò, Kúràngà near Ọyọ. He attended Native Authority School, Másiífà, Ogbomoṣo (1939), St. Joseph Catholic School, Ọyọ (1940-1941), Baptist School, Ísokùn, Ọyọ between 1941-1944. He had his Secondary education at St. Joseph's Catholic School, Ọyọ and Ìbàdàn Boys High School. He attended the University of Ìbàdàn for his university education between 1965 and 1968. He graduated with a B.A. degree in English and French. From the in-depth study of Ọlátúnjí (1982) on Adébáyò Fálétí, it has been revealed that Fálétí is a man with a coat of many colours. His influence cuts across many disciplines and orientations. He is a prolific poet, actor, translator, interpreter, journalist, broadcaster, playwright, producer and director of classical Yorùbá films, historian, teacher, cultural worker and Yorùbá novelist. He has a lot of life experiences and as correctly summarized by Ọlátúnjí:

Fálétí's family background, the literature materials to which he was exposed, and his connection with newspaper, radio, and television, can be said to have exerted a great influence on him as a creative writer. His abundant knowledge of Yorùbá institutions and oral literature, his creative and adroit use of language... are all evidence of his varied (traditional and modern) background. (1982, 12) The great influence of Fálétí on Yorùbá literary ecosystem and his outstanding qualities won him many awards, both in Yorùbáland, Nigeria and in the international community for example, he has numerous awards from University-based Yorùbá Students' Association across Nigeria, Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON), the Festival of Arts award and an Outstanding performance in Arts, an award by the Afro- Hollywood in 2002. He died in 2017 at the ripe age of 87 years.

Adébáyò Fálétí's Novels

The most outstanding novels of Adébáyò Fálétí are *Ogun Àwítélé* (1965) and *Omọ Olókùn Eşin* (1969) which has been translated into English language by Pamela Smith as *The Freedom Fight: A Novel of Resistance and Freedom* in 2010. Between 1956 and 1959, Fálétí wrote numerous short stories in *Nigerian Guide*, *Oşogbo* and up till 1959, he wrote short stories also in *Àwòrèrin*. These short stories are not published as novels. The quality of any novel depends largely on the quality of the minds that are engaged in its production. The two novels published by Fálétí are of high quality in form and content. *Ogun Àwítélé* is a novel that portrays the bravery of traditional hunters in community policing and security in pre-colonial period. They were not only hunters of wild animals; they kept the community safe from criminal elements. Indigenous hunters are very close to nature, therefore, their knowledge of medicine and magic is deep, and they are men of value in the society.

In the novel, a gang of thieves writes a letter to the Baálè informing him of their impending visit to rob the townspeople. The Baálè informs Balódè, the leader of the hunters' guild and pleads with him to rescue the town from the thieves. The whole community shivers but the hunters regard the challenge as part of their social responsibility even though the mode of letter writing by thieves is very strange. The encouraging words of the Baálè ignite the fire of patriotism in them and through the efforts of the Balódè and Ikòlaba, the hunters constitute a powerful vigilante group that protects the community from the impending nightly invasion every night. The criminal gang is well organized. It has a leader, bold and wicked with both male and female members. In their second letter to the Baálè, Alákànşè, the richest man in the community becomes the main target. The gang strikes within four days instead of the twenty-one days indicated in the letter. The thieves charm the young hunters, who fall asleep while the criminals cross the borders with effortless ease and enter the town unhurt. The heavy display of charms by Ikòlaba exposes the thieves and a fierce fight begins. The serious battle between the thieves and the leaders of the hunters constitutes the main plot of the narrative. At the end, Balódè overcomes the gang leader who changes from one animal to the other. But the timely shooting of the gang leader by Adio, the youngest hunter, makes the hunters victorious while stolen materials from Alákànşè's house are recovered.

The title of the novel is a proverb: *Ogun àwítélé kì í parọ́ tó bá gbọ́n* (The aforementioned battle does not kill a wise lame person). Fálétí seems to warn the society on the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge system to combat security challenges in post-colonial Nigeria. Unlike the hunters in Fágúnwà's novel, *Ògbójú Qdẹ́ Nínú Igbó Irúnmalẹ́*, who cannot recite incantations or

engage in divination or magical battle with the antagonists, the protagonists in *Ogun Àwítélé* are knowledgeable in magical arts, and they use their magical strength against their antagonists. Ikolaba uses *isújú* charm to make him invisible to the thieves; he uses his magical ring while the thieves also come to the battle with magic mortal, effigy (*omolangidi*) and weapons to attack the hunters. The gang leader turns to various things-- goat, dog, snake and whirlwind. The display of magical power by both the thieves and the hunters is not only for aesthetic pleasure but to show the relevance of indigenous knowledge system in combating crimes in modern times. *Ogun Àwítélé* is a short novel. The short story format has its aesthetic specificities; its poetic density, powerful rhetorical devices and captivating story line which make the novel pleasurable to an average reader.

Omo Olókùn Eṣin is an historical novel which brings to memory Oke Ogun peoples' struggle for freedom under the Alààfin of Oyo. In the novel, Àjàyí Omo Olókùn Eṣin, the young freedom fighter supported by his three friends Ayowi, Kojajo and Ibiwumi decide to free Oke Ogun from the political domination of Olúmokò. Àjàyí rebels against the wickedness of Roti and the cruel exploitation of his people. According to Ogunsina (1992), Òkò is none other than the 19th century Oyo kingdom, and Òkè Ògùn refers to northwestern Yorùbá towns subjugated by the Oyo kingdom in pre-colonial time. Olúmokò's representatives, stationed permanently in Òkè Ògùn towns, collect different kinds of taxes, dues and tributes. The princes and other palace functionaries organize arbitrary visits to collect material and financial gifts. Most of the time, they misbehave, they rape women and snatch wives. Àjàyí, a younger generation of the nobility rebels against the tradition of enslavement and asserts that: *Mo kóríra àìlómìnira. Mo kóríra idninígèkùn, m'kò sì fẹ́ kí a máa sin àwọn ará òkò mó* (o.i.12) (I hate bondage. I hate captivity, I don't want us to serve as slaves to Òkò people again). The daughter of an Òkè Ògùn chief Ìbíwùmí who later assists Àjàyí to escape imprisonment summarizes the relationship thus: *Ewúré Olúmokò ni Ọlórún dá gbogbo wa, àrà tí ó bá sì wù ú ni o le fi wá dá* (o.i.22) (God has made us all Olúmokò's goats; he can do to us whatever catches his fancy). The animal imagery (*ewúré Olúmokò*) is a portrayal of the mistreatment and oppression of the slave masters. Lágbookun in one of his visits to extort money and properties, torches people's farms and houses to light his way after dark.

Àjàyí leads the rebellion in his town and instigates his three friends to do likewise. He and his comrades endure a series of sufferings, physical assaults and imprisonment. All his efforts to educate and mobilize his own people fail but his close associates in the struggle create tensions in various towns and communities until they are caught, convicted and nearly publicly executed before the Òkè Ògùn people come to their rescue through a peaceful

demonstration. Before granting independence, the Olúmokò makes Òkè Ògùn people pledge that they will supply annually, for ten years, fifty bags of money to the king, another fifty to his chiefs, twenty to the crown prince and two bullocks. The slave communities grant Olúmokò the right to keep up to twenty slaves at one time. Àjàyí and Ibiwumi receive freedom like others and become husband and wife at a festive ceremony.

Conclusion

In the two novels, Fálétí's representation of Yorùbá worldview on issues such as: the supernatural and reality, security and the role of hunters, use of charms, divination as tools of combating crime in *Ogun Àwítélé* is clear. His portrayal of autocratic leadership, slavery and fight for freedom without much violence in *Qmọ Olókùn Eşin* shows him as a non-violent freedom fighter and lover of culture. The two novels have features of magical realism. Magical realism is not magic literature or fantastic narrative. Magical realism, unlike that of fantastic literature, is to express emotions, not to evoke them. In magical realism, the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts (Leal, 2005, p.121). In *Ogun Àwítélé* for example, the narrative does not depict a fictitious world totally removed from conventional reality but there are lots of events that happen which could not be explained by reason. The invocation of whirlwind to dispatch the hunters by the gang leader, the spell that makes the young hunters sleep off, the charm that transfixes the thieves in one position, changing of the gang leader and Balóde into dogs, goats and snakes and anti-bullet charm of the protagonist all fall within the supernatural. In other words, in magical realism, the "real" and the "magical" realms exist side by side on equal terms. In *Qmọ Olókùn Eşin*, Àjàyí is confronted with forces which adopt the conventional and magical methods of punishment, charms, rituals and human sacrifice to oppress and suppress opposition. Even the freedom received by Òkè Ògùn people is strange, limited slavery, partial freedom, a form of neocolonialism which the Òkè Ògùn people, the Yorùbá or even Nigeria as a country is battling with till date.

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