

Portrayal of Social Vices in Obasa's Poetry

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Abstract

This essay examines sub-themes of social vices like wickedness, disobedience, stubbornness, jealousy, deception, greed, laziness, corruption, treachery, foolishness and ignorance, extremism etc. in Obasa's poetry. The study shows that Obasa was a renowned and seasoned poet who used poetic language as a tool to convey Yoruba perspectives and philosophy to his readers. The study further shows that Obasa's poetry series are ever relevant as they address current issues on human relations, socio-cultural, and socio-economic situations of the present-day Nigeria. This work concludes that Obasa was a teacher of morals and ethics who used poetry as a medium of waging war against societal ills.

Introduction

The importance of poetry among the Yorùbá cannot be over-emphasized. Obasa's poetry have been studied by scholars like Babalola (1971, 1973), Olabimtan (1974a, 1974b), Ogunsina (1980), Olatunji (1982), and Akinyemi (1987, 1995, 2017). Obasa was a poet who understood the core Yorùbá language. He has a deep knowledge of series of events, activities, and occurrences in the Yorùbá society in particular and in Nigeria at large. He commends the good and rebukes the bad in his poetry. This essay intends to examine the various social vices as portrayed in Obasa's trilogy. In order to get the message of his poems better, there is a need to do a critical analysis of some selected poems that address social vices in Obasa's poetry. Therefore, this essay will discuss how Obasa portrays certain social vices like deceit, lies, greed and stealing, jealousy, laziness, underrating a fellow man, promiscuity, foolishness

and ignorance, extremism etc. in his poetry and the impact of such vices on the society.

Social Vices in Obasa's Poetry

Social vices are the opposite of social values. While social values like obedience, honesty, truthfulness, kindness, respect, generosity, etc. are regarded as qualities expected of a good person (an *omolúàbí*) in Yorùbá society, social vices like wickedness, disobedience, stubbornness, jealousy, deception, greed, laziness, corruption, treachery, promiscuity, and extremism are all unacceptable among the Yorùbá because they contradict the social norms, practices and order. Anyone who exhibits any of such characters is regarded as being ill-mannered. Poems addressing issues relating to social vices and values are well embedded in Obasa's trilogy but our concern in this essay is to examine how social vices are portrayed in his poetry.

It is no doubt that Obasa was well-immersed in Yorùbá language and culture going by the time he started his poetry collections and his own creativity in rendering them into writing (Akinyemi 1987: 2). There are numerous poems identified in Obasa's trilogy that address various social vices imminent in the Yoruba society, which he condemns in his poetry. Obasa's concern about social vices is how they hinder societal peace and people's wellbeing. Whenever Obasa mentions any social vice, he also points out the danger that could possibly be the repercussion of such act, and preaches to those who engage in such acts to change. Below are some instances of social vices from his books of poetry:

Deceit

Deceit is one of the social vices recorded in Obasa's poetry. He warns people to be careful because the world is full of deceit. People may fail to keep promises; they may also pretend to be who they are not. Obasa advised that when people are encouraged to embark on something, they should think twice before taking any step. Obasa warned that those who advise other people to take certain steps may turn their back against them later. According to Obasa in one of his poems,

*Jálé rẹ, jálé rẹ
 Àwọn a-tan-ni-jálé-ẹni
 Àwọn kì í báni kó o
 Èké tan ni síjà ẹkùn
 Ó fọrún sí'sé sápo ẹni
 Nìsọ! Nìsọ! Kì í síwájú*

Ò-sinmọ-dégbó èrù padà séhìn
A kì í gbón gbón gbón
Bí ẹnì tí n tan ni í jà (Obasa' 1928: 35-36).

Break into another person's house, break into another person's house
 Those who push you to break into someone else's house
 Do not join you in the act
 A deceptive person lures you into a fight with the tiger
 Keeping a broken bow in your bag.
 Those who accompany others into a dangerous forest and disappear
 We are not as wise
 As those who deceive and put one through a fight

Obasa's wants his readers to be careful with deceptive people. In his view, deceptive people do not express genuine love, therefore, such people are not to be trusted. Such act contradicts the social norms and practices acceptable in a typical Yorùbá society. Considering the language of the poem, Obasa chooses *ì jà ẹkùn* (fight with the tiger) to be symbolic of any kind of dangerous step one is advised to take. The gravity of this evil act is expressed through the choice of phrases like *ì jà ẹkùn* and *forún sísẹ sápo ẹni*. It is barely impossible to face the tiger with a broken bow and hope to kill the beast. The *ì jà ẹkùn* could be regarded as a challenge that needs solution while *orún sísẹ* (broken bow) and *apó* (bag) are suggested means that are not adequate means of finding solutions to the challenge. Because deceptive people cannot, and should not be trusted, Obasa admonishes his readers to be careful by saying:

Ojú bánírẹ kò dékùn wọn
Asẹhíndenì kò wópọ
Ẹsà ẹnià n ní fẹni lẹhìn
Bá ọ bá sí nílẹ
Tẹrú, tọmọ, tajáteran
Ní í fẹ ni lójú ẹni (Obasa' 1934: 9).

Being friendly does not guarantee genuine friendship
 Those who can watch your back are not many
 Only few people can watch and care
 When you are not around
 All and sundry
 Claim to support you in your presence.

Nevertheless, Oḃasá' argues that while some people may not be sincere in their dealings with us, there would always be few truthful and sincere friends:

Abánikú òrẹ sòwón
Kì í burúburú
Kó mò kẹnikan mọni
Ẹni tí yóó kunikù la ò mò. (Oḃasá' 1934:10).

Friends who will die with others are rare
 It cannot be so bad
 Not to find someone who will be dependable
 Only that such individuals may not be easily identifiable

Abánikú òrẹ is a friend who can give his or her life for one's sake; but to get such friend, according to Oḃasá, is very rare. He argues that we know true and sincere friends in times of troubles. Deception is very rampant, and in Oḃasá's view, one could better play safe by keeping one's good intentions to oneself:

Máa bánú sọ, má bẹnià sọ
Ẹnià kò sí mò aráyé ti dèké
Ẹni a ní kó kínni lẹhìn
Ó fẹgún sọwọ... (Oḃasá' 1927: 11).

Keep your intentions to yourself, reveal to no one
 Good people are no more, the world is full of deception
 Those you think would assist to scratch your back
 Their hands are full of thorns

In essence, these few lines encourage readers to be careful when revealing their plans and intentions to other people.

Lying

Another social vice portrayed in Oḃasá's poetry is lying. He observes that lying is unacceptable and that which distorts peace, harmony, and progress of a society. He points out some negative impacts of lying thus:

Irọ́ n purọ́ fún'ró
Purọ́ kí ng n'iyi;
Ẹtẹ́ ní ikágun purọ́purọ́...
A kì í tanra ẹni jẹ ríre

Ẹni ẹ̀nìà ní t̀àn níí r̀ù
Ẹni bá ní tan'̀rẹ̀ jẹ
Kíkú ní í kú (Obasá 1934: 18).

Liars telling each other lies
 Telling lies to gain recognition-
 Lands one in a mess.
 Deception serves no one any good
 Those who deceive other people lose weight
 Those who deceive other people are bound to die.

Obasá makes us realize how grievous and deadly lying could be. The one who has been lied to could feel depressed and may fall sick, perhaps as a result of excessive thinking and disappointment when the truth is revealed. A liar is bound to die as a result of menace and disgrace brought on others. According to Obasá, death should be the penalty for telling lies because in his view, a liar should not live. One of the outcomes of lying is tarnishing another person's image. Lying is not by mistake. It is usually an intension of the liar to hurt another person's feelings and tarnish that person's image. This is what Obasá is referring to in the excerpt below:

Eléte kò pa lójú ẹni
Ẹhìn ẹni là á gbèrò ikà
Agúnbàjẹ kò lódó
Ẹnu gbongbó lodó wọn
Àpésọ lẹhìn ní í b̀rẹ̀ jẹ
Abúni lẹhìn,
Ẹrú ẹni ní í se
Gbogbo ẹrú ní i b'Olúwa wọn. (Obasá 1934: 18).

One who plans evil does not do so in your presence.
 Evil is planned when one is not around
 One who pounds evil has no mortal
 His mouth is his mortal
 Whosoever back-bites cut off cords of friendship.
 He who gossips
 Is a slave to the person being gossiped
 All slaves reference their masters.

The lines above show that back-biting is an evil act and it goes hand-in-hand with lying. *Eléte* is someone who is crafty. It is revealed that only a

coward would tell lies and tarnish another person's image behind, and a back-bitter does not have any other weapon or tool beyond his or her mouth that is used to create problems. This shows how dangerously a man's tongue could be.

Laziness

The Yorùbá society commend hard work and detest laziness. They believe anyone who doesn't work doesn't deserve to eat; and anyone who fails to work may likely wallow in abject poverty. Still laziness is one of the cankerworms eating deep into the Nigeria's economy and stability. Oḃasá therefore implores parents to train up their children right from childhood to be hardworking so that difficulties faced as a result of laziness of an individual could be nipped in the bud. One of his poems addresses this social vice thus,

*Enib'òlẹ̀ kò r'omọ̀ bí!
 Òlẹ̀ kòfára ìjà ya
 Òlẹ̀ jìyà gbé!... (Oḃasá 1927: 68)*

Whoever gives birth to a lazy child has no child
 A lazy person cannot be bold enough to fight
 He/She suffers out rightly.

The Yorùbá regard a lazy person as useless because he or she has nothing to gain from laziness. The excerpt below shows that a lazy fellow cannot take good care of his or her family:

*Òlẹ̀ l'ápálásán
 Láìlè fì ùṣé
 Ìyà tó n jòlẹ̀ kò kéré!...
 Tal' à bá fìyà lẹ̀
 Lẹ̀hìn alápa-má-ùṣé
 Bíyàwó òlẹ̀ dàgbà tán
 Olówó ní í bá a gbé e!
 Òlẹ̀ jogún ibànújé
 Ó ẹ̀ b'ógún ìran òun ni. (Oḃasá 1927:68).*

A lazy fellow has hands
 Without using them to work
 A lazy fellow does not suffer less.
 Who is bound to suffer-

If not one who has hands and fails to work?
 When a lazy man is ready for marriage,
 A rich man marries off his wife
 A lazy man inherits sadness
 He thinks it's his lineage inheritance.

The above lines show that laziness does not do a man any good. Man suffers a lot and becomes an object of ridicule in the society. His wife and children also become the rich man's properties because the wealthy can cheat on a lazy man's wife. If this happens, the lazy man becomes sad for the rest of his life.

Jealousy

One of the major social vices in Obasa's poetry is jealousy. Obasa made a detailed explanation on how some people are not always happy with the progress and success of their fellow men. People with such attitude would go to any length to hinder the progress of their fellow men. Some people, as a result of jealousy, become fetish, some become witches or wizards. Those are the people Obasa describes in this poem:

*À n jùwón, kò ẹ í wí léjọ
 Ìjà ìlara kò tán bọ̀rọ̀bọ̀rọ̀
 Ìlara àlájù
 Níí mú wọ̀n gbàjẹ
 Níí mú wọ̀n ẹ́ẹ̀sọ (Obasa 1927: 31).*

Being successful more than your peers can't be said in public
 Jealousy engendered fight does not end easily
 Too much jealousy
 Makes them involve in witch-craft
 Makes them engage in making rituals.

Obasa sounds a note of warning to those who engage in this act to desist from it in order not to regret their actions. They are advised to accept what their destiny holds, otherwise, they would land in trouble:

*N ó ẹ́ẹ̀ ẹ̀gbà
 Ní í mọ̀mọ̀dé gbèlẹ̀
 Ng ó ẹ́ẹ̀ ẹ̀go
 Oko olówó ní í mọ̀mọ̀ lẹ!*

*Ó wu Àgùàlà
Kó mólẹ̀ tósùpá
Ọlórún Ọba kò fún un ẹ
B'Ọlórún kò pe ni ní Baba
A kì í fìyànjú ẹ bí àgbàlagbà. (Ọbasá 1927: 32).*

I want to act like an elder
Makes the little child misbehaves
The quest to flourish
Sends a child into a rich man's field.
It pleases a star
To be as bright as the moon
God allows it not.
If God does not make one a father
You don't struggle to act like one.

A child always longs to be like an elder, and always wishes to act like one. In a child's quest to become rich and exercise an elder's authority, the child could engage in various acts of indiscipline that could land him or her in trouble. This does not apply to children alone; jealousy operates at all levels of life.

As he preaches to the jealous ones, Obasa also encourages those on the receiving end not to fear because all efforts of their enemies would be in vain:

*Ọpòlọ rìn fanda
Lójú ẹlẹgùúsí
Ẹlẹgùúsí kò gbòdò yí i lata
Àbá níkán n' dá
Ikán kò lẹ mọkúta
A-tà-tà-n-kù-rà!
Ẹnu ẹyẹ kòlẹ ran òkúta. (Ọbasá 1927: 43)*

The frog walks majestically
In the presence of the one who has melon
The melon owner dare not make it (the frog) into stew
Termite always aspires
It cannot break stone
A bird's beak cannot break stone.

The above is an admonition to those who are envied to exercise no fear as all efforts of their enemies would become futile. Inasmuch as their creator does not release them into the snares of their enemies.

Underrating Others

This is a situation in which a fellow human being is taken for granted and seen as being powerless. Obasa is of the opinion that no man remains the same indefinitely, as a harmless person of today could become extremely dangerous next time. According to Obasa,

Eni tó fojú ànà wòkú
Èbọra ní í bọ ọ lásọ!
Omi tó t'ojú eni kún
A máa gbéni lọ?
Eni bá fojú "Àgbàrá"
Wo Kúdeti yí ọ mà gbé e lọ! (Obasa 1934: 28).

Anyone who sees the dead for whom the dead was when alive
 Would face the wrath of spirits
 A river that fills up in one's presence
 Might get one carried away
 Anyone who takes the River Kúdeti for mere erosion
 Could be drowned by the River.

The above lines of poem preach to people never to underrate anybody – whether young or old, living or non-living things – because there is no position that is permanent. A powerless person could become powerful, a poor person could become rich, and a subject could become a leader. Yorùbá people value respect so much and they believe that respect is reciprocal. Whosoever we come across should be accorded due respect as looking down on any man or anything could lead to trouble. The concept of *fojú ànà wòkú* (seeing the dead for whom the dead was when alive) implies that a dead person is no longer whom one used to know when alive because the dead one has become a spirit. Kúdeti, on the other hand, is a popular big river in the Yoruba city of Ibadan, that flows very heavily whenever rain falls. Taking its flow for mere erosion could be highly dangerous in that one could be swept away by the force of water flow. In essence, Obasa is telling his readers that underrating or looking down on other people could be dangerous because there is no condition that is permanent.

Greed and Stealing

Greed and stealing are a set of twins that cannot be separated. Anyone who is greedy is most likely to steal. They are both social vices that are waging war against the Yoruba people. Obasa sees greedy people and those who

engage in stealing as those who attract anger and curses from owners of stolen properties:

Òkánjúà baba olè
Òkánjúà tònt'olè
Ogbogba ni nwón íṣe! (Ọbasá 1934: 31).

A greedy fellow is a real thief
 Both greed and theft
 Are equal in gravity

The above lines indicate that greed and stealing are a set of social vices that are equal in gravity; hence, they should attract same punishment. According to Ọbasá,

Oorun am'onílẹ̀ lọ!
Olẹ̀ f'orí gbun'gi-àjà
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni kò gbọdò gbin
Òjòòru p'àjẹ, kò délé wí
Ta ni r'neyẹ l'ode òru? (Ọbasá 1934: 32).

House owner is fast asleep
 A thief dashes his head against the roof
 He cannot scream
 Night rain beats a witch
 She cannot complain
 Who sends a witch out at night?

Stealing is not done openly because it is a criminal act that no one wants to associate with. Those who steal hardly escape the repercussions as individuals whose properties are stolen do not hesitate to rain curses on them:

Òní, Sònpònná ni ń pa á
Ọlá, "Sàngó ni ó pa á"
Ọtúnla, "Ọya" ni ó pá a".
Èpẹ̀ kò jomọ olẹ̀ ó dàgbà
Olẹ̀ tí ó jà, tó jì kàkàkí
Níbo ni ń ti fọn ọ? (Ọbasá 1934: 31)

Today he shall be killed by Sònpònná
 Tomorrow, he shall be killed by Sàngó

Next tomorrow, he shall be met by Oya
 Curses prevent a thief from growing up
 The thief who steals the (king's) trumpet
 Where would he use it?

From the lines above, Oya, Şàngó, and Sònpònná are deities in Yorùbá land that are believed could be sent to avenge culprits who engage in stealing. The properties stolen are likened to *kàkàkí* (trumpet) which when blown calls attention of people. An individual in a community knows what he or she has and people in the same community know what belongs to every individual. To steal somebody's property and use it in the same community definitely exposes the thief. Obasa's poems relating to this context, even though addressing the acts of greed and stealing in the pre-colonial era, is still very relevant with the present-day Nigeria, most especially those who steal and enrich themselves with public funds.

Promiscuity

Among the obvious sub-themes of social vices in Obasa's poetry is promiscuity. This has to do with having casual and unrestrained sexual activities with the opposite sex. This is against the social norms of the Yorùbá. Yoruba culture and society forbid women to have more than one husband, and men having affairs with another man's wife. This act often attracts some grievous consequences. Obasa's view on promiscuity centers more on promiscuous women who are not satisfied with their husband. He alleges that such women use series of strategies to lure another woman's husband into having extra marital relationship with them. Hence, Obasa says:

Agónnigòn obínrin
Tí í gbòkò lówó olóko...
A-mò-ón-dín-mò-ón-sè
Ìyá olóbè sèpón kánrin
Ò fobè gbòkò lówó olóko...
Ó se bí ire bí ire
Ó gbalé lówó olóko (Obasa 1945:15).

Promiscuous woman
 That snatches another person's husband
 One who is skillful in cooking
 A woman who prepares tasty soup
 She snatches another woman's husband with soup

She went gradually ahead
To snatch another woman's husband's house

This act could invariable generate series of arguments and fight within a community. It also may result in having more broken homes and disunity among members of family. Oḃasá also tries to make us know how promiscuous women move from one place to another when he says in one of his poems that:

Obìnrin kò gbébi tó rọ́ ó
Bí ó san, bí ó san
Obìnrin dọlọkọ méfà
Panságà abiyako beẹre (Oḃasá 1945: 16).

A woman neglects her comfort zone
She is desperately looking for a better place
Such women may end up with six ex-husbands.
The promiscuous one with countless mothers-in-law

The above lines of poem present promiscuous women as those who cannot be satisfied with a single husband. They like comfort, and in their quests to get more of it, they move from one husband's house to another, yet they are not satisfied. The phrase *abiyako beẹre* also buttresses the fact that promiscuous women are polyandry in nature. This is not a thing of pride among them, though, because a woman is not expected to have more than one husband at a time in Yoruba society. The word *panságà* is also an adjective used to qualify a sexually loose woman. We could say the poet's choice of *panságà* is to show that such act of promiscuity is uncalled for and should not be practiced.

Conclusion

Having examined various social vices as portrayed in Oḃasá's trilogy, it could be said that Oḃasá was a moralist poet. The study reveals that social vices have no positive impacts on a society. Therefore, Oḃasá preaches against exhibiting these characters in that they hinder the progress, peace, and stability of any given community. They are against Yorùbá culture, norms, and social order. Hence, Oḃasá admonishes his readers not to engage in these acts.

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