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FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE: A NEW READING OF SIX FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN NOVELS

1 INTRODUCTION

Literature as a product of a society has all that it takes to suggest solutions to the challenges in a human society. When an art form repeatedly makes certain issues its focus and debates them regularly, the state and the people will pay a serious attention to such matters. Although literature is manmade, it can well reflect the prevailing day-to-day events and occurrences. Orally or in written form, literature offers a special mode of encountering past and contemporary realities. Literature is an open concept, and therefore it is perceived differently and there are many definitions. Almost two centuries ago, Victor Hugo (1827: 234) opined:

Un art plus libre, capable de prendre pour sujets les grands événements historiques, un art moins rigoureusement intellectuel, frappant directement les sens en substituant aux récits et aux descriptions de spectacle des événements mêmes.

An art that is freer, capable of taking serious historical events as its subject-matters, an art which is less intellectually tasking directly striking the senses by substituting actual events with narratives and vivid descriptions. [My own translation]

Through the use of characters invented by writers, human actions and events are presented to carry out certain functions. Literature has the potential to give “a near perfect insight into social happenings, commentaries and critiques” (Adebayo, 2010: 2). In the words of Ogunba (1978: 1):

Literature is the vehicle for societies to give sensitive expression to the innermost thoughts and feelings of individuals as well as the community. It is also often used to amplify and advertise ideas, and sometimes even to persuade the generality of the people to new directions.

Since literature has an established link with a given society, it can be a tool to set agenda for discussion with a view to moving the society forward. According to Awodiya (2016: 5):

The purpose of all the arts is to communicate the artists' thoughts or emotions, to give aesthetic pleasure and to clarify or help us understand life. It is in the Arts – theatre arts, literary arts and the visual arts – that Nigeria (and indeed Africa) has achieved its most remarkable international honours, laurels and global respect in the world discourses of the liberal arts. Starved by multinational companies, abandoned by the banks, and neglected by governments, Nigerian artists still stand tall over and above other professionals as the nation's number one and most prominent ambassadors. A recent research by an American based website, emeagwali.com, revealed that Nigerian artists beat their politicians, scientists, sportsmen and women, military leaders, clergymen and all others to emerge as the nation's most worthy ambassadors.

From the foregoing, apart from being an instrument to increase our level of awareness through sharing information, reading literature can help make a person because it produces better ways of thinking. By disseminating different ideas, experiences, observations, feelings and findings, among other things, literature develops people's minds and consciousness. The more you read, the better informed you become. In other words, human intelligence will be enhanced when people are exposed to many cultures (national and foreign) through the reading of literary texts from different parts of the world.

It also has didactic value, and can help people learn certain valuable lessons. Literature is not just read for the fun of it. Besides the aesthetic value of such texts, the formalism and structuralism show that literature has the potential to reshape people's behaviour.

In negotiating social transformation in their literary works, committed African writers explore the use of literary devices such as sarcasm, satire, irony, dark humour and metaphor to dress up their narratives. Most revolutionary writings are in practice expressions of sentiments, and this explains why the writers employ the literary devices mentioned above. Apart from making the narratives entertaining, the authors also employ the techniques to achieve other functions of literature.

Moreover, in addition to the wide diversity of literature there are also many literary theories. For instance, there are sociological approaches, along with those based on existentialism, Marxism, feminism, eco-criticism, postmodernism, post-colonial discourse and structuralism/formalism, among many others. However, the current study is premised on Marxist literary theory because of its inclination towards social transformation in a given society. The main focus of the study is the social functions of literature which connect literature to the class struggle agenda of Marxism. In other words, the application

of a Marxist theoretical framework in this study is informed by the fact that the paper focuses on the relationship between literature and socioeconomic and political elements of the society presented in the selected novels. Without any exception, all the narratives depict class-based societies that are divided into different levels of social stratification. As a result of social imbalances, injustice and the unacceptable distribution of state wealth and resources under oppressive governments, there is always a struggle to overthrow a social order that does not work in the interests of most people. As a matter of fact, the socio-economic and political space in the selected novels calls for a redress of the existing social order so as to achieve the desired social transformation that will pave the way for sustainable development.

2 FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE IN SELECTED NOVELS

This study will examine the following writers and novels: Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des bàttu*, Patrick Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône* and Fatou Keita's *Rebelle*. The authors' preoccupations which express their themes are the central ideas they intend to share with the world. Readers are made to understand the significance of education with regard to gaining more opportunities, and that it provides empowerment and the confidence to fight for one's rights. Because Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ is educated, she is economically empowered and able to move on with her life both before and upon the demise of her husband. In a sense, one can say that *Une si longue lettre* and *Rebelle* preach female empowerment socio-economically and politically, as well as the need to fix social infrastructural amenities such as schools and hospitals in African societies. *La grève des bàttu* and *Les vertiges du trône* teach readers that everybody is an organic part of a society. In other words, everybody is important and must be taken seriously no matter the social class they belong to. *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* reminds Africans of the essentials of communal life – the spirit of brotherhood and 'togetherness'. *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* teaches patience, courage, perseverance, resilience, doggedness and optimism. It shows that team spirit and collective responsibility will help people to attain greatness both individually and collectively, for the progress of the entire human society. In short, all the selected Francophone African novels teach people to unite and fight their common enemy at all times, as the Marxists believe that united we stand, divided we fall.

Moreover, through literature people are warned of certain dangers which can jeopardize the foundation of a happy life or the general survival of a given society. In other words, literature is a means of warning. By exposing follies and vices in a society and their consequential effects on individuals and others, readers are warned of deadly behaviour and unacceptable actions. In this regard Mariama Bâ' and Fatou Keita hold that both

the men and women should co-operate with each other, so that society can be transformed for the better.

In addition to this, literature serves as a therapeutic agent by healing people. As people read various literary texts – novels, plays and poems – they come across funny moments which make them laugh. Laughter, it is believed, keeps the body warm, repairs muscles and cures the mind. Besides, being strong will help people to cope with anxiety and uncertainty, Mariama Bâ through Ramatoulaye, her main character, suggests reading and listening to good music as devices to heal the mind or relieve it of shocks. This is one major function of literature and art generally. Besides being a means of information and communication, a source of entertainment as well as transmission of cultural norms and values or teaching of moral lessons, art is also capable of performing a therapeutic function. In other words, it can help to prevent or manage different forms of depression, nervous breakdown, heartbreak and even mental dissonance. Noting the efficacy of reading with regard to solving or reducing such problems, Ramatoulaye tells her friend Aïssatou:

Et tu partis. Tu eus le surprenant courage de t'assumer. Tu louas une maison et t'y installas. Et, au lieu de regarder en arrière, tu fixas l'avenir obstinément. Tu t'assignas un but difficile; *et plus que ma présence, mes encouragements, les livres te sauvèrent. Devenus ton refuge, ils te soutinrent. (Une si longue... p.50-51)*

And you left. You had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands. You rented a house and set up home there. And instead of looking backwards, you looked resolutely to the future. You set yourself a difficult task; and more than just my presence and my encouragements, books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you. (*So long a letter*, p. 32)

When Aïssatou leaves her husband to live on her own, she rents a house and instead of thinking about the past she focuses on her future. She makes reading books her companion and a means of coping with depression. For Ramatoulaye, the continuity of radio broadcasts is a great relief, and the radio becomes her comforter. At night, the music dissolves her anxiety as she listens to old and new songs, which eventually rekindle her hope. As Ramatoulaye puts it :

La continuité des émissions radiophoniques me secourait. *J'assignais à la radio un rôle consolateur. Les mélodies nocturnes berçaient mon anxiété. J'entendais les messages des chants anciens et nouveaux qui réveillaient l'espoir. Ma tristesse s'éparpillait. (Une si longue... p.78)*

The continuity of radio broadcasts was a great relief. I gave the radio the role of comforter. At night the music lulled my anxiety. I heard the message of old and new songs, which awakened hope. My sadness dissolved. (*So long a letter*, p. 52/53)

To cope with the disappointment she suffers as well as to suppress the cognitive dissonance she feels because of this, Aïssatou develops a new attitude. She finds relief in reading while Ramatoulaye locates hers in music (see Ogundokun, 2014). Literature gives pleasure to the mind as it entertains, and the peace of mind one can get from reading is immeasurable. It is on this basis that practitioners and proponents of art for art's sake anchor their criticism. The humour, dark irony, witty expressions and comic relief which are embedded in literature are more rewarding than, say, smoking, drinking beer, or using other intoxicants. For example, readers laugh at the funny image of Modou described below:

La musique enlaçait et désunissait les couples, tantôt lente et enjôleuse, tantôt trépidante et endiablée. Quand la trompette éclatait, soutenue par la frénésie du tamtam, les jeunes danseurs excités et infatigables, trépignaient, sautaient, cabriolaient, hurlaient leur joie ; Modou s'efforçait de suivre. Les lumières crues le livraient aux sarcasmes impitoyables de certains qui le taxaient de «*loup dans la bergerie*». (*Une si longue...* p.75)

The couples held each other or danced apart depending on the music, sometimes slow and coaxing, sometimes vigorous and wild. When the trumpet blared out, backed by the frenzy of the drums, the young dancers, excited and untiring, would stamp, jump and *capé* about, shouting their joy. Modou would try to follow suit. The harsh lights betrayed him to the un pitying sarcasm of some of them, who called him a *cradle-snatcher*. (*So long a letter*, p. 50)

The use of names such as “cradle-snatcher” for old Modou in the above extract, and many other personified and metaphorical statements, as well as funny descriptions, in the selected Francophone African novels, are good sources of entertainment. Entertainment keeps people going in the various activities they engage in, including their efforts to socially transform their societies. When Mawdo is explaining his taking of a second wife, he reduces young Nabou to a kind of food, *a variety*. He states:

On ne résiste pas aux lois impérieuses qui exigent de l'homme nourriture et vêtements. Ces mêmes lois poussent le «*mâle*» ailleurs. Je dis bien «*mâle*» pour marquer la bestialité des instincts. ... (*Une si longue...* p. 52)

You can't resist the imperious laws that demand food, clothing for man. These same laws compel the *male* in other respects. I say *male* to emphasise the bestiality of instincts... (*So long a letter*, p. 34)

Expressions like these entertain the mind, and make us happy and healthy to face our work. Moreover, the idea that school turns girls into devils who lure men away from the right path is also a joke. «L'école transforme nos filles en diabesses, qui détournent

les hommes du droit chemin» (p.30). As a matter of fact, the novel, *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, is prevented from being a completely tragic work because of the humour of the African characters, and it ends with an explosion of laughter instead of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The author accentuates the humour in the novel by ridiculing some of the minor characters in such a way that they are compared to lower animals. Obebé is compared to a dog and a buffalo because he barks and has a thick neck (*Le vieux nègre...*p.14). Mvondo is compared to an old lizard because his skin is wrinkled and coarse (*Le vieux nègre...*p.18). Varini is nicknamed Gosier d'Oiseau-Gullet because he has a long neck (*Le vieux nègre...*p.9). Amalia is said to look like a docile donkey, a beast of burden, because she has a skin like that of an elephant as well as looking like a cat (*Le vieux nègre...*pp. 54, 55 and 65 respectively). The description given to Meka in this show of humour is even more amusing. Meka's anatomy and gestures are satirized thus: Meka's toes are like a tortoise's paws, he opens his mouth like fish, snores like a young panther and twitches his nose like a rabbit (*Le vieux nègre...*pp. 76, 97, 113 & 117 respectively).

In addition to such several witty expressions and uses of sarcasm, there are other ironic situations which make readers laugh, and sometimes throw them off balance. For example, the scene where Mour reverses the usual roles in Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des bâttu* is funny. In Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, the scene where Sadio, a strike-breaker, is subjected to public ridicule and the place where women resisted the arrest of Ramatoulaye are equally entertaining. Moreover, the ironic situation the novelist presents when Fa Keïta is praying in the detention camp is hilarious. One cannot but remember the piteous imagery created in the minds of readers in Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, especially the unpleasant situation Meka goes through in the city centre while waiting for the French High Commissioner who is present him with a medal. There are also some sexual acts and expressions in the novels which can bring about erotic feelings, and they can be considered as a form of entertainment too.

Beyond the expressions of disappointment and indictment about colonial and post-independence Africa, the concept of development is central in the selected Francophone African literary novels. This profound quest for positive social change sustains the authors' artistic creations and constitutes the essentials of the novels, in terms of unity and message. The selected Francophone African novelists believe this development must come through a revolutionary consciousness and rebellion propelled by the people's awareness of their socio-cultural, economic, political and religious situations, and their decision to change society for the better.

Another functional aspect of literature is that it improves readers' vocabularies as they are exposed to different words and their usage. When a purposeful reader meets a given word for the first time in the course of their reading, they then check it in a dictionary and the word becomes part of the reader's vocabulary bank. With an improved vocabulary one is able to write and speak correctly and confidently at all times. Confirming one major role of art, Ramatoulaye state with regard to the cinemas:

Le cinéma, quel dérivatif puissant à l'angoisse! Films intellectuels, à thèse, films sentimentaux, films policiers, films drôles, films à suspense furent mes compagnons. Je puisais en eux des leçons de grandeur, de courage et de persévérance. Ils approfondissaient et élargissaient ma vision du monde, grâce à leur apport culturel. J'oubliais mes tourments en partageant ceux d'autrui. Le cinéma, distraction peu couteuse, peut donc procurer une joie saine. (*Une si longue...* p.77)

What a great distraction from distress is the cinema! Intellectual films, those with a message, sentimental films, detective films, comedies, thrillers, all these were my companions. I learned from them lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance. They deepened and widened my vision of world, thanks to their cultural values. The cinema, an inexpensive means of recreation, can thus give health pleasure. (*So long a letter*, p. 51/52)

The writer has summed up the fundamental functions of the creative arts, which literature is a part of. As a means of entertainment, the arts are great distractions from distress, and it is also possible to learn from them lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance. They can polish one's vision of world, and have some useful cultural values as well as helping to improve health. It can be argued, therefore, that a true work of art is meant to serve people by helping them overcome their problems, both seen and unseen.

Fundamentally, one can observe that to institutionalize social transformation in African states there is the need for the following: the need to improve workers' welfare, promote locally made goods and services, recognize and empower women, appreciate what is good about our culture and tradition, to help the weak, provide jobs for the young, and pay adequate attention to the social welfare of the unemployed, the aged as well as other categories of the less privileged, not only by the government but also by religious bodies and more fortunate individuals. Literature helps readers to develop an analytical mind. In most cases, in an effort to understand a writer's artistic work and ideology, it might be necessary to investigate and/or interrogate the writer's society. It is also worthwhile to study how societal elements are represented in the literature itself. That literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behaviour re-orientation is not negotiable. I would also like to add that revolution requires a gradual and controlled process towards attaining the 'new' vision rather than a few hasty and 'nervous attempts' (Akoh, 2012). According to Onyemelukwe (2004: 26), Karl Marx maintains:

It is from failure that one derives lessons and corrects one's ideas so as to make them correspond to the laws of the external world. This is how one turns failure to success. This is exactly what is meant by 'a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit.

Literature is a reflection of a society's consciousness, and can affect society itself. It is capable of bringing about revolutionary consciousness and rebellion. It is obvious that political consciousness, economic exploitation, the oppression of the masses, gender inequality, and cruel cultural and religious practices are the major thematic preoccupations of the selected Francophone African writers. Based on the reflectionist standpoint, there is indeed a relationship between literature (and other arts) and human society. A broad look at the selected Francophone African novels –*Les bouts des bois de Dieu*, *La grève des bàttu*, *Les vertiges du trône*, *Une si longue lettre*, *Rebelle* and *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*– demonstrates that economic exploitation, political corruption, poverty and oppression of women are common contemporary realities in African societies. Most of these social ills are caused by bad governance, the unfair distribution of wealth/economic resources, and blind adherence to cruel traditions and religious ideologies. The use of all these variables and factors makes it possible to examine the revolutionary functionality of the selected Francophone African novels.

In short, the revolutionary consciousness and rebellion in the selected novels constitute three developmental stages, namely: (a) self-awareness/self-discovery, (b) protest (revolt to reclaim what belongs to you), and (c) establishment of social transformation through a new and better social order to mark the stage of “permanent victory”. And this process has been demonstrated in the current study.

The Africans in the selected novels revolt when they experience a sharp gap between what their life is and what their life ought to be. This often leads to instances of socio-political violence. That is, conflict which is caused by frustration and can be explained by relative deprivation, part of Marxist theory, which we have adopted as the theoretical framework. The ideas expressed in these novels can be traced to the disparity between groups' expectations and the real access to prosperity and power they have, as indicated in the relationship between the downtrodden and those characters from the upper classes.

Sembène Ousmane, Mariama Bâ and Fatou Keïta search for a redefinition of the role of women within male-dominated societies, among other things. They adopt gender as an instrument of socio-cultural, political and economic liberation for African society, while Ferdinand Oyono, Aminata Sow Fall and Patrick Ilboudo intend to deconstruct political and religious hypocrisy to encourage more desirable developments. Sembène Ousmane, like Ferdinand Oyono in *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, uses *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* as a metaphor for colonial rule, while Patrick Ilboudo, Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ and Fatou Keïta use *Les vertiges du trône*, *La grève des bàttu*, *Une si longue lettre* and *Rebelle*, respectively, as a metaphor for African democratic failure. The novels, as a matter of fact, examine the issues of good and bad governance in Africa, with the central idea of redressing various forms of colonial and post-independent madness in African societies. The writers attempt to establish a meeting point between critical realism and socialist realism. In the words of Akoh (2009: 266), the novelists' artistic creations are rooted in the “aesthetic ideology of popular justice”.

Even if the ideological stance of those selected African novelists is not overtly and explicitly to propel revolution, the writers, without doubt, strongly condemn the destructive power of the ruling class both during the colonial era and after. Whether one likes it or not, people's lives depend on the economic situations that surround them, as human society is controlled by its pressure of production. Material circumstances are based on economic conditions, and are important to the survival of any society. The ideological space that comes from human experiences in a society brings about the historical situation of any specific context.

Marxists also work to expose ideologies which cause the marginalization of women with a view to bringing about a positive social change, so that the worth of everybody can be fully attained and appreciated for collective societal growth and development. It is, therefore, clear that literature shares its destiny with societal forces. For instance, one has seen how Aminata Sow Fall condemns the carefree attitude of government towards the welfare of the masses in society. Using the beggars as a reference point, she reveals that neglecting any part of the system, no matter how "insignificant" it might seem, will spell doom for the society at large in the long run, particularly those at the top who have caused the neglect of the so-called poor masses. This is because there will come a time when the services of the poor will definitely be needed. She also rejects the excesses of men with regard to women by frowning at polygamy as well as the poverty and early marriages of young African girls. On her part, Mariama Bâ, denounces in strong terms polygamy, poverty, and the poor attention paid to the education of children, especially girls, along with child marriages and female marginalization in politics.

Today, African writers have deconstructed the patterns of life of the perceived "savage people" of the colonies. It is clear that African literature investigates, interrogates and evaluates African societies. However, it must be stressed that such evaluations should take into account the contemporary social realities which are anchored by the existing moral ethics, societal norms and values in an African context. This study has attempted to show that the selected Francophone African novels – Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des bàttu*, Patrick Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône* and Fatou Keita's *Rebelle* – are focused on the poor living conditions that exist in their societies socially, politically, economically, culturally and psychologically, both during and after the colonial era. This is to raise people's awareness and mobilize them for a positive change.

The novelists thus use their works to raise the consciousness of their people with a view to encouraging them to oppose any repressive and irresponsible government, not only at the time of decolonization but also after the perceived political independence and liberation of their nations. References to towns or cities such as Dakar, Bamako and Thiès validate the much talked about correlation between society and literature. The railway workers' strike in Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* is in fact a revolt

against all forms of discrimination, using the social, political and economic structures of the railway system as a symbolic representation of these. This underscores the didactic value of a literary text, composition or any other work of art, and proves that art is more than something just for its own sake or purpose. It is also made clear that corrupt leaders employ religion as a means of manipulating the masses to exploit them in return. Sembène Ousmane interrogates all these practical social variables that must be addressed if we must move on happily with our lives.

There are usually two unequal worlds in the selected African novels. The masses that are often the oppressed stand in for the African worldview, while the remaining few characters represent the Western world. The handful characters that symbolize the West dominate the more innocent masses, and see themselves as lords. They are often the colonial masters, the missionaries or the post-independence African leaders. They deceive the Africans by giving them gifts such as salt, mirrors, whisky, and medals. Using the case of Ferdinand Oyono's *Meka*, one can ask what kind of medals? A conscious analysis of the situation in Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* and Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* reveals that there is complicity in these issues of medals and gifts, which turn out to be worthless and useless. The medals and gifts are born of hypocrisy or mediocrity, which keep the oppressed in perpetual and stupid submission. Akingbe et al. (2011) are of the opinion that there is no doubt about the relationship between literature and society, which they feel is so close as to be virtually symbiotic. Knowingly or unknowingly, creative writers inject fresh ideas that can (re)shape the agenda for nation building. In this context education is good, as it helps people to know their rights and demand them. It is a tool for civilization, as seen mainly in characters such as Bakayoko, Ramatoulaye, and Malimouna.

In *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Ferdinand Oyono has identified bad governance, repressive policies, corruption and selfishness as factors responsible for the underdevelopment and the protracted disturbances of African communities. Literature is an agent of social change and its suggestions on issues can be applied to solve social problems through mobilization and enlightenment, thus enabling social integration, development and global advancement. There is a definite dialectical relationship between literature and social class, and *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, like the other selected Francophone African novels, is a social satire, which seeks socio-cultural, political and economic transformation, having revealed the imperfections of man. The author criticizes all that appears to be a plague on Africa's political landscape, which has crippled its socio-political and economic development. From this study it is clear that during the colonial period exploitation and brutalization were the means by which Africans were made aware of the realities of French oppression in Africa. The natives suffered economic and socio-cultural oppression, especially in the hinterland, as a result of colonial rule, although it is also shown that a major cause of these people's suffering is that they are predominantly polygamists. The story moves from innocence to the stage of awareness and re-orientation,

and at the end Meka both loses the medal of friendship and his faith in Catholicism and Christianity.

In Ilboudo's *Les vertiges* . . . , President Benoît Wédraogo, in spite of his magical powers, is eventually humiliated by the masses that he once oppressed and treated as nothing. The interesting thing here is that literature has taught leaders in different societies around the world not to abandon the common people for any reason, at any time. Killing and brutalization in any form must be stopped. It is, however, a happy thing that through collective responsibility the oppressed can come together, work to displace the government that victimizes or dehumanizes them, and thereby overturn an unwanted social order. The issue of docile populations in some of the sub-Sahara African states should also be addressed.

Such African novels, according to Sanusi (2009: 118; 2011: 213), are "postcolonial African narratives that successfully depict attitudes of independent African leaders and show them as oppressors of their own people." The use of madman in literary texts is not common in the African literary scene, with just a handful of notable examples, such as those in Chinua Achebe's short story, "The Madman", Wole Soyinka's play, *Madmen and Specialists*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel, *L'aventure ambiguë* and now, Patrick Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône* are examples. Ilboudo's madman, Gom Naba, is a character with multiple identities: a storyteller, philosopher, poet, singer, rebel and/or a mouthpiece of the masses. The character traits of Gom Naba reveal the revolutionary consciousness as well as the rebellious tendencies of Ilboudo, the novelist himself. Patrick Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône*, Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des battù* and Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* are novels of protest in the Franco-African fictional arena, which demonstrate the authors' inclination for revolutionary consciousness and rebellion.

Indeed, the profound quest for positive social change sustains the artistic creations of the selected novelists and constitutes the essentials of their literary works, in terms of sincerity of purpose and message. They believe this development must come through a revolution occasioned by the people's awareness of their socio-political situations and their decision to change society. According to Afanasyev, (1980: 386) "le véritable art a été d'une aide immense à l'homme. Il l'a aidé dans sa conquête aux exploits guerriers" (The good art has been of great help to mankind. It has helped him in his conquest like the military exploits) [my own translation].

As long as people around the world, and particularly in Africa and other developing regions, continue to wallow in bad governance, as seen in unemployment, insecurity, poverty, crime and the lack of human dignity, some writers will continue to enact protest narratives to demonstrate their Marxist tendencies with the intention of displacing the unwanted oppressive social order. Termssuch as "our *mùmú don do*", "we *no go gree*" and "revolution now!" will continue to spread to reflect the feelings of the masses. As

suffering people show their disillusionment, anger and dissatisfaction towards their neglect in the affairs of the state, there will always be social unrest, chaos and even violent conflicts. For instance, a military junta, led by a 25-year old man, recently overthrew the ‘democratically elected’ government in Mali, a West African country which is tied to irresponsible and oppressive governance.

3 CONCLUSION

In summary, this study establishes that literature can play a major role in the social transformation agenda of a community or society as a whole. Literary works are not only for entertainment, they express ideas, pass information, and transmit culture and tradition from generation to generation, preserving and promoting cultural heritage as well as teaching moral values. By exposing and correcting social vices and follies, literature is also capable of institutionalizing social change. Through this, citizens can become more mobilized in the project of national rebuilding and committed to replacing the colonial or neo-colonial order with a better one. It is believed that such a perceived new order will foster sustainable development. Creative writers and authors generally, as well as journalists, actors and teachers of literature, all benefit from the economic function of literature, and this has a direct connection with social transformation. It is therefore worth noting again that literature – like art in general – is not simply for its own sake, as it has the power to contribute meaningfully to the affairs of any given society.

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POVZETEK

VLOGA LITERATURE: REINTERPRETACIJA ŠESTIH FRANKOFONSKIH AFRIŠKIH ROMANOV

Literatura je odprt pojem. Gre za umetnostno zvrst, ki upodablja človekovo zgodovino, izkušnje, domišljijo, opažanja, predvidevanja in predloge v izbranem trenutku razvoja dane družbe. Tako fikcijsko kot tudi stvarno literaturo je mogoče ustvariti v govornjeni ali pisani besedi. Razprave o literaturi pogosto obravnavajo vprašanje, ali literatura nastaja zaradi same sebe ali nemara ne prispeva k razvoju družbe, v kateri je nastala. V prispevku poskušamo odgovoriti na vprašanje, kako je vloga literature obravnavana v izbranih frankofonskih romanih afriških avtorjev in avtoric. V raziskavi smo se osredotočili na romane *Božji koščki lesa* pisatelja Sembèna Ousmana, *Dolgo dolgo pismo* pisateljice Mariame Bâ, *Starec in medalja* pisatelja Ferdinanda Oyonoja, *La grève des bàttu* pisateljice Aminate Sow Fall, *Les vertiges du trône* pisatelja Patricka Ilboudoja in *Rebelle* pisateljice Fatou Keïta. Za omenjena literarna dela smo se odločili zaradi izrazite težnje njihovih avtorjev in avtoric po družbeni preobrazbi. V pričujočem prispevku želimo bralce in bralke ozavestiti ter jih vzpodbuditi k pozitivnim spremembam. Teoretični temelj prispevka je marksistična teorija, ki se osredotoča na literarni opis razrednega boja z željo po dekonstrukciji obstoječih kapitalističnih teženj v družbi. Raziskava je pokazala, da se obravnavani romani osredotočajo na opis slabega družbeno-političnega, ekonomskega, kulturnega in psihološkega stanja, ki je zaznamovalo tako kolonialno kot tudi postkolonialno obdobje afriških držav. Na podlagi analize izbranih literarnih del lahko ugotovimo, da literatura bralcem pomaga pri spopadanju z družbeno-kulturnimi, političnimi, ekonomskimi, verskimi in drugimi izzivi, s katerimi se v procesu samospoznavanja soočajo ob stiku z bolj ali manj neposrednim okoljem. Literatura torej omogoča pozitivne družbene spremembe.

Ključne besede: literatura, družbena preobrazba, afriški romani, francoski izraz, marksizem

ABSTRACT

FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE: A NEW READING OF SIX FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN NOVELS

Literature is an open concept and a creative art which expresses human history, experiences, imagination, observations, predictions and suggestions at a particular time in a given society. Either as fiction or non-fiction, literature can be rendered in both spoken and written words. It is often argued whether literature is for itself or the development of the society that produces it. This study, therefore, interrogates how the selected Francophone African novels, namely Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre*

et la médaille, Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des bàttu*, Patrick Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône* and Fatou Keïta's *Rebelle*, depict the function of literature. The novelists are selected because of their inclination towards the social transformation paradigm. The purpose of this paper is to raise people's awareness and mobilize them towards positive change. Based on close reading, the paper is built around Marxist theory which is interested in the class struggle as demonstrated in a literary text, with a view to deconstructing the existing capitalist tendencies in a given society. The findings reveal that the selected novels are focused on the poor conditions socio-politically, economically, culturally and psychologically that exist both during and after the colonial era. The paper concludes that literature helps readers to cope with the socio-cultural, political, economic, religious and other challenges of their immediate as well as remote environments through the process of self-discovery. As such, positive social change is possible through literature.

Keywords: literature, social transformation, African novels, French expression, Marxism