Volume 13 Issue 37
Originally issued as A6

Global Journal of human social science
Arts & Humanities
Volume 13 Issue 6 Version 1.0 Year 2013
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Beyond Racism: A Study of Sembène Ousmane's Les Bouts De Bois De Dieu

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Abstract- An essential ingredient is missing in "Art for art's sake." That vacuum is the functionality of the art. Art cannot solely be for its own purpose because it is a social creation. A given human society gives birth to its creation and production to reflect on human living conditions, actions, inactions and experiences among other things. For Africa and its people, functional art is the ultimate. An art, which does not only inject its aesthetic values but also teaches moral, transmits cultural values, improves vocabulary pool and heals broken hearts with a view to developing human society, is the kind of creativity or art favourable to Africa sphere. And, by extension, we believe the entire world will benefit from such art in this century, where cultural matters generate serious debates. In this study, we attempt to validate that African literature contributes to the decolonization and the eventual political liberation of African countries by examining the connection between literature and society. Using Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu as platform and adopting sociological criticism as our theoretical framework, the paper concludes that African literature is a panacea to the development of human consciousness and consequent societal advancement.

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GJHSS-A Classification : *FOR Code: 130201p, 190499*



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I. Introduction

Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu, published in 1960, is primarily an account of historical railway workers' strike of the 1940s. Precisely in1948, Senegalese railway workers embark on an industrial action against the high-handedness of the French colonialists. The natives frown at the insensitivity of the self-made Lords, who continuously victimize them on their own God given land. The sordid human living condition of the natives and their low profile status as workers of the railway fuel the struggle.

The strike is not just walking away from work or duty posts; it also symbolizes walking away from racial discrimination and oppression. It is a brave attempt to demand social justice and, or fairness in all ramifications. It is a symbolic walking away from imported social order, which the Senegalese" natives described as "modern life". During the strike, the natives are sapped; their fundamental human rights are restricted, food and water is difficult to get, many people, especially children and the aged people die. Indeed, the Senegalese nationals are repressed by the entire social order of that period.

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Besides all these indices of racism, the writer identifies other salient social matters such as religion, language, women emancipation, poverty, corruption, courage/perseverance, forgiveness and reconciliation as parts of what can hinder the development of human societies. It is against these issues in the African polity, particularly Senegal that Sembène Ousmane writes Les bouts de bois de Dieu to revolt the said inadequacies.

This paper is aimed at identifying the characteristics of the sociological criticism method to literature as expressed in Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu, with the intention of demonstrating the functions of literature in nation building and, or global sustainable development. The motive of our novelist is to hang various forms of colonial and neo-colonial madness. Fofana (2004) remarks thus: "One of the many changes that came about after Senegal achieved its independence in 1960 was that the leadership of the country was inherited by Senegalese nationals. The expectation was that they would be more concerned about the socio-economic welfare of the people than the French colonialists. . ." Of course, as a result of untold disappointment from fellow Africans, Sembène Ousmane does not pardon his erring African brothers in his numerous works of art.

With the use of protest writing, militant but reasonable African creative writers condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material development in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence.

In scholarly studies over the years, the inter-relationship between literature and society has been strongly attested. The writer or artist is an individual subject to emotions and feelings and he/she is a product of certain social make-ups in which literary work is potentially a response. Sartre (1948) observes thus; "The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it,"

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Warner Berthoff (1981) asserts: "… literature itself has its own purpose and determinants… never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time… but it never speaks for the totality of that culture," Therefore, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced and this fact has been demonstrated by Sembène Ousmane. Since social problems are systemic things; literature as a product of a given human society can be employed to solve or at least to reduce social challenges by consistently discussing such issues and recommending functional remedies to the identified perceived social hindrances, disturbances or impediments.

Literature is designed on the basis of prevailing daily or persistent events both socio-culturally and ideologically. As an open concept, it is seen and described variously by different people. Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It is equally, at the same time too, a means of expressing ideas, views, opinions, experiences, feelings, body of knowledge, cultural values as well as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be a medium of apprehending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development and/or positive social changes in different societies of the world.

II. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on faction, an aspect of sociology of literature; that is, sociological approach to the study of literature, which holds that literature and other forms of creative arts, should be examined in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received. This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society.

To better understand a writer's literary work(s), it may probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be "the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature" because it (the approach) takes into consideration "everything within our society which has informed the work", Abiola Irele (1971).

The term "faction" in the words of Emenyonu (1991) is the art of "juxtaposing real and identifiable facts with fiction". Cuddon (1998) attests that faction originated around 1970 in United States to describe fictions which are blended with facts. He argued further by citing Truman Capote's In Cold Blood (1996) and Norman Mailer's Armies of the Night (1968) as examples of faction. In Nigerian literary palace, Kole Omotosho's Just before Dawn (1988), Wole Soyinka's Isara (1989) and Uche Mowah's Eating by the Flesh (1995) are categorized as faction. Cuddon upholds that faction as a literary genre might easily apply to historical novels which fictionalize a great deal of periods, facts or novels incorporating actual living personalities in a narrative that deals with recent events pertaining to historical facts. Tulloch also agrees with the view of Cuddon by painting faction as a blend of fact and fiction.

According to Tulloch (2002), the word, faction is morphologically derived by telescoping the terms "fact" and "fiction". It is believed that faction offers a more direct critic on events and personalities in a given human society and can therefore be used to positively reform the society. Hence, it is an essential feature of satire; a literary composition, which exposes the follies and the vices of people or an individual in a ridiculous manner in an attempt to correct them. In other words, scholars who adopt this theoretical framework are of the view that literature should perform one function or a set of functions, which ranges from aesthetic function; didactic function, therapeutic function and educational function to linguistic function.

By performing aesthetic function, literature appeals to the sense of beauty. To scholars in this field, literature should serve the purpose of delighting, pleasing, enchanting, satisfying and inventive to touch, see, feel, behold and to sense. Literature is in fact, a means of entertainment. This aesthetic function is largely influenced by the ideology of "art for art's sake" (L'art pour l'art).

Through didactic function, we expect literature to perfect or correct man's imperfections and shortfalls by teaching certain moral lessons, norms, values and virtues. This pedagogic ingredient present in literature is estimated to moralize and preach moral uprightness as a way of combating different forms of ills or vices in a particular human society. Scholars in this regard wish to see and ascertain the extent to which a text, a literary composition: drama, poetry or prose portrays morality or immorality.

They try to understand whether characters in a work of art are morally sound or morally found wanting. Also, they try to see if a given piece of art puts virtue over and above vices and so on.

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Literature is without doubt, expected to perform the function of healing which we described as therapeutic function. Readers are expected to be healed or cured of emotional, psychological, economic, pathological and/or socially related health challenges through reading a text, watching a drama or listening to the recitation of a poem. It is again believed that literature can be employed to develop the language of both the writers and the readers. While benefiting from the pleasure of narration, which enables a writer to create a new world, Sembène Ousmane is able to fictionalize real people and events in his novel, Les bouts de bois de Dieu as does in his other novels and films.

Faction fills the existing gaps in our knowledge as regards the private lives of great men and women and even nations that history has refused to cover. This blend of fact and fiction meets a serious need for authenticity in works of arts; especially literature. Faction or if you like, call it historical fiction starts with songs and epic poems. It can be argued that history is the "fact" while the blanks filled by novelists or playwrights are described as "fiction". Literature as a product of a particular place and period has become the most useful instrument to address events which are too large or vast for a perfect digestion in seriously historic form; the base of literature no doubt is history; as fiction emanates from fact. Even in the documentation of real events, creation unavoidably plays a role; the entire story does not merit telling, there are often selections and emphasis on the most striking events and synthesis. Fiction can teach and edify us apart from providing us with new objects for social feeling and knowledge. Hence, through literature, we are able to make up for the deficiencies in real life; with adventures, one is able to participate imaginatively and can arrive at new ideas, innovations or knowledge.

III. Discussion

The racial discrimination and the unjust treatment which characterized the colonial imperialism is captured in Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu. At the initial stage of the story, Tiémoko, one of the striking railway workers laments thus: "We're the ones who do the work . . . the same work the white men do. Why then should they be paid more? Because they are white? And when they are sick, why should they be taken care of while we and our families are left to starve? Because we are black? In what way is a white child better than a black child? In what way is a white worker better than a black worker?" (p. 8). Africans are to the whites as mere children: "They are children, that's all. Somebody has put some wild ideas in their heads, but they'll see sooner or later this strike is going to cost them a lot more than they can possibly gain from it." (p. 167). The issue of racism is further x-rayed in the novel when the novelist paints the atmosphere which envelops Dakar toward the end of the story: "Protective cordons of troops formed a virtual barricade between the native quarters and the residential and commercial avenues of the European quarter, and the enforced segregation had created strain and unrest on both sides of the wall." (p. 205). Also, derogatory words such as savage and pigs, which the whites used in describing the Africans in the story, indicate colour superiority.

Having validated the issue of racism, it is important to discuss other social issues which a thorough and in-depth reading of Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu has revealed. Apart from the family, school and mass media, religion is another major agent of socialization. It is a way of show-casing people's way of life through worship. Religion is an integral aspect of culture since it has to do with a people's mode of life. Every act of worship is a rite or ritualistic in nature. Religious matters are archetypal subjects not only in African literature but also in other arts around the world.

Ideologically, Sembène Ousmane is dissatisfied with the Islamic culture in his creative writings particularly polygamy and fanaticism. He equally frowns at using religion to adjust, direct or control people's minds to achieve personal interests, which in most cases are laced with exploitative tendencies. It is hard to forget the character of El Hadji Mabiqué, who does not share food with his own sister. Instead of helping his relatives at the time of need is preaching gospel to the helpless woman. In his words he says: "I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place, and a certain role to every man, and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The toubabs are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God, and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it- why, look, they have even turned off the water…" (p. 45).

The hypocritical tendency of this perceived devoted Muslim, El Hadji Mabigué is further consolidated by the various derogatory words his sister, Ramatoulaye used in painting him. He is called a fornicator, a thief and an old she-goat! (p. 45). Similarly, the chief Imam of Dakar is implicitly an agent of French imperialism. This can be confirmed through his role when he mediates between Ramatoulaye and the police, and his speech at the racecourse. The Imam rejects the strike action embarked upon by the railway workers. "…the imams and the priests of other sects. After the prayers and religious services all over the city, there would be a sermon whose theme was always the same: By ourselves, we are incapable of creating any sort of useful object, not even a needle; and yet you want to strike against the toubabs who have brought us all of these things! It is madness! You would do better to be thanking God for having brought them among us and bettering our lives with the benefits of their civilization

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and their Science" (p. 206)|. However, Sembène Ousmane loves the kind of faithfulness displayed by Fa Keita, who continued to observe his prayer despite the humiliation he suffered in the hand of Bernadini, the commandant in the prison; believing that what is worth doing at all, is worth doing well. Let us take a peep into the picture of a scene at the camp: "And as Fa Keïta began to kneel, the commandant's boot caught him in the kidney and hurled him head first into the strands of barbed wire. Little drops of blood flecked the skin of the old man's shoulders and back…" (p. 236).

With this, the writer manifests his ideological stance on religion. It is obvious that Sembène Ousmane is upset because he sees religion as a tool employed by the ruling elite to manipulate the masses so as to achieve personal gains.

The writer, Sembène Ousmane extends his discussion to cultural consciousness particularly the issue of language. He condemns the neglect suffers by African indigenous languages in the hands of Africans themselves. This cultural denial is indeed shameful. Culture is significantly the base of every human race and of course, every man. Any form of education; formal or informal is expected to be primarily for the inculcation of culture and its values as no educational system can survive without the Humanities. Sapir (1921) sees culture as "What a society does and thinks"; it is the "socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives". From this statement, one can deduce that through the observation of a people's beliefs and practices, one can identify their culture. Culture is the pivot of any human society. Whoever acknowledges and identifies with the cultural practices of his community is an acceptable member of such society. Goudenough (1964) defines culture thus; "Whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to members and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. This position, which we identified with, is again validated by Okeh (2003), when he observes that culture is "the dearest possession of any human group and any human being. Anyone cut off from his culture is poor indeed… Problems rooted on culture therefore take time to eradicate because customs and traditions cannot be done away with overnight."

The novelist craves our indulgence on the question of language when Niakoro, the oldest woman in the story lashes out at Ad'jibid'ji for the girl's ceaseless speaking of the white man's tongue. "Ever since I was born – and God knows that was a long time ago – I have never heard of a white man who had learned to speak Bambara, or any other language of this country. But you rootless people think only of learning his, while our language dies." p. 4. It is worrisome that most African languages are going into extinction because the natives have adopted their colonial master's language as their lingua franca; official language for administrative purposes, educational and/or commercial purposes at the expense of their own indigenous languages.

Consolidating the writer's position on the sorrow state of abandonment, which African languages are subjected, he uses Bakayoko to debunk a fellow African, Beaugosse. He says: "You can keep your French for yourself… The men will understand you better if you speak their language." (p. 188). This calls for national consciousness in the area of language. For instance, I see no reason why native languages cannot be used teaching and learning purposes in African schools.

Another social issue the writer raised in Les bouts de bois de Dieu is corruption. As an old trade, the novelist does not vindicate the whites from this illicit practice. Lawal (1989) affirms; "Corruption is dishonest or illegal behavior, especially of people in authority, or it is the act of effect of making somebody change from moral to immoral standard of behavior." In the story, Dejean, Victor, Dejean's chief assistant, Isnard, the director of the repairs shop and Leblanc are all corrupt. They plan to win the leaders of the striking workers by bribing them: "We can either buy off the most important leaders – for a price, in return, of course – or work on some of the others and try to build up a rival union."(p. 32). Bakayoko openly confirms the corrupt nature of African leaders, which is the bane of under developed economy we are witnessing all over the places in Africa and the eventual mistrust and so much hatred among the people."We know them, and that we think of them. There are some of them who, before their election, did not even own a second pair of paints. Now they have apartments, villas, automobiles, bank accounts, and they own stock in companies…" (p. 184). This revelation has adequately captured the situation of African polity without being sentimental.

One of the practical realities in Africa is poverty. Inadequate social infrastructures and lack of social welfare and security take the central stage. Coates and Silbourn (1983) observe that; "Poverty is a common phenomenon in capitalistic societies or competitive economies. Poverty is the manifestation of the unequal distribution of wealth, income, power, and it epitomizes the structural inequalities in the societies." This view point is again supported in 1993 by Mohuddin, who defines poverty as "Households inability to provide sufficient income to satisfy the needs for food, shelter, education, clothing and transportation." As a matter of fact, the image of African society painted in Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bios de Dieu reveals that there is a first class poverty in Africa. Look at this unpleasant description: "Constantly hungry, naked children, with sunken chests and swollen bellies, argued with the vultures… there were houses made of wood. Unsteady houses, shored up with beams or trunks of trees, ready to fall down at the first gust of wind…" p. 13. As though that was not enough, we are equally made to see more

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of this ugly situation on page 166, where the writer writes: "In the district around the airfield, the houses are nothing but rats' nests. They were swarming with vermin, and my God, the smell…"

In an unsettled state, riots and break down of law and order take the central stage. Undetermined number of casualties: the wounded/injured and the dead are often dotted the land. This situation therefore calls for courage in order to with stand the storm, which comes with social disorderliness or insecurity. In other words, there is a need for uncompromising bravery at any trying time. The African masses demonstrated this striking feature in Les bouts de bois de Dieu. "The days passed, and the nights. There was no new, except what every passing hour brought to every home and that was always the same; the foodstuffs were gone, the meager savings eaten up, and there was no money in the house… Hunger set in; and men, women, and children grew thinner. But they held on. Meetings were held more frequently, the directors of the union intensified their activities, and everyone swore not to give in."(p. 33). The underlined clauses confirm the courage and the zealousness of the suffering Africans.

Still on courage, Doudou displayed his commitment and honesty in an attempt to reconstruct the social order. He rejects both the post and money promised him by the white imperialists. Let us hear him: "Three million francs is a lot of money for a Negro lathe operator… but even three million francs won't make me white. I would rather have the ten minutes for tea and remain a Negro." (p. 151). This uncommon level of integrity is all that the novelist preaches for so as to move the world towards sustainable developments. Nothing good comes easy; there are prices to be paid and, or sacrifices to be made for greatness, development or a happy living. In the camp, the Africans that were thrown into prison endured a lot of hardships. Fa Keïta, Salifou, Konaté and other prisoners of war/strike tasted hell yet they endured. Happy enough, the courage brings about celebration at the end. "Conditions accepted. Strike terminated."(p. 238).

The Africans demonstrate an unconditional love among themselves. This solidarity confirms the community life-style as a way of life in Africa. This idea of love, brotherhood and collective responsibility can be practically illustrated through the character of Dieynaba. She takes care of some of the Africans who are injured during the face-off between the striking workers and the soldiers. "Dieynaba had transformed the house into an infirmary. She had torn up every piece of material she could lay her hands on and was bathing the wounded with salt water. Mariame Sonko was helping her… and bring back some fresh. Fetch some plantain leaves, too, but put lots of salt in the water before you soak the leaves" (p. 27).

Indeed, decolonization in African states is achieved in part through African literature. At independence and in the post-independence, the realities of human condition and, or contemporary realities are the basis for African literature be it poetry, drama or prose. "African literature explores the realities of human condition in Africa in totality and it speculates what is and what is not to be. In so doing, the minds of the people are sharpened and sensitized towards qualitative change…"(Balogun, 2010).

In Les bouts de bois de Dieu, women emancipation featured as one of the fundamental social issues that the novelist discussed. Walter (2008) defines emancipation as "the process of giving people social or political freedom and rights." That is, to release people from any form of bondage or oppression occasioned by cruel authority, culture or religious practices among other things. The women of Sembène Ousmane in his artistic creation, Les bouts de bois de Dieu, freed themselves from the perceived socio-political, cultural and religious restrictions by confronting the colonial imperialists, which the railway company authority symbolizes during the time under review. This act has raised a serious national consciousness. The initial state of indifference displayed by the women notwithstanding, they drag on and withstand the storm when the events in the story get to its climax. They intervene at the moment that is most important and appreciated. Apart from holding the families together, they work tirelessly to sustain their sapped families and revolt against the unfairness of the colonial rule. To mark the revolutionary implication of the industrial action embarked upon by the railway African workers, the novelist redirects the usual traditional gender role. For we see men fetch water and walk behind the women agitators. The character of Penda, a prostitute, who becomes a leader during the strike, is a new order especially in Senegal, a Muslim country. Women are allowed to speak and contribute freely in the public at a time when crucial decisions are to be taken. "The idea of women addressing a meeting as important as this was still unfamiliar..." (p. 92). Even the strikers accept the changing social order without grumbling: "We are not ashamed to admit that it is the women who are supporting us now." (p. 93). On page 187, Bakayoko, one of the powerful master minders of the strike, announces publicly: "Our gallant women have something to say to us… They have the right to be heard!"

This writer's opinion suggests that the women should be reckoned with in whatever the men do if human societies must develop. This feminist position has been practically proved right by the activities of the women of Dakar, who dared the police, the militiamen, the soldiers and their weapons and the women of Thiès, who marched to Dakar to express their dissatisfaction against colonial excesses as captured in the behavior of the management of the railway company in the story, Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu.

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The novelist also underscores the fact that forgiveness and reconciliation are necessary ingredients in moving human societies forward at all times. We need to learn how to reflect soberly on our actions, forgive those who wrong us and reconcile with them. In the words of Fa Keïta, he advises thus: "… If a man like that is killed, there is always another to take his place. That is not the important thing. But to act to that no man dares to strike you because he knows you speak the truth, to act so that you can no longer be arrested because you are asking for the right to live, to act so that all of this will end, both here and elsewhere: that is what should be in your thoughts. That is what you must explain to others, so that you will never again be forced to bow down before anyone, but also so that no one shall be forced to bow down before you…because hatred must not dwell with you." (p. 240). Among African themselves, Awa demonstrated the need for sober reflection and reconciliation when she overtly approached Yaciné and said: "I came to ask you to forgive me. Out there I was tired and out of my head with the heat, and I lied. You are not a deume." (p. 202).

Through the character of Ramatoulaye, the novelist expresses his position on the commitment, which every good leader deserves. The woman remarks: "When you know that the life and the spirit of others depend on your life and your spirit, you have no right to be afraid – even when you are terribly afraid. In the cruel times we are living through, we must find our own strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard." (p. 69).

In sum, the actions of the masses presented in Sembène Ousmane's Les bouts de bois de Dieu is validated by the view of Balzer (1994), who observes that: "When key crystallizing political events cause people who had previously thought of themselves as mildly aware of their ethnic identity to become dramatically defensive and passionately angered, precisely these people become the fulcrum of more radical brands of nationalism. Issues of leadership, land claims, historical grievances, refugees, national chauvinism, and popular front strategy then become mixed to create a potentially incendiary interethnic dynamic."

IV. Conclusion

In this study, it is established that the oppressed behave as true agitators, struggling for positive social reformation. They are adequately mobilized in the project of national rebuilding. They are committed to replacing the colonial order with a more friendly order, which will foster sustainable developments. Hence, the result of this study consolidates that art is not just for its own sake, it also performs the functions of developing human societies. We have attempted to demonstrate that *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960), translated in English language as *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) x-rays racism, religion, language consciousness, corruption, poverty, courage, women emancipation and preaches for genuine forgiveness, acknowledgement, sincere love, unflinching support for one another and appreciation of one another so that people of different backgrounds and interests can live together mutually anywhere in the world.

This underscores the didactic value of literary text, composition or any other arts for that matter 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 adjusting the minds of the masses to exploit them in return. Sembène Ousmane interrogates all these practical social variables so that they can be adequately addressed if we must move on happily with our lives.

Akingbe N, Ogunyemi CB, Otemuyiwa AA. (2011) "There can be no doubt that the relationship between literature and society is as close as to be virtually symbiotic." By injecting fresh ideas, whether consciously or unconsciously, into the affairs of their society, artists shape or reshape agenda for national development. We therefore recommend that education is good. It helps people to know their rights and demand for them. It is a tool for civilization as we have seen mainly in the character of Bakayoko.

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