

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND HUMANISM RESTORATION

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Résumé : Les différentes définitions de la littérature la présentent plus comme un instrument fictif de divertissement que comme un outil de changement social. Si on considérait la littérature comme étant effectivement un outil de changement social, dans quelle mesure les écrivains et les lecteurs ont-ils recouru à cet outil pour réaliser un changement? Rares sont les exemples de littérature utilisée explicitement à des fins de résolution des conflits au niveau national et international. Pourtant, la création littéraire est l'œuvre d'écrivains intellectuels dont l'influence sur la masse ne peut être négligée. Les textes littéraires sont destinés à la consommation par un public tellement large qu'il va au-delà des frontières géographiques et linguistiques. De la sorte, la littérature a une influence considérable sur les lecteurs et sur le monde dans son ensemble. Écrit sous une approche formaliste, cet article analyse la relation entre la littérature, la résolution des conflits et l'humanisme. Il se focalise sur deux textes principaux: *Invisible Man* de Ralph Ellison et *Time of the Butcherbird* d'Alex la Guma, afin d'étudier le rôle potentiel de la littérature dans la résolution des conflits et dans la restauration de l'humanisme dans un monde menacé par les discriminations de tout genre. L'analyse part du prédicat selon lequel les conflits internes et internationaux peuvent être mieux compris et résolus à travers l'outil littéraire.

Mots-clés: résolution de conflits, humanisme, discrimination raciale, littérature, Ubuntu

Abstract: The different definitions of literature present it more as a tool for entertainment than an instrument for social change. Assuming that literature is indeed a tool for social change, how far have writers and readers resorted to this tool to achieve the needed change? Rare are instances of literature being used explicitly for national and international conflict resolution. Yet, creative writers are intellectuals whose influence on the power structure and on the masses cannot be undermined. Literary texts are meant for public consumption, reaching out beyond geographical and linguistic boundaries. As such, literature has a far-reaching influence on readers and on the world as a whole. Written against formalism criticism approach, this article analyses the relationship between literature, conflict resolution and humanism. It looks at two main texts: *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and *Time of the Butcherbird* by Alex la Guma, in order to investigate the potential role of literature in conflict resolution and in restoring humanism where racial discrimination is threatening it. The work anchors on the hypothetical contention that internal and international conflicts can be better understood and solved through the lenses of literature.

Keywords: conflict resolution, humanism, racial discrimination, literature, Ubuntu

Introduction

The history of humanity has demonstrated the power which written texts have on readers. The Protestant Reformation under the great writer Martin Luther King, the English Revolution, the American revolution, especially with the writings of Jonathan Mayhew, Tom Paine and Harriet Stowe Beecher, up to the more recent Arab Spring Revolutions, have a direct link with a great literary work which might have opened readers' mind and justified their need for life-changing revolutions. Indeed, the relationship between literature and life is an old debate. While general opinion tends to limit the role of literature to its entertaining aspect, this article investigates the other non-explored potential which literature has to address real life problems, especially those related to conflict resolution and humanism restoration. A consideration of a literary work's reception is but one argument in support of my claim that literature does more than entertaining. Just think of it: why are some literary works banned? And why is prison/exile a frequently lived experience among writers in developing countries? It is our assumption that the rationale behind the restiveness of a certain category of leaders over a given book is the disturbing nature of its content. Moreover, if we agree with Gayatri Spivak that knowledge expresses the interest of its producer, how can non-westernized countries claim that their written texts will not be naturally exploitative to the masses? In other words, to what extent are readers affected by texts which an artist produced without consulting them? This article aims at using two novels to investigate the role which literature plays in restoring peace and dignity where conflicts and human rights abuse prevail.

In the current age of globalization, issues of war and conflict cannot be overshadowed by too much generalization, which would ignore or undermine regional or national peculiarities. A writer's audience has its own expectations. On the African continent, they might want to know how the writer addresses contemporary topical issues, which include corruption, power abuse, wars and ethnic conflicts, poverty and hunger, overpopulation and low literacy rate, ... Has a creative writer ever consciously achieved this goal? Through what channel? Can literature fix more problems than it does today? This study attempts to answer these questions, using formalist theory as an investigative tool. It is based on two focal texts: *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, and *Time of the Butcherbird* by Alex la Guma. The two novels are particularly unique in their

treatment of racial discrimination, and the authors' obvious attempts to force *Ubuntu*-humanism among individuals formerly divided on racial bases.

1. *Ubuntu*, the Mind and the Pen

Ubuntu as an African version of western humanism is a philosophy that lays emphasis on virtues that make a human being more humane and different from wild beasts. Solidarity and unity are only two of these virtues, fully lived through the taming of the bestial instincts in human beings, and a greater sense of others' welfare which is manifested through rejection of indifference and by a peaceful involvement in action against injustice anywhere it appears. Franz Fanon, one of Africa's greatest outspoken advocates of post-colonial *Ubuntu*, defines humanism in terms of solidarity with the world's suffering, irrespective of race, color or geography. In this respect, a creative writer concerned with promoting humanism has the duty to denounce all forms of evil. Nnolim calls a creative writer's silence over burning issues, either cowardice or crime. In his own words, "...the most serious creative writer must (...) ask himself why he writes. Is he with or against his society or is he a mere entertainer, or does he write for the betterment of his society? Is he a 'safe' writer, a mere polite chronicler of events and suffering from that ashen paralysis which numbs action knowing that evil persists because good men say or do nothing? The serious writer must be committed ...” (Nnolim, 2007:15) Periods of conflicts, war and persecution should be seized as opportunities for writers to champion peace and *Ubuntu*. A creative writer is called to be the eye and the mouthpiece of society, because seeking safety (silence over burning issues) denotes failure to the universal vocation to *Ubuntu*.

In addition to the functions of informing and entertaining, creative writing also educates. At the beginning of any creative work, a writer does not sit and say, “Now let me educate people about this or that”. By simply putting down thought on paper, a writer creates what might be insightful to decision makers and thinkers, and the audience in general. Literature's potential to develop society, to shape civilizations, to change political systems and expose injustice, has been advocated by Baharti Kamik and by C.T. Maduka. *The Intellectual and the Power Structure* is a book which Maduka upholds as mind provoking in the realm of the relationship between literature and society. In his view, “the meaning of life revealed by a literary work of art...often

helps individuals or groups of people to solve the problems that face them in life” (Maduka, 1999 :2). Chinua Achebe also starts from his people’s wisdom, which indirectly makes allusion to that role expected from literature. If his Igbo people believe that “a man who can’t tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body”, the role to tell the people where rain began to beat them befalls the writer (qtd in Emenyonu, 2006: xii). Of special significance are the two opposites: being rain beaten and drying one’s body. The first symbolically refers to situations of distress, and drying one’s body makes allusion to recovering from hardships. A writer’s duty as a chronicler makes of him not only that intellectual whose influence on the power structure is advocated by Maduka, but also, it puts him in a position to build the future from past mistakes.

Harriet Stowe Beecher, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, occupies a privileged place among writers who got inspired by people’s mistakes in order to prepare a better future. Her book played a great role in anti-slavery propaganda, in words recorded by Nnolim as follows: “In the United States of America, the Civil war embarked upon by president Lincoln to emancipate the slaves was supposedly triggered off by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, so that when the author was introduced to Lincoln after the war ended, he asked: ‘are you the little woman who started this war?’” (Nnolim, 2007: 6) A book which triggers off a war is not supposed to be praised for its reconciliatory value, unless we set it in the ancient Romans’ logic according to which ‘whoever wants peace must prepare for war’, which is still a non-avowed motto among many nations. If a single book could have power to revolutionize a system which centuries of revolt, verbal and physical abuses had failed to dismantle, it is a more reason why literature should be repositioned as a tool to end effectively and peacefully national and transnational conflicts.

Albert Camus understood well this duty, by emphasizing on the need for writers to commit their writing to bettering conditions of those to whom dignity and life are denied or suppressed. In his Nobel Prize award speech, he claims that “the silence of an unknown prisoner, abandoned to humiliations at the other end of the world, is enough to bring a writer back from exile” (Camus, 2004:16)¹. The exile Camus refers to is the temptation for writers to close their eyes to the painful realities around them, which in that case turns them into accomplices and partisans of evil. By implication, a writer is expected to be the voice of the voiceless, displaying humanistic

values in ways which, as Fanon observes, should be materialized in the solidarity with the world's suffering, irrespective of race, color or geography. Geographical, linguistic and ethnic barriers cease to exist for writers, who are expected to use the power of the pen to come to the rescue of "prisoners" of human wickedness.

Despite the obvious challenging nature of any mission to change consciousness among illiterate and non-readers, the truth remains that texts exert an impact on leaders, which justifies writers' frequent imprisonments, exile or execution. The lives of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Alex la Guma, Wole Soyinka, Norbert Zongo, Salman Rushdie, Steve Biko, and others too many to mention, are a few examples of the voices which got silenced for the truth they proffer. They exemplify the impossibility to separate art, mission and vision, despite some scholars' assertion that it is a betrayal of art for the writer to put his writings at the service of a cause, even if it is such a noble and uncontroversial cause as education of the people. The view is also shared by Emmanuel Obiechina, whose view is that violence in Nigeria can be ended by creative writing. He maintains that: "the writer in Nigeria of today has to take his position against the oppression of the people, all forms of brutalities, and of unwarranted violence against the masses" (Qtd in Nnolim, 2007:16) Writers, who reportedly form the most respected group among intellectuals, can use all forms of communication channels to criticize oppressive political systems and by this same token, they directly transform it.

A novelist as a teacher teaches about history and values that are a cultural wealth to a given community. His duties, as Chinua Achebe argues, include that of helping a society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of years of denigration and self-abasement (Achebe, 2007: 105). This responsibility, a novelist shares it with playwrights and poets. It is in moments of hardship that a writer is expected to remain serene in mind, look beyond his own plight, and focus on others', stop over and take note of that exact point at which their trouble started. The chronicler's function makes of him a tool through which life is understood and lived with *Ubuntu*.

The strong relationship between literature and life, and its power to change the world from within, can never be overemphasized. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, socio-political circumstances gave to the writer intellectual's adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking

the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and supplying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority (Said, Edward). Literature can recreate optimism where pessimism prevailed, and forgiveness where vindication was the logic. This is true of the United States of America, with her protracted anti-black discrimination, in not yet fully scarified wounds left by apartheid and xenophobia in South Africa, and it can still contribute to peace building in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, constantly ravaged by internal conflicts.

2. Literature as a Uniting Force in America

Since their landing in America as slaves, the African-Americans were considered by the Whites as inferior human beings who were unworthy of all the human rights and dignity. A logical consequence of such a misguided conception of the African race was the latter's subjugation to the white masters, who oppressed and dehumanized them without any report to give to anybody. Attempts to oppose the white racists' other belief that "the African-Americans were ignorant and contented in their idyllic degradation" (Killens, 1965: 123) included various ingenuous initiatives, ranging from disobedience to collective open confrontation. The Blacks reiterated their firm stand to restore human dignity wherever white racial supremacy had destroyed it, as Killens still eloquently articulates it: "yes, we black people stand ready, eager, willing and able to make our contribution to the culture of the world. Our dialogue will not be protest but affirmation of the human dignity of all people everywhere" (Killens, 1965: 357). The impact of their reactions was not going to be felt and enjoyed by themselves alone, but by the oppressed races worldwide. For the time being, focus will be on Ralph Ellison's attempt to enlighten his audience on the consequences of racial hatred, with his classical novel: *Invisible Man*.

The novel centers on an African American reduced to invisibility by the Whites around him, but who finally accommodates with his invisibility and survives despite it. The protagonist, rightly called the Invisible Man by the novelist, adjusts to life in darkness, while openly condemning the humanely degrading conditions in which he is forced to live. Physical violence against oppressors has proved ineffective, for as he states, "no matter how 'biggity' a 'nigguh gits', the white folks can always cut him down" (Ellison, 1995: 53). History had proved that African Americans' attempts to resort to violence and rebellion, as it was the case with Gabriel Prosser

and his group who attempted to attack Richmond (Virginia) in August 1800, or like Nat Turner who, in 1831, led an insurrection of the Blacks in Southampton, had tragically ended. If violence could thus not be advocated as a safe means to enjoy one's place under the sun, nonviolent but direct action became imperative. The Invisible Man is not alone in this advocacy for peaceful action. Martin Luther King Jr. called for a national boycott of public transport to fight racial discrimination, and it produced fruits, at a time when obtaining the dignity for the oppressed race was so pressing an issue that even amidst beatings and imprisonments which had become a common practice, "jail became a mark of honor" (Core, 1965: 97), and not being jailed for that "noble" cause was a sign of betrayal or cowardice. Martin Luther King praises jail for anti-racial motifs as a landmark of greatness: "the non-violent register is willing to accept violence, if necessary, but never to inflict it. He does not seek to dodge jail. If going to jail is necessary, he enters it 'as a bridegroom enters the bride's chamber'" (King, 1965:265). Opposition to oppression calls for solidarity and militancy in dignity as resistance and survival mechanisms.

Ellison uses his novel to condemn all forms of racial discrimination which in reality programmed to kill slowly African Americans, or to keep them unsafe and unsettled, as they seem to be flag bearers of a secret notice intended to heap more troubles on their head: "To Whom It May Concern...keep this nigger boy running" (Ellison, 1995: 53). The white seeing the Africans as an inferior race, and the African Americans seeing the white as the sleeping [unconscious] race (Ellison, 1995:5) are mutual demonization concepts capable of degenerating into a harsher racial discrimination. Interestingly, the writer turns the victimized race into champions: champions of peace, unity, solidarity, and humanism, shifting the oppressors from the central positions they occupy for centuries to the edge, reducing to marginalization those who refuse to see other human beings in the spectrum of dignity, while giving invincibility that category of the oppressed who do not stop being human beings amidst adversity. Ralph Ellison's audience is warned about the unsuspected consequence of being relegated to the lowest economic and social scales. The backyard becomes a place for undisturbed preparation for adjustment and retaliation: "When you have lived invisible as long as I have, you develop a certain sense of ingenuity. I'll solve the problem" (Ellison 1995:7).

The Invisible Man stresses the need to use words to mend the American society. He has an inborn talent for words, and struggles, amidst adversity, to deliver a speech which could create

awareness of the black race's plight in the American society (Ellison 1995: 278). Indeed, the entire novel can be viewed as the writer's public speech, so talentedly handled and hopefully discouraging illusions of one race's superiority over the others. He exemplifies Edward Said's vision on the role of the writer as an intellectual testifying to a country's or region's experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda.

The power of the word is a tool favored by intellectuals to bring about change. It can pass by speeches, as in the case of Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, or in essays such as William Dubois' *The Souls of the Black Folk*, in poetry (Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Imamu Amiri Baraka), or in fiction, as Ellison excels at depicting the plights of the human beings relegated to a state of invisibility by a racist community which decided to dehumanize the African Americans. Words can liberate, especially when they come from intellectuals dedicated to the cause of humanism. Edward Said is of the opinion that *"the intellectual's role is first to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by the combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity—who tend to work in terms of falsified unities, the manipulation of demonized or distorted representations of undesirable and/or excluded populations, and the propagation of heroic anthems sung in order to sweep all before them"* (Said, 2002).

A speech well-handled to meet listeners' expectations can correct past mistakes and fix current problems. The words of Martin Luther King's "I Have A dream" are still inspiring, years after they were said. Booker T. Washington, known by many for his controversial Atlanta speech, used the power of words to advocate friendship across races. To his African fellows, his call was: "cast down your bucket where you are—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races to whom we are surrounded" (Baym, 1989:622). To the Whites, he recommends: "cast down your bucket where you are.... Cast it down among the eight million of negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when you have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides"(Baym, 1989 :622). William E.B. Dubois, on his side, strongly advocates action rather than emotion as an instrument to address racial segregation-related problems: "In art and literature, we should try to loose the tremendous emotional wealth of the Negro and the dramatic strength of his problems through writing, the stage, pageantry and other forms of art. We should resurrect forgotten ancient Negro art and

history, and we should set the black man before the world as both a creative artist and a strong subject for artistic treatment” (Baym, 1989: 623). The importance of verbal or written words, literature, speeches, can’t be emphasized enough.

Ralph Ellison and other African-American writers addressed the plights of the black race, with a hope that this picturesque depiction would lead to oppressors’ behavioral change. Indeed, if the white oppressed under an illusion of racial superiority, the oppressed endeavored to protest through the use of cultural assets, in order to assert their existence, their identity, and their racial pride. In 1926, Langston Hughes started stressing the beauty in the African- American unique identity, and the pride in being black, in an environment where black was previously an object of shame, ridicule and abuse. One understands how revolutionizing he sounded when he voiced out that “we younger Negroes who create...now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame” (Baym, 1989: 97). With time, the group of the oppressed grew so strong and bold that writers of the post-war period decided to tell the whole truth to America. Although Imamu Amiri Baraka claims that “most negro literature was mediocre because most of the Negroes who’ve found themselves in a position to become writers were middle-class Negroes who thought of literature as a way of proving they were not inferior” (Baym, 1989: 2745), the literature of many African-Americans was—and still is— very committed to the cause of social justice and racial tolerance. It is difficult to assess statistically the impact of such appeals on the population and the audience, given all the races’ search for a common ground, against nowadays’ fresh rise in anti-black speeches and attacks. However, the truth remains that anti-racism literature in America was a voice which remained resonant in listeners’ mind, and which got a wide reception even among the non-African- Americans.

Before closing this section, a note on the subheading. In any context of oppression, the oppressor is usually unconsciously losing more of his dignity than his victims. Just as the African American victims suffered physical, psychological, economic and moral losses, so did their white oppressors, who through their intolerance dragged themselves close to the level of animals (i.e. another definition of de-humanization). If the oppressed recovered none of the above mentioned forms of losses, they lost much in their dignity, whereas those who viewed themselves as a superior race, as a result of wrong ideologies and the power of the gun, were closer to animals than they ever thought. Implicitly, slaves’ emancipation meant regain of human

dignity by both the oppressor and the oppressed. Implicitly, anti-racism literature, which came mainly from the group of the oppressed, re-humanized both the Whites and the Colored Americans.

3. South African Creative Writers as Pace-Setters

More than other African countries, South Africa was affected by the Whites' utopic superiority over the Blacks. Various anti-oppression resistance attempts degenerated in open confrontations and, following the Sharpeville massacre (1960), any action intended to end the unjust system of apartheid became prohibited by white law. Anti-apartheid historical figures such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and Walter Sisulu landed in Robben Island prison, while millions of other activists went underground or in exile. South African literature took a militant tone, for so urgent was the need for them to let the world know what was happening. Short stories and poetry offered a privileged channel for a fast and eloquent expression of the Blacks' plight (Roscoe, 1977:229). One of the anti-apartheid pioneer writers is Es'kia Mphahlele. In addition to fiction writing, he advocated *Ubuntu*, an African philosophy and a lifestyle equivalent to the European humanism. He defines *Ubuntu* as a concept built on a respect for human rights, which embodies ideas of a shared humanity across races. Mphahlele's emphasis on shared human dignity and humanistic values across races took a revolutionizing tone comparable to the Harlem Renaissance idea of "black is beautiful", which, when Aimé Césaire imported it from America to the Caribbean Islands, gave its proponent a qualification of madness. Superiority of the white race over the Blacks was established by white South African supremacists who founded it on the Bible, and preaching about racial equality was viewed by the white racists as erratic. This section uses *Time of the Butcherbird* by Alex la Guma to analyze the writer's advocacy for clemency and for the black race's dignity in Apartheid South Africa.

Time of the Butcherbird recounts the ordeals of black South Africans expropriated by the white settlers and deported to new poor soil good for no human life. Relying on farming for survival, they start dying of starvation diseases, hunger, murder, shooting and hanging (La Guma, 1979:80). Circumstances of this nature trigger off violence and revolt. They call for action and need a strong opposition leader, in the person of Mma Tau, who organizes her people in

resistance against the settlers' relocation plan. She takes it as a leadership duty to liberate the country, which she compares to a prison (La Guma, 1979: 80). Withdrawal into anonymity for personal safety while leaving the masses to the mercy of exploiters, as did Mma Tau's senior brother, betrays cowardice and lack of concern for human beings. Meanwhile, the mass anti-relocation revolt takes a humanistic orientation, according to Mma Tau: "listen, it is better to retain dignity in hell than be humiliated in their heaven" (La Guma, 1979: 86). Either a survival in shame or a physical confrontation with abusers open doors to negotiations for equal treatment among those who live in a same environment.

Blackham and other European humanists preach against the use of violence to settle problems. They discourage resort to humiliations against adversaries, because such attitudes "merely establish a second independent and unnecessary ground of hostility harder to remove than the first" (Blackham, 1968: 160). Negotiation is viewed as the best means to adequately restore peace, love and dignity. That is where literature comes in. Anti-apartheid South African writers endeavored to show to the world the ugly face of racial discrimination and its dehumanizing effect on individuals. Alex la Guma, who is of the opinion that "all writers worth that salt are among the ranks of those struggling for human happiness and progress in all parts of the world" (Asein, 1987: 11) , demonstrates in his literary creation that "oppression has inspired him to expose the situation with a view of changing peoples' ideas about what is happening in South Africa, ...so that they can move forward to take down the barriers which exist between different peoples" (Iheakarani, 1989 :222) . Literature became a speedy and far-reaching instrument of sensitization, so that the world outside will never say, as it did after Hitler's war: "but we didn't know. If only someone had told us" (Roscoe, 1977: 227).

The writers' distress signal had such a worldwide impact that the liberals among the Whites joined the Africans' struggle by producing or supporting anti-apartheid initiatives, which included armed struggle, negotiation, international pressure, literature... and led to Apartheid's official ban and the democratization of South Africa's political system in 1990.

4. The Way Forward

Recurrent internal and international conflicts are currently sowing terror among innocent African citizens. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Cameroon, are only a few cases to mention. The frequently observed other camp's demonization degenerates into a range of human rights abuses that in turn produce long-lasting effects. To take Burundi as an illustration, apart from the historically recorded massive killings of 1972 and 1993-2006, ethnic hatred is so deeply rooted in Burundians' mind that mutual denigration is common course and can be traced back to oral tradition, where an adage like *"gutâmbuka akâbujije umuhima kunyaga"* (To walk the slow walk style which prevented a Hima from looting) derogatively insinuates a natural sluggishness attributed to the Hima ethnic group – or is it not rather a misunderstood elegance?—that prevents him from being fast enough to loot his enemy's possession. In the same line of ideas, a cliché like *"umuhutu yîyóbewe"* (literally, a Hutu who does not know himself, meaning a Hutu who does not behave according to the low place that is socially expected of him), seems to refer to a servant-like alertness always expected from a Hutu, if he does not want unpleasant surprises to forcefully take him back to his naturally low position.

Solving these kinds of heart-rooted forms of the other's demonization which is always dissimulated, but which periodically erupts in various forms of ethnic killings, after which the strongest, the loudest or the most diplomatic will attract international sympathy, is not such an easy task, particularly among Burundians and Rwandans with a less developed reading culture. Time is yet to come when a Hutu will proudly proclaim, like the Harlem Renaissance African-Americans, that Hutu is beautiful, or that Hutu is noble and elegant. Likewise, we are yet to see a day where it will be unanimously agreed that Tutsi is not wicked, or that Tutsi is not nonchalant and sluggish. Even if nowadays it still sounds dreamlike, we are yet to see a new age where a Twa/ Pigmy in the Great Lakes will no longer be considered as a much inferior human being. America and South Africa achieved peace and mutual acceptance through, among others, literature. It is still our belief that writers and other intellectuals have that duty to "uncover and elucidate the contest, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power, wherever and whenever possible" (Said, 2002).

But how practical is the advice, when we know that moments of war call for survival strategies first while other forms of entertainment (reading included) come second? Nor should it be forgotten that the reading culture in most African countries is still marginal, “practiced by an institutional minority, destined to a circumscribed readership” (qtd in Fernandes, 2007: 70). We agree that leaders cannot be as numerous as the people they lead. That is why the few African writers who are committed to change the world around them don’t need to be as numerous as their readers. Chinua Achebe clearly stated the role that can be expected from the few intellectuals in the following terms: “the worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost” (Ola, 1996: 92).

Scarcity of politically committed literature adds to the high illiteracy level on the continent, worsened by lack of good reading culture among the few educated ones. This lacuna could, however, be remediated by a more resort to oral literature, where applicable. Not only is oral literature a form of entertainment, but also, it is accessible to anybody, anytime, as long as the language barrier ceases to exist. Natasha Ikoli has indeed stressed the important role storytelling played in refugee camps of Burundians based in Tanzania. Her study demonstrated that, although story telling activities succeeded in fighting idleness and the subsequent social evils, they mainly contributed in keeping children connected to the Rundi language and the Rundi oral literature, which is needed for reinsertion upon repatriation. Story-telling activities were also encouraged in Northern Jordan in 2014, among Syrian refugee children in the Za’atari Refugee camp, but, unlike in Tanzania, the story telling activity aimed at psychologically healing war victims than it did about social and community re-insertion. A study by Velez and Prieto on the therapeutic role of literature has reminded that, in nations affected by war, storytelling activities can help solve anxiety, reduce traumatic stress, understand stressful situations and re-direct energy of children involved in bullying situations towards more peaceful activities such as reading. There is no doubt that this can also apply to the adult readers/ story tellers. Among the less young audience, literature should, as it did in historical past events, serve as a channel to trigger off revolutions.

Contemporary Nigeria is led by politicians who, according to Moses Idowu, pay writers to produce mighty biographical books which turn the leader into a hero, but often a self-acclaimed

hero. Monarchs and politicians involved in this practice make of creative writing a corrupt art, which exists only for money. This has to stop. Policy makers should rather device policies on how to give the writing profession more freedom of expression, so that it reflects the masses' opinion. It is then that their content will be insightful to readers, who, as it happened since the middle ages, may use the acquired information to take action against oppressors. There is also a need to encourage a more reading culture, which may increase through socio-cultural activities in clubs, associations, schools, NGOs, etc.

In the last analysis, let it be said that oral literature is a tool that fulfils more than one function: to entertain, to educate, to heal psychologically, and to strengthen human relationships. African oral literature abounds with African wisdom on how to solve conflicts with the minimum human lives loss. It abounds with legendary kings (animal or human) whose justice is accepted by everybody. The king's subjects have recognized legal channels through which they can reach him and address their complaints to him. Although this happens in oral literature, it modelled traditional African lifestyles, and can be used in conflict resolution among contemporary war-torn nations.

However, even in case of oral literature, two other non-negligible obstacles persist. The first one is the globalization in progress, which has now reached the poorest countries of the globe, creating a jungle-like struggle for survival. The traditional evening time where most forms of oral literature used to take place has been taken over by more lucrative activities. The second obstacle is related to the nature of oral literature, which is culture-bound and therefore limited to one language and one people, unless in translated (i.e. adulterated) versions. Currently, speakers of the most widely used African languages such as Kiswahili and Hausa, do not have a unique oral literature. The resort to oral literature as a tool for conflict resolution is therefore spatially and linguistically limited. This state of things brings us back to our original concern: the role which written literature and writers play in conflict resolution. Writers and all intellectuals are endowed with a responsibility to expose lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives of often hidden intentions (Chomsky, 1967). Ngugi WA Thiong'o, Aimé Césaire, Wole Soyinka, Callixthe Beyala, and, in the case of our study, Ralph Ellison and Alex la Guma, have created books which cannot leave the reader passive against injustice. After them, creative writers worldwide should use entertainment as a bait, and from there extend

their work to affect other spheres of human lives, use them to settle conflicts and to re-humanize those whose dignity is at stake.

Conclusion

The present article was centered on the various ways in which literature contributes to solving conflicts. It offered some insights into past roles of literature to re-humanize individuals in America and in South Africa under racial discrimination, and it posits that literature can play a valuable role in solving ethnic and political conflicts in Africa and the world over. It has demonstrated the need for writers to reconsider their contribution to humanity on a planet where wars and conflicts are paralyzing national identities and keeping populations in chronic humiliations of poverty, exile, rape, death, imprisonment, and other forms of dehumanization. Contemporary African writers, who, unlike their predecessors, are already said to be more prone to point the finger directly at the cause of the social malaise exist. There are numerous individuals who have vehemently condemned women's oppression, human rights abuse, dictatorship (Fernandes, 2007: 230) and this establishes a solid foundation for their greater role in conflict resolution.

Suffice it to call to mind Jean Paul Sartre's observation, that "if the entire regime, even your non-violent thoughts, is governed by a thousand year old oppression, your passiveness serves no other purpose but to put you on the side of the oppressors" (Sartre, 1963: viii). The energy which is invested in life-changing literary creation yields results on the mind of readers first, whose changed vision might restore order and humanism in worlds previously ruled by chaos and disunity. It is our conviction that writers and critics should come out of their criminal silence and redirect their focus on a literary creation that effectively rehabilitates human beings in their rights, their identity and their dignity.

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1. “le silence d’un prisonnier inconnu, abandonné aux humiliations à l’autre bout du monde, suffit à retirer l’écrivain de l’exil”. (Camus, *Discours de Suède*, 16, my translation)