The Role of the Writer in a Developing Society

My first problem is with the phrase ‘developing society.’ I have always been suspicious of the word ‘developing’ as it has often been used to describe the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America until a few years ago, when some countries in Asia, thanks to American capital and the cheap labour of the people of those countries, performed, and are still performing, what has been described as ‘economic miracles.’

‘Developing’ has often been used as if it were synonymous with ‘underdeveloped.’ Certainly ‘developing’ has never been used to describe any industrial country. ‘Developing’ and ‘underdeveloped’ have another synonym: ‘Third World.’ Quite frankly, I have always been wary of using the phrase ‘developing countries,’ because I could not accept, and still do not accept, that a country like India or Ethiopia or Nigeria is ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped.’ They may not be industrialized, but India’s civilization is no less than four thousand years old, and I know that the Yoruba of Nigeria are the only race of peasants who live in towns and cities. Neither of those peoples has anything to feel culturally inferior about vis-à-vis Americans or Canadians or Europeans.

It may be said that ‘developing’ means ‘in a state of change – fast change – revolutionary change – even democratic change.’ That would be clearer and better. But what society or nation is not always and for ever changing – in some slowly, almost imperceptibly so, in others violently? There is no nation or society that remains static. In that case, all societies are always in a state of development.

With those few remarks, I think it is clear that what I am going to write on is the role of the writer in society. Actually, I firmly believe that the role of a writer is the same, whether his society is underdeveloped, or developing, or developed, or over-developed. The role of a writer, in my view, is the same in Germany as in Nigeria, the same in Australia as in China, the same in Argentina as in Portugal, the same among the Yoruba as among the Alyap, the same among the Ogoni as among the Fulani. The next question is: how?
Before I answer this question, it is pertinent that I say something about myself and how I have come to appraise the role of writers. I grew up in Kaduna, the then capital of Northern Nigeria, a very cosmopolitan town in which Nigerians from all corners of the country lived and flourished in relative peace: or, rather, blissfully unaware of the political winds that were being stirred up, first by the British colonialists, and later by our own political leaders. When I grew up, I became one of those who have had to reap the political whirlwinds. Until I went to secondary school in Ibadan, I did not know how to read or write Yoruba. The languages I spoke as a child were English, Hausa, Igbo in that order, and some Yoruba at home.

In primary and secondary schools, I was much influenced by the books we read – especially English texts – and the songs we were taught. As early as the age of eight or nine, I had been impressed by the plight of the downtrodden in songs like "In Dublin’s Fair City," "Won’t You Buy My Pretty Flowers?" or "Oh, No John, No John, No." I was also, in my childhood days, touched by the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel by the Brothers Grimm. Our primary-school readers contained extracts from "Aladdin and the Lamps," and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."

When I got to secondary school, we were encouraged to read as widely as possible, especially as we had a well-stocked library. Although A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens and Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar were two of the set texts for our Cambridge School Certificate Examinations in English Literature, our English teacher encouraged us to read as many novels of Charles Dickens and the plays of Shakespeare as possible. My early mind was positively impressed by the events of the French Revolution and the courage and daring of the hero of A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Darnay. There was hardly anyone in my class who did not know the memorable first few and last paragraphs of that novel by heart. As for Julius Caesar, as far back as when I was eighteen, that play had instilled in me a dislike of the interplay of politics and intrigue.

When I went up to University College, Ibadan, and in the first two years that I studied Latin, English and History, reading widely was not strange to me. What enchanted me more was what was called ‘literary appreciation’ in the pieces we wrote for tutorials and the discussions that took place with our lecturers and the group of three or four at the weekly tutorials. There was no way you could do well without reading widely. And so, even though Thomas Hardy’s Far From the Madding Crowd was the text for the examination, one had to read almost all the novels of Thomas Hardy to answer questions well. The same went for the poets – Tennyson, Shelley, Coleridge and others.

However, it was not only for our English texts that we had to read widely. It was the same for history. Fortunately, Dr Kenneth Dika came in our second year, and African history became more fascinating for me. As we were taught about the