

EMMANUEL LEVINAS' CONCEPT OF OTHERNESS AND THE AFRICAN EXISTENTIAL SITUATION: A HERMENEUTIC ENGAGEMENT

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This paper attempts an interpretation of African existential situation in the light of Emmanuel Levinas' theory of the Other. The paper presents that the bid to find measures towards the advancement of humanity forms a very vital concern of philosophy. Thus, several efforts have been made by philosophers over the ages to multiply viable options which are considered by various world societies as veritable tools for their socio-political advancement. When compared with the technologically driven Western society, Africa still struggles to measure up with global defined development with all negativities attendant of such situation. Notably, the works of many philosophers are not only the products of their intellectual curiosity but sometimes informed by their experiences in life. Thus, informed by his life experiences, Levinas delved into a phenomenology of Otherness in which he postulates an ethico-political theory aimed at the need for the of universal care of humanity, a theory which the paper considers a veritable hermeneutic tool for rethinking African existential situation. Africa's rise in the global developmental scene, the paper finds, requires basically the eschew of viewing the other(Africa) by another(West) as an object of capitalist exploits, but a communalist co-traveler in the project of African upliftment cum global development.

1. Introduction

The quest for the preservation of mankind assumes various dimensions at different epochs of human history. The Hobbesian imaginary postulation of man's transition from the state of nature to civil society projects man's innate desire for survival in a situation of chaos and anarchy. As the human society evolves in its diversity, so does history harbor the attendant developmental steps of nations. The scientific revolution and advancement of the modern period lifted the Western world to the height of development leaving the rest of the world

including Africa at the threshold of either under-developed or developing world. As the developed world is relatively at home with existence, Africa is regrettably still struggling with the rudiments of life and seems irremediable in its perilous conditions. Thus, African existential situation is pitiable.

Nevertheless, any viable discourse on the African condition ought to take into cognizance the factors that contributed to and still sustain the predicament. The bid to respond to the situation takes the present project to co-opting Levinas' concept of otherness which advocates for fairness and objective care of the other as a necessary condition for the utmost advancement of the human society in general. When the Western colonialism is considered in the light of Levinas' concept of otherness, the Western colonization of Africa remains condemnable in its exploitative tendencies. The theory is equally a veritable tool for conscientize the West on the negative implications of imperialism, neo-colonialism and globalization. Thus, an ethically based international liaison should be geared towards the integral development of nations for the sole purpose of universal common good.

This paper of three sections therefore adopts a hermeneutic approach in its bid to rethink the African existential situation in the light of Levinas' concept of otherness. The first section will be a concise articulation of Levinas' concept of otherness. In the second section, the African existential situation will be widely exposed. The last section will display the hermeneutic significance of the piece in the bid to re-thinking the African Existential situation in the light of Levinas' concept of otherness.

2. Levinas' Concept Of Otherness

Levinas' idea of otherness finds expression in his notion of ethics as the first basis of philosophy whereby "the other is not knowable and cannot be made into an object of the self." (Wikipedia) Rather, "the other reveals himself in his alterity not in shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness." (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1998) Levinas' intention was to project a progressive intellectual revolution in philosophy after the trend of the analytic philosophers, although informed by the circumstance of his time.

Hence, Levinas launched an ideological attack on traditional metaphysics (ontology) accusing it of making 'the other' an object of subjectivity. According to

Levinas, philosophy cannot be “love of wisdom”, for that relegates the care of the other and seeks self gratification (knowledge). Rather, philosophy should best be defined as “wisdom of love” (ethics) where the otherness of the other is upheld as a natural obligation, locatable with reason. Consequently, ethics is first philosophy since the traditional philosophical endeavor of knowledge is but a secondary feature of a more basic ethical duty to the other.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas maintains that the other human being in his separation calls me into question. What this entails is that the care of the other is a matter of ethical obligation. Hence, “in the face-to-face relation, my self-assurance disappears and I find myself in bad conscience”³. This instance presupposes an unlimited and committed obligation to the other. Levinas, thus, denies the conception of ethics in terms of intension or legal responsibility since those are artificial. Hence, justice as the reciprocal system of obligation is not in accord with reason. Rather, as “the I is questioned by the other within the face-to-face relation, so justice is put in question by the face of the other” (Ibid)

In Levinas’ ideal, the other is the sole determinant of personality and identity in so far as the other reserves the prerogative of questioning the identity of the I. As such, to be is to be for the other. And to be for the other is to be without identity since in the other the identity of the I is substituted. With this formula, the I is an other. His *Otherwise than Being* reflects Levinas’ effort to portray “the substitution of the I, whereby subjectivity is being hostage.”(Ibid, 581) Consequently, subjectivity is not the ego isolation of modern philosophy, but the restlessness of being disturbed as a result of the concern for the other.

For Levinas, the irreducible relation, the epiphany, of face-to-face, the encounter with another, is a privileged phenomenon in which the other person’s proximity and distance are both strongly felt. Such encounter produces a revelation that makes a demand to affirm and express the other’s freedom. Consequently, the transcendence and heteronomy of the other is recognized and upheld.

3. African Existential Situation

The term ‘African Existential Situation’ (AES) refers to the condition of the African world considered from the political, social and economic dimensions. It equally comprises of both real and imagined perspectives on the continent Africa. In the global development prism, Africa is branded a third world with all notable stigma attached to such placement. For instance, questions abound as to

the authenticity and tenability of the term 'African philosophy' of which an inherent debate is that of the determination of African identity.

Several efforts have been made by many African scholars on the issue of African predicament adumbrating some factors antecedent to such situation which according to them include slavery and colonialism. Nevertheless, a critical view of the reality of African world leads decisively to a submission that Africa is a problem continent, considering the litany of diseases, famine, wretchedness, corruption that continue to besiege the continent. Consequently, the African predicament is simply pitiable. Sequel to limitations imposed by political and economic constraints. Bakare-Yusuf summarized the African condition as a limit situation. For him, "a limit situation exists where the rules of everyday life have been suspended, and questions of survival are brought to the fore." (www.codesria.org)

In a limit situation, everyday life is laden with uncertainty, tensions, lesion, material scarcity, chaos, genocide, and so no. These and more are factors that constitute the African limit situation in concrete terms. Apart from the aforementioned, it is unarguable that the Euro/western view and political representations of Africa contributes considerably to the plight of the content. Africans have been tagged 'irrational' by western scholars. Hegel(1956) consigned Africa to the unhistorical part of the world in his position that:

What we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which has to be represented here only on the threshold of the world's history.

These debasing notions are still widely propagated all over the west coast irrespective of obvious remedial attempts by African scholars towards reversing the ugly trend. Instead of encouragements, these efforts are met with deliberate resistance such that Bakare comments thus:

When Africans attempt to refuse this representation and provide a picture of how they make sense of and navigate their world, their words and images are neither heard nor seen. Alternative representations are denied and seen as sheer stupidity, madness and against the rule of rationality. (www.codesria.org)

An unfortunate attendant effect of such circumstance is the tendency of even some African scholars aligning themselves in the trend.

The issue at stake in this discourse is not the denial of the Euro-Western claims as complete fabrications, rather the way in which these negativities are propagated, reflective of politics of representation, whereby difficult life situations are framed in absolute negativity and irredeemable terms. The logical implication of propagated African irrationality remains incivility, incapacity for self-determination, development and self-governance. Hence, African colonization was and is still being projected as a necessity for African remedy without reference to the continent's exploitation by the colonialists. Russell's dehumanizing view of Africans regarding self-governance is quite incisive. He submitted that:

It would be difficult seriously to advocate the immediate introduction of parliamentary government for the natives of this part of the world, even if it were accompanied by women suffrage and proportional representation. So far as I know, no one supposes the populations of these regions capable of self-determination. (Russell, 1977)

The Euro-Western exploitation of Africa at the wake of colonialism of which representation is usually avoided by the Euro-Western scholars takes a different form in the modern and contemporary era (neo-colonialism and imperialism) in the bid to leave the continent in continuous disintegration and peril. Thus, neo-colonialism remains an indispensable theme in any authentic discourse on the present African predicament. Neo-colonialism represents an avenue for continuous socio-political and economic exploitation and domination of Africa in spite of the continent's acclaimed independence. Its ugly trend is characterized by "expatriate domination of investment opportunities, made possible by access to credit, technology and managerial skills necessary for industrial production." (Akodo & Imbua, 2006)

The neo-colonialist tendencies include a continuous intrusion of the Western world on African economic path, using the continent to achieve developmental goals. Africa thus exploited, continues to wallow in socio-political cum economic poverty as well as developmental sluggishness. The trend is further stretched by culture projection and coercive apparatus through

modern technology of which effects remains a cankerworm that feeds deeply into the fabrics of the African cultural value system. In this regard, Iroegbu(1994) notes that “Western civilization like Western colonization and Christianization came as a superior force, as the true way to success, in fact as the success itself. Africans had simply to adopt them.” Hence, the Western imperialist ideal inflicted Africa with its capitalist individualistic model at the expense of the much organic African communalism thereby leaving the continent in utter gullibility and crisis of identity.

So long as globalization is a tool for western holistic integration of varied cultures ensuring social, economic and political dependence, inculcated with the imperialist tendencies, quest for an authentic African advancement remains a toilsome task. A concealed deceptive character of globalization is its tendency of increasing concentration and monopoly of socio-economic resources and power through quest for trans-national co-operations. One of its implications for Africa is that the continent comes under the Euro-Western socio-political and economic control. Khor (2000) refers to the consequence of this situation as “erosion of national sovereignty and narrowed ability of governments and peoples to make choice from options in economic, social and cultural policies.” As long as Africans remain under such siege, they remain disoriented, and thus, lack the necessary capabilities for transcending their present situation.

4. Re-thinking the African Condition: The Levinas’ Import

To rethink the African situation is to co-opt agencies (rational) for lifting Africa from its condition. Bakare- Yusuf’s attempt at this project is rather interesting. In his “Poetics of the Belly”, he adopted Scarry’s phenomenology of pain and imagination to drive home his perspective of the African predicament, in the sense that he considered Scarry’s universalist phenomenology of pain and imagination as a vital tool for articulation and expression of the historico-existential field of African experience.

According to Scarry, pain admits of no intentional object in the world, rather its object is ontological, that is imagination. In effect, she noted that, “while pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects.” (Scarry, 1985) While pain is thoroughly of the body, its presence returns the body’s experience to that mute and primal moment prior to language, agency, meaning, culture and

subjectivity. Hence, structured solely through its objects, the imagination allows for pain to be transposed outside of itself and be projected unto cultural artifacts. In considering the African situation, Bakare submits that “the inseparable conditions of life and structural constraints very often push people to resort to creative means to combat their situation: excessive forms of bodily adornment or expressive trickery and play.”(www.codsria.org) Bakare’s position is that African situation is that of pain and its attendant imaginative effect produces creativity (work) directed towards alleviation of suffering for the sole purpose of transforming an existential situation. This is equally considered as Bakare’s response to the popular Western tag of Africa as more imaginative than rational. Imagination, for him, is an inseparable aspect of African reality, since it remains a relative tool for survival in a critical situation. Bakare considerably collaborates Senghor’s widely misunderstood prism, ‘Reason is Hellenic and Emotion is African’. Of course, Senghor never ascribed non-rationality to Africa, since reason is the basic defining feature of man. Rather, Senghor would mean that emotion is also an ostensible constituent of man. The West operates more with their head, while Africans dilute the extremities of the head with their hearts.

Bakare’s position vehemently challenges the conventional vocabulary of basic need or environmental limitation and places survival on an existential level. It is about how to fuse and satisfy metaphysical, spiritual and existential needs in a way that allows a shout of an emphatic “yes” to the challenges of life. It is about how Africans engage every day in creative practices that tame the horrors of their life, turning their incalculable presence of pain into excessive creativity as evident in cultural artifacts, laughter, drama and the like. This means, as related by Abanuka(1994) that, “if the black people have made no significant breakthrough both in the arts and the sciences, they must still be proud of their distinctive characteristic as a black people.”

Being positive about the Africans’ imaginative response to their existential situation is implied in Levinas’ idea in his phenomenology of the ‘other’. Levinas’ gospel of otherness is informed by a quest for authentic existence and preservation of mankind. It is a call for the reversal of persistent man’s inhumanity to man in the face of acclaimed transition from the precarious state of nature to the civil society. The oppressive and exploitative tendencies of man over his fellows are instances of placing the other at the level of mere phenomenal objects, as tools for personal gratification. In such instance, self

interest is placed as premium at the wake of interaction while the good of the other is utterly neglected and relegated.

In the case of Africa , her colonialists and slave traders were not primarily concerned about the continent's civilization and development. Whatever civilization presently evident in Africa would only be providential when considered vis-à-vis the plunder and exploitation of the continent by the colonialists. It is simply a case of Levinas' idea of looking at the other as a mere object of the self. The consequence of colonialism on African remains unarguably obvious. The denial of African rationality and possible civility is borne out of epistemological bias which only seeks self satisfaction at the expense of true knowledge, which Levinas considers a misplacement of philosophical priority.

If ontology does not accord adequate importance to the good of the other, ethics should be first philosophy since in ethics, the otherness of the other is given a veritable consideration. Levinas advocacy is in line with Augustine's view on the ethics of love and care for one another which eschews ego-centricism. Thus Augustine in Mellway(2009) states that:

A love that rejoices in a good that is at once shared by all and unchanging- a love that makes 'one heart' out of many, a love that is the whole hearted and harmonious obedience of mutual affection.

Despite the plundering of Africa in the colonial period, the continent continues to suffer ideological, social, economic and political violence, such that the greatest challenge of African diaspora is racism. In his philosophy of otherness, Levinas desires is to make postulations for the thriving of human freedom, the denial of which is evident in racism, colonialism, slavery, imperialism and neo-colonialism. For instance, Levinas' postulation would condemn the European colonial philosophy which "preached an epistemology that views the African incapable of scientific or philosophical destiny, potentiality and practice." (Osuagwu, 1999) The persistent biased Western ideological representations of Africa, since the image of African world currently in circulation is a literal incarnation of a negative dialectic, amount to a refusal to uphold the otherness of African essence.

The remedial import of Levinas' otherness on African condition remains the need to look at Africa objectively with a view to lifting it from its present predicament and placing it on the appropriate developmental pedestal. It entails African freedom from all forms of neo-colonial exploitations and imperialism. Levinas advocacy is in line with David Hume's moral theory. According to Hume, "we are rationally committed to acting justly by our very practices designed to promote common or complimentary interests." (The Encyclopedia Of Philosophy,1967) It must be noted that Levinas' project does not deny the importance of inter-subjectivity. Rather, it posits that the good of the other should be accorded a fair consideration for the sole purpose of the good of mankind in general. Hence in the African situation, Levinas would call for an adequate none exploitation but a regenerative inter-continental relation which equally places importance on African development, since the face-to face relation presupposes an unlimited and committed obligation to the other.

Equally, Levinas' prayer would be to uphold and appreciate the African nature and adaptation to her existential situations. It demands respect for the *Africanity* of the African of which Nnabugwu(2005) opines that "as human beings, we are all separate individuals but with a common destiny." This entails, in line with Bakare's ideal, a clarion call for the acceptance of African modes of investment in corporeal practices and cultural performance in the midst of existential chaos as a "will to power" that transcends the conventional vocabulary of crises articulated solely in terms of a purely physical need or environmental limitation.

5. Conclusion

A view of Africa from the developmental perspective relegates the continent to a problematic plane. Although several efforts have been made to compel an adequate understanding and articulation of the factors responsible for African predicament, it must be agreed that irrespective of the civilization brought to African through colonialism, the ugly aspect of the trend leaves nothing much to be desired.

As already shown within the course of this paper, Levinas' concept of Otherness has a pivotal role to play towards African redemption. It is therefore strongly suggested that its prospects be adequately relayed and utilized as a sure justification of Levinas' sincere and laudable intellectual effort as well as an

indication that the world societies have transcended rational biases to pave way for the appreciation of objective intellectual endeavours.

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