



Riḥlat ul baḥth 'an al-insān: A Portrayal of Socio-Economic and Political Scenes of Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study explores the role of playwrights in the spread of Islam through Arabic studies, focusing on Riḥlat ul baḥth 'an al-insān hawaari bayna As-Sāil wa Mas'ul. The author straddles a fine path in teaching Arabic and Islamic studies to students of non-Arabic speech community in order to expose the students of Islamic schools to socio-economic and political situation of their country; Nigeria, through the medium of Arabic language in a scripted play. The study further deals with how particular words were used. This requires examination of kinds of language resources used to communicate what was happening, and knowledge and experience utilized as a source for the expressions employed in the texts. Many of the expressions are strongly connected with Islamic terms in different professions. The paper argues that the author of Riḥlat is keen to expose his students to both Islamic and secular world by evolving student-centered pedagogies so that students not only learn through student-teacher communication, but also acquire the knowledge through Arabic play. The study concludes that many Islamic schools in Nigeria today provide a variety of student activities to develop the students' life skills and leadership abilities so as to encourage their students to know the economic and political situation of Nigeria and internalize, and put into practice the principles and values they have learnt in infusing Islamic traditions and values into the teaching of modern secular subjects.*

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Introduction

In the works of contemporary African play wrights language is an important vehicle which authors express their intention in exposing and challenging post-colonial system of governance, and it is like a search light or vehicle through which social reality is beamed and shaped. Through language, a literary scholar communicates with the unknown readers and projects their thoughts and ideological dispositions. Therefore, the most significant items of any work of literature is recognized to be channelized through words which reside in the particular range of meanings and attitudes which members of any society attach to their verbal symbols, the mode of writing and features of literary text that reflect some social practices in the society of playwright. In the light of the above, this study examines the *Riḥlatul baḥth 'an 'Insān*, on the issues of the socio-economic and political situation of Nigeria. These include the expected obligations of the government towards her citizens and failure of political class to making life better and meaningful for the masses. The socio-economic and political problems, insecurity of lives and properties, unemployment, and oppression of the masses by the ruling class are collectively enshrined in the work. The linguistic choice employed in religious assembly and the contexts of the *Riḥlatul baḥth* reflect the state of nation like other playwright frowns at the unresponsive nature of the ruling class. The study concludes that the author skillfully draws from a pool of narrative experiences and artfully established the social situation of his immediate community of Nigeria.

This study intends to discuss the situation of Nigeria scene using *Riḥlat*; an Arabic work written for students of Arabic and Islamic Institute as source of information. The popular opinion of many Nigerians

before independence was self-governance administered by them. They believed that having democratic governance under their control would usher in good condition of living better than what they tasted under the colonial masters. However, the hope is shattered after independence. Nigerian leaders are corrupt, the ruling class is oppressive and the masses wallow in miserable poverty. The rate of unemployment is very high; the youths are sneaking out of the country to abroad seeking for green pastures, while the criminal activities by armed hoodlums are quite alarming. The Nigerian situation therefore prompts the literary figures, articulate scholars and playwrights those who have inherent of social crusades to use the power of their pen to portray Nigerian society, exposing and checkmating the activities of the leaders in literary genre. Nigerian literary writers are worried about the state of economic and human resources mismanaged in the country.

The study therefore intends to study the attitude of the ruling class and the reaction of the less privileged people to the rulers. It is pervasive that a blessed country like Nigeria can throw up some claws who called themselves ruling class and whose behavior only bring untold hardship and embarrassment to image of Nigeria. Their behavior therefore reflects the bad leadership experienced by the people. Nigeria's leaders are reckless in leadership, corrupt in administration and arrogant before the law, wanting in accountability and become object of disgrace after their tenure in office.

This study adopted analytical research method and relevant-related literature was reviewed. Contemporary playwrights in Nigeria criticize exploitation, oppression, child abuse, and bad governance. The situation of things has become the major thematic pre-occupation of

playwrights. Thus, the literary activities in most time in Nigeria is dominated by the users of English language being a national language, but in some occasions users of other languages like Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa ,Arabic, and French have also contributed in same domain.

Literature Review

A sizeable number of researched works have been conducted on Arabic plays in the Muslim world, but question of the Nigeria's Arabic play has received a lot of academic attention.

- Glimpses from Arabic literature, reveals that in the pre-Islamic Arabian society poet was an oracle, guide, orator and spokesman of his community. He was both molder and agent of public opinion, indeed, poetry is the public register (*diwān* of Arabians).¹ Nicholson in his work says further that the idea of poetry as an art was developed afterwards and the pagan poet is the oracle of his tribe, their guide in peace and their champion in war.² In the light of this, the literary scholars in Nigeria serve as oracles and spokesmen of their societies through the

¹- Hitti, P.K. *History of Arabs from the earliest period to the present* (London: The Macmillan press Limited. Tenth edition, 1981), 95.

²- Nicholson, R.A. *A Literary History of the Arabs* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 75

³- Abdullah Yusuf. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Brentwood: Amana Corporation, 1983), Al-Qur'an 26: 223.

⁴- Julie Scott, Misaim and Paul Starkey, ds. *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (London and New York: TJ International Ltd, Pad stow, Cornwall, 1998), 355.

⁵- Ibid, 769.

⁶- Ibid.

vehicle of English language. In this line of argument, the antiquity of Arabic narratives is attested to by the holy Qur'an, both in its condemnation and modification to construct moralizing narratives.³This is followed by numerous genres of narratives in the medieval period which were catalogued in *al-Fihrist* by *Ibn al-Nadīm*'s tenth Century, who records the manners which foreign tales were introduced to Arabic literature.⁴*Abu Wuhay b. Buhul b. Amir al Sayrafi* is regarded as the most prominent and early Arabic dramatist. He lived in Kufa up to the time of *Hārūnar Rashīd*.⁵Glimpses from *Ibn Jawzī's* work; *kitāb al-qīṣaṣ*, makes us to understand the importance attached to narrative literature. His work illuminates the roles played by the narrative genres in the history of Arabic literature.⁶

Al-Thalabī the eleventh-Century Arabic scholar in his work *Qīṣaṣ-ul-anbiyā*, draws on oral legendary traditions surrounding Qur'anic figures. He quotes verses from the holy Qur'an but then weaves around each an entire vividly executed narratives. The narrative techniques of quoting Qur'anic verses and then building a prose narrative around these sentences, while dramatizing the narrative with as much as visual detail as possible so as to hold the audience's attention is a common practice in Arabic literature. Arabic narrative literature also became a favoured type in Islamic community. Some of the most popular classics of medieval Arabic literature are '*Antār* and *Alf Laylah walaylah*. (Arabian Nights) *Sīrat 'Antar* images have found a ready market in modern folk art. Other works of Arabic narrative literature are *Kalīla- wa- Dhimnah* (Animal fables) and

Maqamāt. The authors of *Maqamāt* built their works on series of riddles. The work of *Abu al-'Alā- al-Ma'arrī* which is riddled with riddles.⁷

Nevertheless, the contact of the Arabs with the West through French occupation of Egypt in 1798 C.E marked the beginning of modern Arabic theatrical tradition.⁸Hence, the origins of the modern Arabic drama/plays were popularly ascribed to Lebanese figure *Marun al-Naqqāsh*.⁹ He wrote three high-quality plays, mainly literary Arabic. The first Arabic play was *al-Bakhīl*, it was performed at the end of 1847 C.E., on a stage in his country home Beirut.¹⁰ His other two plays are *Abual-Hassan al-Mughaffall* and *Harūn- ar-Rashīd*, written in verse rather than prose in musical form and *al-Hasud as-salit*.¹¹After the death of *Marun al-Naqqāsh* in 1855 C.E., his nephew *Salīm al-Khalīl al-Naqqāsh* developed on *Marūn's* efforts and later formed his own troupe. In Damascus, *Ahmed al-Qabbānī* staged a number of productions of Arabic drama/plays.¹²

The next significant steps in Arabic plays and theatre took place in Egypt. The first known Arabic play productions in Egypt were taken by Egyptian Jew *Ya'qub Sanū'*, who staged a number of plays in Egyptian colloquial between 1870

⁷- Julie Scott & Paul Starkey *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (1998), 2.

⁸- Ahmad Iskandariya. *Al-Mufasssālfītarīkh al-'arabīa* (Cairo; *Wizārat-ul-maa'ruf al-'umūmiyyah*, 1987), 123.

⁹- Badawi, M.M, Cachia, P, Lyons, M.C, Mattock, J.J “Naqqash and the Rise of the Native Arab Theatre in Syria” In *Journal of Arabic Literature* (1970), 3: 108.

¹⁰- Najm, *al-masrahiyyafī al- Adab al-'Arabī al-Ḥadīth* (Beirut, *DārulKutab al-'Ilmiyah*, 1967), 33-35.

¹¹- Landau, J.M, *Studies in the Arab Theater and Drama* (Philadelphia: RUPHN, 1958), 57-58.

¹²- Badawi, M.M, etc. 3: 108.

and 1872 C. E.¹³ the next theatrical performances in Egypt were staged by Syrian emigrants. In 1876, C.E., *Salīm al-Khalīl al-Naqqāsh* established himself in Alexandria and the Syrian theatrical activities continued during the 1880s and 1890s, with the arrival in Egypt of *al-Qabbānī Iskandar Farah*, *JurīAbyad* and others.¹⁴

Research Methodology

The study adopts the analytical research method; it involves literary and sociological aspects. The literary aspect deals with the use of language in religious assembly and the employment of rhetorical devices in communication. The *Rihlatul baḥth* were studied within the premise of linguistic, grammatical and anecdotal contexts. On the other hand, the sociological, economic and political dimension focuses on human relations between the political class, the public office holders and the echelons of the Nigerian society. It is worthy of note that relevant accessible materials; published and unpublished Arabic books, documents, manuscripts, monographs, journals, periodicals, etc. were consulted and used in this study.

Arabic Play in Nigeria

Although, there are numerous scholarly works on Arabic literature in Nigeria, but there is paucity of writing in Arabic play or Drama by Nigerian Arabic scholars. In comparison with Arab countries, the writing of Arabic play in Nigeria is slow to develop in both development and originality. According to *Oseni al-AmidAl-Mubajjal* is the only published Arabic play in Nigeria up to

¹³. Mossa, M., 'Ya' qubSanu' and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt' in the *international Journal of Middle East Studies*, (1954), 5:401-433.

¹⁴. Julie Scott and Paul Starkey, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* 2 (New York: TJ. International Ltd, 1998), 769.

year 2002.¹⁵ This was followed by *Tajir Sāhib al-mut'am and Ustaz Ragim Anfah* by Mosuudi 'Abdal-Ghaniy, *Qadī Gharātal'najum* by 'AbdGhaniy Adebayo¹⁶ and *Bāqū Muqadar*, by Bārī.¹⁷ There is no much work on novelistic literature in Nigeria that deals with Arabic plays/dramas. Therefore, in the recent past, the new literary work on Arabic play in Nigeria in general and south west in particular is *Riḥlatulbaḥth 'an 'Insān*.¹⁸

Discussion

The Authorship of *Riḥlah*

The author of *Riḥlatulbaḥth 'an 'Insān*, Professor K.A. Balogun, was born on January 3rd, 1951 in the historical town of Abeokuta, into a family that has a long history in the promotion of the teachings of Islam. His primary education was in 1962, at *Ita Iyalode, Owu Abeokuta*, and the present capital of *Ogun State*, Nigeria. He studied the Qur'an and works of Islamic sciences under the care of late *Alhaji Shaykh'Abd Azeez Olorungbo* in his home town, *Abeokuta*. He attended *al-Azhar* Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, *Ilorin, Kwara State* Nigeria between 1965 and 1970. He later went on scholarship to Egypt and studied

¹⁵. Oseni, Zakariyah.I, *Al- 'Amid al-Mubajjal*. (Nigeria:Auchi, *Daruu-Nur* press, 1994), 56.

¹⁶. Oseni, Zakariyah.I, 'Prose and Drama in Nigerian Literature in Arabic: The Journey So far", in *53rd Inaugural Lecture* of the University of Ilorin (Nigeria: University of Ilorin Press, 2005), 15.

¹⁷. AdetunjiBarri, *Baqaumuqadar* (Nigeria: Abeokuta,At-Tayyibun Islamic outlook, 2005), 7.

¹⁸. *KamālulDīnBalughun,Riḥlat li baḥth 'an insaanihawaaribayna As-SāilwaMas'ul*, (Nigeria: *Al-Waran*, 2009).The book,s name is originally in Arabic:

”رحلة البحث عن الانسان حوار بين السائل والمستؤل دار توفيق الله“

languages and literature at Al-Azhar University, Cairo and graduated in 1979. He obtained an M.A Degree in 1982 and PhD in 1990 at University of Ibadan.¹⁹He was appointed as an Assistant Lecturer in 1982, at Olabisi Onabanjo University, and rose to the rank of professor in 2003. Within the University, he holds many administrative positions and served in various committees with different capacities such as Head of Department, Sub Dean, Faculty of Arts, and Director of Sandwich programmes, members of disciplinary committee, chairman ethics committee, and Chairman Post Graduate programmes of Faculty of Arts. Apart from his home base, professor Balogun serves in other Universities in Nigeria. Dean Students' Affairs, Fountain University Oshogbo, External examiner Universities of Ibadan, and Lagos State University and visiting professor at al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State Nigeria. He has to his credit many scholarly works in the published academic journals in Nigeria and abroad. He supervises many M.A. and Ph.D. Theses.

Professor Balogun's scholarly contributions, both with his research and his support of different scholarly institutions in Nigeria and abroad, are very numerous. As a teacher, supervisor and mentor, Professor Balogun has sired many academic offspring, some of whom have become professors, and many more on the way to attaining this enviable status. He is a professor of high standing whose epistemic consciousness is rooted in Islamic studies but welcoming to literary saloon. He is a man of town and gown, Professor Balogun is the Chief Imam of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, the *Mufti* of Egbaland, and the Chief Imam of Gbagurain Abeokuta. He has Arabic institute at Ago-Iwoye named *Dar 'liBayan* where the play of his *Rihlat 'l-Bahth 'aninsani* was staged in his college in 2011.

¹⁹. Balogun A Kamaldeen., Islam and World Peace. 41st Inaugural Lecture *Olabisi Onabanjo* University, Ago- Iwoye. (Nigeria: Olabisi Onabanjo University Press, 2006).

Title of the Novel

The title of the Novel is *Riḥlat li baḥth 'an in saani hawaari bayna As-Sāilwa Mas'ūl (A Travellogue)*. It is a literary work of Arabic play/drama (*masrihiyāh*). It is a quest journey of discovery for a man of impeccable characters embarked upon by the chief characters of the Novel who bear the epithets: *As-Sāil* and *al-Mas'ūl*. It is a realistic comic playwright with a penchant for social criticism irony where Nigerian society is portrayed as a corrupt mélange of liars and cheaters. The Novel consists of ten scenes, introduction and prognosis. The exhausting quest for man of impeccable character forms a basis and provides the foundational ideas of the novel.

The Themes of Novel

The novel has various themes in its component, but the central themes deal with socio-political and economic situation of the community or nation which the novel represents. The novel is a pale picture and a faithful echo of the contemporary community of the author. The existing quest for man of impeccable character forms the basis and provides foundational ideas of the novel, with a powerful evocative conceits, the author describes each stage of the journey.

Prognosis (نقطة إنطلاق)

It is significant to make a brief survey of the drama. The play begins with the chief characters of the novel, *As-Sāil* and *al-Mas'ūl*, getting up one morning and leaving their home carrying their lantern with them, looking for a man of impeccable characters.

Scene I: In the Court (في المحكمة)

After long searching and hesitation, they halted at the court of law. The scene manifests a pale picture and a faith echo of judiciary in Nigeria, which its spectacle does not prick our conscience. This is a situation where a murderer is set free and a stealer of a yam is jailed. The court slammed jailed term on the poor man, while the lawmaker was acquitted. The acquittal of the lawmaker in the novel is indictment of the judiciary to avail Nigerians of justice. The acquittal in the novel is a shame that followed a pattern that had never punished high network offenders either against the state or their compatriots, but never considered the weighty evidence that has been brought against the people of high profile.

Scene II: In the Motor Park (في الموقف)

The scene shows many penetrating insight into aspects of moral decadence in the contemporary Nigerian society this is noted by flaw expression, hard heartedness and insecurity of properties, demonstrated by the unruling conduct, cheeky and fraudulent manner of rascals in motor parks. It is noticeable that verbal slangs of rascality are ubiquitous in many motor-parks in Nigeria. This shows that Nigerian society is full of rascals. And a society full of rascals and thugs can only have elderly rascals and thugs as citizens

Scene III: In the Hospital (في المستشفى)

There is a report of motor accident on the road and the eye-witnesses made spirited efforts to rush the victim to hospital. At the hospital, the uncared attitude of doctors and nurses are not responsive. Hence there are many people passing on because of poor medical attention received in time of need. The blame

is partly on the government and partly on the doctors and hospital staff. A patient who is at danger point needs to be given urgent attention; at least first aid treatment must be given.

Scene IV: In the Residential House (في البيت)

The central focus of the scene is on insecurity of lives. This is occasioned by armed robbers who send many innocent people into graves. Also important in the scene is obnoxious increment on the house rent which makes many tenants suffer untold hardship from the hands of landlords. As the chief characters relaxed in their slumber when subsequent development followed that intercepted their sleep, this was arrival of men of armed hoodlums in the neighboring house, demanding from the dwellers their possessions that possessed none but, three Naira. The head of the house was shot on account of his abject poverty. After the hustle and bustle that followed, the wife seeing her husband in pool of blood becomes ululating with bitter tear collocated in her eyes.

Scene V: In the Village or Rural Area (في الرّيف)

Eventually, after much heart searching and hesitation by the major characters, their hearts are filled with the thought of the rural area. The chief characters never recovered from their imaginative thought when a noisy siren vibrates, symbolizes the arrival of uniformed police men who came for criminal investigation on the ritual killing. But to their dismay or chagrin, the scale of atrocities in the village is truly shocking. There is no difference between urban life and rural life. The chief character queried the remote causes of crime in the village, which erroneously perceived to be better than the town in terms of

security of lives and properties. In this case, vanity with its extravagance, leads people to engage in money-making rituals-even in the village as seen in the poem.

Scene VI: In the Pension's Office (في مكتب المتقاعدين)

The scene reveals the experience of the nation's workers of what they pass through after long years of dictated service to their fatherland. Their gratitude and pension allowances are not paid to them on record time. They are subjected to bad experience, pain, agony and unnecessary queue at pension's office and given unrealistic appointments. Many of them died in the process of collecting their dues. Thus Nigerian society ignores its cultural shift from conventional morality to unbridled hedonism.

Scene VII: In the Airport (في المطار الدولي)

The scene discusses the attitude and love of the youths to travel abroad, because they believe it is profitable to do so. Through interrogation, it is discovered that many people who travel abroad engage in dirty jobs which have no good image for human dignity. But, the home government should be blamed for not providing jobs for her citizens.

Scene VIII: In the House of Legislators (في البرلمان)

The scene discloses the attitude and self-centeredness of the political office holders; they are only interested in their own political proceeds. This is realized from the increment on various items such as furniture allowance, visitor entertainment allowance, cooking allowance etc. They involved in budget padding, filibustering, legislative rascality, sabotage of national interest, among

other criminalities. This attitude of the political office holders prompts chief character of the Novel, *al-Mas'ūl* to poor scorn on the certain aspects of behaviors of legislators and makes a vituperative and blistering attack on the law makers. They were blamed for not imitating their political predecessors like *Awolowo*, *Tafa Balewa* and *Sardauna* of *sokoto*in governance.

Scene IX: In the Market (في السوق)

The scene discusses the socio-economic situation of the community of the author; the prices of commodities are not stable, while the measure used for commodities is of different kind. Furthermore, there are different measures for the same item. In nutshell, market activity is marked by dubious and flaw characters. Police is largely blamed for inflation because of undue bribery collected from merchandise and motorists on Nigerian roads.

Scene X: In the University Campus (في حرم الجامعة)

The scene is a pale picture of campus life, which is ravaged by disease of shamelessness. There is evidence of the negative impact of erosion of shared moral values and standards in University. The central square in the scene rooted on two things. The mode of dressing of most students is mediated by foreign culture and civilization, occasioned by short sighted mentality that views western civilization as a source of individual freedom and liberation. It is also realized that lecturers are not passionate enough to discharge their professional responsibility. In summary, the import of the scene is a biting condemnation of the campus life.

Conclusions

Riḥlatulbaḥth 'an 'Insān like every work of literature is the most representative of the recent development in Nigeria. The novel operates on multiple levels of meaning and can be approached from various angles. For instance, the impact of civilization, modernism, western ideas and culture on our community pervades the novel, and a discussion of this theme would be particularly pertinent in the light of the fact that, on several occasions, the characters seem to imply a causal relationships with their people and economic, cultural and psychological violence perpetrated by the ruling class and people of high profile.

1. In the overall structure and meaning of the novel, the themes play only supportive part; much more central is the psychological significance with which the characters and events are invested. Thus, the novel has a uniqueness of its own and a hidden beauty.
2. The primary feature of this novel is the loving attention which the author devoted to the description of his country. The author places his reader right in the midst of a Nigerian society, and proceeds to elaborate on socio-economic and political situation of Nigeria which has been always dramatic and full of intrigues.
3. *Riḥlatulbaḥth* reveals an original and accomplished artistry, the novel is one of the most interesting works of novelistic tradition written in our contemporary Nigerian society. Its themes, the dilemma of the intellectual from a traditional background, the problems facing the orphans and abandoned children, the conflict between the emerging middle class and aristocracy, disorderliness of campus life, the pejorative nick names and cynosure versus epithets, lack of medical attention to the patients at public

hospitals, preponderance of bestial qualities in university students, the lust for wealth etc. All these added topical value to the Novel (*Riḥlat*).

4. However, despite the beauty of the novel, the novel has its shortcomings on the part of the author, these include grammatical flaw, weak translation of local parlance into Arabic, indirect quotations, unnecessary exclamation etc.
5. It is indeed a tribute to the author of *Riḥlat*, for his great power of imagination, his inventiveness and skill in writing what represents the society he skirts.
6. The novel discloses the social situation of Nigerian society, such as child abuse, insecurity of lives and properties, provocative and indecent utterances of the rascals at motor parks, uncared attitude of the public office holders as noted in the hospital and demonstrated by doctors. The bad experience, pain and agony experienced by retirees at the pension's office, the ritual killings in the village etc.
7. The novel reflects the damage that western civilization and modernism has had on the youths as seen in the campus.
8. We now conclude in this paper that *Riḥlat ul baḥth* is a recent Arabic play that presents a true picture of the Nigerian society. While the themes of the novel echo the voice of Nigerian people. In conclusion, the novel is in class of its own and the author is a literary figure to be reckoned with, his work *Riḥlat ul baḥth* is an eye-opener to Nigerian society.

Recommendations

In the light of this discourse the following recommendations are made for future research works. These are listed below:

1. It is recommended that other pedagogical literary works for teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies should be studied.
2. This present study may serve as a precursory approach to other works written by Arabic and Islamic scholars for students of Arabic and Islamic colleges in Nigeria.
3. In keeping with the social reality of Nigeria, Arabic students are exposed to the situation through Arabic medium, therefore the *Riḥlat ul baḥth* is recommended to students of Arabic colleges and allied disciplines.
4. In the field of Language, Arabic vocabularies are abounding in the work of *Riḥlat*, hence students will benefit a lot from it.
5. As Arabic is relevant to law, politics, economics, and commercial advertisement in radio stations, television houses and print media, Muslim students of these various disciplines who have background in Arabic will benefit a lot from the work.
6. To give Muslim students effective training and ability in Arabic works, Arabic playwrights are urged to more in the area of socio-political and economic aspects of Nigeria.

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