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Post Colonial Disillusionment in Contemporary African Prose Fiction

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Abstract:

Most Contemporary African writers use their texts to reflect the socio- political happenings in their societies. Their works are employed as an instrument of describing the post-colonial nostalgic experiences and disillusionment in contemporary African countries. Most African writings of the period harp on the fact that people still languish in bondage in spite of the independence. Prior to the independence, Africans are hopeful of a better tomorrow when their fellow African men take over governance. However, the reverse stares them in the face as they still suffer penury and pain after independence through social and economic strangulations. African socio-political nature after independence is characterized by social ills, such as: corruptions, victimization of political opponents, violence, other undue influence and greed. Through, the colonialists left physically but left their colonial mentality in the minds of Africans because traces of their oppressive and exploitative tendencies still reflect in every sphere of African life after independence. It can therefore be said that African Prose Fiction is tied to the experiences of the people. This paper hence examines post-colonial disillusionment in Contemporary African Prose Fiction. The novels that are used to portray this disillusionment are Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The paper observes that the postcolonial decadence in African societies is vividly captured and condemned in these texts.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Postcolonial, Nationalism, Colonialism and Prose fiction.

Introduction

In consonance with the essence of literature as a mirror of life, postcolonial African novels are a reflection of the happenings and social realities of the continent. This reveals the fact that literature, in any of its form, is not created in a vacuum. Hence, for any literary piece

to be considered as worthy of meaningful analysis, it must be relevant to the social milieu or environment in which it is set.

African literature can be divided into three categories. The first category focuses on the novels that deal with cultural nationalism; the second category encompasses all the issues that have to do with anti-colonialism, while the third is that of post-independence disillusionment. The 1960s witnesses the emergence of the novels of cultural nationalism which can be described as the literature of self-assertion. The novelists in this category such as Ngugi, Oyono, Achebe and others use their literary works to promote the image of Africa by correcting some distorted views about the image of continent. As earlier stated, the novels of the second category are anti-colonialist novels as they are a protest against the inhuman policies of the colonial rulers. They contemporary stage, that is, the third category wells hugely on national experience, neo-colonialism and postcolonial disillusionment.

According to Adetuyi (Adetuyi 102), African writers, especially, novelists have used many of their works to document some political and social experiences of Africa. Hence, the novels of these writers are characterized by issues fainted by disillusionment, dissociation and alienation. The works of contemporary African novelists focus and reveal vividly the socio-political problems that are characteristic of the neo-colonial establishment which is described as a representation of colonialism. Their works are dominated by the huge emphasis on the societal realities which form the basis of critical evaluation of the African novel.

The contemporary African novel is an amalgam of facts, fiction and history. It can therefore be said that the African prose fiction is handcuffed to history and consequently social realities. Most of the African prose fiction are representations for the loss of African values and bring to the fore the disillusionment of what remains. The themes of these works range from cultural contradictions, political and economic instability, and corruption to nepotism, sexual promiscuity, rape, etc.

Social Realism and the Contemporary African Prose Fiction

Most African novelists have employed the techniques of social realism to comment on African experience. Social realism helps in understanding the relationship between individuals and their society. In the contemporary African prose fiction, the criticism of the society focuses on the absence of norms which provides the basis for the good conduct of an

individual. Such an individual portrayed in African in African fiction are described as victims of erroneous choices because of the failure of the society to guide them into rightful conduct.

The Contemporary African prose fiction has become a veritable tool for analysing and commenting on contemporary life in Africa. The novels evoke and describe the life of a people at a given period of time. These novels are a reflection of the basic structure of any given society and try how the life of the individual is affected by the conditions in which he lives. Hence, this provides the means for the reader to evaluate the society based on how these conditions affect individuals. Social realism has become an instrument for analysing issues that go beyond private conduct into problems of morality in public affairs.

The tone that pervades these novels is that of nostalgic feeling for what has been lost and disillusionment with what remains. They depict African societies that are caught up at cultural cross-roads. Both the alienated elite and the masses are unable to provide appropriate solutions to these challenges. The socio-political problems, among others, include mediocrity in leadership which often results in anarchy. They portray the image of a decaying society where an individual is forced to grapple with the problems of a modern complex social set-up. The novelists have used their art to advocate for a change. It is in this light that we see these novels as embodiments of a rebellion against the authoritarian hierarchy of traditional society, the exploitative colonial set-up, the commercialism of the West and the philistine society of post-independence. The novelists reveal the painful adjustments and sacrifices the individual have to make in order to come to terms to the great changes that their society is undergoing. This tone of disillusionment is apparent in the works of the post-colonial African novelists such as Wole Soyinka's *the interpreters* (Soyinka 96), *A man of the people* (Soyinka 80), and Ayi kwei Armah's *the Beautiful One Are not Born* (Armah 69), etc.

The Tones of Nostalgic and Disillusionment in African prose fiction: A study of Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Achebe's *A Man of the people* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born*.

It is observed that no matter how imaginative a work of art may be, the writers usually writes about the events in the society in which he reside, In other words, the society as the background of his writing. The neo-colonial experiences of these writers have dominated their works as they convey the mood of post-colonial disillusionment to the readers. This fact is reinforced by Gakwandi thus:

The attainment of independence by many African countries in the last decade and the resultant change in the social-political atmosphere of these countries has had discernible influence on fictional themes (Gakwandi 67)

The works of these writers have deviated from the tradition of frequent attack on the common enemy, colonialism, and have sought to interpret the present experiences of the Africans in terms of the human characteristics without reference to the past. The present problems of the Africans cannot be attributed to the common external enemy of the past but to the excesses of the new black rulers of Africa. Achebe asserts thus:

Most of Africa is today politically free; a new situation has thus arisen. One of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (sore as it is still) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not (Achebe 46).

Achebe, Soyinka, among other novelists has provided a vivid insight into the problems caused by the new political order in Africa. Soyinka, for instance, captures the decadence of the contemporary social and political structures in many African Countries in his first novel *The Interpreters*. The main characters in *The Interpreters* are a group of educated elites who are dissatisfied with the social and political affairs of the country are being run by those in power. As a result of their moral stands, they are not allowed to participate in the corrupt system of governance. The main characters are Kola, a painter, Sekoni, an engineer and sculptor, Sagoe, a journalist, Egbo, a foreign office official and Bandele a university lecturer. They collectively lament the emptiness of their society and try to accomplish their desire to change the world around them.

The dilemma Egbo is faced with at the begging of the novel on whether to succeed his ageing grandfather or stay in the foreign office are pointers to the inabilities of the central government to control the traditional chiefs who are as corrupt as the national leaders. His grandfather owns a many smuggling routes which the government uses to get the old man's leftovers. Egbo, Sagoe, and the rest of the group show some kind of resentment and contempt for the politicians piloting in the affairs of the country. The confrontation between Sagoe and the members of the board during the interview shows the usual social conflict between the intellectual elite and the political elites. The political elites are a group of politicians who, as

a result of their slight education, are not equipped to find alternative jobs. These are the people responsible for electoral fraud, intolerance, and creation of politically meaningless party systems. Politics in the Contemporary Africa has become a means for acquiring wealth and social prestige

At the point of Sagoe's interview with the board members of the Independent Viewpoint, he is already prejudiced against the board members. He knows that the interviewers will favour mostly the politicians that lost in politics but who have supported and served the ruling party loyally. They have help the ruling party in thug recruitment, financial backing, Ministerial in-lawfulness, Ministerial pouncing. The eventual employment of Sagoe shows that his knowledge is needed reveals that he is likely to be dependent on the people who wield power. He soon learns that if he wants to earn money in journalism he has to see it as a business and must do what is only profitable for his employers.

The young intellectuals in *The Interpreters* are impatient with the morbidity of their society. They resent the way their country is being run and are determined to change the situation but unfortunately, they realize the impossibility of doing this as individuals. Of all of them, Sekoni passes through the bitterest experience. He is offered a job after his studies abroad but he is exiled to another country because he protests against his boss. On his arrival, he builds an experimental power station which his boss condemns through a hired expatriate because he has heavily in a power supply monopoly. Sekoni is arrested and forcibly taken to a mental hospital when he tries to test it. Sekoni later dies in a motor accident. The death of Sekoni brings to the interpreters a painful awareness of their limitations and their morality. Their youthful strength becomes dulled by painful contemplation. Egbo hides in the rocks until the end of the funeral; sagoe locks himself up in a room full of beer and vomit, and Kola seeks escapes in his painting. The group is bewildered and finds it difficult to regain their liveliness. The moral decay of this world parallels the physical decay which surrounds them.

The government is not alive and sensitive to the problems of the people. This is a result of the fact that it is being run by men like Chief Winsala who always boast. '*In the morning I drink whisky, in the evenings I drink schnapps. In the afternoons I don't drink at all, I sleep...*' (Soyinka 83). Also, Nwabuzor, the editor of The Independent View point belongs to the calibre of people who have sold their souls for money that keep the system going. When Sagoe threatens to resign over the suppression of the article on Sekoni, Nwabuzor tells him:

Sagoe, look I have been in this game for thirty years. Believe me there was a time when I held these ideals. I moved from one paper to the other, living in a flurry of righteous indignation. But look man, journalism here is just a business like any other. You do what your employer tells you. Believe me, Sagoe, just take my word. (Soyinka 95).

The academics, just like politicians, are ridiculed in the novel. But Soyinka's satire is not aimed solely at the elite. The villagers also take their portion of this satire. The socio-political situation in *The Interpreters* is sterile. The intellectuals are the most decadent group in the society. They are a reflection of completely foreign values and the university is structured in a style that is foreign to the community.

Just like *The Interpreters*, Achebe's *A Man of the People* is indictment of the African society after independence. The novel is a portrayal of a society replete with greed, violence and ignorance. The novel paints a dark of African society since independence. The events in *A Man of the People* reveal a society that is uncertain of the future. The society is governed by corrupt leaders like Chief Nanga who sees the nation as a cake from which each group should try to get as large a share as possible. Nepotism and Corruption are at the peak in the novel which is typical representation of an African society. There are many events involving corruption and the misuse of public funds. It is a society where many political office holders have a residence of seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms. Chief Nanga owns not less than three blocks of seven story flats which he built at the rate three thousand pounds each in his wife's name. The level of poverty in the country is reviewed via Odili's experiences as a house boy in Giligili. Odili puts his experience thus:

The only excitement I remember in Giligili was our nightly war on rats. We had two rooms in the large iron-roofed house with its earth walls and floor. My sister, her husband and two small children slept in one and the rest of us- three boys shared the other with bags of rice, garri, beans and other foodstuff. And of course the rats (Achebe 41)

The image of poverty portrayed above is in sharp contrast to the description of the bedroom in Chief Nanga's house:

I was simply hypnotized by the luxury of the great suite assigned to me. When I lay down in the double bed that seemed to ride on a cushion of air, and switched on that reading lamp and saw all the beautiful furniture anew from a lying down position and looked beyond the door to the gleaming bathroom and the towels as large as lappa I had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one for ever (Achebe 37).

Despite this, Chief Nanga continues to acquire more property while the poor in the villages get poorer and poorer. This is a society where exploitation can go on for so long without any protest. The leaders continue to exploit the needy even when they are far richer than them. Inhumanity is seen as a normal way of life. It has become part and parcel of the people of the society. For instance, Josiah who steals the stick of a blind mom, Azoge later receives cheers from the same villagers during the parliamentary election campaign. The writer describes the nation as a cake to scramble for. This is why the political regime after independence begins to scramble for power and position, and public servant are appointed based on whom they know rather than what they know.

The political decadence in the society opens the door for the invasion of a wide range of values which contribute immensely to the destruction of the traditional balance between the material and the spiritual sphere of life, which has led to the hypocrisy of double standards. Odili, a moral voice in the society, is equally hypocritical. Despite his moral objections to the political conduct of Chief Nanga, he could not help himself shouting 'Hear! Hear!' to the gathering of people at Anata Grammar School listening to Chief Nanga's remarks. Odili conceives in his mind like: 'I like to think that I meant it to be sarcastic' (Achebe 10), 'this time I clearly meant my tongue to be in my cheek'. The fact is that Odili is seeking favours from chief Nanga but he does not want to acknowledge it. This makes most of his actions insincere.

Although Odili is one of the people advocating for a change especially in the political system of the country, he is seen to be selfish. He condemns the rate of corruption in the country, the yoke of foreign capitalism but he accepts money from a communist country. He also collects money from chief Koko during the campaign. Just like Soyinka, Achebe's *A Man of the people* captures the disillusionment of the impossibility to escape from double

standards which as disrupted the traditional moral order of the society. The whole society is seen to be guilty of this. Odili, Max and Nanga as well as the whole society are all trapped in the web of conflicting moral values where self-sacrifice and service to the community are undefined.

In the words of Gakwandi: 'the nation is a pressure-cooker of social experiment and it is uncertain whether the pot will contain the pressure or not'.

Ayi Kwei Armah paints the picture of the sourness of African independence in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The novel is pervaded by the persistent imagery of decay, putrefaction and death. The sound, the smells, the sights and the thought of the people all mingle into a single rhythm of decay and death. The symbolic descriptions of objects and situations by Armah reflect an aspect of the decaying process with which the world of the novel is cluttered. Armah releases his disgust and disillusionment at his exposition of African corrupt society with characters of Koomson, Estella and Timber contractor as the literary vehicles. The writer presents the immature principle of uprightness within the man, and his struggle to resist temptation. His struggles for survival in a polluted society often threaten his moral integrity. The image Armah portrays in the novel is that of a dirty and corrupt society where there is no point for an individual to try to change it. Everybody in the society has got to learn to live in the midst of the fifth and must secure his own private salvation through endurance. The title of the novel confirms that the beautiful ones are not yet born. Those that are already born are corrupt, greedy, selfish and dishonest. There is uncertainty as to whether the beautiful ones will be born and this depicts the hopeless situation of a corrupt and polluted post-independence African society.

Conclusion

The novels discussed in this paper are violent attacks on the errors and villainy of the politicians and the people of post-independence Africa. The novelists express their dissatisfaction about the way the affairs of the country are being run. They bring to the limelight our awareness of the socio-political issues of our times. The novelists are social critics that provide a qualitative evaluation of modern African life. The general picture that emerges from this body of criticism of African society depicts Africa as an un-weeded garden that needs prompt weeding.

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