

Francis Deng's Political Novels and the Claim of One Sudanese Identity

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Introduction

Francis Deng's novels try to bridge the gap between the people of then called Sudan before the split of the country into two Sudans: North and South. In introducing his novel *Seed of Redemption* Deng asserts that "The book stems from the profound conviction that what divides the Sudanese people along racial and cultural lines is largely a myth, nurtured and perpetuated by a long history of stratification and discrimination" (S R vii)

In *Seed of Redemption* Deng depicts the victimization and political oppression of the people of Southern Sudan by the colonizer then by the successive post independent governments in Sudan.

At the onset of the book we see Rizigalla a Southerner born to a slave woman, but raised by his kind master who treated him like his own son.

Critics have examined Deng's overt condemnation of the people of North Sudan for widening the gap between the South and the North through Arabicization and Islam.

Seed of Redemption falls into two parts; the first one which is totally fiction and the second part which is based on historical facts about Sudan although all the characters in the book are fictitious. Deng possesses an intimate and impeccable knowledge of Sudan history which he employs as background for this novel and other works.

This paper is about the conflict of identity in modern Sudan. It attempts to refute the claim of the novelist that the people of the North and South are ethnically the same which is adopted not only in his fiction, but also in his nonfiction.

This conflict of identity is actually rooted in the past and the paper will trace back the issue and its complexities.

Ancient Sudan

Upon the arrival of the Arabs in Sudan as traders more than 1400 years ago the South was inaccessible to them and they preferred to settle in the North where they had their trade and business. Deng thinks that:

The significant aspect of the southern confrontation with invaders from the North, including the Arabs, is that while they persistently raided the South for slaves, they never penetrated deeply and did not attempt to settle. Swamps, flies, tropical humidity, and the fierce resistance of the tribes kept the contact marginal, even as it was devastatingly violent. (Africans of Two Worlds 39)

In fact, the North had undergone massive changes by the arrival of the Arab traders and their intermarriages and mingling with the natives. The whole nation of north Sudan gradually altered its language and religion to adopt the Arabic language and the Islamic religion. However, the South Sudan sustained its African origins for thousand years even after the arrival of the British colonizers in the late nineteenth century they kept it unexplored and isolated for many years.

John W. Burton says, "Arabic was widely spoken in northern Sudan communities; scores of previously unwritten African languages were spoken throughout the south (512)."

Modern Sudan

Sudan (before secession)

Sudan is a vast country in north east Africa; it is situated between the Arabic and the Africa part of Africa. Sudanese Arabs in the north rule the whole country. Despite the fact that the South is purely African in all the sense of the word, the people of the south struggle to establish their identity. They neither accept the identity of the people of the north nor accept to be identified with the north.

Deng asserts that:

Sudanese have been molded to identify themselves in accordance with symbols which varied from time to time and from place to place, but which were largely grounded on pre-existing realities, often only reemphasizing already existing familial, tribal, ethnic and ultimately racial values. (Dynamics of identification 20)

Many writers in their works tried to bridge this gap fictionally if it could not be bridged in reality among them Deng in his political novel *Seed of Redemption*, the protagonist is the offspring of an intermarriage between a woman from the south and a man from the north. For his racial mixture Faris passes easily as a northerner even marries a woman from the north then together with his wife try to salvage the country and its people.

Since the departure of the British colonizer from Sudan in 1956 and the declaration of Independent Sudan, a war was triggered between the South and North Sudan which came to an end after nearly half a century in 2005 by signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (C P A) between the two parts in conflict. This war was actually created by the colonizer who planted the seeds of the problem between the people of one nation.

South Sudan is inhabited by ethnically minority African Sudanese and the North Sudan by majority Sudanese Arabs. Despite the fact that there are many ethnic groups in all parts of the country Sudanese people may come together as one nation, but they never have belonged to one identity. Sudan can be well described as a multicultural country. There one can find people originally from Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, Morocco, Syria and Egypt who mixed with the people of the North and created a mixed race known as Sudanese Arabs. Although they do not typically look like Arabs however they have African features.

For nearly 50 years after independence and the departure of the colonizer Southern Sudanese people were in dilemma and conflict to form their identity.

They neither felt their belonging to the North language nor the Islamic religion of the North. They were struggling between their African identity and the Arabic culture and identity of the North.

Historically, it is also believed that in the hands of the British colonizer South Sudan in 1920s was declared a "closed Area" where the Arabs or people from the North and Muslims were not allowed to enter.

Burton adds, "The British banned Islamic religious practice and the use of Arabic, and even went to the extent of physically removing Muslim merchants." (512) hence, the South and its people were alienated and isolated from their brothers in the north. Only Christians and white missionaries were permitted to enter and roam freely in the vast areas of the South. It was the game and the wish of the colonizer to build this gap between the Sudanese nations to remain in the country as long as possible. Consequently, the colonizer managed to divide Sudan into two different parts. The South becomes culturally and linguistically different from the North. There was substantial development in the North and the South remained primitive and lagging behind.

Later on, the gap between the North and the South was increased and it extended to hostility between the two nations of one country. Deng depicts this gap in his book

Africans of Two worlds and displayed the difference between the people of the North who belongs to the Arabic world culturally and linguistically and the people of the South who belong culturally and ethnically to Africa. The British colonizer left Sudan torn and floating in blood of war, thousands of people of the South fled the war towards the North and lived there. A huge displacement occurred in the history of modern Sudan. Despite the fact that, the northern Sudan people embraced the displaced people of the South they felt alienated from the culture of the North. Some of them developed inferiority complex and began to resent the North and its people.

Although, some of the Southern Sudanese people joined the schools and universities of the north, however, majority of them were illiterate and had to do menial jobs. Others claimed they were enslaved by the Northern Sudanese people. It was very hard for the Southern Sudanese people to establish a unique identity in a country which is dominated by the culture and the people of the north. One could say, the situation resembles the existence of the blacks in a dominant white culture. But, the worst thing here is that the issue in Sudan was between the people of one nation. They failed to adopt the culture and the norms of the North and failed to establish their own identity. It was a struggle for them to establish their African identity.

M. I. Shoush believes that the protagonist in this novel "...symbolizes the fusion of African and Arab blood that characterizes this unique identity."(68)

In the protagonist the novelist placed the role of bridging this gap.

But, in reality the gap persisted to exist and the core of the problem was deeply rooted in the heart of the Southern Sudanese people.

Deng notices that "there is a conflict of contrasting and incompatible Identities in the Northern and the Southern parts of Sudan." (War of Vision)

Since Sudan Independence in 1956, all successive governments attempted sincerely to solve the problem between the South and the North. On one hand, Southern people were among the cabinet of most of these governments and they were indulged as delegates and representatives of the South. On the other hand, Southern people refused by any means to be ruled or governed by any Sudanese government from the North. So, clashes and war spread everywhere in the South and in 2005 the present government signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between south and north and the almost half century war came to an end. The Southern people according to this agreement were given 6years to decide their destiny either to remain with the north as one country or establishing a new country. In late 2010 after the referendum Southern people voted for the secession and as the results showed their intention to divide the country into two: Sudan and New South Sudan.

The New South Sudan emerged and saw the light on 9th, July 2011.

Even before the declaration of the new country and the change in the World Map there appears a new conflict of identity between the Southern people themselves. After the call for all Southern people in the North and abroad to return to the South, the Southern people who lived in the north for almost 50 years and assimilated into the culture of the north are not accepted by southern who remained in the south and fought for the independence of the south. Although, they were asked to return they discovered that they are not welcomed by their kin for their identities have undergone changes in the north and they seem alienated from south. As a result, the clash turns now between southerners who lived in the north and southerners who remained in South while the half century war was taking place. The same way the British colonizer had done with India and many other countries. The partition of India and Pakistan was the idea of the colonizer at first place. By keeping Kashmir as an area of conflict between India and Pakistan, Abye (a place in the borders between North and

south Sudan) was exempted from being included in the Peace Agreement and was governed by the north and south at the same time. It is now left as an area of conflict between the new South Sudan and Sudan. This area is inhabited by nomadic Arab tribes and some tribes from the south. It is in tension now between the two ethnic groups. Each group claims the area as their own.

Conclusion

It is clear that South Sudan's conflict of identity in post colonial era is a problem rooted in the past and grown at present. The colonizer was responsible of it by planting the seeds of separation before departing the country. People of both sides never felt of having one identity in terms of culture or religion and imposing the dominant culture on the south led to eruption of war and hostility and distrust.

However, Deng tried hard in these novels to bring the two sides together and to convince them that they belong to one identity. If they do belong to one identity why they waged war for fifty years? Why the country split in two? These questions prove that north and south do not belong to one identity with all the efforts of the novelist to prove the contrary. Partition of the country separates the Arabs from the Africans but still the issue of identity persists even among the people of the newly born South Sudan for it is hard to unite or categorize them under one identity. Deng as a novelist and a political writer tries to tackle the issue in his works to reduce the gap between the north and south, but the gap seemed resistant to all kind of bridging and the gap was widened and led to split of the country into two.

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