

African Literature and English Language: A Literary and Political Discussion

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Abstract

Given the political upheavals that have overtaken African nations, a political literary discourse is crucial right now. Since the author is frequently viewed as an emancipator of the people, the creative writer might use his work to critically evaluate current political circumstances in order to influence and reroute societal behavior, beliefs, and values. Thus, literature has the power to shape people's opinions on politics and how to bring about political change. In order to demonstrate how political issues have been recurring themes in both pre-independence and post-independence Africa, the paper analyzes a few chosen works using the structural-functional approach to literature. The use of English in political circles and the various literary techniques used by African authors to address the threat of oppression and poor leadership in post-independence Africa are also examined in this Article.

Key words: *African Literature, English language*

I. INTRODUCTION

Because artists write or compose their works about societal events and occurring, literature serves as a mirror of society. The responsibility of writing about Africans' pre-independence and post-independence disenchantment has fallen to African writers. Through their writings, authors can critically evaluate the current political climate in an effort to influence or reroute societal behavior, beliefs, and values. Thus, literature has the power to shape people's opinions on politics and how to bring about political change. It is therefore difficult to divorce literature from politics. We tend to agree with the views of the late literary icon, Ken Saro-Wiwa when he states:

Literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics; by intervention and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused critical look at society. He must play an interventionist role. (81).

Given that many African nations are currently dealing with a variety of political issues brought on by poor governance, autocracies, and widespread government corruption, a political literary discussion is therefore quite pertinent. The structural-functional approach to literature, which was developed by Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and others and examines the practical significance of literature in society, serves as the foundation for this essay. Therefore, the political polemics in a few chosen literary works from South Africa, East Africa, and West Africa are examined in the first section of this dissertation. We think that these works' significance in their home countries is a microcosm of what goes on in the greater African community. The use of language in political circles is briefly examined in the second section of the paper.

POLITICAL POLEMICS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Literature portrays the ever-changing human culture. As a result, society will inevitably receive the literature it is entitled to. It will address the problems of justice, freedom, and fair play if it takes place in a hostile setting, such as the one we had in South Africa, for instance. People's humanity will be buried and the government will be given priority if it is written in a utilitarian society like the one that existed in the old Soviet Union. As a result, literature is dynamic. The fundamental African issues of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the dissemination of African ideals to the outside world were the focus of early African writers. Additionally, they aimed to rectify the inaccurate portrayal of Africans in colonialist literature. But as the majority of African nations gained their independence, focus turned to problems like corruption, terrible governance, apartheid, and tyranny.

The ongoing issues of poor leadership brought on by widespread corruption and greed have plagued post-independence African countries. As a result, the general public feels betrayed by the ruling class and disillusioned. The brutality of short-lived, homicidal military regimes has also been a painful experience for many African nations.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie examines this complex facet of African history in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), utilizing her home nation of Nigeria as a microcosm of the continent's broader civilization. In Nigeria, coups and countercoups were commonplace, with promises of improved conditions for Nigerians. Another coup has occurred in the nation, and martial law has been imposed along with the suspension of the constitution. Since anyone who tries to speak the truth gets in trouble with the law, the press is silenced. As a result of publishing two sensitive stories involving the disappearance of human rights activist Nwakiti Ogechi and the Head of State's involvement in an illegal drug deal, Standard Editor Ade Coker is killed. Soldiers raid the publishing company and demolish it. The book reveals the military junta's corruption and hypocrisy. While other drug dealers are put to death in public, the new leader and his spouse shelter a particular drug dealer who is suspected of participating in the same illegal trade for their own commercial gain. After the military overthrows a civilian government with harsh criticism, the new government is accused of committing the same corruption as the former one.

Corruption is at its highest level as funds meant for the provision of social amenities are embezzled by government officials. Consequently, lecturers and other workers are not being paid their salaries for long periods. There is unrest at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka because the students cannot get water, light and medical service. The roads in the country are in a deplorable state and there is acute scarcity of fuel. In a dialogue with Obiora, Amaka says if she were the Vice Chancellor of University of Nigeria, Nsukka, she would ensure the availability of water and light for the students to forestall demonstrations. Obiora responds, "If some big man in Abuja has stolen the money, is the Vice chancellor to vomit money for Nsukka?" (P139). The African writer cannot therefore afford to be indifferent in the face of these anomalies. It is this same vicious circle of corruption and bad leadership that Chinua Achebe captures in *A Man of the People* (1966), with Chief Nanga representing the corrupt civilian regime while in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) the excesses of the military regime in Nigeria are demonstrated by the ruthlessness of the Head of state, General Sam.

African writers have equally shown that poetry could also be a veritable political tool. Odiya Ofeimun, a contemporary Nigerian poet also does not believe in the notion of arts for arts' sake. He looks at art as a tool that could be used for the emancipation of the proletariat. Commenting on the role of the writer in politics, Ofeimun states:

It is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies.... I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considers right and deserving expression. (Talking with African Writers, 66).

The aforementioned remark suggests that the author should always speak the truth, even if doing so offends the ruling class. The title of Ofeimun's poetry collection, *The Poet Lied* (1980), further supports this viewpoint. Ofeimun goes on to say in an interview that "The Poet Lied is not really just about a poet." It is predicated on an evaluation of the leaders who manipulate symbols, which are used by the entire society to interpret the lives of the people in the nation (Talking..62).

Therefore, it makes sense to argue that the writer who avoids speaking the truth is also a participant, using symbols to manipulate the public to the damage of political leaders. Ofeimun's literature revolves around the topic of his nation's successive regimes betraying the people. Given Nigeria's wealth of natural and human resources, he feels that the government should have done far more for its citizens. He is equally incensed at the general public for blindly accepting the existing quo. More than anything else, he believes that the apathy of the populace has fueled the intelligentsia's efforts to undermine African economies and steal the continent's riches for their own ends.

In his poem, "The Messiahs", Ofeimun confirms the perception of the "Leader-Messiah" (a metaphor for greedy and selfish leaders in Africa) as irresponsible. Its ironic structure reflects the attitude that rather than save the people, the "Messiahs" destroy them through incompetence, greed and extravagant life-style. The leaders feed the people with lies as they are usually surrounded by "Political pimps and truth benders". Again, in "National Cakes" the poet uses the vultures as a metaphor for unpatriotic leaders who are incapable of performing patriotic acts, but only feed on what others have produced. This concept of vultures is a reflection on both economic and political attitudes of irresponsibility. He writes:

Vultures' don't bake their national cakes
They just swoop on the ripe carcass of maybe, human cattle
We too, hate to be bakers
And so, we despoil the sunrise we seek

Since the "vultures don't bake national cakes", they "swoop on ripe carcass" produced by other patriotic citizens. In "The New Brooms", the poet recalls the proverb, "a new broom sweeps better than an old one". Ofeimun then interrogates that idea by relating it specifically to the political development in his society where a military regime has replaced a civilian one. In stanza three of the poem, he states:

“To keep the streets clear
They brought in world-changers
With corrective swagger sticks
They brought in the new broom
To sweep public scores away”.

But in spite of the promises that the new brooms would sweep clean the dirt in the nation, soon after their emergence, “The streets were blessed with molehills of unwanted odds and bits”.

As they quickly turn into more corrupt and filthy leaders than the ones they ousted from office, this reveals their hypocrisy. Changes in leadership in Africa have not improved the situation of the majority, as experience has demonstrated. Ofeimun concurs with Ayi Kwei Armah of Ghana in his 1968 book *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* that it's really the same old dance of corruption and poor leadership, albeit in a different fashion. Nonetheless, Ofeimun is hopeful in "Judgment Day" that justice will ultimately prevail over injustice and deceit in Africa, regardless of how long truth remains buried. The “Vultures” would eventually be eliminated and he concludes; “They will tumble down from the dais dazed by hammer blows”.

Ofeimun utilizes a variety of tools to help him convey his message while drawing attention to the people's predicament. He makes extensive use of metaphors. A metaphor for recently appointed leaders is seen in the title of "The New Brooms." Ironically, though, these new brooms are still unable to remove the nation's "garbage." "The Messiah" serves as a metaphor for avaricious and self-centered leaders. Another technique that Ofeimun employs in his writings is symbolism, which is also metaphorical. For example, the vulture is used to represent "rot" and incompetence. Since the vulture relies on decaying prey that has been murdered by others, it does not attempt to kill its own prey.

Ofeimun's use of language vividly depicts his subject. For instance, he speaks to "these morbid landscapes" in "How can I sing?" as a result of the crimes our leaders have committed in the country. This suggests that Nigeria's terrain is afflicted. The poet also uses phrases like "garbage," "swollen gutter," "dung," "decomposition," "night soil," etc. to depict the filth caused by corruption in society. Similar to Armah's portrayal of Ghanaian culture in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), these phrases convey the poet's sense of sickness.

Ofeimun's writings are an impassioned response to injustices and poor governance in his country, even if his vocabulary is often harsh, abrasive, and militant. Through his art, he seeks to raise people's consciousness and instill in them a reluctance to tolerate what is unworthy of change. For this reason, he states in "Resolve" that we should "Resolve that the locust shall never again visit our farm steads" instead of crying.

Notwithstanding the political obstacles, Ofeimun believes that a vision will eventually come to light—a reality that will undoubtedly help the populace identify the cause of their problems and eliminate it to enhance their well-being. In order to reach the point where "our blood challenges our hand in the struggle," he believes that this reality will "re-open our eyes" and "our eyes challenge our mouths." The same goal and vision are pursued by Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare in his poetry volumes *Waiting Laughter* (1990) and *Tender Moments* (2006).

Since the 1970s, writers in East Africa have also focused on themes of disillusionment and unmet aspirations for independence. The resulting genre, known as disillusionment literature, was a harsh critique of the new African political and economic elite, which seemed to have betrayed the countries by exploiting education and privileged positions for individual rather than group benefit. In the post-independence era, the first generation of East African writers—and African writers in general—operated under the broad and tacit assumption that a writer's job was to be involved in and dedicated to nation-building and societal reform. Being an activist was part of being an artist. Therefore, it was essential for the writer to produce "committed literature."

One such committed writer is Meja Mwangi. His works were thus pre-occupied with post independent disillusionment and unfulfilled hopes in Kenya. His urban based novels give an account of the constant struggle for survival that marks Nairobi's poorest sectors. This pitiable situation is a result of bad leadership and corruption that are common features in post independent Kenya. *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* (1976), recreate gory pictures of stinking black alleys, slums and severe social problems that accompany them. There are issues of inadequate housing and jobs, non-existent waste removal services, corrupt government officials, alcoholism, theft and the likes. In *Going Down River Road* (1976), Mwangi probes deeper into the effect of the city environment on individuals in the city. He chooses to do this with the illiterate and semiliterate of the society, who live from hand to mouth and who are in the majority and provide cheap labour. Mwangi does this through a representative character, Ben, who bears the burden of the city, its harsh realities, cold ethics and its fierce, almost brutal fight for survival. Ben's dismissal from the army for selling weapons to armed

robbers is a reflection of the rot in the Kenyan society. The society was bereft of values as no one cared to ask questions about other people's sources of wealth. The resources of the country were therefore being plundered by the privileged ruling class and their cohorts. In answer to Ocholla's comment that he should have known better than to trust gangsters, Ben proclaims:

Nothing was impossible in those days. Everybody was scrambling for big money, and no one cared how you made it. You could have sold the whole goddam country to eager buyers; a lot of those guys in the big cars on the avenue did just that. I was a poor salesman. (Mwangi 54).

Thus, it is clear that the quickest path to riches and social mobility was corruption. As a result, the majority of the hemmed-in individuals of Kenyan society had a dismal future and turned to crime, prostitution, or simply drowning their frustrations in a strong native alcoholic beverage called "Kill Me Quick." It is important to remember that "Going Down River Road" is both a reality and a metaphor. The Karara center and the Development House are both tangible and symbolic. The workers or part of the society is being underdeveloped while the building is developing. Similarly, the underdeveloped segment of the society gather at the Karara center for drinks like a ritual. Mwangi hopes that his writings can help effect social and political change by first changing the consciousness of the people.

In South Africa, before the abolition of apartheid, the obnoxious apartheid system gave rise to protest literature. Most of the writers that emerged during this period were therefore concerned with the issues of injustices and social inequality orchestrated by the government. One of such writers whose work stands out is Dennis Brutus. He was one of those writers that cared to use the arts to promote social justice in Africa and the world at large. Brutus does not believe that the literary artist should be indifferent to the happenings in the society. He must, through his works attempt to effect a positive change in the politics of his society. After all, George Steiner once remarked that, "Men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent" (58). *Letters to Martha* (1968) was Brutus' individual effort in defence of a common destiny of the South African black majority. In spite of his arrest and imprisonment in 1963 for writing protest poetry, he remained undaunted.

As an artist, Brutus' reaction to the tragedy of the South African nation is of three – fold – to heal and restore the life of the ordinary black South African and indeed the human race, to create a new vision for a purposeful growth, regeneration and glorification of man in South Africa and to mobilize a collective conscience of the masses to restore full political and social rights to the black majority in a free South Africa. Brutus is dedicated to fighting the cause of his people. He had actually predicted that his publication of *Letters To Martha* (1968) was destined for the fall and rising of many in South Africa, "the prediction for the fall of apartheid and the rising of black majority from the mountain of freedom" (Omoha, 15). In "The mob", Brutus reinforces the idea of the political relevance of his poetry as he identifies with the African National Congress in the 1960s to campaign against the pass law that restricted free movement, settlement and economic rights of black South Africans. This effort metamorphosed into street protests, leading to the sharpville massacres in 1961 and the subsequent passage of sabotage bill by the apartheid regime in 1962.

Once more, in "The Mob," Brutus describes the unjustified assault on his people that haunts him with images of terror and dreams. from the visuals, especially "the saurian-laden stares/ and fear-blanked facelessness/ of my irrational terrors." His intention was to incite the oppressed black South Africans to rebel against their enslavers. Therefore, such literary works ought to be free of jargon and what Chinweizu and others refer to as "the Hopkins Disease" (174). He uses somewhat plain language because he wants to engage with his people, who are apartheid victims, using straightforward language. Conscientizing them to take physical action against the oppressive regime was his goal.

Also, in order to avoid direct confrontation with the regime, Brutus employs the use of metaphors. In "Abolish Laughter First", the poem itself is a metaphor for the blacks on their struggle for freedom. While the oppressor tightens the repressive measures and enjoys sadism, laughter of disappointment haunts him like a ghost. Brutus uses metaphors to deface the imposing figures of the powers that be.

Brutus' revelation of the prison conditions is intended to provoke reactions from the masses outside the prison. The oppressor is hurt by the revelation and the oppressed is emotionally touched so feels a sense of challenge to take physical action towards liberating himself. This is essential to sustain the action against apartheid because "the not-knowing/ is perhaps the worst part of the agony/ for those outside" (*Letters* 59). Art as the reticule of communication triumphs over repressive act of imprisonment. As the thoughts are conveyed in poetic form, events do not only assume freshness in the minds of the readers, they are also likely to affect the pace of political development. Brutus' effort succeeded in making the world stop South Africa from participating in the Olympic Games in 1976. Freedom eventually came with peace to South Africa in 1994.

LANGUAGE USE IN POLITICAL CIRCLES

While the substance of political narratives varies widely, they follow certain standard trajectories including the recounting of events in the form of retrievals and projections. According to Apter (1993), events serve as metaphors in which meanings are transmitted in terms of past and similar situations, and metonymies in which the event is a fragment or representation of some large logical or theoretical belief system. Sometimes too, euphemistic language is deployed in political narratives. In the process of recounting stories of events, they are systematized and formed into „master narratives“ which requires an „agency“, a public figure, able to play the special role of „story-teller“. In this paper it would be natural to attribute the role of the „story-teller“/agency to the authors whose works we have examined as revealing the political issues of their time. Their narratives draw upon traditional political themes, a rich store of value that can be enlisted to justify the prescriptions that partisan entrepreneurs offer. By manipulating values to achieve strategic purposes, political architects turn the cultural repertoire, into a dynamic political force.

EUPHEMISMS AND METAPHORS IN POLITICAL DISCUSSION

In cognitive terms, euphemisms are used when one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. The aim of using euphemisms is to stroke at a person’s imagination. Euphemisms do not form complete pictures of the mind, nor do they completely define an object or event. Though euphemizing is now an accepted and established practice, it has acquired a dubious connotation in light of its tendency to deliberately disguise actual meanings of words in political discourses. Lutz (1989) while examining the ethical considerations in using euphemisms makes an immediate distinction between euphemisms proper and doublespeak: “when a euphemism is used to deceive, it becomes doublespeak” (18). The sole purpose of doublespeak is to make the unreasonable seem reasonable, the blamed seem blameless, and the powerless seem powerful. The term doublespeak was coined as an amalgam of two Orwellian expressions, double think and newspeak, both of which appear in Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). In doublespeak, there is incongruity between what is said or left unsaid, and what really is; between the essential function of language (communication) and what doublespeak does i.e misleads, distorts, deceives, inflates. Chomsky noted that to make sense of political discourse, it is necessary to give a running translation into English, “decoding the doublespeak of the media, academic, social scientists and the secular priesthood generally” (45).

Metaphors occupy a central place in the rhetoric of politicians and their minions. The troupe generates imagery which invokes targeted associations and channels our way of thinking. This mind-shaping ability of metaphor is convincingly established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Lakoff (1991) argues that abstractions and enormously complex situations are routinely understood via metaphor. He observes that dominant metaphors tend to both reflect and influence values in a culture. There is indeed, an extensive, and mostly unconscious system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions. Political discourses thus are a panorama of metaphor and euphemism and understanding Nigerian/African politics via the tool of literature entails understanding the role the Nigerian/African literary writer plays in exposing the political issues of his time using political actors who deploy metaphorical and euphemistic language to effect enormous social consequences.

II. CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that literature must inevitably be important to any people's political phenomena. In order to live up to this principle, African writers have used literary devices to express their ideas and opinions about the different political challenges that are troubling them. After examining past attempts by African writers to bring about constructive political change in African nations, we firmly believe that the contemporary African writer needs to step up and carry on the fight today more than ever. We must acknowledge that Africa's political issues have also grown increasingly intricate and complex over time. Therefore, in order to face this hydra-headed monster, the up-and-coming African writer must keep coming up with new forms. We are aware that the author might have to wade across pools infected with crocodiles in order to achieve this goal. Nevertheless, African writers must fulfill their duty as the emancipator of the masses and the voice of the voiceless, despite the formidable obstacles that may lie ahead. Experience has demonstrated that, in fact, the pen is more powerful than the sword.

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