

The use of English in Political Circles and the Various Literary Techniques used by African Authors in Post-independence Africa

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Abstract

Currently, a political literary discourse is essential given the political upheavals that have engulfed African nations. In order to influence and redirect cultural behavior, beliefs, and values, the creative writer may utilize his work to critically assess contemporary political conditions, since the author is often seen as an emancipator of the people. As a result, literature has the ability to influence people's views on politics and how to effect political change. Using the structural functional approach to literature, the study examines a few selected works to show how political concerns have been recurrent themes in both pre- and post-independence Africa. 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 paper.

Key words: *African Literature, English language*

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature acts as a mirror of society as artists create works that reflect societal events and happenings. African authors have been tasked with documenting the disillusionment of Africans both before and after independence. In order to change or redirect society behavior, attitudes, and values, authors might critically assess the existing political environment through their literature. As a result, literature has the ability to influence people's views on politics and how to effect political change. As a result, it is challenging to separate politics from literature. 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).

A political literary discussion is also quite relevant, as many African countries are now coping with a range of political problems caused by autocracies, weak governance, and pervasive government corruption. This article is based on the structural-functional approach to literature, which was created by Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and others and looks at the usefulness of literature in society. Thus, the first part of this dissertation looks at the political polemics in a few selected literary works from South Africa, East Africa, and West Africa. We believe that the relevance of these works in their native nations is a microcosm of the larger African community. The use of language in political circles is briefly examined in the second section of this article.

II. POLITICAL CONFLICTS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Human civilization is always evolving, as seen in literature. Consequently, society will unavoidably acquire the literature to which it is entitled. If it occurs in a hostile environment, like the one we experienced in South Africa, for example, it will address the issues of justice, freedom, and fair play. If it is written in a utilitarian society, such as the one that existed in the former Soviet Union, people's humanity will be buried and the government will be given precedence. Literature is therefore dynamic. Early African writers addressed the core African concerns of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the exportation of African values to the global community. They also sought to correct imperialist literature's incorrect depiction of Africans. 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.

In *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores this intricate aspect of African history, using her native Nigeria as a microcosm of the continent's larger culture. Coups and countercoups were frequent in Nigeria, with promises of better living circumstances for Nigerians. The country has seen yet another

coup, and martial law and constitutional suspension have been implemented. The press is suppressed because anyone who attempts to express the truth faces legal repercussions. Standard Editor Ade Coker is slain after publishing two sensitive pieces about the disappearance of human rights activist Nwakiti Ogechi and the Head of State's role in an illicit narcotics transaction. The publishing firm is raided and destroyed by soldiers. 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.

Because government officials pilfer cash intended for the provision of social amenities, corruption is at its maximum degree. For extended durations, lecturers and other employees are not receiving their paychecks as a result. The University of Nigeria in Nsukka is experiencing unrest as a result of the students' inability to get electricity, water, and medical care. There is a severe gasoline shortage and the nation's highways are in terrible condition. In an interview with Obiora, Amaka states that in order to prevent protests, she would make sure that students have access to electricity and water if she were the vice chancellor of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. "Is the vice chancellor to vomit money for Nsukka if some big man in Abuja has stolen the money?" asks Obiora in response. (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 authors have also demonstrated that poetry has the potential to be a powerful political instrument. Another modern Nigerian poet who rejects the idea of art for art's sake is Odiya Ofeimun. According to him, art has the potential to be an instrument for the liberation of the working class. Ofeimun says, "It is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies." This quote reflects the writer's involvement in politics. If a writer thinks he can distinguish between himself as an artist and himself as a member of society with opinions that he feels are legitimate and worthy of being expressed, I think he is being dishonest with himself. (A Conversation with African Authors, 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".

However, shortly after their introduction, "The streets were blessed with molehills of unwanted odds and bits," despite the assurances that the new brooms would sweep the country's filth clean. This exposes their hypocrisy as they swiftly become even more corrupt and filthy leaders than the ones they removed from power. Experience has shown that the majority's circumstances have not improved in Africa as a result of changes in leadership. Ofeimun agrees with Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah in his 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* that corruption and bad leadership are still prevalent, but in a new way. 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.

III. 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.

IV. 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 trope 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.

V. CONCLUSION

As this paper has shown, literature must unavoidably play a significant role in the political phenomena of any people. African authors have employed literary strategies to convey their thoughts and opinions on the many political issues that are bothering them in order to uphold this value. We are certain that the modern African writer must take up the cause now more than ever after looking at previous initiatives by African authors to effect positive political change in African countries. We have to admit that the political problems facing Africa have likewise become more complicated and nuanced over time. Therefore, the emerging African writer must continue to create new forms in order to confront this hydra-headed beast. We are aware that in order to do this, the author may need to wade over crocodile-infected ponds. Despite the significant challenges that may lie ahead, African authors must fulfill their responsibility as the voice of the voiceless and the emancipator of the people. The pen really is more powerful than the sword, as experience has shown.

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