

Exile as Motif in Lenrie Peters' 'He Walks Alone': Trends in Identity, Policy and Globalization

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Abstract

This paper conceptualises the theory of social realism in delineating the theme of migration and exile as recurring poetic motifs in Lenrie Peters' "He Walks Alone". The paper balances collective identity with textual analysis to show various levels of alienation and social experience African people face while in Europe. It calls attention on various artistic devices which the poet uses for the purpose of literary edification and for the development of the human psyche in migrations literature.

Keywords: Exile, Motif, Lenrie Peters, He Walks Alone, Identity, Migration, Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Writings on Exile portend either self identity or collective identity of a group of people who live in a continuum. This kind of writing either informs, educates or entertains but the major motif here is to criticize and to sarcastically inform the people within the literary ethos about the exigency of exile, its psychological effects, sociological effects and even its political effects on African people. Exile writing visualizes issues that bother on alienation and the quest for freedom. Writers throughout the ages have been using their literary works of arts to show various reactions that illumine exile. Some x-ray physical exile others psychological exile which grossly affects the psyche of the writer or the character in question.

Migration and forced migration are panacea to alienation and exile. Writings emanating from such feelings are nostalgic and thought provoking. Many writers have used their works to buttress the feelings of exile in time and space. The experience of exile literature in Lithuania is predicated on the apocalyptic second coming of the soviet armies in Lithuania. This threw away many intellectual and professional away into exile. Poets arose to react critically to these plights. Examples of such poets are Kazys Bradunas (b.1917), Jonas Mekas (b.1922), Algirdas Landsbergs (b.1924) among others from all parts of the world.

My concern in this paper is to examine exile as motif in Lenrie Peters' poetry which is entitled "He Walks Alone". The poem explains various reasons Africans go on exile and their impressions when they feel nostalgic. Feelings for their roots, their families and their cultures give rise to some sensitive impressions in their works of arts. However, the work uses textual analysis to explain how Lenrie Peters uses irony and metaphor to portray the image of exile politically, psychologically, economically and physically as recurring motif in his poetry. His wealth of imagery is situated within the framework of literary application.

EXILE AS MOTIF IN POETRY

Poetry usually employs "the use of epigrammatic statements, lyrics, concrete images which graphically delineate incontrovertible truths in life and social justice" (Maduka and Eyoh, 2000). Consequently, poets such as Williams Wordsworth, John Keats, Shakespeare, Yeats etc use their poetry to explore various motifs from innocence to experience, nature and love, unbridled quest for social justice and so on. Exile is an example of such subject matters poetry focuses its attention on because poets use terse words and encoded metaphor to portray their thematic preoccupations. Poet could successfully communicate his feelings without been harmed or without been intimidated by the society or by the instrument of power. (It is often believed in some quarters that political power holders in Africa sometimes lack *literary power*).

Similarly, poets easily call the attention of audience to the plight of exile in order to bring about new life and new experiences. It boils down to what is exile? According to Jacqueline Corness in a seminar paper entitled *Alienation and Freedom- A study of Dostoevsky's Notes From Underground as it relates to the Theme of Exile*, she defines exile from the perception of Said when she opines that:

Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. For this reason, exile is often thought to be the most psychological difficult state of removal from, for example, one's country. While some people are separated from their homeland because they have freely chosen to live elsewhere, exiles are considered to be at mercy of external forces (2).

Exile is a serious human condition that makes many poets to show their concern and also demonstrate how they feel about the scenario. Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" is an example of psychological exile that is experienced in England when he was refused an accommodation simply because he is a black man. Arthur Nortje's "Autopsy" is a poem that explains the evil effects of exile on children who were naturally born into it, they feel isolated and perverted. Buhadur Tejani's "Leaving the Country" is a poem in Africa that shows the

evils behind political exile and alienation. The spirit of nothingness, hollow expectations and practical dislocations are the feelings that emanate from people. African poets reflect exile situation as motif in their poetic writings.

LENRIE PETERS AND EXILE PREOCCUPATIONS IN POETRY

Although, Lenrie Peters is not a victim of political exile, his exile motif in poetry is predicated on psychological exile and alienation he experiences in Britain. The same feelings Soyinka experiences which makes him to write “*Telephone Conversation*” Before 1965, Peters studies and lives in Cambridge, after the independence of Gambia-his country, he came home to help restructure the political and economic situation. His poem “*He Walks Alone*” is a typical example of exile and alienation people suffer in foreign land. His biography shows that:

Lenrie Peters was born in Bathurst (at the time a British colony), now Banjul, Gambia on September 1, 1932. Poet, narrator, publisher, medical surgeon and opera singer. Author of the poetry books: Katchikali; Satellites; and Collected Poems and the novel The Second Round, 1965. All his works were published by Heinemann, in London, in the collection African writers’ series. After making his first studies in Bathurst and in Sierra Leone, he travelled to Cambridge to study Natural Sciences at Trinity College. In England, he was the president of the Union of African Students. He also worked as a publisher for one of the earliest Gambian newspapers, The Gambia Echo. As well as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and other writers, he belongs to the first generation of the Anglophone West African Writers in being recognized as such and being published abroad. He is an enthusiast defender of the panafrikanism. A cosmopolitan poet, his densely packed, minimalist stanza structures fit in the broad universal spectrum of human experience: aging and death, the risks of love, the loneliness of exile. In his book Satellites (1967), the poet-doctor’s detachment is a metaphor for the uprooted individual’s painful existential isolation; his scalpel penetrating “at the cutting chaotic edge of things” an image for the imaginative piercing and spiritual penetration which are the real goals of the poet’s quest. Although he gets furious with the frustration of the African underdevelopment, he reflects about blind and sickening models of “progress” that do not show a continuity with the past and destroy more than what they preserve. In his only novel The Second Round, a physicist trained in Great Britain and victim of the so called “massacre of the soul” brought by westernization, returns to the capital of his homeland filled up with “noble ideas about the progress of Africa”, but ends accepting a job in a remote jungle hospital and therefore taking roots in the traditional experience (xvii International Poetry Festival of Modelling)

“*He Walks Alone*” is a poem that shows the degree of alienation African students suffer in Europe. As a result of this alienation in their system, they feel exiled and Peters asks them to go home. The poem is a rich experience from the poet who having studied abroad is critical of the hypocritical behaviours which is sometimes found in Europe. An African student is given quality education but refused employment by the system that educates him. The poem is sarcastic because it tries to ridicule the harsh weather and the harsh behaviours Africans face in the Diaspora. As a result of alienation, some Africans have lost their roots. They want to behave like the Europeans but it is not possible because their physiological traits were not tailored towards the European individualistic life! Africans are collective in nature, so when they demonstrate Eurocentric feelings, the Europeans could not accept them, the Africans quickly run back home in order to eat in unison, speak in one accord, love themselves and struggle together in African communalism.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF EXILE IN “HE WALKS ALONE”

The poem is written in seven stanzas of unequal five lines. The poet addresses exile as motif because man is an integral factor in society- Exile has caused many untold pain, isolation and rejection. The first stanza reports:

*He walks alone
head bowed with memories
Exiled in the park
some playful thing of long ago
glues him to a shop window...*

The poet creates an image of an African man in Europe who is looking for an identity. He is not accepted into the system though he is a legal resident. He cannot vote and be voted for; he cannot seek employment in choice places. He walks alone thinking about home, thinking about his family. Most times he goes around with his head bowed to the colour and psychological differences that exist between him and his host community. At the park, he is always given some distance as if he is a mini-human. The situation on the train is the worst, nobody sits beside him. He feels exiled and alienated. The choice of words here shows that Lenrie Peter employs some coded meanings with words like “*head bowed in memories*”.

In the second stanza, the issue of exile seems more manifest

*Faded suit sharp lined
loosely held by his proud heart
shoes scaled with polish
cannot comprehend; too much*

to tell of harsh experiences

The African tries to emulate the European but he cannot really fit into the system. The applications of concrete images such as “*proud heart*” “*shoes scaled with polish*” are contrasting. As an immigrant, he is proud to have journeyed to other part of the world, but in the end cannot fit into the new environment. Irony is another instrument the poet uses to make his poem satiric in nature. Maduka sheds more light on this concept:

*The word “irony” means so many things to many people
that its no longer very useful as a critical idiom.
The protean character of its use has resulted in an
array of terms associated with it. Thus, one frequently
hears of such expressions as Verbal Irony,
Irony of Situation, Sophoclean Irony, Irony of Life,
Euripi dean Irony, Tragic Irony, Cosmic Irony,
Dramatic Irony, Irony of Things, Irony of Circumstances,
Irony of Character (139, The Intellectual and Power Structure)*

In this poem, many of these ironies are applicable. The most important are: irony of situation, irony of life, dramatic irony, irony of circumstances and irony of character. This is because exile explores all these feelings in the life of the African whose character is very critical in the poem. Stanzas three and four explain more:

*No coward he
respository of rejected talents
an ounce of earth
silted weightily in his heart.
the breaking point is looking back
Crossed the Rubicon
Race, nationality, ideology, religion
arrowed from earth to moon
founder of a new brotherhood
an hero he not of our nation born*

Here, the character in the poem is undergoing some rejections. He is grossly isolated, “*crossing the Rubicon*” is a metaphor for Atlantic Ocean. The poet is calling attention that this character who flew across the Atlantic is now been exiled physically and psychologically. He battles racism, nationality stratification resulting into modern slavery, religious differences, ideological divergences, post nationalism and globalization. Language to this poem is very crucial to the understanding of exile and its attendant evils.

The poet chooses both the connotative and denotative language to portray the colourful imagery and metaphors which he explores in the handling of exile as motif in the poem “*He Walks Alone*”. Stanzas five, six and seven substantiate shed more light:

*Known no tenderness
skin a mosaic of scars
heart in fixed deposit
safe from ridicule, decomposing
Marionette-strings linked with stars
Exile go home
under your bed a bowl of tears
leave back streets
nightmares evenings kneeling in pews
brassy noises of homely fires*

*Dream and wait
coarse cauctus of desert wastes
perhaps tomorrow
sunflowers fading in the heat
will lie insensate at your feet*

In this poem, the choice of both connotative language and denotative language is to present the motif of exile and migration in their natural state. The poet wants to prevent ambiguity by using “*everyday’s language*” as connotative and “*implied language*” as denotative. The image of poverty is too conspicuous in the poem. The character lives in isolated area, some areas are exclusively reserved for immigrants and some jobs are also exclusively reserved for them. Such jobs include cleaning, flushing of toilets, etc.

Lenrie Peters is extremely critical about the use of language in the poem. Although he sounds very harsh, maverick and mechanical when he says “*exile go home*”. The poet seems to be worried about frustrations, psychological intimidation people in exile go through. Although this is self exile, he admonishes the Africans that they should seriously start thinking about home for the sake of development and posterity.

Similarly, the arrays of metaphors which are situational make the motif of exile interesting to study. Though exile is a social factor, the poet is critical that instead of constant endurance and travails, affected persons can make it good at home. Although man is powerless in the face of uncontrollable phenomenon, the poet achieves success in his artistic craft and the handling of the theme of exile as motif in "*He Walks Alone*".

The title of the poem is symbolic because it expresses the exile experience and it emphasises individualism which is not part of African culture and tradition. Above all, it is a contribution to African literature because "*African literature, indeed the literature of black civilization, in modern times, has moved from the literature of protest to the literature of assertion and emancipation, which also indicates self examination*" (*Black Aesthetics*, ix).

Of paramount significance is the musical theatricality which the poem employs with distinct end rhymes which gives the poem a regular patterning. The significance of this regular patterning is to show that exile is a continuous phenomenon in the life of people. As African people move from one place to the other, other people too may consider relocation from one locale to the other. They could begin to consider balancing with the socio-geographical factor of the environment they find themselves in. In the course of this, nostalgia, pain, acceptance problem sails in. The end rhyme employed by Lenrie Peters could be considered original because it neither conforms to Elizabethan nor the English type.

The tone of the poem is melancholic. That is the situation exile encourages. The poet is exhibiting a practical manifestation of what it is to be in exile. The expectations are usually very high but the system is not accommodating to satisfy all the yearnings revolving in the mind. The audience would perceive "*He Walks Alone*" as a didactic poem. A didactic poem is a poem that teaches and explains the rudiments about human society and predicament. The motif of exile is an over-riding factor in this poem.

CONCLUSION

The motif of exile is the main preoccupation that Lenrie Peters examines in exhaustive chunk. He uses rich imagery to demonstrate this, bearing in mind that Africans are people of "*historical evolution*" in the word of Boyin Svetlana. This poem is very sensitive to the plight of exile and identity.

The use of ordinary language is to denote clear image of understanding so that the issue of ambiguity would not arise. To sum up, Lenrie Peters' "*He Walks Alone*" is an exemplification of exile experience coupled with the question of identity and how these factors have dire consequences on the people. The rich artistic creation is a contribution to African literature.

Migration is an important aspect of man. Contemporary works have celebrated various reasons why people involve in. The poem by Lenrie Peter cautiously looks at the antecedents that shape migration and exile for socio cultural development. The essence of this is to harmonize culture with economic growth. The place of man in our society is what Lenrie Peters attempts to examine. It is believed that to understand the complex problems of man, the issue of alienation, fear, exile and migration have to be fully explored. This paper has shown the reasons that lead to these phenomena and the need for these problems of exile and identity to be a thing of the past.

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