

A Seed on Good Soil or a Seed on Rocks: Museveni's Contestations with Democracy in Sowing the Mustard Seed

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Abstract

This paper discusses Yoweri Museveni's *Sowing the Mustard Seed* and argues that he uses this literary text to construct identities of him as a nationalist leader. In his autobiography he guides the reader to approach it, not as a scheme to glorify himself, but as an insight into true leadership. However, this paper reveals that Museveni is the quintessential politician determined to retain power using any means available to him, including likening himself to Jesus Christ, the fêted sower. The paper argues, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, is Museveni's scheme to hold onto power. It hinges on the thinking that Museveni's rereading of Fanon is faulty and malicious. Although he draws from Biblical parables and imagery, this paper hints that Museveni's seed might have fallen on rocks and arguably has failed to sprout. He fictionalizes Ugandan history in his autobiography through the use of several stylistic devices to portray himself as a Che Guevera of Uganda, a revolutionary saviour of a dilapidated state. Museveni conceptualises democracy in Uganda through the parable of the mustard seed. By anchoring the title of his autobiography on the Bible, Museveni hopes to create an intellectual space whereby the readers may view him as the sower who sows the seed of democracy in Uganda.

Keywords: democracy, yoweri museveni, parable, saviour, jesus christ

1. Introduction

This paper discusses Museveni's use of Biblical parable in conceptualizing the advent and growth of democracy in an almost ruined state of Uganda. A state that had undergone thirty years of civil strife. This paper argues that, Museveni aims to be perceived as the sower, hence constructing for himself a hallowed identity, that of Jesus Christ. Jesus' stories, also called parables, were illustrations that used something familiar to help listeners understand something new. This method of teaching compelled listeners to discover truth for themselves. The message got through only to those who were willing to listen and learn.

Israel, pictured as a vineyard, was the nation that God had cultivated to bring salvation to the world. From the parables of Jesus, we learn that the religious leaders not only frustrated their nation's purpose but also killed those who were trying to fulfill it. They were so jealous and possessive that they ignored the welfare of the very people they were supposed to be bringing to God.

The concept of "seed" is brought by Jesus to portray himself as the true sower, a leader concerned with ensuring love, salvation, goodness and other adorable virtues abound among people. In the parable, Jesus portrays the Jewish religious leaders as scrupulous, ineptitude, morally corrupt and base, incapable of planting the seed. In Mark 4: 30-32 he reports:

How can I describe the kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? It is like a tiny mustard seed. Though this is one of the smallest of seeds, it grows to become one of the largest of the largest of plants, with long branches where birds can come and find shelter....

Here, the seed stands for the kingdom of Heaven, a place of pure bliss.

Museveni's choice of the title of his autobiography "Sowing the Mustard Seed" therefore is illuminative on how he wants to be understood. The title suggests that he is the only one to bring the kingdom of Heaven to Uganda by building a peaceful country where peace and love abound.

Again, Jesus, in Mark 4: 3-8 he reports:

Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seed fell on the footpath, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprung up quickly but it soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil. Other seed fell among thorns that shot up and choked out the tender blades so that it produced no grain. Still others fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even hundred times as much as had been planted...

Anchoring his autobiography on the above parable, Museveni comes out of the pages of his autobiography as a true sower, just like Jesus Christ the fêted sower. Having come to power in the mid-1980s, a period which seemed to have brought into being a "new breed" of African leadership, Museveni gave the impression that he was dynamic, determined, development-minded, progressive, and willing to break discredited predecessors' taboos (Mujaju, 1997; Leymarie, 1997: 2). Museveni had to banish the archaic and exclusionary modes of governance, corruption and economic mismanagement, and the manifestly discriminatory and

marginalising methods employed by leaders of the past. However, this description revealed only part of the truth. A decade later, when Museveni was writing *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, he still dominated Uganda's popular and intellectual imagination, but a closer examination revealed Museveni to be little more than a scion of the old breed. His autobiography in fact highlights the elements of continuity with past modes of governance that have been manifested and indeed entrenched over the time he has been in power (from 1986 up to date). He began to be seen as a regional troublemaker and Bismarck-like expansionist (Mujaju, 1997).

Museveni, it seems, thus, wrote *Sowing the Mustard Seed* to distance himself from these images by portraying himself as a saviour, a revolutionary leader who had forever broken the evil chain of misgovernance as exemplified by Uganda's former leaders.

2. Biblical Parables and Imagery in the Making of Museveni

The title of Museveni's autobiography, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, has its origin in a parable. A mustard seed is small, but it is alive and growing. Almost invisible at first, it will begin to spread, first under the ground and then visibly. Museveni conceptualises democracy in Uganda through the parable of the mustard seed. The concept is drawn from the Bible, in the Book of Mark 4: 30-32, where the disciples of Jesus request him to increase their faith. In response to their request, Jesus says, "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamore tree, be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you". Thus, the mustard seed represents a small quantity of something that is able to do great works. In the autobiography, Museveni uses several devices that build on this parable, including biblical allusion, figurative language, and fictionalisation of Uganda's history. He uses these devices to portray himself as a revolutionary and a saviour of the Ugandan nation.

By anchoring the title of his autobiography on the Bible, Museveni hopes to create an intellectual space whereby the readers may view him as the sower who sows the seed of democracy in Uganda. He portrays himself as a saviour whose aim is to change the course of history in Uganda through *Sowing the Mustard Seed* the seed of democracy.

To construct his identity of a saviour, Museveni contends that for the mustard seed to grow, the country must be prepared; before the mustard seed of democracy can be sown in Uganda, the land has to be cleared of the rocks and weeds of the corrupt system, which have given rise to sectarian dictatorship and violence. Thus he states, "I believe that through our struggle in the 1980s the seed was finally sown and that it has fallen on fertile ground" (67). The onset of his leadership attests to the coming of age of this seed. He portrays a country that has been impoverished by two decades of brutal dictatorship and is on the verge of economic collapse. For too long, he maintains, preceding leaders hoodwinked the common people, manipulating tribal sentiments to stay in power and stealing millions of dollars in foreign aid and taxes. He likens them to weeds, which should be destroyed for the good seed to germinate and thrive.

In addition, Museveni alludes to the parable of the sower in the book of Mark 4: 3-8, where Jesus discusses how a farmer went out to plant some seeds. Some fell on thorns and weeds shot up and choked out the tender blades. These thorns and weeds must be removed so that the seed may fall on good and fertile soil to grow and produce one hundred times as much as had been planted. Here again Museveni is the farmer who prepares the land before planting his seeds. He must do so through bringing down the bad leaders, whom he likens to the weeds that might entangle democracy and make it unachievable. Museveni again likens himself to Jesus, the saviour of the world, to construct his identity.

However, the continuity of the old is manifest if one examines the military conflicts in the northern and western parts of the country – conflicts that have subsisted for a considerable period of time and throughout the Museveni era. Virtually since the Museveni regime came to power, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) have wreaked havoc in northern Uganda (Onyango-Oloka, 1997; McNulty, 1999: 78). Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, has waged an uprising against Museveni's government for more than two decades. Kony's forces, linked to many atrocities, have faulted Museveni's leadership for marginalisation and discrimination (Onyango-Oloka, 1997; Rosenblum, 2002: 195). While their roots and causes vary from the purely opportunistic to serious questions of ethnic marginalisation and discrimination (Cheru, 2002: 196-198; Khadiagala, 1993: 244-245; Obote, 1990: 23), the mode of approaching their resolution, which has largely been to rely on military methods of suppression, has yet to produce enduring results. Neither in handling domestic politics, nor in resolving internal conflict, has Museveni demonstrated that he is the Messiah that he projects of himself in *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, a leader of a fundamentally different calibre than that of his predecessors.

Museveni also employs the use of imagery to portray himself as a revolutionary leader. He uses figures of speech to put his points across through images, particularly the point of the crucial role he was supposedly called upon to play in the history of Uganda. One of this is the use of similes.

In *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, Museveni uses similes to justify the ouster of his predecessors. For example, he reasons, "We knew that dictators had to be actively opposed and that they would not just fall off by

themselves like ripe mangoes..." (19). This simile advances the idea of using violence to defeat bad leadership. He portrays himself as a leader who does not sit back when the country is being misled by dictators. He takes an active role in removing bad leadership. However, critical examination of Museveni's leadership shows that he did not bring about a new type of leadership but that he has advanced a leadership similar to the one that he claimed to have overthrown.

To create mental images in the minds of his readers, Museveni also employs the use of symbolism which is a literary device where an object represents an idea. For example, he uses the image of the cow as a symbol of the Ugandan nation. Museveni points out that cows were central to his people's culture. *Sowing the Mustard Seed* presents cows that have names. Museveni adds that the name identifies the cow and its mother and that his family's cows were like appendages of the family:

They are like members of our families and we treat them very intimately. For instance, we have a brush called *enkuyo*, which we use to clean and massage the cow, a process we call *okuragaza*. This is done for most of the milking cows, but also for favourites among them. It is a form of communicating with them and they enjoy it very much ... the cows are like cousins and sisters to me. (3)

The way his cattle are portrayed brings out the image of tranquillity and calm – the image of an ideal Ugandan nation. By presenting cows which have human feelings, which can be made happy by human actions, Museveni evokes a picture of a peaceful Ugandan nation and of himself as its herds boy/ leader. As cows were supposed to be guarded from beasts of prey, so the Ugandan nation had to be protected from bad leadership.

It can be argued that Museveni followed this line of thought to turn Uganda into something akin to his personal property, controlling every sphere of the state just the way the owner of a cow can control his herd. At the beginning of 2003, in far-reaching proposals on constitutional reform, Museveni recommended lifting the constitutional provision that stipulates that a president can stand for election for only two terms. Museveni recommended that term limits be removed altogether (Onyango-Oloka, 1997). He seems to have felt that Uganda, his inalienable property, should be under his "protection" forever.

The nation, like the cows, can be productive if the leaders can have its interests at heart. Museveni draws attention to the vulnerability of cows as follows: "For clothing, I wore the skin of a premature calf and this would often invite one of our cows to chase me round and round mistaking me for a wild animal" (4). The cows were afraid of wild animals and had to be protected from them. Likewise, Uganda had to be protected from bad leaders. Elsewhere he compares these bad leaders to a carnivorous bird called *kamunye* and advises people to guard their riches jealously from it:

We are, therefore, continuing to strengthen our defense forces: to neglect doing so would be like exposing meat when there are dangerous carnivores around. Remember the story of the boy who took a lump of meat out in the courtyard? A carnivorous bird (*kamunye*) swooped down on him and not only took the meat but left his fingers bleeding. The boy came crying to his father, who told him, "It was your fault: you should have carried a spear so when the *kamunye* came to grab the meat, it would have impaled itself on the spear." Uganda's riches are very tempting. There are many *kamunye*'s around. (122)

The comparison, which Museveni draws between his predecessors and this carnivorous bird, depicts the images of greed, plunder, murderousness and ineptitude. The leaders that Museveni overthrows are depicted as such a cruel lot that when Museveni becomes a leader people can see him as a saviour come to redeem their lives.

To qualify himself as a saviour, Museveni also creates images of a larger-than-life character, whose supernatural powers supersede those of all his contemporaries. This is seen in the way he fictionalises Uganda's history in his autobiography. The reader is left to imagine a leader with exceptional instincts, who survives even in situations that claim the lives of everyone else.

Freeman (1993: 45) argues that a text that recounts a person's life is a mere recollection of experiences that places us as readers yet another step removed from the life we wish to understand. In his view, these recollections are subject to countless distortions and falsifications. One remembers selectively and perhaps conferring meanings on experiences that did not possess these meanings at the time of their occurrence. Indeed, Museveni fictionalises events in his autobiography and ends up presenting a history of Uganda with a slant. Suffice it to examine one such distortion.

From *Sowing the Mustard Seed* we learn that some of Museveni's best boyhood school friends were Mwesiga, Mwesigwa, and Rwaheru. Museveni's record of how they perished and how he escaped death under the same trying circumstances portrays him as an exceptional leader. Although not present at the scenes of their deaths, he explains in considerable detail how each one of them died.

Mwesiga and Rwaheru, we are informed, died shortly after Museveni says he re-entered Uganda in December 1972. According to Museveni, Mwesiga was killed in the Eastern Ugandan town of Mbale. Judging by the flow of events he outlines in the book, Mwesiga died in either December 1972 or January 1973. Museveni recalls:

Martin Mwesiga, [Wukwu Mpima] Kazimoto and I travelled to Mbale to join the group, without

knowing that its presence had been detected...we saw a contingent of about 15 military policemen coming through the estate...They surrounded the house in an unprofessional manner, without cocking their guns. I had the car keys and one of the soldiers, poking a rifle into my side, told me to open and enter the car. Taking them by surprise I jumped over the hedge. (78)

Museveni then narrates how he escaped from the soldiers pursuing him while his unfortunate colleagues were killed. Museveni fictionalises his escape from the tense and fear-filled atmosphere of the siege. He explains how all 15 military policemen had “in a very unprofessional manner” not bothered to cock their guns (78-80). These are the same soldiers of Idi Amin whom Museveni in another context would have been sure to describe as trigger-happy, willing to shoot innocent civilians, presumably suggesting that they went about with their guns cocked. Museveni also tells of how “taking them by surprise”, he jumped over the hedge (82). If these were violent soldiers who, as Museveni would have us believe, shot innocent civilians on sight without provocation, how much more alert would they have been in or around a house that they suspected to have been a den of rebels. As such, Museveni could not have taken them by surprise. They had come to arrest or kill the suspected guerrillas, and there could have been no surprise whether in the overall sense of knowing what they had come to achieve or in the sense of somehow relaxing once they got to the house. He makes his escape heroic, and in so doing, he presents himself as the protagonist who must not die till the Ugandan nation is liberated.

All through the first pages of *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, Museveni is at pains to elaborate on his exceptional instincts, his quick sense of judgement in all sorts of situations and how these qualities have helped him survive endless danger. He portrays himself as a saviour with a great calling, who could not be killed, like the rest of his friends, because he had a mission to accomplish.

Museveni also fictionalises Rwaheeru's death, which took place shortly after Mwesiga's. He would have us believe the following:

[W]hile Rwaheeru was at Kyambogo with Karuhanga, a platoon of Amin's soldiers surrounded the house. Karuhanga, who was in the sitting-room, was arrested and told to show the security men around. Meanwhile, Rwaheeru had locked himself in the bedroom ... Rwaheeru climbed onto a bed, cut the ventilator netting over the door and lobbed a stick-grenade into the midst of the soldiers who were crowded into the corridor of the house ... Karuhanga fled into the toilet and locked the door. The grenade exploded, killing all the men in the corridor. Rwaheeru then opened the bedroom door and lobbed another grenade into the sitting-room, killing more of the enemy. In all he killed eleven of them. Unfortunately, when he was preparing to throw a third grenade, it exploded in his hands and killed him. (84)

What Museveni does not say is how he, who was nowhere near the scene, came to know all these details about what happened that day. All the guerrillas in the house that day – Karuhanga, Rwaheeru, and Birihanze – died without speaking to him or their relatives. Had Karuhanga, the sole survivor, told anyone the story of what happened that day, it could only have been to the army or the intelligence officers who had been interrogating him. It seems that Museveni imagines what happens to his friend and recreates it as a fictional writer would do.

Karuhanga would not have known what was going on in the locked bedroom where Rwaheeru was hiding. Nor would Karuhanga, who was locked up in the toilet, have seen how the grenade killed Rwaheeru. There is no way Museveni could have learned of what happened in enough detail to describe what happened to Rwaheeru, who had locked himself inside a bedroom and climbed “onto a bed”. Certainly, under the circumstances of complete destruction by grenades, Museveni would have had no way of knowing how it was that a third grenade exploded in Rwaheeru's hands. None at the scene escaped alive to tell the story. Yet Museveni gives the sort of detail that only an eyewitness could have. Clearly, Museveni is fictionalising his narration of the death of his friends. Museveni uses fiction in order to portray a leader who is larger than life, always escaping from dangerous forces, which destroyed his friends. He is the lucky one who cannot simply die before saving the nation from *kamunyes*.

3. Conclusion

This paper has unveiled literary strategies that Museveni uses to create a space whereby he is viewed as he one entitled to govern because he is manifestly better equipped than anyone else for the task – he knows more, and is capable of wisely carrying out the trust Ugandans has placed in him. In his autobiography, Museveni borrows Biblical parables to make his actions messianic. The parable of the mustard seed, which he uses, portrays Museveni as the sower, destroying the weeds, which beset the Ugandan state. He strengthens this parable by making further allusions to the Bible. Museveni also employs the use of figurative language, which is realised in form of similes and symbols. Museveni's *Sowing the Mustard Seed* thus is a determined effort to defend his revolutionary stature, which he had earned during his struggle for the liberation of Uganda. As he tries to consolidate his identity as a revolutionary saviour, he both rekindles the enthusiasm of the masses by demonstrating a re-dedication of his promises in their favour, and discards the views of his critics by portraying

them as variously irrelevant. The “dialogue” with audience thus becomes crucial in the authors’ construction of their identities. Using the potential of literary production to the full, Museveni created a text meant to serve his self-centred purposes, even as on the surface they address topical issues, raise relevant concerns, and provide sound caution. In Museveni’s hands, literature becomes “fiction” in a most unfortunate sense of the term, i.e. a departure from reality in order to conceal one’s actual being in that reality, so as to continue with that profitable way of being and to obviate the need to account for it.

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