

The Political Power Relations in Post-Independent African Society as Portrayed in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Okot p'Bitek's presentation of the prisoner as a body of power and powerlessness in his poetry in *Song of Prisoner*. The aim of the study was to explore the portrait of power discourses in post-colonial writing with specific emphasis on Okot p'Bitek's. The main focus in this paper is on how politics of power manifests itself in these works. The paper argues that the prisoner is found in a complex trap whereby the physical torture to which he is subjected at one point renders him powerless but later, it ironically empowers him as it evokes inner feelings of a strong will and desire to own power. His works being of post-colonial literature do not fall short of the imposition of power by the imperialists and a rejection of this power by the colonized. As such, this advances the argument that literature does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is given impetus by society itself. The assumption in this paper is that in all circumstances, there exists politics of power, be it political, economical, sexual, cultural, and family among others. Therefore, is this politics of power that the poet seeks to articulate in his poetry so as to enable people come into terms with the social realities. In examining these power discourses, the selected primary texts were read through an integration of theories of feminism and Foucauldian's genealogical ideas on power. At one level, Foucauldian's genealogical ideas on power help to understand the play of ways of power over and of bodies. At another level, feminism becomes necessary to the study as Kate Millet argues that 'sex is political primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relations'. The two perspectives display views and experiences of power relations which are the key search for this study. Works by other post-colonial writers have been referred to in so far as they help in advancing the arguments in this study. Our conclusion is that there is power everywhere and it is never static but rather dynamic: it shifts from one body to another. Power over bodies provokes power from the other body which is the body's own power and vice versa. Thus power either provokes resistance or makes one vulnerable to it.

Keywords: Political Power Relations, Post-Independent African Society, Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Prisoner*

1. Introduction

Post-colonial literatures, according to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989, p. 3), emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. Homi Bhaba, as cited in Diana Brydon's *Post colonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2000, p. 105), perceives post-colonial criticism as bearing witness to the unequal criticism and uneven forces of cultural representations involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. The post-colonial discourses formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural differences, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the 'rationalizations' of modernity. While adopting Jurgen Harbermas' ideas to suit her argument, Brydon (2005, p. 105) argues that the post-colonial project at the most general theoretical level seeks to explore those social pathologies, that is, "loss of meaning conditions of anomie", that no longer simply cluster around class antagonism but break up into widely scattered historical contingencies.

The post-colonial perspective, according to Brydon (2000, p. 107), resists the attempts at holistic forms of social explanation. It therefore forces recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres. Okot p'Bitek, one of the post-colonial writers, presents his resistance to the attempts at holistic forms of social explanations. In his 'songs', he presents his interpretation of power, which in many ways challenge and contest the idea of absolute power. Okot's poetic works fall under the category of 'contact Literature' a term used by Ron Carter (2007) to refer to literatures written in European language from outside Europe. It is within the framework of this type of literature that most of the post-colonial writers belong to as they seek to display a post-colonial perspective of their present space or location. These writers have had to transform the European language and use it in a different way in its new context and so, as

Chinua Achebe (1975, p. 62) quoting James Baldwin says, make it ‘bear the burden’ of their experience.

In this paper, however, the concern is with one perceived trend in contact literature, that is, the perspective of ways of power over and of bodies in Okot p’Bitek’s poetry and how he engages with these discourses of power at different levels. To understand Okot p’ Bitek’s engagement and interpretation of power, the reading of his poetry was guided by Michel Foucault’s ideas on how power manifests itself in different forms and situations.

1.1 Okot p’Bitek

Okot p’Bitek was a Ugandan poet, born in Gulu in 1931 died in 1982. His parents were Christians who also participated in the chieftdom and clan rituals, dances and ceremonies. Okot was educated both at home (Uganda) and abroad. He attended Gulu High School and King’s College, Budo. He studied law at Aberyst Wyth, Wales and Social Anthropology at Oxford, completing a B.Litt thesis on the traditional songs of the Acoli and Lango. In 1966, he returned to Uganda as a Director of the Uganda Cultural Center and later founded arts festivals at Gulu and Kisumu. Dismissed from his position for writing critically on Amin’s government, he lived in exile in Kenya where he was a faculty member of the Literature department at the University of Nairobi. He was a fellow in the international writing programme at the University of Iowa in 1969-70 and Professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Ife in Nigeria in 1978. In 1979, after Idi Amin was overthrown, he returned to Uganda where he was appointed a Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of Literature at Makerere University.

Besides the academic arena, Okot was actively involved in the co-curricular field as a footballer, athlete, drummer and dancer. Okot p’Bitek, before getting into creative writing, while still a student, composed an opera entitled ‘A can’ which was performed at school. He is described as a novelist, a poet, a social critic and a scholar. He wrote a number of books, namely the novel *Lack Tar Miyo Kiyero Wi Lobo* (1953) – *White Teeth* (1989), Long poems: *Song of Lawino* (1966), *Song of Ocol* (1970), Two songs: *Song of Prisoner* and *Song of Malaya* (1971). *Horn of My Love* (1974) is a collection of oral verses translated from Acoli; *Hare and Horn Bill* (1978) is a collection of folktales; *Acoli Proverbs* (1985) is a collection of Acoli sayings. His critical and scholarly works include *Africa’s Cultural Revolution* (1973), *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art Culture and Values* (1986), *African Religion in Western Scholarship* (1971) and *Religion of the Central Luo* (1971).

From his biographical background, Okot is a man of double inheritance: Acoli and Western traditions. His works have greatly been influenced by this inheritance. Okot was exposed to *the white man’s* culture through religion, education and language which was seen as the measuring rod for truth. For example, while at school, the power of the mission education was evident as they were prohibited to take part in the ‘get stuck’ dances, but his own will and desire to remain in touch with his Acoli culture was evident in his participation in these dances during the school holidays during which he says “I learnt many songs without any pains, but with great joy and pleasure” (Okot, 1973, p. 21).

Despite the examination system and its imposition on school literature, Okot is also said to have been a creative student (Heron, 1976, p. 23). He produced an Opera in English called ‘A can’. At the same time, the thesis he did at Oxford in Social Anthropology entitled *Oral Literature and its Social Background among the Acoli and Lango*, has hardly any methods of Western literary criticism, although it was done when Okot was involved in further contact with Western scholarship. The thesis has very little on the literary nature of songs, and even the vexed question of the literary status of oral work is dealt with in a few lines in the final chapter. The major effect of his studies was to renew and consolidate his contact with oral literature. From these, it is clear that Okot’s double inheritance catalyses the play of ways of power over bodies and the bodies’ own way of power. This is the same power play that sieves into his poetic works.

Other than the influence from his double inheritance, his multidisciplinary orientation has largely sharpened his perception of social, economic and political reality. His experience in religion, anthropology, law and cultural studies has influenced his perception of socio-cultural issues as presented in his poetry.

1.2 About Song of Prisoner

In *Song of Prisoner*, Okot p’Bitek demonstrates the power of politics in a post-independent African society through the eyes of the prisoner who is three characters in one. The poet presents a prisoner who is in self-defense of his corrupt actions. The prisoner’s guilt shifts from vagrancy when he is picked up for sleeping in City Park, to assassination of a corrupt leader who is purportedly leading the country astray, and to a political squabble within cabinet or coup which led to the disgrace and imprisonment of a minister.

The poet in *Song of Prisoner* brings out the power play of ways of power of and over bodies as embodied in the characters: the prisoner, the uniformed, the judge, the powerful political leaders and the cell or prison. Power of prison is manifested in the prison warders, the judge and the actual prison space, the cell. The power of the ‘rope’ and the ‘steel gate’ of the cell have subjected the Prisoner to physical suffering. Miller (1990) argues that ‘Execution reveals the total power of the state. This power is never an empty space, but has its hierarchies and its institutions and its techniques’. In *Song of Prisoner*, this power of the state is seen through the imprisonment of the law-breakers like the prisoner who is accused of murder, vagrancy and a coup attempt. The state rules are a power over its subjects. They have to be respected, failure to which, the ‘cell’ which is a manifestation of the

state power, becomes the institution into which one gets punished through the cell's power techniques of beating, being tied by a rope and being locked behind steel doors.

According to Foucault (1975), 'the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates and hierarchizes. In short, it 'normalizes'. In other words, the small ceaseless grid of prison existence crushes the meaning out of the bodies of prisoners. The ways of power of the prison as manifested in the physical torture that the prisoner goes through results in a more painful torture: psychological torture and the two perspectives of torture result in the ways of power of the body's own power. The prisoner acquires his own power through illusions, a means through which he resists the power of the pain of torture so as to create hope where there is hopelessness. The prisoner's powerlessness inevitably forces him to invent power through fantasy as he constantly fantasizes about his family, village and his heroism through his physical skills. This enables him to achieve some degree of self-delusory calmness.

Besides the ways of power over bodies as manifested in the body of a prison, the poet, Okot p'Bitek also gives the paradox of a prison. The prison space can be a source of power for its characters. For instance, while in prison, the prisoner acquires power through fantasy. Outside the prison space is another prison. The Prisoner, who is the persona, takes us through the power of outside prison over its subjects. The Prisoner remembers his poverty state while out of prison and does not long to go back there. This then agrees with Okot p'Bitek's argument, in his article *Man the Unfree* (1986), that 'man is not born free since from birth he is tied to his mother through the umbilical cord. When he is cut free from his mother, he still remains tied to societal roles forever that even death cannot free him, as his spirit remains attached to his people' (p. 19). In this, Okot agrees with Jean Jacques Rousseau's sentiment that 'everywhere man goes, he is in chains'.

The study, therefore, set out to investigate this phenomenon in the poetry of Okot p'Bitek, specifically *Song of Prisoner*. The study examined the political power relations in post-independent African societies as portrayed in *Song of Prisoner*.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was mainly library-based. Other than the selected primary texts, the study made use of critical works written by Okot p'Bitek as well as by other writers who have commented on Okot's works and power discourses. The study also utilized the Internet services in accessing some publications that were relevant to the research objectives. The research was carried out in several libraries: The Margaret Thatcher Library, Moi University; Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library and the Department of Literature Library, University of Nairobi, and Moi Library at Kenyatta University.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Power and Powerlessness

In *Song of Prisoner*, power is located within the prison space whereby the uniformed warders, the rope, the steel door and the absence of the judge are bodies of power that torture the prisoner. The levels of power within this prison space are: physical torture, lack of freedom to question and the psychological torture that has the power to oppress and liberate the mind of the prisoner. The ways of power of the prison are evident when the prisoner is subjected to physical torture when he is beaten, tied and locked up without trial, as he laments:

Why do they beat me up
With their clubs
And tie my hands
And feet...
Why do they
Punish me
Before I plead
Or am found
Guilty (1971, p. 16)

It is this power of the physical torture over him that triggers the power of psychological torture that oppresses him as he nostalgically recalls his powerful days and the many privileges he has as a physically skilled character.

Do you know
I was a footballer
And a boxer
I have been a wrestler
And a runner
I am a great hunter...(1971, p. 13)

This nostalgic feeling evokes the body's own way of power over the power of physical torture. This power of the body presents itself in form of insane utterances by the prisoner that are pregnant of anger.

I plead drunkenness

I am intoxicated
With anger
My fury....
I am dizzy
With frustration
I am drowning
In the deep lake
Of hatred
My heart is riddled
With the arrows
Of despair
My head is bursting... (1971, p. 12-13)

It is this state of the body's own power that provokes the Prisoner's mind to reflect on the idea of 'Uhuru' which is signifier of Independent African society. 'Uhuru' is a symbol of power for the African. Ironically, after independence, it is the minority African leaders who possess all the power of 'Uhuru'. Because of this they deny the majority Africans this power of 'Uhuru'. This is clearly demonstrated when the African leaders possess too much power over their subjects to a point of denying their subjects the right of freedom. The leaders become unrealistic in punishing their fellow Africans as they convict them of petty crimes. For instance, the Prisoner is accused of vagrancy. He is denied freedom to enjoy basking at City Park yet this is the same power of freedom that the African, as symbolized by the Prisoner, had desperately fought for from the colonial masters. To illustrate on this irony of 'Uhuru', Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) argues: 'Independence was simply the removal of the racial barriers to social mobility but the Pyramid structure remained the same with some Africans climbing up the Pyramid to the middle and top zones but hardly any mobility downwards' (p. 90).

This then reflects the image of independent African society as the power of the colonial masters has been imposed on the independent African leaders. These leaders use this power on the Africans in an oppressive way. Therefore, freedom is not guaranteed in Africa and one must seek a license, which is a symbol of ways of power over bodies, to be able to carry out any activity freely. Wa Thiong'o (1993) says: 'People cannot meet for a cultural activity, any cultural activity without a license. Whether they are meeting to write, to produce or to dance...' (p. 91).

The ways of power of bodies over bodies as manifested in the independent African leaders by 'Uhuru', displays itself through the oppression and suppression of 'Africans'. This same power that has empowered the leaders ends up depriving the leaders of their power of glory of leadership. The prisoner demonstrates this when he criticizes the leaders for being petty with their power as they miss to see and condemn more serious crimes that endanger the social ethics but instead perceive ones freedom for leisure as an offence. Thus:

Brother
I am not a witch
I was not caught
Dancing stark naked...
Did you find me
In bed with your wife
Or raping your mother (1971, p. 15)

The Prisoner imposes his body's own power as manifested in his realistic condemnation of the leaders' action. They punish him for having leisure yet they are unable to punish those who commit more serious crimes like immorality. He argues:

Why should I not
Sleep with the green grass
In the City Park
While I nurse
My hunger...
Why do they call me
A vagrant
A loiterer? (1971, p. 15-16)

As a way of presenting the social upheavals of the post-independent African society, the poet digresses from his analysis of ways of power in the political arena to deal with ways of power in one's social responsibilities. Okot (1986, p. 20) in his article *Man the Unfree*, gives examples of the complex terms by which a person is defined: son, father, husband, clansman among others. These terms are the stamps of the power of a man's freedom or lack of freedom. In *Song of Prisoner*, by being a father and a husband, the prisoner finds himself in bondage of responsibilities. As a father and a husband, he has been embodied with power over bodies that are his children and wife. He has the power to provide and take care of them as dictated by society. Ironically, this very power of

carrying out his responsibilities that should empower him as a father and husband, render him powerless as he fails to fulfill them. He attributes his failure to another power that is working over him, the power of poverty. Because of this, his children are malnourished and his wife waits for food in vain. He says:

Have you seen
The mosquito legs
Of my children...
My wife cleans her pot
Her Kitchen fire
Burns gently,
The water simmers...
She and her children
Sit and wait
For the beans
Maize flour
And salt... (1971, p. 22-23)

The Prisoner goes on to contrast the power of poverty over him with the power of wealth over the rich. The leaders have amassed a lot for themselves till even their dogs have excess while the poor like the Prisoner writhe in poverty. The power of materialism deprives the rich and the leaders of the insight to the reality of poverty that is eating up the people of Africa. This contrast between the rich and the poor symbolize African independent societies. The Prisoner's lack of power in form of material makes him agonize bitterly as he equates himself to a 'wounded crocodile' that is quite fierce. He alludes his state to that of Lazarus in the Christian mythology who used to eat the remains of the rich man. The emotional suffering that the Prisoner is going through evokes another power over the body in form of psychological torture. The power of psychological torture is so strong over the Prisoner till it drives him insane. Paradoxically, his new state of insanity acts as a source of the body's own power. He is given the power of temporary freedom in the form of:

I plead insanity
I am mad
Can't you see? (1971, p. 24)

In this state of madness, he receives no blame for failure to carry out his responsibilities, thus; he has the power of a free man.

Okot p'Bitek also employs the use of imagery in his poetry to portray ways of power of and over bodies. For example, in part three of *Song of Prisoner*: 'black mud', he uses animal images to present the power relations between the leaders and the prisoner. The image of the Elephants and Rhinos represent those with power while the image of butterflies, insects and earthworms represent the powerless. As the persona contrasts the two images, he clearly demonstrates how those who have power deprive the prisoner(s) of all their power to be decisive or carry out any duty. He says:

Ten uniformed stones
Break into my tiny hell
Elephants trumpet
Rhinos scream
For blood... (1971, p. 30)
I am an insect
Trapped between the toes
Of a bull elephant
I am an earthworm
I grovel in the mud... (1971, p. 34)

It is this deprivation of the prisoner's power to decide that provokes another power in him to irrelevantly respond to the questions asked in court. This response symbolizes the prisoner's (body's) own power over the power of those in authority. This is demonstrated in the drama in court between those in authority and the prisoner:

Do you plead
Guilty
Or
Not guilty?
I plead smallness...
I plead fear
I plead helplessness
I plead hopelessness (1971, p. 32-33)

This then, portrays ways of power whereby the prisoner's own body of power reacts to the power imposed on him by the power of the state. He rebels by giving alternative feedback which is contrary to the already laid

down procedures of response 'guilty or not guilty'.

The poet also sarcastically uses the image of 'bonfire' in part 4 to demonstrate way of power in *Song of Prisoner*. A bonfire by definition is 'a large fire made outdoors as part of a celebration'. Ironically, the bonfire in this case portrays the power of tribalism and nepotism in Independent African States. Chinua Achebe in *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) defines tribalism as 'A discrimination against a citizen because of his place of birth' (p. 7). He further argues that: "But all this self-conscious wish, to banish 'tribe', has proved largely futile because a word will stay around as long as there is work for it to do..." (1983, p. 6).

In *Song of Prisoner*, the Prisoner is psychologically tortured by the fact that his father failed to marry from the right clan, which would have ensured that the offspring are secure as they would be powerful members of society. These offspring would have been empowered with the power of intelligence, hard work, thrift, ruthlessness and success over those who lack these traits. Thus:

You should have known
The clan
In which the most intelligent
Hardworking
Thrifty
Ruthless
And most successful chiefs
Are born and bred...!
Do you not know
That offsprings inherit
Intelligence
Handwork
Thrift
Ruthlessness
And success
From their mothers? (1971, p. 36-37)

Later, he again blames his mother for making a similar mistake as his father did: marrying a man from the wrong clan, as the man from the right clan would have given them the gift of the power of beauty, wealth and cleverness over those who lack these qualities.

Why did you elect
This poor man
From the wrong clan
To be my father
Do you not know
That children inherit
Beauty
Power
Wealth
Cleverness
And success
From their fathers? (1971, p. 50-52).

The concept of marriage, in this case, symbolizes the ways of power of nepotism and tribalism in post-independent African states. The prisoner feels that the two animals: nepotism and tribalism are manifested with ways of power as some clans are considered as being more powerful than others. He demonstrates this when he blames his present state of being in prison and in a state of powerlessness on his parents' mistakes of being from the wrong clans. The pain and anger that he feels because of this, provokes an inner power. He has illusions on what he would do once out of prison: he would punish his parents for subjecting him to suffering. These illusions symbolize the body's own power. He says:

When I get out
Of this hell
I will exhume your bones
And hang you
By the neck... (1971, p. 38)

This demonstrates how the power of nepotism and tribalism in post-independent African States has power over the power of merit of an individual. This then means that, one cannot be a powerful member of society even if he has the qualities and qualifications required if he does not belong to the 'right' clan. These are the circumstances the prisoner is victim of as satirized by the poet. Achebe (1983) has the same fears of the power of tribalism when he says:

A Nigerian child seeking admission into a federal school, a student wishing to enter a college or university, a graduate seeking employment in the public service, a businessman tendering for a contract, a citizen applying for a passport, filing a report with the police or seeking access to any of the hundred thousand avenues controlled by the state, will sooner or later fill out a form which requires him to confess his tribe (or less crudely, and more hypocritically, his state of origin).(p. 7)

The prison space is another element that the poet uses to demonstrate ways of power of and over bodies. The power of prison is seen through the physical and psychological torture that the prisoner goes through while in prison. For instance, he is tied with a rope, thrown at dust. These subjection to physical suffering leads him to a world of hallucinations which again becomes a power over him as he hallucinates about his wife sleeping with a rich and important man whose power is the 'Benz' and his status of a 'Big chief'. This thought makes him shiver with fear and anger. He then gains power as he gets into a world of illusions which act as a defense mechanism. The body's own power is then manifested in his new state of insanity which gives him the power to want to do the impossible:

I want to drink
Human blood
I want to eat
Human liver
To quench my boiling thirst... (1971, p. 46)

When he gets out of his illusions, he clearly flashbacks to his past and the power of a youthful married life that was full of love. These thoughts of the power of love in his youthful marriage gives him another power of hope that he will not be hanged but freed as he fantasizes how his wife will celebrate his release. As:

When you hear
The great news
Jump with joy...
I will not be hanged
I will plead
Not guilty
The best lawyers
Will defend me...
Will set me
Free...

His hope of not pleading guilty gives him the power over the warders, as he will not be subjected to further physical suffering. He is quite optimistic that his fellow 'African judges' will not fail to use their powers to defend him and so will those who 'hired' him. This optimism becomes a power of hope over the state of hopelessness. Unfortunately, his hopes are thwarted as after the murder, he is jailed and beaten instead of being 'saluted' and 'congratulated' as a hero. He wonders:

You uniformed Brothers
Beating me now,
Why do you not
Salute me?
And congratulate me... (1971, p. 68).

In spite of this oppression that he faces from the warders who deprive him of the power of a free man, he still hopes to possess power in 'absence'. He expects his wife and children to be proud of him. He further achieves power through self-delusory calmness when he visualizes staying with his family in 'a farm in the fertile valley'.

Tell the children
Not to cry for me,
Let them be proud of me.
I have bought
A farm
In the fertile alley
A thousand acres
Of heaven
For you and me
And our children (1971, p. 59-60).

As the prisoner recounts his act of murder, he reflects on how the victim of assassination had power over others as he oppressed and exploited them.

He was a traitor
A dictator

A murderer
A racist
A tribalist
A clannist
A brotherist... (1971, p. 67).

His subjects feel empowered when they are able to get rid of him as they get free of oppression and exploitation. To carry out this they had to hire the prisoner to do it. Ironically, this way, they and the prisoner are empowered with the same evil of murder. The prisoner claims power over the assassinated who is said to have been blocking progress. The prisoner says that he is not a coward, a thug or insane and he never did it for material gain but did it to end the evils of the assassinated. He tells the wife of the assassinated:

Your husband was
An obstacle blocking
The path of our progress
He had to be urgently removed... (1971, p. 72)

The prisoner imagines that his act of murdering 'the corrupt dictator' gives him power over others. Therefore, he should be praised and given a guard of honour as a hero of freedom who has freed his people from a corrupt leader. He says:

I want to join
The jubilant throng
Gathered at the City Park
Waiting for me...
Let the people see
The hero
Of Uhuru!
Let parliamentarians
Rise and honour me...
The corrupt dictator
Is dead...
I have done
A great deed
And have become
Immortal! (1971, p. 77-79)

Ironically, the act of murder that should have empowered him as a great man in society deprives him of all his power as a free man. He is subjected to physical and psychological torture through the power of prison. He has been charged for murder. He desperately yearns to be freed as he requests them to:

Open this steel gate
You uniformed Brothers
Open the door
And let me out
Cut off this rope
Free my hands and feet... (1971, p. 75-76)

The poet's use of freedom as a symbol of ways of power is also evident in the prisoner's urge to be freed to go and participate in cultural ceremonies which he can't do while in prison. Thus:

I want to go to the village
To perform
The cleansing ceremony
To deaden the sharp spear
Of the vengeful ghost (1971, p. 76)

Other than the power of the cell in which he is confined, there is also the power of 'ghost' which he must free himself from. His power as a free man goes beyond his simple desire to be a societal hero and he becomes a dreamer. He gets into a world of fantasy where he is a minister, a powerful man who everybody ought to know as he declares:

I am minister
Do you not know me?
Do you not
Recognize my voice...
I am responsible
For law and order
I am responsible

For peace and Goodwill
In the land
I am your minister
You are my officers
I command you... (1971, p. 82-83)

As he fantasizes as a leader who has power over his subjects, he is able to note that his subjects are powerless and disillusioned. This portrays the position of post-independent states where the leaders like the minister are aware of the powerlessness state their subjects but care less, thus:

Listen to their bitter chorus
The protests and curses
I see them
Shake their heads
And spit with contempt... (1971, p. 84)

The prisoner's desire for power is just like Wamala's in John Ruganda's *The Burdens* (1972). Wamala fantasizes on how to make millions by making 'two tops matches' in partnership with Mr. Kanagonago; an unrealistic venture. In the same way, the prisoner again gets into a world of fantasy. While in prison, he wants to write letters with a golden pen and send fat cheques to his parents:

Where is my gold pen?
I want to write letters
To my children
And send them money
I want to send a fat cheque
To my old mother
And another fat cheque
To my father ... (1971, p. 86-87).

Ironically, his powerful world of fantasy is rendered powerless as he still in prison and the time to pass his judgment is indefinite since the judge is on leave. Therefore, the time factor also renders him powerless and 'imprisons' him.

There is an empty chair
In the cabinet room
The occupant is on leave
He is alone
Buried in of cotton wool
Thoughts of hope
Filled with poisoned needles
Of hopelessness... (1971, p. 87)

He further gets disillusioned as he is ashamed of his state of powerlessness that he cannot disclose to his children and parents. It is his secretive nature that gives him the power of optimism as he keeps on hoping for freedom soon.

I don't want them to know
That my hands and feet
Are tied with ropes
And I am sitting
On the naked thigh
Of the stone floor
But how can I tell them
That I am shoeless
That my feet are swollen
Blistered and bleeding
How can I tell
My mother that I am
Naked and bruised
All over?
I will tell them
That I am coming home
To see them
Very soon... (1971, p. 86-88)

'Uhuru' which signifies independent Africa, is said to have had 'its candle blown out'. This means that independence is devoid of power, on its people. It has no value or relevance to the people of Africa. The people

of Africa are oppressed by the evils of independence. This then deprives them of their own power of 'independence' – freedom.

For the candle
Of Uhuru
Has been blown out
How can I think freely
When the very air
Has ears larger than
Those of the elephant (1971, p. 90)

The prisoner's strong desire for freedom which will empower him to move and express himself freely, tortures him psychologically. It leads him to a world of illusions as he hopes for great deeds which will empower him for example to drink alcohol and have sex with women. He desires

... to drink
A whole bottle of whisky
To quench my thirst
For freedom
I want to sleep
With experienced prostitutes... (1971, p. 92)

At the same time, the prisoner's use of the future tense 'I will' in his speech portrays his optimism. He hopes that the future may empower him despite his powerless state in prison at the present. Time then becomes a source of power. He says:

Let the French girl
Bring her sexy cognat
And I will drink it
I will cover her
With my broken kisses
I will touch her unbroken breasts (1971, p. 93)

To be able to empower himself, the prisoner desires to forget the ideology of 'Uhuru' that was supposed to have empowered the Africans through independence. With contempt, he speaks of the paradox of independence when he says:

I want to forget
That I am a lightless star
A proud Eagle
Shot down
By the arrow
Of Uhuru (1971, p. 94)

Thus, to forget is to be empowered and to remember is to be disempowered.

Far from the paradox of 'Uhuru', the prisoner thinks of his children's beauty as a way of empowering him as a father. The children empower him by lifting his ego as they call and run for him. They proudly recognize him as their 'papa', which evokes some inner power of his status as a father who is looked up to by his children. He proudly says:

The moon kisses
My daughter's emerging breasts
And my son's dimples
I plead guilty to pride
My children call me
Papa!
They run to me... (1971, p. 99-100)

The paradox of the 'pride he pleads to' is brought out when he recalls that the misery of his children, unlike other children, is when they fail to go to school to learn from the teachers as others do. His children then become victims of powerlessness just like he is at his present state of being in prison and therefore not able to carry out his role as a father.

My children do
Not go to school
My children will
Never go to school (1971, p. 101)

It is this psychological torture about the suffering of his children and his lack of power to redeem them that gives him a nostalgic feeling of wanting to be freed. He desires to be free to clap, sing, drum and dance. He also remembers his body's own power as evident through his physique. He says:

Look at my athletic thighs
My chest was broad
And without a scar
My teeth were the
White Okok's birds
Standing on the back
Of a buffalo bull...
I want to clap my hands
And sing for my children
So that they may dance
I want to drum the wall
With my hands,
I want to jump up
And dance... (1971, p. 101)

While still in his nostalgia, he recalls his power over tradition. During his father's funeral, he is the one expected to carry out the cultural rites. Unfortunately, he is deprived of this power as he is in prison. He 'cries' out for this freedom in:

But how can I address
The ghosts of my fathers
From here ?
Free my hands and feet...
I want to tread the earth
With a vengeance
And shake the bones
Of my father in his grave (1971, p. 102-104)

The poet also makes use of the image of 'cattle egret' to bring out the paradox of ways of power. The prisoner nostalgically reflects on his days of power physiologically, culturally and economically. A cattle egret is a beautiful bird that eats ticks from cows but in the process harms the cow as it picks the ticks. Similarly, the nostalgic feelings of the prisoner's power emit an element of powerlessness. He is helpless and cannot exercise his powers while in prison as he used to do while out of prison. Despite all the suffering in prison and his hopelessness for failing to amass wealth, he wants to beat all odds and be happy. Just like an oasis in the middle of desert, his body's own desire to enjoy life through dance gives him the freedom and power to live. It is this desire in the midst of a sea of problems that is equated to an oasis in the middle of a desert. He says:

Let me dance
And forget my sorrow (1971, p. 108-109)

Finally, the poet through the prisoner's voice gives the paradox of ways of power of and over bodies in post-independent African society. The prisoner talks of how the Africans asserted their own power over the colonial master. They fought and lost their lives so as to gain the power of freedom from the colonialists. Ironically, the freedom they strongly fought for has become a body of power over them as manifested in the post-independent African leaders. The Africans are now exposed to oppression, exploitation and civil war as:

Black corpses strewn
Along the streets
Dead to free Africa
So that they may
Suffer in freedom (1971, p. 116)

African, as a body of power, gains its power through freedom from the colonial master. Paradoxically, this power works on its own body, Africa, thus disempowers it as evident in Africa fighting itself. Painfully, the prisoner reflects on the civil wars in Nigeria and Congo which are independent African States.

Listen to the orphans
Wailing in the Nigerian
High-life tune
Listen to the bombs
Bursting, in the market place
Scattering the neat heaps of yams
And pieces of human bones...
The Congo forest
Is on fire
The anguish of rape
Bloodshed and death... (1971, p. 114-115)

This allusion to the Nigeria and Congo civil wars symbolize the powerlessness of the African as seen through the prisoner. The African who should have been empowered by independence is rather subjected to painful suffering of 'bloodshed' and 'death' which is power over him. It is ironic that he can only be of value to Africa if dead. Thus:

The only good Black
Is a dead one! (1971, p. 115)

The poet through the eyes of the prisoner satirizes African independence since death becomes a body of power over the living as no one can torture a body. But then, of what use can a dead body be? This shifts the center of power as the absence of life in a body renders that body powerless.

The Prisoner's pleas to be freed from the prison gates wishes to forget his past deeds. This evokes the body's own power which gives him the power of freedom. Nevertheless, this power of freedom lacks permanency since memory is a way of power that cannot be erased. This is evident in the way he recurrently remembers his past life that had empowered him. He is aware that to forget will only give him temporary power that will be rendered powerless once again by the power of memories. He says:

I want to dance
And forget my smallness
Let me dance and forget
For 'a small while'
That I am a wretch... (1971, p. 118)

The use of the phrase 'a small while' demonstrates that the prisoner will never be completely free. He may gain power over his memories by forgetting at one moment but at another moment, he may lose it.

The paradox of the power of prison as in the case of the prisoner, is also evident in Hama Tuma's short story 'The case of the Prison Monger' in the anthology *Looking for a Rain God and other stories* by Gordorn. I (1995, p. 36-42). Hama Tuma satirizes society in its way of dealing with ways of power of prison and freedom. In this story, the Prison Monger commits various crimes which land him behind the prison gates. The prison, which is supposed to have power over the prisoner by torturing him, instead gives him power. It is in this prison that he is able to have company, eat and get shelter. This is contrasted with the power of freedom which over him as he lacks the facilities of shelter, food and relatives. While free, the body's own power as he yearns for the facilities in prison, is evoked. He therefore rebels power of freedom and commits another crime to ensure he goes back to prison.

4. Conclusion

The study examined political power relations in the post-independent Africa society as presented in *Song of Prisoner*. Ways of power of and over bodies in the text are manifested in the characters: the prisoner, judge, warder and the cell environment. The prisoner, a body through which power is played out, clearly demonstrates two levels of power: physical and psychological. The observation made in the analysis of this text is that these levels of power trigger one another, as none is self-sufficient. For instance, the warders who are a body of power physically torture the prisoner. In the process, this torture triggers another source of power, the psychological power as he hallucinates on various issues and finally he gets drawn into a world of illusions. At this point he gains his own power as he fantasizes on doing miraculous deeds.

This state of the prisoner can be perceived as being symbolic of the post-independent African society. Physically, either the colonial masters or the neo-colonial African leaders have deprived Africa of its resources, which are a source of power. In return, this deprivation has psychologically tortured the people of Africa as they writhe in the pain of poverty disease and ignorance. As a way of freeing themselves, Africans have got into a world of illusions as they fantasize on how to turn tables by becoming industrialized by the end of the first two decades of the twenty first century. This may just be an illusion as the main problem of the corrupt African leaders is far from the end.

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