

Freedom from Imperialist Domination: Organized Revolt as an Imperative in the African Novel

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Abstract

African literature evolved largely as a reaction to the colonial presence in Africa and expectedly its growth and development bestride the tapestry of Africa's subjugation by the colonial powers. The novel, which is the concern of this paper, has been employed by African writers to show the monstrosity of Africa's colonial, neocolonial or postcolonial traumas, which mostly are depicted against a backdrop of violence unleashed on the people by power wielders, whether Western or African. In countering this, critical realist writers depict in their novels gory portraits of the misdemeanors of members of the ruling class and the effect of these on the Africans, but socialist realist writers advance revolutionary options for redressing the social problems created by the ineptitude of misgovernance by members of the African ruling class. Organized revolts, whether in the syndicalist form of strikes by workers or physical contestations by the African peasantry against the ruling class have become the norm and this is conceived as an outlet for the oppressed to recreate or humanize themselves and take their destinies in their own hands. This is in tandem with what the Marxists call 'dictatorship of the proletariat class' which is the final goal of the socialist revolution. This phenomenon will be further discussed in some of the novels of African writers of this strain of writing as the paper unfolds.

Keywords: Freedom, Imperialist domination, Organized revolt, the African novel

Introduction

Radical thinkers and philosophers of the Marxist persuasion outline in their discourses the tension created by the squabbles attendant on the interaction between members of the bourgeois and proletariat classes in every society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels placed the redemption of the proletariats in the hands of the petite bourgeoisie or the lower middle class; a class that was envisaged by the radical thinkers to mobilize or conscientize the masses through the dictatorship of the proletariat class to fight and sequester power from the bourgeois class and assume eventual control of the reins of government and control of the economy after the socialist revolution. This equalitarian Marxist view of social transformation and normalization of the interests of social classes necessarily overplays the imperative of violence, tension and conflicts between classes in every society. In many previous essays¹, I have demonstrated the possibility of the adoption of this prescription as a viable channel to overhaul the African scenario where the experience of colonialism, apartheid and neocolonialism has foisted on the people the hegemony of western imperialism and the continuation of the status quo in postcolonial Africa.

This study is conceived and structured in its entirety on the Marxist critical viewpoint, especially since it discusses the conflicts between the ruling bourgeois class and the deprived masses of the African people. It seeks to mobilize the deprived masses of Africa by conscientizing and enlightening them on the practical possibilities available through their banding together in organized revolts to topple the oppressor class as a way of reclaiming their dignity and putting an end to their oppression. This is the very dimension of revolution espoused in the writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Lenin as well as later Marxist theorists such as Georg Lukacs, Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Ernst Fischer, Terry Eagleton and a host of other Marxist scholars.

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* as well as Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* have drawn attention to the use of violence as a strategy employed by the western colonizers to subjugate Africa and her people during the colonization of the African continent. Thus, although Karl Marx did not have Africa in mind when he propounded the above view of revolution, those like Fanon who adopted wholesale his radical views and applied them to the African context have not failed to identify violence as one of the means through which colonialism was propagated. Indeed, through the same logic, violence has also become implicated in the agitations to end colonial rule in Africa as the colonized band together to unsettle their colonial and neocolonial oppressors in the wake of freeing and dealienating themselves from the onslaught of western imperialism in Africa.

African literature has largely been very reactive in temperament, mainly because it has evolved against the gory background of the experience of the different phases of colonialism in Africa, which the literature has also largely mirrored. The primacy of the novel genre in Africa has been stressed again and again, not only by Phanuel Egejuru, but even recently by Abiola Irele in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. As he says, "Although Africa has had a long and enduring tradition of poetry and drama, the novel is today, as almost everywhere else in the world, the dominant literary genre on the continent" (1). Certainly, the novel has been the most employed genre to document the African experience of western imperialism. The colonial encounter in Africa, the agitations for decolonization and the fight to put an end to apartheid in South Africa have all been

most remarkably fictionalized by novelists, remarkable among whom are Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Festus Iyayi, Camara Laye, Mongo Beti, Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Meja Mwangi, Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, Naguib Mahfouz, El – Sadaawi, and many others too numerous to mention across the regions of Africa.

While the novel has largely been employed to showcase the monstrosity of colonialism by African writers of the critical realist strain during the period of the colonial encounter, possibly apart from Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, which details the colonial encounter in pre-independence Senegal and yet showcases an epic and momentous syndicalist revolution, only ideological novelists who subscribe to the Marxist ideology and writing about postcolonial Africa, have essentially deployed the novel to combative and revolutionary ends by rousing the masses of the African people to unsettle through syndicalist agitations or physical contestations the neocolonial status quo. This is the domain of novelists such as Sembene Ousmane, Festus Iyayi, Ayi Kwei Armah (in *Two Thousand Seasons*), and Alex la Guma, especially in *The Stone Country*, *In the Fog of the Season’s End* and *Time of the Butcherbird*. Armah, however, operates in the novel mentioned above from the pedestal of idealism, since he has consistently rejected the tag or label Marxist.

Thus, critical realism and socialist realism are the two most marked traditions of social criticism that are clearly discernible in the evolution of the African novel. A critical realist writer writes out of a burning desire to effect changes in the society by using his novels to draw attention to the problems of the society. He expresses a strong indignation against corruption, bad governance and the general putrescence in the society, but he does not advance solutions or show the way to alleviate or totally extirpate from the society such identified problems. He is contented with showing the problems in the society through his work; not hazarding or suggesting solutions to move the society forward. Achebe’s *A Man of the People* and Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* exemplify this trend.

While it can be argued that highlighting the problems of the society and bringing them to the doorsteps of those at the corridors of power is the first step towards solving such identified problems, the revolutionary novelist or socialist realist writer moves a step further by suggesting a way out of the identified problems of the society. This usually comes in the form of a revolution or an organized revolt; a confrontation by the oppressed class with the oppressor to free themselves from his clutches as a way of redeeming their humanity and personal integrity. This could be syndicalist in the form of workers being mobilized to go on strike against their employers/oppressors as we find in Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, Iyayi’s *Violence* or Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, or it could be in the form of a spontaneous physical contestation with or mobilization of the people against their rulers/oppressor as we find in La Guma’s anti-apartheid novels, Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* or even Ousmane’s *Xala* and *The Last of the Empire*.

Organized Revolt as an Imperative in the African Novel of Post-Independence Disillusionment

The generality of African novelists who used their novels to counter the domination or subjugation of Africans during the colonial period often presented protagonists who served as bulwarks to colonialism. Such protagonists: Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, Waiyaki in *The River Between* and Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child* etc. were crushed by the violence emblematic of the colonial system. And even when we find chronic satirists such as Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono ridiculing the futility and eventual failure of colonialism in Francophone Africa in their novels, it was still within the resistant anticolonial trait that was common to the novels of the period. While not saying that such reactions were muffled and inconsequential, they were indicative of the desire by Africans to attain freedom from their entrapment and dehumanization by their experience of colonialism. As said earlier, the grandest of such response to colonialism in novels of the period was Ousmane’s epic fiction, *God’s Bits of Wood* which embodies a well planned and well executed syndicalist revolution directed at the white French directors of the Dakar-Niger railway company in colonial Senegal. In the novel, the strike action by the African workers of the railway company to call attention to the sordidness of their working condition metamorphoses into a communal experience, bringing forth a new generation of African women who were no longer content with being sidelined by tradition from taking active roles in the general fight against colonialism.

The stoical endurance of the womenfolks and the radicalization of their defiance under the leadership of Penda, Dieynaba, Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi and the blind but essential Maimouna, complements the efforts of the African male workers at the Dakar-Niger Railway company under the leadership of Bakayoko and his co-unionists. The epic march from Thies to Dakar by the women is the highest point of resistance to colonial domination in the world of the novel. Although fraught with logistical problems, the heroic journey to lodge their complaints to the colonial administration in Dakar succeeds by and large as the management of the Railway Company is forced to negotiate with the striking workers and accede to their demands. Although the conflict in *God’s Bits of Wood* could be said to be strictly economic since it concerns the relationship between the African railway workers and their white directors, it also extends to the threshold of colonialism since the conflict epitomizes the larger domination and subjugation of the African people by white French colonial operatives.

Ousmane believes that colonialism was primarily an economic undertaking in an exploitative capitalist system.

The novels about the immediate post-independence period in postcolonial Africa embody a combative ethos and they give us the clearest examples of resistance to neocolonialism. As I stated elsewhere, this was largely unexpected because African writers and the generality of the African people supported the political class during the fight for decolonization:

If protest as a thematic concern in the literature of the colonial period was tolerable and justifiable, one would have thought that the attainment of political independence by many African nations and states will symbolize the beginning of a new kind of writing that will continue to express support for the political class in Africa, especially now that the colonialists had retreated from the scene. We were now supposed to have in place a government of the people headed by our black African brothers who were supposed to cater for the pre-independence aspirations of the citizenry, especially since the local people, peasants, market women and the like were very useful in the fight for the decolonization of Africa which has now enthroned the political class within the ambit of power. (Agho, 2011: 12-13)

The euphoria of independence in many African states and nations was shortlived by the realization on the part of the masses of the African people that nothing had really changed from the days of the erstwhile colonialists. In postcolonial Africa, corruption and dysfunctional governance have become the organizing principles of the political class. The African people are groaning under the burden of poverty, unemployment, shoddy social infrastructure and generally bad governance. Ironically, Africans are the people at the helms of affair in African nations and states. As I pointed out in another study titled “Class Conflict and the Rise of the ‘Proletarian’ Novel in Africa:

The neocolonial phase of Africa’s political evolution has been dominated by ill-feelings towards the political class whose members assumed the mantle of governance upon the exit of the colonialists. This was the reason for the euphoria that followed the granting of political sovereignty to African nations and states because the gains of the freedom did not percolate down to the African masses, and their pre-independence expectations have thus largely remained unfulfilled.... Not only are the healthcare needs of the people almost at zero point, there is massive corruption in the civil service and the staggering percentage of unemployment has accentuated the degree of insecurity of lives...

This unfortunate development has also deepened the despair and frustration of African writers, who have had to change their role from being cultural custodians of African society to using their writings to criticize the corruption and misdemeanours of members of the political class.(2012, 53-54)

This development has given rise to the ascendance of what has been described as the ‘novels of post-independence disillusionment’; a label appropriately typifying the mood of most novels about post-colonial Africa. In the rest part of this essay, two African novels randomly selected from the different regions of the continent that embody these concerns will be discussed for the purpose of illustration.

The Nigerian Festus Iyayi is clearly one writer who has carved a niche for himself as an ideological novelist who writes programmatic novels woven around Marxism, his professed ideology. This ideology dictates how he has structured his major novels till date: *Violence*, *The Contract* and *Heroes*. But for the present discussion on organized revolt as a reaction to the emasculation of the masses of African people by the African ruling class and the class of property owners and capitalists, only his first novel suffices. *Violence* was published in 1979 and it portrays a very grim picture of postcolonial Africa, where unemployment and poverty of the masses of African people are pitted against the wanton squandermania of the monied class. The novel testifies to the author’s disgust and infuriation at the present state of development in Africa. Not only are characters like Idemudia, the novel’s protagonist, Adisa, his wife, Patrick and Omoifo, his co-labourers, victims of exploitation by Queen and Obofun, representing the monied class, there is a dearth of social infrastructure in the referent society in the text; bad and unkempt roads, usually flooded and impassible during the rainy season; all showing a shoddy attitude of government towards maintenance of social amenities.

Iyayi believes that the creative art can be used as a tool to equilibrate the inequalities contained in a capitalist economy. In *Violence*, he shows the way to freedom to the oppressed class by demonstrating to them the Fanonian creed of restorative violence as a channel to redefine their humanity. He characterizes ‘violence’ as the totality of the ill-treatments meted by the rich on the poor and encourages them to protest. This radical definition is presented to the readers through the counsel for defence in the mock-drama performance in the government hospital where Idemudia is recuperating after offloading a trailer load of cement for Queen at a ridiculously low price. As the counsel says:

... acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the opportunity of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly. We often do not realize that it is the society, the type of economic and hence the

political system, which we are operating in our country today that brutalizes the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realize that when such men of poor and limited opportunities react; they are only in a certain measure, answering violence for violence ... I feel and think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence ... (193)

It is the awareness of this possibility of reclaiming his dignity and humanity through the mechanism of violence that prompts Idemudia to orchestrate a syndicalist revolt at Queen's building site, where we confront the most bestial and callous display of insensitivity by the monied class for the impoverished and exploited workers. In trying to meet the ultimatum set by government to execute her low-cost housing contract, having diverted the mobilization fund received from government to her other personal projects, Queen plans to exploit her workers by making them work more for less pay. Not satisfied with the plan, she further decides to reduce the workers' break time by thirty minutes and includes Sunday as a working day. In doing this, she practically rules out the possibility of negotiation with the workers.

However, it is the cumulative unsettling nature of these experiences that awakens the latent revolutionary instincts of the workers, prompting them to embark on strike to call for improvement of their working conditions under the leadership of Idemudia. The ultimate success of their action demonstrates the legitimization of violence as a means of liberation and an instrument for the rejection of injustice and dehumanization.

Kenya's foremost writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, is one of Africa's best known novelists. Ngugi embraced Marxism as an ideology very early in his writing career, no doubt as a result of the gruesome nature of British imperialism and the also turbulent and militant nature of the response by Kenyans to it through the activities of the Mau Mau freedom fighters and he has used this ideological conviction to structure his novels. He saw much of this in his childhood and details his people's experiences of the brutality of the early settlers and later colonialists in Kenya in his early novels: *The River Between*, *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*. Because he believes in the legitimacy of the Mau Mau war of insurrection in colonial Kenya, he glorifies the efforts of the freedom fighters and ceaselessly gives a pride of place to this struggle in his fiction. In a sense, Ngugi is obsessed with this issue, which he also handles even in his novels about postcolonial Kenya: *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*, especially the betrayal of the Kenyan peasants who fought for freedom by the neocolonial ruling class. Ngugi sees this betrayal of the Kenyan peasants by the comprador bourgeois class in Kenya as most unfortunate because these emasculated peasants were the true heroes of the Mau Mau revolution, which ushered in uhuru. Many of these same peasants lost their lives, many were maimed and yet, those that survived the ordeals are now relegated to the background in post-independence Kenya.

As a novel of post-independence disillusionment, *Petals of Blood* best illustrates the combative will of the oppressed to battle with and triumph over their oppressors and thus it is in the novel that the revolutionary imperative discernible in Ngugi's fiction finds its most eloquent manifestation, especially the enunciation of syndicalism as an avenue to freedom and liberation. For this section of the paper, I shall give a detailed discussion on the novel to demonstrate the proletarian leanings of the author as well as show the prevalence of conflicts between the bourgeois class of exploiters and oppressors in Kenya and the masses of the Kenyan people.

In the first part of *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi establishes the setting (Ilmorog community) and provides in it a mirror through which present happenings in neo-colonial Kenya are projected. Faced with drought, dwindling farm resources and economic recession, the Ilmorogians, acting on the advice of Karega, Munira, Wanja and Abdulla; all strangers to Ilmorog, decide to march to Nairobi to meet their elected representative – Nderi wa Riera, who sustains the image of the MP in *A Grain of Wheat*. The second part of the novel is an account of the journey to the city by the people of Ilmorog. In line with the epic breadth of the story, the particular journey is portrayed as cumbersome, hazardous and fraught with bitter experiences: hunger, thirst and wickedness from city elite such as the Reverend Jerrod Brown, Raymond Chui and Hawkins Kimeria.

But what is the reaction of their representative to their predicament? Part three shows the changes that came upon Ilmorog on account of the journey. There is a gradual transformation of the village from a rural community to an urban city bubbling with industries and economic activities. One can say that the long arm of Nairobi's bourgeoisie is reaching out at the same time as old Ilmorog begins a gradual gravitation towards death.

Part four, which is also the final, continues the story of the rise of New Ilmorog and reveals the beginning of the exploitation of the peasants of Ilmorog. Not only are the original inhabitants marginalized and pushed to the fringes of the old Ilmorog, they have also been displaced from their jobs and lands by a combined team of Kenyan capitalists, acting in alliance with foreign interests. This is therefore a political novel in the widest sense and it provides a comprehensive statement of its author's commitment and humanism, which is summed up in his following statement:

I believe that a people have a right to know how wealth is produced in their country, who

controls it and who benefits. I believe that every Kenyan has a right to decent housing, decent food, and decent clothing I believe in a national economy free from any foreign domination or free from imperialist control. (As qtd by Killam, 96-7)

We find in the novel a representation of the author's fears – the antithesis of his beliefs – which has become crystallized in the contemporary Kenyan society.

In Ilmorog's metamorphosis from a rural home of peasants into a sprawling industrial capital, the very seed of class division which was only slightly hinted at in Ngugi's early works reaches its greatest heights. In Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria; all three directors of the Thengeta Brewery Ltd., and Nderi wa Riera of the KCO Holdings, we find the very extreme of property acquisition and ownership. This comprador bourgeois class, in alliance with international finance capitalism, is pitted against characters such as the one-legged Abdulla, a freedom fighter whose only gain for fighting to liberate his country is his stump of a leg, Karega, Munira, Nyakinyua and others in the novel who are victims of even greater exploitation by the class of property owners. Any wonder then that Wanja, obviously a type character representing the most ruthlessly exploited class of women in Kenya, prostitutes her talent in order to survive.

It is the totality of these aberrations that energizes Ngugi to advance the revolutionary alternative. This comes in the author's implicit endorsement of revolutionary syndicalism as a viable method of enforcing changes in the conditions of the workers, and preventing their further exploitation by the class of property owners as well as in the death of the three capitalist mongrels: Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria in the conflagration that consumes Wanja's brothel. Although, it could be argued that the death of the three capitalists is not a solution in itself, it is, however, symptomatic of the final destruction of their base.

In the novel, Karega is the author's mouthpiece and change agent for proselytizing the crusade to resist the oppression of the directors of the Thengeta brewery Ltd and he succeeds in arm twisting them to grant concessions to the workers in the company. Like Bakayoko in *God's Bits of Wood*, he is the soul of the syndicalist movement in the novel and the preparations for the major strike by the workers at the close of the novel to press for his release from prison and bring about improvement in their conditions of service is the high point of the struggle against the oppression and dehumanization of the working class by the monied class in the world of the novel.

Conclusion

So far, it has been established that western imperialism was foisted on the African people through violent means and expectedly Africans can only free themselves from their entrapment by colonialism and other imperialist indulgences that have emasculated them for centuries through the crucible of violence and redefine their humanity and integrity by so doing. Marxism as an equalitarian ideology adumbrates the restorative attributes of the mechanism of violence and this weapon is the change agent that is expected to set free the proletariat class from the stranglehold of the bourgeoisie and through the dictatorship of the proletariat class empower the proletariats to bring to fruition the major goal of the socialist revolution.

In the works of ideological novelists such as Sembene Ousmane, Festus Iyayi, Ngugi and La Guma, organized revolts have been employed by the working class to sequester concessions from their exploitative employers and the masses of the African people are mobilized by change agents in such novels to engage in contestations with members of the African ruling class over the issues of misgovernance, corruption, unemployment, decaying and decayed social infrastructure and other social problems in postcolonial Africa. This has gained momentum in the novels about postcolonial Africa written by these socialist realist novelists.

Again, it is possible for writers to use their novels to mirror the problems of the society without necessarily prescribing any solution to such identified problems. Writers of reknown such as Soyinka, Armah, Achebe and others who have written and continue to write about the problems of postcolonial Africa in the manner described above operate within the parameters of critical realism. In fact, these two traditions are the entrenched modes of depicting reality in the domain of social criticism as applied to the African novel.

Notes

1. I have written a substantial number of essays published in local and international journals on the present subject of discourse, where I demonstrated the possibility of adapting the Marxist prescription on societal restructuring and equalizing of the class interests of all citizens, especially through the agency of a revolution, to the African context. See entries in the Works Cited section of this essay.

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