

Toward an Interpretative ‘Destruction’ of Tewfik Al-Hakim's Fate of a Cockroach

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Abstract

Like the cockroaches’ kingdom, Nigeria is plagued with enormous socio-political problems. Sadly, those who are saddled with the responsibility of providing solutions to the problems are bereaved of ideas on how to go about them. Accordingly, most of the studies on Al-Hakim’s *Fate of a Cockroach* have overtime been limited to the socio-political realities in Egypt. The use of language and metaphors in the play transcends various stunted interpretations. This paper attempts an interpretative ‘destruction’ of the play to demonstrate the powerlessness of ready-made concepts. It places the events in the play on the Nigeria canvas together with the idea of social reality in literature which the play symbolically captures. There is, for instance, the clueless king alongside his ministers who cannot proffer solutions to the daring problems of foreign dominance, food insufficiency, insecurity, and threat from the ants. The paper therefore highlights the leadership flaws of a nation. It underscores that for the healing of the nation, there is the need for an Epistocratic system of government in Nigeria and a world of communality like that of the ants, where discipline and leadership are practiced and everyone is significantly taken into account. This would result to an egalitarian society free from hollowness, absurdity, and vulgar crystallizations. Combining deconstruction and sociological theory of literature, the paper advocates for a change in attitude towards the capacious and yet subtle role of the author in our interpretation of the text.

Keywords: deconstruction, socio-political reality, interpretation, literature, metaphor

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I. Introduction

When the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’—victory to the critic... In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered* (Barthes, 1968).

The divergence of perspectives from critics of a given work of literature is the beauty of literary scholarship which keeps literature alive. Conversely, a homogenous approach to a text announces the ‘death’ of literary scholarship. The play *Fate of a Cockroach* is a political allegory. An allegory depicts events and characters which in most cases represent something else other than what is ordinarily portrayed. Our attempt in this paper is to interpretatively ‘destroy’ the play, with the Nigerian society forming its sociological backdrop. By ‘destruction’, attention is rather drawn to the "breaking down" or "analysis" of a given work of literature to reveal its underlying perspectives and purposes, which depart from what the author intended. It is from this stance that this paper tilts toward the socio-political reality in Nigeria through the lens of Al-Hakim’s play, rather than merely refocusing on the Egyptian society which some critics believe informs the author’s art. In this paper, the play is explicated as a metaphor and reflection of the prevailing issues in Nigeria. From a deconstructionist perspective, Leitch (1983) argues that deconstruction embodies an interpretative “destruction”. The implication of this is that, just as earlier observed, the writer’s set intention is subtly subverted. Thus, “Derrida affirms that the text tells a different story from what the writer consciously presents” (Udumukwu, 2021, p. 250). This is apparently the leaning of this paper and it is not really an easy task.

From the sociological impulse, critic Wilbur Scott, as cited in *Charters and Charters’ Literature and its writers: A compact introduction to fiction poetry, and drama*, believes that “art is not created in a vacuum. It is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important...part” (p. 1613). The literary artist is informed by the prevailing issues in his environment. Environment here is not static as the socio-political realities of a place could be similar to one in another place. In most African countries for instance, unemployment, bad leadership, inadequate infrastructure etc. are general realities that are not peculiar to any region. Arguably, social forces have an impact on the literary works and their thematic preoccupation. Because of this, literature is frequently referred to as a mirror of life and human experience. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that events or conditions that occur in a certain society have an impact on literature.

In Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s (1972) essay "Homecoming," he also makes the claim that literature does not exist in a vacuum, just like Scott. The social, political, and economic dynamics in a specific society give it a driving

force, shape, direction, and sometimes even a focus of attention. Particularly in Africa, where contemporary literature has developed against the backdrop of European imperialism, the relationship between creative literature and other forces cannot be disregarded. The position of Ngugi Wa Thiongo is that there is a link between literature and the society. In other words, he argues that economic, political, and social forces all influence writing. He asserts that these factors influence the form or character of a literary work. For instance, we have in the play, the Priest which represents religion, the king cockroach which represents political leadership, Ministers which represent member of cabinet/parliament and the cockroaches as subjects. Thus, in this analysis, we are therefore situating the actions in *Fate of a Cockroach* alongside Nigeria as a political entity.

II. Theoretical Framework

This paper combines deconstruction and sociological theory of literary criticism with a focus on language of literature and the interconnectedness between prevalent social reality, particularly in Nigeria. In Derrida's view, it is inherently complex and challenging to explain deconstruction because it actively criticizes the language that is required to do so. He claims that all of his essays are attempts to define deconstruction. Nevertheless, it is an approach to comprehending the connection between a literary text and meaning. Jacques Derrida (1976) describes it as a departure from Platonism's notions of "true" forms and essences that take precedence over appearances in favour of thinking about the constantly changing complex function of language, rendering static and idealist ideas of it inadequate.

According to Birkerts (1993), the whole point of deconstruction is to reveal the slipperiness and instability of meanings in literary texts—indeed, in all human systems of discourse. Birkerts (1993) further upholds that the theory can be seen as evolving from the premises and practices of structuralism and that:

Words are just arbitrary markers, each made distinct by its visual and phonic difference from all others, then it stands to reason that all words are in a sense equal. But what we find in all human communications is an implicit privileging of certain terms and values and, in the last analysis, ideologies (p. 1575).

Deconstruction emphasizes language's mere appearance in literary works or at least suggests that the essence of language can be found there, despite the fact that language itself is "undecidable" and that it cannot be empirically assessed to determine what it actually is. Abrams and Harpham (2012) posit that:

Deconstruction, as applied in the criticism of literature, designates a theory and practice of reading that questions and claims to "subvert" or "undermine" the assumption that the system of language is based on grounds that are adequate to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meaning of a literary text (p.77).

Charters and Charters (2004) argue that critics who practice this approach believe in a basic logical syllogism:

- a. Human language is fundamentally unstable, as its meaning is dependent on the changing but omnipresent social and historical factors.
- b. Literary texts are composed of human language.
- c. Therefore, literary texts are fundamentally unstable (p. 1615).

This must have informed Barthes (1968) when he explains in his essay "The Death of the Author" that to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. For Udumukwu (2021), "another way of perceiving the 'destructive' tendencies of deconstruction is in the way it celebrates the text's self-betrayal. This implies that rather than saying one thing, or declaring a fixed logical situs, the text says many things at the same time" (p.230). These diversity of 'sayings' subtly subvert the author's intention since the text gives a different perspective of the story from what the author consciously presents. For clarity sake, 'the death of the author' as Roland Barthes posits merely refers to the change in attitude towards the capacious and yet subtle role of the author in our interpretation of the text.

As a social phenomenon, literature is a product of its time and place. On the other hand, the prevalent social, economic, political, cultural, and religious circumstances in a particular geographic enclave are referred to as social reality. The thematic preoccupation of literary works are determined by these conditions. Because of this, Achebe and Wa Thiongo disagree with the New Critics' viewpoint that "the work of literature is an aesthetic object independent of social context." According to these New Critics, a work of art should only be valued for its aesthetics because it has no social significance. This is what Achebe (1975), in one of his lectures describes as "art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit" (p.19).

Wa Thiongo and Achebe have argued that art must be founded on specific circumstances or settings rather than being created for its own sake. To put it another way, literary works are produced as responses to sociological, economic, religious, and cultural realities that a writer experiences or notices in a particular society and such captures it as a literary text. For instance, in the literature of the African Diaspora, the literary artists were able to capture and lend their voices to the issues of slavery, search for equal right, struggle for freedom, etc. This prevailing issues at that time were reflected in the works of Langton Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Alice

Walker, Derrick Walcott, Lorraine Hansberry etc. Similarly, we witness a handful of social reality in apartheid South Africa in the works of Lewis Nkosi, Athol Fugard, Gibson Kente, Alex La Guma, Peter Abrahams etc. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria also, works of writers like Ibiwari Ikiriko, Sophia Obi, Kaine Agary, Esiaba Irobi, Eni J Umuko, G'Ogbonwei etc are a reflection of the environmental degradation and exploitation of the region.

Similarly, the writers of colonial literature created their works as a reaction to the oppression of the colonized. Eziechine (2016) posits that:

[the] concern arose as a reaction or response to the negative, distorted image of Africa and her peoples presented in the literary works and travel reports of European writers and explorers. The works of such writers as Joyce Cary, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, etc., created widely believed images of Africa and her peoples as barbaric, cultureless, primitive and savage. Such widely accepted notions encouraged European abuse of and contempt for Africa and Africans (p.6).

Thus, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was Chinua Achebe's response to the colonialists' misguided view of Africa.

African authors from the post-independence era wrote their works in response to the demise of the hopes and aspirations that independence had fanned up. These authors, who were disillusioned with the state of affairs in their nations, wrote to expose the moral, political, and economic decay present in post-independence African society. Apparently, ideological writers use the literary medium to draw attention to the social ills that are pervasive and to free the masses from the economic prisons to which the bourgeois class has imprisoned them. According to Echezona (2014), his writing is "to unravel the unequal and unhealthy relationship between the dominant and ruling class and the oppressed and working class in a real or hypothetical society" (p.189).

We can sum up this section by reiterating that sociological criticism is written by critics interested in exploring the economic, racial, and political context of a work of literature. This approach aims to remove the text from the kind of isolation favoured by Formalists and to read it as a product and expression of a range of societal forces (Birkerts, 1993)

III. Fate of a Cockroach as Metaphor for Nigeria's Socio-Political Reality

The play *Fate of a Cockroach* is an allegory dramatized in two distinct world of existence. The kingdom of insects makes up the first world, followed by the human world. The author portrays events in the cockroach kingdom, which is apparently governed by King Cockroach alongside his ministers. The play's opening act, takes place in the insect world. Eziechine (2016) upholds that the play "is a satire which exposes the true nature of man by ridiculing his political ideology" (p.139). He argues that human beings are by nature oppressive, wicked, and domineering which they employ whenever they are in a position of authority to oppress their fellow beings who are often times subjected to their whims and caprices.

As earlier highlighted in the introduction, this paper's attempt is to place the metaphoric events in the play alongside the prevailing reality in Nigeria. The symbolic play *Fate of a Cockroach* is unquestionably politically charged. Majority of literary critics agree that the play is a product of the political and social climate in Egypt during the Gamal Abdel Nasser's administration. However, our concern in this paper is to interpretatively 'destroy' such a stand and situate the play in the Nigerian context.

The play *Fate of a Cockroach* is seen as political satire criticizing the flaws of leadership in Nigeria. The play's opening act is set in Adil and Samia's toilet in what could be described as the Cockroaches' kingdom. King Cockroach, the self-appointed ruler of the cockroach kingdom, is involved in a dispute with his wife and other characters in this play, within his cabinet. The government is not elected democratically. This makes a subtle reference to the political realities in Nigeria, where often times political leaders rig and install themselves into power in disguise of democracy. Nigerians have lost faith in their leaders which questions their ascension to such position. Tewfik illustrates this in his play by showing how the Cockroach King is clearly cut off from the populace under his control. Despite being in power, the cockroach king has little influence over his subjects. The queen makes clear this flaw:

Queen: Your worth?

King: Yes, and my authority. You are always trying to diminish my authority.

Queen: (*Even more sarcastically*) Your authority? Your authority over whom? Not over me at any rate- you are in no way better than me. You don't provide me with food or drink Have you ever fed me? I feed myself just as you feed yourself. Do you deny it? (p.3).

The dialogues here are thought provoking. First, like Wole Soyinka, a tiger doesn't flaunt his tigritude; instead, he pounces. Or to put it another way, a tiger doesn't stand in the forest and declare, "I am a tiger." The duiker's skeleton is a sign that tigritude has emerged from the area where the tiger once traversed. The King Cockroach only proclaims his kingship but never acts in accordance with his esteemed position. Thereby failing in his duty of providing food and security for the people. He deliberately avoids attending to daring problems of the kingdom as captured in the dialogue:

Queen: He understands what you mean perfectly well. He merely pretends not to. He turns the matter into a personal one so that he need not bother himself about the decisive solution which everyone awaits from him.

King: ...Are you trying to accuse me of neglecting the duties of my position?

Queen: I am not accusing you, I am merely drawing your attention to the necessity for finding a solution to the problems of ants (p.7).

It therefore brings to fore the many promises of Nigeria's political leaders prior to emergence into a political position. For instance, you hear them say "we will bring an end to insecurity, problems of electricity, corruption, inadequate food supply, etc.", but when they ascend to power, such problems which they claim to have solutions to, become unrealizable for them. They cast blames on past administrations and the opposition party. Sometimes, like the King Cockroach, they say: "we grew up, our fathers, our grandfathers, and our grandfathers' grandfathers grew up, with the problem of the ants there...seeing that you know all that, why do you today assign me the task of solving it? Why should it be my bad luck that I, out of all those fathers and grandfathers who came before me, should be asked to find the solution?" (pp.7-8). The implication of this is that the national problems are not new and as such they have no solutions to give to the people. Thus, when the queen laments: "You don't provide me with food or drink. Have you ever fed me? I feed myself just as you feed yourself. Do you deny it?" (p.3), our attention is drawn to the Queen as a microcosm of the entire Nigerian populace who are disillusioned, one can feel her pain; her struggle to survive, to feed herself, to secure herself from the Ants' threat; the failure of the leaders.

Just like the cockroach, these political leaders have lost their ability to identify systemic dangers like herder-farmer conflict, election fraud, police brutality, terrorist attacks, armed banditry, religious and ethnic conflicts. They are bereaved of the necessary strategy to deal with these difficulties. Nigeria requires an epistocratic system of government that is based on the pedigree of its leaders as well as the education of its electorate, as opposed to the current system with clueless leaders, in which leadership is acquired through bribery, intimidation, and violence. The play is thus, an illustration of the inherent frailty of the government where cabinet members and ministers lack the qualifications to handle the delicate posts that have been given to them. Members of the cabinet are given different posts for equally stupid reasons, just like King Cockroach, who was made king because of the length of his whiskers. The Minister is given his portfolio because he frequently delivers bad news. The priest's credentials are his incomprehensible statements, and the learned Savant's credentials are the strange knowledge he possesses regarding things that exist only in his mind. Apart from the fact that these individuals are unworthy of their positions, they are also unable to give a solution to the state's enormous problems, especially that of the Ants.

King: (*Impatiently*): Come along, Minister- suggest something!...put forward an opinion, even if it's a stupid one.

Minister: Put forward an opinion?

King: Yes, any opinion. Speak-quickly. It's one of the duties of your position to put forward an opinion and for me to make fun of it (p.8).

The lingering insecurity issue that is bedeviling Nigeria is metaphorically captured in the play. In addition to the daring terrorism of the Bokom-Haram, there are also the threatening unknown-gun-men, bandits, herdsmen which also pose security risks to the nation. Despite the terrorist group's limited size, they are nonetheless able to cause a great deal of damage to the majority of Nigerians, including breaking into Nigerian Defense Academy and prisons, attacking presidential convoy, kidnapping and killings members of the society. Indeed, the Nigerian Military and her government have a lot to learn from the metaphorical ants in the play rather than merely playing politics with insecurity in the country. The ants are organized and disciplined with a capable minister of war who leads the ants to victory and do not compromise his position like some military heads in Nigeria do, sabotaging the efforts of the security agencies. The play reveals thus:

Servant: First, the ants have a Minister of War

Queen: A Minister of War?

Servant: Naturally, a Minister who devotes all his attention to the business of organizing armies. It is reasonable that all these vast troops should march with such discipline and order in serried ranks without somebody responsible behind them, somebody specialized in organizing them?

Queen: The question is simple one—why don't we too have a specialized Minister of War?

Servant: That is a political matter, and I don't understand politics. Ask his Majesty about that.

King: A specialized Minister of War? Is that in my hand? (p.19).

The king just like the Nigerian president, sometimes forgets that he is the Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces. Sadly, when the Savant (one of the Ministers) reports that his son has been abducted by the ants, the state's inability in combating the Ant scourge is only made worse. According to King Cockroach, cockroaches cannot defend themselves against ants because they lack discipline and group cohesion. This is a

reference to the Nigeria's State and its characteristics. Due to its division, ethnicity, party conflicts etc, the country is becomes vulnerable to attacks from the enemy. In addition, the continuous call for secession for Biafra Republic, Oduduwa, Arewa, Niger Delta etc has also made it impossible for the country to tackle her enormous problems with one voice. As the King puts it, "how can we try? We are quite different from ants. The ants know the discipline of forming themselves into columns, but we cockroaches don't know discipline" (p.9). In addition, the death of one of the Ministers son signposts great danger; the resultant of a problem not dealt with which invariably, every one (both the rich and poor) will have their own bitter share. The Minister laments:

Minister: My son, Your Majesty—my one and only son...has been taken in the prime of youth—has died in the spring of life—he has been killed! Killed!

King: Killed? How? Who killed him?

Minister: The ants.

King: The ants again? (p.6).

Accordingly, when we consider the circumstance that leads to the son's death, who "was walking along the wall, just going for a stroll for amusement's sake, like anyone else at his age—a perfectly innocent stroll of course..." (p.6-7), it brings to mind the many deaths of 'innocent' travelers recorded at the Abuja-Kaduna railway, Benin-Ore express way, Lagos-Ibadan express way, East-West road etc; apparently perpetrated by terrorists groups who kill, kidnap and sexually abuse citizens.

In the play, King Cockroach is unable to address the nation's food shortage. Tewfik illustrates this with the "issue of tomatoes." Thus, "the matter of tomatoes" is a metaphor for the various failures of reforms and policies in the agricultural sector of Nigeria, leading to food crisis and insufficiency. It demonstrates the government's inability to sufficiently produce food for the people. The dramatist, through the symbolic Cockroach also bemoans the government's lack of concentration. The King Cockroach's decision to leave the discussion on how to solve the Ant problem and visit the mysterious lake which the Savant speaks of, Illustrates lack of focus of our leaders and their escapist tendencies. He eventually slips, and plunges into the lake, where he meets his fate.

There is religion which like Karl Marx, is the opium of the people. In this regard, religion is not only employed by those in positions of power to oppress the poor, but it is also a way of making them feel better despite being oppressed especially when they cannot afford the actual opium. Karl Marx believes that the comfort and security blanket of religion, when removed, will make the oppressed to take action to improve their dire situation. This is metaphorically portrayed in the play through the character of the Priest. In the midst of calamities befalling the land, the Priest leaves a vague statement: "May the gods grant you comfort! I shall say a prayer for you"(p.15). Religion has blinded the people such that the only thing they think of when problems come is to fast and pray rather than take necessary actions. In some cases, the Priest (a symbol of religion) demands sacrifices of sugar, goats, rice, yam, cows and even money for an unseen god while the living are dying of food shortage.

King:...but the question of these sacrifices has become tiresome—and a trifle old fashioned. In the past we have offered some of the sacrifices you demanded but they gave no results.

Priest:The result is not in my hand—I offer the sacrifices and the gods are free to accept or refuse them.

Minister: Truly, we noticed that with the piece of sugar you demanded as a sacrifice. It was the ants who ate it.

King: O Priest, ask the gods to help us without costing us anything.

Priest:Do you want them to serve you for free?

...

King: Then why do you demand wages for the gods?

Priest: I can't put conditions on the gods.

Savant: Do they stipulate the fee to you, or do you volunteer it?...

Priest: Describe it how you will, but I cannot make a request of the gods while I am empty-handed (15-16).

This is a typical dramatization of Nigeria's blurry religious reality. Indeed many have sold their properties to please the gods, yet their problems still defy solutions.

IV. Conclusion

For some critics, the play may have been written against the Socio-political realities in Egypt under Gamal Nasser that swept the nation at that time, but we have attempted to situate these actions in the Nigerian context as language of literature is not stable. The clueless and inability of the King Cockroach and his ministers to solve the kingdom's problems are symbolic of Nigeria's reality. These are age-long diseases that need cure. Thus, this paper advocates for an Epistocratic system of government and a world of communality, cohesion and discipline

like that of the ants. Like Barthes, we have as well eliminated the Author, his background and social experience. These enable us to give a fresh perspective to the text; a change in attitude towards the capacious and yet subtle role of the author in the interpretation of the play.

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