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## Post Colonial Disillusionment in Contemporary African Prose Fiction

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### **Abstract**

Most contemporary African writers use their texts to reflect the socio-political happenings in their societies. Their works are employed as an instrument of describing the postcolonial nostalgic experiences and disillusionment in contemporary African prose fiction. The novels that are used to portray this disillusionment are Achebe's *A man of the people*, Soyinka's *the interpreters* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The paper observes that the postcolonial decadence in Africa society is vividly captured and condemned in these texts.

**Keywords:** African Writers, Socio-Political Happenings, Postcolonial Nostalgic, Disillusionment and Prose Fiction.

### **Introduction**

In consonance with the essence of literature as a mirror of life, postcolonial African novels are a reflection of the happenings and social realities of the continents. This reveals the fact that the literature, in any of its form, is not treated in a vacuum. Hence, for any literary piece to be considered as worthy of meaningful analysis, it must be relevant to social milieu or environment in which it is set. African literature can be divided into three categories. The first category focuses on the novel that deal with cultural nationalism, the second category encompasses all the issues that have to do with anti-colonialism, while the third is that of post-independence disillusionment. The 1960s witnesses the emergence of the novels of cultural nationalism which can be described as the literature of self assertion. The novelists in this category such as Ngugu, Oyono, Achebe and others use their literary works to promote the image of Africa by correcting some distorted views about the image of the continent. As earlier stated, the novels of the second category are anti-colonialist novels as they are protest against the inhuman policies of the colonial rulers. The contemporary stage, i.e. the third category dwells hugely on National experience, neocolonialism and postcolonial disillusionment.

According to Jude Agho (1995), African Writers especially, novelists have used many of their works to document some political and social experience of Africa. Hence, the novels of these writers are characterized by issues faintly by

disillusionment, dissociation and alienation. The works of contemporary African novelist focus on review vividly the socio-political problems that are characterised of the neo-colonial establishment which is described as a presentation of colonialism. Their works are dominated by the huge emphasis on the societal realities which form the basis of critical evaluation of the African novel. The contemporary African novel is an amalgam of facts, fiction and history. It can therefore be said that the African prose fiction is handcuffed to history and consequently social realities. Most of the African prose fiction is representation of reality of post-independence Africa. They portray a nostalgic experience for the lost of African values and bring to the fore the disillusionment of what remains. The themes of these works range from cultural contradictions, political and economic instability, and corruption to nepotism, sexual promiscuity, rape, etc.

### **Social Realism and the Contemporary African Prose Fiction**

Most African novelists have employed the techniques of social realism to comment on African experience. Social realism helps in understanding the relationship between individuals and their society. In contemporary African prose fiction, the criticism of the society focuses on the absence of norms which provides the basis for the good conduct of an individual. Such an individual is often made to establish an admirable code of conduct. Such individuals portrayed in African fiction are described as victims of erroneous choices because of the failure of the society guide them into rightful conduct.

The Contemporary African prose fiction has become a veritable tool for analysing and commenting on contemporary life in Africa. The novels evoke and describe the life of a people at a given period of time. These novels are a reflection of the basic structure of any given society and try to illustrate how the life of the individual is affected by the conditions in which he lives. Hence, this provides the means for the reader to evaluate the society based on how these conditions affect individuals. Social realism has become an instrument for analysing issues that go beyond private conduct into problems of mortality in public affairs. The tone that pervades these novels is that of nostalgic feelings for what has been lost and disillusionment with what remains. They depict African societies that are caught up at a cultural cross-road. Both the alienated elite and the masses are unable to provide appropriate solutions to these challenges. The socio-political problems, among others, include mediocrity in leadership which often results in anarchy. They portray the image of a decaying society where an individual is forced to grapple with the problems of a modern, complex social set-up. The novelists have used their art to advocate for a change. It is in this light that we see these novels as embodiments of a rebellion

against the authoritarian hierarchy of traditional society, the exploitative colonial set-up, the commercialism of the west and philistine society of post-independence. (Gakwandi, 1977), the novelists reveal the painful adjustments and sacrifices the individuals have to make in order to come to terms to the great changes that their society is undergoing. This tone of disillusionment is apparent in the works of the post-colonial African novelists such as Chinua Achebe's *A man of the people* (1966), Wole Soyinka's *the interpreters* (1965) and Ayikwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1986) etc.

**The Tones of Nostalgia and Disillusionment in African Prose Fiction: A study of Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Amah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.**

It is observed that no matter how imaginative a work of art may be, the writers usually write about the events in the society in which he resides. In other words, the society serves as the background of his writing. The neo-colonial experiences of these writers have dominated their works as they convey the mood of post-colonial disillusionment to the readers. This fact is reinforced by Gakwandi thus:

The attainment of independence by many African countries in the last decade and the resultant change in the social-political atmosphere of these countries has had discernible influence on fictional themes.

The works of these writers have deviated from the tradition of frequent attack on the common enemy, colonialism, and have sought to interpret the present experiences of the Africans in terms of the human characteristics without reference to the pasts. The present problems of the Africans cannot be attributed to the common external enemy of the past but to the excesses of the new black rulers of Africa. Achebe asserts thus:

Most Africa is today politically free; A new situation has thus arisen, one of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (Sore as it is still) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not.

Achebe, Soyinka, among other novelists has provided a vivid insight into the problems caused by new political order in Africa. Soyinka, for instance, captures the decadence of the contemporary social and political structures in many African Countries in his first novel *the interpreters*. The novel interprets the post-independence dilemmas in the political arena of African countries. The main characters in *the interpreters* are a group of educated elites who are dissatisfied with the way social and political affairs of the country are being run by those in power. As a result of their moral stands,

they are not allowed to participate in the corrupt system of governance. The main characters are Kola, a painter, Sekoni, an engineer and sculptor, Sagoe, a journalist, Egbo, a foreign office official and Bandele, a university lecturer. They collectively lament the emptiness of their society and try to accomplish their desire to change the world around them. The dilemma Egbo faced with the beginning of the novel on whether to succeed his ageing grandfather or stay in Foreign Office are pointers to the inability of the central government to control the traditional chiefs who are as corrupt as the national leaders. His grandfather owns a many smuggling routes which the government uses to get the old man's left-over. Egbo, Sagoe, and the rest of the group show some kind of resentment and contempt for politicians piloting the affairs of the country. The confrontation between Sagoe and the members of the board during the interview shows the usual social conflict between the intellectual elite and the political elite. The political elites are politicians who, as a result of their slight education, are not equipped to find alternative jobs. These are the people responsible for electoral fraud, intolerance, and creation of politically meaningless party systems. Politics in the Contemporary Africa has become a means for acquiring wealth and social prestige.

At a point of Sagoe's interview with the board members of *The Independent Viewpoint*, he is already prejudiced against the board members. He knows that the interviewers will favour mostly the politicians that lost in politics but who supported and served the ruling party loyally. They have help the ruling party in thug recruitment, financial backing, Ministerial in-lawfulness, Ministerial pouncing. The eventual employment of Sagoe shows that his knowledge is needed and that the people who control the paper cannot do without people like him. It is important to point out that the encounter between Sagoe and the board members reveals that he is likely to be dependent on the people who wield power. He soon learns that if he wants to earn money in journalism he has to see it as a business and must do what is only profitable for his employers. The young intellectuals in *the interpreters* are impatient with the morbidity of their society. They resent their country is being run and are determined to change the situation but unfortunately, they realise the impossibility of doing this as individuals. Of all of them, Sekoni passes through the bitterness experience. He is offered a job after his studies abroad but he is exiled to another because he protests against his boss.

On his arrival, he builds an experimental power station which his boss condemns through a hired expatriate because he has heavily in a power-supply monopoly. Sekoni is arrested and forcibly taken to a mental hospital when he tries to test it. Sekoni later dies in a motor accident. The death of Sekoni brings to the

interpreters a painful awareness of their limitations and their morality. Their youthful strength becomes dulled by painful contemplation. Egbo hides in the rocks until the end of the funeral; Sagoe locks himself up in a room full of beer and vomit, and kola seeks escapes in his painting. The group is bewildered and find it difficult to their liveliness. The moral decay of this world parallels the physical decay which surrounds them. The government is not alive and sensitive to the problems of the people. This is a result of the fact that it is being run by a men like Chief Winsala who always boast. 'In the morning I drink whisky, in the evenings I drink Schnapps. In the afternoon I don't drink at all, I sleep....'[P.83]. Also, Nwabuzor, the editor of the Independent viewpoint belongs to the calibre of people who have sold their souls for money that keep the system going. When Sagoe threatens to resign over the suppression of the article on Sekoni, Nwabuzor tells him;

Sagoe, look I have been in this game for thirty years. Believe me there was a time when I was a time when I held these ideals. I moved from one paper to other, leaving in a flurry of righteous indignation. But look man, journalism here is just a business like any other. You do what your employer tells you. Believe me Sagoe just take my word. (P. 95).

The academics, just like the politicians, are ridiculed in the novel. But Soyinka's satire is not aimed solely at the elite. The villagers also take their portion of this satire. The socio political situation in *the interpreters is sterile*. The intellectuals are the most decadent group in the society. They are a reflection of completely foreign values and the university is structured in a style that is foreign to the community.

Just like *the interpreters*, Achebe's *A Man of the People* is an indictment of African society after independence. The novel is a portrayal of a society since independence. The events in *A Man of the People* reveal a society that is uncertain of the future. The society is governed by corrupt leaders like Chief Nanga who sees the nation as a cake from which groups should try to get as large a share as possible. Nepotism and corruption are at the peak in the novel which is typical representation of an African society. There are many events involving corruption and the misuse of public funds. It is societies where many political office holders have are residence of seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms. Chief Nanga owns not less than three blocks of seven-story flats which he build at the rate of three thousand pounds each in his wife's name. The level of poverty in the country is revealed via Odili's experiences as a house boy in Giligili. Odili puts his experience thus;

The only excitement I remember in Giligili was our nightly war on rats. We had two rooms in the large iron-roofed house with its earth walls and floor. My sister, her husband and two small children slept in one and the

rest of us-three boys-shared the other with bags of rice, garri, beans and other foodstuff. And of course the rats (P. 41)

The image of poverty portrayed above is in sharp contrast to the description of the bedrooms in Chief Nanga's house:

I was simply hypnotized by the luxury of the great suite assigned to me. When I lay down in the double bed that seemed to ride on a cushion of air, and switched on that reading lamp and saw all the beautiful furniture anew from a lying down position and looked beyond the door to the gleaming bathroom and the towels as large as lappa I had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one forever (P.37).

Despite this, Chief Nanga continues to acquire more property while the poor in the villages get poorer and poorer. This is a society where exploitation can go on for so long without any protest. The leaders continue to exploit the needy even when they are far richer than them. Inhumanity is seen as a normal way of life. It has become part and parcel of the people of the society. For instance, Josiah who steals the stick of a blind mom, Azoge later receives cheers from the same villagers during parliamentary election campaign. The writer describes the nation as a cake to be scrambled for. This is why the political regime after independence begins to scramble for power and position, and public servants are appointed based on whom they know rather than what they know.

The political decadence in the society opens the door for the invasion of a wide range of values which contribute immensely to the destruction of the traditional balance between the material and the spiritual spheres of life, which has led to the hypocrisy of double standards. Odili, a moral voice in the society, is equally hypocritical. Despite his moral objections to the political conducts of Chief Nanga, he could not help himself shouting 'Hear! Hear!' to the gathering of the people at Anata Grammar School listening to Chief Nanga's remark. Odili conceives in his mind like; 'I like to think that I meant it to be sarcastic' (p.10), 'this time I clearly means my tongue to be in my cheek'. The fact is that Odili is seeking favours from Chief Nanga but he does not want to acknowledge it. This makes most of his actions insincere. Although Odili is one of the people advocating for a change especially in the political system of a country, he is seen to be selfish. He condemns the rate of corruption in the country, the yolk of foreign capitalism but he accepts money from a communist's country. He also collects money from Chief Koko during the campaign. Just like Soyinka, Achebe's *A Man of the people* captures the disillusionment of the impossibility to escape from double standards which has disrupted the traditional order of the whole society. The whole society is seen to be guilty of this. Odili, Max and Nanga as well as all the whole society are all trapped in the web of conflicting moral

values where self-sacrifice and service to the community are undefined. In the words of Gakwandi; 'the nation is a pressure-cooker of social experiment and it is uncertain whether the pot will contain the pressure or not. Ayikwei Armah paints the picture of the sourness of Africa independence in *The Beautiful One Are Not Yet Born*. The novel is pervaded by the persistent imagery of decay, putrefaction and death. The sound, the smells, the sights and the thought of the people all mingle into a single rhythm of decay and death. The symbolic descriptions of objects and situations by Armah reflect an aspect of the decaying process with which the world of the novel is cluttered. Armah releases his disgust and his disillusionment at his country's politics through this novel which is a representation of the inner moral and outer social conflicts of West African reality. The writer uses the novel as a platform for denouncing Nkrumah's regime in Ghana. He presents to the reader a special insight into the political and social issues in the Ghanaian society. The work is a bitter condemnation of the Ghanaian government led by Nkrumah.

Armah presents an African society that is replete with human lust for power and money. It is a society where the sense of community and mutual respect is shattered and the people rely on the self-seeking unscrupulous aspects of their nature to secure their position in the society

How was it possible for a man to control himself, when the admiration of the world, the pride of his family and his own secret happiness, at least for the moment, all demanded that he lost the control of himself and behave like someone he was not and would never be? *Money Power* (P.115).

The drive to satisfy individual desires results in a complete disregard of a typical post-independence African society. The decline of the society is traced back to the colonial period when the exploited people were forced to fight in the white man's war. This war affects the characters in a tragic manner as some of them, for instance Kofi Billy loses leg in the war, and AgyaAko dies of robbery attack occasioned by the post war economic depression.

Armah employs archetypal imagery to convey the tone of disillusionment about ugly experiences of the Africans after independence. The sea symbolizes freedom but its bareness and monotony is also sometimes used to reflect deprivation. The land which is the region of man's life is equally polluted. The events in the novel centre on the conflict within the man, and his struggle to resist temptation. His struggle for survival in a polluted society often threatens his moral integrity. The image Armah portrays in the novel is that of a dirty and corrupt society where there is no point for an individual to try to change it. Everybody in the society has got to learn to live in the midst of the filth and

must secure his own private salvation through endurance. The title of the novels confirms that the beautiful ones are not yet born. Those that are already born are corrupt, greedy, selfish and dishonest. There is uncertainty as to whether the beautiful ones will be born and this depicts the hopeless situation of a corrupt and polluted post-independence African society.

### **Conclusion**

The novels discussed in this paper are virulent attacks on the errors and villainy of the politicians and the people of post-independence African. The novelists express their dissatisfaction about the ways the affairs of the country are being run. They bring to the limelight our awareness of the major socio-political issues of our times. The novelists are social critics that provide a qualitative evaluation of modern African life. The general picture that emerges from this body of criticism of African society depicts African as an unweeded garden that needs prompt weeding.

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