

## **African Literature and English Language: A Political Literary Discourse.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *A political literary discourse is important at this moment, given the political upheavals that have engulfed African countries. The writer is often seen as an emancipator of the masses therefore, the imaginative writer can, through his work, offer critical appraisal of existing political situations in order to mould and redirect the actions of society, its belief and values. Literature can therefore influence people's perception about politics and how to effect a political change. Using the structural-functional approach to literature, an analysis of some selected works has been undertaken in the paper to show how political issues have been re-current motifs in both pre-independence and post independent Africa. The paper also analyzes English language usage in political circles and the different literary devices that African writers have employed in their works over the years to confront the menace of repression and bad leadership in post independent Africa.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Literature is the mirror of the society because the artists write or compose their works about the events and happenings in the society. African writers have had the task of writing about the experiences of Africans before independence as well as post independent disillusionment. The literary artists can through their works offer critical appraisal of existing political situation in order to mould or redirect the actions of society, its belief and values. Literature can therefore influence people's perception about politics and how to effect a political change. It is therefore difficult to divorce literature from politics. We tend to agree with the views of the late literary icon, Ken Saro-Wiwa when he states:

*Literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics; by intervention and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused critical look at society. He must play an interventionist role.( 81).*

A political literary discourse is thus very relevant at this point in time when many African countries are faced with diverse political problems, occasioned by mal-administration, dictatorship and excessive corruption of governments. This paper is premised on the structural – functional approach to literature pioneered by Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and others which looks at the utilitarian value of literature in the society. The first part of this paper therefore examines the political polemics in some selected literary works from South Africa, East Africa and West Africa. We believe that the relevance of these works in their respective countries of origin is a microcosm of what obtains in the larger African community. The second part of the paper examines in brief, the use of language in political circles.

### **II. POLITICAL POLEMICS IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

Literature depicts the human society which keeps revolving. The society will necessarily therefore, get the kind of literature it deserves. If it is in a hostile environment like we had in South Africa for example, it will be tackling the issues of fair play, justice and freedom. If it is written in a utilitarian society like we had in the former Soviet Union, the humanity of the people will be submerged and the government given prominence. Literature is therefore dynamic.

Early African writers had dwelt on addressing the basic African problems like colonialism, neo-colonialism and propagation of African values to the outside world. They also sought to correct the misrepresentation of Africans in literary works of colonialists. However, with the attainment of independence by most African countries attention was shifted to issues like apartheid, dictatorship, bad governance and corruption.

Post independent African nations have persistently had to grapple with the nagging problems of bad leadership occasioned by monumental corruption and greed. There is therefore a general feeling of

disillusionment and betrayal of the masses by the ruling class. Many African countries have also had the bitter experiences of brutalities of truncated murderous military regimes.

In *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores this thorny aspect of Africa's history using Nigeria, her country as a microcosm of the larger African society. Coups and counter coups were frequent occurrences in Nigeria with promises of a better deal for Nigerians. There is yet another coup in the country and the constitution has been suspended and martial law introduced. The press is muzzled as anyone who attempts to tell the truth falls on the wrong side of the law. Ade Coker, Editor of the Standard is consequently murdered for publishing two sensitive stories about the disappearance of Nwakiti Ogechi, a human rights activist and the complicity of the Head of state in an illicit drug deal. The publishing firm itself is raided by soldiers and destroyed. The novel exposes the hypocrisy and corrupt activities of the military junta. Some drug pushers are publicly executed, while the new leader and his wife shield a certain drug pusher who is alleged to have been involved in the same illicit trade just to protect their own business interest. One civilian regime is overthrown by the military with serious condemnation, only for the same regime to perpetrate the similar corruption the previous regime is accused of.

Corruption is at its highest level as funds meant for the provision of social amenities are embezzled by government officials. Consequently, lecturers and other workers are not being paid their salaries for long periods. There is unrest at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka because the students cannot get water, light and medical service. The roads in the country are in a deplorable state and there is acute scarcity of fuel. In a dialogue with Obiora, Amaka says if she were the Vice Chancellor of University of Nigeria, Nsukka, she would ensure the availability of water and light for the students to forestall demonstrations. Obiora responds, "If some big man in Abuja has stolen the money, is the Vice chancellor to vomit money for Nsukka?" (P139). The African writer cannot therefore afford to be indifferent in the face of these anomalies. It is this same vicious circle of corruption and bad leadership that Chinua Achebe captures in *A Man of the People* (1966), with Chief Nanga representing the corrupt civilian regime while in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) the excesses of the military regime in Nigeria are demonstrated by the ruthlessness of the Head of state, General Sam.

African writers have equally shown that poetry could also be a veritable political tool. Odi Ofeimun, a contemporary Nigerian poet also does not believe in the notion of arts for arts' sake. He looks at art as a tool that could be used for the emancipation of the proletariat. Commenting on the role of the writer in politics, Ofeimun states:

*It is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies.... I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considers right and deserving expression. (Talking with African Writers, 66).*

The above comment implies that the writer should at all times tell the truth, even if it hurts the powers that be. This opinion is further buttressed by Ofeimun with the title of his collection of poems, *The Poet Lied* (1980). In an interview, Ofeimun further explains that, "*The Poet Lied is not really just about a poet. It is based on an assessment of the symbol manipulators, the leaders who manipulate symbols by which the whole society interprets the life that people live in the country*" (Talking. 62).

It is therefore logical to say that the writer that shies away from telling the truth is himself a collaborator, manipulating symbols just like the political leaders to the detriment of the masses. The issue of betrayal of the masses by successive governments in his country is central in Ofeimun's writing. He believes that the government ought to have done a lot more for its people, giving the abundance of human and natural resources in Nigeria. He is equally angry with the masses for accepting the status quo without questioning. He is of the opinion that more than anything else, it is the people's complacency that has encouraged the intelligentsia to batter the economies of African nations and plunder the continent's wealth for selfish reasons.

In his poem, "*The Messiahs*", Ofeimun confirms the perception of the "Leader-Messiah" (a metaphor for greedy and selfish leaders in Africa) as irresponsible. Its ironic structure reflects the attitude that rather than save the people, the "Messiahs" destroy them through incompetence, greed and extravagant life-style. The leaders feed the people with lies as they are usually surrounded by "Political pimps and truth benders". Again, in "*National Cakes*" the poet uses the vultures as a metaphor for unpatriotic leaders who are incapable of performing patriotic acts, but only feed on what others have produced. This concept of vultures is a reflection on both economic and political attitudes of irresponsibility. He writes:

*Vultures don't bake their national cakes  
They just swoop on the ripe carcass  
of maybe, human cattle  
We too, hate to be bakers  
And so, we despoil the sunrise we seek.*

Since the “vultures don’t bake national cakes”, they “swoop on ripe carcass” produced by other patriotic citizens. In “The New Brooms”, the poet recalls the proverb, “a new broom sweeps better than an old one”. Ofeimun then interrogates that idea by relating it specifically to the political development in his society where a military regime has replaced a civilian one. In stanza three of the poem, he states:

*“To keep the streets clear  
They brought in world-changers  
With corrective swagger sticks  
They brought in the new broom  
To sweep public scores away”.*

But in spite of the promises that the new brooms would sweep clean the dirt in the nation, soon after their emergence,

*“The streets were blessed with molehills of unwanted odds and bits”.*

This exposes their hypocrisy as they soon become more corrupt and filthy than the leaders they chased out of power. Experience has shown that changes in leadership in Africa do not better the lot of the masses. Ofeimun agrees with Ghana’s Ayi kwei Armah in his *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968) that it only amounts to the same old dance of corruption and bad administration, perhaps with a different style. In “*Judgment Day*” however, Ofeimun is optimistic that no matter how long truth is submerged, it must one day come to the surface and justice will triumph over injustice and falsehood in Africa. The “Vultures” would eventually be eliminated and he concludes;

*“They will tumble down from the dais dazed by hammer blows”.*

In highlighting the plight of the people, Ofeimun employs a number of devices to help him put his message across. He employs copious use of metaphors. In “*The New Brooms*”, the title is a metaphorical reference to new leaders that have just come to power. Ironically, however, these new brooms still fail to sweep clean the ‘garbage’ in the country”. “The Messiah” is a metaphor for greedy and selfish leaders.

Symbolism is perhaps another device which Ofeimun uses in his works and these symbols are again metaphorical in nature. The use of vulture for instance symbolizes ‘rot’ and ineptitude. For the vulture does not make any effort to kill a prey itself, but rather depends on rotten preys killed through the efforts of others.

Ofeimun’s diction paints a vivid picture of his subject matter. For example, in “How can I sing?”, because of the atrocities that our leaders have committed in the land, he refers to it as “these morbid landscapes”. This implies that the landscape of Nigeria is diseased. The poet also paints a picture of filth due to corruption in the society by using words like ‘garbage’ ‘swollen gutter’ ‘dung’, decay’ ‘night soil’ etc These words express the poet’s feeling of nausea, similar to Armah’s Portrayal of the Ghanaian society in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968).

Generally, Ofeimun’s language may be blunt, militant and the tone harsh, but we must understand that his writings are an angry reaction to mal-administration and injustices in his land. He hopes that his work conscientizes the people and activates in them the refusal to accept what deserves to be changed. That is why in “*Resolve*” he says, we don’t need tears, rather we need to

*“Resolve that the locust shall never again visit our farm steads”.*

In spite of the political impediments, Ofeimun sees a vision that will ultimately emerge, a truth that will definitely enable the people to discover the source of their tribulations, so that its elimination will improve their welfare. He hopes that this truth could “re-open our eyes” and “our eyes challenge our mouths”, which leads to the time when “our blood challenges our hand in the struggle”. It is this same agenda and vision that Nigeria’s Niyi Osundare pursues in his poetry collections, *Tender Moments* (2006) and *Waiting Laughter* (1990).

In East Africa too, writers have been pre-occupied with the issues of disillusionment and unfulfilled hopes of independence since the 1970s. The resultant genre was termed disillusionment literature, which vigorously criticized the new African political and economic elite that appeared to have betrayed the nations by using education and positions of privilege for personal rather than collective gain. The first generation of East African writers and indeed African writers in general in the post independence era, worked from a general and implicit belief that a writer’s task was one of involvement in and commitment to nation-building and social improvement. To be an artist was to be an activist. The creation of “committed literature” was thus a necessary task of the writer.

One such committed writer is Meja Mwangi. His works were thus pre-occupied with post independent disillusionment and unfulfilled hopes in Kenya. His urban based novels give an account of the constant struggle for survival that marks Nairobi’s poorest sectors. This pitiable situation is a result of bad leadership and

corruption that are common features in post independent Kenya. *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* (1976), recreate gory pictures of stinking black alleys, slums and severe social problems that accompany them. There are issues of inadequate housing and jobs, non-existent waste removal services, corrupt government officials, alcoholism, theft and the likes. In *Going Down River Road* (1976), Mwangi probes deeper into the effect of the city environment on individuals in the city. He chooses to do this with the illiterate and semi-literate of the society, who live from hand to mouth and who are in the majority and provide cheap labour. Mwangi does this through a representative character, Ben, who bears the burden of the city, its harsh realities, cold ethics and its fierce, almost brutal fight for survival. Ben's dismissal from the army for selling weapons to armed robbers is a reflection of the rot in the Kenyan society. The society was bereft of values as no one cared to ask questions about other people's sources of wealth. The resources of the country were therefore being plundered by the privileged ruling class and their cohorts. In answer to Ocholla's comment that he should have known better than to trust gangsters, Ben proclaims:

*Nothing was impossible in those days. Everybody was scrambling for big money, and no one cared how you made it. You could have sold the whole goddam country to eager buyers; a lot of those guys in the big cars on the avenue did just that. I was a poor salesman. (Mwangi 54).*

It thus becomes obvious that corruption was the fastest means of social mobility and wealth. Majority of the hemmed in members of the Kenyan society therefore, had a bleak future and resorted to prostitution, crime or simply drowned themselves in a very potent locally brewed alcoholic drink called 'Kill Me Quick', to drown their frustration. It is worth noting that the novel, *Going Down River Road* is both a metaphor and a fact. *The Development House*, and the *Karara center* are both concrete and metaphorical. The workers or part of the society is being underdeveloped while the building is developing. Similarly, the underdeveloped segment of the society gather at the Karara center for drinks like a ritual. Mwangi hopes that his writings can help effect social and political change by first changing the consciousness of the people.

In South Africa, before the abolition of apartheid, the obnoxious apartheid system gave rise to protest literature. Most of the writers that emerged during this period were therefore concerned with the issues of injustices and social inequality orchestrated by the government. One of such writers whose work stands out is Dennis Brutus. He was one of those writers that cared to use the arts to promote social justice in Africa and the world at large. Brutus does not believe that the literary artist should be indifferent to the happenings in the society. He must, through his works attempt to effect a positive change in the politics of his society. After all, George Steiner once remarked that, "Men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent" (58). *Letters to Martha* (1968) was Brutus' individual effort in defence of a common destiny of the South African black majority. In spite of his arrest and imprisonment in 1963 for writing protest poetry, he remained undaunted.

As an artist, Brutus' reaction to the tragedy of the South African nation is of three – fold – to heal and restore the life of the ordinary black South African and indeed the human race, to create a new vision for a purposeful growth, regeneration and glorification of man in South Africa and to mobilize a collective conscience of the masses to restore full political and social rights to the black majority in a free South Africa. Brutus is dedicated to fighting the cause of his people. He had actually predicted that his publication of *Letters To Martha* (1968) was destined for the fall and rising of many in South Africa, "the prediction for the fall of apartheid and the rising of black majority from the mountain of freedom" (Omoha, 15). In "The mob", Brutus reinforces the idea of the political relevance of his poetry as he identifies with the African National Congress in the 1960s to campaign against the pass law that restricted free movement, settlement and economic rights of black South Africans. This effort metamorphosed into street protests, leading to the *sharpville massacres* in 1961 and the subsequent passage of sabotage bill by the apartheid regime in 1962.

Again, in "The mob" Brutus speaks of the unwarranted attack on his people which leaves permanent image of horror and nightmares on his mind. From the visual images, particularly 'the fear-blanked facelessness/ and saurian-laden stares/ of my irrational terrors'. He meant to stir the deprived black South Africans into action against their slave masters. Such literary works should therefore be devoid of obscure language or what Chinweizu and others call "the Hopkins Disease" (174).

His use of language is to some extent prosaic because he wants to use simple language to be able to communicate with his people, who are the victims of apartheid. His aim was to conscientize them into taking physical action against the repressive regime.

Also, in order to avoid direct confrontation with the regime, Brutus employs the use of metaphors. In "Abolish Laughter First", the poem itself is a metaphor for the blacks on their struggle for freedom. While the oppressor tightens the repressive measures and enjoys sadism, laughter of disappointment haunts him like a ghost. Brutus uses metaphors to deface the imposing figures of the powers that be.

Brutus' revelation of the prison conditions is intended to provoke reactions from the masses outside the prison. The oppressor is hurt by the revelation and the oppressed is emotionally touched so feels a sense of

challenge to take physical action towards liberating himself. This is essential to sustain the action against apartheid because “the not-knowing/ is perhaps the worst part of the agony/ for those outside” (Letters 59). Art as the reticule of communication triumphs over repressive act of imprisonment. As the thoughts are conveyed in poetic form, events do not only assume freshness in the minds of the readers, they are also likely to affect the pace of political development. Brutus’ effort succeeded in making the world stop South Africa from participating in the Olympic Games in 1976. Freedom eventually came with peace to South Africa in 1994.

#### **IV. LANGUAGE USE IN POLITICAL CIRCLES**

While the substance of political narratives varies widely, they follow certain standard trajectories including the recounting of events in the form of retrievals and projections. According to Apter (1993), events serve as metaphors in which meanings are transmitted in terms of past and similar situations, and metonymies in which the event is a fragment or representation of some large logical or theoretical belief system. Sometimes too, euphemistic language is deployed in political narratives.

In the process of recounting stories of events, they are systematized and formed into ‘master narratives’ which requires an ‘agency’, a public figure, able to play the special role of ‘story-teller’. In this paper it would be natural to attribute the role of the ‘story-teller’/ agency to the authors whose works we have examined as revealing the political issues of their time. Their narratives draw upon traditional political themes, a rich store of value that can be enlisted to justify the prescriptions that partisan entrepreneurs offer. By manipulating values to achieve strategic purposes, political architects turn the cultural repertoire, into a dynamic political force.

#### **V. EUPHEMISMS AND METAPHORS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

In cognitive terms, euphemisms are used when one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. The aim of using euphemisms is to stroke at a person’s imagination. Euphemisms do not form complete pictures of the mind, nor do they completely define an object or event. Though euphemizing is now an accepted and established practice, it has acquired a dubious connotation in light of its tendency to deliberately disguise actual meanings of words in political discourses. Lutz (1989) while examining the ethical considerations in using euphemisms makes an immediate distinction between euphemisms proper and doublespeak: “when a euphemism is used to deceive, it becomes doublespeak” (18). The sole purpose of doublespeak is to make the unreasonable seem reasonable, the blamed seem blameless, and the powerless seem powerful. The term doublespeak was coined as an amalgam of two Orwellian expressions, double think and newspeak, both of which appear in Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949).

In doublespeak, there is incongruity between what is said or left unsaid, and what really is; between the essential function of language ( communication) and what doublespeak does i.e misleads, distorts, deceives, inflates.

Chomsky noted that to make sense of political discourse, it is necessary to give a running translation into English, “decoding the doublespeak of the media, academic, social scientists and the secular priesthood generally” (45).

Metaphors occupy a central place in the rhetoric of politicians and their minions. The troupe generates imagery which invokes targeted associations and channels our way of thinking. This mind-shaping ability of metaphor is convincingly established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Lakoff (1991) argues that abstractions and enormously complex situations are routinely understood via metaphor. He observes that dominant metaphors tend to both reflect and influence values in a culture. There is indeed, an extensive, and mostly unconscious system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions.

Political discourses thus are a panorama of metaphor and euphemism and understanding Nigerian/African politics via the tool of literature entails understanding the role the Nigerian/African literary writer plays in exposing the political issues of his time using political actors who deploy metaphorical and euphemistic language to effect enormous social consequences.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has established that literature must of necessity, play a crucial role in the political phenomena of any people. As such African writers in living up to this tenet have deployed literary tools to communicate their thoughts and concepts of the various political issues bothering them.

Having looked at earlier efforts by African writers to effect positive political changes in African countries, it is our candid opinion that now, more than any other time; the modern African writer must rise up to continue the struggle. We must know that the political problems of Africa have equally become more complicated and sophisticated over time. The emerging African writer therefore needs to continue to devise new styles to confront this hydra-headed monster.

We are conscious of the fact that in pursuant of this goal, the writer may have to wade through crocodile-infested pools. But in spite of the daunting challenges that may be on the way, African writers must rise up to their responsibility of being the voice of the voiceless and the emancipator of the masses. After all, experience has shown that indeed, the pen is mightier than the sword.

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