

Coup d'état in African Fiction: Literature as a Mirror of the Society

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ABSTRACT

One of the main characteristics of post-independence Africa is the high percentage of successful coups d'état. Specifically, and since literature is the mirror of the society, many African writers have ended their novels with coups d'état as an attempt to give a very clear insinuation about the political spectrums in their nations. Among African novels that dealt with the concept of coup d'état are David Rubadiri's *No Bride Price*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. These writers and their literary works gave a very vivid, solid and clear picture when it comes to African politics particularly in postcolonial Africa. Additionally, this paper is situated in the field of the qualitative method. It deals with analyzing and scrutinizing literary texts and inspired by the major African writers who have tremendously written on the issue of coup d'état and the political turmoil in their countries.

Keywords: Literature, Africa, coup d'état, post-independence

INTRODUCTION

Since the independence, civilian governments have been supplanted the military in well over half of Africa's states, while in many of these states (especially in Anglophone Africa) one wing of the military has subsequently been displaced by another as in Nigeria 1966 and Ghana in 1960. Several other states have experienced serious coup attempts, including Gabon, 1964, Angola, 1977, Kenya 1982. Such statistics underline the basic instability of most African governments in post-independence. (Tordoff, 1997)

One of the questions, which exercised political scientists in the 1960s and 1970s, was why military intervention occurred with such regularity in both the Francophone and

Anglophone states. Some sought the answer in societal tensions, which, it was argued, more or less sucked the military into the political system. Some even regarded the military as the ideal instrument of post-colonial governance in the sense that it was supposedly a ‘modern’ institution, which might assist the task of economic modernisation.

The poverty of the modernisation paradigm emerged with particular clarity in relation to the military, which proved no more efficient, ‘modern’ institution which transcended ethnicity and which possessed skills, which might assist the task of economic modernisation. The poverty of the modernisation paradigm emerged with particular clarity in relation to the military, which proved no more efficient, ‘modern’, or development oriented than the politicians it displaced. In the light of evidence, other analysts such as Samuen Decalo asserted that the coup syndrome was rooted less in societal causes, and rather more in the military itself. Corporate pride, ethnic jealousies and personal aggrandisement were seen as some of the factors, which came into play.

To this may be added the demonstration effect, because after the first takeovers it became apparent that mounting a coup was actually not that difficult. It merely required a tight-knit group of conspirators that could deploy enough soldiers to arrest key figures, and take over strategic installations – notably the radio-station and the airport. If presented with a *fait accompli* and a plausible justification for acting, the rest of the armed forces would probably fall into line (Nugent, 2004).

But why has postcolonial Africa been so vulnerable to military coup? Examination of the different types of military interventions and comparison of the immediate independence period with the 1970s show the major sources of coups to ethnic antagonisms stemming from cultural plurality and political competition, and the presence of strong militaries with factionalized officer corps. There is no evidence for a political “overload” due to rising mass participation, but politically factionalized regimes were more vulnerable to coups. During the 1970s, export dependence created political penetration, by strength states, deterred coups. Military coups are largely driven by elite rivalries inside the military and the civilian government. Stable rule would require an elite pact to regulate political competition within multi ethnic states (Nugent, 2004).

DISCUSSION

Coup d'état is overdone phenomenon in African societies. Many African writers make out of coup d'état a concluding sentences their novels. And both *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* ended with the military coup. Achebe states in his novel: "Overnight everyone began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime, at its graft, oppression and corrupt government: newspapers, the radio, the hitherto silent intellectuals and civil servants everybody said what a terrible lot; and it became public opinion the next morning. And these were the same people that only the other day had owned a thousand names of adulation, whom praise - singers followed with song and talking – drum whenever they went. Chief Koko in particular became a thief and a murderer, while the people who had led him on – in my opinion the real culprits took the legendary bath of the hornbill and donned innocence". (p. 148)

The novel's end, so far as the political theme is concerned, offers a rationale for postponement problems have been identified and brought to the attention not only of the people but also of the world. (Killam, 1969)

A Man of the People attracted considerable attention when it was published because the military take – over in Nigeria in January 1966, the month of novel's publication. The novel had, and still has, topicality. There is no necessary correlation between topicality and art: often a novel achieves the status of art when it transcends the local and the particular. The closing paragraph of the book suggests a generalization about human experience, which the events have been. Earlier in the novel Josiah, a local trader, a supporter of Nanga's party in Odili's village, is driven from the village for stealing. Josiah returns at the time of the election, a powerful influence with Nanga's support. When the military coup takes place and political parties are abolished, the members of the former party are wholly discredited, among them Chiefs Nanga and Kolo (Achebe, 1966).

The closing paragraphs of the novel reveal Achebe's assessment of the specific circumstances the novel dramatizes while at the same time suggesting the appropriateness of

such an assessment to any situation where similar conditions obtain. The terms of reference are local, the application general. The irony is of a familiar kind: “Koko had taken enough for the owner to see, said my father to me... My father’s words struck me because they were the very same words the villagers of Anata had spoken of Josiah, the abominated trader. Only in their case the words had meaning. The owner was the village, and the village had a mind, it could say no to sacrilege. But in the affairs of the nation there was no owner, the laws of the village became powerless”. (Achebe, 1966, p. 148-9)

This closing paragraph of the novel shows Odili’s surprise by his father’s words, since they are the same of those of the villagers in Anata when they spoke of Josiah. In Odili point of view, he surmises that the villagers are unwilling to change what is going on in their nation. This problem can be characterized as an outcome of the lack of the national consciousness, no one feels any ownership that why the law of the village becomes powerless.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born like *A Man of the People* ends with military coup. This coup meant a reaction against the misleading and mismanagement. It becomes clearly that the only solution, in which is these dictators is through military forces:

It was not until after eight o’clock that the other staff started coming in. When, at half past seven, not even the messengers had come, the man had wondered what could have happened, but in a while he took his mind off the matter. The messengers were, as usual, the first to arrive. One of them came in like a ghost, so quietly in fact that the man did not notice him till the other arrived. This one came whistling, which was not disturbing the man. But the other messenger shut his companion up. The second could not bear the silence long, and, walking around behind the man, he sighed very loudly and exclaimed, ‘Ei, these coups! (Armah, 1968, pp. 156-7)

Of course, the military coup is the climax of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. In the coup, which was staged in February 1966, Government ministers and high party officials are being arrested, and a cowering Koomson seeks refuge in the man’s bedroom. The man returns home from work to find a new look in his wife’s eye: the look of respect and trust. At a time

when those associated with the toppled regime walk in fear, the man walks tall and fearless. Koomson is so immobilized by an excessive fear, literally, an overpowering stench. Oyo now confesses to her husband: “I am glad you never became like him.” (p. 165). Eventually, the military forces track Koomson to the man’s house, and Koomson and the man are forced to make their escape through the hole in the pit latrine in the man’s house. This latrine is so descript and stinking that the man himself prefers to use the latrine at work, another oversubscribed latrine. It seems a fitting end to Koomson and this likes of him, considering the use of excrement as a leitmotif in this novel: from shit to shit (Esty, 1999).

The phenomenon of coup d’état is usually shown in African novels. In a novel, which is written by Malawian, David Rubadiri’s *No Bride Price*, contains further condemnation of the African politicians. Government ministers are shown living in luxury and employing their top civil servant. Those leaders who seemed so virtuous and dedicated when the country was struggling for independence now seem totally unscrupulous, immortal and worthless. When the army launches a coup and takes over control of the nation, people rejoice that a new era has. They agree with the General of the Army who states his first radio broadcast that:

Over the past three years much harm has been caused by the people you elected to rule you. Not only has there been corruption, murder and injustice but their policies and love of power had forced them to use all means to destroy the people. Whole generations of young people have been turned into monsters, trained to be destroyed of the souls of our formerly simple and great people. (Rubadiri, 1961, pp. 155 – 156)

For African nations afflicted with such soul-destroying politicians, the only solution possible in this novel is military rule. The fact that many African nations actually turned to such a solution to rid themselves of corrupt politicians indicates that the literature written in Africa after independence accurately reflects Africa’s new mood of disillusionment with its former heroes. (Lindfors, 1994)

The Cause of the coup

In both *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the military coups were caused by the mismanagement of the leaders. And the masses realized that the only way of removing these embezzlers is to stage a coup. In *A Man of the People*, the military coup came after the election days, which many have believed as unfair. No, the people had nothing to do with the fall of our government. What happened was simply that unruly mobs and private armies having tasted blood and power during the election had got out of hand and ruined their masters and employers. And they had no public reason whatever for doing it. Let's make no mistake about that. (Achebe, 1966, p. 144)

And this estimate is confirmed towards the end of the book. Max is killed on Election Day by Chief Koko's thugs. Eunice, Max's fiancée, killed Koko in turns. Nothing has changed in the country as a result of the election: "Meanwhile the Prime Minister had appointed Chief Nanga and the rest of the old Cabinet back to office and announced over the radio that he intended to govern and stamp out subversion and thuggery without quarter or mercy. He assured foreign investors that their money was safe in the country, that his government stood 'as firm as the Rock of Gibraltar' by its open-door economic policy". (p. 143)

But ironically, Marx achieves in death what he would not likely have achieved in living. "The fighting which broke out that night between Max's bodyguard and Chief Kolo's thugs ... struck a match and lit the tinder of discontent in the land" (p. 143). The chaos, which follows, is subdued by the army, which "obliged us by staging a coup at that point and locking up every member of Government," (p. 143). Then, and only then, does the 'body politics express a concern over the national situation in which until this time they had existed contentedly.

Aftermath of the coup

The result of military coup is usually discontent and chaos. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe did not give us any information about the aftermath of the coup. All what he said is that "the military regime had just abolished all political parties in the country and announced they would remain abolished 'until the situation became stabilized once again'. They had at time announced the impending trial of all public servants who had enriched themselves by defrauding

the state. The figure involved was said to be in the order of fifteen million pound”. (Achebe, 1966, p. 147 – 148)

But in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the readers have seen different drama from what they have seen in *A Man of the People*. Armah tries to make his readers know what has happened after the solution, which is military coup. When military coup was staged the Man knows, however, that there will not be very much of a change. He states:

In the life of the nation itself, maybe nothing really new would happen. New men would take into their hands the power to steal the nation’s riches and to use it for their own satisfaction. That, of course, was to be expected. New people would use the country’s power to get rid of men and women who talked a language that did not flatter them. There would be nothing different in that. That would be a continuation of the Ghanaian way of life. (Armah, 1968, p. 162)

Teacher believes that there is no change or what called the apes of the apes: No difference at all between the white men and their apes, the lawyers and the merchants, and the apes of the apes, our party men. And after their reign is over, there will be no difference ever. All new men will like the old (p. 89).

At the end of the novel, in the wake of Koomson’s humiliation, Armah seems finally to endorse the protagonist’s stubborn resistance to the excremental current. The coup’s immediate aftermath reconsolidates the man’s ethical selfhood and restores his domestic harmony. In the last scene, he glimpses bearing the slogan “*THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN*” and a pained flower that is “solitary, unexplainable, and very beautiful” (183). Many readers have seized on the slogan and flower as symbols of political hope – an interpretation made all the more attractive in that it would seem, at long last, to transcode excrement from the residue of colonial debasement into the fertilizer of a beautiful postcolonial future. Armah, however, is not so optimist. (Esty, 1999)

Despite personal and domestic reconciliation in his own life, the protagonist is left in despair. The latest coup (like independence itself) promises only an exchange of one overfed

exploiter for another; in real collective terms, nothing has changed. Indeed, Armah combines his closure symbols – flowers and latrine – precisely to signify the inadequacy of the protagonist’s merely individual (and familial) horizon of closure, beyond which would lay the possibility of wider social regeneration. Consider, from this perspective, the protagonist’s groping insight:

Were there not some proverbs that said the green fruit was healthy, but healthy only for its brief self? That the only new life there ever is comes from seeds feeding on their own rotten fruit? What, then, was the fruit that refused to lose its acid and its greenness? What monstrous fruit was it that could find the end of its life in the struggle against sweetness and corruption? (p. 145)

Living only for and as his own “brief self”, the protagonist clings to an ethical-individualist perspective. Despite misgivings about his own – limiting status, he sees no other option for to yield to the dialectical and communal urgings of history (to the growth and rot of an uncertain “new life”) seems in an era of neo-colonial corruption, like sinking into the abyss. As a bottom line Armah thought that the military coup, not more that the apes of the apes or what he called new style, old dance (Armah, 1968).

The concept of militarization

Militarization is a sign of the existence of a large malaise in modern Africa. It is one manifest response to the problems that African governments have face since independence – score resources, poor economic performance, wide and growing dissatisfaction and cynicism, vulnerability to external pressure and manipulation, and domestic instability. This, in turn, leads to wider dissent, greater instability, and more determined use of repressive force. It is not an automatic response. Some African governments have sought other solution to their perceived problems. But militarization is a common fall-back for governments in trouble (Rotberg, 1988).

Militarization, expressed as a form of military build-up, and it can be characterized by several indicators – armed force levels, military expenditures, arms imports, arms production, wars, and military regimes. We cannot deal with all these indicators here, but a few will serve to illustrate the general point. (Rotberg, 1988)

The concept of militarization was practiced in *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. This force was viewed as the only solution that can surmount the chaotic situation in post-independence African societies. This phenomenon is vividly expressed by Armah and Achebe. In *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* the authors tried to make their reader know that the malaise that is privileged cannot be changed unless the intervention of the military. This intervention usually caused by the reluctant of the leaders to relinquish power.

CONCLUSION

In both *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, coup d'état was the only possible solution to remove African leaders from the rainy season. Armah and Achebe were very exasperated by the vast socio-political contradiction in their nations, this leads them to make out of coup d'état full stops for their novels. Achebe was very frustrated by the deplorable situation. He says that "things have got to such point which there is no other answer, no way you can resolve this impasse politically, the political machine had been so abused whichever way you pressed it, it produced the same result. And therefore another force had to come in." (Killam, 1969, p. 85) This is one of the reasons that push him to conclude the novel with the military coup as a solution the malaise in his country, and as a solution for any situation which is similar.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* coup d'état is the climax of the book. This coup has been staged as a reaction against the mismanagement. Armah and Achebe they differ in their coups, Achebe did not show his readers the aftermath of the coup and Armah did. Armah gave a clear picture of the result of the coup; he believed that there is no change or what he called the apes of the apes. Armah was very pessimist about African leader's ways of ruling. He concluded that new men would take into their hands the power to steal the nation's riches he concludes pessimistically that is the Ghanaian way of life. (Armah, 1968 p. 162)

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