

Division and Corruption as Recurrent Themes in African Literature: A Socio-critical Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits division and corruption as some of the prevalent themes in African literature through the lenses of three of the best known African writers, namely Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. By means of Socio-criticism and intertextuality, it highlights these misbehaviours as the calamities which have disrupted life in post-colonial African societies. There have been oppositions between social classes, with the elite exploiting the masses as did the white man. Besides, political leaders have excelled in corruption to such an extent that they have led the militaries to seize power as the ultimate solution.

Keywords: *division, corruption, sociocriticism, African literature, elitism, clash of cultures.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a revisitation of the themes of division and corruption as instantiated in African literature. This literature deals mainly with African problems at all levels. Among the latter, corruption has been treated as the main theme in the novels *A Man of the People* (MOP) by Chinua Achebe, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born* (BOB) by Ayi Kwei Armah and *Devil On the Cross* (DOTC) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. But it is also singled out as a minor theme whenever the authors criticize the mishandling of economy and social life at large in Africa. Such is the case for *No Longer At Ease* (NLAE) by Chinua Achebe and *Two Thousand Seasons* (TTS) by Ayi Kwei Armah, to name but a few. As Taleb (2020b: 188) observes:

One of the most prevalent and omnipresent issues in the African novels particularly after the independence is the issue of corruption. Many African writers have extensively explored the theme of corruption in their novels. Additionally, it was one of the major hurdles that Africa was facing and most of the literary works produced on Africa view it as an inevitable problem in post-independent African politics.

Another salient theme is division. It has taken different forms such as tradition against modernism or colonizers against Africans in pre-independence Africa as in Chinua Achebe's works. It has also been presented as the new African elite against the peasants in post-colonial Africa by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah. Herein, I try to illustrate this dialectical presentation of the social issues in African literary works, a presentation which involves opposed forces each time.

Admittedly, the themes exploited by African writers have been changing since the very first novels produced during the colonial period. African writers were trying to depict the social issues of their respective eras. Hence, their topics of interest varied in line with the social life itself. Yet, corruption and division happen to be among the outstanding and recurrent themes. This work investigates into these themes on the basis of the works of the aforementioned writers, viz. Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. For the sake of intertextuality, however, a mention will be made of other relevant literary works.

As to its structure, after the introduction to set the scene come literary theoretical and methodological considerations. Second, a short history of African literature is provided in order to justify the changes in the themes. Then, the paper discusses division and corruption and illustrates them with excerpts from the authors' works as appropriate. Finally, it concludes the study by showing intertextuality among African works before suggesting further research. In line with the social function of literature (Fowler 1981), the study will draw moral lessons as the empowerment of the African readers and citizens so as not to suffer the same bad consequences.

LITERARY THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As any literary criticism, this work is first of all a library research, and it is also interdisciplinary insofar as it draws on a set of methods and techniques for its achievement. Basically, there are two categories of methods necessary for a literary work: internal and external approaches. Internal approaches, also known as ‘intrinsic approaches,’ consider data exclusively from within. That is, the literary work itself remains the basic source of evidence so that quotations are taken from it only. By contrast, external approaches or ‘extrinsic approaches’ resort to critics to back up the researcher’s argumentation. Historical, biographical and sociological data are used to this end (Lynn 2005).

Besides, the method adopted in this paper is qualitative because it deals with analyzing and scrutinizing texts in search for characters’ behaviours and attitudes towards social issues. More importantly, the paper is inspired by the major African writers who have written very extensively on the issue of corruption in post-independence African literature. For the sake of intertextuality, it examines three of the most influential African novels, viz. *A Man of the People*, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Devil on the Cross*, which portray corruption and its vital consequence on the living condition of the mass in post-colonial Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya respectively.

In order to achieve this goal, it will be necessary to use intertextuality and sociocriticism. In literature, intertextuality means the relationship between two or many literary works like when many novels have the same theme (Mulamba 2020: 83). Given that the themes of division and corruption have inspired many African authors though to different extents, this paper will single out some works to testify to their widespread coverage. Besides, as Katufya (2020: 8) puts it, “intertextuality not only helps ‘to negotiate interconnection’ between the novels under study but also it shows the unity of discourse across these novels as well as their relationships with other literary texts.” It is thus relevant to study these themes across different authors because one author does not constitute African literature. The recurrence of themes attest to their relevance and fundamental functions in a society.

As to sociocriticism, it makes a link between fiction and the real society being depicted. It is used to assess the extent to which these novels have depicted the social issues under study, and above all, how faithfully they have done that. In other terms, the readers can

wonder whether they are presented with a real picture of the African societies, or conversely with a parody.

Synonymous to sociocriticism is Lynn's (2005) "Historical, postcolonial and cultural studies" approach. It takes into account the setting of the work by paying special attention to "when and where something was written and by whom," that is, "facts about the author's life and status, the larger history around the author and the work, and the intellectual paradigms available to the author and the readers" (p. 1). That is why these novels will be studied along the background of the history of their respective countries.

Before proceeding to the thematic study, let us first say a word on African literature. As a matter of fact, there is a strong link between the author's life and the experience reported in the literary creation.

The study of the authors' backgrounds is necessary for a good understanding of their literary works. But admittedly, a good study of literary productions can help one to have a good idea of their authors' backgrounds. This explains the historians' propensity to analyse the writings referring to a social and political background, located in time and space. This double link between literary productions and their backgrounds reveals the dialectic relating the two, and this is particularly true for African literature. This point can be supported by this statement of Ernest Emenyonu, cited by Mami (2019: 44):

African literature has come to mean several things to several people. To some it is a tool for the literate African's arrogation of the essence of his cultural heritage - an assertion and at times an imposition of the contents and excellence of a black culture, on a white dominated world. To others African literature means a new literature of the world' with its authentic and original genre, themes, and message. To a few, it is only a political document of protest against the assumptions of colonialism and imperialism as they relate to the world of the black man. To yet other people, African literature in all its ramifications represents a mere appendage to British or French literature since most of the African Writers write chiefly in English or French.

There are three different stages in the evolution of African literature. First, there is the pre-colonial stage or traditional Africa. At that time, African literature was mainly

a literature of transmission. It was the stage of oral literature which was characterized by the records of the "griots" who would sing the glories of African noblemen such as kings and wealthy people.

After the traditional or pre-colonial stage of African literature comes the colonial one. During that period, African literature was in the form of protest. African writers tried to retrace, in their works, the mistreatments which their black fellows were victims of. At this stage almost all African writers protested against the evil deeds of the colonists. This literature of protest showed that Africans had enough of the presence of the white man who settled in Africa only to exploit its economic and human resources.

Certainly at the very beginning Africans used to blame all their difficulties on colonizers, particularly because of the changes brought by the latter and which had disrupted African's ways of living. Such studies have been classified under the theme of "Clash of Culture" or "Tradition versus Modernism." The heralded work in this literary trend remains Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Overall, while some of the works were mere descriptions and paints of the "disappearing world" that ancient Africa was becoming, some others were protests against colonization. Committed writers produced works to fight for independence. However, independence just meant the replacement of the white man and colonialism by African leaders and corruption. Hence, the theme of research shifted from clash of cultures to corruption in different forms.

Finally comes the third but very important stage of African literature because of its literary richness. This stage of post-colonial literature has given birth to a literature of denunciation. At this stage the bulk of African literary productions is about the disastrous situation which has prevailed in Africa in the first years of independence. More than the protest, the literary productions at this stage aimed also at awakening ignorant people, that is to say African masses. This sort of literature aimed at inviting the Africans to resist against black leaders who were carrying on white domination and to partake in the reconstruction of Africa which was ruined by imperialism. The theme of neo-colonial imperialism is at the centre of African post-colonial literature. The authors under study belong to this literary trend, although Chinua Achebe has also contributed to the previous stages.

It is worth noting that in the post-colonial era, the white man was replaced by black leaders but he succeeded in finding new ways of maintaining the black continent under his yoke. To some extent, the new black leaders are nothing but pawns of the white man whose presence on the African soil was no longer bearable. However, we can note that, before leaving Africa, the colonist had succeeded in training and setting the native elite. Since these pre-possessed elite have no critical say on the decisions they have taken, they too, in order to boost their ruptured egos, deny their brothers the right to voice their minds.

After this word on the African literature, let us now turn to the thematic analysis.

THEMATIC INTERPRETATION OF NOVELS

This analysis turns around two themes only, namely division and corruption in African literature.

The theme of division in African literature

Technically, division is expected in literature in the classification of characters. You cannot have a hero in a novel if there is no villain, and you cannot discover an honest character if the society has no corrupted characters. That is how a protagonist is always identified in opposition to an antagonist.

With respect to this work, division takes different forms in the literary works under study. African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o have talked about the theme of African elitism in their works. For Ngugi, African elitism is like an underlying theme in all his writings. He opposes educated people or "the new elite" to the masses which are usually uneducated. He blames the former for their misdeeds on the latter and the country.

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi opposes two different classes; on the one side, he presents the peasants, the students and the workers, and on the other, he places the exploiters and their close collaborators. This last group, even though they represent a small part of the society, is the wealthy people upon whom the destiny of the whole society depends; in a nutshell, they are the elect people. But it is good to recall that these elite members are the

elect of the white imperialists as it is the case in the gathering in the cave for the competing selection of the best native robbers who would represent the colonizers. Therefore, we can say that these African political elite are those whom Ngugi describes in *Devil on the Cross* as the "local watchdogs" of the white man. This distinction between the elite and the masses refers to the British "divide and rule" system of administration for the mere reason that by considering themselves superior to their black fellows, the elite create a clear-cut separation between the masses and themselves.

To another extent, we can say that the elite are composed of the most powerful elements of society. Accordingly, in any stratified society, the elite are part of the dominant class and occupy the most important positions in the social hierarchy. A study of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (POB) and *Devil on the Cross* gives way to two main definitions of the concept "elite".

First, we can say that the elite are all those who, in diverse activities, are at the top of the hierarchy and occupy privileged positions of prestige and importance. They are those who occupy the most important positions in the state apparatus and can be seen as the holders of the political power. They are often those who have replaced the white man and carry on exploiting the masses. We identify thus this group as being the political elite.

Secondly, the elite can be defined as the persons and the groups that, besides the power they possess or their influences contribute to the actions of a community, either by the decisions they take, or by the ideas, the sentiments or the emotions which they express or symbolize. They contribute by their decisions, their ideas, and their sentiments to the improvement of the community's living conditions. They are those who spared no effort in order to awake the masses: students, the Civil Society, corporate associations etc. It is this group which leads the masses' struggle against oppression and exploitation.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o also talks of "the moneyed elite" that he considers to be the "local watchdogs of the white man". They are those who collaborate with the white man in order to carry on neo-colonial imperialism. In other words, they are those who reap where they have never sown.

Still, as regards post-colonial African literature, the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o illustrate well this fact. First and foremost, the interest lies in the topicality of the subject, not only as regards post-independence Kenyan society, but equally in connection with

most contemporary post-colonial African countries. Ngugi depicts situations and problems that are common to almost all post-colonial African countries. His fight is to liberate Africa from neo-colonialism, imperialism and local corrupt powers. He is a man whose actions and writings are dedicated to the building of a society of justice, democracy, equality, and brotherhood.

Some proverbs turn around the theme of social injustice based on power relationships. The same act can be a crime when it is performed by a powerless citizen, but a normal act when performed by a man with (political, economic) power:

Don't you know that it is the thief who steals twenty-five cents who is usually hanged? (DOTC: 9).

A rich man will cultivate even a forbidden, sacred shrine (DOTC: 60).

In the first quote, Ngugi leaves it understood that in the domain of theft, big swindlers usually end up being made innocent thanks to corruption and protection from people in power who also benefit of that theft. By contrast, minable thieves will be presented as social calamities and punished hard to warn other potential wrong doers. In the second, he shows that even the fundamental features of the African culture can be violated by people who hold some power; hence social justice does not apply equally to all the citizens.

The nature of the relationship between the political elite and the masses is that of the jungle. Everyone fights for his own survival and enrichment, not caring at all about other people's misery; such is the new turn taken in the relationship between the political elite and the masses. Some elite's ideas about the poor masses are the following:

1. We have not made them poor and, therefore, their condition of poverty is none of our business;
2. They are poor because they lack intelligence, imagination, enterprise or capacity for work, or a combination of all or some of these attributes; etc.

From this view of the elite about the masses, we can say without any doubt that the elite, in whatever key role they find themselves, consider the masses in the same way the natives were considered by the white colonial officials.

Similarly, Ayi Kwei Armah exploits the theme of division in his novels *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, particularly in the first. *Two*

Thousand Seasons is a novel with the initial intention to evoke the frustrations of an unhappy present. Like in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah carefully examines the postcolonial reality in his home country so as to bypass the unhappy state of affair of the present.

Two Thousand Seasons can be regarded as a spiritual biography of the continent in showing that Africans have had a long history of struggle, and of survival and sometimes material triumphs despite the wrongs inflicted as a result from that struggle (Mami 2019: 40). Culturally considered, this novel attempts to treat the political crisis of modernity by presenting the opinion of those who are on the other side of the power-game.

With respect to division, there is the class of local rulers who behave worse than the white man himself. They have inherited of everything that belonged the white man: his castle, his way of ruling by submitting people to corporal battering to tame them. Kamuzu, the chief leader, is satirized to long for everything that the white man was. With him, there are also other Africans who hold power but to accomplish their selfish targets. As Mami (2019: 51) observes, “King Koranche sells a number of his subjects to chattel slavery when he is denied Abena whom he intends as a bride for his son, Prince Bentun renamed Bradford George.”

In front of them is a group of freedom fighters led by Isanusi, a woman master minder who plays the role of awakening people’s awareness to go back to the traditional way of living known as “the way, our way”. To end the exploitation of people, Isanusi stages a rebellion with the freedom fighters to work towards the destruction of the regime of the African rulers.

Division is also found in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in terms of social stratification, like in Ngugi’s elitism. The wealth of the nation is in the hands of a small minority made of politicians and other holders of power. The masses are reduced to poverty as a result of unemployment and poor salaries. Needless to say that in the ensuing struggle for life, people turn to all kinds of corruption.

Finally, Chinua Achebe also depicts some types of division. The clash of cultures in *Things Fall Apart* (TFA), *Arrow of God* (AOG) and *No Longer At Ease* opposes

tradition to modernity. Those Africans who still live according to their customs are confronted with foreign practices and behaviours which are adopted by the followers of the white man:

Mr. Ikedi had come to Umuofia from a township, and was able to tell the gathering wedding feasts had been steadily declining in the towns since the invention of invitation cards. Many of his hearers whistled in unbelief when he told them that a man could not go to his neighbors' wedding unless he was given one of these papers on which they wrote R.S.V.P. (Rice and stew very plenty) which was invariably an overstatement (NLAE: 10).

It is worth noting that *R.S.V.P. – Répondez s'il vous plaît* -- is the French for "Reply, please;" a message sent by the host to the guests to know beforehand the number of the attendants at the party. It has nothing to do with rice or stew. Yet, it attests to the division among people who no longer share the same practices with respect to hospitality. Overall, the society is torn apart because of the new philosophy brought in by the white man and adopted by those who can reap some benefit, viz. the elite principally.

I am not blind and I am not deaf either. I know that Umuaro is divided and confused (AOG: 132)

This quote reports lack of social harmony and attests to the fact that division prevails because the chief does not respect tradition regarding the time to eat new crops.

In conclusion, division obtains as one of the major themes in African literature, and it varies depending on the characters in action.

The theme of corruption in African literature

As aforementioned, hardship and poverty have led Africans, particularly the elite, to turn to corruption – whether moral, material or political - in order to make the ends of months meet. It would be better to consider corruption herein as an inclusive term even for bribery and embezzlement. Although corruption is reported as a minor theme in many literary works, three novels, viz. Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* have made it successfully their main theme. They have depicted this social calamity intertextually, ending each time with a military coup - in the first two novels - as a solution to eradicate it and to

punish the actors. In fact Taleb (2020a, 2020b) discusses corruption in African literature and the military coups which have actually marred the political life in Africa. As he writes,

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 (2020a: 150).

A Man of the People depicts the political situation and the impacts of corruption on social life in Nigeria. Corruption is embodied in the Minister of Culture, Chief the Honorable Nanga. He is involved in common bribery, election rigging, prostitution and so on. Given the unrest which followed the rigged elections, the Army staged a military coup to pacify the country. As Achebe observes ironically:

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 (MOP: 148)

Corruption is also reported in other works such as *No Longer At Ease*. Obi Okonkwo gets bribed by Mr Mark, who needs a scholarship for his younger sister. Obi rejects that bribe. Secondly, Mr Mark's younger sister comes herself ready to corrupt Obi sexually in case he rejects money:

She accepted the glass and smiled her thanks last year, she said suddenly, none of the girls in our school who got grade one was given a scholarship. Perhaps they did not impress the board. I was not that, it was because they did not see the members at home (NLAE: 69).

In the context of the narrative, corruption is harshly punished. Obi is arrested and sent to prison because the legal system is still controlled by the white people:

He then searched Obi and found the marked notes. He began to say some more things, invoking the name of the queen, like a

District officer in the bush reading the Riot Act to an uncomprehending and delirious mob. Meanwhile the other man used the telephone outside Obi's door to summon a police van (NLAE: 128).

Now the legal system is only controlled by black people so that crimes such as corruption go unpunished because the judges, the prosecutors, the lawyers, the barristers, the solicitors, the president of the bar etc. are surprisingly champions in corruption.

The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born similarly depicts the political situation and the impacts of corruption on social life in Ghana. The embodiment of corruption also happens to the Minister of Culture, his Honorable Koomson. He is involved in embezzling money, buying fishing boats under the names of family members etc. Throughout the country, corruption is even known as 'the national game' insofar as civil servants try to benefit of their positions by charging free services. Like in *A Man of the People*, a military coup ends this regime hopefully to improve the situation. Yet, Ayi Kwei Armah is pessimistic about it and ponders on the future of the nation in these terms:

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 (BOB: 162)

In conclusion, "All new men will like the old » (BOB: 89).

Since literature is for him a mirror of the society, Taleb (2020a: 154) quotes Lindfors (1994) who writes:

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.

Such a stance is also in accordance with Fowler's (1981) view of 'literature as social discourse' because literature should depict the society in which the literary work is set.

That is, there should be a link between the work and its setting as is required in sociocriticism and historical, postcolonial and cultural studies.

Corruption is also used as a bait throughout the novel *Two Thousand Seasons*. Money and presents are used to get services, even to motivate informants to betray the freedom fighters. All moral does not stand in front of money.

Finally, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has also treated corruption in his works though not so openly as did Achebe and Armah. He concentrates on the most significant theme of corruption through portraying the sexual abuse. As Taleb (2020b: 189) argues, he has shown the theme of moral corruption through the interaction and relationship between the bourgeoisie, such as Boss Kihara and the ordinary people like Wariinga. The employers are not interested in the skills of the female employee, rather to satisfy their desires and lust. In *Devil on the Cross* for instance, when talking of sexual harassment of women in search for jobs, Ngugi makes this character report:

He told me that the only job he could offer me was to spread my legs, that women with mature bodies were experts at that job (DOTC: 38).

Instead of reporting that she has been sexually harassed in order to be hired, Wangari talks of "spreading her legs" as a job. This euphemism is an indirect and less embarrassing way of talking about sex.

The same use of sex as a bribe is also reported in *Petals of Blood*. The attitude of Hawkins Kimeria towards Wanja is a good example of the exploitation of women by the elite. In the journey to Nairobi, Kimeria wants to force Wanja to bed when she only asked him for help for a sick child. In both novels, school girls too are subjected to this sexual exploitation.

Another area where corruption obtains is that of elections, that is, political corruption. As Ngugi argues, it is by rigging the local elections and bribing their way into office that politicians get access to parliament.

As a concluding word, it can be noticed that corruption is hardly absent in literary works depicting social issues because poverty and hardship easily erode people's morality.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed at illustrating the themes of division and corruption in African literature on the basis of the writings of the aforementioned three well-known African authors. These themes have replaced that of clash of cultures when writers realized that the new African leadership was not attending at the people's social needs but proceeded to self-enrichment through corruption. Throughout African literary works there are all kinds of divisions, and they are better summarized by Ngugi wa Thiong'o as elitism. In other terms, after fighting together the white man for independence, Africans shifted to social class fights for the possession of the wealth of the country. In this new society marred with selfishness and competition, divisions of all kinds set people apart from people.

Besides, corruption – moral, political, material - is widely exploited as a proof of disillusionment of Africans with the ways the native leadership was handling their welfare. It was a real U-turn with respect to the criticism of colonialism: the natives were even worse than colonizers. By replacing the white men as rulers, African leaders mishandled economy and all the aspects of societal life because of selfishness. Corruption happened to be the main strategy to reach the unattainable objectives. The manipulation of the masses and political corruption were omnipresent in these novels.

To wipe out such calamity at the national level, the military coups were used to end the government terms in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *A Man of the People*. Armah and Achebe are very good observers of their time because, historically, Africa has known the reign of militaries who used to neutralize civilians and to take power from them. Militarization was viewed as the only solution that could surmount the chaotic situation in post-independence African societies. These authors were very exasperated by the vast socio-political contradiction in their nations; this leads them to end their novels with coups d'état.

Finally, the theme of division is mainly explored by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in both *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* which have conveyed their author's vision about African elitism. He depicted the greed of African leaders and their subjugation to the white man controlling Africa from abroad. From the cultural point of view, the elite have swallowed all Western values without any restriction, ending thus in cultural identity crisis. As a lasting solution of alienation, Ngugi wa Thiong'o proposes *Decolonising the Mind* because most

African problems stem from Africans' attempt to ape the white man to the detriment of the native customs and philosophy.

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