

Exploring the Issue of Corruption in African Novels

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ABSTRACT

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 the literary works produced on Africa view it as an inevitable problem in post-independent African politics. This paper aims at unearthing the moral and political corruption based on three of the most powerful African novels which inspect thoroughly the issue of corruption: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. These writers use a very clearly way to disseminate the greed and lust for wealth, power and corruption.

Keywords: Literature, Africa, Corruption, post-independence

INTRODUCTION

The seemingly chronic incapability of most African countries to overcome poverty debt and bad governance has inspired a growing literature for general readers that apply diagnostic and prescriptive approaches on a continent scale. Each author adopts a spin that allots responsibility for Africa's problems primarily to external or internal causes, then offers solutions that can range from the technocratic through the hard – nosed political on into the realm of the spiritual and cultural. (Ayittey, 1998)

Ayittey blames Africa's economic woes mainly on weak and corrupt African leaders and prescribe a return to the foundations of pre-colonial culture. Ayittey is an emigrant Ghanaian

economist. After a short romantic detour through pre-colonial political culture, he gets down to straight talk: an angry polemic against the “sultanism” and statism of Africa’s inept and self-seeking rulers, the fawning elites who support them, and the criminally negligent western lenders and donors who have helped to foster and perpetuate their misrule. The only solution to economic failure, he argues, is radical political reform to rid Africa of its “Vampire” states and restore the accountability and democracy said to be characteristic of African political tradition. The agents of this transformation must be Africa’s intellectuals, particularly those like himself who have gone into exile rather than sell their services to immoral regimes. (Ayttey, 1998)

Corruption is an unlawful practice in Africa; it is the disregard of rules and requirements of one’s office for the sake of a personal advantage, such as a bribe. While corruption occurs whenever officials accept bribes, corrupt governments can develop only where such practices are widespread and are sustained by social attitudes. Corruption is widely practiced, it is evidence of the weakness of public institutions and the strength of private appetites desires as determinants of political and administrative behaviour. (Lewis, 1998)

One of the major issues facing post-independence Africa is corruption. This phenomenon is obviously seen in novels like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross*, Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Ngũgĩ’s *Devil on the Cross* depicts corruption in post-independence Kenya and its crucial consequence on the living condition of the mass in Kenya. The idea of corruption was bluntly seen from the very beginning of the novel. From the cover of the novel, one can deduce the fact that the writer’s intention to expose some of the frightening issues in his society. He linked the devil with powerful people whose traits are characterized by the devil. A very courageous character in the novel is Wangari who tries to get rid of the robbers and tried to save her country.

In *A Man of the People* corruption has been shown as an inevitable problem in African post-independent politics. Odili in *A Man of the People* was depicted at the very beginning as an ideal but at the end of the novel he showed his audience that politics in Africa is not more than ruses. Achebe has used this aspect of Odili in order to depict the situation of the educated elite

immediately after the independence. Chief Nanga on the other hand was described as one of the dedicated men, who can get anything he desired.

By the same token in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the Man was scrambling to change the world around him, but he found out that it is impossible to live without being involved in corruption. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* two of the most important metaphors were depicted in this novel; the bus and the banister, which stand for corruption. In these two novels bribery and embezzlement contributed in the malaise that afflicting post-independent African societies. (Eli, 2020)

RESEACH METHOD

The method adopted in this paper is the qualitative method since it deals with analyzing and scrutinizing texts. 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 such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah. It tries to examine three of the most powerful African novels. *Devil on the Cross*, *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* which portray corruption in post-colonial Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana and its vital consequence on the living condition of the mass in Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya. These novels considered to be among the most powerful novels written on corruption in the history of African literature.

DISCUSSION

To investigate the issue of corruption in *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi concentrates on the most significant theme of corruption through portraying the sexual abuse. 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 Waringa. The employers` are not interested in the skills of the female employee, rather to satisfy their desires and lust.

The protagonist, Wariĩga experienced moral and sexual abuse by her employer and has to face the music as a result of her “rejection the advances of Boss Kihara, her employer”

(Ngugi, 10). Kihara was portrayed in the novel as a devil since he wants to exploit Warĩnga for his joy. Additionally, the manipulation of the masses and political corruption were omnipresent in this novel. This can be seen through the character of Kihahu who says “I hadn't shed a drop of sweat. All my money came from the very people who had voted for me. How? Because it was their tax that would go to pay back the money borrowed from foreign banks... I never stopped plucking it” (Ngugi, 116)

Corruption is a theme in Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Achebe shows in his novel all kinds of corruption, be it political corruption or moral corruption. In this novel he created one of his best creation, and shows how corrupt he is. Nanga is the most corrupt politician in this novel. Instead of serving his people, he uses everything against them. Odili the main character was struggling against the situation, but he found out that he couldn't live without being involved in this filthy situation. (Achebe, 1966)

A Man of the people falls more or less evenly into two parts. At first scornful of Nanga's fraudulent political behaviour and understanding the devious and dishonest means by which Nanga has achieved prominence, Odili is nevertheless nearly overwhelmed by Nanga's charisma and seduced to his opportunistic way of thinking and acting. He accepts an invitation to be Nanga's guest in the capital city and there sees at first hand the extravagant life by lived by senior members of Government, an extravagance supported largely through defrauding the people by a very thinly disguised system of bribery, corruption and nepotism. Of this experience gained through his stay with Nanga (Erritouni, 2006).

Achebe struggle against corruption is not new. In his book *The Trouble with Nigeria* which is written during the country's noisy 1983 election campaign, here the book which is an outpouring of frustration at Nigeria's problem. In this book the readers encounter new notion about Nigeria. In the false image he says: Listen to Nigerian leaders and you will frequently hear the phrase this great country of ours. Nigeria is not a great country it is one of the most disorderly nation in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is dirty, callous, noisy ostentations, dishonest and vulgar. In short it is among the most unpleasant places on the earth. (Achebe, 1983, p. 7)

In this passage Achebe uses everything that he could, in order to make his reader know that Nigeria is one of the corrupt places in the world, if is not the most corrupt. In page thirty-eight he says: Corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed ... keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating yam. This is a bad way of putting it, worse perhaps than the president's denial of its severity. A goat needs yam because yam is food for goats. (Achebe, 1983, p. 38)

True, Achebe gave his readers perfect picture of corruption in Nigeria. But this is not only the novel that Achebe tackles the dilemma of corruption. In his novel *No Longer at Ease*, he says, "African is corrupt through and through" (Achebe, 1960, p.3).

In Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, corruption is the dominating theme in the novel. In this novel the bus stands for the decadent society "The bus had come to a stop. Its confused rattle had given place to amendless spastic shudder, as if its pieces were held together by too much rust ever to fall completely apart (p.1). This nice episode, but Armah is not only the one who describes his decadent society in metaphor of the bus.

Ngugi in his novel *Devil on the Cross* gives the same picture "The car's body shook like a reed in the wind. The whole vehicle waddled along the road like a duck up a mountain (Ngugi, 1987, p. 31). Thus, though the bus episode is a particular one described in detail, the reader is made to realize that it has a wider implication: the bus represents the decadent nation. It seems that its driver and conductor stand for its corrupt, opportunistic, and self-interests leaders who instead of ruling the country with honesty and consideration subjugate the citizens through bribes and pressure. (Ogede, 1966)

1. Moral corruption

This is a widespread theme in post-independence African novels. In *A Man of the People*, both the representatives of the two generations were seen as corrupt morally. Odili moral corruption began with the nurse Elsie. He took her from the party that was organized by the

students' Movement he snatches her to his room and went to bed with her. Since the action that Odili has undertaken with Elsie, the readers knew that Odili is corrupt morally. Even the most womaniser in the entire university starts to call him by Ralph from that day in reference to his moral corruption. Odili also has undergone the same experience with Jean when he slept with her.

But, Odili is not the only character that is morally corrupt in the novel. Chief Nanga more corrupt than him, Nanga abuses his money and power by over-spending his money and having his way with the women he desired. He confesses that he can bring any lady he desired. "If you like I can bring you six girls this evening. You go do the thing so-tay you go beg say you no want again (p. 72). This is just an example of his moral corruption. He slept with many ladies like Mrs Akillo, and what he has done with Elsie later.

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, women are viewed as an object for men's satisfaction. This can be seen through Armah's portrayal of the women who are seeking only for some material gains. This prevalent problem was caused by women's greed for commodity, which inspired people to be corrupt. The leaders usually humiliate women in African novels. The writers usually show the male dictatorship on these women. In Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*, Wariinga faced many problems, she tramps all over Nairobi looking for a job but nothing because she wanted a job without the condition of bosses for employing girl is a meeting for five minutes of love. "You give me I give, so goes the saying." (Ngugi, 1980, p. 19) This shows clearly that the moral corruption in African societies is big phenomenon since the worker needs to be corrupt morally.

2. Bribery and embezzlement

Bribery takes place in both *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Those who have money tried to make out of it a means for bribing the masses. Chief Nanga attempted to bribe Odili in many ways, but Odili was smart most of the time. He offers him scholarship to study abroad, but this is a kind of bribery. Chief Koko bribed Max, but Max surmises that this is the national cake and he should take his own portion since the country lacks

the national consciousness. Nanga tried to inform Odili by Max's bribe and to tell him that he is smarter than him. "Your good friend Maxwell Kulamo has more sense than you. He has already taken his money and agreed to step down for Chief Koko" (p. 119). Odili unlike Max, he justified his strong stand against the national game: "In fact one reason why I took this teaching job in a but, private school instead of a smart civil service job in the city with car, free housing, etc., was to give myself a certain amount of autonomy (p. 17). Nanga tried to degenerate and discourage him by his stand against the national game. He adds:

You staying the bush here wasting your time and your friends are busy putting their money in the bank in Bori. Anyway you are not a small boy. I have done my best and, God so good, your father is my living witness. Take your money and take your scholarship to go and learn more books; the country needs experts like you. And leave the dirty game of politics to us who know how to play it... (p. 119)

Nanga also embezzled the public money and used it in his own household. Odili adds: "The first thing critics tell you about our ministers' official residences are that each has seven bedrooms, one for every day of the week" (p. 36). But Odili himself embezzled the money of his party at the end of the novel. This is one of the fatal mistakes that Odili has done, in, which leads him to his being a naïve character. Odili who is narrating the story says:

I had already decided privately to borrow the money from C.P.C. funds still in my hands. They were not likely to be needed soon, especially as 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 the same 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 pounds. (Achebe, 1966, pp.147-8)

In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the timber Amankwa, comes to the man's office and offers him twenty Ghanaian Cedis to facilitate the transport of his felled logs from his inland concession to the harbour. The man declines and instructs Amankwa to come in during regular

hours the following day and apply to the booking clerk. The timber contractor actually gets offended; he says. “Why do you treat me so? Why have I done against you? Tell me, what I have done?” (Armah, 1968, p. 31) Scratch my back and I’ll scratch your back has become so ingrained in Ghanaian social relations that the timber merchant is confounded in his confrontation with a man of integrity. The irony here is that this is such a routine procedure that the man does not understand why the timber contractor is offering him a bribe. But economic difficulties have created an environment where nothing is for free. The exchange of money and gifts lubricate even the most trivial request. (Hay, 2000)

The Man in his way back from saving Koomson, he sees a police barricade in the distance, and playing the role that he has played all along – that of the witness, the voyeur, but not the participant – the Man watches a bus as it is stopped by a policeman for a road check: “The policeman who had spoken raised his right hand and in a slow gesture pointed to his teeth. The man had seen this gesture before, several times. Usually, its marker would add the words; Even Kola nuts can say “hanks” (Armah, 1968, p.182). Armah believes that nothing has happened nothing has changed. The police are the same; bribery and corruption are still national game. (Larson, 1971)

CONCLUSION

Finally, it is very obvious that corruption is one of the most dominant and rampant themes in post-colonial literature. Thus, Ngugi, Achebe and Armah can be viewed as rebellious novelists who took the initiative to tell the realities of their own societies through their literary works. They concentrated on Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana and their politics; the abuse exploitation of the colonizers and they call for the freedom by the side of the colonized. These writers were not ashamed to give very vivid pictures to their readers. For example, *A Man of the People* is a cautiously plotted and amalgamated piece of writing. Achebe achieves sense of balance and proportion in the treatment of his theme of political corruption by evoking both the absurdity of the behaviour of the principal characters while at the same time suggesting the serious and

destructive consequence of their behaviour to the Commonwealth of principal character Odili, Nanga and Odili's father are the most successful and for different reasons.

Odili's motifs are never entirely disinterested: capable of idealism, he nevertheless acts often out of self-interest and dishonest in his dealings with his protagonist Nanga. He is thus not a stereotyped character of a familiar type in novels, which treat this subject. Nanga is, in many ways, a compelling creation (Achebe, 1966). Odili also reveals that Chief Nanga is one of the most corrupt politically since he usually trying to make people obey him by the gifts. Odili states: "Chief Nanga was a born politician; he could get away with almost anything he said or did. And as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nanga of this world will continue to get away with anything". (Achebe, 1966, p. 65)

The personality of Odili's father is presented both as a type and an individual, one who embodies suggestions so typical of the generality of Nigerian of his generation, yet capable of independent and noble action. Odili reminds us by the Man in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. At the beginning of that novel, the *Man* was struggling against the gloomy and corruptive atmosphere in which he lives. But toward the end of the novel, he leads the way through the hole of human waste as Koomson escapes in the period of military intervention. In this symbolic portrait, Armah captures his character as trapped in the world in which he lives (Udumukwu, 1996).

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