

CRISIS OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY IN AFRICAN AESTHETICS

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RESUMO: O artigo coloca questões de grande importância acerca das relações entre arte e política, expressão e opressão e trata com propriedade do problema da liberdade como requisito da produção artística. O papel da arte como negação da condição sub-humana imposta pelo colonizador e a conseqüente concepção da expressão artística como via da recuperação da humanidade autêntica é enfatizado e tratado com a relevância que o tema merece.

UNITERMOS: arte; política; expressão artística; expressão política; opressão

But while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is man's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated. It is affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity.¹

Attempts have been made by African artists to evolve a revolutionary ideology that will negate the evils of colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, imperialism and capitalism. Vacillations and apathy typify the search for such an ideology of development. African artists have not really salvaged modern man from "a profound feelings of powerlessness", which makes him "to conform to anonymous authorities", to use the words of Erich Fromm. This raises a big issue in modern African literature, namely, in spite of the fact that contemporary African artists have a maximum opportunity to develop ideological clarity, they indulge in "mixed-diet" of literary ideologies. This article examines the strategic weaponry of ideology in imaginative creativity. Concepts such as

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(1) Paulo Freire: *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin Books Ltd., England, 1972), p. 20.

"Dysfunctionality", "Conscientization" and "Violence" serve as operational terms.

Colonialism through the process of aculturation creates "a new mental universe in Africa." The crisis is visible in the area of "Psycho-affective equilibrium" and "dependency syndrome", to use the words of Frantz Fanon. Social dysfunctionality created by historical contradictions are recreated in modern African Literature. Ngugi observes:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction, and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other factors cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grain against the gotty background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: Slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against same dwarfing background.²

The third World countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America are embroiled in this cataclysmic force of history. The sustenance of conservative, feudalistic and totalitarian hegemonic structures in Fascist prototypes like South Africa, and colonial and neo-colonial capitalist settings, make inevitable a manifestation of cynical machiavellianism. Capitalism seeks refuge in reactionary violence and the aesthetic culture of subjugation. Comparing the nature of censorship practised in South Africa to that of Soviet Russia and French Enlightenment, T.T. Moyana concludes that "censorship had not yet been developed into such a viciously meticulous science with a well-trained and permanent bureaucratic cops to enforce it."³

In post-colonial African States and other third world countries, progressive governments are heavily policed and disorganized by the strong Intelligence networks of Western powers. The cases of Patrice Lumumba (former Belgian Congo), Nkrumah (Ghana) and General Murtala Mohammed (Nigeria) can be cited. The recent assassination of Samora Machel of Mozambique is the latest of the imperialists' intrigue. The ruling class in many African countries cannot be

(2) See Author's note to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o *Homecoming: Essays On African and Carribean Literature, Culture and Politics*. (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1972), p. xv.

(3) T.T. Moyana: "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa" in *Aspects of South African Literature* (ed.), Christopher Heywood (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1976), p. 89.

exonerated from acts of aggression and repression. The revolutionary forces, especially the intellectuals, face the risk of arduous tortures or even extermination at the order of the ruling class. Prison memoirs such as *The Man Died* and *Detained* expose such administrative nihilism of the African political establishments.

Capitalist-oriented cultures breed all forms of alienation. A study of the imperialist economic ideology is significant for an ideological examination of African literature whether in the colonial or neo-colonial phase. Angus Calder in a letter to Pio Zirimu stresses such ideological relevance:

Economics as an ideology, not a science and development (as aid giving countries define it) forms an integral part of an ideology of exploitation and alienation. This ideology, unchecked, will destroy the world as it has already destroyed the comfort of most of its inhabitants. The artist, if he merely wishes to survive, physically into the middle age cannot exempt himself from political action. He must commit himself to the destruction of a system which destroys humanity.⁴

To him, "this implies an aesthetic which defines itself as primarily anti-bourgeois." He advocates that "the artist must wrest control from the bourgeois aesthetic propagated in films and pulp fiction where ever Pan-Am makes the going great for capitalism."

In their various guises, these sources of social dysfunction are the same factors responsible for the submersion of people's consciousness and which prevent them from perceiving dialectically the essence of their being. The revolutionary commitment of the modern African artist is the recreation of a more coherent, dynamic, intellectual and psychological atmosphere to boost a radical cognition, from which cultural action for freedom can emerge. This is the central thesis of this article.

In *What is to be Done*, Lenin advocates the political education of the working-class. Such education should transcend merely pointing out the contradictions of the society. It should provide means of building critical consciousness, mobilizing the people, engaging in struggle and reflecting on the struggle. Paulo Freire adds the empirical dimension to Lenin's view. History provides Freire an ample chance of developing and testing his paradigm of action, not as a liberal, but a dialectician, revolutionary in his method. Such a programme of mass socialization and mobilization he terms "Conscientization."

(4) Andrew Gurr & Angus Calder (ed.): *Writers in East Africa: Papers From a Colloquium held at the University of Nairobi 1971* (East African Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1974), p. 207.

The central logic of Freire's concept is the "problematization" of the natural, cultural and historical reality in which the masses are immersed.

But to 'problematize' in his sense is to associate an entire populace to the task of codifying total reality into symbols which can generate critical consciousness and empower them to alter their relations with nature and social forces.⁵

Many African countries today have characteristics of "a reflex object society, lacking a sense of nationhood. Backward, illiterate, Antidialogical, Elitist." The masses are still in a state of either intransitive or semi-transitive consciousness. Conscientization thus becomes an essential factor of historical development in the movement from acritical to critical consciousness.

Ross Kidd, adult educator and researcher into the Third World Popular Theatre from Botswana, links the development of such theatre to the empirical strategy of Freire:

All over the Third World organized groups of peasants and workers are rediscovering the potential of people's theatre as a weapon in their struggles for land, better working conditions, and political rights. The new tradition builds on a long history of people's songs, drumming, and puppetry being used in resistance against colonial and other forms of oppression...⁶

Kidd's bibliographical data and field work experiences illustrate the relevance of conscientization as ideo-praxis in revolutionary art. Examples cited include: "Experiments in Community Theatre in the Philippines"; "The RCDA Experience: Organizing the Poor through Cultural Action" in India; "Theatre as Revolutionary Activity: The Escambray in Cuba" and Freire's empirical participation in Guinea-Bissau's revolution.

The impact of such an ideo-praxis is still minimal in Africa. Playwrights and theatres of socialist complexion have rarely extended beyond the gambit of academicism and elitism. Despite what a critic regards as "Osofisan's participatory theatre", the masses are yet to benefit practically from his socialist

(5) Paulo Freire: *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, (Writers and Readers, London, 1976).

(6) Ross Kidd: "People's Theatre, Conscientization and Struggle" (Unpublished, January, 1980), p. 1.

spirit. Before the rehearsals of *Hope of the Living Dead* began, Ola Rotimi advised his casts, "your ultimate obligation is to your audience."⁷ Audience at the National Theatre, Iganmu and the University Ivory Towers or the audience in the theatre of social garbage and dregs? The play's emblem of class struggle is brandished only in the literary theatre, without provoking motivation for change in the real social theatre of oppression. This parodies what he exalts as the "Polaroid (Instamatic)" nature of his audience. Biodun Jeyifous raps the bull by the horns and makes a factual statement representative of the general crisis of revolutionary theatre in Africa:

To my mind, the literary playwrights have not sufficiently clarified the issue of their audience or the publics for which they write. Stated plainly and directly, a popular literary drama will emerge only if, and when there is a conscious wish for its emergence.⁸

Conscientization demands disalienating script-writing from the shackles of academicism and the psychology of production and performance from elitism. Ross Kidd describes and authentic revolutionary theatre:

This use of theatre is not a cathartic one, simply giving the oppressed a chance to get their grievances and frustrations off their chest; nor is it the 'banking' one of the spoon feeding the oppressed with externally prescribed messages, fitting them into a stereotyped developmentalist mould. This is Brechtian theatre, challenging people to look critically at their situation and *change* it, provoking the insight into the ruling class myths controlling consciousness, including the myth that the world cannot be transformed. This turns theatre from a monologue fostering passivity or pseudo-therapy into a dialogue in which the 'audience' are actively engaged in the production of meaning. It converts the 'audience' from passive recipients of received truth to active protagonists in creating a theatrical experience ... critiquing it, and using this analysis ... in working out political strategies and engaging in struggle.⁹

The Kamirithu Educational, Cultural and Community Centre in Limuru in Kenya encouraged this type of theatre. The Centre's objectives include: "Adult

(7) Director's charge to the Actors of *Hope For The Living Dead*. (Delivered by Ola Rotimi on the day of the first reading of the play: Friday February, 1985. Extracted from the production Diary by Lola Oluyide, Stage Manageress.

(8) Biodun Jeyifous: *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*. (Port of Spain, London, 1985, p. 83.

(9) See "People's Theatre: Conscientization and struggle", p. 1.

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Education (adult literacy, continuing education, etc.); cultural development (music, dance drama, etc.); material culture (furniture, basketry, leather-work, music crafts); and health." ¹⁰ The Centre produced *Nghaahika Ndenda*, a play scripted, rehearsed and performed by the masses of the rural setting. Bourgeois democracy stunts human spirits for easy hegemonic control. No wonder, the Kenyan comprador bourgeoisie banned the play and Ngugi himself detained for subversive activities. The historico-literary circumstances that produced *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Nghaahika Ndenda* (1980), *Detained* (1981), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), suggest some conscientizing force in the occurrence of the coup d'état in Kenya in 1982. ¹¹ As early as 1960, Sembene Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood* employs mass mobilization as a "sine qua non" in the proletarian struggle. The absence of a coherent mass mobilization scheme in Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, diminishes its strength as a socialist novel.

Basic to the process of conscientization is the democratization and popularization of African Literature via national languages. Ngugi's crusade for the linguistic decolonization of African Literature is aimed at this revolutionary goal. At the festival of African and Afro-Caribbean writing organized by ICA and Heinemann Publishers (August, 1986) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Ngugi restated his position:

Neo-colonial structures also mean that the ruling regimes in those countries do not actually want to encourage any promotion of progressive ideas being available in the languages spoken by peasants and workers because those ideas might be dangerous. ¹²

In an article, I stress the revolutionary effect of Ngugi's standpoint:

... its long time effect will not be less than the type of iconoclasm that accompanied the invention of printing during the Middle Ages and

(10) Ngugi: *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1981), p. 75.

(11) Ngugi has always emphasized the role of workers, peasants, students, progressive intellectuals in the struggle against imperialism (*Detained* XV). These gave him unflinching support while in detention. Students' and progressive intellectuals were involved in the abortive coup of 1st August, 1982 (*The Weekly Review*, Kenya, October 22, 1982). On the Kenyatta Day, a Arap Moi blacklisted the University of Nairobi for "crudest stupidities of dialectical subversion."

(12) "Literature and Politics: Africa's pen-warriors" in *African Concord*, (14th August, 1986, n° 103), p. 27.

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subsequent popularization of literature and radical consciousness. It is an historical reality that such development destroyed the monopoly of knowledge by the Papacy over Latin Christendom and produced the era of Lutheran Protestantism. ¹³

Paulo Freire's idea of conscientization has a logical relationship to the Fanonian theory of violence, since any programme aimed at dismantling the anti-dialogical method of oppression and its aesthetic culture of subjugation, inevitably invites revolutionary violence. While reactionary violence is galvanised daily by the oppressors, the oppressed are advised to engage in the pacifist semantics of "democratic, constitutional and humanistic approach."

Soyinka professes humanism in art. He contends that "ideology once it departs from humanistic ends is no longer worthy of the name. The ultimate purpose of striving is humanity." ¹⁴ Ideologies including those of violence, must be tempered by humanizing influence. The dysfunctional society in *Season of Anomy* needs a more realistic panacea. His humanist sentiments make the bureaucratic genocidal propaganda thrive unabated in the novel.

The idiosyncratic duality (creator and destroyer) of Soyinka's Muse, Ogun, contained in Yoruba Cosmogony, seems to impose some constraint on his literary ideology. His seizure of the radio station in Old Western Region of Nigeria in 1965, his peace campaign during the Nigerian Civil War and his provocative idea of "gunrunning and holding radio station" at the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in Stockholm in 1967, are the many faces of Ogun fused into the personality of the creative artist. This duality recurs in *Idanre* and almost all his plays. Destruction that dialectically creates and recreates is humanistic. In the passage-rites through the chthonic realm, Ogun, the pathfinder, destroyed to create functional "man-cosmos organization."

Rationalizing on humanist sentiments makes *Season of Anomy* and *Two Thousand Seasons* identical. The later in all its creative force manifests revolutionary violence, ranging from the revolutionary activities of the women in the harem, the implied revolutionary violence in the hunting imagery encapsulated in Anoa's myth, to the guerrilla strategy of the people of "the way." Through authorial comments, Armah contradicts this, detesting the use of arms and probing rhetorically, "for in the face of armed enmity is unarmed

(13) See 'Bayo Ogunjimi', 'Language, Oral Tradition and Social Vision In Ngugi's *Devil On The Cross*.' An article accepted for publication in *UFAHAMU: Journal of African Activist Association*. University of California, Los Angeles, 1984.

(14) Wole Soyinka, "An Interview by Biodun Jeyifous," *Transition*, 42 (1973), p. 62.

courage not merely another hazy name for suicide?"¹⁵ Soyinka commends this ambivalence as "the humanistic recourse to proportion." History of social revolution attests to the truism that whether armed or unarmed, the oppressed will react violently, when stung to the marrow.

Both novelists appreciate revolutionary violence, but like Ofeyi, they detest fouling up "the remnants of (people's) humanity as others do by different means."¹⁶ The revolutionary or humanist artist wants to eat his cake and have it. Humanism is still a rhetorical concept as long as people are politically and economically strangled by the machiavellian apparatus of the state. Such violence emasculates human psyche and physique. Revolutionary violence being an antidote aids psycho-social therapy and has humanism as its ultimate goal.

Soyinka and Armah's ambivalence is further compounded by the ironically depressing views of Robert Fraser. He describes the revolutionary activities of the people of "the way" in *Two Thousand Seasons* as "the small-Unit scale of recent terrorist war fare", just as Majdalany degrades the MauMau activities.¹⁷ This, of course, destroys the futuristic and prophetic vision in Armah's novel. In the face of a conventional army, guerilla warfare is the revolutionary alternative to curb the excesses of neo-colonial capitalist regimes. This probably is the last stage of the struggle against oppression in Third World Countries and the earlier the creative artist expressed this reality the better. This is the epoch, when violence as an ideo-praxis assumes its true empirical and pragmatic values in proletarian revolution.

As ideo-praxis, conscientization and revolutionary violence are yet to assume proper ideological function in African aesthetics. Artists are afraid of being smeared "propagandists" and "anarchists". Those that realise the essence are still struggling in the process of experimentation. The logic of conscientization as an ideological force is that "the child is the father of man." The revolutionary sensibility articulated by Andrew Salkey's children in *Joel Tyson* has rarely formed element of characterization and action in African literature. Since the majority of African Governments have no radical educational programmes, the psychology of the budding generation (the

(15) Ayi Kwei Armah. *Two Thousand Seasons* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1973), p. 141.

(16) Wole Soyinka *Season of Anomy* (Rex Collins, London, 1973), 135.

(17) Robert Fraser. *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah: A Study in Polemical Fiction* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1980), pp. 79. Also, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Home Coming* (Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1972), pp. 26-30. Contemporary Political process has the reactionary and revolutionary forms of guerilla warfare. The latter is the vocation of the oppressed.

generation of the future) is still enslaved by the conservatism of the status-quo. Participants at the Sierra Leonian Conference on Children's Literature in Africa (March, 1983), were shocked by Kole Omotoso's comment that such literature should reflect the contemporary African political reality.¹⁸

The transformation of society through art demands a more pragmatic ideological approach. The fluctuation of ideas and ideals, the inability of many African artists to translate and interpret the historical and materialist perspective of African development to a progressive literary and social vision, adversely affect the emergence of a coherent revolutionary art.

ABSTRACT: This work treats very important questions on the existing crises between art and politics, communication (expression) and oppression as well as the question of freedom as a requisite to artistic production. The role of art as negation of sub-human condition imposed by the colonizers and the consequent conception of artistic expression as a way to regain the authentic marking is emphasized and dealt strongly.

(18) See "Publishing in Nigeria, Writing Wrongs For Children" in *West Africa*, 7th March, 1983.