

**LITERARY IDEOLOGY AND THE CONSTRUCT OF VIOLENCE AND
CRIMINALITY: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON F. O. ORABUEZE'S
MEN BEHIND THE MASKS, ADAMU KYUKA USMAN'S HOPE IN
ANARCHY MEKINZEWI'S AND THE DEAD SING ...JUSTICE**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the representation of violence and criminality in literary works, with limited focus on select Nigerian novels. In the study of literature as the language of representation, Aristotle's concept of mimesis has come to stay as representation. However, for many a modern realistic critic, mimesis implies that literary criticism will be vacuous and trite if it does not consider the writing and reading environment. But even in reflecting the society, literature and literary criticism still maintain the otherness status of the art. Thus, from a Marxist and Post colonialist perspectives, this paper shall advance Northrop Frye's view that the critic is no longer imaginatively subjected to a literary work but tries to make sense out of it, not by going to some historical contexts or by commenting on the immediate experience of reading, but by seeing its structure within literature and literature within culture. Here, we bear in mind that culture is dynamic and has language as its vehicle and the critic deals with language as represented in the work under scrutiny. Violence and criminality have animated the words in F.O Orabueze's Men Behind the Masks, Adamu Kyuka Usman's Hope in Anarchy and Mekinzevi's And the Dead Sing... Justice. These artists have incorporated and built on the basic form patterns of language to create art from these global phenomena that have assumed the proportion of "modern culture." In identifying loss of social value as the bane of violence and criminality and proffering intellectual militancy as a possible solution, this critic still relies on Northrop Frye's view that literary criticism is both centripetal and centrifugal, that is, moving inwardly towards the structure of a text and outwardly toward the society and the outer world; one relying on syntax and lexical choice to

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delineate characters and establish mood and the other relying on the elements of history and visual aesthetics to draw conclusions. It is the beauty of literature to hold this apparent contradiction in creative tension.

Key Words: Language, Literature, Representation, Marxism, Post colonialism, Violence, Criminality.

Introduction

From time immemorial, literature, as the language of representation, has been deployed by literary artists to depict life in the society. Representation, here, also conveys the idea of literature as the re-making of reality; where the tripartite principles of probability, possibility and plausibility are consciously and unconsciously exploited through defamiliarization of the 'muthos' and the deliberate act of distantiation. The classical Greek texts furnish exquisite examples in the Trojan wars just as the Shakespearean age literature depicts the Anglo-Roman wars as well as the controversies that trailed the English throne and the royal family. Even the romantic age with its apparent obsession with nature and aesthetic values, still reflects the social realities in the literature of that time. African and other black writers are no exception, as they have historically employed literature to capture or retell their experiences at the various stages of their evolution; from the pre-colonial time to the present socio-political debacle and other global phenomena; including violence and criminality being orchestrated by various forms of post neocolonialism and their consequent disillusionment.

Thus, Olaudah Equiano's moving tale about the overarching consequences of the transatlantic slave trade on the indigenous peoples, especially Africa, and their identity, which became warped, is seen as one of the earliest representations of global violence and dehumanizing criminality in world literature. It not only retells these experiences but also shows the attempt by African writers to reaffirm the African identity. Chinua Achebe's earliest novels share the same category with Equiano's text as dialectics of violence and terror between two or more cultures and civilizations. *A man of the people*, for instance, has been generally described as "highly prophetic" because of the political violence in the Nigeria of late sixties which culminated in a bloody civil war, the gory details of which the novel surprisingly foreshadowed; having been published just few months before the escalation of the violence. Other writers like Wole Soyinka, Chukwuemeka Ike, Ayi Kwe Armah, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, to

mention but a few, have since then employed their arts, through prose, poetry or drama, to represent the social realities of the time through the language of the literary, thus confirming Ngugi's assertion that:

What Achebe has done in *A man of the People* (and *No longer at Ease*) is to make it impossible or inexcusable for other African writers to do other than address themselves directly to (contemporary social realities) their audience in Africa... and to tell them that such, problems are their concern (Ngugi 1992:54).

In this paper, therefore, attempt is made to expose violence and criminality as menacing global phenomena that have served as provocations for literary creativity to contemporary writers. The principal texts for the discourse are F.O. Orabueze's *Men Behind the Masks*, Adamu Kyuka Usman's *Hope in Anarchy* and Mekinzewi's *And the Dead sing... Justice*, though panoramic references to supporting texts are made, as per intertextuality.

Violence and Criminality: Two Sides of One Coin

The relationship between violence and criminality is like that between the two sides of one coin. It is either that violence begets criminality or criminality begets violence. Although all criminal activities are not violent it goes without saying that no act of lawlessness can go without some kind of violence to either individuals or the society. From the different definitions of violence, the bottom line is that it has to do with any behaviour that involves physical force intended to hurt or kill somebody; to damage or destroy something. Violent acts include the use of brute force, cruelty, savagery and other barbarous behavior. Violence, as deliberate wielding of "naked power", ultimately brings about physical and psychological or emotional damage to both individuals and the society as a whole.

Criminality on the other hand, is seen as any unlawful act that is punishable by law at different levels of authority. Although the Encyclopedia Britannica explains that the word crime, which is derived from the Greek word "krime", refers to intellectual mistake or an offence against the community rather than private or moral wrong, invariably, it is often the private or moral wrongs that often graduate into criminal activities such as murder, rape, abortion, armed robbery, kidnapping, alcoholism, drug abuse, embezzlement, forgery, etc, which are punishable by different degrees of imprisonment or even execution. Here then lies the dialectical nexus

between violence and criminality and in the foregoing discourse we shall find how they have animated the words of the texts under scrutiny.

Literary Ideology; the Construct and Criticism of Violence and Criminality

Both Marxism and Post colonialism as literary theories have identified this “naked rampage of power” as the breeding ground of violence and criminality based on facts from the political history of many nations of the world, whether developed or not. For the Marxist and Postcolonial theorists, political violence, socio-economic crisis, resulting from war or poor government policies, and all forms of domestic violence and criminal activities are a result of the stratification in the society and the persistent imperialist and neo-colonial tendencies. While the Marxists decry despotic hegemony, capitalism and the Machiavellian approach to politics, the Postcolonialists see the tyranny in political leadership resulting in violence in the society simply as the replication of the violence that functioned (as colonial administrative subterfuge) before the independence of the colonized nations. Thus, while the Marxist sees violence and criminality as resulting from social imbalance - the subjugation of the poor by the rich, the post-colonialist sees these as hangover from the colonial experiment that has perpetually dehumanized the indigenous people. Thus, in his preface to Frantz Fanon’s political treatise, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre remarks that when the European elite undertook to manufacture native elite, they picked out promising adolescents from the colonized peoples and branded as with hot iron and made them to act like the Europeans in all their learning and sophistication. But then he adds:

A new generation came on the scene, which changed the issue. With unbelievable patience its writers and poets tried to explain to us that our values and the true facts their lives did not hang together, and that could neither reject them completely nor yet assimilate them (Fanon,8)

Sartre’s view coheres with the ideological bent that the assertion of a political unconscious presupposes that writers of any nations have the task of analyzing and exploring the multiple paths that lead to unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts. Jameson (1981) alludes to this when he posits that,

only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while

disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles with those of the present day.

Thus, in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, we read:

Spring water flowing to the desert, where you flow there is no regeneration. The desert takes. The desert knows no giving. To the giving water of your flowing it is not the nature of the desert to return anything but destruction. Spring water flowing to the desert, your future is extinction. (1987: ix)

Armah's emotional flight in the above extract is a typical example of reflection on the society and history through literature. In his flow of metaphor, Armah describes the Arab and European invaders as the desert while the subjugated races are the flowing water whose future is but extinction. And for him, this captures the violence and criminality that colonialism has meted out on the indigenous peoples. Thus, Nwahunanya (2007:333), paraphrases Kofi Anyidoho as stating that "although history is Armah's point of departure, he transforms historical experience and subverts and recreates history". And because Armah's work is literature, Nwahunanya avers that, "...this subversion and recreation calls for certain adjustments in the way we apprehend historical reality".

Both Armah's ideology and the perspective of this paper are in tandem with the axiom in Wole Soyinka's postulation that, "One of the social functions of literature is the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purpose of social direction" (1976:106). But it is from the structure of these texts; their syntax and lexical choices that delineate their characters and give them form, that we can move to the elements of history and aesthetics that make the texts relevant to their contexts.

Collapse of Social Values and the Rise of Violence and Criminality

In F.O. Orabueze's *Men Behind the Masks* the picture is painted of corrosive violence and criminality, where everybody is indicted, from the rank and file to the cream of the society. Although the indictment is coming from the mouth of criminals in their executive hideout, the ironic tinge of the narrative echoes the parody encapsulated in the title of the novel. This parody reverberates from the beginning to the end of the novel. The thematic import of the novel is not just about armed robbers who mask their faces to hide their identity while operating but also about the mass of the people who

masquerade as saints but are actually wolves in sheep's clothing. With the preponderance of real historical names like Anini and Iyamu, the text simply finds a comfortable space in the catalogue of realistic novels. Only a few Nigerians would not remember Lawrence Anini, the notorious armed robber who caused many people nightmare in the early eighties and the corrupt police commissioner, George Iyamu, who was his aid in crime; yet Orabueze's novel is neither a history of Nigeria nor a text book on criminology. Rather, in this art of literary defamiliarization, the narrative vindicates John Updike's assertion that, "fiction is nothing less than the subtlest instrument for self-examination and self-display that mankind has invented yet". Thus, in the first chapter of the novel we read:

This is a shameless society...even when you make it by selling human heads and parts to other millionaires to make more dirty money; you are still the toast of everybody in society. Even the Pharmacists import expired drugs as good ones. The medical doctors take money that runs into thousands before they can touch a patient in government hospitals. The judges also take money to pervert the course of justice. The policemen give arms and ammunitions to armed robbers and relevant prices of information for their operations. The civil servants are not left out, after all they take money before they can do their jobs for which they are paid. It is no longer a secret that every top civil servant owns a building or two in the big cities. And the lecturers, they also sell their handouts. The customs men and women allow contraband goods into the country through the borders on payment of bribes. Everybody is thinking and talking about personal gratification... (8-9).

The above tirade coming from the mouth of the leader of an armed robbery gang, Keally, is not just an indictment of all the category of people mentioned but, above all, a catalogue of reasons why the gang cannot stop from their nefarious and violent acts. Thus, for Kate, a female member of the gang, "It is only foolish girls that waste their time on illusionary sentiment called love. For me, it is cash and carry" (8). And for Toby, another member of the gang, "all that I want is first of all to make my own money and become a millionaire, no matter the means I use to make it, it doesn't matter how man makes his wealth" (8). Everybody in the society is indicted in one way or the other, so the leader of the gang queried, "Why should the armed robbers

be tied to stakes and shot when they are caught? After all everybody in the Nigerian society is one form of parasite..." (9)

The church or the religious circle is not spared from this indictment, as Mr. Curu, the corrupt and avaricious contactor has thrown church title and religious creed to the wind and declares:

I want my own paradise on earth here, knighthood or no knighthood. Today known armed robbers, murderers and fraudsters and people rumored to deal in human parts as I deal in motor spare parts are conferred with knighthood (48)

The implication is that in a society where money has become the measure of all value, and everybody is seeking it by all means, integrity is thrown to the dog. Mr. Okonta, the bank manager is still nursing the emotional wound of his amorous escapade with Jane, a close friend of his wife, Doris but it hasn't prevented him from playing along with a robbery gang that plans to attack his own bank as a way of positioning himself financially in case his bank sacks him. The gang is succeeding because Mr. Okonta has already fallen prey to the seductive look of Jane, the female member of the gang assigned to lure him. The narrative voice describes his inner resolve as follows:

He has to pay her visit in the night, the noose is now on his neck, and he must go. He either succeeds with the project or sinks with it. There is no middle way... he has seen the hand writing on the wall. This may be the salvation he has been waiting for these past three months. (33)

A similar picture is painted in Mekinzewi's novel, *And the Dead Sing... Justice*, where the young Kimberly Dudu is desperate to amass wealth and power by all means and thus has to sacrifice his mentor because the demand of the ritual is that he must bring the fresh head of a wealthy and intelligent person. He has to obey this command at the climax of the ritual: "You are Kimberly Dudu, Drink the essence of your superior, and surpass him, to achieve your ambition for immense wealth and worldly power. Drink! All! Now" (253).

What he has to drink is the substance made from the fresh brain of his master Chief Kento, whose family members are still trying to reconcile their missing father with a headless corpse found lying along a lonely path. Thus, like Doctor Faustus, in Christopher Marlowe's play of that title, who stops at nothing to employ Mephistopheles to his ruin, Kimberly Dudu has reached the point of no return in his mad quest for prominence.

The criminal tendency in a society that derides the intellectuals and truly honest people is represented in the plight of the likes of Prof Ebusa who has become the butt of children's merriment because he is still driving the same car he drove in the 60s despite the fact that he has trained all his children in the universities abroad. The society's negative assessment which drives people into violence and criminality is captured thus: "After all, all these lecturers, the professors, the medical doctors and the lawyers in their towns what have they achieved with their education" (42)

Thus, in *The Dead Sing... Justice*, Professor Ogbede accepts to serve as the Commissioner for Public Utilities under the ritual killer, Kimberly Dudu, who has now become the new Governor of Biaramo State, a fictional state in Mekinzewi's Nigeria, Kimberly Dudu, "a mere third rate student at the time he, the commissioner, was already a Senior Lecturer in the same university", yet the narrative voice tells us that Professor Ogbede follows him sheepishly. Why? Because he (the professor), "became convinced... that more pragmatic wisdom for surviving in the modern Nigerian world lay outside the humdrum wall of a university" (33). Thus, he immediately became "an ardent student and disciple of the governor" (33-34). Consequently, he religiously adheres to the Governor's method of fraudulent enrichment unmistakably couched in the following words:

If you finish the projects you budgeted for, what will there be left for those who will take over the government from you to accomplish? The reason I have appointed you a commissioner is not so that you will commission accomplished projects; rather that we initiate brilliant projects, and share the budget costs for executing them between ourselves and the lucky contractors. (32)

The above extract echoes the ironic tone in A.N Akwanya's *Moments*, where the persona in the poem, 'All The Things We Started', has this to say: "You don't know how young a country/ we are/ But you can tell/ from all the things/ we started" (8). So, the hallmark of a new nation is starting "all the things", whether good or bad. Unfortunately, the persona continues, "after a dream about adaptation of technology/and all:/ he forgot to forgot to continue/ what he began to build" (9) ; thus giving rise to the abandoned projects syndrome, which is criminality in the highest order. Walter Rodney (2005:22) has this in mind when he writes that, "It has been noted with irony that the principal 'industry' of many underdeveloped countries is administration".

And so, inflation of contract costs, falsification of figures and outright forgery become the order of the day in Kimberly Dudu's administration, as the commissioner enters into partnership with a foreign firm from the far East, "that was very keen to make an in-road into the Nigerian government business scene, to benefit from the abundant, prodigally managed oil wealth the country was flaunting recklessly" (34).

While Orabueze and Mekinzewi mirror a society where violence and criminality have eaten up the fabrics of every system, Usman's *Hope in Anarchy* is a tale of the effect of these monstrous evil on the poor and the less privileged in the society. The narrative voice tells us from the very opening of the novel that:

Ahoka stretched, turned and gradually sat up under the bridge. He was a tall, fair complexioned boy always wearing a brooding expression on his face. Asabeni bridge became his only home since the day he and his father were thrown out of their one room apartment in Dosewa because they could not pay the three thousand rida monthly rent demanded by their landlord (1).

The above description of Ahoka, the protagonist of the tale is a good synopsis of the entire novel. A promising young man who lives under the bridge with his father because they cannot pay their house rent; not because the man has no money to pay but because:

For three years, he had gone to the army legion office in Beku almost begging to be paid his gratuity of four hundred rida. But he always returned home with baleful story of a corrupt bureaucratic bottleneck that was denying him his gratuity (12)

Eventually, "after backhanding the pension officer and the desk clerk", he gets paid but on that same night armed robbers broke into his house and took the entire money in an attack that left one of the robbers dead from their own gun. Such was the plight of the rank and file in *Hope in Anarchy* whereas in the same Republic there are the likes of Chief Kento, who have enough to eat and throw away. Chief Kento belongs to the bourgeois class described in the novel as the "Sharks", who with the military brass connive to impoverish the poor through coup, counter coup and unhealthy political alliance with the defunct colonial masters. Thus, when the equation

committee start their violent revolution, called exorcism, no shark is considered good to live.

Whereas Ahoka and his fellow destitute choose to take solace under the bridge and survive on the picking of garbage around the residence of the sharks, in *Men Behind the Mask*, the victims of similar executive criminality, social injustice and government malfunction choose a different course of action; to unleash violence on a corrupt society and political system that cannot provide for her teeming youth population. This is succinctly captured in the words of a member of the robbery gang:

It is not what I had wanted as a kid, even as a student in the university. I had a dream then. I had my hopes. I had all the aspirations that could move a mountain. All these are like mists that disappeared before the morning sun... In fact, this is a country that destroys her children, especially the young and the innocent (9).

The Myth and Fact of Intellectual Militancy

Intellectual militancy refers to the idea that literary works have been employed as means of redressing social injustice which includes violence and criminality. How and to what extent this assumption has been vindicated raises the question about the myth and fact of intellectual militancy. Has literature actually helped in any way to shape or direct the history of any nations? How has literature been employed to question the basis and legitimacy of state violence; the criminal tendencies inherent in political oppression, and all forms of dictatorship? Are there proven cases of success where the pen became actually mightier than the sword as literary artists, through their works, changed the unbecoming status quo and replaced it with just and equitable order, without necessarily, calling to arms?

Duhan Roshni (2015), has contended that literature is a reflection of both the good values and ills of the society, "either as corrective function to make the society realize and correct its mistakes or to project the good values for people to emulate". Thus, he argues, it is impossible to find a work of literature that excludes the attitudes, morale, and values of the society, since no writer has been brought completely unexposed to the world around him. But for Albrecht (1954), influence and social control are the main implications in most theories of the relationship between literature and society reflection. He explains that "although literature is interpreted as reflecting norms and values... the process of class struggle and certain types

of social facts and social control articulate closely with one version of reflection, though to a limited extent in complex, dynamic societies”.

Thus, even though the success of literature may not have been stupendous regarding the questions raised above, it is obvious that it has often laid the ground work for change and intellectual awakening. The literary artist, consciously and unconsciously, is saddled with the role of portraying the strategies of and upturning injustice and at the same time speak up for the less privileged in the society. Drawing from Northrop Frye’s notion of literary criticism being both centripetal and centrifugal, even the formalists, with their avid aestheticism, still find a way of playing down on the dreamy, farcical literature that concentrates only on art from the inside with no attention to the outside. This kind of political engagement through fictional writings has been seen in the texts under discussion by their not only critiquing and putting in perspective the trajectories and menacing grips of violence and criminality in the society but also suggesting the panacea

For instance, in *Men Behind the Masks*, in the midst of corrosive violence and criminality, it is shown that there are still people who would not soil their garments. Alex would not allow the Greek gift from Mr Curu to subvert the company’s schedule and award him contract even though they are secondary school friends. Prof Ebusa is not worried about the ridicule of the society over his outdated car, which mockingly call a moving house, having been exposed to understand that the life of a man is not measured by the abundance of his wealth but on the good legacy bequered to posterity.

Similarly, *Hope in Anarchy* is structured as an indictment on the revolutionary leaders who have come up at one time or the other claiming to be the messiah people are waiting for but turning immediately into vampires, like Napoleon and his group of hegemonic pigs in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Thus, the bottom line of the story is the futility of attempting to stop evil using evil means. The Equation committee known as the movement for exorcism, whose aim is to wipe out the corrupt military brass and their indulgent politicians eventually turned out to be more corrupt and brutal. Their method includes raping and maiming their victims which incidentally often include innocent members of the society. Thus, they end up destroying themselves like in Okpewho’s *Tides*, where the protagonist tries to mobilize the citizens to rise in arms against the degradation of their lands and waters by the oil companies.

It is the same scenario in *And the Dead Sing... Justice*, where nemesis catches up with Kimberly Dudu as the man who prepared his charm confesses to Chief Kento's daughter, Amaka, who plans to unmask the giant, as no evil will go unpunished. Thus, in the last paragraph of *Men Behind the Masks*, we read that, "The small stream that toddlers had crossed to pour out waste on the hill had swollen into a violent and turbulent river by the drainages that discharge their water into it"

These words are loaded with symbols and meanings. Beyond the violent turbulence of the stream – turned – into – river, one sees the inescapable consequences of violence and criminality on both the perpetrators and the powers that aid and abate these evil. The corpse of Keally, the dreaded leader of the robbery gang is being tossed about by the violent river, having been shot dead by the instrumentality of the law. But ironically the corpse of another leader of a team, the soldier who has executed justice on Keally, is also being washed down by the same river. His cry for help is unheeded. Where are the members of his team? For inexplicable reasons they are not there to help. Kwasi who would have helped is more interested in watching his shanty being carried away by the violent breeze and the fire he made which is being put out by the heavy rain. So, he is helpless, though he sees the two bodies being carried away.

Here, one sees the stylistic exploitation of nature in literary narrative. The imagery of violent breeze, heavy rain and the mere stream that toddlers use to cross which has grown into a violent river as a result of the activities of drainages, symbolically represent the corrosive power of violence and criminality, which appear inconsequential at the beginning but eventually grow to overwhelm and consume the entire community. Thus, both the armed robber and the soldier are destroyed by the violent forces of nature, because, "The slave will always die with their masters because they obey the echo of their master's voice" (*Men Behind the Mask*, 290).

But in spite of the ugly picture, the narrative implies that there is hope for the living. Thus, "The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started" and as Kwasi raises his eyes, he sees that, "The sky was laced with several silver linings", and he smiles, turns and walks back up to the hill. Though the walk up the hill may be tasking, there is assurance that behind every dark cloud, there is a silver lining. Thus, no amount of violence and criminality can totally obliterate the light which represents good conscience and morality. In the end, good must triumph over evil.

Conclusion

Literature is the language of defamiliarization and as such, even though social and historical events provide the provocation for its making, its truths are not meant to be verified. Thus, the difference between the social critic who appropriates (or misappropriates) literary texts and the literary critic who is conscious of the context of reading and writing is that while the social critic starts from a study of the society to the application of theory and finally to the literary text, the literary critic begins from literature as an organized language, to theory as a basis for the classification of binaries and finally to the society as represented in the literary texts. This calls for reconciliation between the mimetic language of criticism which is transparent and the opaque language of criticism which would severely restrict or quite deny the mimetic reference of the work of art. This is what we have attempted to do, by studying *Men Behind the Masks, And the Dead Sing... Justice and Hope in Anarchy*. The intellectual mooring is that even in its "ontological situs" as art, literature is capable of engendering social change without losing its 'Otherness'. We have seen this in the idio-aesthetic and radicalized intellectual engagement applied by F.O. Orabueza, Mekinzewi and Adamu Usman, in artistically presenting their perspectives on the existential problems of violence and criminality and how to overcome them.

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