

“The Nigerian Novel and the Imperative of Good Governance: A Critical Study of Joseph Edeki’s *The African Dream*”

Jude Aigbe Agho, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria

In all these novels, the oligarchy to be found at the top of the party hierarchy is depicted as vulgar, sensual and uncultured. The luxury of ministerial offices and official residences is blatant and extravagant, cynicism is the order of the day, drinking to excess frequent, and power is simply a way of getting rich. ... (Claude Wauthier. *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*. 1978: 320)

In whose name should the ‘handful’ monopolize the riches of our countries? In whose name should they live in excessive luxury while the rest strive to obtain food? These are some of the questions that the African writer asks himself, or at least those a self-respecting African writer should ask himself. (Coovi Innocent Datondji, 1980: 88)

Abstract

As can be seen from the above epigraphic statements, the image of governance in novels written by African writers about civilian governments and military regimes in African nations has generally been bleak, negative, directionless and vacuous, especially so in novels about post-independence Africa, where power has become in the hands of the ruling class, whether civilian or military, a conduit-pipe for self-aggrandizement, embezzlement of public funds, corruption, graft and hero-worshipping. African writers across the continent, starting with Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, Soyinka in *The Interpreters*, Festus Iyayi in *Violence, The Contract and Heroes* and Abubakar Gimba in *Sunset for a Mandarin*, through Ghana’s Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments* and *Osiris Rising*, to Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow* have generally depicted governance in Africa as we have painted above. The attitude of indignation and protest expressed in the above-mentioned texts is not misplaced, but derives from the writers’ frustration resulting from the truncation of the joy of the masses of the African people shortly after the attainment of political independence as a result of the derailment of their pre-independence expectations by the African ruling class.

However, so many years after the attainment of independence in African nations and states, there is the need for African writers as custodians of the values of their societies, reformers and beacons of hope of the African people to foist a paradigm shift from the hitherto nihilistic and pessimistic outlooks of their creative works to

one that is essentially supportive of the general drive to re-orientate and transform the society for good. This is one sure way of sustaining the growth of democracy and good governance in Africa. In Nigeria, this shift is clearly seen in one novel by a Nigerian writer, namely: Joseph Edoki in *The African Dream*.¹ This study is based essentially on this text as it critically assesses governance as portrayed in the spotlighted novel against the backdrop of the realities that are observable in the larger society.

Introduction

The term governance as used in this study refers to the process of ruling and governing a nation or state by a constituted civilian government or, as it is in some parts of Africa and the Third World, by a military regime, which though anachronistic, is commonplace in this part of the world. According to Goran Hyden (quoted in Galadima, 1998), “governance is the conscious management of regime structure with a view to enhancing the legitimacy of the public realm” (116). Whether as an activity or a process, governance entails “organizing and managing legitimate power structures, entrusted by the people, to provide law and order, protect fundamental human rights, ensure rule of law and due process of law; provide for the basic needs and welfare of the people and the pursuit of their happiness” (Galadima: 116-117). Implied in the notion of good governance are virtues such as accountability, responsiveness (responsibility) and transparency.

In Africa, where there is a proliferation of one-party and military dictatorships in some of the nations, governance has been characterized by the blatant corruption of the ruling class, visionless leadership, political instability, corruption, poverty, self perpetuation in government and hero-worshipping of leaders who see themselves, more or less, as messiahs leading their people into the proverbial promise land which is a haven of comfort and other goodies of life. In practical terms, post-independence African nations, with the possible exception of Tanzania and South Africa, which have had a fairly good history of good leadership, are wallowing in economic misery and this is the predictable outcome of bad leadership. In this situation of bad governance, the clarion call for good governance and the cultivation of democratic ideals which the novel designated for this study proselytizes is timely. In the following sections of this study, an attempt is made to discuss the spotlighted novel, especially from the point of view of its encapsulation of good governance as an ideal in Africa. As earlier mentioned, this is one sure way of sustaining the growth of democracy and good governance in Africa.

Good Governance as an Imperative in Joseph Edoki’s *The African Dream*

In *The African Dream*, the author fulfils one of the cardinal expectations from a truly committed writer, which is that African writers should strive to use their works to deconstruct the social problems that are afflicting the African society by providing solutions or credible ways of bailing the continent out of such problems. In Africa, where we have had several instances of political quagmire arising from visionless and misdirected leadership, where political leaders want to remain forever in office and would not budge whether the masses of the people are crushed to death in the wave of the violence which is orchestrated to achieve such dastardly ambitions, as we have

seen in recent times in Kenya and Zimbabwe, the message and vision enunciated in the novel are timely.

In coming to terms with these parameters of social commitment, the author of the novel attempts a social re-engineering of the African society, offering a revised model of leadership and good governance as alternatives to the festering problems of visionless leadership, bad governance and political instability in Africa. As I pointed out in an earlier study of the text, “by its patently patriotic and nationalistic anchorage, the novel attempts a demystification of the view, popular among many, that Africa is the haven of corrupt-prone governments by showing the possibility of having a clear-headed, focused and target-getting government in Africa. The novel thus proposes a blueprint for the regeneration of democratic governance in Africa” (Jude Agho, 2006: 30).

Dr. Amedumego Fernando, a 34-year old philosophy lecturer at the Apex University in Savannah and the novel’s protagonist, coming from a background asphyxiated by poverty, deprivation and lack, envisions for his country Savannah a clear-headed government that will put the country back on track after the despoliations and purposelessness orchestrated by past governments, especially those of Sir Afiam Dodo, General Edgar Mollan and the incumbent Colonel Allison Aile. Although somewhat idealistic on account of his youthful exuberance, fate and the tenacity of his faith in what he can do if given the chance propel the protagonist to the centre stage in the political evolution of his country. From his initial ambition to run for the presidential election in his country as an independent candidate, Fernando is adopted as the presidential nominee of the Conservative Convention when the party became embroiled in internal wrangling due to dissatisfaction over allocations of ministerial seats and undue antagonism between the two most influential chieftains of the party: Chiefs Ikoyiko and Dan Looker. The latter chieftain, who makes it possible for Fernando to become his party’s presidential nominee, also works out an outright merger with the socialist party of Sule Umonte to ensure victory at the polls for Fernando.

Fernando’s presidential victory is an embattled victory since he was only invited to the Conservative Convention for the presidential election, having been an erstwhile independent candidate. Now as president of Savannah, he does not truly belong to the Conservative Convention, which has an overwhelming majority in both arms of the National Assembly of the referent country in the text. Die – hard members of opposition in the Senate, especially Chief Ernest Chicom, the Senate president and his clique are set to frustrate the effort of Fernando with the threat of impeachment within his first year in office or better still to stifle him with funds to execute his people-oriented programmes such as free education, free medical health programme and gainful employment for the masses of the people. Tasking and daunting as these problems appear, Fernando is determined to make a success of the mandate given to him by the Savanese people as their president.

As president, Fernando leaves no one in doubt about his altruism. He is ready to make the necessary changes that will transform the lives of the citizenry through exemplary leadership. He not only runs an open administration, ready to make himself available, not only to the members of the elite class alone, but to the truck-pushers,

carpenters, market women and other ‘dregs of humanity’ in the society, he is ready to fight the monstrosity of corruption and triumph over it. As against the practice of past Heads of State of Savannah getting a yearly gratification of one million dollars from Chief Ralph Ozidi, Chairman of the Merigo Chambers of Commerce and Industries, Fernando rejects the offer, saying: “I don’t need that kind of gift, okay? I suggest you donate the one million dollars to our schools and research institutes or to the ‘Poverty Society of Africa’” (241).

This no-nonsense disposition, which signals the dawn of accountability in governance in the referent society in the text, is replicated in many other circumstances by Fernando. For example, Mallam (Sir) Chief Isa Megadu, the building contractor who offers to buy a private jet for Fernando and who had earlier given a whopping sum of fifty million pounds to Angela, the president’s wife, all to unduly influence Fernando to award him a ten billion pounds building contract is rebuffed with the president also unashamedly returning the bribe accepted by his wife. This is clearly a vivid demonstration of his pre-election campaign dictum, which he articulates thus: “I believe in a noble cause and for this cause I am set to pay the supreme sacrifice. I am prepared to live and die for my fatherland. I am prepared to lead and to leave behind a good legacy ...” (75).

The author necessarily imbues Fernando as a leader with practical resourcefulness. He is a calculative and forthright leader who knows the usefulness of planning. As a first step towards addressing the problems of hunger, poverty and unemployment in his country, he directs his ministers to furnish him, on a daily basis, the number and names of jobless youths in the country as well as the varying prices of common foodstuffs in different parts of the country. These are the raw data he requires to formulate an economic blueprint to transform the lives of the citizenry of Savannah. To stem the tide of materialism in the people and re-orientate their age-long mentality foisted by the wanton corruption and primitive accumulation of wealth exemplified by the members of the ruling class, Fernando designs a blueprint for accentuating the creative ingenuity of Savanese. Monetary rewards and honours are given to inventors to encourage technological growth and productive agriculture is given a boost under his green revolution programme in order to achieve food sufficiency and eradicate hunger and poverty in the nation. Not only this, he revolutionizes education in the country by making primary and secondary education completely free of charge. Hospitals are refurbished and filled with essential drugs to minister to the health needs of the citizenry.

In carrying out these reforms orchestrated by his government, Fernando relegates his family to the background, thus emphasizing his selflessness. Not wanting to be misconstrued by his people or become the subject of sensational journalism, he refuses to build a house for his father or even for himself during his tenure. Again, he is able to curtail the pressures from his wife who sees nothing wrong in enriching himself while in office. Just when his wife’s attitude was getting out of hand, especially after the holocaust contrived by the opposition threatened to smear his image, he detains Angela, his wife, in a confinement and eventually divorces her. This underlines the fact that the reformation programmes that Fernando outlines to transform the nation of Savannah must first start with his family. Once this is achieved, the larger nation is

ready to follow the leader all the way.

To combat the problem of corruption in a country already used to the practice of illicit enrichment by its public servants is a gargantuan task. But a transparently honest leader, which Fernando exemplifies, must not shy away from this monstrous problem, which has become the bane of most Third World nations all over the world. Savannah is a country with a sad history of corrupt and visionless leadership. As the narrative voice in the novel tells us:

The story that is now history is about General Edgar Mollan, a former Head of State of this country who used his privileged position to amass stupendous wealth. While in office, the dictator made sure every major government contractor paid twenty percent of the contract sum awarded to him into his foreign bank accounts. ... This meant all the contracts had to be inflated, executed poorly or abandoned. When the Head of State left office, he had accumulated over ten billion U.S. dollars in his foreign bank accounts. (68)

This illicit enrichment is replicated in the other successive regimes and even by those like Chief Halle Bashal who had served in various other capacities in previous governments. It is for the same reason that the National Assembly under the leadership of Chief Chicom tries to frustrate the passing of the appropriation bill, wanting the president to bribe the members before the bill is passed; an action which makes the president to suspend and eventually imprison the members of his legislative arm of government for being corrupt.

To build on this sanitization exercise, Fernando constitutes a probe panel to try all those who had served in previous administrations, either as Heads of State, governors or heads of government parastatals. He instituted the process of asset declarations, personally appearing before the panel to declare his own assets, forfeiting to the state those assets his detractors had clandestinely registered in his name. Assets corruptly acquired by all past civilian or military leaders of Savannah are confiscated by the state and monies recouped from frozen bank accounts owned by them are used to improve the lot of the citizenry.

For his unparalleled display of selflessness and his success in bringing joy to the life of the average Savanese, the people reelect Fernando for a second term of four years as president on an independent platform, and even when a military junta headed first by Sergeant John Kadenya and then by General Maxwell Sokpan disrupts his government through a coup d'etat, the Savanese people rise to his defence, many losing their lives to reinstate him to power. Again, the Savanese people, desirous of honouring Fernando and ensuring that he continues to rule them press for amendments to the Savanese constitution to enable the president have a third and possibly a fourth term in office. Although the National Assembly of Savannah accedes to the request of the citizens, Fernando refuses to give his assent to the amendment, believing that "No leader is indispensable. There are so many people who can do far better than what I have done. After all, if I hadn't the chance to prove myself, nobody would have known

I could do it" (434).

This is a particularly important lesson to African heads of government who want to cling to power forever, even when they have become unpopular. The recent Kenyan ethnic crises which came on the heels of a presidential election in which the incumbent President Mwai Kibaki, who hails from a major tribe that has always provided leadership for the country since independence, was accused of outmaneuvering his opposition candidate, who clearly won the election, even after so many years in office, clearly attest to this fact. So also is the Zimbabwean scenario where President Robert Mugabe after 28 years as president of Zimbabwe was reluctant to allow room for other candidates to take over power from him. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo is not left out of the list of power-hungry African leaders. It is on record that after successfully completing two terms in office, he tried albeit unsuccessfully, to institute a third mandate by constitutional amendment. By enunciating a model of governance, as we have discussed above, which is overly practicable in Africa, as an alternative to the festering problem of bad governance, visionless leadership and absolutism in power wielding by African political leaders, Joseph Edoki, the author of *The African Dream* performs a cardinal responsibility; "that of a visionary reconstruction of the society with an eye set on solving basic social problems in Africa" (Agho, 2006: 41).

As I have said in the early part of this essay, one important way of fostering an enduring democratic culture in Africa is for our writers and other custodians of culture to try to cue in to the general reorientation of the African people, now being canvassed, for the good of the entire continent by supporting the growth of democratic ideals through their creative works. Writers should develop only positive attitudes in their works that can bring out the best from Africa, not negative attitudes that will make the rest of the world jeer at Africa as a retarded or cursed continent.

Nihilism and unbridled pessimism should give way to reformism backed by genuine commitment in art.² Social criticism as an artistic creed is desirable in the African literary tradition, but it must be made to wear a human face. Even when a writer is decidedly peeved about certain reprehensible developments in the society, he does not need to become pessimistic in his vision, but can work towards reformation and transformation of the society even while still unhappy. After all, satire as an artistic medium must eventuate in reformation, properly understood and applied. The reason why a writer satirizes an object, a character or an institution in his work is to reform the butt of his satire, so that a positive change is made possible. Understood in this sense, the writer functions as the conscience of his society; he is a barometer gauging the pulse of the society and dictating at varying times the stresses and tensions latent in the society, but he must continuously point out the way from the socio-political morass in the society.

Notes

1. Apart from the novel we have used for this study, another Nigerian novel that embodies this paradigm shift from untoward nihilism and antagonism to a cooperative spirit geared towards a collective redirection of the society by enhancing and sustaining the tempo of development in Africa through creative works is Vincent Egbuson's

Womandela . This novel, as explained in the blurb, is “a call for the emergence of leaders with a sense of purpose and direction. It is also a signal tune that the time has come for women in Africa to play very prominent roles in politics, considering the myopic, self-centred system of administration being run by male presidents in different parts of Africa at present”. We have left out this text from the essay as a way of thinning down our discussion on the subject to a manageable scope.

2. This is the attitude reflected by Olu Obafemi in his novel, *Wheels*. Although a novel of social revolution geared towards equilibrating the inequalities inherent in the capitalist setting of the novel, reformism, especially the type devoid of class antagonism and violence, is espoused and this provides a logical panacea to the agitation of the youth vanguard in its march towards the attainment of peace in the referent society of the novel. See, for example, my article entitled “Youths as Vanguard of Social Reformation in Olu Obafemi’s *Wheels*: Towards a New Taxonomy of Heroism in the African Novel.” *Anyigba Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 4 (Dec.) 2005-2007: 67-76 for more discussion on this matter.

Works Cited

- Agho, Jude. “In Praise of Imagination: A Thematic Study of Joseph Edoki’s *The African Dream*”. *The Ker Review: A Journal of Nigerian Literature*. Vol. 2, No. 1 & 2, (Dec.) 2006: 27-43.
- . “Youths as Vanguard of Social Reformation in Olu Obafemi’s *Wheels*: Towards a New Taxonomy of Heroism in the African Novel”. *Anyigba Journal of Arts & Humanities*. Vol. 4 (Dec.) 2005-2007: 67-76 (Co-authored with Obaje, A. A.).
- Datondji, Coovi Innocent. “Literature and Development: How the Study of African (English) Literature in Schools and Universities Can Help Social Development in African Countries.” *Presence Africaine*. No. 115 (3rd Quarter, 1980): 61-96.
- Edoki, Joseph. *The African Dream*. Lagos: Nookia Publishers, 2005. All references to the text are to this edition, with pages of reference provided in the main body of the essay.
- Egbuson, Vincent. *Womandela*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2006.
- Galadima, H. S. “Militarism and Governance in Nigeria.” *Governance*. Vol.1, No. 1 (1998): 116- 177.
- Obafemi, Olu. *Wheels*. Ibadan : Kraft Books Ltd., 1997.
- Wauthier, Claude. *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1978.