

HUNGER AND WAITING IN THIRD WORLD LITERATURE

Remi AKUJOBI

Department of English and Literary Studies
College of Human Development
Covenant University, Ota.

THEMES OF “HUNGER” AND “WAITING” IN THIRD WORLD LITERATURE: A STUDY OF MARQUEZI’S *NO ONE WRITES TO THE COLONEL*, ENROLL JOHN’S *MOON ON A RAINBOW SHAWL* AND MARECHERA’S *HOUSE OF HUNGER*

ABSTRACT

Using colonial discourse and post-colonial theory as a point of reference, this article takes a look at colonialism as experienced in the so-called third world and see how the experience has helped shaped the literary production of the countries and people so colonized. The study examines the British idea of 'Empire' and the colonial enterprise in a selected range of 20th-century texts, in an attempt to understand how imperialism affected literary texts produced in some former colonies particularly those in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America. Texts to be considered in this study include: Marquez’s *No One Writes to the Colonel*, Enroll John’s *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* and Marechera’s *House of Hunger*. The study will be viewing a literature characterized by elements of the fantastic woven into the story. A literature that scrutinizes society to its basis by examining the postcolonial hangover, a literary trend that separates the literature of the “subject” from the literature of the “other”

INTRODUCTION

The grounding act of third world literature is colonialism and this experience of imperialism has greatly influenced the lives and texts of the so-called colonized.

This is particularly so in the sense that literature is often taken from every day lives of the people that produced it, it does not develop in a vacuum, but shaped and directed by social, economic as well as political underpinning of the society. In this sense therefore, literature and society go hand in hand and for this reason also, it is impossible to talk about third world literature without specific reference to colonialism.

The European quest for territories away from “home” brought him to Africa as well as other “remote” parts of the world. He came to Africa and subjected her people to various kinds of hardship, starting with slavery and then moved to out-right exploitation of her resources both human and material. This aspect of third world history is often exploited and given great attention in literature particularly by writers from the so-called colonies as

they touched on the realities of their peculiar experiences and society which is basically the reason why this paper touches on the themes of “hunger” and “waiting” in Third World Literature. The term Third World is not a term that is well defined in literary corpus in that it is not as defined as say, “West African literature” or “South African literature” or “Latin American” is elaborately defined, Third World literature is said to simply name a historical aspiration, majorly protest against the “empire” as it is necessarily a national allegory and as Jameson (1986:69) puts it:

Third World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory; the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society.

Third World literature in this sense comprises of the literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, possibly with their respective metropolitan Diasporas. In this sense, it is Third World literature that inherited the revolutionary, whether peaceful or otherwise, utopian aspiration from its colonial encounter. Third World literature for all it carries appears to replace as well as act as a kind of relay for the lost promise of a "proletarian" literature or literature of the “masses”. Even then, it is still the key, the eye-opener for the so-called first world, no matter how hard the first world will want to devalue it as a literary and cultural theory. It is obviously not the literature produced "in" the "First World, no matter the standard of English or French or Spanish used." To this end, Jameson (1986:85) contends that the first-world literature is condemned to the "luxury of a placeless freedom in which any consciousness of his own concrete situation flees like a dream" and third-world literature has managed to concretize its historical destiny because for the third-world writers, as Jameson puts it, the narration of "the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself" (86).

The Third World is still very much alive as a possibility. It is not a matter of cheering for Third World countries to make their revolutions; it is a dialectical matter of seeing that we here are involved in these areas and are busy trying to put them down, that they are a part of our power relations. (Jameson, Interview)

In looking at the term, Third World therefore, the idea of the nation is nothing more than the constructive details of the lives of ordinary people caught in the timeless acts of living and dying and laughing endlessly about the enigma of existence. Third World Literature as the name suggests therefore will be the literature written in hundreds of regional languages all over the world but, as one may quickly point out also, only a very a handful of them get translated and in this sense, many canonical works in these languages are often overlooked and left to rot by those who choose representative fictions for translation into the First World languages.

Aijaz Ahmad (1992:101) in this vein exposes the weaknesses and disparity of the characterization of the third-world on the basis of "the experience of colonialism and imperialism" whereas the first-world and

second-world are characterized on the basis of their capitalist and socialist modes of production". It is at point that one may state that third-world literature strives to deal with the psychological and spiritual reality of the individual as it manages to concretize its historical destiny because for the third-world writers, the narration of the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself.

The in-thing is to substitute the term *postcolonial* for Third World and as has been said reflects the rise of postcolonial theory in the corridors of the so-called elite, and the sense of what one may see as in-action on the part of the elite who within that academy makes uncritical allusion to obsolete doctrines of national liberation which was fought for long time ago. The term, Third World literature is resurfacing in the present dispensation. Meanwhile, the literature itself—Third World, postcolonial, or whatever it is called today—occupies a central position in the metropolitan canons that once excluded it. But after all of these have been experienced and mirrored, particularly on literary terrine, it is just right for one to turn to the political, social and economic spheres of the whole enterprise and see how what the writer writes reflect the society that produces such discourse.

THEMES OF "HUNGER" AND "WAITING" IN THIRD WORLD LITERATURE

The themes of "hunger" and "waiting" are made manifest in literary production of the third world and this can be traced to history- that of infiltration, colonialism and exploitation in the Third World. These themes are vividly documented in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*, a collection of nine in which the writer brings the reader into the lives of simple people struggling for survival and meaning in a harsh world. Gabriel Garcia Marquez gives vivid and pulsating life to the characters and poignancy to their struggles.

No one Writes to the Colonel (which in Spanish is *El Coronel no tiene quien le escriba*) has been described to be especially brilliant in form. It is the story of a veteran Colonel who had worked all his life and expecting a reward from the authority at the "close of time" The colonel is in his mid seventies and he and his wife are down to their very last money, selling off family heirlooms to eat. They are waiting for his pension to begin, and in-between this wait, they must confront hunger both physically and metaphorically, a wait in anticipation of letter which will announce the commencement of the colonel's pension that will invariably bring them the income for life to which he is entitled. During this period of waiting, he can be likened to the two trams in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* Estragon and Vladimir's wait for a mysterious Mr. Godot who never makes an appearance. The colonel and his wife have been waiting now for more than 15 years, the colonel going everyday to the post office to see if the letter has come. They wait patiently for their manner to come which explains why people who are waiting for something think that they have time on their hands but for the colonel, there is no time to waste considering his age, his very demanding wife and his other sorrows to contend with.

The story is told in a slow and ponderous manner to show the colonel's resolve and faith. Even in their growing hunger they maintain the life of the fighting cock which their son left when he supposedly was killed for political reasons a year ago. While the colonel's wife mourns her son, the colonel knows that he only lives for the day. He keeps his son's cock alive for much the same reason he keeps hoping for his pension that is to seek a meaning for living.

The story of the colonel is a hopeless and helpless one even as Marquez makes one feel the pace of life in the slow moving, somnolent pace of the story, a story in which "waiting" is portrayed as an important characteristic of human condition in that people always wait for one thing or the other and so life itself is simply made of waiting suspended between eternity. In waiting, what is known as meaning is subverted and one is left with nothing but hope that one day things will get better very much like the colonel who, in spite of his age sees the need to wait and hope but the awfulness of this situation is a symbol of the human existential predicament.

The Rooster in the story is very symbolic, it at some point serves as a savior and at other point serves as a means of sorrow- it belongs to the colonel's dead son, in which sorrow is evidenced because it is a reminder of the late son and it is a savior in that, it brings money through gambling - salvation in this case is short-lived.

Marquez, in this story combines the plane of fantasy and realism in a way that the human and the symbolic move side-by-side and the finale, with its painful lamentation tends to reconcile the conflicting personalities of the colonel and his wife in their common submission to human destiny. It is in this vein one may be allowed to say that the setting may be anywhere, not only Columbia and the colonel in this case, is a representative of every man and the fate of Marquez's tortured hero merges with that of mankind in the sense that it appeals everyone and the theme is universal, are pensioners not waiting endlessly in Nigeria for instance? It could be anyone and anywhere.

This universal theme is also seen in Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. This is a play about deprivation, hunger, waiting and exploitation. Starting with the setting, one glances through a society that is plagued with poverty and hunger. It is a communal setting with its communal spirit and togetherness, but within this neighbourhood, one finds a mixture of characters- the good, the bad and the ugly and each one of the character stands for something, something that gives a clue to the themes under discussion.

It is a play, which realistically depicts a man's struggle to escape a world of poverty and petty crime, in this sense therefore, the play presents pessimistic tragic view of humanity, that is, humanity confined within the pitiless universe. In stating this, one is also quick to add that the play does not give a fatalistic perception of human existence, no not like what one finds in George Eliot. This tragic view comes from a detailed identification of

the ruralness of the Caribbean peasants. The play reflects both the harshness and beauty of human existence where the individual is at the mercy of some incomprehensible forces. In detailing the trails of human existence, Errol John invariably shows a world that is both dreadful/complicated and beautiful, a world that is both harsh and kind to its inhabitants and a world full of paradoxes; he mirrors the dreadful condition of the working class with unfulfilled dreams and aspirations. Errol presents a situation where mankind is surrounded by decadence—living in yards, gully and all the degrading places which also accounts for the degrading or dehumanizing of the working class.

The suffering experienced by this class is likened to the uncompromising condition of the hearth in *King Lear* where workers are endlessly lost in a host of shadows—this may account for the behaviour of Charlie in the play. The society in this case has a huge role to play in shaping man and this particular society pushes man to act indecently, (that is why some behavior can be term pardonable but heinous at the same time) hence Charlie steals to satisfy his wants and desires. Mankind is here presented as a victim of his own choices, so Rosa picks Efh for a husband very much like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in spite of the comfort old Mack offers and Efh in turn, runs away from what he calls a trap—his environment in this case is a trap for him.

The fact that poverty and hunger prevail in the play advances the knowledge of “philosophy of chance” (which Efh capitalizes on) or one can simply tap into the comfort presented by “indifference” (which old Mack also uses to his advantage) at the end of the day, the elemental forces of this world come together to torment mankind

Errol John uses sadistic and erotic images to bring out the extent to which society has degenerated—Mavis turns a prostitute not out of her own free will but because the society she finds herself made her one. The writer also explores the inner-mind of his characters to show their deteriorating personalities and the relationship they engage in. he also mirrors the fragmented physical environment in order to show the tragic and complicated pattern of these characters’ existence— their behaviour to John is an organic part of a larger design.

The themes of poverty, hunger, oppression, injustice and urgent desire by the people in the community to run away from all that is considered undesirable are well documented in the play *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* and the failure of the individual to completely run from all these casts a pessimistic and inevitable mood in the play. John also presents the true picture of the faceless people in a fruitless enterprise and the hope of the people for joy; communal life and desire for fraternity are dashed by the writer’s tragic perception of the inexplicable pathos of life.

The idea of hunger and waiting is found in the previous texts discussed but there is actually a text with hunger as its title. This text is

The ***House of Hunger*** by the late Dambudzo Marechera. It talks about the Zimbabwean society and by extension mirrors the larger society, particularly the Third World society.

The house in question is not the conventional type but a metaphor invented by the writer to comment on events in society. The writer's rare gift of fantasy and lyricism find full expression in a novel characterized by violent passion, a passion which is common with modern writers, most especially those from the Third World. The tragic view of the writer in this sense most often than not leads to insanity as evidenced in the case of Marechera. The crises arising from the injustice melted out on the black man by his white "conqueror" often develops into a kind of disorderliness on the part of the "conquered", it also results in clashes and protest and these are the issues addressed by the author in *House of Hunger*.

Though the hero is not named and in this case, there is no pointed hero, but he represents a figure or figures in that particular "house" and in this "house", there is constant lack, particularly that of food, food not in the physical sense but in a metaphoric sense which may be taken for lack of freedom. The lack of freedom makes it extremely difficult for the individual to find fulfillment. Segregation and all the poison that goes with it make the individual a complete failure and the feeling of failure breeds anti-social behaviour.

The same "lack" in the "house" drives the individual into all sorts of permissiveness like alcoholism, sexual pervasiveness, violence (which is two-fold-the case of the big oppressing or bullying the little as seen in Stephen and Edmund, Peter and his wife or a more manifestation of violence in the sexual intercourse amongst the characters). The author's vivid description of these sexual events transports the reader straight to the world of Ayi Kwei Amah's "sick" usage in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* as Marechera portrays a sick society in this book

This is not a conventional story because it has no beginning and no clear end, it is a fragmented story but one thing is glaring as one goes through the pages of the text, the idea that it expresses this hunger for freedom-political, social and economic freedom and the quest for this freedom is what may likely equate with man's quest for self-definition, identity and self-actualization. With this quest, the text that comes to mind is Fugard's *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* as it shows the strength and weakness of the individual in time of need for in seeking an identity and a home, Sizwe finds these two in death.

House of Hunger explores the social dilemma of man, his every day life experiences, the violence, terror and elemental forces that tend to hack him down as he struggles with the reality and illusion of his existence. Like Sizwe Banzi who seeks in vain an elusive identity, the characters in *House of Hunger* drift in a void among the woods and in the process become victims of predatory nature. Their dilemma with every day life is expressed through

sexual freedom since they can not express this through political, social and economic means; solace is then sought for in sexual violence.

In *House of Hunger* Marechera makes the reader feel the bad omen against which humanity contends and the fatal consequences of defeat. Mankind, very much like most of the characters in the novel (Peter and others) fall back on certain principles that may be counter productive to their true nature and wishes.

CONCLUSION

From the various assessment of these texts- a play and two novels, one is left with no doubt as to the underlying themes of Third World literature. It is evident that the people of the so-called Third World share a common historical back-ground- colonialism and this experience makes the themes that the literature address very convincing and identical.

The theme of "waiting" stems from the passive attitude of the people towards the brutal forces milking them dry of their resources both material and human, then the theme of "hunger" which is a later development stems from the awareness that there is a limit to man's passiveness, so man becomes really aggressive, yearning for freedom, breaking loose from the chains of oppression, exploitation and neo-colonialism through any means available to him. The "hunger" through awareness breeds discontent and eventually leads to revolution very much like the one under Gandhi in India, Nasser in Egypt, Jomo Kenyanta in Kenya, Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Mandela in South Africa. All these revolutions actually stem from this hunger, abandoning "waiting" that may not get man to his desired destination.

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