

SATIRE IN POST-INDEPENDENCE WEST AFRICAN FICTION

By

E. C. Nwezeh

We must seek the freedom to express our thoughts and our feelings, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say might be taken as evidence against our race (Chinua Achebe).

While satire was not absent and was even used to great advantage by West African writers before independence to castigate and deride imperialism and its agents, both foreign and indigenous, it is certainly not an exaggeration to state that satire which was an element, albeit essential, of pre-independence fiction has since become a recurring and predominant feature of West African novels written in both English and French.

The predominance of satire in West African fiction since independence is closely linked to the historical evolution of the various states. Present-day socio-political reality in Africa is generally characterized, among other things, by greed, corruption, violence, and general mismanagement of national affairs. Disgusted by the prevailing social order, the writers have assumed the role of watchdog of the nation and the novelists in particular, have wielded the powerful weapons of satire with dexterity in varying degrees to defy and subvert the established order, which they rightly consider as a betrayal of the great hope engendered by the transition from colonial rule to independence.

Theory and Practice

It is neither my intention to provide a lengthy exposition on the nature of satire nor is such a discourse possible here in the light of the spatial limitations imposed on this study. However, a clear vision of the definition and techniques of satire is indispensable at this juncture in order to enhance the reader's appreciation of the practice of satire in post-independence West African novels. According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

. . . formal satire is a quasi-dramatic poem, "framed" by an encounter between the Satirist (or, more reasonably, his persona, the "I" of the poem) and an Adversarius who impels the satirist to speech. Within this frame, . . .

*vice and folly are exposed to critical analysis by means of any number of literary and rhetorical devices. . . .*¹

Satire has, however, outgrown the narrow straits of "formal satire" as it is defined above, but the internal dynamics of satire outlined above are still relevant for any meaningful discussion of the art of satire. Highet's more general definition below reflects the contemporary conception of satire, both from a theoretical and practical point of view, and for the purposes of this study it is a very useful definition:

*Any author, . . . who often and powerfully uses a number of the typical weapons of satire--irony, paradox, antithesis, parody, colloquialism, anticlimax, topicality, obscenity, violence, vividness, exaggeration--is likely to be writing satire.*²

In West Africa, the novelists have often focussed attention on politicians, whose socio-political foibles are ridiculed. The satiric portraiture of Chief the Honourable Dr. Nanga, M.P., LL.D. in Achebe's *A Man of the People* exemplifies this trend. Chief Nanga, the "uncultured minister of culture," had been a teacher nicknamed "M.A. minus opportunity." He was appointed a minister for notoriously leading "the pack of back-bench hounds" against the prime minister's opponents during a parliamentary crisis:

*"They deserve to be hanged," shouted Mr. Nanga from the back benches. This incident was so loud and clear that it appeared later under his own name in the Hansard. Throughout the session he led the pack of back-bench hounds straining their leash to get at their victims. If anyone had cared to sum up Mr. Nanga's interruptions they would have made a good hour's continuous yelp. Perspiration poured down his face as he sprang up to interrupt or sat back to share in the derisive laughter of the hungry hyena.*³

Having obtained his cabinet post in this ridiculous manner, it is not surprising that as "Minister of Culture, he announced in public that he had never heard of his country's most famous novel." It was, of course, "a common saying after Independence that it didn't matter *what* you knew but *who* you knew" and Nanga, the Honourable Minister of Culture, is besides too busy enriching himself in all sorts of dubious and corrupt ways to care about his ministerial obligations. Mr. Nanga has ordered ten luxury buses to ply the new route which he wants to get tarred through his influence in spite of expert advice against the project:

"It doesn't mean I have sixty thousand pounds in the bank," he hastened to add. "I am getting them on never-never arrangement from the British Amalgamated."

I wasn't too sure of the meaning of never-never at that time and I suppose I had a vague idea that the buses were a free gift, which in the circumstances would not have been beyond the British Amalgamated.⁴

In the *Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah expresses his rage and disgust at his country's politics in a satiric vein. Armah paints a very dark picture of Ghanaian society under Nkrumah, whose rise and fall are seen as part of a complex process of social decay. Koomson, the "successful" party man, seems to be the embodiment of the physical and moral decay, which characterizes the novel. Like Chief the Honourable Nanga in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Koomson is the express image of corruption and power in "independent" Ghana. Koomson, the Minister, was planning to buy an expensive boat costing thousands and thousands of cedis under a borrowed name, and the man, a former schoolmate of a "not very intelligent" and "actually stupid" Koomson, wonders how Koomson acquired the money for such a boat:

I had taken a piece of paper to calculate Koomson's total salary since he joined the Party. Now I dropped the paper and said, "Oh, I see." And again with this patience of hers my mother-in-law asked me what I had seen at last. So I got angry enough to tell her I had seen corruption. Public theft.⁵

Koomson had also risen from the ranks to prominence and ill-gotten wealth like Chief Nanga and both are in politics to make money:

Koomson we all have known for a long time here. A railwayman, then a docker at the harbor. Pulling ropes. Blistered hands, toughened, callused hands . . .

I still don't know how Koomson got to Accra. Everybody says with a wave of the hand, "Oh you know, the ideological thing. Winneba." True. That is where the shit of the country is going nowadays, believing nothing, but saying they believe everything that needs to be believed, so long as the big jobs and the big money follow. Men who know nothing about politics have grown hot with ideology, thinking of the money that will come.⁶

Koomson, of course, typifies Armah's view of "the socialists of Africa, fat, perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who had sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade."⁷

In *Les Soleils des Indépendances*, Ahmadou Kourouma also satirizes post-independence West African politics and politicians. The main protagonist, Fama Doumbouya, had sacrificed a lot during the anti-colonial struggle to help achieve independence for his country from the French. Like a swarm of locusts, independence befell the various African countries, thanks to anti-colonial militants like Fama:

*... les Indépendances une fois acquises, Fama fut oublié et jeté aux mouches. Passaient encore les postes de ministres, de députés, d'ambassadeurs, pour lesquels lire et écrire n'est pas aussi futile que des bagues pour les lépreux. On avait pour ceux-là des prétextes de l'écarter, Fama demeurant analphabète comme la queue d'un âne.*⁸

Fama knew that he was educationally ill-equipped for any of the above appointments and his interest lay elsewhere. He was particularly interested in the most profitable appointments--the posts of secretary-general of a subsection of the single party or headship of a cooperative society:

*Le secrétaire général et le directeur, tant qu'ils savent dire les louanges du président, du chef unique et de son parti, le parti unique, peuvent bien engouffrer tout l'argent du monde sans qu'un seul oeil ose ciller dans toute l'Afrique.*⁹

In order to get one of "les deux plus viandés et gras morceaux des Indépendances," Fama prayed to Allah day and night and even went to the extent of sacrificing a black cat in a pit. Neither prayer nor sacrifice nor the two combined achieved the desired result. All that Fama got from independence was the national identity card and the membership card of the single party and later imprisonment for not reporting his dream of impending subversion and violence to the president. The independence which Fama had fought so hard to achieve became "l'indépendance maléfique" or "ces durs soleils des indépendances" in which it becomes a miracle to "travailler honnêtement et faire de l'argent." Independence is seen as a betrayal, which leaves the majority of the population with unfulfilled promises. When it rains the roads, lacking drainage, become impassable:

Sans égouts, parce que, les Indépendances ici aussi ont trahi, elles n'ont pas creusé les égouts promis et elles ne le feront jamais, des lacs d'eau

*continueront de croupir comme toujours et les nègres colonisés ou indépendants y pataugeront tant qu'Allah ne décrochera pas la damnation qui pousse aux fesses du nègre.*¹⁰

The pessimism expressed by Kourouma in the above quotation is very similar to that of Armah, who speaks of "the pain of hope perennially doomed to disappointment" and whose comment on the military coup at the end of *The Beautiful Ones* is as follows:

*. . . for the nation itself there would only be a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted. . . . Endless days, same days, stretching into the future with no end anywhere in sight.*¹¹

The politicians--embezzlers, discussed above, are part of the emergent bourgeoisie, including senior public servants and "businessmen," of the new independent states. This class is noted for its shameless display of ill-gotten wealth, bungalows, and cars (preferably Mercedes). Armah expresses his disgust of the new phenomenon in the following words:

*No difference at all between the white men and their apes, the lawyers and the merchants, and now the apes of the apes, our Party men. . . . Bungalows white with a wounding whiteness. Cars, long and heavy, with drivers in white men's uniforms waiting ages in the sun.*¹²

Koomson has three cars, the latest being a "Mercedes 220 Super." The title of Nkem Nwankwo's more recent satirical novel, *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours*, is also significant in this regard.

Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* is a searching indictment of the new rich businessmen of post-colonial Africa, represented by El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye. Intellectually he is like Nanga and Koomson. "El Hadji, limité, borné, n'était pas plus intelligent que les autres."¹³ Like Koomson, El Hadji has a chauffeur-driven Mercedes car; in addition he has three villas, one for each of his three wives. The display of wealth by the emergent bourgeoisie is offensive to the writers under review because their fellow countrymen live in abject poverty and deprivation. The writers sharpen their satire of the life style of the bourgeoisie by contrasting it with the wretched existence of the other inhabitants. In *The Beautiful Ones* the man makes frequent reference to "Passion Week," the difficult week before he gets his monthly salary and he suffers untold hardship for his inability to meet the demands of his family; unemployment is also rife in the country. In *Les Soleils des Indépendances*,

Fama, a man of noble ancestry, has to depend on his wife for his upkeep in addition to what he ekes out of various ceremonies, weddings, burials, etc. In Xala, when El Hadji goes into the interior in search of Sereen Mada who would cure him, Ousmane hints at the lack of social amenities in the area:

Les cases étaient disposées en demi--circonférence, avec une seule entrée principale. Ce bourg n'avait ni boutique, ni école, ni dispensaire, ni aucun point d'attraction.

There was of course no pipe-borne water in the village. El Hadji drank only imported mineral water which was the very antithesis of the village drinking water with small *seep* roots floating on its surface. El Hadji's Mercedes car could not get to the village because it was connected with the outside world by a mere footpath. However, El Hadji did not need to go so far for the contrast because in front of his shop was a beggar daily chanting for alms:

*Le mendiant était très connu à ce carrefour. Le seul qui le trouvait agaçant était El Hadji. El Hadji, maintes fois, l'avait fait rafler par la police. Des semaines après, il revenait reprendre sa place. Un coin qu'il semblait affectionner.*¹⁵

It must be noted, however, that the novelists pillory big and small, rich and poor in the above satirical novels. In *The Beautiful Ones*, for example, Armah satirizes the man's wife, Oyo, who thinks that "It's only bush women who wear their hair natural."¹⁶ Armah also focusses his satire on civil servants:

*About nine-thirty the Senior Service men come in each with his bit of leftover British craziness. This one has long white hose, that one colonial white white. Another has spent two months, on what he still calls a study tour of Britain, and ever since has worn, in all the heat of Ghana waistcoats and coats.*¹⁷

Kourouma satirizes the ignorance of the common people through his caricature of the ridiculous efforts of the sterile Salimata to overcome her sterility through prayer and occult practices. She first says certain pious and long prayers recommended by the marabout, then she feverishly unfolds her gris-gris, swallows bitter potions, and burns leaves that give rise to disgusting odours in the hut; she claps, sings, and dances until she falls into a state of semi-consciousness:

Essoufflée, en nage, en fumée et délirante elle

bondissait et s'agrippait à Fama. Sur le champ, même rompu, cassé, baillant et someillant, même flasque et froid dans tout le bas-ventre, même convaincu de la futilité des choses avec une stérile, Fama devait jouer à l'empresné et consommer du Salimata chaud, gluant Sinon, sinon les orageuses et inquiétantes fougues de Salimata!¹⁸

Armah's Critics

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is undoubtedly the bleakest picture by a West African novelist of the betrayal of African independence. The author is so disenchanted with the new socio-political situation that his pessimistic and almost tragic vision seems, to some critics, to overburden the novel with the image of inevitable decay and filth. As regards Armah's pessimism and tragic vision, it must be noted that there are two types of satirist, as Highet points out in *The Anatomy of Satire*:

There are then, two main conceptions of the purpose of satire, and two different types of satirist. One likes most people, but thinks they are rather kind and foolish. He tells the truth with a smile so that he will not repel them but cure them of that ignorance which is their worst fault. Such is Horace. The other type hates most people or despises them. He believes rascality is triumphant in this world. . . . His aim therefore is not to cure, but to wound, to punish, to destroy. Such is Juvenal. . . . This satirist is close to the tragedian.¹⁹

Among the satirists studied above, Armah could belong to the Juvenalian type while Achebe's satire is more akin to Horace's. Satire is, however, noted for its polychromatic nature and although the above classification is valid and useful, I must hasten to add that it is not absolute or watertight. Armah's novel exudes the "aesthetic affront" which has characterized the works of writers like Kafka and Musil. His shocking imagery, used to present his fundamental critique of society, has been criticized from various quarters. Achebe, a fellow satirist, even says: "There is something scornful, cold and remote about Armah's obsession with the filth of Ghana."²⁰ S. A. Gakwandi declares in his book *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*: "We are unwilling to accept the story at the level of social realism because that would call for a more balanced portrayal of life than the author affords us in the novel."²¹ This statement reminds one of the response of an Irish bishop who

who read *Gulliver's Travels* and missed its satiric implications:

There was an Irish bishop who read Gulliver's Travels soon after it was published and so far missed the satiric implications of the narrative as to declare that he didn't believe a word of it. (Or at least Swift said so to his fellow-satirist Pope).²²

It will be fair to say that Gakwandi also missed the satiric implications of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. How else can one explain his search for balanced social realism in the novel? Caricature and exaggeration are normal ingredients of satire! As for Armah's obsession with the filth of Ghana, it is also a part of his function as a satirist:

Few can look at and immortalize on canvas the content of a garbage can, the colors of an open sore, the lingering currents of a stream of sewage. Yet the satirist must do this. He enjoys it. For him, a rotten fish shining and stinking in a dark pantry is more fascinating than an opening rose.²³

Moreover, Gakwandi chides Armah for setting himself above his society to denounce others: "Besides, it appears arrogant for the artist to set himself apart and denounce sections of the community as if he himself were above all of them."²⁴ Here again, Gakwandi seems to have missed the satiric implications of Armah's novel because, as a satirist, he has the privilege of being a part of and apart from his society:

The greatest satire has been written in periods when ethical and rational norms were sufficiently powerful to attract widespread assent, yet not so powerful as to compel absolute conformity--those periods when the satirist could be of his society and apart from it, could exercise the "double vision."²⁵

Conclusion

All the illustrations in the above study have been culled from four novels, two in English and two in French. Among the many works not mentioned above are Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth My Brother*, Femi Osofisan's *Kolera Kolej*, Camara Laye's *Dramouss*, Beti's *Remember Ruben* and *Perpetue*, to name only a few. It is hoped, however, that the above study has thrown some light on the rich mass of satirical novels, which undoubtedly are in vogue in post-colonial West Africa. This satirical fiction cuts across national and linguistic barriers and "mirrors" the same disillusionment, although understandably with some variations in artistic perception

and representation. Just at the disillusionment of the post-Napoleonic era produced some of the best satirists in European literature, the disenchantment of the post-independence period has prompted West African novelists to adopt the satiric mould with as much vigor and success.

¹"Satire," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 738.

²Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 18.

³Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (1966; London: Heinemann, 1975), pp. 5-6.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968; London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 58.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁸Ahamdou Kourouma, *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 22-23.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹Armah, *The Beautiful Ones*, p. 162.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹³Sembène Ousmane, *Xala* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976), p. 98.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁶Armah, *The Beautiful Ones*, p. 129.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁸Kourouma, *Les Soleils des Indépendances*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁹Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, p. 235.

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers," in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 26.

²¹ S. A. Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 89.

²² Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, p. 15.

²³ Ibid., p. 241.

²⁴ Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience*, p. 91.

²⁵ *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 739.