

Review

Crisis in Modern African Political Leadership : A Study of Cyprian Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers*

Tambari Ogbonanwii Dick, PhD

Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Email: tammysublime@gmail.com

Accepted 8 July 2016

The secularization of modern society is seen as the very basis for dictatorship and corruption as the ideology of traditionalism had been sidelined by obsession for materialism. Corruption has been the bane of post-independence West African countries. Greed for power may lead politicians to imperil the existence of the young nation states by furthering sectional ethnic solidarities and using them to foster their political ambitions. In West Africa, especially in the former British colonies, the democratic system was set up before independence was granted. After the first democratic election, the values of democracy are being undermined. This created a moral vacuum and conflict of values which left the people confused. The early novels, especially the West African post-independence novels, were aimed primarily at satirizing politicians. Intolerance of political opponents is a common phenomenon in the modern political system borne out of greed and materialistic tendencies.

Keywords: Secularization, Traditionalism, Nationalism, Manichaeism

Cite This Article As: Dick TO (2016). Crisis in Modern African Political Leadership : A Study of Cyprian Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers*. Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult. 4(6): 96-99

INTRODUCTION

The early novelists were nationalists whose works of art were directed at the colonial polarization of African culture and the destruction of the traditional system of government. They were concerned with the organized system of African traditional politics and values. The exploration of these values of society contributes 'substantially to social and moral insight' as the representation of human behavior and feeling. The novelists dealing with the contemporary West Africa have as the dominant subject, politics which is an absorbing interest to the people. In a subject like politics, the novelists are led into the sphere of ideologies. In the

words of Irving Howe, "political novel is peculiarly work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behavior and feeling, yet it must also absorb into its strain of movement the hard and insoluble pellets of modern ideology"

The African political ideology of traditionalism which is in sharp contrast with the colonial ideology of individualism culminated in the creation of nation-states. The writers' deals with various aspects of politics and political behavior by following the political terrain, we can see the practices they censured and the values they promoted to ensure social integration and the happiness

of the people. They devoted their time and intuition – though not politicians – for the social development of the society and to shape their attitude to the political problems of society. This they do by describing the political situation in terms of men and women who inhabit the society. They portrayed them as greedy, egocentric and corrupt, and often imply or say outright that they are in politics not for the opportunity to serve their fellow men, but for what they can get out of it. The early novels were therefore powerful weapons directed at corrupt politicians.

Post-Independence African Political Disillusionment

The character in Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers*, Wilson Iyari is a pharmacist as well as a politician. He represents the generation of revolutionaries who wants to protect democracy. Ekwensi, like many intellectuals in West Africa, is a believer in democracy. He is deeply outraged when he sees the values of democracy being systematically destroyed by self-seeking politicians. He marked them out for attack. He employs a novel having satirical elements, from invective to ridicule and satire to portray his aversion towards the corrupt political system in post-independence West Africa.

Wilson Iyari is an embodiment of political radicalization, the Minister of consolation is a jester and self-centred politician. Ekwensi not only satirizes politicians but also criticizes the rude and crude means employ by them to ruin elections. The use of thuggery, bribery, and violence which have mistakenly reduced the values of democracy in Africa, are freely employed by agents of politicians to seek votes from the electorates. The character of Paul Aremu who wants his opponent liquidated shows that the spirit of democracy is annulled by the general intolerance of political opponents, whose actions revolves around the recruitment of private bodyguard and the "use of all conceivable unfair means to thwart political opponents". Political rivals regard each other as 'enemies'.

The character of Wilson Iyari is the symbol of African solidarity and unity. He does not seek political office but to pressure politicians to uphold the values and tenets of democracy and to ensure a level playing field and fairness for every participant in the game of politics. He is a pan-Africanist who admires the qualities in notable African leaders by naming his children after them; Lumumba, Pandhit and Jomo. Nigerian politicians and indeed African leaders have one thing in common, to hold on to power; if possible die with it, and to amass to themselves as much wealth as possible to last ten generations after them. This is the conflict that accompanies the politics of individualism, a system of self-aggrandizement which contrasts with the traditionalist system in which political offices and officials were supernaturally perfected and social homogeneity

reduced the areas of fundamental disagreement among individuals or groups. This was the true nature of traditional societies.

In *Beautiful Feathers*, the theme of politics receives more concentrated attention. It focuses more on pan-Africanism with Wilson Iyari, a radical politician championing the cause of Pan-African politics. He tries to ginger up support and solidarity from Nigerian politicians, to embrace the cause of unifying Africa. Ironically, he is helped by a political refugee from Ghana named Kwame. He organizes a 'peaceful' demonstration which is broken up by the police. The demonstration turns violent and shop-looting by demonstrators becomes the order of the day. Nothing but disillusionment follows.

Wilson Iyari has some problems in his unification bid. His house is in disarray following the negligence of his domestic responsibility. He is deserted by his wife who should be the pillar behind his cause. There is the generation of intense emotions which goes to confirm Irving Howe's observation that 'the political novel generates such intense heat that the ideas it appropriates are melted into its movement and fused with the emotions of its characters'. 'The novel deals with moral sentiments, with passion and emotions, it tries, above all, to capture the quality of concrete experience (Irving, 20). Wilson discovers to his chagrin the disunity in Africa at Dakar as the leader of the delegation to a Pan-African conference. The language barrier the colonial legacy left behind for the polarization of Africa. The 'non comprehends pas' response from a French delegate gives him the first shock and a feeling of failure in all he has laboured for.

Effects of Colonialism on Modern African Politics

The hunting expedition portrays the conflicts and tensions generated within the African politics. While the African delegates were busy arguing amongst themselves, the animal killed was taken away by Europeans who accompanied them as observers and gun-carriers. Contemporary African politicians are averse to change. They want to maintain the old order. The politics of he that wins all, takes all. The novel captures the urban drift by all categories of people because of the greater opportunity it offers for employment. These unskilled and uneducated people roam the street in search of non-existence jobs which in the final analysis manifests in dissatisfying and frustration. Their unfulfilled dream metamorphosed into mob actions such as demonstrations and riots. Yaniya is a product of this urbanized individualism in which decision on moral rectitude in the exclusive right of the individual other than the collective responsibility of the society and the familial control of individual behavior. The novel focuses on the public life, especially the poorly individuated and unstable

mob. *The common subject-matter in Beautiful Feathers brings to mind what Frantz Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth terms to as "Manichaeism" which refers to a system which governed colonial society, and is preserved intact during the period of decolonization and has emerged in the new-colonial era as a "process of domination, of exploitation and of pillage" (30).*

Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers* reflects the traditional politics in the present-day national politics in the newly independent African countries. It portrays the relationship between the constituents and their elected representative. The Minister of Consolation accepted this as a fact after he has been invaded by the people from his constituent. Some came with their applications for jobs and even helping themselves with the minister's food and drinks, thus indicating an obligation on the part of the minister to the constituents. This is confirmed in his words, "They're nice people..., they vote me into power, so I mus' respect them (BF 76).

Traditionalism and Politics

It has been observed that the inability to define relations in the new social context and the failure to dissociate traditional obligations and their political roles from the new social order is largely responsible for the much nepotism and corruption that is so prevalent in the system. The man in a responsible position is expected to, in the spirit of traditionalism, reach out to his kinsmen. It is assumed that the more prosperous and successful members of the community have the obligation to cheer and sustain less-privileged. The politician accept this traditional obligation when in response to a question from the reporter he said, "you know, this Ministry looks after all the people, you know... women, men, children, who have no home, no father, no mother, no husband, no nothing... We take them in and we console them or help them" (BF 78). This politics of traditional sentiment is aptly exemplified in the perennial secretary's ironic exegesis of the function of the Ministry's sympathetic gesture" of setting up an orphanage in which "most of the children come from the minister's constituency and only a few from other parts of the countries". Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers* to the two political figures in West African countries, Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria, shows his political outlook and the realism which he sets out in his novels.

In his own assessment, Nnolim asserts that Cyprian Ekwensi is an exception in the subject-matter and style of his novels. His novels are usually pre-occupy with cultural assertions, in terms of native proverbs, folk tradition, myths and legends but love romances in the manner of "true confessions", a devoted writer of popular literature for the urbanized masses, prostitution, crime, politics, the corruptive influences of the city, immersion in the

ecstasies of life in a teeming city, leading a no-so-respectable life, and a last-minute repentance and return to village life. This is the hall mark of Ekwensi's novels as cosmopolitan novels. The novel, according to Irving, is inconceivable without an effort to present and to penetrate human emotion in its most private, irreducible aspects; but the direction in which the emotion moves, the weight it exerts, the objects to which it attaches itself, are all conditioned, if not controlled by the pressures of abstract thought.

Ekwensi touches on love and crime in Nigerian cities. A political novel enriches our sense of human experience. It educates the populace on the political trend vis-à-vis the various crisis engender by bad leadership.

Beautiful Feathers portrays the actual human experience and the political milieu in the era of national political order as against the traditional system. Ekwensi is regarded as the father of the modern Nigeria fiction writers whose works are definitely set in urban environment, where crimes are part of the daily hiring. Brother Jacob, Wilson's brother-in-law, survives on the crimes of extortion, thuggery and lies. He is into politics for the sole purpose of making ends meet. Wilson suffers economically by playing the traditional role of cushioning the economic effects of his in-law. The traditions in which people lived in a community and were interrelated by blood or marriage, or common occurrence interests and religion. Everyone was involved directly or indirectly in the life of the community and in the well-being and health of society. It is against this backdrop that the police break up the demonstration and Wilson Iyari is seen as a trouble-maker.

In *Beautiful Feathers*, politics is seen as a dirty game and politicians are to be feared. They are villains who are in politics to actualize their ambition of holding on to power at all cost. It therefore believes the writer as a custodian of the moral conscience of society, to keep a critical eye on societal values and to hold a mirror up to society to let it see when it is in danger of going wrong.

In his assertion, Nnolim sees Ekwensi as an exception in the subject matter and style of his novels. Not for him the pre-occupation with cultural assertion, nor for him the heavy reliance on the native proverb, the use of folk tradition or our myths and legends but love romances in the manner of "true confession". Unlike the culture-based Achebe's works, Ekwensi's, is the emergence of the urban novel in the evolutionary process, and *Beautiful Feathers* is one. Ekwensi, however shows a marked restraint in his criticism of politicians in *Beautiful Feathers* as against his fiery, critical and uncompromising stance in other works. This is so because of his involvement in the system as a director in an information establishment which also reflects in "an unmistakable respect and even affection for the then prime minister of Nigeria" (Obiechina, 99)

The character of Wilson, who is a revolutionary, takes a dramatic turn when he is appointed to lead the Pan-Africanist delegate to Dakar. The death of Kumar sets the stage for the funeral of the fight for African solidarity. "Obviously, Ekwensi tends to sentimentalize the prime minister, but the fact remains that what impresses him is the democratic outlook of the man, coupled with his devastating realism, which sharply contrasts with the reckless idealism of the demagogue" (Obiechina, 103). In spite of the changes in traditional politics, however, behavior based on the old values persisted since independence in the former British colonies. Ekwensi has shown the disparity between the traditional politics and modern politics of nation-state as it affects the people's cultural behavior and attitude to change. According to Maduka thus, the members of the ruling class pitilessly destroy the humanity of the toiling masses by impoverishing them through their economic plunder of the nation" (36).

CONCLUSION

Beautiful Feathers embodied two traditional assumptions as earlier mentioned; that it is the duty and tradition demands that the prosperous and successful members of the community have owe it as an obligation to reach out and help the less successful and the needy, and second, that the role of a political functionary of the nation-state should be clearly defined and dissociated from the traditional assumption on clearly shown in the minister's "good will" to his clansmen in order to enhance his position.

REFERENCES

- Booth, James. *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*. London: Rodder and Stoughton, 1981. Print.
- Ekwensi, Cyprian. *Beautiful Feathers*. London: Heinemann, 1963. Print
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (trans) Constance Farmington; England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1961. Print
- Howe, Irving. *Politics and the Novel* New York: Horizon Press, 1957. Print
- Maduka, C.T. *Taming the Beast in the Body Politic: Culture, Nationhood and the Imperative of Order in Nigeria*. 6th Ed. School of Graduate Studies Public Lecture Series. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 2010. Print
- Nnolim, Charles E. *Approaches to the African Novels*. Ithem Davis Press Ltd., Owerri, 1992, p. 238. Print
- Obiechina, E.N. *Language and Theme*. "Essays on African Literature". Howard University Press, Washington, D.C., 1990. Print