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Clogs in the Re-branding Wheel: Images of Leadership in Nigerian Fiction *(Pp 1-13)*

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Abstract

According to Randall Frost, place branding determines whether a country may be chosen as “a tourist destination, a place to invest or a source of consumer goods.” Rebranding implies that Nigeria’s image is inimical to attaining these goals. Sensibly, writers are perceived as stakeholders in this new project. This study illustrates the fact that fiction has consistently mounted the image of a nation drifting under a corrupt leadership. From Achebe to Adichie, it has been a portrait of a self-centred semi-literate political class brazenly suspicious of the intelligentsia, through military dictatorships, looting the commonwealth and sponsoring a pogrom that culminated in a civil war, to the woeful breeding of a teeming population of jobless graduates forced into drug-peddling and violent crimes. Fiction has been faithful in depicting verisimilitude. It seems to be saying that Nigerian leaders do not take heed of its prophetic messages.

Introduction

Branding is a very familiar term in the manufacturing industry. A brand is a type of product made by a particular company. Take milk for example: there are the *Peak, Three Star, Cowbell, Dano* brands, etc. Each is packaged in a special way – cylinder or paper bag – with a logo and inscriptions done in colour. When these extrinsic values combine with a favourable intrinsic quality, the product acquires a brand loyalty. The same condition applies to any other type of product, be it radio, television, drugs, pen, etc.

Because of the effects of globalization and a very competitive world economy, places such as cities, towns, resorts and countries are now being packaged like goods. According to Randall Frost, in Uche Nworah's "Rebranding Nigeria: Critical Perspective on the Heart of Africa Image Project", the portrait 'we have of another country says a lot about how we view it as a tourist destination, a place to invest or a source of consumer goods' (3). In other words, in a fast changing world of efficient communication and vast growing economy, a country needs to package its security values, tourist attracts, economic resources and benignity to remain relevant in the scheme of things.

The Rebranding Nigeria Project launched by the Honourable Minister of Information and Communication, Professor Dora Akunyili, in February 2009, implies that Nigeria's brand at home and abroad is inimical to the achievement of national goals and aspirations. In a Convocation Lecture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, recently, the minister writes that the project is part of President Goodluck Jonathan's 'commitment to repositioning Nigeria for a better tomorrow' (19). She further adds:

It is common knowledge that Nigeria is saddled with the challenge of correcting the perception of a poor image foisted upon her by the international community and given flesh by bad behavior of a few of us both inside and outside the country. The negative perception about Nigeria has gone unchallenged for so long that it is beginning to stick in the consciousness of most people around the world that most Nigerians are criminals or fraudsters ... In a highly competitive world in which we live, Nigeria will have no choice than to present a compelling and coherent image to the world if it wants to be taken seriously (20).

The campaign is conducted with a logo and slogan: 'Nigeria – Good People, Great Nation' and, bless the minister for the crucial afterthought, she hosted the Association of Nigerian Authors to a breakfast meeting where the members were accorded the status of stakeholders. One of the interesting outcomes of that assembly is Wale Okediran's reminder that 'Nigerian writers over the years have been in the forefront of rebranding this country quietly without much fanfare.' Another is that the occasion provided an opportunity for writers to lash out once more at an insensitive leadership which has ever been the bane of the country in its march toward acceptance by the international community. Yet another small but

significant result is the tacit accusation against the minister herself for violating the spirit of rebranding by sending her manuscript abroad for publication. Perhaps, it is a contestable statement that the leaders of this country have most of their children abroad.

This paper aims at x-raying four images of leadership in Nigerian fiction from independence to the present. The purpose is to highlight the half-truths in the minister's *raison d'être* for her rebranding campaign because literature, especially fiction, has from the beginning drawn attention to the unwholesome perception of this nation as a consequence of a corrupt leadership. It is doubtful whether there can be a working partnership between the fiction writer and the politician in the project because of the peculiar nature of this art.

The Nature of Fiction

In fact, fiction and Nigeria's leadership appear to be strange bed-fellows. Fiction is the defender of truth, a rearrangement of reality. As Nancy Smith puts it:

The novel deals with man in relation to society rather than merely to himself. It is about people, not concepts. For example, it may be about a man whose potato crop has failed and whose family, therefore, faces famine but will not be about a bad potato crop; about the effect upon a woman (or women) of a particular war, not war in general. It is the personal crisis set against the backcloth of society, the world in which those people happen to be living at that moment in time, and it will deal with several moments of truth (55).

In our circumstance, fiction is not about leadership; it is about its effect on the individual, the common man on the street and, perhaps, his people. As a rearrangement of reality, it has verisimilitude as an underlying principle such that it reminds one of that major characteristic of art which attracts Dr. Samuel Johnson's applause in 'The Preface to Shakespeare': the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life' (2727). Or, as Susan Cahill says, 'A novelist existed to serve the world as its dispassionate observer' (ix). The same cannot be said of statecraft which allows for window-dressing and, consequently, admits falsehood.

It will make an interesting study to review the images of leadership in fiction written by Nigerians themselves, a people who have produced the

greatest number of acclaimed novelists in Africa, with a view to discovering the extent to which the genre has gone in its prophetic, dispassionate function of stating the truth to redeem society, and in its lead as a re-branding factor. Illustrations will be taken from Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Lawrence Nwokora's *Red Harvest* and Chibuzo Asomugha's *A step into the dark*.

Images of leadership in Nigerian fiction

It is important to repeat this fact here: Chinua Achebe is the doyen of African fiction. Consequently, his image of leadership in *A Man of the People* set in an unnamed African country whose seat of government is a city known as Bori, must be reliable. Odili, a graduate who teaches in Anata Grammar School is Igbo. Ego Women's Party is apparently a women's organization in an Igbo setting. Mr. Nwege is the proprietor of the grammar school, the venue for the minister's reception. He too must be Igbo. In the minister's entourage are people of diverse ethnicities. Mrs. Eleanor John, 'an influential party woman from the coast', a chain-smoking lady, is probably from one of the riverine areas of Nigeria (15). The huge tough-looking member of the Minister's entourage, the one-eyed thug who is to confront Odili on his arrival at the minister's residence in Bori, appears typical of an Ajegunle product. Chief Nanga mentions a fellow cabinet minister by the name of Chief the Honourable Alhaji Doctor Mongo Sego, likely from the northern region of the country.

Bori also has a lot in common with Nigeria's capital city at independence: Jean drives Odili 'through wide, well-lit streets bearing the names of our well-known politicians and into obscure lanes named after some unknown small fish' (58). In this city, a minister owns ten houses on one street and they are rented out to embassies; in this same city, Chief Nanga alone has a street, an avenue and a circle named after him. Thus, there is no doubt that Achebe has depicted a fictionalized version of Nigeria.

The prevailing image is that of a country in which the leadership arrogates every social amenity to itself, leaving the masses to wallow in stinking slums and backstreets where overflowing pails of excrement invade the air with sickening odours. It is a leadership comprising mediocres who, suspicious of the enlightened few among them, gang up to dismiss the Minister of Finance, Dr. Makinde, a first-rate economist, and others like him for insisting on transparency in budgeting and prudence in financial management. The semi-literate Prime Minister, with the support of boot-

lickers such as Chief Nanga, in the parliament, destroys meritocracy. Sycophants like Chief Nanga shout obscenities at the humiliated ministers. This is quickly noticed by the head of government and Hanzard writers. The hitherto unknown back-bencher, consequently, bags the portfolio of Minister of Culture. A cabinet of ravenous self-seekers emerges and corruption becomes the credo. Chief Nanga's eagerness to have the road to Anata tarred is to enable him float a fleet of buses – ten in number – which he is to get 'on a never-never arrangement from the British Amalgamated' (46). This is fraudulence.

Nanga is a Minister of Culture without culture. He has no respect for his family; he sends his wife and children home at Christmas so that he can defy his matrimonial bed with impurity. In addition to his other sexual exploits in that season, he also takes Elsie, Odili's girl-friend, to bed. By that singular immoral escapade, he violates the natural law of hospitality, not to talk of his self-debasement in the act of brazenly sharing a woman with his one-time pupil. That Odili seeks out Max and joins the new political party hatched in the latter's house at Bori, as a platform from which to launch vengeance on Chief Nanga, is an indictment of the average power-seeking Nigerian. They go into politics for the wrong reasons.

In this regard, Achebe's use of a naïve narrator is a powerful satiric technique. It implies that no Nigerian, no matter his moral or ethical pretension, can resist the lure of power and the attendant corruption. And that Nanga carts away the social amenities meant for Urua community because Odili refuses his two hundred and fifty pound bribe shows how a corrupt leadership uses social amenities, the people's legitimate possessions, as baits to trap and twist the arms of the electorate in the bid to retain power. In the words of Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan 'That *A Man of the People* is about corruption – insatiable, devoid of conscience, lacking any sympathy for the poor who form the vast majority of the population – is evident' (55-6).

A corrupt and inept leadership will not brook opposition. Soon the ruling POP and the rival PAP engage each other in violence. People are killed on both sides, forcing the military to intervene. The injection of a *deus ex machina*, at this point, may be seen as a weakness in the texture of the novel but, perhaps, it is in response to a bewildered author's wish that the carnage and anarchy be stemmed. At the point when the military step in, the matter has defied any democratic resolution.

It must be noted that Achebe does not leave his readers, his country, without hope. At least there is one person who refuses a bribe and that is the hero, Odili. According to James Booth, 'on the political level, he refuses ever to take a bribe, even when the transaction could easily have passed undetected. In this, he is unique in a novel where society is built on bribery and corruption' (102).

Fiction set in Nigeria builds up themes in line with history. Thus, in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, that 1966 coup prophesied in Achebe's story takes place. Olanna is used to travelling to Kano. In this faraway northern city, she cherishes two sets of people: Uncle Mbaezi and his family, and Mohammed, her Moslem boyfriend before she met Odenigbo in their undergraduate days in Ibadan. The former are her blood relatives; in fact, Mr. Mbaezi's wife, Auntie Ifeka, is said to have breast-fed Olanna and her twin sister, Kainene, when, at their birth, their mother's breasts had failed. The couple in Kano has children. One of them is Arize, a lady betrothed to Nnakwanze who works at the railway. Arize and Olanna are like bread and butter. It is on this visit that Uncle Mbaezi and his friend Abdulmalik come home together. Olanna and her uncle's Hausa friend had met before when she had bought a few pairs of leather slippers from him. On this present occasion, Abdulmalik makes a present of another pair of his wares to the lady and even invites her to his home.

He muttered more congratulations before he sat with Uncle Mbaezi on the veranda, with a bucket of sugarcane in front of them. They gnawed off the hard, green peels and chewed the juicy white pulp, speaking Hausa and laughing. They spit the chewed cane out on the dust (sic). Olanna sat with them for a while, but their Hausa was too swift, too difficult to follow (41).

The above passage is significant. Mbaezi is Igbo; Abdulmalik is Hausa. But years of contact and friendship have virtually eroded their ethnic differences. That sharing of sugar cane, chewing and dropping the chaff on the dust is a ritual cementing their relationship. Mbaezi speaks Hausa as fluently as his friend. This is brotherhood; this is the position at the grassroots. But one notices that the Igbo, in Kano, cannot send their children to the same schools as Hausa children. Hence the Igbo Union Grammar School on Airport Road. This is segregation, politically instituted to keep the ethnicities from fusing. It is the leadership ploy in the north to divide and rule without criticism.

Appeal to ethnic sentiments is a strategy used by corrupt political leaders to divert the attention of their followers from their selfish undertakings. By Olanna's next visit to the north, the coup has taken place. Many political leaders from the north including the Prime Minister and the Sarduana are killed. Because a majority of the five army majors who plan and execute the coup are Igbo, the leadership in the north sees it as an Igbo uprising and 'The B.B.C. is calling it an Igbo coup' (127). Besides, the Igbo in Kano are rejoicing. Aunty Ifeka says:

'The Sarduana was an evil man, *ajo mmadu* ... He hated us. He hated everybody who did not remove their shoes and bow to him. Is he not the one who did not allow our children to go to school?' (133).

Meanwhile a new song by Rex Lawson is played aloud in every compound in Sabon Gari. The song mimicks the bleating of a goat. The Igbo, right at the heart of Kano, sing it in derision of the Hausa; they say that was how the Sarduana cried when Major Nzeogwu arrested him: 'Mmee-mmeee-mmeee, a goat begging not to be killed: mmeee-mmeee-mmeee' (133). It is played even in beer parlours. This is the height of callousness. By the way, it is the death of the Premier of Northern Nigeria and Moslem leader that is being derided in his own domain! The Igbo in Kano, like Aunty Ifeka, are reacting in consonance with indoctrinations against the Sarduana by national leaders of Igbo extraction and in response to the segregational policies instituted by the northern leadership. Olanna's position that 'It's not funny' is Adichie's verdict: one should not hate even unto death; besides, commonsense demands that one should mind how one gloats over the tragedy that befalls one's host no matter how hostile the spirit of the place of abode may be.

What follows during the counter-coup of 1966 is also morally unjustifiable. Moslem soldiers and civilians 'are blocking the roads and searching for infidels' (149). Again, Olanna is in Kano. When the news reaches her, she is on Mohammad's veranda, eating. She insists on being taken to Sabon Gari instead of the railway station as suggested by her host. The gory sight is better described in the narrator's voice:

She opened the car door and climbed out. She paused for a moment because of how glaringly bright and hot it was, with flames bellowing from the roof, with grit and ash floating in the air before she began to run towards the house. She stopped when she saw the bodies. Uncle Mbaezi lay face down in an ungainly twist, legs

splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Aunty Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips (150).

In that crowd, wielding an axe or machete, is Abdulmalik saying “we finished the whole family. It was Allah’s will!” (151). It is not Allah’s will. No. It is that of political and religious leaders in the north, including officers of northern origin who execute the counter-coup.

The train in which Olanna is traveling back to the east is packed with refugee’s flee from a pogrom masterminded by political/military leaders. One such refugee is the woman carrying a calabash. At a point she invites her fellow passengers to see what is in her bowl:

Olanna looked into the bowl. She saw the little girl’s head with the ashy-grey skin and plaited hair and rolled-back eyes and open mouth. She stared at it for a while before she looked away. Somebody screamed (152).

What is painful and pitiable is the role of the likes of Abdulmalik. He represents the masses who are brainwashed by self-gratifying religious and political leaders into jettisoning such grand ideals in the philosophy of the Blackman that a sojourner and his host can become, or have become, brothers when they have partaken of the ritual meal as Mbaezi and Abdulmalik have done. It is the leadership in Nigeria that has consistently and deliberately worked against the achievement of unity in diversity.

But even in Adichie gruesome portraiture of collective violence, there is hope in the person of Mohammed. It is not just that he rescues Olanna; it is rather that he condemns the incident:

‘Allah does not allow this’, Mohammed said. He was shaking. “Allah will not forgive them. Allah will not forgive the people who have made them do this. Allah will never forgive this’ (151).

In Lawrence Nwokora’s *Red Harvest*, the military, in Barankasa, execute a series of coups aimed at getting some officers into power. Under the banner of BP Club 555, five senior army officers – Brigadier Udu Zakih, Colonels Afojuani and Egen Obong, Lt. Colonels Abdul Dankali and Eugene Oversen – lead operations that finally land them into positions of national leadership. Most of them become military governors in General Gaga’s regime. When

they observe that the head of state's posture is one that does not brook corruption, the five plan his overthrow even from their prison cells. General Mbedandar succeeds Graga. He releases the mutineers, restores them as governors and virtually gives them blank cheques to siphon the country's wealth.

Col. Afojuani is the military governor of his home state, Nkwassa. He loots public fund which he shares among his hitherto unknown brothers. One, the ex-headmaster, becomes the owner of a huge pharmaceutical outfit, supplying all the drugs needed in the state public health institutions; the other brother is assisted to float fleets of transport vehicles and the youngest, Engineer Ikeaka, establishes a formidable construction company which is awarded all the major contracts by government.

With the connivance of the traditional chief of his town, the governor acquires land by sheer force. The case of Citizen Onuelu who refuses to part with his patrimony is representative of the despotism of military leadership in Nigeria. Igwe Enunweike is a typical example of the bootlicking sycophants of the military era. He banishes Onuelu to create an opportunity for his land to be seized. When the exile receives his pardon and returns, he discovers that a mansion has sprung from what used to be his compound. His wife and children are nowhere to be found. He commits suicide on a tree at the centre of the land in dispute. The Igwe orders his thugs to quickly bury him in the hole from which that tree is excavated.

Again, military leadership fails the masses. A few enlightened hungry civilians are appointed into administrative positions. Col. Afojuani ensures that he appoints commissioners from his extended family and that of his wife.

Leadership, whether civilian or military, employs the same sordid lifestyle. Thus, Col Richard Afojuani is not morally better than Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga. Both assault marital tranquility. All the while, Dinah has tailed her husband as he changes female sex partners. The last, Ondalia, is daring indeed. She nearly rocks the boat of the family.

The image of the country in the outside world is poor. 'We must simply be a laughing stock for the outside world because by now it has dawned on all that what motivates these two or three yearly coups in most countries of the land of Sunshine is not the welfare of the poor masses' (68). According to V. Onyema Chukwu, *Red Harvest*

... is an allegory ... Nkwassa appear to be a misspelling for an Igbo word symbolizing 'squandamania.' It echoes the prevalent mood during Afojuani's regime. Again, we may have to examine the names of characters: 'Afojuani is an Igbo proverbial phrase for the limitlessness of the earth's depth. Applied here, it stands for greed ... 'Kudi' is the Hausa for money. Such other names as 'Yanyan', 'Gaga' and 'Salama' are onomatopoeic and stand variously for the exuberance, madness and bestiality of military dictatorship (134).

Onuelu's resistance gives hope. He dies for the cause of truth.

Chibuzo Asomugha's *A step into the dark* deals with a very recent situation that needs to be arrested if the rebranding campaign is to succeed. Nigeria is a very busy route for hard-drug peddling. The barons are people like Alhaji, described as 'a huge black ape of a man' (43). Even when they may not be leaders, they have adequate connections with the leadership and are well protected. They exploit the unemployment situation to engage frustrated graduate job-seekers in the nefarious trade.

Kunle is Fred Okoli's companion in their youth service year. Fred, by upbringing and education, is an idealist who believes that Nigeria can be a veritable haven for everyone. Kunle, on the other hand, is a realist. For him, no amount of theorizing can change the situation. This is a huge country with vast potentials and, rather than become an armchair philosopher, one should join the looters, the squanderers and spoilers. Kunle is, therefore, a potential candidate for the drug-courier job.

The Alhaji lives in grand opulence:

... Massive twin columns, intricately carved motifs slithering their length and breath, held between them are equally massive gate cast in bronze (sic). The walls of the compound were so high they made it impossible for prying eyes to see what lay beyond them... For about a quarter of a kilometer, they drove through a resplendent avenue lined on both sides by royal palms held in by a stretch of green cut carpet of grass (40-41).

That is the approach to the *Oga's* house. The mansion itself is 'built of gold-tented glass and at night when fully lit, it looked like it was built of light' (41). For people like Kunle, this is what it means to be living. For this reason, he adores Alhaji. As soon as he has made a couple of successful trips

peddling drugs for the *Oga*, he acquires enough money to imitate his model's lifestyle. He has a posh car and lives in some degree of grandeur in 18B Adesoye Street, Maryland, Lagos.

On his part, Fred huzzles for employment in Enugu. His father, a retired public servant, tries to help with his connections. When everything fails to secure even a teaching job, he goes in for a post-graduate study in Military History. With an M.A., he still cannot get a job. This is when Kunle's letter comes inviting him to Lagos. Irene, his girlfriend during the service year, writes too: she has got a job.

Gradually, Fred's moral fabric erodes. He defies his father and joins Kunle. The opulence around the latter is so tantalizing that Fred regrets all that idealism of his former life. His meeting with the Alhaji gives him the zest to take a plunge.

In spite of all the assurances by Alhaji, and Kunle, Fred is caught on his first trip. He is locked up and nobody, not even Kunle, comes to look for him. A lawyer appears, reassures him and disappears. The elder Okoli, his father, is the only person who stands by him until he is tried and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

The problem of unemployment has arisen as a consequence of the leadership's lack of political will. Our schools need more teachers, the public service has gaping holes, the active parastatals are understaffed. Jobs can be, and are always, created by a responsible leadership. Such exercises are healthy for any nation's economy. Asomugha's image of leadership in Nigeria does not include those who have a conscious plan for employment generation. A young writer recently voiced the anger and frustration of young people of this country: the leaders have

... failed in so many ways. Where they could not get the extra they needed, they stole from the future. The resources that could have been used to build libraries, research centres, schools, laboratories and good roads were used to buy luxury cars; a generation that could not demarcate avarice from necessity; a generation that almost totally abused the fate and hope of the oncoming generation (Udochukwu Onuoha: 24).

Smart Malife reflects on this experience, when he says, 'No one wants to see long term projects that will yield profit and provide adequate employment for

the youths because the grassroots is afraid of the sincerity of the leadership' (107).

Conclusion

In conclusion, two of the authors – Achebe and Nwokora – employ the *deus ex machina* motif as a further warning to the country's leaders that their misrule may invite divine wrath. Three of these writers demonstrate confidence in the masses of the country. This is hope that this nation will survive.

One may now re-assess the call for partnership between writers and government in the re-branding project. First, what Okediran has said of literature must be understood clearly: by its nature, literature, especially fiction, depicts realism, an illusion of reality. Truth is its watchword. From time, it has always painted the overriding image of a Nigeria drifting under corrupt leadership. This is the noblest contribution to the rebranding campaign. It cannot convey propaganda which fosters falsehood.

In the Minister's convocation address, she tries without much conviction to exonerate the leadership. We tend to cover the sore only to let it fester. It is not 'a few of us both inside and outside the country' that foist a poor brand on Nigeria. The leadership has to go on a retreat to ponder on how guilty it is in this crime. And people who pray several decades of the rosary so that their children can win lottery visas to the U.S.A. cannot be taken seriously when they advocate that the rest of us should look inwards to rebrand the country.

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