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**The Worm Squirring in the Root: An Image of Democracy in
Okediran's *Tenants of the House***

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Abstract

Democracy in Nigeria may be said to have made some headway since independence. Even though this democracy seems to have overcome the truncation of its first and second republics by military dictatorships, and has transited over the decades into what may appear from an uncritical observation to be an emergent stable democratic culture, the same worm squirming in its root that had sent it into a coma is burgeoning rather than whittling down. Nigerian fiction, acting as the weather-vane for this development has spotted these political shenanigans. The literary artists have lived up to their calling as defined by Howe: to be "seized by the passion to represent and to give order to experience." This article identifies unrelenting compulsive and pervasive corruption as the image of democracy in contemporary Nigerian literature. The paper undertakes a study of Okediran's *Tenants of the House* to explore political insensitivity that is propelled by avarice in leadership in Nigeria. The study attempts to examine the angst of the author's creativity in his attempt to capture a moment of Nigeria's leadership vacuum in the historical consciousness of the people, and concludes that contemporary Nigerian literature remains a committed art, decrying social ills that negate the well-being of the people.

Introduction

The subject of democracy in literature would fall within the ambit of what, even if sceptically, may be referred to as a sub-genre of the novel the political novel.

Writing about the political novel, Howe (1957) avers that:

When I speak... of the political novel, I have no ambition of setting up sill another rigid category. I am concerned with perspectives of observation, not categories of classification (16).

This reluctance to assign that appellation to the novel as its sub- genre notwithstanding, Howe defines a political novel as

... a novel in which we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and, it follows, with the possibility of some analytical project (17).

On his own part, Nnolim (2010) asserts that:

Politics enters a novel at those times when the fate or destiny of peoples or classes are locked in the death throes of survival, when continuity in a people's way of life is threatened, when alien forces by way of military forces or colonial invasion endanger a people's future or make that future uncertain, and in our body politic, when the vultures of corruption descend to devour a people's cherished ethical, religious or moral values (62).

Both Howe and Nnolim (cited above) while putting forth a strong argument for the political novel seems to admit that literature admitting politics into its structures is of a dubious status. This tacit agreement or inkling stems from an old argument that dates to as far back as 1790 that "the pure esthetic experience consists of a disinterested, contemplation of an aesthetic object without reference to its reality" (Abrams, 1981). Abuh (2005, 2011) argues, however, that the proposition of a pure art devoid of referentially is, at best, an unrealized ambition. This position is buttressed by Nnolim (1999), when we say that "the major concerns of the novel... are representational (i.e., drawn from the common idiom of life) as against non-representational fiction or pure fantasy (i.e., not drawn from the common idiom or realities of life), and that the novel deals with realistic problems of everyday living (235-6).

One therefore does not need to be sceptical about qualifying a kind or a group of novels as political. At least, the primordial link between literature and rhetoric is an indication that literature is a persuasive art. All artists represent realities or "refract" (represent bended reflection) realities in order to make their audiences see the world from their own perspective. This is perhaps why Nnolim (2010) in "The Writer as Patriot" asserts

that “all art is propaganda even if it is propaganda in its most subtle form.” (29-30) Howe (1957) toes this line of thought when he defines the novelist as “a man seized by the passion to represent and to give order to experience (20).” When that “passion to represent” relates to the fate of a people (to recall Nnolim cited above) that is locked in the death throes of survival as a result of the manner in which their affairs are being run, then the imaginative narration is a political one. This angst or passion, that strong desire to represent in fictional discourses a people’s political experience must be seen to be patriotic. Fulbright (cited in Nnolim (2010) avows that, “...to criticize one’s country, to tell her that it could do better, is to pay the highest compliments” (220). Nnolim recognizes this mode of criticism as constituting “the highest patriotism, provided that your loyalty or patriotism is not to one regime or junta, but to an indivisible country and to all her peoples” (220).

From the forgoing, one can see the political novel in the light of narrative fictional representations of political milieux in which the political experience does not jeopardize the aesthetic experience. In other worlds, the final product of the writing endeavour must exude in an uncompromising manner analyzable qualities of literary art. In this qualification, the ostracizing alarm blown by standhel may be allayed. He is quoted as saying: “politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention” (Howe, 1957). In a political novel, therefore, the pistol-shot becomes absorbed into the harmony of the concert, which, otherwise, the concert would have missed as a vital part.

In what follows therefore, this paper will undertake a brief review of Nigeria’s post-independence literature and discuss the dynamics of imagery in literature. The image of corruption will be examined using Okedira’s *Tenants of the House* (2009) for practical critical analysis.

Nigerian’s Post- Independence Literature of Disillusionment

The aim of this section is to show how the defeat of the high expectations of the practical dividends of political independence sharply contrasted with the performance of the people entrusted with the solemn responsibility of making up for the citizenry the gross exploitation and oppression they had suffered in the hands of the colonial task masters. In *A Man of the People* (1965), a poem which Achebe assigns to Maxwell Kulamo, a revolutionary character, will continue to haunt his (Achebe’s) audience for a long time after reading the novel. We will quote the part of that poem available to the audience.

I will return home to her- many centuries have I
wandered-
And I will make y offering at the feet of my lovely

mother:

I will rebuild her house, the holy places they raped and
plundered,

And I will make it fine with black wood, bronzes and
terracotta.

Recall that the poem was composed way back in Maxwell's undergraduate days but now re-read to lament the unbelievably hopeless situation in an unnamed African (but pointedly Nigerian) nation. The prodigal son in the poem had solemnly promised to redress the wrongs of centuries of exploitation by colonial masters - wrongs that the poet identified as the raping and plundering of poor mother Africa - only for the son to turn out to become a dishonourable "honourable" Member of Parliament. In order to allay doubts, Chief the Honourable Nanga, M.A. (MP) in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, is a caricature, in a most despicable representation of ethical ugliness, of a corrupt and of a corrupting politician engaged, not in the pursuit of public welfare but in hedonism, avarice and debauchery, whose chief method is violence when his shenanigans fail him. With his likes inflicting violence simultaneously in a desperate bid to retain their ministerial appointments and legislative seats, the nation is plunged into chaos of a horrendous magnitude. This is quite understandable as disorderliness is the natural product of unstoppable corruption because by its self-preserving mechanism, corruption renders systems dysfunctional. In the midst of the confusion, the military strikes in a coup d'état that sweeps Chief Nanga and his cohorts into detention. Only then does the cynical public who had been full of praises for the corrupt regime - sycophantic praises, anyway - begin to exclaim that Chief Nanga had overreached himself by his stealing escapades to the extent that the owner had noticed it. This scenario is what Nnolim (2010, p. 64) succinctly captures when he writes thus:

In Anglophone, West Africa, the politically attuned novelist revealed in very bad light the subversion of post-independence hopes and promises by those who were banked upon to redress the wrongs inflicted by the colonial masters.

Achebe's *A Man of the People*, cited above, is a representative sample; several other Nigerian writers were disenchanted with the corruption and mis-governance of the politicians. The portraiture of the disgust with corruption and neglect of the people's welfare by the novelists is unmistakable - Okara (*The Voice*); Aluko (*One Man, One Matchet*); Munonye (*A Wreath for the Maidens*) and Soyinka (*The Interpreters*) are a few of them.

It is important to note that the first republic did not outlive its corruption escapades. The major excuse that the military gave was that the deposed government was excessively corrupt. The avalanche of literary repudiations signified by the list above,

and the historical evidence agree that corruption was the bane of the first republic (as indeed it was with the second) in Nigeria. The butt of this analysis is that corruption in the body-politic of Nigeria in its extremity jeopardizes democracy. Nigeria may not be the only corrupt country in the world. But the contrast between the country's super-abundant resources and the flaunted opulence of the ruling class on the one hand, and the squalor, disease and abject depressing poverty of the masses on the other is glaring enough to incense people against a collapsed system that a hedonist few struggles to maintain for the furtherance of their greed. Moreover, once the dogs in *Animal Farm* (1945) have tasted blood by executing fowls that had confessed to the crime of communicating with Comrade Snowball in their dream, they will be eager again to taste it once the opportunity presents itself. By analogy, other nations of the world may indefinitely put up with failed economies and civil services, but Nigeria's military, having tasted power and its bogus fringe benefits, may not forever be able to resist the temptation to step up their corrective and sanitizing saga, not so especially when it is not a fabrication to say that Nigerian politicians are corrupt. At least, in Nigeria, and some other democracies in Africa, corruption puts democracy in danger. And the image of democracy in Nigerian literature is that of growing corruption. The paper now turns to the device of imagery in literature.

Imagery and Sense Perception

Imagery is one of the most frequently used devices in literature. It is used to create mental pictures and to arouse memorable experiences (Maduka and Eyo, 2000). Imagery can as well make an otherwise abstract quality or reality available to sensory perceptions in concrete terms.

Defining imagery is not as easy as it seems. According to Abrams (1981 78) it is one of the most ambiguous terms in modern literary criticism. It can mean the "mental pictures" which a reader experiences when reading a work of literature. It can as well mean "the totality of images which make up..." the literary work (78). Abuh (2005 32) explains that an image is "...a word or a group of words by which an artist seeks to communicate to a reader a mental picture or some sense impression."

Imagery is available to all the senses of perception - sight, taste, touch, smell and hearing. For example, the following stanza from David Rubadiris's "An African Thunderstorm" can be used to illustrate two of these sense perceptions made possible by imagery:

Pregnant clouds
Ride stately on its back
Gathering to perch on hills
Like dark sinister wings;
The wind whistles by
And trees bend to let it pass (ll.10-15. See Senanu & Vincent 1981 91)

The unusual size of the cloud (it is pregnant) strikes the reader's imagination: the content of the pregnancy is unknown. However, the sinister wings (suggesting evil) another unusual thing about the cloud, instils fear in us. These two images, namely, the pregnant clouds and the sinister wings give a premonition of danger, which the whistling of the wind (sound imagery) reinforces, for the trees bend (brutal force) to let it pass. So, when later in the poem,

Women
 Babies clinging on their backs
 Dart about
 In and out
 Madly (ll.20-24)

The terror of the storm becomes obvious. In the poem, both visual and sound imagery converge on sense perceptions to show the destructive tendencies of thunderstorms in Africa. Imagery can thus deepen our appreciation of both meaning and beauty of a literary work and thereby make the literary experience memorable and enjoyable.

The Image of Democracy in Okedirani's *Tenants of the House*

Okedirani's *Tenants of the House* opens with visual imagery - the image of violence. The first sentence of the novel reads: "I handled a gun for the first time the day I saw one in Hon. Elizabeth Bello's handbag" (1). Right from the opening of the novel, therefore, the reader is alarmed by this image and is given grounds to guess that something is rotten in the world of the novel. Expectedly, throughout the book, democracy in Nigeria is bedevilled with intrigues, conspiracy, bribery and gross irresponsibility. The greatest problem that threatens democracy in the novel is the abandonment, except in one instance, of legislative responsibilities for personal interests in filthy lucre. For most of the politicians, it is base motive that informs their political actions and inactions, and not any commitment to the expectations of the electorate.

The novel runs two parallel plots concerning Honourable Samuel Bakura, the political plot, which is the main plot, and the sub-plot about his love affair with a young Fulani girl named Batejo. Both plots are relevant for our present discourse.

The main plot concerns the political activities of the honourable members of the lower house of Nigeria's National Assembly, the Federal House of Representatives. At the outset, Samuel Bakura, the narrator and protagonist, had noble motives for entering into politics. He says:

I had been in legal practice for a decade; making a tidy sum. Politics was something I watched with trepidation and pain. They called it a dirty game but I was a clean man. I would join the game and contribute

my quota to good governance and the promotion of democratic culture (4).

This initial good intention is, however, imperilled by the reality he meets once he becomes a member of the legislative house. What he sees in actual practice is a pack of legislators wearing the appellation of honourability prefixed to their names but whose conducts are anything but honourable. These “honourable” members engage in political gangsterism, intrigues, betrayals, deceit and conspiracy, the underling motive being a mindless pursuit of lucre. The strategies in this pursuit are deceptions, bribery, corruption and intimidation. The most important factor in the entire scenario is money, which they describe as “the fertilizer of politics.” Amassing as much money as is possible, therefore, becomes about the only interest that rules their lives, day and night. In the process, ideals and original intentions get beclouded and forgotten.

Bakura’s first encounter with corruption was when his nomination as a contestant had to be confirmed by the party chieftains. He ruminates:

To get my nomination confirmed at the constituency level had been a fierce struggle. I had coughed up half my annual income for nomination but it was not enough... And money! Every step of the way it was more and more and more money. Money for the chieftains, money for the constituency monguls; money for party stalwarts; money for party thugs, money for polling agents... (4-5).

Since Bakura was nominated in the end, it meant that he was able to satisfy the numerous bribery demands. Even though he had resisted the next demand that he should be initiated into a secret cult by the party chieftains that does not absolve him from this charge of corruption. Thus, before the novel opens, at the very inception of his career in politics, Bakura had been baptized into corruption.

We have cause to believe Bakura when he recalls that at entry, he was a clean man. This is made apparent by the way he is taken aback at the image of violence signified by the gun he finds in Honourable Elizabeth Bello’s handbag in the legislative chamber. The idea of a legislator carrying a gun, beating all security gadgets, horrifies him greatly, to the extent that it haunts him into a nightmare after the day’s session. He keeps wondering to himself what business a gun got to do in the service of one’s nation. In this respect, Bakura is a baby politician in the rating of Elizabeth for whom killing is part of politics. For her, “to kill is a crime; to kill at the right time is politics.” It is significant that Bakura and Elizabeth, both representing Kaduna State, come from two different backgrounds. While Bakura’s father was a poor peasant farmer who had no capacity to contain the Fulani herdsmen who ravaged his crops. Elizabeth had a tough veteran Nigerian politician for a father. So, Elizabeth had been in the orientation of Nigeria’s kind of politics since childhood.

It is on this note that Honourable Elizabeth Bello appoints herself as Honourable Samuel Bakura's tutor on some vital lessons in politics. For instance, the concept of the "fertilizer of politics" is a topic in which Elizabeth is very much adept in. "Fertilizer" is such a frequently and universally used term (among the honourable members) that it assumes something of a motif. She urges him: "money, money, money is the fertilizer of politics. Sam don't be a small boy. How much do you earn here as a member of parliament? Peanuts... Peanuts that godfathers and constituents Swallow up as quickly as chickens devour maize)" (6).

Again,

How many Reps make it back? Only two out of ten. Sam, Sam, Sam, and how many times did I call you? You want to make it back? Take the money from anywhere, prepare for the rainy day. Politics can be good for you. In this Nigeria, life outside parliament is hard, hard, hard (6).

The image of money, nay fertilizer, looms large. Sam is dazed. And Elizabeth completes her task; she introduces Sam to a member that should help him to acquire the fertilizer - first, the speaker of the house of representatives, Rt. Hon. Yaya Suleiman, and later, Hon. Linus Wenike, who is later to spearhead the schemes for the Speaker's impeachment.

When the plotting comes for the removal of the Speaker, Bakura has understood the "language" of money. The image of money devolves from mere abstractions encapsulated in the rhetoric of fertilizer into palpable dollars. To enlist Bakura into the camp working on the project of the speaker's impeachment, Honourable Wenike advances to him ten thousand dollars, "the first of three installments" (11). The way Bakura describes the money indicates that he is going to cave in, and he does. He says: "Quickly, I ripped the envelope open. Many freshly minted American dollars greeted my eyes. 'Sizzling Lizzy,' I said excitedly, 'how much is this?'" Bakura does not miss the point in emphasizing the visual effect of this imagery. It is compulsive, irresistibly so.

Furthermore, Okediran uses the opportunities of this impeachment plot and, later, the tenure elongation bid of the President to portray the irresistible power of corruption to advantage. In both cases, the author parades the legislators as people who are ready to sell their conscience to the highest bidder. This is shown in the way in which people change camps of loyalty either in support of the impeachment (Honourable Linus Wenike's group) or against it (the Speaker's group). The choice to belong to any of the gangs is not dictated by conscience – a consideration for what will be in the interest of democratic culture or the country. The choice is dictated by the amount of money that is available to be shared. In that case, it is apparent that the Speaker is very likely going to lose his seat. The narrator emphasizes this fear when he says:

His (the Speaker's) worst nightmare came when it was discovered that members of his group had started moving to the Wenike group to whom the Presidency had reportedly given the hefty sum of ₦100 million to effect his removal (48).

The Speaker, in his own desperate bid to retain his seat, decides to fight back:

He opened a safe behind his seat and brought out some naira notes. Working quickly, he put the equivalent of 2,000 dollars each into ten brown envelopes and packed them into a bag (50).

Offering the money to Bakura after a brilliant speech during his mid-night visit to his house, the Speaker acknowledges the insignificance of the amount as Bakura reports:

As he said this, he brought out a brown envelope from his trousers pocket and held it out to me. I know I cannot match the presidency naira for naira but kindly take this small token for your urgent needs (54).

To be fair to Hon. Samuel Bakura, it is not the money that makes him change camps in favour of the Speaker. Rather, it is the appeal to his conscience. That notwithstanding, he has collected the money. He promises to return the money he had collected from Wenike but fails to do that. Therefore, Bakura cannot be absolved of complicity in corruption deals, even though he successfully battles the impeachment plot. Joined to Bakura are the students and workers whose gallant performance during the protest contributes greatly to the frustration of the impeachment plans. They also get a "heap" of money (97).

It is interesting to note that all the trouble about the impeachment of the Speaker was ignited by the President not on any sound principle. It is just a move to get the Speaker out of his way for his personal interests. His allegation of bribery in the appointment of members to key posts within the house is only a ruse. Even though the members of parliament know this, they still expend so much energy in pushing for it. The role of some of the members makes an interesting study as well. Honourable Elizabeth, for instance belongs to both camps: while her allegiance is to the Wenike's group, working for the President to unseat the Speaker, she is a spy in the Speaker's camp. She remains a mole until Bakura deserts the Wenike group for the Speaker's. And there are several people doing just that. Mohammed Danladi, the Principal Secretary to the President feeds the Speaker with information pertaining to every strategic decision and line of action of the President. In the same way, Senator Smollet's driver secretly sells information to journalists. The State Security men are paid to bug the Speaker's office. Apart from the military that is not mentioned, almost everybody and every organization is available for hiring for dirty jobs. The mass media are not an exception. Those of them who are loyal to the President get a gratification of felicitation messages on the

occasion of the birthday of Chief Mrs. Veronica Oneya, the mother of President Ambrose Oneya. Corruption in the society is therefore a pervasive phenomenon.

The tenure elongation bid of President Abrose Oneya is another event that exposes the quality of legislators in the House of Representatives. Ethically, the legislators are expected to interrogate every sponsored bill in its merit. But in the world of this book, that is not the case for some of the members. Bribery continues unabated. The positive note in the novel at this point however is that the bribery and intimidation of legislators notwithstanding, the bill fails. This positive trend continues into the next major problem, namely, the impeachment of the President. As usual, heavy bribery is the “language” that the politicians understand. And during each of these upheavals, Senator Smollet gloats on the spoils of the fight. He fronts the bribery assaults launched by the President throughout the novel. And each time he wins an argument for the release of money for bribery, he cannot disguise his excitement over the gains accruable to himself. The narrator captures Senator Kayode Smollet’s mood on one of such occasions when he says: “He was also exhilarated that he would make a tidy sum from the scheme” (p. 25). That is why he is always apt to persuade the President to hike the sum involved maximally, for instance, one gets an excellent example of Smollet’s persuasion on page 29:

Your Excellency, success costs money. The strategy is pure and simple: hit them, hit them hard; give them what they dare not reject. Sir, we must remember it is a contest of wills and resources. It’s a tug of war: naira for naira, dollar for dollar. Money is the name of the game, Your Excellency (29).

One cannot do more than to agree with Ogezi (2010 3) when he describes Okediran’s *Tenants of the House* as a book pre-occupied with portraying “... a nation in search of its lost soul, using the Federal House of Representatives he (the author) knows so well as the microcosm of the larger society” Just as it has been said earlier, the novel is a study in an all-encompassing corruption, just a step away from what makes Nnolim (2009) remark (about Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are not yet Born*) that “Ghana is one giant and stinking lavatory (p. 111).” In *Tenants of the House*, no character seems to be absolved of corruption, not even the somewhat “repentant” Honourable Samuel Bakura. Instead of a concern for the well-being of the electorate, self-interest occupies the inhabitants of the house day and night. Bills are not about the people except for Bakura’s bill on conflict management between Fulani herdsmen and crop farmers.

However, the frustration of the Speaker’s impeachment bid, the vote of confidence on the President bill and the tenure elongation bill, and then the impeachment of the President are positive signs in an avalanche of filth.

One is almost at a loss trying to make out what Okediran intends to achieve by running the Bakura-Batejo love sub-plot along with the main one. He is not as successful here

as Achebe is in weaving the Odili-Edna love story into the political plot of *A Man of the People*. Surely, Bakura's legislative duties that take him to the Fulani communities where he meets Batejo, (the Fulani girl whose beauty he cannot resist even though she is already engaged to be married to the herds boy, Gidado) is part of the political and main plot. But his ill-advised but failed snatching of Batejo from Gidado is outside the political plot unlike Odili's case where what actually takes him into politics is the search for vengeance over the snatching of his girlfriend by a member of parliament, Chief Nanga. It can be said in favour of the Bakura-Batejo sub-plot, however, that deceit and gangsterism witnessed among the politicians are also traits noticeable among the Fulani herdsmen. His test of manliness at the flogging contest, for instance, is deceitful. It turns out to become a test of the efficacy of charms. Again, the scene where Gidado and his friends gang up against Bakura in a murder attempt reminds one of the gangsterism that always goes on in the Federal House of Representatives.

However, one must not lose sight of the enmity between the crop farmers of the Hausa community of Samuel Bakura's boyhood days and the Fulani herdsmen. He had vowed, by then, to fight the Fulanis in his adulthood through a legal career, but he is forced to have a second thought when his legislative duties open his eyes to the numerous deceits they Fulani people get from the politicians:

All they want is our votes. Those politicians, vote for us! Have a good life! Vote for us! Milk and honey will flow! But once they are voted in, they become deaf and dumb to our plight... you wouldn't even see them. Only civil servants hunting us all over for cattle tax. The crooked vet doctors who bleed and bleed us of money before vaccinating our cattle. Let politicians leave us alone! (150).

Bakura realizes here that the Fulani have genuine grievances to take it out on anyone they can overpower. He says: "the animosity I had harboured against them over the decades vanished" (150). His attempt to marry the Fulani girl, therefore, is a symbolic action, a rite of reconciliation (on his part) which, however, fails partly because he is not versed in the culture of sharo flogging of the Fulanis. He fails woefully. If, by this ending, a symbolical reading can be sustained as an attempt of the author to test out dissolution of irreconcilable ethnic differences, then Okediran is a prophet of doom for Nigeria. Our stay-together, then, is a marriage of convenience, much as one may flinch from this reading, it seems to be there.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to argue that Nigeria's democracy, as it is portrayed in contemporary Nigerian fiction, is far from being healthy. The paper asserts that the cause of the discomfiture of Nigeria's democracy is a root-devouring, life-sapping worm awash with soul-rending but lame declamations, yet squirming in the root and the fabric of Nigeria's existence, a monster which no benevolence, nor might, nor will

has been able to expel and banish. Rather than exterminating that worm, it is, rather, burgeoning, with all vitality, undaunted, as it's a threat to democratic culture. That worm is corruption. This study identifies corruption as this dominant image of democracy in the fictional expressions of Nigeria in the period under focus. It is noted as well that the same image of corruption portrayed in contemporary literary works formed the subject matter of the dirge on the demise of the earlier republics.

Contemporary Nigerian fiction, as seen in Okediran's *Tenants of the House*, therefore, is still singing the same old mournful song. We believe that African literature will not stop singing that song until the worm of corruption and related socio-political ills become at least listless. Then, the African creative talent may fully consider science fiction in pursuit of "poesie pure" or the pure art, devoid of referentiality.

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