

DISILLUSIONMENT IN P. L. O. LUMUMBA'S STOLEN MOMENTS

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African literary writers attempt to capture the social, economic and political realities in African nations. Many novelists have represented post-independence disillusionment in Africa. P.L.O. Lumumba's (2016) novel *Stolen Moments* effectively portrays a disillusioned people in the fictional African nation called Kangura. Using the socio-historical approach, the proposed paper examines the decay and betrayal in an independent African nation. It also highlights the literary devices that Lumumba uses to imaginatively capture post-independence woes and disillusionment that are typical of African nations. Lastly, the study will identify the solutions prescribed by the novelist on how to correct the ills in Africa.

Keywords: Disillusionment, post-independence, PLO Lumumba, *Stolen Moments*

Introduction

The novel as a literary form rose in the eighteenth century in England to interpret the everyday social and psychological problems of the common man. A novel presents characters and actions with some degree of realism – that is, “truth to individual experience” (Watt, 1987, p. 13). The imaginary characters and actions are in some sense representative of real life; “although fictional they bear an important resemblance to the real” (Hawthorn, 2005, p. 5). And, indeed, true to the motivation of the rise of the novel, African novelists have written in response to the social, economic and political concerns in African nations. Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba is one such novelist. He successfully creates a realistic representation of an African country. This paper focuses on his concerns for the people of Kangura -- a fictitious African nation that is a reflection of Kenya. The historical events in the text are suggestive. In *Stolen Moments*, Lumumba (2016) attempts to capture the pressing problems of post-independent Kangura. Post-independence novelists recreate the African experience and attack the ineptitude, dictatorship, corruption, and selfishness of African leaders. African leaders have failed to deliver on the social, political and economic hopes and lofty expectations of their countrymen – hence pain, frustrations, and disenchantment. Disillusionment is one of the main

concerns of post-independence African novelists that has not been explored in *Stolen Moments*.

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* attempts to capture what it means to undergo disillusionment. It defines disillusion as “to make someone realize that something which they thought was true or good is not really true or good” (Mayor, 2009, p. 485). Likewise, the adjective ‘disillusioned’ is presented as meaning “disappointed because you have lost your belief that someone is good, or that an idea is right” (Mayor, 2009, p. 485). This paper will give an insight into the utter disillusionment as fictionalized by Lumumba in a text that critiques the post-independence experience of an African state where hopes of a new beginning are illusory. The text chastises politicians, intellectuals, and commoners, whose attitudes and actions have led to Kangura's socioeconomic underdevelopment and stagnation. The writer also seems to suggest that the solution to the African woes is a united Africa (Lumumba, 2016) and youthful leaders who are guided by a revamped constitution.

Brief Biographical Sketch and Synopsis of *Stolen Moments*

P. L. O. Lumumba is the Director and Chief Executive Officer of Kenya School of Law. He is a professor of Public Law. He is also a former director

of Kenya Anti-corruption Commission. *Stolen Moments* is his debut novel – a story that revolves around Agwati, a scholar whose thesis titled “*Stolen Moments since Independence*” ruffles a few feathers in Kangura government. Consequently, he flees from Kangura to Norway to seek asylum. The story depicts tribal animosity between the people of Lamogi and those from the Mountains. It also highlights issues of unemployment and corruption.

The text identifies several opportunities when stolen moments would be restored. The first lost moment is when booklets of Agwati’s PhD thesis that had been stocked in university libraries are withdrawn. The other lost moment is Kangura’s attainment of independence; this is when ethnic-based politics was born. Thirdly, hopes are high after the death of Josano, the first president, and the subsequent takeover by Maneno, the Vice president; dictatorship reigns. The amendment of the constitution to allow the re-introduction of multiparty politics was another chance, but the opposition split into many factions which then gave Maneno victory in the elections.

Post-independence Disillusionment in Africa

Mortimer (1990) examines francophone literature of the Magreb and sub-Saharan Africa. He notes that writers (Ahmadou Korouma and Mouloud Mammeri) are pessimistic. When the characters are stripped of their illusion, they choose death as a form of escape. The independent African country does not offer respite from corruption, hypocrisy, poverty, and repression. Lumumba’s text urges rejection of cynical attitudes and calls for the implementation of the new constitution to serve Kangura (African nations).

Obi (1990) observes that “novels in the disillusionment tradition engage post-independence African reality by taking a forthright counter-establishment stance” (p. 400). He studies two novels of disillusion: *A Man of the People* (1966) by Chinua Achebe and *The Interpreters* (1967) by Wole Soyinka. He notes that the counter-establishment intellectual heroes (for example, Agwati in *Stolen Moments* who holds a PhD) of “the novel of disillusion do not succeed in changing their societies or even affecting the mores of their people. Their critical, progressive,

and well-intentioned voices are drowned out in din of the corrupt context in which they operate” (Obi, 1990, p. 406).

Achebe’s (1966) *A Man of the People* describes post-independent Nigeria with its attendant corruption, moral decay and oppression by the ruling class. The leaders that fought for independence become traitors that pursue selfish interests. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiongo’s (1977) *Petals of Blood* brings out the disillusionment of the Kenyan people after independence. The politicians and those in privileged positions do not support the ideals of nationalism; instead, they embrace neocolonialism where the peasants and workers are marginalized and ruthlessly exploited, yet it is they that engaged in the anti-colonial struggle. Instead of establishing plans that can transform the independent country, the ruling elite work with multinational companies to benefit themselves. Fanon says, “The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor invention, nor building, not labor; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket” (Fanon, 1991, pp. 149-150). The middle class ceases to be the voice of the nation and betrays the ideals of nationalist liberation struggle.

Theoretical Framework

This paper makes use of a close reading of the primary text with examples drawn from the novel. The text is analyzed in an attempt to determine how Lumumba exposes disillusionment in society. The study adopts a socio-political approach as the tool of analysis. This approach helps relate the novel to the social and political forces that shape the writer’s writing. It recognizes that a work of art is a product of its time, yet has the potential to challenge society within. Indeed, authors are affected by their social milieu. The approach makes it possible for the researcher to examine the novel in terms of social context, historical context, and political conditions under which the text was produced. The study assumes that literature does not develop from a vacuum. Like Glicksberg (1972) has argued, literature

simultaneously reflects while critiquing society. This approach examines the relationship between literature and society, and analyzes whether literature affirms social ideologies and attitudes, or subverts them.

Stolen Moments deals with the social and political condition of postcolonial Kangura. Wellek and Warren (1977) have observed that, “a work may be the result of author’s deep understanding about social problems around him” (p. 95). A literary work may present social problems, hence the appropriateness of the socio-historical point of view. The approach will help highlight the struggles of national and relate their plight to post-independent Kangura.

Critical Analysis of the Novel

The novel examines the lost moments occasioned by the bad leadership in Kangura’s post-independence history. The story begins with a long letter written by Agwati, the protagonist, to his aging father Ohinga. Agwati and a few others endure traumatic experiences and hardships in post independent Kangura. Lumumba indicts the government of Kangura for failing to provide meaningful employment to the youths, many of whom live in abject poverty. The exploitation of citizens robs them of dignity and takes them to foreign countries to find odd jobs. Kanguran migrants hope for better lives. However, unfortunately, while in foreign lands, they are abused and dehumanized. Sabina, for example, grows up in a “poor village” called Lamogi in Kangura (Lumumba, 2016, p.66). Even before she completes her primary education, she is married off to a man older than her father. At 17, she is widowed with four children. She engages in menial tasks and supports herself through high school and university.

After university she is unemployed for five years. While trying to find a job, she confesses, “male bosses demanded sexual favors before considering my request. In other offices, my tribal name denied me opportunities to get a job” (Lumumba, 2016, p. 67). It can be safely asserted that sex for jobs, which is a form of bribery, and tribalism are forms of corruption. Sabina is disillusioned because she realizes that completing

university was a futile exercise. Her frustrations point to the moral and social decadence in post independent Kangura. She is disillusioned about her prospects of leading a decent life in her country. Her dream of living happily and comfortably with her children in Kangura is constrained by the unemployment plaguing her country.

There are no economic opportunities. Out of desperation and a longing for better economic opportunities, she gets recruited by an agent to try her luck in Saudi Arabia. However, her hopes and happiness are soon dashed when she starts working as a house help. She goes through a harrowing experience. Her passport is confiscated and she is denied even the meager salary she had been promised. She is sexually abused by her boss’s husband and forced to eat rotten left-overs. Clearly, the middle class oppresses the low class. The greedy agents orchestrate the suffering and exploitation of the masses. The novel emphasizes the disillusionment of Sabina’s dream of a better life. *Stolen Moments* (Lumumba, 2016) highlights the fate of European-bound or Arab-bound job seekers of African origin. Besides enduring racism, migrants suffer unemployment, misery, agony, hatred, hostility, starvation, distress, cold, poor health, marginalization, and alienation. Agwati and Sabina in *Stolen Moments* testify to this. Sabina goes to Saudi Arabia to find a job to fend for her children. As soon as she gets there, she becomes a victim of dehumanization and exploitation. She works many hours, yet she cannot send money back to her children in Kangura. Sabina’s frustrations signify the many problems that post-independence African citizens face. Lumumba dwells extensively on unemployment as a major problem facing independent African nations. Agwati and Sabina cannot secure decent jobs worth their academic qualifications. They are forced to do exploitative odd jobs for survival. Sabina is even denied any pay. The inhumanity she suffers is evident in her overwork and undignified treatment. Similarly, Agwati, while in exile in Norway, is not hired by anyone. He thus decides to open his own law firm. However, his dark skin betrays him. Clients leave as soon as they learn he is the lawyer (pp. 26-29). He does not get to enjoy

the “milk and honey” found in Europe (p. 23). The initial impression he had of Europe clashes with the reality that now unfolds before his eyes. The migrants suffer unbearable torture, indignity, dehumanization, and frustrations and thus contemplate suicide. This explains why Sabina commits suicide in Norway. She is forced to have sexual intercourse with the employer’s dog; she is denied medication, clothes to wear and a room to sleep. Consequently, because she thinks herself worthless, she opts for suicide. Her opting out is reminiscent of Gregor Samsa’s in Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Sabina’s experience as a citizen, daughter, wife, and sister points to the plight of women. She is ill-treated, abused and exploited by males in her life. Like a commodity, she is married off by her father at 12 years of age. Secondly, she fails to secure a job because she refuses to give in to the sexual demands of the employers. When her efforts to find a job fail, she goes back to her rural home to venture into farming. However, her father and brother deny her a chance to cultivate the land. She reports, “They called me “mgogo”, a demeaning name used to refer to married women when they go back to their natal homes. Being a girl, I had no rights to cultivate or inherit my father’s land so I was thrown out of home when I refused to be married off yet again to another old man” (p. 67). Thirdly, her boss’s husband in Saudi Arabia touches her inappropriately and sexually abuses her. After going through oppressive tradition, humiliation, suffering and misery, Sabina commits suicide.

Clearly, considering her brilliance and success in academics, Sabina could have contributed positively to the county’s development. Patriarchy should be fought in order for women to be emancipated. Women are deprived of ownership of assets since everything belongs to men. Culture forces women to depend on men. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) notes that a woman “is often an appendage of someone else – a man – because most of our cultures are patrilineal and patriarchal” (p. 140). She suggests that traditional customs deprive women of independence and the right to own property. The novel also explores the cancer of corruption not only among the ruling elite, but also the general

public. In the nation-state of Kangura President Maneno, whose incumbency is threatened by a united opposition, creates a group of “young people under the name and style of Youth for Maneno (Y4M) to spearhead campaigns and crack the opposition” (p. 17). While the citizens believed that the “introduction of multiparty would bring back the stolen moments since independence” (p. 17), it did not happen. The Y4M brigade engaged in political corruption; “they moved around the country bribing everybody on sight and when necessary employing violence with impunity to ensure Maneno retained the presidency” (p. 17). Indeed, Y4M “made political corruption and voter buying the culture of Kanguran politics” (p. 18). The Y4M activities suggest a depraved government that is bent on hanging on to power by hook or by crook. Clearly there is no democracy.

Corruption in the countryside is evident in Agwati’s walk about meetings. The rural folk including “able men and women, youth and at worst young primary school-going children” ask politicians to give them money in exchange for votes. They use the Luo popular expression “gonywa” (p. 208). The word is loosely translated, “give us something.” Indeed, the general public is so used to handouts that they cannot be weaned off that culture. One unnamed character, for example, angrily criticizes the begging and nagging crowd, but after he disperses the grumbling crowd, “ironically, the ‘tongue-lasher’ immediately asked for a soda for his services” (p. 209). Elsewhere, after Agwati has distributed his campaign flyers, he hears a woman shouting, “If they do not bring money they should not come back” (p. 209).

Lumumba’s novel also attacks one of Kangura’s biggest political problems: negative ethnicity. This is an impediment to stability. He suggests that the seeds of negative ethnicity and corruption were sown at independence by the fathers of the African nations. In his letter to his father, Agwati notes that the conflict between Masiga (an opposition leader in Kangura, modeled after Jaramogi Oginga Odinga) and Josano (the first president of Kangura, modeled after Jomo Kenyatta) is ethnic based. The letter says in part, “The spirit that united us at independence waded” (p.

11). Indeed, many years after independence, when Agwati calls a peaceful demonstration that he was to lead with the sacked VC of Kangura, the VC declines to participate because “His Excellency is one of their own” (p. 22). Moreover, the political parties formed were ethnically inclined. “Each ethnic leader came up with a party for their ethnic group with no common cause anchored on a clearly defined ideology and all the tribesmen and women became members by default” (pp. 179-180). Fanon (1991) rightly saw ethnicity as an impediment to nationhood. He said that “the tribe is preferred to the state. These are the cracks in the edifice which show the process of retrogression, that is so harmful and prejudicial to national effort and national unity” (pp. 148-149).

Lumumba’s text also protests against political intolerance in Kangura. The office of the AG clamps down on people perceived to be critical of the government’s abuse of power. The government stifles the dissenting voices even when they are not a security threat. Agwati is an intellectual who is grilled by the AG about his PhD thesis. The masses are denied freedom of expression. According to Agwati, the level of political intolerance becomes extreme when the government authorities use violence against those with different opinions from theirs. Agwati goes to exile for fear that he may be tortured or even murdered.

Despite the utter disillusionment and disenchantment, the novel suggests a sense of optimism. Lumumba uses Agwati as his mouthpiece to resist bad governance, firstly, by writing a PhD thesis “Stolen Moments since Independence” scathing about the performance of Kanguran governments over the years. He, however, sees hope in the future. He has confidence in the many university students who are assembled in Ohinga Memorial Arboretum to listen to him. He sees “hope and a bright future for Africa” in their faces (p. 220). He sees graduates “that have changed their attitudes towards themselves, our environment and culture” (p.228). He further adds that his new book *The Beginning of Hygiene* highlights the gains made by the new constitution. He avers that the new constitution “is the panacea to our national malaise” (p.223). Some of the gains include cancellation of election results where rigging was reported; deregistration of politicians who bribed

voters from the list of voters and banning them from participating in any election; the reformation of the police and judiciary; and increased public participation in matters of governance and decision making. Agwati wants the students to catch the spirit of the new constitution.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can safely argue that while Lumumba is disappointed in the political, social and cultural norms of Kangura, he is optimistic that the new constitution and the university students will help restore the lost moments. However, the rosy picture he paints of the future is betrayed by the current disheartening political, economic, and social conditions of African nations. Dictatorship, corruption, poor governance, tribalism, marginalization of women, cattle rustling, election violence, and so on, suggest that Africa’s problems are far from over.

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