

# The African Writer as a Counter-Force to Dictatorship: An Overview

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**Abstract**—A man cannot be an abstract being in his society. The writer, like any other individual in the society, cannot be divorced from the events going on in his society or the historical events of his nation. A true writer represents the ‘eye’ and ‘ear’ of his people. As eyes, the writer must sharply focus on the conflicts and sufferings of his people and as ‘ears’ he must hear the people’s cries and distressed appeal for equality, justice and peace. The history of colonialism gave early African writings a monotonous theme of protests and conflicts within African societies. In this respect, African writers express, in their writings, the disintegration of the once homogeneous African society. Even though dictatorship has taken a new dimension in Africa today, this article still presents a brief overview of how African writers have been able to oppose dictatorship by their art.

**Keywords**— African writer, Colonialism, Dictatorship, Society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

NGUGI Wa Thiong’ O,(1972) the prolific Kenyan writer said the African Writer should reveal in his writings, the struggles of his people against their society. In his words, he says “ i believe that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggles of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal... perhaps in a small way, the African writer can help in articulating the feelings behind this struggle.”

Thus, for Ngugi, the African writer has the duty of being committed to the cause of his people, by actually participating in their struggle for freedom. There have been varieties of tyrannies and dictatorships in the present day African World for the past twenty years. African leaders like Idi Amin, Siad Barre, Sani Abacha and Jean Bedel Bokassa, Maummar El Gadaffi among others have all gone into historical records as dictators. In the course of time, it became obvious that many of these African leaders in government became oppressive; thus African writers gradually beamed their search lights on the issue of dictatorship in the African Society as against the ills of colonialism they initially focused on.

Literature is used as a medium of reflecting life as it really is; hence it becomes the artistic expression of the real problems of the society.

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There is a close affiliation between literature and politics. As Ali Mazrui (1990) notes “Literature and Politics in Africa continues to meet at a variety of points.” Every true artist reflects the beliefs, philosophy, political and social situations of his age and time, since art is never created in a vacuum. Literature has a high degree of constructive power and that is why it is evident for the writer to harness this power and use his art to lend a hand in the intricate struggle of life. David Kunene(1990) claims that art and particular literature derives its power from the fact that it is a vehicle of ideas, and ideas, untrammled and free flowing that it becomes the enemy of the oppressor.

Kunene expatiates this point further by saying that, literature is the most reliable mirror that can be used to give a true reflection of any society and its people. The oppressor sees himself reflected in his ugliest form. In Kunene’s words; “the oppressor sees the ugliest in the art and not in himself and instead of removing his own deformities, he breaks the mirror.” Ngugi(1990) again claims that there is no area of our lives including the very boundaries of our imagination which is not affected by the way that Society is organized, by the whole operation and machinery of power; how and by whom that power has been gotten; which class controls and maintains it; and the ends to which the power is put. In Africa, the writers who all along had been concerned with culture conflict have found it compelling to address themselves to the realities of power and politics as we have in the independent African nations. The abuse of political power and dictatorial systems of government which has since characterized many contemporary African nations has attracted a lot of writers to politics. As rightly observed by Dan Izevbaye(1979) in his article, apart from novels about colonization, the bulk of African novels are political in the narrow sense. The themes of the African novelist have so far been related mainly to national politics.

In the traditional non – literate societies of Africa, the artist uses his creativity to serve the society. He is made to be a part of the government by performing special duties. For example, some are attached to the king’s court as poets or praise singers on permanent basis. In the contemporary African society, the literary artist also becomes an important part of the national process through his arts. To the artist, art has first to be art and then all other interests follow. This is where aesthetics comes into art. In this respect, the political and social life of his people becomes crucial to the artist, and

this is reflected in his arts. Derek Wright (1990) in "Somali Powerscapes: Mapping Farah's Fiction", expresses what he observed to be Nurudin Farah's view of the African literary artist. To Farah, "an artist is the creation of his nation's enlightened opinion" Many African artists have explored dictatorial regimes in their works. For example, Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* is a satire of the regime of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Soyinka's condemnation of dictatorship is portrayed through Kongi, an independent African state ruler, who exalts himself foolishly and destructively above his followers and the gods. Camera Laye's novel, *Dramouss* has also been an indictment of the regime of Sekou Toure of Guinea.

Other African writings on dictatorship include Sembene Ousmane's *The last of the Empire*, Alex la Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird*, Mongo Beti's *Remember Ruben*. Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk*. The novel, though an alien form in Africa then, has been a very convenient form for the writer to transform his research into practical situations and to put across his opinions to a wider audience. This idea is succinctly put by Obiechina (1973) when he argued that it is the changing cultural and social situations in West Africa which "both gave rise to the novel and in far-reaching and crucial way conditioned the West African novels' content, themes and texture". This view of Obiechina suggests too that it is not possible to divorce the social, political and economic changes in Africa from the discussion of the major trends in the African novel and literature as a whole. If the artist or writer is to be such a prime mover in the social and political affairs of the society, then his role is indeed very vital.

Therefore, in the contemporary realities of much oppressive governments, the artist cannot fail to address his writings to such realities of human predicaments as that experienced under dictatorships. African writers have made themselves counter forces to dictatorships by their subtle use of language and techniques to expose the brutal nature of dictatorships and by revealing to their audiences/readers (and the society at large) the devices used to divide and rule the people. Ali Mazrui (1990) in one of his essays, "On poet presidents and philosopher-kings", examines closely how arts can be used as a counter-force to dictatorship. Based on real life situations, he uses the works of Leopold Sedar Senghor and Agostinho Neto as examples to suggest that the sensibility of art could reduce the misuse of power. In his words "...art in a ruler is no guarantee against dictatorship; genuine artistic genius may be a protection against brutal extremities and excesses as art by itself is no substitute for democracy." He argues further that a genuinely gifted artist in the position of power is less likely to ignore the imperatives of humanness than a ruler bereft of aesthetic sensitivity. His contention thus affirms that arts and the knowledge of it can be a very effective tool in opposing dictatorship. Mazrui is however careful to conclude that there is no proof yet that art has an inherent tendency towards democracy and social justice. This could

mean that not all writers preach the gospel of democracy with their writings.

By getting involved and writing about evils of dictatorship or any other sensitive national issue of the day, the literate artist is not only performing a civic duty but as Josaphat Kubayanda (1990) claims, it is also an obligation to the self.

Nuruddin Farah states during an interview, as quoted by Derek Wright in "Somali Powerscapes: Mapping Farah's fiction," in clear terms that the artist as a counter-force to dictatorship, especially in Africa is risking his life. As Farah's puts it, "in Africa, writing is a matter of life and death" (1990). This according to him is because "If you write something condemnatory of the regime in power they pass the death sentence on you (21). Apart from the 'death sentence', the artist could be detained, imprisoned, exiled or maltreated in any other form. From the foregoing, the writer and the dictator can be said to be odd bedfellows. This is because the writer uses his art to instill fear in the heart of the dictator. In doing this, he employs with great dexterity, different techniques such as satire and parody coupled with the subtle use of language to convey his message. The writer's message in a dictatorial system is that the (mis) governance of such a regime must not be allowed to continue. Farah's Somalia has been seen to have witnessed more violent acts as a result of dictatorship than Achebe's Nigeria. In these two countries, military dictatorships have led to brutal civil wars which claimed the lives of innocent citizens.

## II. CONCLUSION

Dictatorship has been examined in this study as an integral part of the political situation in the contemporary African society. The novel has been an appropriate form for the African writers to reflect the realities of post-independent Africa with its social, political and economic disillusionment. Many African writers who view the contemporary political order in the continent as desperately in need of social changes have put into writing the ideas, words and images that relate to the contemporary power system in order to construct an alternative Utopian society that is desired. This is essentially the relationship between Literature and dictatorship. All these they have done so many times at their own risk. No doubt dictatorship still prevails in one form or the other in Africa today as many of these leaders continue to enjoy acceptance and even outright support, but once they are out of power, they would be condemned by one and all. Thus, it is obvious that the socio-political situations in Africa are yet to reach the necessary state of excellence, hence the need for writers to address more of these problems in their writings

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