Change and the Intelligentsia in African Literature: a Study in Marginality

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RESUME La littérature africaine met en relief le rôle plutôt incertain que joue l'intelligentsia dans la société africaine moderne. Il est bien vrai que celui qui est instruit peut opérer des miracles; hélas il reste en marge des choses. On lui fait des éloges, il reçoit des accolades, et tout cela au mauvais moment, pour des raisons erronées. Il a perdu pied par rapport aux sources d'antan et pourtant, il ne saisit pas non plus, ni "n'africanise" l'essence du monde contemporain. Il ne joue aucun rôle majeur dans quelque plan de changement que ce soit. Les intellectuels africains constituent une étude de cas marginaux dont la vie est marquée du sceau de la rupture de l'aliénation.

Hantée par la disparition d'une belle culture, l'intelligentsia africaine se retrouve tiraillée entre la course folle pour rattraper le reste du monde et le besoin de préserver les valeurs d'un monde tombant dans l'oubli. La littérature africaine tente de faire passer une vision d'une certaine totalité, un paradigme de la totalité de l'existence d'un peuple. Vue donc sous cet angle, l'intelligentsia africaine vit désespérement seule, sans convictions, isolée du commun des mortels; elle a tendance à démissionner de sa responsabilité publique elle souffre de la dépendance et ne parvient pas à trouver les mots appropriés pour faire passer l'expérience du peuple africain.

Bile burns my inside!
I feel like vomiting!
For all our young men
Were finished in the forest
Their manhood was finished
In the class-rooms,
Their testicles
Were smashed
With large books!

(Okot p'Bitek, SONG OF LAWINO)

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Long Before Mongo Beti decided to devote his considerable fictional talent to the exploration of unhappiness[1] and memories of his country's political traumas[2] he wrote a satire called Mission to Kala or, to give it its French title, Mission Terminée[3], which really means that an assignment has been successfully done. In that story a boy by the name of Jean-Marie Medza who has failed his baccalaureat or sixth - form examination returns to his village only to be sent on a momentous mission which involves retrieving a wayward wife who has ran away from her husband. Like all great prophets and leaders of genius before him, Jean-Marie Medza tries to wriggle out of his mission. He is only a child! His fellow villagers, however, think otherwise. To them, Jean-Marie Medza is "he who is to come", the one man who can save the honor of their village, the integrity of a family, the continuation of the human race! To drive this point home, the village sage, old Bikokolo uses a parable:

> *There was a man who all unbeknown to himself, spoke with the voice of thunder. Imagine his astonishment when one day he was sent on a very similar mission to that which faced me now. In particular he asked himself what supernatural power he commanded to make him succeed where others had failed*[4].

Jean-Marie Medza, Mongo Beti's archetype of Africa's intelligentsia is given the sense of boundless power in the harangue he receives from the sage Bikokolo:

'My son', he concluded, 'when this story is recited after my death, you will be its hero. You are that formidable man; you speak with the voice of thunder, and have never suspected your own powers. Shall I tell you what your special thunder is? Your certificates, your learning, your knowledge of white men's secrets...'[5].

That a boy who has failed his sixth - form examination can still be seen as possessing the voice of thunder underpins Mongo Beti's irony. It also highlights the ambivalent place of the intelligentsia in modern African society. The man who has 'read' books can work

1 *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness*, Heinmann, AWS, 1978.

2 *Remember Reuben*, Heinmann, African Writers' Serie, 1980.

3 *Mission to Kala*, Heinmann, AWS, 1964, first pub, 1957 by Editions Courrier.

4 *Mission to Kala*, Heinmann, AWS, 1964, p. 15.

5 *Mission to Kala*, p. 15.

miracles but he still remains on the fringes of things. He receives accolades and encomiums for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. He has lost touch with the well-springs of yesterday without grasping and "Africanising" the gist of today's world. He occupies no central position in any blue-print for change. He is a case study in marginality.

Jean-Marie Medza is gradually debunked until at the end of his mission he has been found wanting not only in his knowledge of things African but also in the very white man's science which had been earlier regarded as his voice of thunder. On the way to Kala, Medza sees himself as a conqueror going to discover a new world, almost in the manner of those Spaniards, the so-called "conquistadores" who destroyed the Inca and Aztec civilisations of South America. A simple elongation of his name by the suffix "ro" would make him a "conquistador". He would then become "Medzaro" as in Pizzaro![6] but Kala overwhelms him not only by its physical vibrancy but also by its intellectual probity. He finds he has to resort to lies and to a great deal of drinking to be able to answer the many and varied questions of the people of Kala. There is little superiority left in him now except perhaps in the minds of some of the more gullible of his admirers. The man who was supposed to speak with the voice of thunder is found to lack even the strength of a mouse!

At one point Medza is holding a discussion with his uncle in Kala. They are talking of blood - relationships. Medza, the man who knows science and represents Africa's intelligentsia maintains that blood is the liquid which runs in our veins. More in sadness than in anger his uncle patiently teaches him that blood stands for kinship.

Mongo Beti is taking a hard look at the formation of our intelligentsia - and does not seem to like what he finds. If a boy who has failed his sixth - form is of no use to his village and to himself, of what use is his kind of education? Mongo Beti asks, "To what god were we being sacrificed, I wonder[7]?

In the ironic meaning of this satire's title, Jean-Marie Medza's mission is a failure. The wayward wife who was to be returned to her husband does not return or, rather, she returns at her own time and with a lover in tow! There is however, one sense in which Medza's mission is a success. Our archetype of Africa's intelligentsia has pitted his "school" wisdom against the commonsense of the people of Kala and found out how deficient in many things such wisdom is.

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6 *Mission to Kala*, p. 19-20.

7 *Mission to Kala*, p. 25.

Mongo Beti's satire, Mission to Kala, embodies many characteristics of the treatment of the intelligentsia in African literature. The person who by reason of his "reading" or formal education appears to stand above and apart from his fellow men is subtly compared and contrasted with those of his fellow men (or women!) who may on the surface appear less gifted, less noble and even venal but who on closer look are in many ways stronger, more intelligent, wiser and perhaps more humane than we were originally led to think. Medza is compared and contrasted with his cousin Zamba and those other colorful young men of Kala such as 'Abraham the Boneless Wonder', 'Petrous Son of God' and 'Duckfoot Johnny' (alias St John of Kala). His mission to retrieve the local 'Helen of Troy' and those Faustian powers attributed to him by Bikokolo are compared and contrasted with his re-education and maturity. Medza is no longer the passive object of his father's educational experiments. He now holds his own views. He even grows up emotionally and contracts a marriage. The point about all this maturation in Kala is that the successful completion of Medza's mission is not the recovery of someones wayward wife but the discarding by Medza of all the illusions he had held concerning his upbringing and his Paris - based education. Medza's life remains ephemeral and meaningless until it is lived within the total experience of his people. We cannot place a member of the intelligentsia on any phase of the transition from one era to another until we know what meaning his life has in the hopes and aspirations of his people.

A great deal has been written about that early African poetry now generally given the label of "negritude". Many critics and commentators have had some harsh things to say about this poetry, accusing it of idealizing the Africa of yesterday at the expense of historical accuracy. Some have even gone to the extent of comparing negritude to apartheid. The harshest form of criticism has come from writers in English-speaking Africa, notably Wole Soyinka, Esk'ia Mphahlele and Taban lo Liyong. At this point in time it would be idle to pick up the cudgels either for or against this poetry. What we need to realise now is that negritude poetry was a gigantic and systematic attempt by the intelligentsia of French - dominated Africa and of African origin to undo the marginalisation which they had suffered and which they perceived the African continent to have suffered at the hands of colonial policies, especially the policies of assimilation.

Let us consider, for example, the famous long poem *Return to my Native Land* by Aimé Cesaire[8]. Cesaire's cry for a return to his fatherland is, in fact, a cry for those spiritual and psychological moor-

8 *Return to my Native Land*, Penguin, 1956.

ings without which any change, any transition from one era to another, remains meaningless and without direction. Even among writers from English-speaking Africa this centrality of roots and cultural resources has been explored. The poetry of Okot p'Bitek derives its power from the poet's relentless search for "the roots that clutch", to use a phrase from T.S. Eliot[9]. Okot's persona in *Song of Lawino* decries the discontinuity and alienation which characterise the lives of the African intelligentsia. Lawino puts the lives of today's Africans on a scale of wholeness and meaning and finds them wanting. Her razor - sharp mind enables her to see the absurdity beneath all the frantic and feverish pursuit of change. For her the man who has "uprooted the pumpkin" from his homestead occupies only a marginal position in society.

The great writer that was Okot p'Bitek wrestled with this problem from all possible angles including that of playing the devil's advocate by attempting to demolish the position he bad taken in *Song of Lawino*. The attempt in Song of Ocol comes out as a half-hearted and unconvincing defiance of our nagging gods:

To hell
With your pumpkins
And your Old Homesteads,
To hell
With the husks
Of old traditions
And meaningless customs,

We will smash
The taboos
One by one,
Explode the basis
Of every superstition,
We will uproot
Every sacred tree
And demolish every ancestral shrine.

We will not just
Breach the wall
Of your mud hut
To let in the air,
Do you think

9 "The Waste Land" in T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 51.

We plan merely
To bring light
Into the hut?

We will set it ablaze
Let fire consume it all
This lair of backwardness;

We will uproot granaries
Break up the cooking pots
And water pots,
We'll grind
The grinding stones
To powder;

That obsolete toy
With which you scratch the soil
And the other rusty toys
In the hut,
The dried fish
Riddled with cockroaches,
The piece of carcass
Hung above the cooking place
Black with soot...
We'll make a big heap
Of all the rubbish
From the hut
And set the heap
Aflame...[10].

Okot p'Bitek's reliance on hyperbole in *Song of Ocol* shows that his case against "the pumpkins in the homestead" is yet to be made. It is because the old gods refuse to die that the poet adopts this tone of exasperation and sarcasm. We have here none of the graceful wit, devastating logic and sense of humor which we find in *Song of Lawino*. Okot p'Bitek's mask or persona in the latter "song" does not rely on exaggeration to make her point. Her disarming simplicity and clarity of thought succeed in making the reader see the centrality of culture in all our blue-prints for change. She manages to show how our frantic and feverish preoccupation with the "here and now" can only remain marginal until we are able to separate those things which matter from those which do not matter:

10 Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Ocol*, East African Publishing House, 1967, pp 209-210.

And while the pythons of sickness
Swallow the children
And the buffalos of poverty
Knock the people down
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant,

The war leaders
Are tightly locked in bloody feuds,
Eating each other's liver...[11]

Although the speaker in *Song of Lawino* recognises the passing away of much of what her world represents, the fact still remains that that world was based on the solid foundation of a culture fully understood and appreciated. Not so with the universe traversed by *Song of Ocol*. This outrageous concoction of hyperbole and outlandish dialectics cries out to the reader not to be taken seriously:

We will arrest
All the village poets
Musicians and tribal dancers,
Put in detention
Folk-story tellers
And myth makers,
The sustainers of village morality;
We'll disband
The nest of court historians
Glorifiers of the past,
We will ban
The stupid village anthem of
"Backwards ever
Forwards never".

To the gallows
With all the Professors
Of Anthropology
And teachers of African History,
A bonfire
We'll make of their works,
We'll destroy all the anthologies
Of African literature

11 *Song of Lawino*, East African Publishing House, 1966, p. 182

And close down
All the schools
Of African Studies.

Where is Aimé Cesaire?
Where Léopold Senghor?
Arrest Janheinz Jahn
And Father Placide Temples,
Put in detention
All the preachers
Of Negritude;

The balloon of
The African Personality
Exploded long ago,
Dubois is dead
We will erect
No memorial for him;
Why should I care
Who built the citadel
Of Zimbabwe?
Of what relevance is it
Whether black men
Architected the Pyramid?

Smash all these mirrors
That I may not see
The blackness of the past
From which I came
Reflected in them...[12].

An ominous air of uncertainly pervades the speaker's tone in this poem. It is as if he needs to reassure himself of "the pastness of the past" to quote T.S. Eliot again[13]. The stance is deliberate but the agonizing search is real. Okot p'Bitek appears here to be faced with the kind of dilemma which confronted the Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats. The times in which Yeats lived witness the high point of Irish nationalism, the horrors of World War I, the crass

12 *Song of Ocol*, pp 214-215.

13 "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Word*, Methen 1960, p. 44-60.

materialism of most of the Irish bourgeoisie on the dawn of Irish independence and, above all, the whole uncertainty of a new age. Yeats was moved to write:

And what rough beast its hour come round at last
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born[14].

The Africa of Okot p'Bitek is in many ways similar to the Ireland of William Butler Yeats. What makes Okot p'Bitek's poetry even more prophetic than that of Yeats is that the marginality Okot p'Bitek ascribed to the African intelligentsia represented by Ocol became apparent even in Okot's own lifetime. The beauty of the culture whose passing away he laments in *Song of Lawino* remains to haunt Africa's intelligentsia caught between the frantic rush to catch up with the rest of the world and the need to preserve the values of a world that is being forsaken. This dilemma has well been captured by the Gambian poet Lenrie Peters in his poem, "Homecoming":

Our sapless roots have fed
The windswept seedlings of another age[15].

It is partly to get out of such a dilemma that the speaker or persona in *Song of Ocol* advocates a "tabula rasa", a clean slate, as our precondition for entering into a new area. The "integumenta" of history is to be jettisoned and we are to begin a future without memories of heroes or kings for these can only be taken for what the speaker says they were rogues, tyrants, charlatans and "paper-tigers":

You young soldier
Guarding the border post,
Do you know
When that sacred boundary

Was drawn?
Which of your ancestors
Established the area
Of your beloved
Country,
No street

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14 "The Second Coming in *Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Selection*, edited by Norman Jeffares, McMilla, 1984 pp. 246-247.

15 "Home-coming" in Moore and Beir, *Modern Poetry from Africa*, Penguin, 1963, p. 79.

Will be named

After Mansa Sulayman
Of ancient Mali,
He is as irrelevant
As the Greek goddess Artemmis.

A miserly king
He passed nothing on
To us;

Mohammed Askia
Great monarch of Songhai,
What a hollow sounding name?
The Nilotic chiefs
Labongo and Gipir
Were famous for their quarrels
Over famous for their quarrels
Over a spear
And for splitting open
A baby's belly to retrieve a bead!

Let the kings of Ghana
Rot in the earth,
We'll forget
The rulers of Monomatapa...

As for Shaka
The Zulu General
How can we praise him
When he was utterly defeated
And killed by his own brothers?

What proud poem
Can we write
For the vanquished[16]

The irony in the position taken by Okot p'Bitek's persona in *Song of Ocol* is that in advocating a *tabula rasa* or clean slate as our starting-point he is enhancing the very weakness he seems to be attacking. Without a past, of whatever kind, we are unlikely to have a future. The models we are often asked to emulate; namely, Japan,

16 *Song of Ocol*, pp. 254-255..

China, India, Russia etc have in some ways drawn upon the resources of their past to build their present and their future. They have escaped marginalisation by drawing upon the resources of the very forces against which they were reacting. The feudal loyalties of the Japanese appear to have metamorphosed into loyalty to industrial companies. We can see and speak of a "Japanese" character which has turned it into the industrial giant that she is. Our intelligentsia has not come up with anything new precisely because it has not succeeded in infusing the values so eloquently envoked in *Song of Lawino* into any of our blue-prints for change. It would be a most rewarding exercise to study or, at least, compare and contrast the "message" of our poetry with many of the theories along which we have attempted to mould society such as "ujamaa", "African socialism", "humanism", "authenticity", "The Common Man's charter" etc. We may well find that these blue-prints do no more than set out more logically and perhaps more coherently those ideas which creative writers dramatise in their own inimitable way. We may also find that the lucid and coherent theories on which all our manifestos are based do not, in practice, really work and that a better understanding of our literature would be a more useful guide into the future. A work such as *Song of Lawino* throws light on one moment of transition from a culture-bound tradition into one dominated by the "cash-nexus". It throws such light without separating what men admire in life from how they live. It is in the vision of a certain wholeness, a paradigm of the totality of a people's existence that the value of masterpieces like *Song of Lawino* is to be found. In looking for such a value we are struck by the marginal position which those who should be leading society by reason of their learning and thinking occupy:

Bile burns my inside
I feel like vomiting!

For all our young men
Were finished in the forest
Their manhood was finished
In the class-rooms,
Their testicles
Were smashed
With large books[17].

17 *Song of Lawino*, p. 191.

In a recent article on the role of intellectuals in policies as seen by African writers, Dr Juliet Okonkwo has observed:

> *Until recently, the educated African was a retiring and cautious individual who, partly because of the intellectual and social gulf which existed between him and his countrymen, preferred to live in isolated retirement rather than become embroiled in disputatious misunderstanding with the uneducated who form the majority of his people. He was often an object of distrust and of persecution. Antagonistic forces constrained many intellectuals to hold ideas which could lead to the upliftment of their people*[18].

Those achievements and attributes which should make him useful are the ones which tend to separate the African intellectual from the rest of his society. african literature highlights a number of traits common to members of the intelligentsia.

a)Loneliness:

In African literature members of the intelligentsia tend to stand alone not only in the hour of their triumph and in the moment of their wisdom but also, and especially, in the hour of their folly. Obi Okonkwo, the central character of Chinua Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*[19] comes across as a lonely young man. In some ways his loneliness resembles that of the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*[20], his grandfather who commits suicide because the men of Umuofia are no longer prepared to fight for those values which in his youth had made them great. The only difference between Obi Okonkwo and his grandfather, (and it is a major difference), is that whereas the original Okonkwo is lonely because he holds certain values, our latter - day Okonkwo is lonely because he despises and at the same time acquiesces in the new dispensation around him. As Nadine Gordimer has observed, we see Obi Okonkwo "extending himself docilely on the rack of bourgeois values his society had taken

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18 J.L. Okonkwo, "*The Intellectual as Political Activist in Recent African Fiction*", UFAHAMU, XIII, 2-3 (1984) pp. 216-237.

19 Heinemann, AWS, 1960.

20 Heinemann, AWS, 1958.

over from the white man; values totally unreal in the economic and social conditions of that society"[21].

We admire Obi Okonkwo when he deflates the pomposity of the Umuofia Progressive Union by appearing in his shirt - sleeves when everybody else is sweating it out in three - piece suits or formal *agbadas* at a party in honor of Obi Okonkwo. Achebe wryly refers to this simplicity on the part of Obi Okonkwo as "Mistake Number one"[22]. We also admire Obi Okonkwo's guts and confidence when he replies to the florid and convoluted address of welcome from the same Umuofia Progressive Union in plain English:

> *"Education for service and not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries. With our great country on the threshold of independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly"*[23].

With devastating irony Achebe refers to this reply as "Mistake Number Two[24].. The deeper irony is that the Obi Okonkwo who returns from England with such confidence and courage soon embraces practices that are contrary to these views. He does not stand up for the Nigeria of his original beliefs. He accepts bribes, cancels his engagement to Clara on the grounds that she is descended from an Osu or outcast and frantically combs the city in search of an abortionist to undo the result of his love for Clara. His loneliness could not have been greater had he decided, like his grandfather, to commit suicide. He who had seemed superior to members of the Umofia Progressive Union sinks lower than they had anticipated although they still rally around him and decide to engage yet another lawyer to launch an appeal against his conviction[25]. Great things had been expected of Obi Okonkwo but he achieves nothing. He leaves no mark on the history of the threshold of his country's independence, no positive contribution to change. Obi Okonkwo's interview for the post at the scholarship office is presented by Achebe as an omen of things to come. The interviewers probe Obi Okonkwo's knowledge of English literature, in particular, his knowledge of

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21 Nadine Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters* Spro - Cas/Ravan, 1973 p. 23.

22 *No Longer at Ease*, Heinemann, 1960, p. 39.

23 *No Longer at Ease*, pp. 32-33.

24 *No Longer at Ease*, p. 5.

25 *No longer at Ease*, p. 5.

Graham Green's novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, whose existentialist thrust complete with tangled passions and a suicide exalts failure and downgrades the kind of confidence and courage Obi Okonkwo needs to leave a mark on his country's history.

b) Lack of convictions

Tied to Obi Okonkwo's loneliness and moral failure is a certain lack of conviction. We can with certainty point to the values which the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* holds. There are no such values and convictions in the story of Obi Okonkwo. Even his love for Clara is expendable in the interest of what? We may here recall the words of William Butler Yeats'.

> *"The best lack all convictions while the worst*
> *Are full of passionate intensity"*[26].

This lack of convictions has sometimes been referred to as an "ideological vacuum", a term which in some ways leaves much to be desired. Members of the intelligentsia in Africa have been known to profess certain ideologies while doing the very opposite of what such ideologies demand. It has become doubtful whether those who profess identifiable ideologies are even convinced of the correctness of what they are professing. Cynicism and opportunism, like the poor, will always be with us. Need they be?

In Nuruddin Farah's novel, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, the unnamed General who rules Somalia with an iron fist boasts that he has nothing to fear from his country's intellectuals whom he sees as being more interested in fast cars, in women and in holidays abroad than in national problems[27]. He therefore pays more attention to the feelings and rumblings of tribal elders. He fears religious leaders more than he fears intellectuals. When news reaches him that imams are about to protest against his rule, he has ten of them executed in one day[28]. The General is "Opportunist Number One" who affects a commitment to socialism and publicly professes friendship with The Soviet Union but laughs at the Russians behind their backs. Only a writer of Farah's foresight and understanding could have so accurately dramatised Somalia's switch in alliances from West to East and now

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26 "The Second Coming" in *Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Selection* edited by Norman Jeffares, 1984, p. 246.

27 Nuruddin Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Heinemann, 1979, p. 53.

28 *Sweet and Sour Milk*, p. 53.

back to the West. It becomes clear that ideology plays an insignificant part in this change of alliances and that intellectuals play an even less significant role here. Those who secretly form a kind of opposition alliance are easily routed. They are subjected to torture, bribery, exile and even cooption into the General's cabinet. Some of them, like the sauve physician Ahmed Wellie who seems to be on everybody's side, are turned into the eyes and ears of the state.

The unnamed General also so thoroughly understands the weakness of the intelligentsia that he will even try to use those he has killed to confuse those who survive. In *Sweet and Sour Milk* the regime kills the leader of the secret band of intellectuals opposed to the General's dictatorship and then fabricates "his last words". He who had felt only revulsion at the slogans of the regime is now made to utter with his last words:

> *"Labour is honour and there is no general but our General"*[29].

The cooption of the dead young intellectual is complete. He is made "a hero of the Revolution" and a street is named after him. Not only is he made to deify the General posthumously but he is also deftly removed from the minds of his admirers. His father, a former security functionary who had lost his job because of torturing a detainee to death is now reinstated and given a pension on top of his late son's gratuity. The rift between him and his remaining son is irrevocable. This remaining son is a bewildered man who is now isolated and forced into the splendid exile of a diplomatic posting. The thoroughness with which members of the intelligentsia can be decimated and sometimes eliminated is frightening.

It is possible that such a decimation is made easy by the intelligentsia's lack of convictions. It is not easy to elicit sympathy and followers when the public cannot distinguish your ideological position from that of your tormentors. In Chinua Achebe's fourth novel, *A man of the People*, the teacher Odili Samaru does not, in the final analysis, differ from the corrupt and cynical Chief Nanga. Chief Nanga flaunts his cynism and his ill-gotten wealth and influence. Odili Samaru silently envies this wealth and is ready to throw in his lot with Chief Nanga:

> *"When I lay down in the double - bed that seemed to ride on a cushion of air, and switched on that reading lamp and saw all the beautiful furniture a new from the lying down position and looked beyond the door to the glean-*

29 *Sweet and Sour Milk*, p. 99.

ing bathroom and the towels as large as Lappa I had to confess that if I were made a minister at that moment I would be most anxious to remain one forever"[30].

We may read this as the exaggeration of a man laughing at himself in a moment of enlightenment. We also need to remember that Odili Samaru has at that point already entrusted himself to the Byzantine ways of corruption by accepting Chief Nanga's intercession in the matter of his scholarship abroad. It is also remarkable that Odili Samaru does not break with Chief Nanga until the latter seduces Elsie, Odili Samaru's girl-friend in his hearing!

Odili Samaru's brief flirtation with political organisation is also characterised by a clear lack of conviction and a naive approach to national issues. He is more interested in avenging a personal injury than in tackling national problems. We are not surprised when he devoted the best part of his time to courting Edna, Chief Nanga's fiancee and not to politics. It also comes as no surprise when after the military coup he uses party funds to pay for the bride - price and educational expenses of the girl he snatches from Chief Nanga. In setting personal scores in this manner Odili Samaru is playing the same game of corruption that the Nangas and Koko's of this country are playing. His convictions, such as they are, do not go beyond private and personal loyalties. His admiration for his friend Max stems less from this friend's political position than from the fact that Max had "impaired someone to come forward and shoot (his) murderer in the chest without asking to be paid"[31]. The heroism being singled out for praise here has nothing to do with politics as such. Max is avenged by his girlfriend.

c) Political and social naivety

In modern African literature the classic example of the naive intellectual is the teacher Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel.* His naivety shows even in his appearance. We see him in "an old - style English suit, thread - bare but not ragged, clean but not ironed, obviously a

30 *A Man of the People*, Heinmann, 1966 pp. 36-37.

31 *A Man of the People*, p. 149.

size or two too small. His tie is done in a very small knot, disappearing beneath a shiny black waistcoat. He wears twenty-three - inch bottom trousers, and blanco - white tennis shoes"[32]. His attack against bride - price is a volley of synonyms whose impression is not strong enough to support his beliefs. When he runs short of adjectives he excuses himself by saying he owns "only the shorter companion Dictionary[33] and that he has "ordered The Longer One"[34].

Lakunle has no beliefs - only a hapazard collection of simple - minded impressions of what constitutes "civilisation". It comes as no surprise to the audience when Lakunle loses the girl Sidi to the village Chief, the Baroka of LLijunle. Lakunle makes a poor showing in strength and wisdom while the wily old fox comes across as the supreme example of wit, strength and wisdom. Our village intellectual Lakunle fails even in his understanding of the knowledge of that new world with which he is supposed to be familiar. For him the new dispensation overrunning the land is essentially a collection of superficial and demonstrative ways of white people. He will kiss his wife "as white people do" and as white people do he will walk arm in arms with his wife in the streets of Lagos. It is this naivety which Wole Soyinka is attacking in *The Lion and the Jewel*. Soyinka seems to be saying that if our intelligentsia perceive change in this simple - minded manner we need not be surprised if traditional leaders win out against change.

The message here differs from that of *Kongi's Harvest* where the attack is against dictatorship in Africa but Soyinka's intellectual does not rise in any considerable manner above the simple - mindedness of the teacher *Lakunle in the Lion and the Jewel*. A similar naivety surrounds the five members of the intelligentsia around whom the novel, *The interpreters*, revolves. These young men are supposed to interpret to the reader their impressions of the new Nigeria in which they find themselves. They are also supposed to interpret to Nigeria the new enlightenment which they bring from their universities. These interpreters are rightly disgusted by the artificiality of their society as symbolised by the mannerisms and the decorations in professional houses and at professional parties. In their righteous indignation these young professional people smash plastic fruits at receptions in professors' houses. They formulate, in the privacy of their offices weid philosophies, such as Sagoe's philosophy of shit," which are meant to dramatise their revulsion at the corruption in

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32 *The Lion and the Jewel*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 6.

33 *The Lion and the Jewel*, p. 8.

34 *The Lion and the Jewel*, p. 8.

Nigeria and to titillate our sense of the bizarre and the ridiculous but, in the final analysis, they leave no impact on their society. The best of them, Sekoni, is mercilessly crushed by the coordinated "alliance in corruption" between local contractors and "expatriate experts". His beautiful idea of a cheap power station is pronounced "unsafe" and is dismantled. He himself drives into a parked lorry and dies on the spot. There is a certain simple-mindedness in the belief that armed with their admirable ideas and their education, a group of five or six intellectuals can make a dent on the polluted atmosphere of Nigerian society. Our interpreters end up with the usual concern of members of their class - personal and private relationships and art as the exclusive preserve of the groves of academe and exclusive soirees. To say all this is not to attack Soyinka's achievements which are formidable but only to point out what kind of world, what kind of vision some of his characters evoke. The observation we have just made in relation to the central characters of *The interpreters* was made by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1969 in relation to the characters of Soyinka's plays. Ngugi wrote:

> *The ordinary people workers and peasants, in his plays remain passive watchers on the shore or pitiful comedians on the road... It is not enough for the African artist standing aloof, to view society and highlight its weaknesess. He must try to go beyond this, to seek out the causes and the trends*[35].

Ngugi himself has indeed reached a stage in his writing where he does go beyond highlighting society's weaknesses to seeking out causes and trends. This was not always the case. The Central characters of *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child* have their own simple - minded panacea to the problems of Kenya. It is education. Waiyaki combs the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu trying to promote education. People rally to his call but these people also want something more. They want the recovery of their lands and it is only when the people have discanded him as a leader and he is about to be tried for breaking his oath with the secret society he had joined in order to reconcile the old and the new that he realises that education must be for unity and the unity must be for political action:

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35 Ngugi wa Thiongio "Satire in Nigeria" in Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Munro, *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, 1969.

> *"Maybe one day he would join forces with the men from Muranga, Kiambu, and Nyeri and with one voice tell the white man" Go! And all at once Waiyaki realised what the ridges wanted. All at once he felt more forcefully than he had ever felt before the shame of a people's land being taken away, the shame of being forced to work on those same lands, the humiliation of paying taxes for a government that you knew nothing about*[36].

In *Weep Not Child* we see a similar kind of simple - mindedness on the part of Njoroge the boy who pins his hopes on education. These hopes are rudely shaken by the ferocity of British soldiers and British settlers against the Mau Mau. This ferocity makes education, for the time being anyway, irrelevant. Njoroge is called back by his mothers from an attempted suicide. Side by side with Njoroge's naivety and his desire to flee from his surroundings is the resolve of his girlfriend Murihaki who rather than flee her present problems is determined to stay and help her people.

d)Isolation from the Common People

Loneliness, lack of convictions, and naivety go hand in hand with isolation from the well - springs of a healthy outlook on society, in African literature members of the intelligentsia tend to be prisoners of the mores and prejudices of their class, usually the lower and upper middle class of society. Their association with the common man lacks the solidarity of people with a common cause. It has not always dawned on the intelligentsia that there can never be really an 'African' intellectual life apart from the general experiences of the African people at any given moment in time. The much - maligned negritude poetry we referred to earlier recognised this fact. Aimé Cesaire's defiant and "tongue - in - cheek" exaltation of those who never invented electricity or gunpowder is an assertion of the poet's psychological unity with all his people irrespective of class.

Matters are not that simple when we look at some of our writers in English - speaking Africa. The well-known and much - admired poet, Christopher Okigbo, spent the best part of his writing career pursuing an extremely private and personal vision. We see him undergoing purificatory acts and concentrating his gaze on a somewhat ephemeral image of fulfillment and salvation. In all this, he is alone. His audience does not matter and people "out there" do not matter:

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36 The *River Between*, Heinemann, 1963, p. 142.

"I was the sole witness
to my home coming"[37].

This is an extreme case of the intellectual who is isolated from the well-springs of a healthy outlook on society. We feel relieved when the realities of Nigerian politics jolt this writer into a more "public" but still highly resonant poem, *"Come Thunder"*[38], and we are, in a way, not surprised when his commitment takes Okigbo to the front of the Nigerian Civil War where he dies.

We have already had occasion to look at Wole Soyinka's "interpreters" and to see how their views and expectations come to nought. We should, of course, add that no one can "interpret" a society of which he really knows only a part. The drawing - rooms of professors' houses are no substitute for the whole life of society. Neither are night - clubs. Works such as *The Interpreters* are far removed in space and time from the works of, say, Jane Austen but their limitations are the same. They are enclosed in a self-contained world which only occasionally admits intrusions and fresh air from outside.

The Interpreters like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* employs excreta as a symbol of corruption and decay. The disgust evoked by this symbol is so powerful that it seems to overpower some of the central characters in these Novels. It is well - nigh impossible to calmly analyse the underlying causes and trends of society's ills when you are overcome by the stench of focus and the slime and rot of everything around you. Such a stench increases your isolation from the main flow of life around you. You do not see ordinary human beings engaged in a daily struggle to make a living. You only see the beginnings of that which is doomed to put refaction and dizzying smells. You begin to see corruption as the natural law of the human condition and you make no effort to uproot it from society. This kind of fatalism or defeatist attitude to corruption is what Chinua Achebe was really attacking when he pronounced *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born.*

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37 From "Distances" in Moore and Beir, *Modern Poetry from Africa*, 1963, p. 141-143

38 Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation day,* Double Day Anchor, 1975, p. 33.

"a sick book. Sick not with the sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of the human condition[39].

It is not enough to simply shun corruption. One must actively fight against it. We feel that Ayi Kwei Armah's central character "The Man", is by his passivity guilty of the many sins of which his wife Oyo and her mother never tire of accusing him. Although he has his convictions he is still very much like the "chichidodo", that bird which hates excrement but still feeds on maggots. His wife teaches him that life is like a road on which so many people are driving. Our man refuses to drive and there is no mention of the fact that he might even try to drive the other way round from everyone else's goal! The man's main problem is his isolation not only from "the drivers on the road" but also, and especially, from those who have no cars and with whom he might have forged a fellowship of those wo either refuse to drive or wish to walk, - even in the other direction.

In chapters five and six of *The Beautiful ones are not yet born* we see a recapitulation of recent Ghanaian history. We see the high fences and savage dogs of colonial masters, the brutalised soldiers returning from the second World War, the lawyers who pioneer nationalist agitation for independence, the coming and impact of Kwame Nkhrumah as well as the sitting into the body - politic of post-colonial corruption and the elitism of political leadership.

Through all these events, our man, "the man", is an outsider. He merely watches in dismay as the euphoria of Nkhrumah's coming and agitation for independence is replaced by corruption,

"How could this have grown rotten
with such absence hast"[40]*?*

The man cannot really answer this question because he is too isolated from the common man, to calmly study and analyse the corruption engulfing his country.

In *why are we so blest* Ayi Kwei Armah isolates his central character even more painfully than he does in *"The Beautiful ones are not yet born*. Modin, the central character, seeks to join forces with the movement fighting for the liberation of an unnamed country ruled by the French, presumably, Algeria. He spends weeks trying to establish

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39 Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on creation day,* Double day Anchor, 1975, p. 33.

40 Ayi Kwei Armah *The Beautiful ones are not yet Born*; Heinmann, 1969, p. 88.

contact with these forces and by the time he is on his way the french "Foreign Legion" have found out his location and his intention and they fall on him and tear him apart limb by limb in a macabre dance of death. Modin and his girl-friend are tied to a landrover and forced to make love as they are dragged in the hot sands. His tongue is cut off. What leads to this heinous cruelty is the relationship between Modin and his girl-friend. He is black and she is a white American. The racism of their capturer reached a frenzied peak and we are somehow shown that having established a relationship with a white woman Modin has isolated himself even further from the movement he seeks to join than he will ever realise. History would not appear to support Ayi Kwei Armah's point-of-view here but it is a view which does run through the entire novel. Modin's relationships tend to have a severely tangled complexity because of their defiance of the color line. His seduction of his professor's wife is not free from the overtones of color and racial prejudices. We may also recall here the overtones of color and racial prejudice which inform Armah's description of Arab slave - dealers from the North in *Two Thousand Seasons*. Race and color would appear to enhance isolation in Armah's works - a function that is more able served by other techniques such as "flash-back" narration and the "stream of consciousness". In their ability to show us the past in the present and the inner thoughts of character now moving before us the streams - of - consciousness and flash-bach techniques are most suited to the presentation of the next trait we associate with the intelligentsia in African literature. We will call this trait abdication. Members of the intelligentsia often opt out of society's problems and they invariably opt out of what we may call, borrowing a term from Sigmund Freud, "the reality principle".

e)Abdication from public responsibility

In the novel, *Fragments* Ayi Kwei Armah gives an extremely intelligent young man who like 'the man' in the *The Beautiful ones are not yet born* or 'the interpreters' in Wole Soyinka's novel of that name is disgusted by the corruption, artificiality and sterility he sees all around him. Life, he finds, is now governed by money in Ghana. Even an originally beautiful custom such as "out dooring" is now used to make money and infants die from exposure because the parents use their out dooring ceremony as an occasion for collecting money from friends, well-wishers and those who are out to show the world how much money they have. Banko, our young intellectual cannot take all this travesty of life. He wanders from place to place in search

of sanity and eventually runs mad. He has not only left society to its own devices - but has also deserted the reality principle.

Before his madness he had carefully analysed the malaise of his society and found it to be based on "the cargo mentality", a Polynesian tradition whereby a piece of cargo is set afloat the wide ocean only to return as multiplied wealth. He himself is seen in that light by his mother and his other relatives. Unfortunately this particular "cargo" returns as he went, with nothing to show for his absence except a keen intellect and an educated mind. He brings no refrigerator and no car as his friends do. What is worse he does not even think that the things matter. The stress of having to be reminded of his failure and his lack of conformity is too much to bear. He abdicates from society, not consciously perhaps but no doubt as a relief.

We find it remarkable that a similar "solution" should have been resorted to by Kofi Awooner in his novel, *This Earth my Brother.* Here also a non-conforming intellectual runs away from wife and family and ends up running away from society as well as from sanity.

Perhaps the most remarkable examples of intellectuals who abdicate their public responsibilities are to be found in Ngugi's novel, *Petals of Blood.* We have first the case of Raymond Chui who as a school-boy leads a strike against a Euro - centric syllabus which emphasises kindness to animals while treating human beings as expendable. Raymond Chui rallies his fellow - pupils against the Principal a man by the improbable name of Cambridge Fraudsham. The strike is a success though pupils like Munira lose their places at the school.

The Raymond Chui who later by popular acclamation succeeds Cambridge Fraudsham as Principal no longer remembers his school-boy principles. He not only reinstates the Eurocentric syllabus against which he had fought in his younger days but out does the Europeans themselves in playing the role of middle-class Europeans. We last hear of him devoting more time to his business interests than to his school which he runs from gulf-clubs and other pleasure resorts. Yet another strike is simmering at Raymond Chui's school - only this time it is not against a white headmaster but against Raymond Chui!

The case of Godfrey Munira in *Petals of Blood* is a different example of abdication. He does not opt for high living and "playing white" as Raymond Chui does. His disappointment in his marriage and in his father first lead him to a remote school where he does a great deal of good work. He is one of the four people on whom this village depends for its upliftment and is centrally involved in the historic journey which the people of this village make to Nairobi in search of help. The transformation which the village experiences

after this historic journey is beyond everyone's belief. Development comes accompanied by slums and the usual denonciations one sees in African cities and towns.

Through out all these changes Munira sees himself as an outsider. The world is changing in the lives of other people not in his because all he can see is experiences in which he has no part.

It is when he becomes a "born-again" Christian that he seems to be involved in what goes on. The irony of this conversion is that it is spurred on by the loss of Wanja, the girl who is one of the central characters in the novel. She goes over to Karega, a younger and more dynamic man. The conversion is also spurred on by Munira's extreme disappointment with his father to take the Mau-Mau oath during the struggle for independence and who now takes this oath to safeguard Kikuyu land and other property holding against "the envy" and rumblings of other tribes.

In his new - found light Munira sees everything in Biblical metaphors. He will no longer fight against corruption and exploitation because these are of this earth and they will pass. When he does commit the one decisive act of the novel, that is burning down Wanja's brother, "Sunshine Lodge", he does it to save Karega from sin. He in fact kills Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria, representatives of massive foreign business interests. Munira at this time is no longer "of this world" and cannot see his arson in its proper perspective. He has become "a man of lead", a prophet, an even more marginal figure than when he first set out from Limuru to help the remote village of Ilmorog.

f) Dependency

The cases of Ngugi's, Raymond Chui and Armah's Modin illustrate one trait which we have not discussed so far. The intelligentsia in African literature has interesting links with the outside world. In *Sweet and Sour Milk* and in *Sardines* we see Somali intellectuals nostalgically remembering their days in Italy. We also see, especially in *Sardines*, the kind of adulation which some of them pay to intellectuals from the lands of their former colonisers. The case with which an Italian journalist named Sandran enters the corridors of power in a "left-leaning" Somalia is striking.

In his book, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*[41], Professor Ali Mazrui sees the intelligentsia in Africa as passing through two main phases of dependency, viz, christian dependency

41 Heinemann, 1978, pp. 368-379.

and the secularisation of dependency. The secularisation of dependecy has four phases:

1) the liberal phase
2) the liberal nationalist phase
3) the socialist nationalist phase and
4) the marxist phase.

The language in this transition begins with Biblical imagery and ends with marxist dialectics.

In African literature one sees a kind of amused revolt against this kind of dependency. When Biblical imagery is used at all it is often in an invented form as we see in an early fourth African poem called *"Civilised Labour Policy"*.

'CIVILISED' LABOUR POLICY

Hertog is my shepherd; I am in want.
He maketh me to lie down on park benches
He leadeth me beside still factories.
He arouseth my doubt of his intention.
He leadeth me in the path of destruction for his Party's sake
Yea, I walk through the valley of the shadow of destruction
And I fear evil, for though art with,
The Politicians and the Profiteers, they frighten me,
Thou preparest a reduction in my salary before me,
In the presence of mine enemies.
Thou anointest mine income with taxes,
My expense runneth over,
Surely unemployment and poverty will follow me
All the days of this Administration
And I shall dwell in a mortgaged house forever.

The language of the Bible has been found apt in describing situations of oppression. It comes, after all, from a religion which began as a refuge of the oppressed. We find that in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* some of the Biblical verses quoted are said to have been "underlined in Kihika's Bible" and Kihika is a dealer of the liberation movement. In *Petals of Blood* the biblical images used (such as the one from the Book of Revelation just before the openning of the novel) tend to emphasise the deterioration of the socio-economic order - in Kenya. When such images are used by the "born-again" Godfrey Munira they tend to attach corruption and exploitation as aspects of "the devil's work".

f) Language and experience

One discussion of the reliance on biblical imagery by the intelligentsia in African literature would be incomplete without reference to the poetry of Okigba, Soyinka, Eoherua and others who have been severely attacked for their borrowings. The eclectic nations of the symbolism and imagery of this poetry has made it difficult. The writers are familiar not only with their own Logba and Yoruba mythologies but also and especially with the Bible, as well as with Greek and Latin mythologies. This exasperating amount of learning has led some critics to pronounce this poetry "non-African". It suffers, they argue, from what they call "the Hopkins' disease", presumably after the English jesuit - poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins.

We are now refering to the book, Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature by Chimweizu, Madubuike and Jamie[42]. The main thrust of this book's message is that African literature should obey African aesthetic standards which themselves derive from African cultural values. The book finds what it calls the Ibadan - Nsukka group of poets deficient in these standards because of the excessively difficult English used and also because of heavy borrowing from classical mythology and from catholicism.

The debate involved in this discussion is not new. As far back as 1963 Obi Wali has argued that African literature was facing a dead end unless it stops using foreign languages and returns to African languages[43].

In the view of this paper the dependency at issue is not language as such but language as the articulate vehicle of experience. What Chimweiru and his colleagues are attacking is surely not the absence of any mystical "Africanness" conveyed by works of art but the absence in some works of literature of any sense of the experience of African people. Language by itself is nothing. It is in its relation to experience that language acquires meaning and importance. Chimweizu and his colleagues should be requiring of African writers not some mysterious Africanness that language conveys by its simplicity but a certain ability to expand the reader's awarness of the present moment of our existence in its entirety. There is, afterall, a language which transcends language, a style above all styles, it is the language

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42 A poem by "L.R." in Chapman and Dangor Editions *Voices from Within*, Ad Donker 1980.

43 Obi Wali, The Dead end of African Literature, *Transition*, 3-10 (1963), pp. 13-15.

of how people live, or fail to live, what they experience or do not experience.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the presentation of the intelligentsia in African literature. The term is not all inclusive and literature clearly shows which character plays what role in a given poem, play or novel. We have examined those characters whom the writers by design assign the role of intellectuals. We have looked at the possibilities before such characters and found that they have common traits which have made their role in Africa somewhat marginal. Perhaps this marginality has contributed to Africa's present crisis. Perhaps.