

Postcolonial Psychosis and Recovery Process in Osita
Ezenwanebe's *Withered Thrust* and Helon Habila's
Measuring Time

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Abstract

A dialectical study of the histories of colonization according to scholars like Mohan (2012), Ashcroft (1989) and Bhoemer (1993) are the histories of the collisions between the natives and the European communities, and since colonization involves direct territorial appropriation of another geopolitical entity, combined with forthright exploitation, appropriated cultural power with political sagacity, colonized nations are bound to be subjected to the position of inferior. The outcome of this conflict leads to the emergence of postcolonial theory, whose multiple discourses and trajectories, significations and positional ties has made its conceptualization difficult. Nonetheless as a set of unstable formations, it claims as its special provenance the terrain that in an earlier day used to go by the term 'Third

World', describing the emergence of new cultural productions as a result of colonized-colonial relations. This paper however discusses the problems the colonized nations faced after the expiration of the so-called colonialism and through the study of Osita Ezenwanebe's *Withered Thrust* and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* the paper reveals the postcolonial psychosis encountered by nations that have undergone the experience of colonial rule.

1. Introduction

A dialectical study of the histories of colonization according to scholars like Mohan (2012), Ashcroft (1989) and Bhoemer (1993) are the histories of the collisions between the natives and the European communities, and since colonization involves direct territorial appropriation of another geopolitical entity, combined with forthright exploitation, appropriated cultural power with political sagacity, colonized nations are bound to be subjected to the position of inferior. The nations affected in the appropriation process at a point had to source for a counter ideological tool to subvert the hegemonic tendencies of the West over them. This counter ideological tool eventually surfaced and resulted in Post-Colonialism which Mohan refers to as "the new intellectual life and a force on a par with the western minds" (1). The issue of Postcolonialism has thus become a theory that remains an open field of discursive practices and in engaging it as a concept, two particular questions are always asked. Mukherjee raises the questions thus:

Is postcoloniality a mere chronological label referring to the period after the demise of the British empire? Or is it, as some scholars have conceived it, an emancipatory, ideological concept enabling students of literature outside the western world to interpret certain aspects of the study of literature that were hitherto taken for granted, and also encouraging them 'not only to read their own texts in their own terms but also to re-interpret some old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of their specific historical and geographical locations?

Postcolonial theory like Post structuralism and Postmodernism is all language plural. It has multiple discourses and trajectories, significations and positional ties. Nonetheless as a set of unstable formations, it claims as its special provenance the terrain that in an earlier day used to go by the term 'Third World', describing the emergence of new cultural productions as a result of colonized-colonial relations. While it does not have one fixed meaning, it is generally applied to a range of theoretical positions which are developed in and from the work of Edward Said (1978), Homi K. Bhabha (1986) and Gayatri C. Spivak (1985). But Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) remains a key text.

While there are different forms of postcolonial theory that vary both in practice and political implications, there are certain fundamental assumptions they all share; issues such as decolonization, political independence, subjectivity, self-identity, hybridity, representation, etc., have become key themes in postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory thus remains an open field of discursive practices, and as a counter discourse, it aims to achieve, as Andrew Hammond posits:

An authentic globalization of cultural discourses, extending globally the intellectual concerns and orientation originating at the central sites of Euro-American cultural criticism and by introducing into it voices and subjectivities from the margins of earlier political and/or ideological colonialism which now demand a hearing at those very sites at the centre (46).

The goal indeed is to address the question of culture and power, departing from the essentialist and dichotomic thinking and binarism that are characteristic of western thought.

However certain critics, both foreign and indigenous, have criticised either postcolonialism as a concept or the way it has been deployed by some scholars. These critics have called attention to the complicity of postcolonial theory in ignoring the material bases of culture and diverting our attention from the concrete to the abstract, from the real to the allegorical. They claim that postcolonial theory also exercises a form of ‘hegemony’ in diverting our attention from contemporary problems of social, political and cultural domination, and its obfuscation of its own relationship to what is but a condition of its emergence: a global capitalism, that however fragmented in appearance, serves nevertheless as “the structuring principals of global relations” (Andrew Thacker, 2007:19).

Arun P. Mukherjee, another of the critics points attention to the slippage in the discourse of postcolonial theory where its practitioners move indiscriminately from the text to writer to the people represented by the writer in the text, thereby ignoring to consider the question of the writer’s gender, race and class and caste positions and how they impact on his/her text. According to him, it gives too much authority to the author without checking his/her credentials; it forgets that writers exclude and misrepresent quite often. Mukherjee rounds off his arguments thus:

...I wonder if the preoccupation with identity, i.e., hybridity in the postcolonialist’s vocabulary is not an “elite” preoccupation, something one can only devote one’s mind to one’s your basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter have been met. I am saying then, that postcolonialists’ selection of writers and their prioritization of issues to be focused on do not have my agreement. I feel that the issues they privilege erase some basic very pressing concerns of millions of people who probably would like to call themselves by other names besides the generalized ‘the colonized’, and would probably read the texts the postcolonialists are reading in a very different way if asked (18).

However to justify Mukherjee’s reaction against postcolonial theory as enunciated above, there is no doubt about the desirability of such an enterprise, so long as one can make sure that the terms of discourse are indeed being generated by the needs of the culture to which one belongs, rather than by the imperative set elsewhere. Tejumola Olaniyan’s (1992:15) remark in his analysis of postmodernism sums up our position with regard to postcolonial theory: ‘There is a lot to disagree within postmodernism, and there are absolutely no guarantees of its solidarity with our interests outside our constant vigilance and deliberate critical refashioning: therefore what will matter in the end is not the discourse as such but the

use we make of it.” Makarand Paranjape’s postulation below would appear to agree not only with Tejumola Olaniyan’s position as regards to postmodernism but also with regard to postcolonial theory:

Postcolonialism then like most things of western origin can be neither rejected nor accepted fully. We have each to work out our own adjustment and compromise with it. We may try to use it against the grain, subvert it to our advantage or deploy it to our benefit, all the while endeavouring to safeguard ourselves from its distorting tendencies (45).

However, the challenge of a definition of postcolonial theory is its contextual framework, as it is linked to race, culture and gender, settler and native. The pertinent questions theorists need to ask are: When does a settler become coloniser, colonised and postcolonial? When does a race cease to be an oppressive agent and become a wealth of cultural diversities of a postcolonial setting? Or in the human history of migrations, when does the settler become native, indigenous, a primary citizen? And lastly, when does the native become truly postcolonial? The answers to these questions make postcolonial theory problematic.

Based on such questions, the road from colonial to postcolonial never ends merely with “post” in a postcolonial concept. Instead it becomes a new form of influence through local agents. This vicious circle does not allow the world to be postcolonial - to be entirely free from colonialism.

A critical approach with an optimistic view of postcolonial theory is therefore more preferable than a pessimistic view. According to Bhabha (1994:171), postcolonial criticism “bears witness to the unequal and universal forces of cultural representation” that are involved in a constant competition for political and economic control in the contemporary world. Moreover, Bhabha sees postcolonial critique emerging from colonial experiences. He argues:

Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, race, communities, peoples(171).

Postcolonial theory therefore formulates its critique around the social histories, cultural differences and political discrimination that are practised and normalised by colonial and imperial machineries. According to Young, postcolonial critique is concerned with the history of colonialism “only to the extent that history has determined the configurations and power structures of the present (56).” Postcolonial critique also recognises anti-colonial movements as the source and inspiration of its politics. Postcolonial critique can be defined as a dialectical discourse which broadly marks the historical facts of decolonisation. It allows people emerging from socio-political and economic domination to reclaim their sovereignty;

it gives them a negotiating space for equity. A number of theorists share this view, including Kenyatta (1968:36); Bhabha (1994); Spivak (1988:197-221); Ashcroft et al (1989; 1995); Sugirtharajah (1996:1-5); Dube (1996); Segovia (2000:11-34) and Punt (2001, 2003).

It is our believe that the philosophy underlying this theory is not one of declaring war on the past, but declaring war against the present realities which, implicitly or explicitly, are the consequences of that past. Therefore the attention of the struggle is concentrated on neo-colonialism and its agents (international and local) that are still enforced through political, economic and social exploitation in post-independent nations.

The implication of all of these is that through the negative effects of colonial hegemony on the colonized nations, some characters within these nations have developed psychosis, that is a distorted view of reality up to the extent of operating within the confine of hybridity which Mohan refers to as the result of the interaction between imperial culture and the complex indigenous cultural practices. This distorted view of reality is what postcolonial writers engage through their literary works as a means of reflecting on how the process of colonization has seriously affected the people and to propose a healing process by which the colonial nations under the siege or burden of the ex while colonial influence could be healed. Through the study of Osita Ezenwanebe's *Withered Thrust* and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, this paper engages the state of post colonial psychosis and recovery process in Nations that encounter colonization.

2. Psychosis and Recovery Process in Social Realist Literature: The Example of Osita Ezenwanebe and Helon Habila

Contemporary literary writing has become a potent social institution that uses medium of language, setting, characters and characterization to represent life. Literary writing as a discipline according to Akinwale exposed a lot of our:

social problems, condemning them and suggesting the way forward. These social problems ranged from marital issues, superstitious beliefs, kinship issues and what Schipper referred to as “Highlife and Misery” (131).

This is where social realist literary writing in Literature comes to the fore. That is a work of art that is characterized by a belief in the power of the word and in the writer's ability to portray in a satisfying documentary fashion the structure of social reality. Though inspired in various ways by Russian revolution, the contemporary African writers have adopted this literary style in reflecting and refracting the society as Morris has affirmed that “much of the art of realist writers consist of disguising their art and fostering the illusion that they are referring to actual people, places and events (56)”.

Socialist literary writers believe that Literature involves a direct observation of human behavior; therefore, there is a thrust to use contemporary settings, time, and periods that are relevant to everyday life and problems in their reflection. Social Realistic texts are however written in everyday language and the characters are expected to be normative both in speech and in conduct. According to Nobert Oyibo, Social Realist narratives insist that:

All human problems should be brought in the open, including issues previously considered unsafe for public discussion. Consequently, the question of paternally of children, sex and divorce which were formerly seen as unspeakable issues found expression in realistic theatre (36).

Most notable Social Realist writers in Africa like Athol Fugard in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Ngugi Wathiongo in *Weep Not Child*, Isidore Okpewo in *The Victims* and Chimamanda Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* and many more have examined biting social issues in bold and outspoken manner that have resulted in the people taking positive social change. Most realist texts explore ordinary people and situations where characters are product of social factors and explore themes and conflicts belonging to a real contemporary society. However, social realist style has become a potent literary style and tool of engaging postcolonial theory because of its relevance in “questioning received ideas about the history and way of life of colonized people (191)”. It is also used to question and reveal the ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathized with working – class people, particularly the poor. The lesson to be learnt from a social realist text either in the form of drama, poetry or prose is aimed at using its art more than entertainment purposes, but as a means of disseminating information and taking critical look at issues that need urgent social development. With this, Ezeigbo proposes that these writers highlight the positive aspects in their texts “in order to encourage their people to emulate them and perpetuate them for posterity (5)”. This encouragement, if driven toward achieving positive end result is what is referred to in this paper as “recovery process”. With this as our background, let us quickly examine the texts in focus.

Osita Ezenwanebe’s *Withered Thrust* is a postcolonial African drama that reveals the prevalent issues of social concerns such as corruption, lack of the spirit of patriotism, hypocrisy, poverty, and ineffective leadership. Through the play, the playwright exposes some of the major problems of corruption Nigeria faces as a nation. This play centres on the principal character: untimely death in his bid to expose corrupt practices in the banking sector. Lucky Echidinma, a young banker working with Giant Bank Plc who has been finding it uneasy to take care of his family with his meager salary, sees an opportunity to make money by reporting to the Bank management staff of a cheque of one million naira that has been increased to fifty million naira. Unknowingly to him the same people behind the fraud are the members of the management committee. As a way of covering up for their corrupt practices, the management committee headed by Chief Owoda Badmus sends hired assassins to kill him, thereby plunging Echidinma’s family in to perpetual mourning.

The play therefore, considers the Nigerian society as a postcolonial nation that has been ravaged by decadence, injustice and disintegration. This confirms Adams assertion that postcolonial texts “to some extent, reflects the realities of the African continent that greatly mark her as a third world (24)”. A further interrogation of the play reveals that the playwright reflects on the high level of moral decadence and the disintegration of the Nigerian society due to corrupt practices of the people. Up till the moment of this research, Nigerians still experience such acts as corruption, indiscipline and social decay like lack of good

infrastructures, inadequate water supply and epileptic power supply as people have no respect for the rule of law thereby making the country a geographical space controlled by lawlessness like terrorism, drug trafficking, kidnapping and other social vices. This is again reflected in Adams affirmation that “everyone seems to be involved in this act of indiscipline and corruption that has swallowed up the Nigerian state (27).” The play is however used as a probe of the postcolonial Nigerian nation’s social situation that has been dismantled by corruption, greed; get rich quick and self interest. The consequence of all this is the psychosocial ailment that have resulted in the nation’s social paralysis.

Helon Habila’s novel, *Measuring Time* like *Withered Thrust* explores a wide range of themes such as political decay, corruption, hypocrisy, the Nigerian democratic experience, political conflicts, national and global politics and a wide variety of social, religious and domestic issues. The writer in the novel displays a strong social conscience, an intense consciousness of the democratic/political and social problems that afflict his society and the potential for reforms. It should be emphasized here that Helon Habila has in the last ten years carved a niche for himself as not only the projector of the aspirations and hopes of the Nigerian subject but also as a propagator of reforms in the lives of Nigerian women. Helon Habila is a novelist for whom literature serves a definite committed ideological purpose. Through the novel, Habila captures some of the ills militating against a just democratic rule in the country. Though the country has returned to democratic rule, there are still problems bedeviling the nation as a result of military rule. Habila depicts the realities in our environment, conscious of the existing social relations which elevate some at the expense of the marginalisation of others. His position is empathetic and humanistic; he is able to locate his sympathy in the plight of Mamo’s girlfriend, Zara. We see Habila attempt to address not only socially relevant issues, but also issues affecting the individual. As Chidi Amuta avers:

The artist is a member of society and incarnates its structural and ideological inflections; the artist’s individuality and the society’s values are mediated in the work of art; the work of art creates both the artist and the society and indeed is not a passive object but a restless concourse of images, actions, movements, experiences and statement. The end result is a new higher reality in which both artist and society assume a particular and universal identity (79).

Measuring Time is a very subtle piece of work in which the story of a family and community in northern Nigeria in the 1980s and early 90s is woven into a wider socio-political narrative, touching on education, responsibility, the colonial inheritance and the mythic substratum of folklore. The novel is however a narrative excursion of the postcolonial Nigerian nation and how the nation has been misgoverned by the ruling class leaving the down trodden to be subjected to poverty and neglect. This is why Uwasomba affirms that the novel is about:

the narration of Nigeria’s chequered history of great dreams deferred, signposted by the irresponsibility of decadent class that has been running its affairs since independence(3).

3. Conclusion

The art of literary writing has been with human being and it continues to perform the role of conscientising the people. Through the role it plays as a reflection of the society, it is artistically designed to show the society its current position and the line of action to take in changing for the better. This shows that its essence in the advancement of the society towards development is never in doubt.

As a tool of conscientisation, literature draws its themes from daily experiences of happenings in the society; its effectiveness is seen in creating awareness that could bring about positive social change. However through the exploration of Osita Ezenwanebe's *Withered Thrust* and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, this paper has shown how literary texts can be used to reveal the psychological behavior of characters in a nation that under the siege of different social vices and political confusion. There is no gainsaying the fact that the two texts explored in this paper reveal the social reality of the postcolonial Nigerian nation. A nation plagued by various strands of corruption including political, social and economic corruption up to the extent that the citizens begin to experience psychosis in their quest for survival and having hope in hopeless situations. The writers however through the texts propose ways of recovery from the psychotic malady.

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