

## **Raping the Dreams and Subverting the Aspirations: Post Independence Disillusionment in Zeleza's Smouldering Charcoal**

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the notion of post independence disillusionment from the dimension of civilian dictatorship as reflected in Zeleza's novel. Many African leaders with a bias for the dictatorial have long made independence a huge nightmare for the African people. This is because rather than help their people realize their independence dreams and aspirations many of these post independence leaders have become tin gods who ride roughshod over the rights and privileges of their people. On parade in Zeleza's novel is the all-powerful party leader whose terror machine is driven by countless "untamed pests" who come in different guises as house-helpers, editors, housewives, university lecturers, and youth militia. Their daily visit of poverty, oppression and suppression on the hapless people is not only a woeful negation of their fundamental rights but also an affirmation of many critics' view that power was actually handed over to the wrong persons at independence in many countries in Africa. Zeleza's Movement for National Transformation with its guerrilla agenda seems a way out of the consequent blind alley of underdevelopment. To succeed however, the paper contends, the movement must break away from the usual guerrilla norm of replacing oppressive masters with more undemocratic and oppressive masters and be truly and functionally transformational in its agenda.*

**Keywords:** *dictatorship, independence, pests, dreams, aspirations, movement*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In his Kwame Nkrumah's Memorial Lecture, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1977:35) stated that during their campaign for independence, African leaders had made promises which raised high hopes and expectations in their peoples. According to him, they had pledged that on the attainment of independence and sovereignty, they would be in a position to

put an end to oligarchic oppression and capitalist exploitation, elevate the African from the morass of humiliation and indignity into which more than five hundred years of slavery and colonialism had left him, usher in for the masses of the people, a new era which would guarantee to them basic freedoms and the full enjoyment of the fruits that come from the products of their lands and labour.

The above were beautiful dreams and aspirations and the vast majority of the people to whom these promises were made were diseased, ignorance-ridden, lived in squalour and below subsistence level. They believed and trusted their leaders' words and voted enmasse for them. The expectations of brighter years to come sustained their loyalty. "In any stable society", says Jennifer Trusted (1987:38), "people rely on their expectations being fulfilled and moral duty arises as a result of this reliance". A promise is a debt that must be paid without prompting. Commenting on the virtue of keeping our promises, J.R. Searle (1904:20), deposes that we are all obliged to keep our promises to avoid a betrayal of trust. In his observation

the making of a promise is an institutional fact, if a person promises to do something this is a fact that puts him or her under a moral obligation to act as promised

In the light of the above submission, African leaders were for a number of reasons, under obligation to fulfill their promises which they voluntarily and solemnly made to the people and to do so with a sense of urgency. The truth, however, is that the freedom, abundance and comfort which people had been made to believe would come to them with independence have been absent. Instead,

a vast majority of them continue to till the land and her stones and wood with the same self same tools which were fashioned by their ancestors about 600 years B.C. As a result, the present class remains as abject and impoverished as ever, and in consequence, the whole of the community suffers from secular stagnation (Obafemi Awolowo, 1977:39).

In his analysis of the relationship between political leadership and followership, Frantz Fanon sees government as a trust. Government depends for its justification on a shared morality between those who rule and those who are being ruled. The very existence of this shared morality also implies a mutuality of obligation as between government and the governed. Adele Jinadu (1980:168) opines:

The political party as one organizing device for structuring social and authority relations must reflect, and can be shaped by the their notions of shared morality and a mutuality of obligation. This is indeed Fanon's manner of linking morality and politics.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the post independence realities in Africa have proved a huge negation of Jinadu and Fanon's analyses above. In fact, in his unflattering assessment, Fanon (1967:181) reveals a woeful disappointment occasioned by the immediate post colonial leaders in Africa

The people who for years on end had seen this leader and heard him speak, who from a distance in a kind of dream have followed his contests with the colonial power spontaneously put their trust in this patriot. Before independence, the leader generously embodied the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people, in what touches bread, law and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers for their returns which constitute the natural bourgeoisie.

The African masses who had expected to witness the gradual unfolding of the bright future promised by their leaders became disappointed. Apart from the blinding euphoria of independence in which so much was promised and so little was to be realized or even realizable, on account of their deficient vision from which promises were made, one major reason for this ugly scenario, according to Le Vine (1997:187), was that the so called African leaders "had other plans". In the Kantian conflict between duty and self interest, reason dictates choosing obligation over advantage (Kant, 1980:10). But rather than allow their self interest to be compatible with that of the masses to be morally defensible, the post independence elite chose to service their greedy instincts. In the final analysis, the masses found out painfully, "that the iniquitous fact of exploitation could wear a black face" (Fanon, 1970:145). This vesting of political power in the wrong hands after independence to the detriment of the African people is a reminder of the premonition of the retiring white District Officer, John Thompson in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1982). According to him, although colonialism was coming to an end in Kenya, the colonial status quo would continue. While this statement was implied in Thompson's discussion with Margery his wife, on the eve of independence celebrations, it becomes an artistic prefiguration of the behavior of the ruling elite in post independence Kenya in particular and Africa in general. Independence, Ngugi emphasizes, has only brought about a negative change—expatriates capitalists are replaced by local capitalists.

Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Tiyaambe Zeleza's undiluted concern with the oppressed masses of the African continent more than justifies the location of the theoretical underpinning of this research in sociological criticism with a bias for the Marxist aspect which, in the observation of Jerry Eagleton (1976:vii).

is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practices of transforming them; and what that means, rather more correctly, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of

the struggle of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression.

This paper therefore, proposes to examine the complexion of the raping of the Africa dream and the subversion of the people's aspirations after independence by the continent's immediate post independence leaders as demonstrated in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992).

## **2. INDEPENDENCE AS A MONSTROUS CONCENTRATION CAMP IN ZELEZA'S SMOULDERING CHARCOAL**

In what amounts to a critical literary dissection of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Neil ten Kortenaar (1993:60), asks the reader to "only connect to discover that *Anthills of the Savannah* is a fictional working out of Achebe's concern in the *Trouble With Nigeria*" where "the leaders have placed their own interest before those of the nation". Similarly, the reader does not need to overwork his literary connectivity to discover that Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* is actually a fictional working out of his earlier thesis that Africa's independence is nothing more than a catalogue of "disaster, disappointment and disillusionment" (1994:174). Classed with such African novels as Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, (1969) Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *A Grain of Wheat* (1982) and *Petals of Blood* (1988) and Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966 ) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* is set in post independence Africa where so called Africa leaders' predilection for exploitation, oppression and unparalleled tyranny has long made nonsense of the people's pre-independence dreams and aspirations. Zeleza contends that the beautiful dreams and aspirations of independence were brutally raped and subverted by the wrong "leaders" who took charge after the exit of the colonialists thereby turning the continent into a monstrous concentration camp.

A typical example of such dictatorial and oppressive post independent Africa leaders is the president of Zeleza's fictitious country in *Smouldering Charcoal*. Simply referred to as "the leader", nowhere in the novel does he appear in person. However, like an Orwellian Big brother, he has almost everybody in the country in his radar. This is possible through the party of which he is the sole administrator. The party has no boundaries and competitors and through it the leader has his iron grip on the country through vigilant party women, fanatical youth leaguers, chairmen, ministers and other informers who work either as house helps, university lecturers, newspaper editors, housewives or prostitutes. These are Zeleza's "untamed pests", a horde of fanatics or political loyalists who, according to Makayiko Chirambo (1999:9), "have chosen to serve the party either in position in its hierarchy or as undercover agents in clandestine activities".

Skillfully presented in the novel are three groups of people who, though are different in terms of status and rank in the society, are actually united by their common bond of fellowship with the infestation by the untamed pests in the country. The first group consists of the inhabitants of Njala, a shanty village on the edge of the city. Here persons like Bota, Michere, Biti, Nambe and Lucy who, in their squalid environment, daily dialogue with extreme poverty, prostitution, drunkenness and infidelity. Mchere's rat-infested one-room shack for example, can hardly accommodate his expanding family. Like Bota his friend, the little he earns from his bakery job is barely enough to feed his family let alone pay his house rent. He therefore, remains a perpetual debtor, forever at the mercy of his landlord whose threats of eviction hang over him like a menacing sword of Damocles. The local primary school is a study in absenteeism among the children. Many of them do not attend school because their parents cannot afford the school fees. The few whose parents have sacrificed all in order to pay their schools fees have no teachers to teach them no thanks to the unattractive low wages and poor teaching facilities. The children therefore, have no choice than to go "to the football grounds, a distance away from their houses (where) they could play and fight as much as they liked" (19).

Years after independence, the local people of Njala have no access to the basic necessities of life like good roads and pipe borne water. As the water in their rivers has been polluted by industrial wastes, the people resort to trekking long distances to neighbouring villages to fetch water from the wells. The wretched people of Njala are the equivalent of the political economists' fourth world, "whose lives are in no way improved by the fact of their country's independence and who,

in fact, are exploited as ruthlessly by their countrymen as they were by the foreign imperial masters” (Killam, 1989:202).

The second group is the group of the educated or intellectuals in high employment. Dambo the lawyer, Chola the journalist, Catherine the university student and Dr Bakha the lecturer occupy this group. The third group is that of the ministers, members of parliament, the militia and the chair persons. These party functionaries wield a lot of power in the society unlike the other groups. Their power and influence come straight from the unquestionable power of the leader. As stated earlier, the leader has successfully infiltrated these three groups with his bunch of fanatical loyalists otherwise known as “untamed pests”. With their clandestine activities, the leader is able to maintain his tyrannical hold on the hapless citizens. As the eyes and ears of the leader, these pests are everywhere in the country visiting mayhem, destruction and untold hardship on the people in their objective to stifle any political dissent. The ubiquity of these untamed pests in the country has created an atmosphere that is defined by fear and uncertainty. The people have long bade goodbye to trust and good neighbourliness as one does not know who is spying on who. The legitimate strike of the bakery workers for better condition of living becomes a huge fiasco as the strikers are betrayed by fellow workers and are imprisoned without trial. Chola is spied on by his own houseboy at home. In his office, the leader’s “untamed pests” come in the guise of editors who daily check the content of the country’s newspapers in order not to embarrass the leader whose “unsurpassed wisdom and unrelenting emphasis on law and order had created a favourable atmosphere for investments” (20). Reasonable persons must be wondering why a leader with such impeccable leadership credentials will constitute a threat to a fellow citizen. Not to wonder though, for editorial fanaticism has not become extinct yet in the world of journalism. This is why the *Daily Dispatch*, the country’s daily newspaper is not only dominated by sterile facts and hearty accolades to those in government but also full of “pictures of the leader and bold headlines calling the nation’s attention to his latest activities” (21). As it is with Armah’s *Fragments* where the media is dominated by sycophancy and praise-singing so also is Zeleza’s *Smouldering Charcoal*. The discerning reading public has little time for doctored and teleguided information, a reason, says Gboyega Alaka (2014:42), “Why some state-owned newspaper houses are fast fading into irrelevance”.

Untamed pests contaminate life in Zeleza’s novel. Their nefarious activities have no respect for any institution, sacred or secular. Not a few teachers have been given over to the party by their wives for refusing to sacrifice their miserable salaries to buy them party uniforms. Taking advantage of Chola’s arrest, Dr. Bakh, a university lecturer, wants to take over his girl friend Catherine. Even so, finding it difficult or awkward to overtly murder Chola, government officials find it convenient to use one of their pests on death row, the monstrous Bonzo, to kill him. Dambo the lawyer is killed by agents of the government for daring to quit the party. Untamed pests have no respect for the right of others as they oppress and suppress with impunity. This is why they are not conscience-stricken when they loot the spoils from the party-victims like Biti. The party Militia have power from the Leader to stop and hold traffic until road users produce or buy the party membership card on high ways. Chola is humiliated, for example, on the road by members of the Youth Militia for not carrying his party card. Until he buys one, the party’s youth militia were prepared to vandalize his car. If Chola feels humiliated, Zeleza tells us that

Chola was in many ways lucky that he had not yet suffered a worse fate. Others were beaten to death, their house burnt, or women raped and children banned from school if they did not possess the almighty card (18).

For Mchere’s wife Nambe, tragedy comes in droves courtesy of the unforgiving circumstance created by the leader’s numerous diabolical tentacles. In the absence of her husband who is in prison for participating in a strike at the bakery, she and her children are evicted from their house, her sick son dies in hospital while she is later sexually assaulted by one of the “untamed pests”, Gwape, who is a youth leaguer in the party. To worsen her already pathetic case, she and some other wretched women like her are evicted from Njala to their remote villages for refusing to participate in the dance rehearsals for independence while their husbands are in incarceration. Like Nambe, Catherine not only loses her fiancé first, to prison and later to death, she is also dismissed from her university as a student for no apparent reason other than that she is a fiancée to Chola the former journalist with the government *Daily Dispatch* newspaper

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In a manner reminiscent of the notorious State Research Council (SRC) headed by the evil genius Lieutenant Colonel Ossai, otherwise known as Samsonite in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, the Youth Militia brook no iota of opposition, real or imagined, to the leader and the party, Dictatorship is indeed stormy. The devastation of the country by the leader and the party loyalists are evident in the murders, torture, eviction, dismissals and repressive laws that dot the entire narrative. Indeed, as rightly put by Chirambo (1999:7), "the events from the strike through prison to exile are nothing short of a night storm". *Smouldering Charcoal* is a story of frustrated dreams and aspirations. Essentially, it is a story of disillusionment with post independence African leaders who abuse the mandate of the people. Standing in a Emergency Ward, Mchere thinks of the beautiful dreams of his father and others like him who had nourished such with the sweat of their struggle and the blood of their deaths only to rear a stillborn future. He says

freedom and independence, they had proclaimed everywhere in broad daylight and in the darkest of nights, on hilltops and along creeks, with the zeal of the faithful and they had poured their own blood as their final libations to a future in which those dreams would mature into reality (89).

Frustrated, he then asks rhetorically:

What was it sitting in a long queue on a cold bench at night with no blanket, no warmth save for the hot breath of one's restless heart? Surely, the words "freedom and independence" had to mean something more than this? (89).

Betrayal by post independence leadership with its consequent disillusionment has remained for many years, a huge focus of the African novel. African novelists have shown in no uncertain terms how these so called leaders actually only succeeded in derailing the gains of independence to the detriment of the common people who had expected so much. Emmanuel Obiechina (1990:23) says:

The failure of independence is regarded as evidence of the failure of the elite to justify themselves to the masses and validate their claim to leadership. The novelists see the post independence leaders as betraying the pledges they made in the nationalist days to create a just, egalitarian and constituted new states out of colonial societies.

In many African countries, their people's sense of disillusionment has unfortunately, been heightened by the presence of soldiers who come into government with the intention of clearing the mess of the politicians only to get messed up in the process. Ever since one of the first coups in the continent which took place in Togo in 1962, Africa has witnessed several coups and counter-coups which have further deemed the hopes of the masses and led them into a blind alley of frustration and hopelessness. President Sam, the military dictator in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is of the same dictatorial and oppressive hue with the Leader in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*. Aware of the misappropriation of the gains of independence by the new leadership, the African novelist has since deepen his artistic vision, in deference to realism, from his role as a custodian of culture to a visionary of his society. "It was necessary", says D.S Izevbaye (1968:83), "for the role of the writer to change from that of a discoverer of identity to that of a prophet for his society". Francis Ngwaba (1986:14), calls this period, "the second phase of the African novel which concentrates on the disturbing though worthwhile exercise of critical self examination". It is this that informed Abiola Irele's concept of "new realism" which he defines as

That process by which the African writer has began to modify his vision and to adjust his angle of perception to take account of these political and social realities that began in the wake of African independence to impress themselves more closely upon the general attention through the entire continent (1981:70).

Going by the present frustrating mood in the continent even Irele, like many concerned critics, have advocated the need for a heightened sense of new realism to correctly reflect the treacherous realities in all African writings especially in fiction which

by its very nature affords the writer the most convenient means of reporting upon life and of underscoring such reporting of an expressive point of view (Irele, 1981:71)

Even so, while many novelists in the continent fully endorse Irele's view, they also call on African writers to bring their artistic prowess to bear on the continent's multifarious problems. In other words, beyond mere portrayal, the novelist for example should suggest a way out of the socio-political lockjam that is Africa today. This, no doubt, is in order, for in the words of Terry Eagleton (1977:52), "the reflection of a distortion will become a distorted reflection". Zeleza no doubt, subscribes to this literary school of thought hence his pet movement as enunciated in *Smouldering Charcoal*.

### 3. TAMING THE PESTS TO AVOID STORMY NIGHTS

In view of the ubiquity of the untamed pests who have come to dominate the very existence of the people, it is almost impossible to think of any way out. In a subtle way however, the novelist invests the narrative with an uncommon hope in the resilience of the people to fight for their freedom from such bondage and suffering. It is this resilience that occasionally gives rise to individual acts of courage in defiance of the status quo. Chola regularly burns the party card which he is forced to buy by the overzealous Youth Militia every evening as a way of demonstrating his resistance and struggle against the oppressive machinery of the dictatorial government. Motivated by the need to do something tangible rather than shout a thousand slogans on the need to do away with dictatorship and imperialism, Dambo joins the party with intention to transform it from within. But this is to no avail as he is murdered apparently by party agents who view such positive transformation as an anathema. What Dambo's death shows is not only that it is impossible to transform an oppressive system with the instruments of oppression as rightly observed by Chola but more importantly, that in this kind of struggle to do away with an oppressive system, individual acts of messianism will certainly lead nowhere. Similarly, the spontaneous protest of the women who defy the party dance rehearsals and instead march to the prison where their husbands have been detained is a welcome one. For one thing, their action is a clear cut demonstration of their rejection of the system that has long traded their dignity and well being for crass tyranny. Good as this rare feminine uprising is however, it has no staying power to effect a long lasting change. Indeed, as Chola is never tired of saying

spontaneous outbursts of popular discontent are fine, but they are like spurts of fire from wet wood, which do not last as long as the intense heat of charcoal (149).

Given the nature of the tyranny with its numerous untamed pests, it will require a close-knit establishment with overall organization, overall strategy and overall objective to effect a meaningful change in the stifling status quo. This is where the Movement for National Transformation comes in. Simply called the Movement, it is an underground organization dedicated to uniting pockets of strikers, demonstrators and boycotters in the country into a formidable force capable of causing a revolution in the system. According to Chola the arrowhead of the organization in prison, the aims of the movement is to bring together all the oppressed people and classes in the society "in order to wage a common struggle against poverty, exploitation and oppression" (148). Rather than brood over his incarceration, Chola has found it convenient to harvest recruits into the movement from among the school teachers, lawyers, civil servants, workers, peasants and former ministers who constitute the political detainees in prison. As the organizing secretary of the Movement in prison, Mchere makes sure that each cell has its own semi-autonomous committee in order to prevent the prison authorities from paralyzing its activities should they isolate a few key leaders.

The movement is out to organize to be able to capture state power first in order to create a more humane and democratic society. To achieve this objective, the movement has infiltrated and continued work with the progressives among the workers, peasants, students, patriotic elements and radical intellectuals in every nook and cranny of the country. Dambo who later becomes one of the Movement's chief theorists tells us why the oppressive system that eventually murders him must be destroyed:

People must become aware that the system we have at present is evil. It serves the rich and the powerful at the expense of the masses. It is not as if it's the will of God, if you see what I mean; it's the creation of greedy men, and anything which men can make, men can also destroy and build something better in its place. Capitalism and all its bastards... should be eradicated once and for all (77).

Neither the torture, imprisonment, intimidations and outright elimination of Dambo and Chola by agents of the government are able to stop the activities of the Movement. In fact, the manuscript that Chola drafted while in prison is smuggled out from the prison by a sympathetic warder and handed over to Mchere who takes it into exile. By the end of the story it is obvious that a full scale guerrilla warfare to dislodge the evil system has started as Mchere, Ndatero and Catherine in exile continue from where the other left. As the charcoal of the revolution smoulders, it is a sense of optimism that seems to fill the air. Indeed, if the recruitment into the military wing of the Movement is anything to go by, it is obvious that the anticipated tumultuous change will definitely sweep away the dictator and his ancien regime of evil, for as the mantra of the Movement states, "the future has begun".

Civilian or military, dictatorship is an ugly reality in postcolonial Africa. It often manifests itself in arrests, exile, execution or consistent harassment of dissident voices. Political activists and writers are particularly at risk in Africa. In fact "in Africa writing is a matter of life and death" according to Nurudin Farah (1990:21), because "if you write something condemnatory of the regime in power, they pass the death sentence on your head". According to Joseph at Kubayanda (1990:5), the consequence of dictatorship "is an atmosphere of fear, hate and humiliation" Needless to say too that enlightened opinion also dies. *Zeleza's Smouldering Charcoal* for example, took about ten years to release because of the untamed pests and night storms in president Banda's government. According to Chirambo (1999:9),

when the Malawi special Branch Police picked up the news of his intention to publish a novel critical of president Banda's government in 1982, they threatened the authors family relations in Malawi with harassment. For fear of the lives of his relations, he shelved the book until 1992.

In the face of the dictatorial challenge in the continent, Zelezas' Movement for National Transformation is certainly welcome. It is a vote for a full scale confrontation with the monster of tyranny and oppression. Except that its unclear agenda remains a nagging question. If its top priority is simply to capture state power first before a consideration is given to democracy, then what is the assurance that it would not be as tyrannical as the present regime? This is because as Ndatero initially observed, most radical movements often concentrate all their energies in capturing the state machine. And when they do, "the state swallows them up and they become reincarnations of the ousted regime" (151). The Movement hopes to wage a common struggle against poverty and exploitation but one is not told of any economic blueprint that will help in this direction. Even so, the recourse to guerrilla warfare to overthrow the pest-infested regime does not seem to guarantee the possibility of realizing the dreams and aspirations of independence. One is not even sure that the right persons or genuine democrats will have access to power to effect a meaningful change in the lives of the people. This is because guerrilla warriors have never been known anywhere in the world to be democrats. One only hopes and prays that these guerrilla warriors fighting to assume power should be an exception to the general worldwide norm.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Whatever the observation about the weaknesses of the Movement for National Transformation, there is no doubt that it represents a bold move to confront the oppressive post colonial state in Africa. It's truly organic nature is a great asset any day. But because most so called revolutions in the continent have often taken over power only to replace old masters with new ones and continue the vicious circle of oppression and exploitation there is an urgent need for a correct understanding of the situation. A correct diagnosis of the political situation or complexion of the continent is badly needed in order to be able to proffer a lasting solution. What exactly went wrong immediately after independence was achieved in many African countries, for example? How and why was the nationalist fervour killed immediately after independence? There is a need to know, at the risk of being a little bit Achebesque, where and when the rain started beating us as a continent in order to prevent being drenched irredeemably. It is in this dimension that Ndatero's proposed play becomes largely relevant. He has deliberately set his new play in the fifties during those heady days of independence struggles and decolonization. Ndatero says he "wants to

understand what went wrong” (181). One can only hope that the continent’s many untamed pests and horrible night storms do not stall Ndatero’s literary efforts so that a lasting and functional solution can be found for the unsavory post colonial state in Africa with its consequent disillusionment which has made independence an illusion.

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