

**TURNCOAT REVOLUTIONARIES AND POLITICAL
RENEGADES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ARMAH'S *THE
BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN* AND PEPETELA'S
THE RETURN OF THE WATER SPIRIT
BY**

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ABSTRACT

*A revolution is a radical change in the machinery of governance for efficiency. It is a fundamental change in power or organizational structure that takes place over a relatively short period of time. But more often than not, perhaps due to a complex interplay of many factors, revolutions miscarry throwing up turncoats and renegades. This paper is a comparative examination of this phenomenon in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit*. Regarding the attainment of independence in African countries as a kind of revolution, it argues that the much expected gains has remained a mere dream courtesy of the turncoat revolutionaries and political renegades that took over the reins of governance from the colonial powers. Genuine revolution, the paper contends, must be of the people and by the people rather than for the people, to succeed. Even so, another revolution may lead nowhere except it is truly masses-oriented with*

emphasis on the group spirit and the greater happiness of the whole rather than of one class.

KEY WORDS: *turncoats, renegades, revolutionary, masses, betrayal, independence.*

In his article “The Revolution against Revolutions”, Tatalo Alamu (2011:3) submits that the problem with revolution is not just that it consumes its own children like a demented hen, but it is its tendency to easily metamorphose into a barber’s wheel of opportunism. He asserts:

It is the tendency of fiery, lean and hungry revolutionaries to turn out as pot-bellied despots, criminal sadists who commit unspeakable crimes against humanity.

Tatalo Alamu’s submission was motivated by the political upheavals in the Arab world in 2011 in which the marginalized and grossly underrepresented people once again found themselves up in arms against the same people whom they had celebrated as messiahs and true revolutionaries for having joined them to do away with oppressive monarchies. Aptly described as the Arab Spring, one by one, the tyrants in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Bahrain woke up to the savage fury of the people they had alienated and subjugated over the years. The sad irony is that these same leaders were among the people who had deemed it fit to sack the old dictators whose leadership was nothing but servitude to the people. Overwhelmed by the awesomeness of power and crass megalomania, these so called leaders had forgotten the ideals of their own revolution and found a beautiful bride in tyranny to the detriment of the people whom they had allied during the revolutionary struggle. Over the years, these leaders had

donned the toga of turncoats and renegades. They started as hardboiled and committed revolutionaries, but ended up as betrayers of the same revolution. The people, therefore, needed another revolution to clean up the Augean stable if political sanity must return to governance. History, indeed, must be such a monstrous and eternal cycle of human futility.

A revolution is a radical change in the machinery of governance, a sweeping, broad and thorough radicalization of the system or society to make it truly functional and humans-friendly. According to Tabita Soares (2012:1), mankind often needs a revolution:

Not only because we don't have enough jobs, not only because the public health system is no longer functional, not only because our politicians are corrupt or because our teachers are not getting paid, we need a revolution because the system is not a system where people can live the way they are meant to live... When money loses its human quality, when it no longer serves the people but rather the other way round, we are no longer living in a human reality, but in a distorted one. We need a revolution in order to bring reality to a level where love and compassion – forces that are naturally inherent to every human being – can regain their original power.

As long as injustice, oppression, maladministration, staggering inequality and social discrimination exist in society, revolutions are inevitable. Revolutions are meant to do away with all these “societal sins” which often create a huge wedge between the ruled and the rulers. But more often than not, perhaps due to a complex interplay of human imperfections, power drunkenness, greed and corruption, revolutions miscarry. When this happens, many a committed Moses becomes an oppressive Pharaoh whose uncanny

delight is that the people make bricks without straw. Life for the common people, therefore, becomes difficult and unlivable thereby setting an agenda for societal change.

The “societal sins” which the so called leaders in their insensitivity daily visit on the people do not go unreflected with the sensitive artist whose imaginative framework is the society he knows. Realism, the touchstone of every genuine work of art, of course, dictates no otherwise. In his famous “The Art of Fiction (1884)”, Henry James tells us:

The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. When it relinquished this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it must have arrived at a very strange pass
(Quoted in Kaplan, 1957:424)

The Russian Revolution of 1917 inspired *Animal Farm* in which the author, George Orwell, satirizes the Russian system of government called socialism, which flourished in the now defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). In this context, old major is the equivalent of Karl Marx while Napoleon represents Josef Stalin, the “Russian man of Steel” and turncoat revolutionary per excellence, whose brand of totalitarianism shook the people with untold fear. According to George Orwell, the main objective of writing this novel was to expose the soviet myth of socialism in a story that would be easily understood by almost everyone. Like the English novel, the African novel has never been found wanting in dully and artistically portraying the betrayers of many a revolution in the continent. This paper focuses on these turncoat ideologues and renegades as reflected in two African novels viz Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969) and Pepetela’s *The Return of the Water Spirit* (2002). In an attempt to demystify the betrayers of the African revolution as represented in each novel under study, psychoanalysis readily comes handy. This is because it will help in unraveling the motives behind the characters’

action in focus. Indeed, as rightly observed by Di Yanni (2002:2085), the psychological perspective not only helps to explain, “How a literary work reflects its writer’s consciousness and mental world, it also helps one to understand the literary characters they create”.

TURNCOAT REVOLUTIONARIES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The ideals of the French Revolution of 1789 became betrayed in the wake of the Reign of Terror, whose unspeakable horrors were committed in the pursuit of Robespierre’s Republic of Virtue. The economic historian, Rene Sedillon (1989:45), summarizes the very essence of the betrayal of the revolution.

Now, historians are dealing with facts, not poetry. In the name of liberty, liberties disappear. In the name of equality... the rich became richer the poor, poorer.

While Napoleon Bonaparte, who came to power in France through a coup d’état towards the end of 1789 saw himself as the “Revolution in Boots”, many critics consider him “the Revolution Betrayed”, “subverting its humanitarian, egalitarian and universal principle” by bringing back the “church establishment and the trappings of monarchy and feeding his megalomania with blood-stained wars of conquest” (48).

The cause for which the Russian people fought during the Russian Revolution of 1917 can be divided majorly into four: the immediate proposal of a democratic peace, the abolition of landlord’s claim to the land, workers’ control of production and the creation of a government of the Soviets. Karl Marx had predicted that the workers’ revolution would be followed by what be called “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. As soon as the revolution had succeeded, workers in Russia were to look forward to their much-propheesied dictatorship in vain, for as the betrayal of the essence of the revolution gradually gathered momentum, the dictatorship of the proletariat was to mean the

dictatorship of the communist party and eventually the dictatorship of one man – Josef Stalin. It is no exaggeration to state, like Alamu (2011:3) that “the humanist ideal of the Russian Revolution collapsed when the lever of power was seized by the ruthless and cynical Josef Stalin”. This is because after Trotsky’s downfall in the post-revolution leadership crisis, Stalin entrenched himself in power and in 1928, stopped the New Economic Policy that had helped to avert famine in 1921. He forced the farmers into his dubious policy of collectivization. Those who kicked against this policy were subsequently deported to concentrate camps, in far away Siberia. Anthony Cash (1967:121) writes:

The 1930s were also the period of the purges, the great unresolved conundrum surrounding Stalin’s rule. Stalin’s purges were an infinitely grimmer affair. The terror which had been used against the whites and the Bolshevik socialist enemies by the Cheka (renamed OGPU and later NKVD) was now turned against the communist party itself.

Many innocent Russians were affected in Stalin’s purges. A good number of people were shot. In most cases, the charges against these victims were entirely fictitious. Not a few were made to “confess” all kinds of impossible crimes. Anthony Cash (1967:122) continues

This period of the purges coincided with the rewriting of Soviet history. Poems were written in Stalin’s honour. Painting and Statues depicted him in dramatic postures. No scientist would publish a work without acknowledging his debt to the genius of Stalin.

Stalin’s betrayal of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution arises from his despotic inclination, his display of stark disloyalty to the tenants of Marxist

revolution and distancing himself from the envisaged collective leadership. According to Trotsky, “by proclaiming a universal suffrage, Stalin made it clear that there was no longer a dictatorship of the proletariat” (As quoted by Kola Kowski Leszok, 1987:197) Stalin, therefore, needed to be overthrown by yet another revolution for derailing the people’s because. This is because his forced collectivization of farms and gradual elimination of the very peasants who formed the masses the revolution had set out to salvage were nothing short of treachery.

The untold sacrifice of the peasants and the workers in Algeria resulted in the negotiation between France and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Algeria (G.D.R.A., founded in 1958) leading to the Evian Agreement which was signed in March 1962. Due to the preference given to France in the areas of agriculture, economy and even the military, many radicals considered it a shameful betrayal of the revolution by the Algerian bourgeoisie Frantz Fanon (1967:100) observes:

The betrayal lay precisely in the sphere of ending feudal relations on the land and the failure to satisfy the aspirations of the peasantry which had borne the brunt of the fighting and suffering. It was clear that the Ben Kbadda leadership was not going to carry out the agrarian revolution which is the basis of a national democratic programme.

Frantz Fanon’s point, perhaps explains why the militants and radicals of the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) (founded in 1934), rallied round Ben Bella who had found in King Bonmediene a valuable ally then.

The Renegading Role Of Nkrumahist Leadership in Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

In his Kwame Nkrumah’s Memorial Lecture, Obafemi Awolowo (1977:35), states that during the campaign for independence, African leaders

had made promises which rose in the African people high hopes and expectations. They promised:

To put an end to oligarchic oppression and capitalist exploitation, to elevate the African from the morass of humiliation and indignity in which more than five hundred years of slavery and colonialism had kept him; to 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 land and labour.

The vast majority of the people to whom these promises were made were diseased and ignored-ridden, lived in squalour and below subsistence level. The expectations of brighter days to come sustained their loyalty. Kwame Nkrumah, the attainment of independence by many African countries in the fifties and sixties was nothing short of a revolution which promised so much for the long suffering people of Africa. Little wonder he gave characteristic expression to the African optimism in the early years of independence when he defined the “African revolution” as that, according to the Post (1964:73), “which heralds the coming of a bright new era for all, a revolution destined to transform radically and completely the entire face of our beloved nation and our humanity”.

It is no longer news that the above optimism never really led to anything concrete. In fact, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah accuses the post independence elite of betrayal for hastening the country in its unfortunate journey towards disintegration. Armah’s immediate critical focus is a Nkrumah’s regime. The entire Nkrumahist leadership is portrayed as having betrayed the people’s trust. As the protagonist in the novel disembarks from the rickety bus and walks to his drab office, we are confronted by an ugly aspect of neocolonialism which is distinctly reminiscent of the supposedly gone colonial years. It seems that the old has never really gone away at all. Independence, it

seems, is just a word to bandy about without any meaning by the new policy makers who have done nothing tangible to change the inherited colonial structures. This first sign of betrayal is introduced early in the novel:

He passed by the UTC, the GNTC and the UAC and the French CFAO. The shops had been there all the time; as far back as he would remember. The GNTC... was regarded as a new thing, but only the name had really changed with independence. ...the same old stories of money changing hands and throats are getting moistened and palms getting greased... The sons of the nation were now in charge after all, how completely the new thing took after the old (9-10).

In spite of the “sons of the nation” – inspired societal decadence, Teacher tells us that in the years preceding independence, they are indeed, existed the potential for transforming Ghana into a truly great country. “The promise”, he says, “was so beautiful” (85). The very embodiment of this promise was Nkrumah, who led the country to independence in 1957. His campaign speeches captured the mood of the masses that had seen him as the true savior different from the hypocritical “nationalist agitators” of the years preceding independence who were members of the political elite that owed its exalted position to its cooperation with, and deference to the colonial administration. As Teacher reflects, Nkrumah’s speeches were full of purposeful action and he was so simple. “He was good when he had to speak to us and liked to be with us” (88) the masses who had repudiated the besotted jokers saw sincerity in Nkrumah’s speeches and came to trust him. A new spirit of solidarity was forged which the people thought would truly lead Ghana to the New Jerusalem. But as rightly observed by Neil Lazarus (1987:44)

It is an Armah’s contention that this spirit which Nkrumah seemed to embody during the decolonizing

years was subsequently betrayed by Nkrumah himself once independence had been won.

The president's degeneration from the "homeless and Verandah Boy" into an ostentatious "Show Boy" surrounded by a circle of personal friends and sycophants is to say the least treacherous. And yet, the people had thought that the president was an unlooked-for exception of hope different from what had come to be regarded as a tradition of betrayal that started from "the days of chiefs selling their people for trinkets of Europe" (149). But Nkrumah too fails for his seeming simplicity and style that had endeared him to the people was nothing but a brief flicker of a deceptive hope. This is the genesis of Teacher's deep seated pessimism and cynicism.

After a youth spent fighting the Whiteman, why should not the president discover as he grows older that his real desire has been to be like the Whiteman governor himself, to live above all the blackness in the big old slave castle (92).

Armah accuses the Nkrumahist leadership as a whole of betraying the people in their greatest hour of need. In Armah's vision, the tragedy is that the party with which Nkrumah roused the people and organized them into an unstoppable formidable political force later betrayed them by turning the main thrust and the logic of the revolutionary movement upon itself. As Teacher observed, the party men who once seemed genuinely fired with revolutionary zeal have sabotaged the essence of independence by embracing corruption and hypocrisy like the pre_independence elite. Leading the line of corrupt party men, the new elite who have destroyed the beautiful promise of independence and trampled down socialism is Joseph Koomson, Minister Plenipotentiary, Member of the Presidential Commission, and Hero of the Socialist Labour, who now lives in one of the posh residential estates that previously accommodated the envied

colonizer. An ex-docker, Koomson's passage through the ideological school at Winneba has not made him any more committed to the Marxist ideology. Indeed, he has been transformed into a minister whose motto is driven by corruption. In spite of his ministerial position which forbids getting involved in private business, Koomson borrows state credit under aliases to invest in fishing boats. Koomson gets the state's Furniture Corporation to furnish his house free of charge because of his "connection" with the manager. He uses his influence to award his empty-headed sister-in-law a scholarship to study dressmaking in England. In addition, she is to get foreign exchange to buy a Jaguar car courtesy of Koomson because she has threatened to kill herself if she cannot have it. His socialist training notwithstanding, Koomson talks of "this foolish socialism that will spoil everybody's peace" (185).

Members of the ruling elite are presented as hankering after European bourgeois elegance to distance themselves from the rest of the people. Koomson's wife, Estella for example, prefers European drinks because "the local ones make you ill" (132). From their Europeanized names to the hurry to demonstrate their newly acquired western status symbols like golf playing and the celebration of the alluring gleam in the Atlantic Caprice, Armah tells us:

No difference at all between the white men and their
apes, the lawyers and the merchants and now the apes of
the apes, our party menu (89)

An attempt by an ideological professor to reorientate the ruling elite and the party men towards the socialism they once professed is reduced to a huge joke. To deepen the professor's frustration, the Attorney-General in his vote of thanks makes light of the whole lecture by treating the audience to what he calls "the stages of booze" (157). Indeed, the ubiquity of the perfidious antics of the ruling elite can be summed up in a rather crude, semi-literate inscription on the wall of a latrine as "SOCIALISM – CHOP MAKE – 1 – CHOP COUNTRY

BROKE” (174). It is the very anatomy of the rubbishing of the gains of independence.

Sacrificing on a New Altar in Pepetela’s *The Return Of The Water Spirit*

Unlike in Armah’s *The Bea*

Artful Ones Are Not Yet Born, members of the ruling class in *The Return of Water Spirit* are very brazen in their renunciation of the Marxist ideology. In the face of a crumbling Russian empire and the promptings of International Monetary Fund (IMF), the ruling elite, once socialist, now worship at the altar of greedy capitalism. In post-independence Angola, the god of socialist ideology seems powerless in the face of the capitalist dollar, which the state and its ideologues in their new fangled materialism think they cannot do without. Hardboiled and committed socialists of the decolonizing years have become turncoat revolutionaries and renegades in post colonial Angola.

The living symbol of the failure of the Marxist-led government is the strong-willed atheist Carmina, nicknamed CAF (Carmina-as-Face). A fanatical and local member of the ruling Peoples Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), Perpetual presents here at the beginning of the novel as a strident Marxist and socialist until she “recognizes” that virtually everybody in her party is “moving towards the so called market economy” (11). With this claim, Carmina immediately jettisons the moral and ethical principles of socialism and embraces capitalism. She therefore, joins the big business league importing all kinds of luxury goods. As far as she makes her profit Carmina does not bother about the fact that Angola has nothing to export to boost her economy. She gains a parliamentary seat in the country’s election, but the rival party breaks the ceasefire and civil war resumes. Carmina exploits this opportunity by simply switching over to the importation of arms to the MPLA government in its fight against the rebels.

For Carmina, it is bye-bye to the austerity and discipline of the youth activist of the revolutionary years and welcome to the luxury of mundane

dressing, gluttony and basking in the euphoria of wealth, for “the people only respect the rich and the powerful” (50) She is even now “an habitué of the luxurious boutiques that existed side by side with the indescribable misery of the refugees and of the children who had been orphaned or abandoned” (55). Carmina the turncoat revolutionary minces no words when she tells her weak-willed and lazy, but computer games-loving Joao Evangelistic her husband that:

Convent morality is dead and gone. We’re now living
under a market economy, and there are three centuries of
capitalist ethics to demonstrate how legitimate it all is
(54).

Like her kindred spirit in the African novel, Joseph Koomson of Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the once fire-spitting Carmina but now died-in-the-wool capitalist, has established a private company contrary to the ethics guiding members of Parliament. Her colleagues, who advise her against such illegal practice, she says, are sheer hypocrites. Anyone who reminds Carmina now of her former strongly-held Lenin’s thesis, which forbids the professional politician from indulging in private business is either an “incompetent idiot” or a “half-baked Franciscan (who) wants to nurture misery as though it’s a virtue” (56). When the frustrated homeless masses decide to go naked as a protest against the uncaring government of the day it is ironic that it is this former active member of the Marxist “Y” group who now calls such a protest, “an immoral monkeying around” (108). Such an “affront”, she says, should be crushed with a military decisiveness:

We’ll give them the civil movement. The Army’s
moving in and all this getting fresh will come to an end.
A few broken skulls and this fashion will be old news
(100)

The ascendance and embrace of rampant global capitalism by the Angolan ruling class automatically puts socialism on the retreat. Like a malevolent virus the ruling classes are hardly immune to its characteristic corruption, meism, fraud and individual profit at the expense of the masses. In fact, many critics like Shun Mane Emily Chow (2012:2) have suggested that the Magical Realism – like Luanda Syndrome is actually a poetic demonstration of betrayal by the sitting government since the collapsed buildings cannot be divorced from the failure of the socialist principles of the so called revolutionary government and the expected egalitarian ideas. She says:

In *The Return of the Water Spirit* perpetual chants the way in which the socialist ideals of the victorious Marxist revolutionary party slowly wither and are replaced by the immediate personal gains to be had through the embrace of global capitalism.

Carmina herself corroborates this new attitude

Samuel... got rid of all the Ministry cars and was able to keep five for him. He then gave a car to each of the directors to keep their mouths shut. As for Bisnaga, he managed to lay his hands on a set of military trucks and now he's building a most impressive private fleet. And there is ... Joaquin Domingos (who) got hold of a Navy vessel... bought the boat for the token price of a thousand Kuanzas... sold the cannons to a group of arms dealers (14)

As members of the ruling class now direct their energy toward making themselves comfortable at the expense of the masses and the economy Dasylyva's assertion comes to the fore:

The betrayal of the people by the emerging political elite is vividly portrayed.... in the nature of the corrupt,

irresponsible, base, hypocritical and spiritually-blind
ruling class (1997:30)

RESPONSES OF THE MASSES

On the basis of their reaction to the colonial-like “system of exploitation without responsibility” (Awoonor, 1975:146) of the ruling class, the masses in the two novels can be categorized into three. The first group comprises those who have decided to collaborate with the ruling class in their corruption in the society. Here belong the bus conductor and the driver, wife of “the man”, Zacharias Lagos, Abednego Yamoah and the timber merchant in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* who like the powerful ruling elite, have come to see success in life represented by Armah’s literary construct of the gleam which is daily consummated at the multistoried Atlantic Caprice. In *The Return of the Water Spirit* many members of the poverty-stricken scum of the society whom Marx (1848:13) aptly called the *lumpen proletariat* who cannot beg like the amputee resort to fraud to eke out a living for themselves. The teachers, office-drivers and account officers are of this hue. For members of this group it is bye-bye to the revolutionary spirit of the party in power as they openly embrace fraud which is so “prevalent that it is not only religiously accepted as a fact of life, but actually endorsed as a way to get ahead” (Neil Lazarus, 1987:150).

The second group is made up of those who have decided to concede the central province of reality to the gleam and retreat into marginality each in his own individual way. In *The Beautiful Ones*, Rama Krishnan escapes into the immaterial world of spirituality. The dementia-inducing betrayal of the president completely throws Sister Maanan who had reposed so much trust in him, across the borders of sanity while Teacher finds freedom of a sort in a death-bound alienation. In *The Return of the Water Spirit*, Joao Evangelista’s escape route is in computer games where he has managed to create a utopian world in a dystopian post independence Angola. In the third group is “the man” in *The Beautiful Ones* whose reaction to the subculture of betrayal and

corruption is not to capitulate to its domination. He may occasionally lack certainty and self-confidence which only make him human after all but his artistic significance is unmistakable. As observed by Henry Chakava (1973:100), his “determination to continue to live in this society and endure public disgrace, family abuse and marital conflict without being defeated is the greatest sign of hope in the whole book”. The transformed Honorio and the homeless in Kinaxixi Square in *The Return of the Water Spirit* also belong here. Unlike “the man” however, Honorio and his fellow homeless travelers decide to convert their frustration and hopelessness into a civic protest against the government, which has long abrogated its social responsibility in favour of capitalist meism, greed and profiteering. Although the details of the protest are still hazy, it no doubt represents the masses’ road map to genuinely reclaim their political voice, like the water spirit, in the new political dispensation in Angola.

CONCLUSION

As the analysis of the two novels has shown, the characters examined become turncoat ideologues and political renegades because they decide to abandon the masses-oriented revolutionary group, its principles and philosophy. They, instead, degenerate into selfish a leader whose definition of leadership begin and ends with three word, namely me, me and me. For example, Kwame Nkrumah’s liberal view of competitive parliamentary democracy soon changed after independence and the road towards one party state was taken. In no time, the so called ideologues of Ghana turned their talents to the perfidious rationalization of the one party state whose main feature a dictatorship. As the “Show Boy”, an image emerged, transforming Nkrumah into a veritable “Leninist Gar” (Mazrui, 1984:15), the people’s faith disappeared leaving them with one conclusion:, “the savior image then is discredited by the savior politician (Richard Peck, 1989:33). In *The Return of the Water Spirit*, members of the ruling class have become renegades because they have jettisoned the

socialist ideology which, to a great extent, had helped to build a strong cohesion among the people in their fight against Portuguese colonialism. The next stage after independence would have been to strengthen the bond of unity between the leaders and the led to create a state where the greatest happiness of the whole rather than that of one class preside. The problem with most so called revolutions is that although they are for the people, they are often not for the people and by the people. Our optimism in the “naked revolution” in *The Return of the Water Spirit* arises from the fact that Honorio understands this point clearly. This is why he says that the revolution, “arose from the masses and no one’s going to control it and make use of its We – the whole lot of us – we won’t allow it” (99) Genuine and positive societal transformation must emphasize the collective spirit or group consciousness; not greed, selfishness and megalomania. Post independence African leaders must learn to allow their self interest to converge with the collective interest of all for genuine development, for in the final analysis, to quote the character Abena in Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, “there is no self to save apart from all of us” (111).

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