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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THREE REGIONS, ONE MESSAGE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POEMS FROM AFRICA, THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND BRITISH GUIANA

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ABSTRACT

Comparative Literature brings about a sense of the unity of knowledge. Comparative analysis allows for understanding and adaptation without necessitating elimination of opposing views or the absolute privileging of one theoretical position, thus the differences and similarities within and across literary genres are perceived. The context, geographical or historical hugely influences the interpretation of the message in these genres. This paper, therefore seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of six selected poems, with an aim of establishing the elements of comparison, including the tone, personas, themes and styles, with a leaning on the theoretical standpoints of Marxism and Postcolonialism. Projected arguments by various comparative literature critics are featured to help decipher the message in the poems.

INTRODUCTION

The poems under study are from Africa, the United States of America and British Guiana. They have different lengths and approaches towards common thematic aspects namely: Suffering, Hypocrisy, Poverty and Class Difference. They include: 'Naturally' by Austin Bukenya (Uganda); 'Peasants' by Syl Cheney-Coker (Sierra Leone); 'I am the People, the Mob' by Carl Sandburg (U.S.A); 'A Song for Ajegunle' by Niyi Osundare (Nigeria); 'Up here Down there' by Micere Mugo (Kenya) and 'Tomorrow belongs to the people' by A.J. Seymour (British Guiana). 'Naturally', 'Peasants' and 'I am the People, the Mob' are relatively short as compared to 'A Song for Ajegunle,' 'Up here Down there' and 'Tomorrow belongs to the people.' The Geographical difference among this selection does not in any way bar a comparative analysis because, as Hutcheson Posnett put it, "individuals recognize themselves as connected to and formed by an increasingly wide range of distant social formations, thus the comparative method enables recognition of social and cultural differences and, hence, encourages the dissemination of relativism as well as entry into a single world system" (During 313).

Comparative analysis of the poems from Africa, The United States of America and British Guiana: Marxism, a key theory that will help understand the key thematic concerns in these

poems, as propelled by Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels has ideologies which Donald Hall (2001) believes are set to make the assumed roles as given by the ruling class to the proletariat appear natural. They include religion, patriotism and consumerism, which are used to control the workers' thoughts and ways of life for the benefit of the bourgeoisies. The worker remains at the centre of any literary analysis that engages Marxism (Tyson 56). Adetuyi, Chris Ajibade and Adeniran, Adeola Adetomi in "African Poetry as an Expression of Agony" explain that in African poetry, 'Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality in their poems but they write from experience which they have had earlier in life, they visualize societal ills using symbols through their poems they profound solutions to the ills. Poets therefore do not write their poems to express their personality. African poetry has expressed many concerns which make them unique to the understanding of African ethos and traditions.' They add that 'Poetry and agony are inseparable because poems of agony tend to have its share in the market because people are eager to know what their ancestors have passed through in the past, the poem is clearly seen as a counter-attacking instrument against the bad people to curtail the power of whoever has such bad behaviour in mind. This kind of poetry comes in different themes, some come having, suffering theme, some, theme of neglect, some theme of failed promises, theme of forgotten promises, theme of bad leadership, theme of racial abuse and many more' (21).

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These sentiments, in my opinion, go beyond Africa, and apply to the six poems under study. The voices in these poems vary, but express similar key concerns. In 'Naturally,' 'Peasants,' 'A song for Ajegunle,' 'Up here, down there' and 'Tomorrow belongs to the people' the personas are detached from the suffering of the workers. In 'Naturally' for example, the persona fears the workers and their toil, but ironically 'whores' their daughters and overruns their kids. 'Peasants' has a persona who observes the agony of the workers including their 'miserable nights, battered souls and projectile bellies' among others. In 'A Song for Ajegunle,' the persona is 'like a curious bird' who watches the slum from Ikoyi, a wealthy region, seeing their 'weed-infested smiles, taps without water and weeping wives.' A similar scenario is observed in 'Up here, down there', where the persona is looking at the poor residents of 'Kunguni Tele,' a Swahili term loosely translated as 'Bedbug Infested' 'from 'Mabenzi,' loosely translated as 'Benzes,' a lofty area, observing their 'congested shelters and polluted water.' In addition, the persona in 'Tomorrow belongs to the people' acknowledges from a distance that the future belongs to the workers who struggle to build the society, who even though they may not reap the fruits in their lifetime, will have their children benefitting from their sweat when they become part of the Legislature and build schools. On the other hand, the persona in 'I am the people, the mob' is the people who suffer despite being 'the inventor, the maker of the world's food and clothes,' to whom harm is done but is forgotten.

Several styles have been used to address the four overriding themes including Suffering, Hypocrisy, Poverty and Class Difference. To begin with, the lower class is referred to as *wananchi* in 'Up here, down there,' 'Ignorant' and 'illegitimate' in 'Tomorrow belongs to the people;' pronouns like 'they,' 'their' and 'you,' that clearly isolate the speakers from the workers, and terms used to refer to their residences like 'Kunguni Tele' and 'Ajegunle,' a worthless slum are all symbols of their lower societal status, making them 'the other', befitting the group that Edward Said refers to as 'the Orient' in Postcolonialism (Al-shamiri, 270). The wealthy bear authoritative pronouns like 'I' repetitively to assert their position, and ride in 'benzes' and 'limousines', both symbols of affluence as presented in 'Naturally' and 'Peasants.' Verbs like 'drone' in 'Naturally' also showing the superiority of the bourgeoisie and their role in the 'hives' also express the position of the high class in the society. Linguistic differences are also notably used to express Class Difference, where the high class speak a 'colourless tongue' in 'Naturally,' and 'incomprehensible languages' in 'Peasants,' that sound like jargon to the peasants, who continue to tirelessly work for the wealthy without realizing their real worth. This dwells on the Marxist ideology of patriotism, where the lower class is made to understand that their sweat goes into building the nation. This idea haunts the persona in 'Up here, down there,' who refers to himself/herself as a crank because the rest of Mabenzi residents were not moved by the ideas filled in the minds of the workers thus:

'Unemotional, normal and practical
citizens they know
'these things must exist in all "developing countries"
And they also realise
'all men cannot be equal.'
So up there in Mabenzi
And down there, Kunguni Tele. (Stanza 4 lines 7-13)

This assertion equally enhances Classism, another Marxist ideology which indicates that the members of the higher class are worth leadership positions, a clean environment, posh vehicles and all manner of luxury, while the lower class should struggle to ensure that the higher class benefit from their sweat. This situation is well captured in 'Naturally' thus: 'And still they toil: at boiling point/in head-splitting noise and threatening saws:/they suck their energy from slimy cassava/ and age-rusty water taps: till they make a benz/And I ride in the benz...' (Stanzas 2 and 3). Irony is another poetic device enhancing the theme of Hypocrisy, whereby the bourgeoisie is hypocritical, only recognizing the proletariat when they need favours like votes, but in actual sense they do not care about the workers' welfare. In 'Naturally', despite the workers inability to understand the exploiter's language, the persona 'tells the workers to unite:/ Knowing well they can't see, hear or understand: /What with sweat and grime sealing their ears/ And eyes already blasted with welding sparks, /And me speaking a colourless tongue' (Stanza 6), and rides in the benz painstakingly made by the workers, who dress in rags, with blistered hands, overrunning their children. This hypocrisy is also seen in 'Peasants' where the politicians give the poor peasant voters 'party cards but never party support', marshal them 'on election day but never on banquet nights' and 'melliferous words mildewed bread.' In 'I am the people, the mob,' despite the best of the persona being sucked and wasted, they forget, yet everything else goes to them, making them work, giving up what they have, but 'Death' does not. The Kunguni slums occupants in 'Up here, Down there' drink filthy water from Kabangi river on its lowest course where it has acquired a 'deep brownish shade/ that makes the mud-plastered shacks/ of Kunguni Tele' (Stanza 6 line 10-11), which ironically naturally harmonises with the colour scheme of 'those who live down there', while the Mabenzi occupants live in stone and brick houses, breathing fresh air and drinking clean water.

Similes have also been incorporated in these poems to enhance their understanding. 'A Song for Ajegunle' is dominated by similes describing the state of the slum, for instance 'I... have seen you sprawled out/like an empty bag on the threshold/Of Ikoyi's bursting barns'(Stanza 2), which brings out a sharp contrast between the hunger and starvation in Ajegunle vis a vis the excessive food in Ikoyi; and 'I saw you sprawled out/ like a stream without a bed' (Stanza 5 line 7-8), indicating the helpless situation in which the Ajegunle occupants have found themselves. These similes enhance the various images of Ajegunle in the mind of the readers, relating it to 'an empty bag, stream without a bed, daub of apprentice painter and a sheath with an absent cutlass,' all indicators of a suffering lot due to poverty, owing it to their being members of the lower class. The Marxist element of consumerism, where the poor want to appear like the rich, is also seen in 'Naturally', whereby the daughters of the workers turn to prostitution in a bid to salvage their situation. Having been raised in 'litter-rotting hovels,' they desire a 'quickquick highhigh lifelife/ to break the bond' (Stanza 5 line 3-4). The same ideology applies to the workers in 'Tomorrow belongs to the people, who are ignorant of the fact that it is their 'ignorant, illegitimate hands/that shape history' (Stanza 4 line 5-6), hence struggle to frequent cinemas like the high class, thronging 'races and dance halls' despite their small wages and ragged clothes. However, as Marx and Engels rightfully predicted, the situation will not remain the same forever. The workers will one day wake up from their slumber and refuse to be used by

the bourgeoisie. They will stamp their feet and cause a revolution, a point that is succinctly brought out in all the six poems. To begin with, the last stanza of 'Naturally' predicts a symbolic rainstorm that shall wash the ears and eyes of the workers clean, making them understand their need to unite and give the '...long-delayed/Blow.' The foregrounded 'Blow' can be interpreted as a complete turn of events, making the peasants benefit from their sweat. The last line of 'Peasants' serves as a warning to Africa, that soon the lower class members will lose their patience in persevering the agony of their misery, hunger, intolerable fees and the like, leading to a revolution. 'I am the People, the Mob' ends with an imminent arrival for action by 'the mob-the crowd-the mass' after their remembrance of their robbers and those who played them for fools. In 'A Song for Ajegunle,' the slum described by the persona as the '...dreg of our foaming wine/Graveyard of our truant conscience/Cesspool of brewing rage,' a filthy group of people has eventually 'sprawled out/Like a wounded snake' ready to strike the bourgeoisie in leafy Ikoyi so as to finally live a healthy life, send their children to school and dwell in a clean environment. 'Up here, down there' is no exception as it ends with the guilty persona seeing a fire igniting from 'Kunguni Tele,' spreading towards 'Mabenzi', and as it draws closer, the air gets drier. The poor in this case have had enough of breathing 'used up air from Mabenzi hill' and drinking filthy water from Kabangi river, thus are slowly but steadily moving towards the higher class to take charge of that which they work tirelessly for. 'Tomorrow belongs to the people' is an acknowledgement that the people despite being 'a slumbering giant,' is a 'hero' and the holder of history because they work tirelessly, battling with the earth while profiting other people. However, in due course, their children will 'force their way out of the slums,' smash the slums 'And build schools,' be members of the legislature because tomorrow, the future, is in their powerful hands.

Contextually, both Uganda and Kenya are still experiencing the concerns raised by Bukenya in 'Naturally' and Mugo's 'Up here, down there' respectively, where political struggles are evident, with the rich luring the poor into voting for them, but soon after forget about their welfare, instead, enriching themselves further at the expense of the workers whose taxes keep being raised. However, the 'rainstorm' and 'fire' that will liberate the workers is imminent, as day by day, the workers realise that they are being conned and exploited. Postcolonial Nigeria has been experiencing a lot of unrest, with the majority of its population living under deplorable conditions as expressed by Osundare in 'A Song for Ajegunle.' The ongoing protests by the poor, a wounded lot will soon yield to an overhaul of the greedy leaders who harness money from oil and every other available resource, leaving the poor growing poorer. Akingbe, as quoted by Adetuyi and Adeniran stated that

Osundare's poem fits this description perfectly. Contemporary Nigerian poets have had to contend with the social and political problems besetting Nigeria's landscape by using satire as a suitable medium, to distil the presentation and portrayal of these social malaises in their linguistic disposition. Arguably, contemporary Nigerian poets, in an attempt to criticize social ills, have unobtrusively evinced a mastery of language patterns that have made their poetry not only inviting but easy to read. The epochal approach in the crafting of poetry has significantly evoked an inimitable sense of humour which

endears poems to the readers. The over-arching argument of various studies is that satire is grounded in the poetics of contemporary Nigerian poetry in order to criticize certain aspects of the social ills plaguing Nigerian society as representatively exemplified in some poems" (22).

Cheyney-Coker in 'Peasants' addresses Africa in its entirety, warning its greedy leaders that the agonizing citizens are running out of patience thus are bound to revolt and take over to curb the 'damn agony', exploitation and suffering. The disregard of grammatical rules of beginning sentences with capital letters is already an indicator of the workers' impatience as it were. Sandburg in 'I am the people, the mob' describes the situation in the USA at the beginning of the 20th Century when nations were starting to form, borders to be drawn, and new and more innovative systems of governance coming into being. The hardships that the masses have had to bear at the hands of a powerful and corrupt few informed his message, and he envisions a day, forthcoming, where the common people, the ordinary, the mob, the crowd, the mass will rise up and change the situation because extraordinary persons, notably Napoleons-one of the greatest commanders in history, and Lincolns- who abolished slavery, strengthened the federal government, and modernized the economy of the United States, have also come, and will keep coming from within them, hence the people must not be taken for granted. They have the power to be led to freedom by one of them, not the colonizers. The treatment of African-Americans as commoners by the white majority, that led to the rise of Civil Rights Movement can also be linked to this poem. America needed and still needs to equalize the rights of both the blacks and the whites, or face a revolution in the near future.

Seymour started writing at a time when the nationalistic, anti-colonial spirit was generating waves in the Caribbean but as a literary figure in British Guiana, he was among the pioneers. Edward Baugh explains that 'as a poet in that class-conscious, colonial society Seymour felt like "an upstart." His poetry is never going to be described as radical or even bold. He did not depart from formal convention...but attempted to capture local rhythms to match local musical tones and oral qualities' (Guyana: Land of Six Peoples). This explains the rather soft but firm expression of who the future belongs to, and that is 'The people', including the Chinese, Portuguese, Indians and Africans, owing to the multi-racial occupation of British Guyana. The tone of 'I am the People, the Mob' is one of defiance. Though it is believed that the masses can easily be suppressed, the poet does not agree with this. He feels that the common people can start a revolution to govern themselves. His tone reflects this belief very strongly. 'Peasants' bears an angry tone, as the anger of the peasants has been piling, thus they must either be listened to, or forcefully remove the African political leaders from their powerful positions and rule themselves. 'Tomorrow belongs to the people' has an assertive tone, addressing the custodians of history as 'the people', who by default then become the owners of tomorrow, despite hoping today that their upcoming generations will take charge. Both 'Naturally' and 'Up here, down there' have a guilty tone, whereby the two personas feel disturbed by their actions towards the masses, and expect to be toppled over in due course by the oppressed citizens. 'A Song for Ajegunle' contains a fearful tone expressed by a persona who clearly sees the disparities between the rich and the poor, who are overworked for the benefit of the rich, but are prepared to pounce as at the end of the poem, the poor are likened to a

'wounded snake.' The various tones in the six poems express the shaky relation between the rich exploiters and the workers, thus the dire need for the workers' call to be heeded.

Conclusion

It is therefore certain, from the comparative analysis of the six poems that the larger continental difference by the poets has not hindered the delivery of the key message, which is the imminent revolution by the workers against their current oppressive rulers if they do not heed to the call of change in how they handle the people, who form the majority.

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