



**RE-READING ARMAH'S THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN AND ACHEBE'S A MAN OF THE PEOPLE. INTERROGATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OPINION AND THE LAW IN CURBING SELF-INTEREST AND IRRESPONSIBILITY OF POWER BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Any democratic government should prioritise the interests of the people. In a democracy it is the majority opinion which determines legislation and government is conducted by the representatives of the people who are elected at regular intervals. However, like any other form of government, democracy is not without defects. Two common evils of democracy are self Interest and irresponsibility of power by government officials. With reference to Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Achebe's *A Man of the people*, this paper argues that 'Opinion' and 'The Law' have not always been successful in Curbing Self interest and irresponsibility of Power which are common in Post-Independent African Democracies, taking into consideration the role of literature as a reflection of Society.*

**Key Words:** Democracy, Opinion, victimization, Corruption.

**INTRODUCTION**

Democracy has got a long tradition and as such, matters pertaining to democracy have been revised from time to time .Yet what seems to hold at the end of the day is the fact that democracy is a government by consent of the people and is conducted through representatives of the people who are elected at regular intervals. Gauba (2003:421) contends that, "Democracy as a form of government implies that the ultimate authority of Government is vested in the common people so that public policy is made to conform to the will of the people and save the interests of the people."

The people should, therefore, have a say in all matters that affect them, be it political, economic or social. However this has not always been the case. James Bryce who is widely acclaimed as one of

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the major proponents of democracy has enumerated six outstanding evils of the existing form of democracy. As quoted in Gauba (2003: 423), The six are,

- (i) the power of money interests to pervert administration or legislation;
- (ii) the tendency to allow politics to become a trade entered for gain and not for services;
- (iii) extravagance
- (iv) the failure to evaluate properly the skilled man, and to abuse the doctrine of equality;
- (v) party politics; and
- (vi) the tendency of politicians to play for votes.

However, Bryce admits that the first three are common to other forms of government as well, they are not specific to democracies. The last three are the ones he deems to be more closely associated with democracy. He then sums them up by declaring that 'self interest' and 'irresponsibility of power' are the major factors that undermine democracy. Bryce believes that opinion and the law are the two powerful weapons to fight against these two major evils of democracy. However the extent to which opinion and the law can be effective in fighting against self interest and irresponsibility of power can be questionable and this has been captured in a number of literacy works including the two texts under study. Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* and Achebe's *A Man of The People* have been largely read as narratives of corrupt tendencies of Africa's ruling elite. In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not yet born*, Armah expresses disgust at the rampant corruption that has infiltrated every aspect of the Ghanaian lives. He shows disappointment at the way in the way in which Post Independent governments (who are supposedly democratic) have mismanaged the affairs of their countries, mostly in pursuit of self interest. In almost similar manner, In *A Man of The People*, Achebe gives expression to the disgust that Most Nigerians in particular and Africans in general have felt at the mess that their elected representatives have made of their countries. These texts aptly summarises in Fanonian terms, the intellectual poverty of Africa's ruling elite and their betrayal of national Aspirations; what he calls 'The Pitfalls Of National Consciousness.' This paper seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of law and opinion in checking self interest and misappropriation of power and it shall argue that where opinion and the law are supposed to come in handy whenever chosen representatives act irresponsibly, mostly in pursuit of their personal interest, in most cases the law has failed to protect the people and neither have they been free to air their opinions. Apparently this is typical of post independent African countries, as shall be shown by an analysis of incidences in the texts.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The beginning of Armah's text is set in the bus, where the passengers represent the ordinary citizens while the driver and the conductor are the authorities conniving to defraud the citizens. At the centre of the text is the character, The Man, whose anonymity represents every ordinary Ghanaian citizen and by extension, every African citizen. Armah blames the poverty of the masses (represented by the man) on the irresponsible new government. According to Palmer ( 1972), what happens in the beginning of Armah's text is a parable of what happens in the country as a whole.

For instance, When a messenger who has won money at the lottery expresses his fear that he will not get it since he knows people who have won in the past and have not yet received their monies, The man asks him if they have gone to the police, and he exclaims,

‘For what’

‘To help them get their money’

‘You are joking,...it costs you more money if you go to the police’ (p18-19)

In this case it is apparent that the law is failing to protect its citizens. They actually have nowhere to turn to. This defeats Bryce’s assertion that the law could be useful in upholding the interest of the ordinary people.

Armah presents the character Koomson as the embodiment of corruption. He repeatedly uses his office as a minister to further his own personal interests and to amass wealth at the expense of the poor people. At one time he bemoans that he is failing to join a lucrative boat business as people will start complaining. He then uses his mother in law’s name to deceive the people, albeit , like he has always done and like every other minister has always done. Zimbabwe has had its fair share of Ministers who abuse their offices to amass wealth. For instance, The Willowgate Scandal, a lucrative undercover trade involving government ministers in the purchase and sale of scarce motor vehicles from Willowvale Mazda Motor Industry. Five government ministers resigned when the scandal was unearthed. This is a typical example of what Bryce bemoans, that of the “tendency to allow politics to become a trade, entered for gain and not for service.” Another problem is also the fact that such acts often go unchallenged. In this particular text, the man witnesses this incident and does not say anything. Infact, throughout the text, the Man is constantly observing acts of corruption perpetrated by different people, yet he remains silent. Infact, strong reference is often made to silence. For instance, when the man returns from work it is said, there were no voices, no sounds, just silence and the waiting eyes of his wife. These eyes are flat, the eyes of a person who has come to a decision not to say anything. Eyes totally accepting and unquestioning

The man is also constantly referred to as ‘The watcher’, ‘The giver’, ‘The silent one’. This constant reference to silence maybe construed to mean the general lack of voice that all the people have no matter what the government does. In other words, people are not free to express their opinion. In some cases it is because the people have since realised that even if they talk, nothing will be done anyway. In other cases it is due to fear of victimisation.

As regards expression of opinion, Gauba (2003:425) points out that “Mass media (newspapers, radio, television, etc) also serve as effective channels of communication between leadership and the people” In other words, both the leadership and the people should be free to express their opinion through the media. Yet in most cases, the aim of the state controlled media is to realise political profits, to produce flat and pro-government news at the expense of the opinion of the majority. To this end Sullivan (1994: 141) says that, “What is consumed by the audiences from the media is predominantly what the owners want the consumers to consume”

This is evidenced in Achebe's *A Man of the People* when The Minister of Finance is sacked because his plan of economic recovery goes against the Prime Minister's interests. In a broadcast to the nation, The Prime Minister claims that the dismissed ministers were conspirators and traitors who had teamed up with foreign saboteurs to destroy the new nation. Apparently, 'The newspapers and the radio carried the prime Minister's version of the story' (p 4). This goes to show that contrary to Bryce's hope that opinion can be an effective tool in monitoring those in public office', it is clear that individual opinion is not respected or listened to if it is a threat to the personal interests of government officials. In this case the media is used to pass on a biased version of the story and the dismissed ministers are not given a voice. This is later on echoed by Minister Nanga, who at one time says 'Don't worry about the press. I will make sure they don't publish it' (p. 42) This is yet another clear example that the press is being manipulated to serve the interests of politicians.

According to Akhakpe, Fatile and Igbokwe (2012) "One major index of social change today is indeed rural development." They go on to say that no nation can boast of being a developed nation if the majority of her rural citizens are still living in abject poverty. Yet the government officials in *A Man of the People* actually divert the government's efforts to develop rural areas for their selfish ends. At one point Minister Nanga is angry about 'his' road which is taking long to complete since he wants it completed before the next election. He wants to use the road to gain political mileage by impressing voters, and he also wants his buses which he has corruptly acquired to ply that particular route, hence his impatience to have the road tarred. It is not so much that he has got the people's interests at heart, rather, it is for his own selfish interests.

When The Character Odili and his colleagues form a political party, they find it difficult to get coverage. Odili actually says that,

I wanted to keep a close watch on the antics of our national radio system which incidentally had not so far said a single word about the existence of our new party even though we had kept them fully aware of our activities (p 130 )

This is in direct contrast to Gauba (2003:427) who asserts that one of the mechanisms of democracy is having ' more than one political Party Freely competing for Political Power.' In this case, not only is the new party denied free expression of opinion, Odili's father is victimised because of his son's political activities. He is arrested on false accusations of tax evasion and manhandled. Once again, the law fails to protect a victim. To this end parallels can be drawn to the Zimbabwean Situation where the former Opposition Party The Movement for Democratic change (MDC) used to suffer from gross lack of coverage from the sole broadcaster The Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). The independent newspapers which normally covered them were often threatened and to this effect the then *Zimbabwe Independent* Publisher, Trevor Ncube said in The Financial Gazette of 1 – 7 february 2001, that

Some sections of the private media especially those journalists who are regarded as critical and inconvenient are going to come under pressure ... Many have been shaken by rumours

of a hit list of reporters who must be eliminated before the election ... a crude form of intimidation.

There has also been cases of violence before elections in Zimbabwe, the most recent and probably most gross being the widespread victimisation of members of the then opposition party, the MDC, where supporters were tortured, killed or had their homes burnt down towards the 27 June 2008 – Presidential election re-run.

In fact, this goes against Bryce's belief that Law and Opinion can be used to monitor those in power. Actually, people are being denied freedom to express their opinions and where they dare to do so, they are subjected to immense victimisation.

In Achebe's text, after the government has eventually been removed in a coup, it is said that

Overnight everyone began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime. At its graft oppression and corrupt government. Newspapers, the radio and hitherto the silent intellectuals and civil servants, everyone said what a terrible lot it had been, and it became public opinion the next morning.

It is interesting to note that people only start to talk about it after the particular regime is gone. Before that people are not free to express their opinion such that indeed the effectiveness of Bryce's weapons (opinion and the law) in regulating those in power is questionable.

Actually, abuse of the media by the ruling elite to fulfil their personal interest, as regards the Zimbabwean Situation is best summed up by Mutandwa in *The Financial Gazette* of 1 – 7 February 2001 who says,

Upon coming to power, one of the government's first acts was to change the ownership structure of the media that were tools of oppression during the colonial regime. It is a painful irony that the same government has now turned full circle and seen it prudent to reincarnate both the Rhodesian herald and the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation, making the two monsters even more rabid.

This takes us back to the issue of the way in which the state controlled media often produces flat and pro government news for the benefit of those in power. Where, instead the media has actually been at times referred to as the forth arm of the State and is supposed to serve the interests of everyone not just the interests of the ruling elite.

## CONCLUSION

In light of this discussion it is apparent that, contrary to Bryce's belief, opinion and the law are hardly effective in checking the evils of democracy. This is evidenced by cases cited in the two novels under study, cases which also can be and have been likened to real situations in post independent African democracies. These include misappropriation of power by government officials which goes unquestioned, victimisation and violence to those who offer different opinions to those of the ruling elite as well as the general lack of publicity that Opposition Parties have to endure. A lot needs to be done to ensure that everyone is free to express their opinion without fear

of victimisation if Bryce's hope of using Opinion and the Law to check self-interest and misappropriation of power is to be fulfilled.

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