

Political Ontology and Post-colonial Poetry: A Study of Nol Alembong's The Passing Wind and Titus Moetsabi's Fruits and Other Poems

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Introduction

The period of the 1990s is very important in African history and political discourse because it saw the re-introduction of political pluralism in Africa after almost thirty years of dictatorship and totalitarianism in the continent. In fact, Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle paint a vivid picture of the political atmosphere of this period when they note that “The first half of

the 1990s saw widespread political turbulence across the African continent” and the transition “from one party and military regimes started with political protests, evolved through liberalisation reforms, often culminated in competitive elections, and usually ended with the installation of new forms of regimes”. They also state that “While not unfolding uniformly and to the same extent everywhere, these movements and institutional rearrangements were evident in some degree in almost all African countries” (Bratton and Wallet 1977, 3). These descriptions and commentaries on the political situation in Africa during this period translate the unvarnished fact that the transition from political monism to political pluralism in Africa was not a smooth ride but a clash of the titans because many political conservatives rejected his wave of political revisionism.

The re-introduction of political pluralism in the 1990s also had far-reaching effects on the ideological orientation of many African writers as could be read in their works. The impress of 1990 African politics on African literature has not been unexpected and un-previewed because creativity does not find expression in an extra-terrestrial hemisphere but within a socio-political and cultural context. Consequently, every political epoch produces its own literature to serve as interpretation of its activities and times. Leonard B. Meyer justifies this idea when he contends that “Our awareness of time – the causal chain of history - provides the framework

within which we interpret and understand works of art” (Meyer 1964, 293). Many African writers, during this period, used their art to clamour for political liberalization which they hoped was going to catapult their various countries to the pinnacle of success and good living. Consequently, the literary and cultural texts that were produced during this period fall within the genre of resistance literature as described by Barbara Harlow who postulates that resistance literature “calls attention to itself and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity” because “The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production”(Harlow 1987, 28-29).

In this guise, Wole Soyinka argues that “The artist has always functioned in African societies as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time” (Soyinka, 1969, 21). In other words, Soyinka strongly endorses the idea that African literature should perform a functional role in the African context and the artist/writer should shun the Kantian doctrine of art for art’s sake in favour of art for social and political commitment. The production of politically committed and functional art was the clarion call of many African writers in the 1990s who saw their artistic vocation as a call to duty to help advance the democratization process as revealed in Nol Alembong’s *The Passing Wind* and Titus Moetsabi’s *Fruits and Other*

Poems. This paper, therefore, aims at analyzing the poetry of Alembong and Moetsabi in order to articulate the response of African poets to the re-introduction of political liberalism in African in the 1990s. In this guise, the paper posits that many African poets of the 1990 era are committed towards the political project of exposing anti-democratic political structures in their society. In their critique of these structures, the poets indirectly clamour for resistance against these structures and the strategies which are being used towards stifling the manifest democratic sentiments in their social context.

For the purpose of conceptual clarity, it is imperative to define the concept of *political ontology*. In philosophy, ontology is connected to human consciousness and existence. It is a branch of metaphysics which studies being in general and embraces a plethora of issues or discourses which alludes to the nature of human existence and the issue of reality. In this view, political ontology is a concept in contemporary political science that studies man as a political being and his activities within a specific political reality. Political ontologists such as Charles Tilly, Robert E. Goodin, and Colin Tilly contend that political analysis cannot be ontologically neutral because politics is a human activity that finds expression within a specific ontological reality. Thus, Colin Hay affirms that “Ontology relates to being, to what is, to what exists, to the constituent units of reality; political ontology, by extension, relates to *political being*, to what is politically, to what *exists*

politically, and to the units that comprise political reality (Hay 2006, 80). In a nutshell, political ontology analyses the consciousness, awareness and discussions of the conditions of man in his political milieu and the willingness and determination to improve on his condition in the said political reality. Thus, the political ontologist seeks not just to describe and analyze a particular political reality and existence; his ultimate purpose is to change that reality and make it comfortable for human habitation.

Alembong and Moetsabi: Political Consciousness in African Poetry

Aristotle, in chapter two of *On the Art of Poetry*, argues that literature/poetry deals with societal activities with man at the centre of these activities. Also, in the opening lines of *The Politics* Aristotle further contends that man by his nature is a political animal. From a syllogistic reasoning, if man is a political creature and literature, or poetry as the case maybe, is the result of man's creativity and ingenuity, then literature is political in all perspectives. Furthermore, the British novelist, George Orwell, notes that creativity cannot be free from socio-political consciousness because "no book is free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude" (Orwell 1966, 777). With these arguments in mind, African literature is political because the African writer is not a hermit but a socio-political being who is an integral member of his

community and his writings are influenced by the political and cultural activities of his immediate community in time and space. The Zimbabwe literary and cultural critic, Emmanuel Ngara, upsurges the debate further when he notes that literature is linked to the socio-political realities of the writer because “every writer represents certain ideological concerns and class interests” (Ngara 1988, 128). Consequently, he acknowledges that “In modern Africa literature has so far tended to oppose the ideology of the ruling class. Committed writers see the exploitation of their fellow citizens and the mismanagement of the economies in their countries and feel with the continent and with the masses” (Ngara 1988, 130).

Many African writers, in the 1990s, deeply participated through their works in the political discourses of the era. In fact, these writers were interested not only in the aesthetic virility of their works but also in the correctness of the political contents of their works. In this connection Bate Besong¹, in an interview with Pierre Fandio says, *inter alia*, that: “Art provides the writer the arena in which to explore political ideas as refracted through human character. Literature deals with human beings and their relationships over time in space” (Besong 1993, 5). It is within this context that in 1991 in Anglophone Cameroonian poet, Nol Alembong, published his maiden collection of poems entitled *The Passing Wind*. Most of the poems in this collection reflect the political change and impasse that swept across Africa during this period and

Cameroon in particular although a few of the poems handle other discursive issues such as the conflict between tradition and modernism. This collection, therefore, contains poetic expressions which are functional in vision and depict the political and socio-cultural realities of the post-colonial African society at the time – realities such as political injustice, corruption, dictatorship, political sycophancy, and social revolution and upheavals.

Michael Chapman, in paraphrasing Chinua Achebe, argues that “It is expected that the African writer addresses the big socio-political issues of the day. The writer who does not do so may end up being considered irrelevant” (Chapman 2007, 154). Nol Alembong projects himself as an anti-establishment poet because his poetic discourse exposes the socio-political anomalies and tribulations of the 1990 African society in highly symbolic terms through his ample use of African local imagery, cultural symbolism and African folklore. Thus, the title of this collection *The Passing Wind* symbolizes a political and revolutionary change from one system of governance to the other. Evidently, the discourse of political revolt is seen in “Come, Brothers...” where Alembong rallies the post-colonial masses to revolt against the post-colonial political establishment because the leaders are not working for their benefit. The poem, therefore, is a clarion call for political activism as seen in its first stanza:

Come, brothers.....
The dog of the house calls.

Come, stand on the anthill
and let the mound give way
under your weight. (Alembong 1991, 7)

The poet-persona calls the masses “brothers” in order to show the unity and commitment that exist among the downtrodden citizens. More so, the “dog of the house” is a metaphor for the revolutionary leader and “the anthill” symbolizes the irresponsible, unpatriotic, and tyrannical post-colonial regimes whose rulers are more interested in their personal aggrandizement and have no communitarian vision.

The speaker, further, exhorts the citizens to stop complaining and weeping but “Gropé” their “way up the anthill” so that “the mound may give way/ under your weight”. These words remind the masses that they are not helpless and should not resign to fate but take a political and pragmatic approach in overthrowing these irresponsible leaders. The poet, consequently, harbours Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy of social contract in political governance where he argues that “What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and the absolute right to anything that tempts him and that he can take; what he gains by the social contract is civil liberty and the right of property” (Rousseau 1968, 65). In other words, the relationship between citizens and their leaders is like a social pact where the leaders guarantee a comfortable live for their citizens while the citizens surrender some of their rights to them. In a context

where the leaders are not working for the common will, the citizens have the right to remove these leaders either through democratic means or through revolution.

In addition, the speaker encourages the masses not to be afraid of the “stink” of the “queen ant”, a symbolism of the post-colonial tyrant. In fact, he poses the question: “But what does it matter if one is stunk/in the dust of the mound?” (Rousseau 1968, 7) By this rhetorical question, the poet-persona is aware that the post-colonial dictatorial establishment will not relent any effort to subdue any uprising against it. Mindful of this fact, the poet uses this rhetorical question to give courage to the masses not to give up in the face of tyranny. For Chinua Achebe argues in *Arrow of God* that no man however strong can win a war against his clan. In a nutshell, the ideological posture of the poet-persona is one of collective consciousness and social revolt. He believes that the post-colonial society cannot be changed by an individual but through the principle of collectivism and communitarianism. The call for revolutionary change in Alembong’s collection is finally realized in the poem “The Passing Wind” which happens to be the title-poem of his collection. This poem further strengthens Alembong’s ideological consciousness as a poet who believes in social revolution within the framework of Marxist-socialist philosophy. The first stanza of the poem begins with poetic suspense when the poet-persona says:

It came suddenly
And caught us as if unawares
It came limping
As a child learning to walk
It came naively
As a chameleon in a race to immortality. (Alembong
1991, 6)

The repeated use of the neutral personal pronoun “It” creates an atmosphere of suspense in the poem since the reader does not know what the “it” signifies. Furthermore, the poet-persona in the second stanza of the poem, shows the consequence and destruction in the land as a result of this unknown “it”. Through the use of detailed description and insightful metaphors, the poet-persona notes that their “soft lips/Turn to scabs”; their “tough soil/Cracked to let microbes in”; their “trees/Shiver in their shoes” and “Drop their leaves in a falling sickness” (Alembong 1991, 6) etc. All these environmental destructions show the far-reaching effect that this phenomenon had on the natural environment and the people. It is only in the last stanza of the poem that a poet makes it clear that he is talking about a “wind” which symbolizes a violent political change. The poet says:

And when we looked round
To see what was driving things mad
We saw that it was
The passing wind. (Alembong 1991, 6)

The revolutionary consciousness is also found in “And

it Flowed”, a poem which is dedicated to B.B. This abbreviation stands for Bole Butake one of the most prolific and radical Anglophone Cameroonian playwrights who published a play in 1990 entitled *And Palm Wine Will Flow*. This play at the time was very prophetic of political change in Cameroon and post-colonial Africa in general. When Alembong dedicates this poem to him, it shows that he shares in the revolutionary consciousness of Bole Butake as expressed in his play. The speaker in the poem narrates an account of a revolution that griped and cleansed “Mandela’s earth” which is a metonymy for African as a whole. The speaker says:

Alas!
The Labourer burrowed the soil –
How dry its every pore!-
To reach tap-root’s end
For a drop for thirsty throats

And at dead end prophetic voices
Announced the sap flow:
AND PALM-WINE WILL FLOW! (Alem
bong 1991,32)

The poem begins with an exclamation “Alas!” which is a semiotic sign to show that the people had been waiting tirelessly for this revolution before the “Labourer burrowed the soil”. The image of the labourer is metaphorical of the leader of the revolution and the dryness of “its every pore” portrays the difficulties and

complexity that the revolutionaries went through before succeeding. And finally, “it flowed”. More so, in the remaining section of the poem, the speaker brings out the devastating effects of the revolution and gives “a red feather for the neophyte!” The speaker says:

And it flowed to unleash the Nixons
From the splendor of Watergate palaces
To the slimy gutter of destitution

And it flowed, and swept miasma to Hades,
And the testimony became our hagiology
Ah, a red feather for the neophyte! (Alembong 1991,
32)

Through the ample use of biblical and historical allusions, the speaker declares that the revolution was strong and violent that it even “unleash the Nixons” from “the splendor of Watergate palaces”. This alludes to Richard Nixon, the American president who resigned in 1974 because of what became known in American political history as the “Watergate Scandal”. This historical allusion shows that even renowned rulers and tyrants could not resist this change but succumbed to it. Also, this change brought about the change of roles and status as the leaders were forced out from their palaces “To the slimy gutters of destitution” (Alembong 1991, 32). The poet is therefore sensitizing post-colonial leaders that no leader no matter how strong can never be more than the people. In fact, in contemporary times the situations

in Burkina Faso, Tunisia, Egypt, and Madagascar are glaring examples of how a people can dethrone their leaders through popular uprising or social revolution.

Nol Alembong, through the technique of memory, narrates the lives of historical personalities who were freedom fighters in their country in order to inspire the masses in post-colonial Africa to continue in the footsteps of these nationalists in the liberation of post-1990 Africa. In “Steve Biko and His Fist”, the poet narrates the history of the black South African freedom fighter, Steve Biko, and the role that he played in the dismantlement of apartheid. In this narrative poem, the poet portrays his deeds by presenting him as an extended metaphor of a nationalist whose radicalism is worth emulating in revolting against undemocratic institutions in post-colonial Africa. In the opening stanza of the poem, the narrator declares that Steve Biko “rose to the height of the baobab/not to harvest nuts from the tallest palms/but to clear the place of cobwebs.” (Alembong 1991, 39) These lines show Biko’s nationalistic vision as one who is unassuming and more concerned in seeing that his society is cleared from “cobwebs” – an image which symbolizes the ills of his society.

In a conversational manner between the poet-persona and his audience, he narrates the political exploits of Steve Biko from when he was born up to when he became a nationalist and freedom activist in South Africa. The poet affirms Steve Biko’s participation and role in fighting against

racial superiority in South Africa which was disadvantageous to South African blacks. The poet-speaker says:

They say the house in which they live
has rooms of different sizes and books.
They say they all live in different rooms
and no door opens to the other
They say they are like children from
the same vagina living like cats and dogs,
with none able to force a smile from the
others

And this Steve Biko
gave up father and mother
gave up brothers and sisters
gave up wife and children
to throw down and to root out
the walls that divided this house
the walls that made this house
as divided as the fingers are. (Alembong
1991, 40)

From the above-extract, “the house” is an extended metaphor of South Africa while the “rooms of different sizes and looks” are representative of the different racial components in the country. Steve Biko undertook a campaign “to throw down” and “to root out” “the walls that divided this house” which, in other words, is his fight against apartheid in South Africa. The speaker, further, affirms that Steve Biko’s radicalism against the apartheid system caused “a rope” to be “thrown round his neck, as we do to catch pig” and “For this, they flung

him into a fence” (Alembong 1991, 42) where he eventually met his death. Consequently, Biko’s fight against apartheid depicts him as one who is selfless and has a nationalistic spirit; he does not only think about himself but also his entire community. At the end of the poem, the poet glorifies Steve Biko and attests that South Africa is now enjoying freedom because of the exploits of Steve Biko. The poet says “the flame of that fire/ continues to burn bright in that country” and “Today/ the flame of that fire is making/ the people see through the fog over the land” (Alembong 1991, 43). From the above lines, the poet brings the reader to self-consciousness that the effort of an individual can liberate a people from the claws of tyranny and injustice in his society.

Furthermore, Alembong sounds a note of hope in this collection when he predicts the inevitable doom of irresponsible African rulers. These prophetic revelations are articulated in poems such as “Wait” and “Some Day for Sure”. In these poems, the poet edifies the post-colonial masses to be patient because these post-colonial leaders are not eternal. In the poem “Wait”, the poet begins with a rhetorical question: “Why do you make vain/ To climb this baobab tree of ours?” (Alembong 1991, 11). The “baobab tree” has been used as a metaphor of political power where the poet advises the post-colonial masses that they should not hasten to seize power from their leaders which might be in vain. He further states that even in the midst of suffering which he express-

es in metaphorical language such as “the rags over your nakedness”, which may “spark your heart” to “crimson readiness”, they should still exercise patience. The poem ends with a rhetorical question thus: “But why waste stones on birds/When the elephant-hunt is yet to come? /Every dog has its day” (Alembong 1991, 11). The same discourse runs across “Some Day for Sure”, when the poet articulates the same hope and optimism. The title of this poem, in itself, resonates elements of prophecy and futurism. The poet reverberates hope in the future despite the present sociopolitical melancholy of the masses. This very short poem goes thus:

Oh, how snake-like the trembling cry
Twines the small of my brains!
The feeble cords of that voice
Spell the agonies of the Tortoise
Down trodden by the Elephant.
But for how long will this last
When the Tortoise’s shell is hard to crack?
The journey may be too long and hard,
But was the chameleon not the first
To drum the long-awaited message of death?
Where was Dog that thought
The race was his? (Alembong 1991, 20)

In the same context Moetsabi’s *Fruits and Other Poems*, published in 1992, laments on the situation of his country after independence and that of the Southern African sub-region in general. Just like his contemporary Nol Al-

embong, Titus Moetsabi in his poetry identifies himself with the suffering masses of his society and serves as the legitimate herald of the problems and worries of this social group. To this effect, Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues: "The writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and space. As a member of society, he belongs to certain class and he is inevitably a participant in the class struggle of his times" (Thiong'o 1981, 72). On this basis, Moetsabi's poems handle a variety of discourses which range from colonial subjugation, identity crisis, class stratification, leadership crisis, nationalism, and Pan-Africanism. In a nutshell, Moetsabi is a poet whose commitment is directed towards the plight of the down-trodden in his society which, in most cases, is brought by the misuse or abuse of power by postcolonial politicians.

Diana Brydon notes that postcolonialism does not deny "history's textualized accessibility" but "focuses on the reality of a past that has influenced the present" (Brydon 1995, 142). Titus Moetsabi in his poetry demonstrates a great affinity to historical discourse and how it has shaped or influenced the socio-political, and cultural conditions of the postcolonial citizen. In fact, postcolonial writings are usually tied to the apron's string of history for as Bate Besong contends: "A writer who has no sense of history is like a sparrow without wings, for the writer must be the visionary of living truth" (Besong 1993,15). In "Rufaro", Moetsabi discusses the impact of colonial history on the ideological and existential consciousness of postcolo-

nial Zimbabweans and Africans as a whole. The speaker argues that the present despicable state of Zimbabwe and Africa in general is due to the ills of colonialism and slave trade. The speaker affirms in the opening lines:

Zimbabwe the dying culture
Africa the dwindling roots
of kingdoms abused
they took all
left whisky to blow the mind
was it not the storming of petrol depot
that lit city and country
that sent abusers aflight
when afternoon pain
conceived our gift. (Moetsabi 1992, 5)

The speaker, metaphorically, describes Zimbabwe as “the dying culture” and Africa as “the dwindling roots” (Moetsabi 1992, 5). The use of diction such as “dying” and “dwindling”, portrays a society which is in the state of stagnation and dispossession (Moetsabi 1992, 5). It shows generalized dystopia and hopelessness in contemporary Africa and in a way, the poet is awakening the African people to re-think their existence and not to bow to the dictates of their past. In addition, the poet does not only criticize the colonial masters for their dubious and exploitative nature; he also criticizes the Africans for their gullibility and shortsightedness where the colonialists, who came to Africa, “took all” and “left whisky to blow the mind” (Moetsabi 1992, 5).

The speaker precedes further and shows the manifestation of the destruction of Zimbabwean culture by the forces of colonialism. Those cultural sign-posts that were indicative of Africa's rich cultural patrimony have been destroyed by the ills of slavery and colonialism. The speaker laments:

where lies the horn
that tore the moon's hymen
where lies the drum
what savaged April nightness
enrapturing cold Rufaro with summer
fruits. (Moetsabi 1992, 5)

In the above-stanza, “the horn” that “tore the moon's hymen” and “the drum “ that “savaged April nightness” and “enrapturing cold Rufaro with summer fruits” are African cultural metaphors that have been destroyed by the colonialists (Moetsabi 1992,5). In a nutshell, the poet laments on the crushing effect of colonialism on Africans – an effect which has made them not to have a national culture. In a way, therefore, the contemporary African is still undergoing the process of colonialism as Frantz Fanon argues that “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (Fanon 1995, 154). This poem, therefore, interrogates

the present situation of Zimbabwe and educates African citizens to re-think and ameliorate their situation.

In addition, Moetsabi's poetic discourse handles the discursive issues of nationalism and decolonization. According to him, national consciousness is an on-going struggle since nationalism creates power by making more men available for participation in its larger community. In "The Return", he narrates the history of Zimbabwe's fight for independence and the role that the people, through the charismatic leadership of Robert Mugabe, played in this struggle. It could be inferred that the poet goes back to the history of Zimbabwe's fight for independence to educate the people that they should use the same determination to fight for nation-building in their society. The ample use of historical material in this poem also shows the faithful confluence between literature and history – which in this context Laurence Lerner argues that: "the world of fiction "is not isolated but "overlaps with the world of history (Lerner 2004, 439-440)

The title of the poem reminds one of soldiers who went for a battle, defeated their enemies and are now returning home triumphantly. The poem begins with a scene of jubilation and euphoria of the people who have just won a battle. The speaker describes the parade of these people as "thunderous boots" in order to show the determination and agility of the soldiers. They were also "loud smiles/jumping/dancing/twisting/turning and singing"

with “clenched fists upraised” (Moetsabi 1992, 3). The fists of these people are “upraised” which is a symbol of victory over the colonial master and his agents. The poet further describes the country as “great Zimbabwe rises” and how “pillars of the district commissioners house/collapse(s)” when the crowd, “in deafening rumbling” attacked it (Moetsabi, 1992, 3). The description of Zimbabwe in such superlative terms depicts the poet’s patriotic sentiments for his fatherland which further strengthens his pan-Africanist tendency. Also, the district commissioner is a semiotic representation of the colonial master and the collapse of his house emblemizes the end of colonialism and the acquisition of political and constitutional independence. These expressions depict the fierce struggle that the Zimbabweans went through fighting for their independence. Although the activities take place in Zimbabwe, the poem depicts painful processes that Africans went through in the fight for independence. In this case, Zimbabwe becomes a metaphor for Africa while Mugabe symbolizes African freedom leaders.

The pernicious effects of neo-colonialism on Africa are also some of the thematic articulations in the poetry of Titus Moetsabi. The poet argues that the involvement of western capitalist states in the internal politics of post-colonial Africa has a serious repercussion on Africa’s socio-economic development and political stability. He, thereby, indicts African states to solve their internal issues without Western intervention. Phillip G. Altbach

gives more strength to Moetsabi's views in his argument that neocolonialism differs from traditional colonialism in that "it does not involve direct political control, leaving substantial leeway to the developing country" (Altbach 1995, 452). He reiterates that this new form of colonialism is similar to direct colonialism because it also concerns the "domination by the advanced nation over the developing country remain" (Altbach 1995, 452). Consequently, "Neocolonialism", he argues "is partly a planned policy of advanced nations to maintain their influence in developing countries, but is also simply a continuation of past practices (Altbach 1995, 452). In "Bare Denial", Moetsabi attacks Western involvement in the internal politics of Africans. This involvement is a typical trade-mark in post-colonial African politics where Western countries, through multinational companies, are deeply involved in the political discourses of contemporary Africa. It is widely believed in Africa that these comprador Western capitalists in African politics only help to set the continent ablaze as could be seen in cases like the crises in Ivory Coast, Libya, Zimbabwe, and Central African Republic. Using Angola as an extended metaphor, the poet declares that Angola should be allowed to solve her internal problems alone because "fleas on Angola/continue gnawing and sucking/the blood" (Moetsabi 1992, 12). Kwame Nkrumah in *Africa Must Unite*, strengthens this view in his argument that neocolonialism and balkanization are the greatest dangers facing African countries after the

acquisition of political independence (Nkrumah 1963, 174). The metaphor of the “fleas” symbolizes the Western imperialist who continue to ‘suck’ the “blood” of Angola and the African continent in general (Moetsabi 1992, 12). The poet, in these metaphors, shows the exploitative propensity of Western nations which is compared to a flea that sucks blood from a human being.

According to the speaker, Angola should be left alone because “the lie” – that is Western manipulation – “is clear as stars/in the black night” (Moetsabi 1992, 12). Through this figure of comparison, the poet criticizes neocolonial manipulation and invites Angolans to do the same. In fact, the situation that the Angolans find themselves, in the poem, is aptly articulated by Chinua Achebe, in *Arrow of God*, that when two brothers fight, the stranger takes away their goods. In order to show the political and mutual solidarity among African nations, the poet concludes that “Angola shall drink peace/because she is the not alone” (Moetsabi 1992, 12). The speaker says:

When Angola talks
the people of the land
smile dance and hold arms
they go with steel irises
singing the sweet notes
‘leave Angola alone,
She is not alone.’ (Moetsabi 1992, 12)

Furthermore, Oyeniyi Okunoye argues that African literature derives its relevance and utilitarian nature “from its responsiveness to the collective African experience” and concludes that “its form and concerns have been conditioned by the reality of the colonial engagement, either in the sense of betraying the overwhelming European presence or of asserting the African will to authentic self-expression” (Okunoye 200, 119). Okunoye’s theoretical foundation finds expression in Titus Moetsabi’s poetic discourse where he articulates the postcolonial discourses of patriotism and self-sacrifice as could be read in “Goodbye Mother”. Ideologically, the poet expostulates that the postcolonial African society is in a quagmire of despair and privation because most Africans have lost their sense of patriotism and collective humanism, making self-aggrandizement and egoism the political culture of Africa. In the above-poem he holds that, for his country to develop there must be national and republican consciousness and not the vice of individualism which has bedeviled the entire postcolonial world. In the poem, the speaker/persona is a freedom fighter who has left his family to take part in the freedom struggle against the colonial master. He bids “Goodbye” to his mother because it is probable that he might be killed in the battlefield. The speaker, in the first stanza, says:

Goodbye mother
I go to fight
In the furious forests

Sleeping in caves

But mother

Shed no tears. (Moetsabi 1992, 60)

In the above-stanza, metaphors such as “the furious forests” and will be “sleeping in caves” show the seriousness of the struggle and the commitment of the speaker in the battle (Moetsabi 1992, 60). Similarly, the speaker gives a vivid description of the battle when he says “bayonets which tore flesh at Chimoio” are “feeding human flesh to jackals” in order to show the bestial nature and complexities of the struggle (Moetsabi 1992, 60) He, further, wishes that his country, Zimbabwe, “with each sunset”, “were born/ as the womb swells” (Moetsabi 1992, 60). With these expressions, the speaker hopes that his country will be set free from the claws of colonialism with the shining of “the freedom flame” (Moetsabi 1992, 60). At the end of the poem, the speaker says:

I stab!

die Douglas and Abel

this calabash of your blood

I feed

to hounds. (Moetsabi 1992,60)

The stabbing of “Douglas” and “Abel”, who are extended metaphors of the colonial masters and their agents, projects the inevitable collapse of the colonial system and the usher in freedom in Zimbabwe and the African world in general. The poet is sounding a clarion call

to postcolonial African citizens that the strength they used in fighting against the colonial master should also be used in building their society for the common good.

Titus Moetsabi does not forget about the critical discourses of identity and ethnocentrism in his society because they are critical issues that have bedeviled the African continent since independence. A cursory analysis of political crisis in post-colonial Africa will lead to the conclusion that ethnocentricity is at the nerve centre of all these problems. Although Stuart Hall had argued that every human being is “ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (Hall 1995, 227), it is not a safe harbour for the postcolonial subject to indulge in ethnocentric tendencies. In “My identity”, the speaker criticizes those who practice ethnic segregation and want to attach themselves only to those of their tribe and language. These people fallaciously see themselves and their tribes as superior to other. The entire poem goes thus:

Blinkered country folk
withhold fruits
from other farmers of the struggle
because
of differing roots

fellow country folk
colours of our trunks branches and
leaves

textures of our intentions
Will always differ

some came from the west
others came from the east
some came from the south
others came from the north

I am proud to have come to my home
I am proud to declare my identity
Name ... Zimbabwe
Totem ... Africa. (Moetsabi 1992, 15)

This poem portrays that there is ethnic discrepancy in his society. The “blinker country folk” are those myopic citizens whose visions do not go beyond their tribes (Moetsabi 1992, 15). The ideas of withholding “fruit/ from other farmer of the struggle” because “of differing roots” show a society which is inflamed with ethnic antagonism (Moetsabi 1992, 15). It is ironical that these people, at the time of the struggle were together but after the struggle, they are fragmented on ethnic lines. The poet, thus, deconstructs the notion of race and ethnicity and tacitly argues that diversity in identity does not necessarily result to identity/ethnic conflict. This ethnic rivalry only comes to light when ethnicity is politicised by the political elite when they manipulate the post-colonial masses to think that some ethnic groups are more superior than others. The speaker, therefore, projects a multicultural discourse that the postcolonial citizen should accept diversity and collaborate with one another.

Finally, Titus Moetsabi interrogates the present political mayhem in postcolonial Africa and the misuse of political power by African leaders who are driven by the politics of rigid individualism as opposed to that of communitarianism. In relation to this, Martin Meredith notes that “Africa has suffered grievously at the hands of its Big Men and its ruling elite. Their preoccupation, above all, has been to hold power for the purpose of self-enrichment. The patrimonial systems they have used to sustain themselves in power have drained away a huge proportion of state resources” (Meredith 2005, 687). The poet sides with the suffering masses and believes that the postcolonial political elite is responsible for the inhuman conditions lived by the downtrodden masses. The gross abuse of political power is articulated in “The Servile” – a short poem which goes thus:

The megalomaniacs
Subdue and subject
the servile
to toil
while like bed bugs
they drain the last blood. (Moetsabi 1992, 30)

Conclusion

In summary, this paper examined the poetry of Titus Moetsabi and Nol Alembong to show the response of

African poets following the democratic wind of change that blew across the entire African continent in the 1990s. The paper sustained the premise that African poets of this era were engaged in exposing the post-colonial anti-democratic political structures in their society. The poets, therefore, were clamouring for resistance against such structures and strategies which are being used in stifling the manifest democratic sentiments of the post-colonial African masses. The content and form of these poems portray the ideological consciousness of the poets which is analogous to communitarian consciousness and nation-building. Furthermore, the analysis of these poems show that every historical epoch comes with its own literature which serves as a mirror of the activities of the epoch. However, from a liberal humanist perspective, it should be mentioned that although these poems were published in the 1990s, they are still relevant in today's Africa because very little has changed from the time they were published to present.

Notes:

1. Bate Besong is a radical Anglophone Cameroonian playwright and critic who also published in the 1990s. His works falls amongst the most radical and militant writings that were published in the 1990s.

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