Pedagogy of Disillusionment: The Case of Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* and Chin Ce's *Gamji College*

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Introduction

FERDINAND OYONO'S *The Old Man and the Medal* and Chin Ce's *Gamji College* respectively constitute an indictment on colonial French and local African leaders for the economic, political, and social exploitation of the people of Africa. Both cases bequeath the culture of corruption and violence instituted and entrenched in colonial and post colonial administrations.

In *The Old Man and the Medal*, Meka, as a result of the medal that is offered to him by the Chief of the whites, is led to believe in the virtues of equality and brotherhood propagated by the colonizers. However, Meka's horrendous experience with the police chief, Gullet, awakens black consciousness regarding white hypocrisy. More than ever before, the blacks decry their marginalization by their oppressors and enkindle a revolutionary flame that shall

arrest some of the abuses. In *Gamji College*, through the trajectory of Tai and Jerry, we relive the tale of moral paucity that is characteristic of an independent African nation as the masses struggle to install some sanctity in the conduct of public affairs.

White on Black / Black on Black

The interaction between blacks/whites and blacks/blacks has been a familiar theme in most African writing, especially the novels dealing with the (post)colonial periods. While novelists like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Kenjo Jumbam and others have addressed this concern by generally indicating how blacks have often been outpaced by the dispensation proffered by the white world, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiongo'o articulate instances of a matching resistance to Western influence. Ferdinand Oyono appears to tread the middle ground in this Africa-Europe confrontation. His submission shows an oppressed people that initially are naïve, but ultimately become aware of the tertiary role that is imposed on them by their oppressors. This is particularly the case of the villages of Doum and Zourian in *The Old Man and the Medal.* Meka, a veritable upshot of these twin villages, is subjected to harrowing series of exploitation, hypocrisy and injustice by the French. It is through his lenses that we view the lot of the oppressed black community.

On his part, the works of Chin Ce expose society and citizens who are disgusted with the conduct of black governments in a post colonial era. *Gamji College*, his second work of fiction, is illustrative of a nation that is putrid

to the core as it rides on the crest of corruption. The final dissolution of its trumped-up presidential election insinuates a flicker of hope that Gamji may emerge from its inglorious past as a rejuvenated and democratic entity that can jettison suicidal and greedy politics.

Informed by Paolo Freire, Liam Kane insists that committed art is the weapon of the 'oppressed' in a world run by 'oppressors' in the hope that their education can awaken them to the injustices inflicted on them by their oppressors (12). Therefore while Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*, working within the confines of post colonial criticism, may help us reappraise Europe's biased consideration of Africa as degenerate and totally needy of redemptive Western values, with Chin Ce's *Gamji College* we come to the understanding that Africa is not a show case of impeccable values as its body politic is ridden by vices that require urgent surgery. A meaningful, ideological alternative therefore is one that can synthesize the virtues of both camps and, at the same time, shun their predatory drives. Put simply, we are inferring a post-modern philosophy that promotes a society where no one is most important and no one is least important; a society where the minority is as equally important and relevant as the majority (Iwuchukwu 386).

The Old Man retraces the bitter experiences of Meka and his kindred, on the one hand, and the travails of Gamji's students, on the other. It postulates that even though they are under the burden of (post)colonial administrations, they are eventually aware of the wars of discrimination and exploitation on them by their oppressors. In pursuing this line

of action, the (post)colonial overlord disengages himself from the warning that we must be guided by a vision of the person untainted by ideological and cultural prejudices or by political and economic interests which can instill hatred and violence (Benedict 4). We revisit the tedious path to enlightenment for these downtrodden people and indicate that, following their disillusionment, things will hardly be the same as when they had warmly embraced their leadership and, in the process, wallowed in various expectations.

A. Great Expectations

When Meka (*The Old Man*) receives a summons from the Commandant, he loses his peace of mind as he is struck by insomnia. He is overwhelmingly anxious about what good fortune is appended to this strong invitation in the same way that the youthful Tai (*Gamji*) braces himself for academic and moral edification at Gamji College. The elderly Meka is, therefore, obliged to wake up his snoring wife, Kelara, to share in his excitement and he wonders how a woman, faced with the summoning of her husband before the white officer, can still enjoy the luxury of sleep: "Kelara! he roared, thumping her back. How can you sleep when your husband has troubles?" (3). At this bewildering moment, poor Meka, like Ngugi's Muthoni, can only resort to prayers as he implores God to protect him. He fails to fathom the modus operandi of French colonialism which was/is a thoroughgoing, comprehensive and deliberate penetration of a local or 'residentiary' system by the agents of an external system, who aim to restructure the patterns of organization,

resource use, circulation and outlook so as to bring these into a linked relationship with their own system (Brookfield 1-2).

Following this important call, Meka dresses smartly to impress the white man. After all, among the Fong of Cameroon, the name Meka signifies loyalty and submission, especially to colonial authority. He is compelled to wear his cockroach-infested jacket, which has been hanging on the wall for ages, as a mark of respect for the Commandant. His attire, coupled with the ancient helmet above his head, is truly exotic and, in the rollicking words of Kelara, he is "like an American missionary" (4). In line with subjectifying blacks to French administration, the white priest makes Meka believe that in surrendering his land to the church, he is fulfilling a divine wish that will earn him celestial joy. As a result, Meka is seen as a model Christian, one that will shudder from a taste of the local brew, arki, for fear of not only risking imprisonment, but guilt of committing mortal sin. Notice this subterfuge of the French that is reminiscent of the age-old anecdote of the colonization of Africa that the natives were cajoled into praying to God while the white colonizer tactfully dispossessed them of their land. In concomitance was the charade of Christianity as the new converts were reminded to love and obey their foes irrespective of the situation. By isolating Meka for distinction, the French oppressors favour selected leaders rather than promoting the community as a whole. The latter course, by preserving a state of alienation, hinders the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in a total reality (Freire 143).

The scoop is the forthcoming decoration of Meka on the 14th of July by the great Chief of all the white men in Timba. Paradoxically, the French liberation festivities are intended to hoodwink the natives that they and the French are indivisible in the quest for liberty, fraternity and equality regardless of colour and/or race. There is ululation by the women following these tidings and men strive to identify themselves with the 'heroic' Meka. By evening, this news is embellished in the understanding that the President of France is specifically coming to Doum to decorate Meka. A certain eerie feeling envelops the imminent medalist in the light of these premature celebrations: "With these white men you never know" (17).

As Meka reluctantly drives away the festive women lest they usher some misfortune for him, he is convinced that his medal is hidden in a drawer in the Commandant's desk or in the keeping of the Chief of whites in Timba. Between this day and the 14th of July, he is restless; he is fearful that he may die as he awaits his medal. His worry is greatly compounded by his inability to determine his age. Being the first person called from among several blacks cued in front of the Commandant's office, Meka considers himself a seer among blind men and a crowing cock in the midst of hens. In the pompous words of the white Officer, Meka is distinguishable because

> You have done much to forward the work of France in this country. You have given your lands to the missionaries, you have given your two sons in the war when they found a glorious death. (He wiped away an imaginary tear). You

> are a friend… The medal that we are going to give you means you are more than our friend. (19)

Meka, then, sees himself wrestling with the wind in the quest for ultimate recognition. But Ignatius Obebé thinks differently; he views the medal as trivial and a hoax, and wishes that Meka wins a more rewarding medal that is void of colonial trappings, perhaps one of salvation.

Similarly, in *Gamji College*, the college of Gamji has for some time been the pride of the natives as many youths had identified hope in this citadel of knowledge. Unfortunately, this institution has been steadily declining as marked by the political change from military autocracy to civilian democracy:

> In three years of democratic *laissez faire*, when chief executives of federal, state and local governments -not to talk of college high lords gave vent their plundering mania, everything in town, not excluding the landscape, had become a ghost of its former self. (5)

From stinking hostels to the stench reeking in the drainage system, this college remains a blemish to academia to the extent that those who enroll there are considered inmates of filth. The likes of James and Peter attempt to enkindle some veneer of hope in freshmen. These two entreat Tai to attend a fellowship crusade on campus that will, they claim, be crowned with miracles.

Attempting to mollify Tai, James stresses that all human beings are one in the eyes of God and that they are all

reflections of the divine image. In Gamji, politics and religion constitute a curious blend hence the Rector's participation in the divine service. What is probably overlooked is the fact that the Rector is a nephew to His Excellency and that the marriage between politics and religion serves the goals of the politicians in deceiving and exploiting the poor. As the Squealer that he is, James warns Tai to guard against hypocritical and deceptive occult groups parading the university premises. The only safe fellowship is that of Gamji College that can contend the seductions of 'nefarious' cults sprouting on the campus. In other words, only the ruling regime can adequately satisfy the concerns of the majority; any opposition party should not be tolerated because it is myopic and diabolical. But very soon, this sweeping assertion, like Meka's bloated medal, will begin to dissipate.

B. **Dream Fragmentations**

Oyono shows that the various festivities organized in Meka's house on the eve of the medal award are at variance with local expectations. His compound bustles with animation and pride and poor Meka is compelled to stitch a special 'zazou' jacket, purchase shoes for the occasion. While his shoes greatly pain him, he apparently does not have an option if he has to appear decent before the white man. He is a determined man as evident in the clenching of his teeth in a bid to put on leather shoes. He finds it extremely difficult to walk and this is a subtle reminder of the friendship purported by the whites towards him and his compatriots.

Meka's increasing sleeplessness visibly portends the falsehood enshrined in the medal. He is anxious about its colour and size, but is consoled that it may not be a replica of a catechist's medallion nor resemble the inconsequential one won by Ignatius Obebé. It is only in this distinction in enormity that his fame shall rise, making him the envy of Doum and beyond. He overreaches himself when he imagines clasping the white man in a warm embrace and offering him a basket of eggs. His exuberance as the medal is pinned on his chest places him, in this appreciation of Ngugi wa Thiongo'o, as "an ugly savage screaming with gleaming white teeth and looking at the reassuring presence of his white master" (Heywood 6).

Regrettably, Meka is confounded to observe that while he stands alone in a painted circle under an excruciatingly hot sun, the whites take shelter in the shade of Father Vandermayer's veranda. The black recipient is abandoned to himself for unending hours, deprived of the warmth of his fellow Africans that are several feet away from him. He notices that not only is Pipiniaki's medal different from his, but the white merchant receives a reassuring embrace as the medal is carefully placed on his chest: "Then Meka saw the great Chief grasp his shoulder and put his cheeks one after the other against the cheeks of the Greek" (92).

When it is his turn, his medal is not only inferior in quality, but in place of an embrace, he gets a handshake from the Chief of the whites. The latter finds it condescending to rub his body against the sweaty bosom of Meka. A keen observer in the crowd aptly comments about the triviality of

the medal in compensation for the great sacrifice of Meka towards the French cause: "I think they ought to have covered him in medals. That would have been a bit more like it. To think he lost his land and his sons just for that…" (94)

This remark sends Kelara weeping profusely. It now dawns on her and her female folk that Meka had traded too much for too little; and that the medal is largely disproportionate to the two sons lost in a war. It is an antique as proven when Meka taps the holy Vandermayer to determine the lieu of the reception party; he is ignored by the white priest. This is a vivid illustration that the medal alone cannot break the social barriers between the blacks and the whites, and that the latter are hesitant to welcome attempts by the former to fully fraternize with them. Put differently, the acclaimed friendship is a veneer that cannot penetrate the skin colour.

Acting partly under the influence of wine, the blacks gulp down glasses of whisky to the disenchantment of the whites. In the words of Meka, "If you want to know what your friend thinks of you, drink a few glasses with him" (106). Armed with this conviction, he challenges the whites on the notion of brotherhood by inviting them for dinner at his compound. The High Commissioner politely turns down this offer intimating that because of his busy schedule, he can only partake of Meka's goat in spirit. Ironically, he feasts with the white medalist. His rebuff of Meka clearly underscores French hypocrisy and crystallizes black criticism of the love and friendship encapsulated in the medal. They are soon vindicated in that when the mood becomes festive in the

Community Centre, the whites find this embarrassing and abandon the blacks to themselves. No sooner do they celebrate their newly found freedom than Gullet and his men order them to quit the hall. They are now considered scallywags. Bit by bit, it dawns on the blacks that they had blown out of proportion the significance of the medal; they analysed it literally against the metaphorical exegesis of the French.

We can compare this treatment meted to the underdogs to that of the Nigerian story of Chin Ce where draped in a green and white agbada, reminiscent of the national colours of Nigeria, President Baba Sonja, the Kadiye of the land, cuts a grotesque image before his younger national Tai: "The diseased-looking pot-bellied old man had never inspired him for once as a president" 18). After pouring several diatribes on youths for being injurious to the nation, this mischievous politician implores everybody to support him as he draws a fallacious link between him and God: "I call on everyone to support the vision of our country as directed by God" (18). Earlier on, the Parliament had exposed his chicanery by rejecting a proposed Bill that put God in the centre-spread of the national map. In these inflated words of the President lies the post colonial drive to dupe the nation and subvert the people's aspirations:

> Arise Compatriots
> God's holy call obey
> To serve the Lord thy God
> With ho-liness and faith
> The labours of the saints ago

Shall no more be in vain
To serve the lord thy God
One na-tion bound in justice
Peace and Unity (19).

The stress in the words "ho--liness" and "na--tion" accentuates the falsehood of the politician in establishing a harmonious link between these two streams. Baba presents himself as an enlightened despot in that as God's representative on earth, he cherishes the welfare of the nation, especially the youths. The political pretence is unmistakable as we notice the sycophantic Dr Jeze describe the presidential 'speech' as the "Gamji declaration" (19). The President and his cronies ensure that the masses are brainwashed as the latter intone a new national anthem that extols the virtues of politics and religion. Rimi Merenge, the Head of State's alter ego, spares no effort in hailing the new leadership of Baba and imprecating youths for breeding the culture of skepticism, particularly within a college milieu. Leader Obu, the Pastor's partner in this hoax, reiterates the sinfulness of youths as he supplicates God to cleanse them of the vice of mistrust. The service culminates in the religious pranks of some fellowship members as they fling themselves to the ground in a spiritual frenzy intended to underscore the overriding power of prayers. Like the case of Oyono's story, religion is used by the administration to maintain a stronghold on the population.

As the President's acolytes –James and Peter– insist that Baba Sonja is a born again Christian and, therefore, an instrument of the Lord. Tai, like Soyinka's Igwezu, retorts

that Baba is to blame for the collapse of the nation. Confronted by Tai's intransigence to attend campus service, the insidious duo intimate that he has lately joined a cult or, connotatively, aligned with an opposition party.

In the second section of the story, Churchill decries the plight of the masses by situating them as victims of "Arrest and Detention. Advance and Deviance" (59). The citizens are perpetually subjected to various abuses orchestrated by their inept ruling governments. It may be posited that the youths in Gamji take alcohol as opium, a ruse by the despicable regime to deaden their consciences in the wake of state atrocities. As earlier stated, while the French ban the consumption of liquor in Doum and Zourian ostensibly to encourage the purchase of foreign brands, the Gamji government allows its subjects to drench in it for the purpose of docility.

As Churchill himself tells us, Gamji's rulers are, therefore, a reflection of petty tyrants across Africa that continuously harp on patriotism and sacrifice on the part of the oppressed citizenry as these leaders loot and plunder the economy, and stifle any opposition:

> And he made a few flattering noises about sacrifice and patriotism from his country men, except of course some public enemies and politicians he had clamped in jai. (61)

Like most of the new nations born out of the ashes of colonialism, Gamji is a travesty of democracy and freedom. Such post colonial states resonate with various negations, says Churchill: "Everything that Machiavelli thought was possible in a Hobbessian state, those scumbags epitomized

them all in the black man" (62). Their newfangled Presidents always abandon the object and chase the shadow. Churchill succinctly captures this aberration in this remark: "Some fools started War against Indiscipline when it should have read War against Injustice" [1] (62).

C. **Disillusionment**

Be it in the case of Oyono's world or Ce's Gamji state, the masses successfully unveil the cloak of oppression and fathom the deception that has been progressively practised on them by (post)colonial authorities. Their experiences with the callous administration awaken their consciousness to the necessity to arrest the dehumanizing treatment to which they are being subjected. How and to what extent both communities succeed in severing ties with the agents of evil will be appraised in the following paragraphs.

As the blacks in Oyono's The Old Man scramble out of the Community Centre, Meka, dead drunk, is abandoned to himself in the collapsing building that is being buffeted by heavy rain and a violent storm. It is as if nature and the French are partners in this torture. He painfully wriggles himself out of the wreckage of the hall and is comforted that his Christian medal, Saint Christopher, is tenaciously clinging to his chest. However, the one given to him by the Chief of the whites is detached from his coat. Is this to remind him that the medal is simply a gimmick by the whites to cajole him into believing in their friendship, a loud-sounding nothing devoid of substance? He is soon apprehended by Gullet's by G llet's

convinced that the whole exercise is an insult to justice.

Predictably, the election is halted by violence that sweeps across Gamji. This new nation is in desperate need of definition following the contours of justice, freedom and democracy. It is not any better than Oyono's world. Both societies are crippled by the vices of colonialism and post colonialism, dependence and independence; the quest for a consummate nationhood that fuses the genuine aspirations of the oppressed masses remains disturbingly elusive for Gamji.

Oyono structurally splits his novel into three parts corresponding to the expectations, broken dreams, and disillusionment of Meka as each section of the story tackles these triple phases of the hero's life in the process of pedagogy. It also mirrors the extended patience of the blacks against protracted French provocation. This sophisticated division seems to affirm the discrepancy between the promises of the French and their fulfillment. And that their word constitutes a veritable tossed yo-yo that clearly leaves aspirants frustrated. Indeed, Meka suffers from self deception as he earlier had confidence in the French; his final delusion by them is revealing as he and his brethren are tutored that in dinning with the French, they need a ladle in scooping the bowl. In other words, his experience constitutes a ringing challenge to his counterparts that they should be wary as they flirt with a hyena. Now, they have been sufficiently conscientized that the struggle for their rights must be initiated and sustained by them; it does not depend on the benevolence of the colonial master. They had been overtaken by their naivety and ignorance into believing that

the medal was a magic wand to their problems. Far from it; the good is yet to come through their commitment in liberating themselves from the claws of oppression and its attendant vices.

Chin Ce's *Gamji College*, aside its graphic illustrations depicting the shifting moods of the story, is also skillfully divided into three crucial phases, namely, "The Cross", "The Bottle", and "The Gun" respectively representing the intoxicating influence of the bible on the mindset; the liberating force of alcohol on people as they reveal their innermost minds; and the resultant violence and chaos unleashed by the gun –white man's legacy of brigandage in Africa. This meticulous structure reflects a floating society in need of justice, stability and peace; Gamji is miniature Africa grappling with the throes of independence as some of the injustices of colonialism are replayed.

While in Ferdinand Oyono's novel there is cautious optimism that Meka and his comrades can successfully break the chains of oppression and possibly get embroiled in the vicious cycle of anomaly typical of post colonial Gamji, Chin Ce's heroes seemingly do not present the same degree of commitment to stem the tide of violence. However, a common denominator between the people of both fictions is the self hallucination that leads to disillusionment triggered by (post)colonial forces. Despondent as the future may look for Gamji, a revolutionary flame is ignited in Tai and Jerry as both vituperate the ills of the new nation. The 'beautyful ones' are in the process of being born. They are seen as harbingers to a more embracing, political dispensation that may eschew

the abuses and excesses of the preceding age. Gamji, Doum and Zourian will make ideal nations when they effectively harness solid Western principles of good governance and freedom alongside African values of brotherhood and communalism, or when they adroitly lubricate Western steel with African grease.

Notes

[1]The slogan of "War against Indiscipline" was en vogue during the military regime of President Buhari of Nigeria. Enforced by his 'No. 2 strongman', Tunde Idiabon, it restored some civic discipline among the ordinary citizens while, paradoxically, senior government officials shamelessly pillaged the nation's economy.

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