

## **Political Sagacity in the Fictional World of Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path***

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### **Abstract**

*A literary discourse can recognize history and culture using the canvas of fictive world. For a writer, fiction becomes an ideological screen on which the preceding and contemporaneous issues can be conveniently represented. Contemporary Nigeria is struggling with colonial legacy, identity politics, cultural conflicts and power struggle. This research attempts to examine political thought in Kilanko's fictional world through an episode of past elections in Nigeria where violence has become a part of political culture since independence. Kilanko depicts corruption, violence, deception, nepotism, on the part of politicians who are enjoying absolute power supported by equally corrupt bureaucratic structure. It gives Kilanko an opportunity to write on the behalf of the suffering nationals who are confronting repressive leadership. By revealing the picture of dystopian Nigerian society, the writer has offered critical assessment of the existing political situation to redirect the actions, beliefs and values observed by her fellow citizens. She has documented historical realities and mysteries which otherwise remain hidden from the descendants.*

*Keywords: Nigeria; people; political; power; violence;*

*Article History:- Received: 22 March 2017; Accepted: 24 August 2017; Published 15 December 2017*

### **1. Background of the Study**

Early African writers addressed the complications of colonialism, neo-colonialism and misrepresentation of Africans in literary works of the Whites. Now the focus has shifted to issues like apartheid, dictatorship, bad governance, and corruption. Post-independent African nations have to struggle with the frustrating problems of corrupt leadership, "diverse political problems, occasioned by mal-administration, dictatorship and excessive corruption of governments" (Amase, 2013, 63). Therefore, a general feeling of disillusionment and treachery prevails among the masses. These countries have had bitter experiences of brutalities of military regimes replaced by totalitarian democratic governments.

Yejide Kilanko is one of the leading Nigerian writers who not only cherishes her origin and heritage but also highlights various contemporary problems being faced by Nigerians in the current times in *Daughters Who Walk This Path*. Kilanko discovers the intersection of the personal and the public by engaging intimate details of the lives of her characters in the background of social and political forces of contemporary Nigeria. Her narrative traces how Nigerians are trying to cope with the difficult political situation of the country. Themes of gender violence with resilience and retribution are discussed in the backdrop of affairs of state where politicians loot the treasury, crash the economy, and send their children to the best educational institutions of the world. The present research proposes a comprehensive and detailed study of a political scenario where people, hungry for power and money, are ready to go to any extent to maintain the status quo. The tools of coercion once employed by the colonizers and indoctrinated natives are now adapted by politicians in love of power. The ramifications of violence are

explored; the evils of civil violence and its impact on the national psyche of Nigerians are highlighted in the study.

## 2. Justification of Infusing Politics with Fiction

Authors grow up encountering various socio-political complications. They cannot turn a blind eye to the frightening and repulsive realities that have been persecuting the lives of individuals for decades. However, it is the writer's choice how much she wishes to engage herself to the larger society and how far she can be empathetic to her fellow citizens. The writer decides which characters and circumstances she wishes to present, what stances to take, and what to ignore. About the contemporary novel, Kumar says,

Today, the novel directly reflects the condition of religious, moral and political instability in which we all live. The novelist is compelled by his craft to face the facts. The narrative artist is simultaneously, both an observer and a preserver. No doubt, he is an ardent critic of the contemporary society, but being a creative soul, he is also a philosopher. (2002, 184)

A writer is not only an observer or a preserver of factual details but he can mark the perception of people about politics. Ken Saro-Wiwa thinks that literature has a functional role to perform. He says, "Literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics; by intervention and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused critical look at society. He must play an interventionist role" (1999, 81).

In the text, before giving vivid details of the political scenario of Nigeria, Kilanko refers to Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* which was written in 1974 but people still read it because people want "[t]o know and learn from the past" (152). This reference is a kind of justification on the part of the novelist to present political scenario in the fictional world. It will induce the people to stand at a distance and judge the past plus learn lessons to enrich the future. Mohsin Hamid, in an interview "Does Fiction Have the Power to Sway Politics?" to New York Times, says, "Fiction can say publicly what might otherwise appear unsayable, combating the coerced silence that is a favored weapon of those who have power". Therefore, a political literary discourse helps people to get a better understanding of life.

## 3. Research Objective

I aim to explore how a novel, a genre adapted to narrate the story of individual lives, can be stretched to represent abstract political positions.

## 4. Discussion

*Daughters Who Walk This Path* is coming-of-age novel in which Kilanko talks of two women protagonists who are unexpectedly raped by those who are trust-worthy men in the eyes of their parents. These women characters mature into heroines as they brave patriarchal conditions. It takes the reader to domestic lives of Nigerian families but in three chapters of the novel, the writer explicitly talks about the political scenario of Nigeria where rigging in election takes place at enormous scale. A common man dares not to take stand against corrupt politicians because the Chiefs are enjoying unlimited power which gives them authority over lives and properties of populations. Aunt Morenike who is an educationist, on finding that the country is badly in need of honest people, becomes a political activist. She feels that people should oppose dishonest leaders otherwise the country will face dire consequences and the coming generations will continue to face same problems of clean water and unpaved roads with no sound educational facility.

Kilanko gives reference of Chief Gani Fawehinmi (1938-2009), a man who pursued his principles and beliefs; who worked for social justice and fundamental human rights. He wants to bring a positive change in the lives of masses who are victims of institutional corruption. The character of Tihamiyu is presented as a hardworking and educated but poor man who wants to sincerely help the people of Nigeria. Aunt Morenike wants to support this young man who is fair and honest in his intentions and dealings. On seeing the enthusiasm of Aunt Morenike, the Mummy of Morayo comments bitterly on adulteration of the elections by referring to the previous elections:

But I have not been paying much attention to the posters. After all, what difference will my voting make anyway? Everybody knows these elections are always rigged. Last election, did Chief Omoniyi not win with over seven hundred thousand votes? The entire population of Ibadan North West Local Government, even counting the goats and chickens, is less than two hundred thousand. (153)

Being aware of this situation, still she gives permission to her daughter to accompany her aunt in helping the upcoming leader who has decided to take part in politics and stand against Chief Omoniyi, though Mummy is afraid of thugs of the Chief and warns them to beware of them.

Mr. Tihamiyu is an educated and honest man but with no socio-economic support. People make fun of him when they come to know that he is going to contest elections that used to run half-naked in childhood in the streets of Ibadan. These men have not seen the school but they can judge through their experience that a poor person who has no support will utterly fail in elections in the current situation. While on the other hand Chief Omoniyi is like a demi-god in local government. His friends and family members hold top government positions and “his political thugs, notorious for their brutality, [are] his personal law-enforcement body” (155). He is so powerful that he takes undue advantages like ruthlessly murdering the people who oppose him. People still remember how an engineer and his wife were killed in broad daylight two years ago and how a man who publically challenged Chief Omoniyi disappeared from the scene. It is understood that either that man must be in personal jail of the Chief or his party-workers might have killed him and thrown his body to an unknown place. Nigeria despite its abundance in natural resources remains underdeveloped due to lack of good leadership roles (Okeshola, 2014, 150).

The socio-economic status of Tihamiyu stands in no comparison to Chief Omoniyi. Tihamiyu cannot even afford chairs for those who come to listen to his address but on the other hand on the day of election Chief Omoniyi gives his supporters hot food with clean water not only at the time of casting votes but also lavish evening-meal. Tihamiyu addresses the small crowd with passion reflected in his eyes and sweat dripping from his face. He has a vision of running water taps, well-constructed roads and up-to-date maternity centers. He stresses on the fact that almost quarter of the century has passed since independence but they are being deceived by one political personality who is being replaced by the other bringing no virtual change in the life of masses. He not only criticizes the corrupt leaders but he thinks that the whole nation is responsible for the present state of affairs. It is ironical that people who protest against the corruption of transporters “sell bottles of adulterated palm oil to unwary, hungry buyers with a friendly smile” (160). He goes on emphasizing the fact that government officers demand bribes besides drawing salaries to do the work. All of them must reflect on the fact that they should demand what they do observe themselves. The integrity which they demand in their leaders should be there within all of them. It is a fact that this land is their joint inheritance but very few people are enjoying meat on the bones. They, after enjoying meat, throw dry bones to the rest of the nation as if they are stray dogs. He continues that just by “talking and crying” (160) will not do any good to them; they should try to condemn those who plunder national wealth for their selfish motives. The educated people will leave the country in search of prosperous future while the younger ones “will look around at the utter desolation and accept, yes accept that this catastrophe is their only reality. They will accept that for [their] land, indeed for [their] peoples, there can be no change” (160). Tihamiyu worked exhaustively in the hot days of Ibadan but failed to attract the audience. It appears as if people are already aware that he is wasting his time and energy in futile efforts.

The bad infrastructure of the country is reflected in the episode of flood which every year kills many people and destroys property of the masses. To Gray and Kaufmann (1998) acts of corruption include appropriation of public assets for private use and embezzlement of public funds by politicians and high level officials. The father of Morayo says that no matter how many animals are sacrificed to protect them from natural disasters, the people will keep suffering until some practical measures are taken against them. Laughing bitterly, he remarks:

For eight years, the rechannelization project has had no head or tail. The construction companies take the money and run. Even if those traditionalists sacrifice all their chickens and goats to the river, nothing is going to change. We are just going to have another flood and more people will die. (165)

The educated middle-class, like the parents of Morayo, believes that it is useless to cast vote. They think that apparently these politicians wear tribal and religious dresses but when their paraphernalia is removed, all of them appear “identical—corrupt, manipulative, interested only in furthering their own personal agendas” (172). Near the elections, heated discussions go on everywhere, Aunt Morenike is sorrowful to see that people are again ready to make wrong choice. She feels sad that it is because of the wrong choice of these ignorant and uneducated people, the whole nation has to suffer.

The novel exposes the hypocrisy and corrupt activities of politicians through the character of Chief Omoniyi. On the day of election when the powerful Chief comes to see the people casting votes in his favour, he feels very happy and proud at his obvious success. Not only the officers of the election commission bow before him but people are shocked to see that the father of Tiamiyu goes to the Chief and prostrates flat before the Chief to thank him for the business he sent to the old man late this month. The wife angrily argues with him but he thinks that it is his practical decision because he cannot afford rivalry with such a powerful political figure that is no less than a demi-god. It is true that he has degraded his own son, who is opposing the Chief in the election but he has saved lives of his family members because if he would not have done that, the Chief would have killed them with hunger. People are ready to cast vote for that man who is going to embezzle all funds allocated for “leaky primary schools, unsafe roads, and dry taps” (175). This is such an obvious and plain truth that even a child playing in the street knows the fact. With these funds he will further upgrade his extravagant life-style by lavishly spending on his “harem of women and sending his children to the top schools in the United Kingdom and the United States” (175). Commenting on the pitiable state of Nigeria, Omolumen Dawood says, “The governance dimension continues to be dominated by the ramifications of corruption and the difficulties in eradicating what has become a part of the system itself” (2015, 70).

People are afraid to speak up against the Chief for he is maintaining his private army to control them. Even the father of Tiamiyu prostrated before him in fear of the Chief who can kill them with hunger but one blind man fearlessly comes forward and addresses the Chief that though the word Omoniyi *means* a child of great honour and hope but he has proved himself to be a thoroughly greedy man who is living a reckless life by snatching food from the mouths of poor children and spending lavishly on himself and his family. It is his misconception that such wealth will bring honour to him. In fact, it will only bring disgrace as people do not respect him from their hearts but only pose to respect him out of fear. The old man fearlessly continues that he is “[l]iving life like the hunting dog who forgot his master’s call. Living without purpose as if your name is Lost” (177). Through the speech of the blind man, the writer has exposed true picture of politicians whose conditions are not less than hunting-dogs madly running after the wealth; unlike a human-being who is blessed with thinking faculty, who thinks before and after taking some action in his life. A human-being does not run mindlessly after anything. Assessing the contemporary state of Nigeria it is seen that “[c]orruption inhibits socio-economic development and denies equitable distribution of wealth and makes sure some sections of the country, which are considered ethnically disadvantaged, remain worst off in the distributive arrangement of national resources” (Bello et al., 2011, 172).

When the favorites of Chief run forward to avenge themselves of the insult brought by the blind old man by harming Tihamiyu and his supporters, the chief stops them by saying that he is a man of peace and does not believe in violence. This is an ironical statement because on one hand he maintains his private army and keeps thugs who shamelessly kidnap and kill the people. On the other hand he professes that he is a man of peace. He continues that he will insult and degrade the opponent by defeating him in the election. Mkaanem Emmanuel points out the importance of presenting societal values in literature,

There is that type of literature by which the writer rebels against societal values. He is the one that is sensitive to what is going on around him; one who wants a better deal for everybody. This is the kind of literature that becomes an instrument for social transformation. Its basic aim is to awaken the revolutionary consciousness in the majority of the group of the society who are oppressed, exploited and deprived of good social living condition (2007, 87).

To celebrate the victory of which the Chief is so certain that he has already made arrangement of professional drum-beaters. When he says that very soon they will celebrate their victory “[t]he praise singers increase the tempo of their drum-beats, driving the crowd into a frenzied dance of victory” (179). After losing the elections of which the opponents knew even before participating in it, Tihamiyu talks over that the people are used to “the pitiful crumbs” (180) that these leaders throw in front of poor countrymen after eating the best part of the bread. These politicians have tasted the pleasure of power so they go to any extent to achieve and maintain it. He criticizes the shortsightedness of Nigerians by saying that when the people of Nigeria see the danger coming towards them, they run away to save their lives not realizing the bitter truth that everyone is going to die late or soon, so one should die while boldly fighting against the evil powers of the Universe. Ofeimun believes that a writer can certainly play a positive role in the politics of the country. He says,

It is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies . . . . I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considers right and deserving expression. (*Talking with African Writers*, 1990, 66).

## 5. Conclusion

This study has attempted to evaluate sociopolitical design of Nigerian society as portrayed in Yejide Kilanko’s *Daughters Who Walk This Path*. The emerging Nigerian writer has presented political and economic greed of the leaders who are supported by dysfunctional bureaucracy. They have huge collection of money in foreign banks but morally they are bankrupt. The writer has not only exposed the societal ills but attempts to identify the centripetal forces that work against the struggles of bourgeoisie and downtrodden masses. Corruption is probably at its highest level as resources meant for social amenities are embezzled by political leaders with the support of government officials. The masses are very much aware of their exploitation but they find themselves helpless in comparison to the enormity of power. They are disillusioned because of their unfulfilled hopes of independence which already claimed heavy sacrifices from them. The new Nigerian elite are betraying the nationals by misusing positions of privilege for personal rather than mutual gain. Kilanko, by protesting through the episode of elections, demonstrates her commitment to nation-building and social improvement. She has become the spokesperson of the masses that are passing pitiable lives because of few greedy people.

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