

MYTH AND MODERNITY IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN EXPLORATION OF
THE MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC IN ADEBAYO WILLIAMS' *THE REMAINS
OF THE LAST EMPEROR*

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Abstract

Adebayo Williams' novel, *The Remains of the Last Emperor* represents a committed writer's engagement with the political contradictions which define his beleaguered milieu under the savage sway of dictators or despots. How productive and rewarding this engagement turns out is the governing concern of this paper. Williams, therefore, sets out to expose the shenanigans of political rascality on the African continent with an uncanny insight and unsparing virulence to underscore the fact that a progressive artistic commitment must take sides with the people as the true makers of history as against their oppressors. Without a doubt, *The Remains of the Last Emperor* is a text that is complex, not only in its plot structure, but also in its narrative technique. It might as well be described as featuring a macabre blend of the marvellous and the real. To be sure, the novel meshes myths, legends, and other forms of the African oral tradition with a Euro-American narrative style. The paper submits that through the deployment of a unique stylistic choice, Williams' succeeds in executing a powerful rendition of the warped postcolonial African condition where maximum ruler ship has become the norm rather than the exception.

Introduction

According to modern literary theory, one of the tasks of serious literature is to de-familiarise and not to reassure us of the established conventions, not to present us with the recognizable and the often written, but to lead towards a new perception of experience, narrative order, and aesthetic wholeness. Like a good deal of newer writing, Adebayo Williams uses the anxious, compromised instrument of language, the prime object of modern critical speculation (in deconstructive criticism, for example which has made a paradox out of the idea of rhetorical authenticity) as a means of questing through the interlocking worlds of the familiar and the unfamiliar, awe and atrocity – in the hope or belief that we can find depths below the surface, and so accept moral responsibility for our utterances and actions.

The Remains of the Last Emperor (1994) is an aesthetic and sociologically erotic novel, a flamboyant and indeed brilliant display of a busy and inventive author's repertoire. The novel has many postmodern habits: the characters are voices and so virtually, in a manner of speaking, characterless, and voices and bodies change into other clothes or even other bodies in a continuous metamorphosis. There is a great deal of redundancy, or excess noise and action, which could be annoying to some of the inmates and neighbours in the fictional world of the novel. It is hard to find critical words to describe Williams' distinctive style, with its learning, its elaborate ciphering, its proliferation of text for its own sake, its awareness of producing writing in a world that has tipped over into the supernatural, magical realism, political consciousness and entropic decline.

William's style could be called a "paranoid" style. This is a style of writing of a world so made up of plots, conspiracies, codes and systems that the individual character within it is necessarily swamped by overwhelming exterior discourse and even the literary language itself becomes a part of it. If we work outwards from the language of a novel we are likely to arrive at a sense of how it expresses the deepest contradictions of the period of its production. Traditional criticism favoured steady novels expressing central truths about human experience. Recent criticism is engaged with showing that these steady novels are not as coherent as might appear to be the case. If one alters the position from which criticism operates, one gains a different sense of what is involved in any particular text. A critical approach in which the key terms are theme, plot, character and point of view, may have little to say about a text, but a critical approach which places language at the centre of the discussion has a lot to say. Rather than just focusing on ideas, critics now look at how the writer constructs a narrative and how language functions in that narrative. If one focuses on the language one tends to become absorbed with how the novelist confirms or challenges the discourse of his day. The problem of the novelist is not what to write, but how to write. *The Remains of the Last Emperor* makes it clear that Williams is one of the remarkable figures of the contemporary Nigerian novel, though his works seem largely to have remained the interest of a narrow readership. He manifests a prodigious talent for constructing labyrinthine plots and large conspiracies. This novel is a contemporary one in the way it attempts to explore individual states of mind against the background of a society that has been fractured almost beyond repair. However, we need to examine very closely the master-slave dialectic as an issue in Marxist literary discourse within which ideological and theoretical framework the novel is written.

To do some justice to this issue we may first need to examine some of Williams' thoughts on the relationship that subsists in nations between the dominating and dominated classes. In doing this, the study shall explore Williams' essay entitled "Madunagwu and the End of These Times" (2000). Here, Williams describes Edwin Madunagwu as an "irrepressible Nigerian Marxist". As the title of the essay suggests the article represents its author's rejoinder or contribution to that Marxist's mathematician discourse in a newspaper article. What Williams is concerned with is to show how, in spite of the rigour of his joyless prose, the indefatigable Marxist had

been unwittingly “privileging clan politics over ethnic contentions.” Williams, with specific reference to the Nigerian situation, submits that “ethnic, religious and other primordial identities tend to take primacy over class identity,” when Marxists theorise and analyse the nationalist dialectic of the socio-economic relationship existing between the people and their visionless leaders in “mere artificial” nations like Nigeria, it is against this background that the study attempts a critique of the master-slave dialectic in *The Remains of the Last Emperor*. And this is as it should be because quite often extra-textual knowledge is deployable in the deconstruction of literary creations. Thus, the paper intends to show how much Williams’ artistic vision approximates his real life consciousness.

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And still on the narrative technique employed in the novel, we note that there is a mixture of points of view as the author uses the third person omniscient point of view to present the story’s outline and thereafter transfers the narrative responsibility to one of his characters variously called “Old Man” and “Sir Dandy”, who relates most of the story in the first person point of view.

Thematically, *The Remains of the Last Emperor* is a powerful metaphor of the ultimate futility of absolute power. Indeed, we may call it a kind of introspective analysis of the psychology of power. This is very much so when we consider the motivations that impel its protagonist to the inordinate pursuit of power as an end in itself. However, what the author preoccupies himself with is to show how debasing it eventually becomes for someone who wields absolute power over not only a fellow human being, but in fact over a people who had looked up to him as a deliverer. The novel, therefore, convincingly demonstrates how a totalitarian and autocratic demagogue must perpetually subject himself to grave personal indignities to keep his people down. In the final instance, the novel is a testimony to Williams’ assertion that “history does not end with the triumph of the slave-master over the slave” (20), but that, as with epochs, history only ends “when the slave defeats his master” (22).

The study also examines how Williams constructs the socio-cultural and political-economic dynamics of the novel’s fictive space. While one agrees that Williams’ ideological bias is in favour of the people as is obvious in the stylistic construct of reflecting the tyrant Samusangudu’s cruelty in the parlous condition of the people, we must, nevertheless, note that he does not idealise all of the people as he shows clearly that tyrants only draw their vitality from the collaborative acts of some of the masses.

About an hour ago some of the security people came to inform His Majesty that there had been a serious mutiny in the army. I suspect it

must be a very serious revolt because the old man started whimpering and cursing... what shall we do? The ruthless double screamed...

What do you mean nothing?... I think I'm going to make my peace with the new people!

They won't need your services... How do you know.

All rulers need duplications and masters of duplicity. Without us the Emperor would long have been torn apart by the vultures he is ruling over... We must disappear with him, his companion said in grim reflection (TRLE, 206).

Thus the writer spares the reader the gory details of Samusangudu's horror chamber until the final moments of the narration. Returning now to the novelist's essay mentioned earlier, one observed that in Williams' reading of the Nigerian Marxist barometer the operating variables are issues of ethnicity and religion. What this means is that in the struggle between the masses and the propertied class, that is the master-slave dichotomy, the actual factors at play are ethnic affiliations coupled with religious sentiments – not yet the existence of a peasantry that has no such divisive elements that prevent the people from presenting a united front against the dominating class.

Having said this, the study now proceeds to show how Williams successfully aggregates populist characters in a metaphorical medical ward called "The Ward of the Damned"... so that they can realize its ideological vision for society by rejecting the balkanizing tendency of ethnicity and in fact using their ethno-cultural diversity to advantage. One observes at the outset that it does great credit to the narrative format of the novel that Williams uses this self enclosed outpost of "madmen", to explore his theme. While the occupants of this asylum are nominally mad, we, nevertheless, know that it is actually the novelist's intention to show us that there can indeed be a great deal of method in the "madmen", of those who have set out to assist their society to be liberated from the stronghold of annihilating forces. Though a minority, these annihilating forces are diametrically opposed to the people's survival. What the ward together with its leadership, provided by the doctor and the leader, Oriade, typify, is the need for a focused group of people to be committed to the effort of social conscientisation which eventually leads to social change. Symbolically enough, each inmate of this suspiciously utopian ward had experienced one form of disillusionment or the other with the "real" world (of sane people) before seeking solace in the intellectually challenging climate of this "ward of ideas." In one particularly brilliant scene, the author shows how the inmates provide the ideological basis of their significance vis-à-vis the rest of the society and the government of the day.

I see, the doctor said rather sorrowful and began to walk away. But I still believe till date that I could see a strange smile dance around his oblong intense face. A few moments later, Lamidi emerged, groaning

and giggling at the same time. There as a thunderous applause for him. The rowdy celebration continued far into the night with none of the officials daring to stop us. This was another important victory in our war of independence. Infact, I can say with authority that it was that night that the ward crossed the Rubicon, as they say. (TRLE,6).

Some of the more notable inmates are Lamidi, Jerry, Oseni, Suara, Alamu, Burma Cobra, Soroye, Mr. Aboaba and including, of course, Sir Dandy (who also doubles as the old man who narrates much of the story to the young editor) and the predestined leader in the person of Oriade a.k.a "Were Pataki." All these characters contribute one perspective or the other to the discourse that eventually culminates in the overthrow of the tyrant. Certainly, it is Williams' intention to show how much Samusangudu, the last Emperor succeeds in wasting the human resources of his country on account of his morbid fear of opposition. Indeed, Samusangudu does not mind subjecting himself to a sub-human form of existence if only that will ensure his subjugation of a thoroughly harassed and impoverished people. However, in line with materialist dialectic, such a situation cannot persist for too long provided that, as one witnesses in the unity of goal displayed by, not only the inmates of the ward of the damned, but also the totality of the peasantry as reflected in their climatic uprising – the actual ideological conflict is identified as strictly being between the oppressing class and the oppressed one. Thus, for Williams it will not do to have a peasantry that is bedeviled by schisms brought about by ethnic and religious sentiments. In the light of this therefore one may conclude that the fictive world of *The Remains of the Last Emperor* clearly aligns with the viewpoint offered by its author in the essay referred to earlier.

What Williams has, therefore, done is to make powerful contributions to various debates on issues in philosophy, economy, religion, psychology, sociology and of course, literature. In the novel we are suffused with evidence of the role of propaganda in politics and how it can at once enslave and endear an undiscerning people to their tormentors. One can also see that dictators do not emerge suddenly but that they develop insidiously and as such can only be uprooted with the right combination of strategy and determination. This much is obvious in one of the leader's deeply philosophical statements:

By the time you are talking about tyrants, you are talking about an individual or a group of individuals who have unleashed a reign of terror on the whole society. They do not normally get there by accident. So, you cannot remove them by one grand gesture of defiance, but by careful planning and timing. (TRLE, 90).

Indeed, the argument seems to be that in every man dictatorial instincts exist, but that it behoves society to provide appropriate control mechanisms to prevent one man from wielding absolute power over another, especially political power. If one regards the artist as a visionary and a democrat, one may say that *The Remains of the Last Emperor* qualifies as a topical commentary on contemporary Nigeria socio political reality, even if the author calls it "Gbitiland."

It may be added that Williams' aim is to direct society's attention to the need to struggle for social change the moment the conditions for such are available. In such a situation, all arms of government will have become grossly culpable and the people will no doubt face a herculean task in their quest to restore order and sanity. In Williams' fictive Gbitiland, the people, under a visionary and selfless leadership, ultimately overthrow Samusangudu's tyranny at huge costs of life and property. It is the view in this study, however, that this new order may eventually revert to the earlier one, lending credence to the possibly pessimistic posture of Williams when he observes that:

Indeed, epochs end when the slave defeats its master, and history, in its own version of the resurrection, begins all over again like the frozen carcass of a Siberian bear after the winter of hibernation (TRLE, 21).

One may consider also Soyinka's view in his philosophical treatise, *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*:

Let those who wish, celebrate the present blunting of the Marxist tool; the battle to eliminate that distinction (the schism between affluent being and impoverished nothingness) will continue to occupy societies as long as social inequality is manifested or enthroned as a principle of social ordering (30).

Conclusion

Williams' novels are a convulsive reaction to the degrading government pervading the nation. In TRLE the use of aesthetic device mingles together to present a formidable story of mysticism and social decadence under a tyrant. His characters are essentially painted to present his story as a unique one. In the light of societal prominence where the human rights activists are those who carry the cross of the society, Williams brings out their sanity. They converge under the influence of the 'doctor' in an asylum.

The symbolic representation of each of these characters as a 'Crusader for Justice' with unique characteristics keeps them ready for the event.

Can there ever be an end to injustice? I asked with a deep sigh. It seems to be that as long as there are lice in the clothes, there will be blood on the fingers.

He looked at me with admiration.

There are some old versions of injustice which make new version of injustice appear like some form of justice. What is important is to move humanity and history forward to new ideals of justice, he said (TRLE, 152).

The 'Emperor Samusangudu' whose rebellion against his society, even with a change of name from Samson to Samusangudu, is basically a means of representing

societies under the rule of tyrants, and the awe in which the people they govern hold them. They are societal twists on which resistance are carried out through the character of the leader, who is appointed by the doctor and several inmates of the asylum. The waste of society's brilliant young minds is reflected in Ade who finds an accomplice in Lamidi (or vice versa). These are the people society hinges its hopes on, yet which it destroys: the educationist, the religious stalwart, the agriculturist, and the human rights activist. The need for a rebellion was necessary when the leader, Ori-Ade found out that "The law-givers had become the greatest law breakers."

He must have been eyeing the leader for a long time, seeing him as an emblem of docility before authority that he so much detested. He grabbed his chance once it presented itself on a farm near the school and gave the leader the thrashing of his life... he did not deem it fit to defend himself... it was against the school's regulation to engage in a fight.

You mean if somebody wants to kill you, you will say it is against the school's regulation to defend yourself? I asked in alarm.

Yes, he began with supreme conviction, because a law is a law, a sacred order. Look, elder, we either have a law-abiding society or we have anarchy and chaos. My crisis began when I discovered that people were inventing their own rules for the game. The law-givers had become the greatest law-breakers (TRLE, 46 – 47).

He goes further to elaborate that "when the entire society suffers a nervous breakdown then there are no longer available criteria for determining the good or great citizen" (47). The doctor, who eventually dies in the course of the struggle, like the others, is a people mover, a motivator. He prevents the emperor from condemning the intellectuals in the society to a total demise of their physical and mental states. In the words of the old man the doctor is "the greatest revolutionary in the annals of the nation, a man who rejected compromise and fought for justice, an orphan by choice, who in turn became the guardian of orphans without choice (12).

He is the one who sees the viscous quality of the leader, and chooses him in that respect, rather than Sir Dandy, the social entertainer-turned-crusader. He is not only a healer of "madmen" but he is also the "healer" of the future. The essence of deliberation on social vices and handled as relevant features in the progression of any nation. He (the doctor), is depicted in his eventual demise as a burnt, scarred body. Sir Dandy sees him as one of the nation's "redeemers."

He was a great lover of humanity who believed that human beings had the capacity to organize their society along the lines of justice and fairplay (TRLE, 79).

If Williams produces nothing else aside this novel he would still be assured of a place in the annals of contemporary Nigerian, and even African literature, for this work reveals him as a mature stylist with a razor-sharp perception and an ability to reflect contemporary Nigerian society under the yoke of the military dictatorship of yore.

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