Diplomatic Foolery: A Look at Melamu's Use of Juvernallian Satire in *Odyssey*

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We must seek the freedom to express our thoughts and our feelings, evenagainstourselves, without the anxiety that what they say might be taken as evidence against our race.
—Chinua Achebe

Abstract

This article attempts to unpack how Melamu wields Juvernallian satire in his short story, *Odyssey*, which appears in his collection of short stories titled *The Unweeded Garden* (2006). The story is told through the lens of a protagonist with untested diplomatic skills on the continent. The satire explores how the absurd clash between the stoic, aloof world of the diplomat is thrown into a cultural malaise of vice and spontaneity. Framed in realism, the article depicts how humour can tear away the veil of moral degeneration in our neo-colonial society.

Keywords: satire; vice; realism; Melamu; absurdity.

Introduction

Satire as a literary genre has its roots in the time of the ancient Romans (LeBoeuf 2007). Back then it was known as *Satura* and its usage was quite unlike what it is today, in the sense that the early works of Horace were much more restrained lectures on right and wrong. Today our understanding of satire has undergone profound change from its earlier use.

The profound change is one of scope and premise. For instance, Collins asserts that "satire is verbal aggression in which some aspect of historical reality is exposed to ridicule" (Collins 1992:335). This definition is somewhat broad and does not adequately capture the contemporary literary space in African literature where humour is an antidote to the current social ills that bedevil the post-colonial individual. In contrast, LeBoeuf states that satire is "always a critique of some form of human behaviour, vice or folly with the intent of persuading the audience to view it disdainfully and thereby encourage a degree of social change" (LeBoeuf 2007:5). Given that the course of human history has never been smooth at any one time, it is understandable that satire has deep roots that go all the way to the ancient Greeks. The Aristophanes' plays which were performed in Athens during the Greek games, for instance, poked fun at high-ranking city officials and respected members of society. In the Middle Ages satire continued to grow exponentially and Chaucer's *CanterburyTales* is a good example of a text that is still enjoyed to this day. The text illustrates the hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church and the government of England by pointing out the eccentricities of some of its characters. A good example of this is the friar who collects money from society, ostensibly to undertake church projects, but uses the proceeds for his own interests. Other notable writers who have made this literary device popular include Alexander Pope (*RapeoftheLock*), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver'sTravels*) and John Dryden (*HindandthePanther*). These writers were unamused with the social-political landscape of English society at the time. It is thus unsurprising that satirists can be labelled as cynics, combative and even provocateurs of social order. Satires have a wide literary footprint and include irony, sarcasm, caricature and lampoon.

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However, there is a need for artistic balance in that "without a moral focus, satire is merely comedy, without an entertaining style all it does is sermonize" (Greenberg 2011:14). Satire sheds light on the ills of the world and scrutinizes them for condemnation and introspection. The writer of satire has certain expectations on the reader or the audience: they should have some sort of moral compass to appreciate the message in the literary work. Beneath the humour are some hard lessons on life. "Any literary work which holds up a society to ridicule or shows the foolishness or weakness of an idea or custom towards its attitude of amusement or scorn is called a satire" (Iwuchukwu 2009:20).

Satire can generally be found in two forms, direct or indirect. The difference essentially lies in the point of view technique and the purpose of the humour therein. Abrams asserts that "in formal satire, satiric voice speaks out in the first person, that is, 'I', may address himself either to the reader or else to a character within the work itself who is called the adversaries" (Abrams 1984:168-169). Formal satire can further be broken into two parts, Horatian satire and Juvernallian satire. In Horatian satire the protagonist is the urbanised character who is "moved more often towards amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human follies and absurdity which at times include his own" (Okafor nd.) Horatian satire is much gentler on the target with emphasis on humour, often with the reader or audience laughing at themselves in addition to the object being mocked or teased. Juvernallian satire entails a character who is "a serious moralist, who uses a dignified and public style of utterance to decry modes of vice and error which are no less dangerous because they are ridiculous and undertake to evoke contempt, moral indignation or an unillusioned sadness at the aberration of man" (Okafor nd) Juvernallian satire is more painful in its barbs, focusing on esteemed individuals, big parastatals and symbols of leadership. Often the intended response is anger and condemnation. *Odyssey* falls within this type of satire and its depiction of power and authority, for instance, forces the reader to introspect at how a lot of Africa's problems are self-made and have little to do with a colonial dispensation more than fifty years in the past.

Theoretical Framework

Realism works well with satire in that the two look at a particular aspect of the world through somewhat divergent lenses that ultimately complement one another. As a literary approach Realism seeks to portray our surroundings without romanticising it. This is a movement that has its roots in nineteenth century France and can be credited to novelists such as Flaubert, George Eliot and William Dean Howells. In Africa, a good showcase for Realism is Chinua Achebe and a reading of *Things Fall Apart* (1956) and *A Man of the People* (1966) provide adequate examples of this. One of the proponents of Realism, Ian Watt, defines it as "the most original feature of the novel form" (Watt1957:11) but it should be noted that Realism is multifaceted. One can talk of Magic Realism as shown by Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) and Marechera's *House of Hunger* (1978). This type infuses the fantastic with the mundane. It has strong links with oral tradition where the line between reality and fiction is often blurred or at times intertwined.

Social Realism often highlights class struggle and inequality and is another tangent to the approach. It is best seen through the works of Sembene Ousmane *Xala* (1973) and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* (1980). Realism, "portrays the world as it really appears" (Dwivedi 2008:2). The realistic novel is more usefully applied "to works which are realistic both in subject and manner…throughout the whole rather than in parts" (Abrams 1971:141). In *Odyssey,* Robert's trip across Africa reveals a lot of alarming aspects of human nature, hence using Realism as an approach

helps unravel this literary piece. Realism "is best for writers who show explicit concern to convey an authentic impression of actuality, either in their narrative style or by their serious approach to the subject matter" (Gray 1992:241). Realism depicts a symbiotic relationship between Man and his environment. In practical terms an individual cannot function while being detached from his surroundings. Lukacs asserts that "the true great realism depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing one or the other of their aspects...realism means a three dimensionality, an all roundness that endows with independent life, characters and human relationships"(Lukacs 1964:6). An analysis of *Odyssey* shows that man cannot function as a separate entity from his society. Despite class differences, the clash of ideas and divergent personalities, *Odyssey* strikes a chord in that Africans cannot barricade themselves from fellow Africans in the name of VIP treatment.

Analysis of *Odyssey*

Melamu's *Odyssey* chronicles the unfortunate yet hilarious travel of a diplomat to a conference in Niger. As the title suggests, the story is a motif for a journey, one that is transformative in that the character, Robert, undergoes a traumatic experience in the diplomatic world. As the narrative states in the very first line, it was a "baptism of fire" (Melamu 2006:193). It is Kurtzesque in depicting Robert's sojourn, into unchartered territory striking parallels with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* In other words just as Conrad's Kurtz undertook a journey into the unknown concluding in a shocking revelation into the human condition, Melamu's *Odyssey* touches on this journey of transformation, except in this case the abyss is of moral degeneration. The use of the first person narrative is ideal for creating a "chokehold of emotions" on the reader and the technique is well executed in *Odyssey*.

The story can be read as a coming-of-age piece on an Africa often heard of but not really encountered by those civil servants in positions of privilege – the seedy, laissez faire behaviour that brands many a country on the continent. Melamu peels back layered personalities during Robert's travels, the protagonist, and the tale becomes a motif for transformation from naivety to appalled revelation, from diplomatic indignity to sexual impropriety. This is a story of extremes and highlights how poles apart certain parts of Africa are to each other in a subtle yet pointy jab at Negritude.

Odyssey chronicles Robert's trip to Niamey, Niger, a part of French speaking Africa where his ability to converse in French is by his own admission, "extremely dangerous" (Melamu 2006:193). Robert starts from a position of privilege and power. He is heady with the unexpected yet welcome trappings of the 'soft life' as a diplomat in Africa. His trip from the airport to the hotel is a case in point. The narrative states, "The sirens cleared the road for 'His Excellency' with magical ease, while by-standers stood there, trying to peer through the windows of the limousine to see who the VIP was. Boy was that power!" (Melamu 2006:195-196). The African is depicted as having a morbid fascination with symbols of prestige while the continent as a whole is crippled by poverty and untold hardship. The trip to the hotel is bliss for Robert but it foreshadows his naivety, that swiftly moving from A to B in a chauffeured, escorted vehicle does not translate to efficiency or service delivery. Nowhere is this more telling than when he arrives well in time for the ten o'clock conference the next morning.

The rest of the delegates saunter in around 11:45am, totally unbothered by this. Then, "instead of knuckling down to business immediately, the heads of delegation got involved in heady reunions, bear-hugging displays and multiple cheek kiss greeting by the Arabs. That took another thirty to forty-five minutes of our time" (Melamu 2006:211). The conference disintegrates from its mandate of dealing with topical matters of the continent to becoming an 'old boys club' of sorts. Robert goes through various emotions at this spectacle ranging from shock and disbelief to resignation and

frustration. Satire works to expose the follies of man. In respect to the African in this scene, the bone of contention is 'African Time' which the people at the conference venue wear as a badge of honour. The narrator's indignation at the way things are done is summed up when he states, "Of course, we had to be in a hurry in Africa, unless we wanted to behave like Rip Van Winkle and wake up to find the rest of humanity in the middle of the twenty-first century" (Melamu 2006:210). The timeline of the protagonist's journey has already encountered potholes of ineptitude.

The rot, like the proverbial fish, starts from the head down. The first citizen, the President, arrives long after the official time. He is a stereotypical portrayal of leadership, exuding megalomania. To emphasise this, the narrative states, "His regal appearance preceded by innumerable bodyguards" (Melamu 2006:211). The delegates take on a peacock mentality where it is all about optics. The discussions become peripheral. This political abnormality is pervasive and Robert is the exception to the rule. As the layers of naivety are peeled off the young diplomat, he realises that the conference is a sham. Despite the expenses and the diverse attendance, it is all about rhetoric and self-aggrandisement. The narrative states, "forty-five minutes later, after a tumultuous applause of the President's address, there followed a series of long-winded encomiums, none of which pretending to any semblance of spontaneity, delivered with suitable ministerial pomposity" (Melamu 2006:212).

There is an underlying sense of deja-vu even for the protagonist who is attending his first conference. It is a marvel that anything gets done at all. The President spends a lot of time blasting neo-colonialism and "long departed colonizers and their successors, the neo-colonialists" (Melamu 2006:212) for the sad state of events in Africa. This obsession with the past instead of dealing with the current malaise of unemployment and poor governance is not met with derision but "tumultuous applause" (Melamu 2006:212). The hypocrisy in the speech cannot go unchallenged. The President as well as the other dignitaries are fully at fault for the current state of affairs but find collective therapy in throwing verbal stones at a target long departed. Africa, post modernism and disillusionment is a satirist's dream mainly due to how African leaders blame everyone but themselves for the state of affairs on the continent.

Melamu presents Africa as pre-occupied with pomp and ceremony to the detriment of service delivery. There is so much talk but very little in terms of substance. "This was to be the pattern for the next two days – late start of the sessions, long pointless debates on minutiae, endless mutual congratulatory statements at the slightest provocation, bold declarations of good intentions which would never be realized" (Melamu 2006:213). We find the descriptive humorous, yet we feel, too, scorn and indignation at the vast waste of state public resources. After the conference we are informed that the ministers will be treated to an "exclusive dinner-dance at some posh hotel in Niamey" (Melamu 2006:213). Not once in the narrative is the plight of the poor addressed. It is as if the delegates are in a different world.

Unsurprisingly, the sequestered nature of the conference contrasts sharply with the general condition of the population. In Douala the town is described as "one giant slum" (Melamu 2006:200). There is a sense of acceptance bordering on indifference from the citizens. It is a town that is striking in its third world status, especially when contrasted with the extravagance of the conference. "The streets were dirty; there were hawkers with all sorts of wares all over the place, with hardly any walking space on the dusty pavements" (Melamu 2006:200). It goes without saying that the general population is on survival mode and could not care less about the conference. There is a yawning gap between the haves and have nots. The regal state of the VIP life contrasts sharply with the somewhat callous attitude of the people, living and working in an area devoid of basic amenities. "What really shocked me out of my wits was the sight of a woman making water in the middle of the road in full

view of other people" (Melamu 2006:200). So disturbed is Robert and the other two dignitaries with him that they agree as one to return to the hotel. Satire is not averse to chronicling the scatological. This disquieting representation of 'voiding' tugs at our levels of tolerance and disgust. In that brief moment of relieving oneself, there is that dichotomy of morality and immorality, necessity and frivolity. The protagonist's phrase of 'making water' is a well-meaning yet futile attempt to sugar-coat for himself as much as for anyone else, a most embarrassing scene.

The appalling conditions on the streets play themselves out in the hotel as well but in a different context. Prostitution, disguised as friendship and hospitality is continuously on display. The rampart sex work is an underlying theme of the story and further highlights the moral degeneration at play. What makes it even more shocking is that hotel employees are complicit. Realism does not sanitize debauchery; the effect is to jar one to an emotional or physical reaction. It is not neutral in its descriptive slant. When Robert is confronted by one of these bold ladies, he approaches hotel security to voice his displeasure. Instead of providing assistance, the guard, "chuckled, and asked what kind of men we were who wouldn't accept a gift from the gods" (Melamu 2006:208). There are numerous encounters with these ladies of the night much to Robert's consternation. Interestingly enough, and with no small irony, these prostitutes are an example of dedication to service and commitment. They are fluent in both French and English and also persistent to the point of being obsessive. This bilingualism is something that Robert is woefully inept at. They do not feel the angst that Robert does, nor are they prone to philosophical escapism on why they are unable to make physical connections with other people. Robert struggles to make friends and states, "I'd never felt so lonely before. To kill the time, I started playing about in my mind with different definitions of "loneliness" (Melamu 2006:202).

In retrospect and with no small amount of tongue in cheek, Robert surmises these prostitutes as beneficial to Africa, "perhaps it's creatures like these who can unify Africa" (Melamu 2006:206). In the *Odyssey* it is tempting to view Robert's treatment of women as "Other" in the way that men see themselves as Subject as espoused by De Beauvoir (2011:np) that "to posit the Woman is to posit the absolute Other, without reciprocity, refusing against experience, that she could be a subject, a peer". In the same breath, we are reminded by Hegelian dialect that how men identify themselves is irretrievably dependant on the creation of the other in the woman. "Female sexuality has always been conceptualised on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray 1985:23). We are reminded of this when Robert states that for a woman to actually approach a man with romantic intentions borders on the unnatural. After one of his brief yet extremely uncomfortable encounters with a prostitute he reflects, "It wasn't the done thing. To have a woman telling a man she was available was positively unreal. Such brazen behaviour was, in my opinion, unladylike" (Melamu 2006:206).

Conclusion

Odyssey needs to be read as a young diplomat's humorous journey through a part of Africa previously unknown to him. That being said, the story is also a revelation into the gap that exists between Africa's social classes.

There is also the need to appreciate the lack of political will to overturn the status quo because leadership is preoccupied with an obsession to preen itself and divert the problems of their making to the colonial master.

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