

CONFLICT IN THE NOVELS OF T. M. ALUKO AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION-BUILDING

George N. Anaso

Abstract

This paper examines the major concern of T. M. Aluko in focusing on the theme of conflict in the three novels under review. The operation of conflict is highlighted in the three novels: *Chief the Honourable Minister, His Worshipful Majesty and Wrong Ones in the Dock*. The various conflicts are seen as socio-political which the writer uses to highlight the nation's need for educational development, good political leadership and functional judicial and law enforcement systems respectively. These form the implications for the nation, of various conflicts handled by Aluko in his three novels under focus.

Introduction

Every human society is rocked by various kinds of conflict such as economic, political, socio-cultural and religious conflicts. Conflict is as old as human history and reflects the life of the society where it occurs. The literature of every society is bound to mirror these various conflicts as part of the main plots. It has been noted that writers should concern themselves with what is happening in their environment. Jones (1963:34-5) has in this vein prescribed a role for the African writer:

The writer today in Africa must see around him bad politics, bad religions, the misleading of ordinary people and he is bound to write about all this if he writes about his environment. Of course he can decide to opt out of it altogether to write space fiction or something like that. But I feel that a writer has to write about what happens around him.

By independence in 1960, Nigerian literary artists had started writing about independence and nationhood in such works as *Things Fall Apart, A Dance of the Forest the Naked Gods* etc, which bear reflections about post-independence Nigeria. Among the post independence writers is Timothy M. Aluko the novelist of our concern here whose works include *One Man, One Wife, One Man one Matchet, Kinsman and Foreman, Chief the Honourable Minister, His Worshipful Majesty and Wrong Ones in the Dock*.

Aluko's writings are based on some historical anecdotes which he uses not only to portray conflicts in the society but also to pass artistic comments and value judgments on his society. Through this, one can assess and classify Aluko's writings into three stages. The first is the Early Aluko, made up of the first two novels: *One Man, One Wife*; and *One Man, One matchet*; the second is the Middle Aluko made of *Kinsman and Foreman* and *Chief the Honourable Minister*; while the later Aluko is made of *His Worshipful Majesty* and *Wrong Ones in the Dock*. The identification and classification of these stages are based on "thematic and stylistic closeness of the novels grouped together, as well as the author's changing attitude to tradition as can be seen in the works" (Anaso, 1985: 27)

This paper focuses mainly on the last three works of Aluko, namely *Chief the Honourable Minister, His Worshipful Majesty and Wrong Ones in the Dock*, but passing references will be made on the other earlier works where necessary.

Conflict

What is Conflict?

Holman (1960: 118) defines conflict as: the struggle which grows out of the interplay of two opposing forces in a plot"

He identifies five levels of conflict which a protagonist may enter into as follows,

1. The protagonist may struggle against the force of nature
2. He may struggle against another person, usually the antagonist;
3. He may struggle against society as a force;

4. Two elements within him may struggle for mastery;
1. He may struggle against fate or destiny.

In all the three novels under focus, the conflict is located not necessarily in a protagonist as a person but in the society itself, taking the posture of a faceless protagonist where two elements within it—the western and the traditional ways are in opposition. In each novel, Aluko adopts a shifting emphasis on different subjects in his dimensional presentation of conflict in his society. The major question he appears to raise is how can these two opposing elements within the society exist side by side without permanently damaging each other? This big question continues to run as a motif in the novels under presentation, with the novelist proffering modestly the answer.

Conflict in the Novels

Chief the Honourable Minister presents conflict in the personality of Alade Moses who possesses a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of London, and a Diploma in Education. On his return home, he was feted by his community which organized a rousing entertainment for him and he later became the Principal of Newtown Grammar School. The conflict arises from the operation of what he wants and what his community wants him to be. He would have preferred to remain the principal of Newtown Grammar school and enhance the educational upliftment of his community, a role deemed more urgent by the novelist, owing to his (the novelist's) continuous decrying of ignorance in the society. Alade Moses, rather than stick to this convincing and more honourable role, allows himself to be overwhelmed by his obligation to the Newtown Improvement Union's rousing welcome party on his return from abroad, and the union's unflinching support for his candidacy for a parliamentary seat and eventual appointment as a cabinet minister in the republic of Afromacoland. Moses is inalienably committed to the interests of the union and its leaders for their contribution to his personal advancement.

Although morally upright even in political office, he had greatly compromised his position to his community. The effect is that he is unable to curb the exercises of his subordinates and so, he degenerates into ineptitude; hence, he is bull-dozed by the Newtown Improvement Union into supporting Grew Abbyssinia's (a half-literate businessman) appointment as principal of Newtown Grammar school;

Once more, he was worried about what he was going to ask his cabinet colleagues to do. He thought he knew what was right and what was wrong, but he also knew that since he became a Minister of State, a good many things that had been done by his colleagues were not right... some times done by the cabinet collectively, most often done by individual ministers (Aluko, 1980: 60-61)

Aluko clearly lays down the process of psychological decay in the erstwhile Principal and educationist, Alade Moses. He not only starts to give reasons to justify his inability to do the right thing, but also procrastinates:

Long after Cargeous Gregory had gone, Moses sat in his chair in the lounge, thoroughly displeased with himself. Again the thought came to him for the umpteenth time that he must take a stand sometimes. There must be a limit to the dishonourable acts that he would allow himself to be associated with.

But again, for the umpteenth time, realisation comes to him that his action was now ill-timed and belated (Aluko, 1970: 181)

There, in the cabinet, Moses discovers that his colleagues and the political system they expose are warped and corrupt and he would have liked to resign and go back to Newtown Grammar School to help educate his community. Also he discovers that he cannot do so because the society he cannot refuse to oblige has put him there for their selfish advantage, not for his own sake.

In Alade Moses therefore, we see a character struggling against the society but losing out because the force he is struggling with is too imperious for him to withstand. He falls when the author (in exasperation and disappointment with the westernized elite he thought would lead the society out of the darkness of ignorance, fails woefully) brings in the military to topple the corrupt democratic system in a bloody coup d'etat.

The portrayal of Alade Moses is an anti-climax, comparing him with Titus Oti, the British

trained and upright antagonist of his corrupt, traditionalist kinsman, Simeon Oke. Titus knows what he is doing and what he wants to do. Despite the hue and cry of his own community, he gets his corrupt kinsman convicted and jailed so as to rid the service of bad elements. While, therefore, western culture wins the struggle in *Kinsman and Foreman*, tradition overwhelms the former in Chief the *Honourable Minister*.

In His Worshipful Majesty, conflict is shifted from a single protagonist and his society to representatives of two conflicting elements. Mr. Morrison, the Chairman of Aiye Local Government and a lawyer by profession symbolizes westernization while Oba Olayiwole, the Alaiye of Aiye is the embodiment of traditional life and wisdom. The conflict started when Mr. Morrison was appointed the Chairman of the new Local Government Council by government, in the bid to transform and modernize the local government system to respond to modern democratic dispensation, from what it was in the past, where the paramount ruler was the autocratic ruler in the colonial dispensation. The Alaiye saw the new local government reforms as a deliberate infringement on his inalienable authority over his domain and so was out defend his traditional authority against any such encroachment. This conflict is symbolic of the encroaching tendency of western culture on the traditional African values, which started with colonialism in African in the early twentieth century.

As should be expected, a dismal struggle ensues between the Alaiye, trying to ward off threats to his traditional authority and Mr. Morrison trying to set up a modernized local government system along Western line. Mr. Morrison, however, dies as a result of this conflict while the Alaiye is elated by this pyretic victory. However, for fear of reprisals from government, the Alaiye decides to commit suicide; than live to be subjected to some unimaginable disgrace of royalty by some unknown commoners in the guise of government. The conflict therefore ends on a note of no-victor-novanquished.

In Wrong Ones in the Dock, Aluko presents a social miasma. He winds the plot on an incident early 1980s in which forty-three of the sixty-two suspects standing trial in some courts in Lagos were suffocated in the enclosed lorry conveying them to and from the courts. The lorry with its passengers was left under the scorching heat with very little air space. The result is that forty-three suspects died. The novel is centred on two of the remaining survivors- a man and his son (Jonathan and Paul Egbor respectively). The crisis arises at No 22 Fasanya Street in Lagos. A quarrel occurs among some neighbours- the families of Gilbert Bassey and Jonathan Egbor. This fracas results in a fight Gilbert in an attempt to hit Jonathan with a club inadvertently clubs his own mother to death and passes the guilt over to the opponent. This warrants police arrest and detention of Jonathan and his son Paul.

Aluko exposes the flaws in the western judicial system as practiced in Nigeria

The police force in Nigeria is also exposed to be ineffectual owing to either the incompetence of the member of the force or their corrupt and unreliable attitude. Again the "Juju" factor is a scourge which the judicial system cannot address. For instance, Mr. Oherinde is an eye-witness of what actually happens on the day of the fight at No 22 Fasanya street. His mysterious death in a motorcycle accident is interpreted as an attempt by the Bassey family to silence him and so keep the truth perpetually covered up.

In a sort of comparison with the traditional judicial system Aluko asserts that the customary courts sometimes allow the contestants to engage in verbal confrontation while the members of the jury listen to them. In some cases, the truth can come out of such an exercise, whereas the English judicial system will regard such as contempt of the court by the contestants.

The determination of the actual truth of the matter in the conflict took almost two years. At least, after much physical and mental agony and near death in "Black Maria" Jonathan and his son got acquitted and discharged. But here, Aluko points out that the father and son do not receive justice because judgment delayed is judgment denied. The western judicial system which is expected to provide a speedy and accurate trial and justice has become hindered by the traditional elements like the operation of "Juju" scare and the incompetence and total lack of reliance on the law enforcement agents in performing the sanctimonious role of ensuring that the innocent are protected by the law.

Implications of Aluko's Portrayal of Conflicts to the Nation-Building

Chief the Honourable Minister symbolically portrays in the Republic of Afromaco land, Nigeria as an emerging democratic state. Democracy being a completely novel political experience in Africa, is bound to present various problems to politicians in particular and the nation in general. One such problem is the intrusion of the unmitigated whims and caprices of some ignorant but powerful vested interests who sponsor candidates to both the parliament and cabinet offices. These sponsored persons serve as mere stooges to their grand masters who are some where behind the scene, playing the fiddle. Such was the case of the leaders of the Newtown Improvement Union and Alade Moses who cannot withstand pressure from behind. This situation leads to "bad politics" according to Jones (1963), which incidentally leads to the collapse of government and finally to chaos.

The conflict in *His Worshipful Majesty* exhibits the dangers fraught with the attempt to change an existing system in African setting. These are definitely toes that will be stepped on, interests that will be hurt, as well as territories that will be encroached on. These vested interests will surely give a fight and the crisis may also engulf a large group of people who will fall on one side or the other of the conflict. In this respect Aluko expects those who are concerned with introducing innovations in a traditional milieu to plan their strategies well so as to reduce conflicts and their attendant casualties. Modernization of traditional communities can be a dangerous business if a confrontational approach is adopted. In *Things Fall Apart* the first missionary in Umuofia community Reverend Brown, after friendly interactions with some elders discovered that a frontal attack on paganism would be fraught with risks and problems. He decided to build schools and provided gainful employment to the graduates of these primary schools who were employed as court messengers and clerks. However. Mr. Brown's successor, Mr. Smith saw things differently and adopted a confrontational approach which brought down a major crisis in the community.

Mr. Morrison would have succeeded if he had introduced such other innovations in the local government scheme that would make his intentions less obvious to people like the Alaiye of Aiye, Oba Olayiwole Adegoke. Introduction of educational and infrastructural improvements into the scheme would have convinced the people of government's good intentions and would have perhaps reduced attachment to traditional institutions by the people, making the job easier for the administrators.

In *Wrong Ones in the Dock*, Aluko brings into focus the consequences of faulty application of western institutions in Africa. The British judicial and law enforcement system, rather than sanitizing the society, is a hindrance, such that even the traditional system seems to be working better. However, the westernised urban centres cannot continue to adopt the customary court system, for such system is already out of place even though it may work in a homogenous community. Aluko uses *Wrong Ones in the Dock* to call for serious and urgent judicial reforms that would reduce unnecessary delays in the administration of justice in the land. Using the fate of Jonathan Egbor and his son as a critical point, the writer notes that justice delayed is justice denied. This travesty of justice happens on a daily basis. It is only one case out of many, and many innocent citizens are brutalized, blaming this on fate.

Conclusion

Bemth Lindfors' rather uncharitable criticism of Aluko does not appear tenable after due consideration of the writer's works. Lindfors said:

One seaches his novels for the high moral seriousness that pervades the earliest works of such committed writers as Achebe, Soyinka and Armah,

Aluko seems content to laugh at his world, and because his laughter contains no undertones of anguish or outrage, it rings hollow. He is a critic without a troubled conscience, a tiding gadfly without a sting (Lindfors, 1971:52).

A careful consideration of the three novels under focus will reveal that Aluko has a troubled conscience. He is troubled about the ineptitude and corruption pervading the political atmosphere of the country in *Chief the Honourable Minister*. In *His Worshipful Majesty*, Aluko is troubled by the modernization process of traditional society and institutions. He does not want to see the communities polarised into opposing camps rather than marshalled together for progress. Finally, in *Wrong Ones in*

the Dock, Aluko, after reviewing the operation of the judiciary and the law enforcement outfit, notes with pain that a lot remains to be done to make them effectual. He wants therefore, to see a reform of the judicial process and the operations of the law enforcement agency so that the society will have confidence in them when their operations have become relevant to the public.

Reference

Aluko. T. M. (1970) *Chief the Honourable Minister*. Ibadan; Heinemann.

Aluko. T. M. (1973) *His Worshipful Majesty*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Aluko. T. M. (1974) *Wrong Ones in the Dock* . Ibadan: Heinemann.

Anaso, G. N. (1985) Conflict in T, M. Aluko, A Study of the Novels of T. M. Aluko Department of English, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Holman, C. H. (1960) *A Handbook to Literature* Indiana: Odyssey.

Jones, E. (1963) *The Writer in a Modern African State*. Per Watsberg Edition

Lindfors, B.(1971) T. M. Aluko Nigerian Satirist *African Literature Today* ,No. 5, London: Heinemann.