

Aspects of Protest in Mongo Beti's Novels

By

David Eka

*Department of English Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus*

ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with Aspects of Protest in Mongo Beti's Novels. It was first published in Modern Languages Association of Nigeria (MLAN) Journal in 1983 as part of the proceedings of the 7th Annual Conference of MEAN which took place in Calabar from 20- 23 April 1983 have revisited it here on request and as a part of our effort to get our younger colleagues to be acquainted with an appropriate background to protest literature. Data for the study were collected mainly from library sources, particularly the novels analyzed and some of the critical sources on the novels in line with the theme of the Conference which was "The Writer and the Critic" The findings and the critical views expressed are direct and very easy to appreciate They centre around oppression dysfunctional education and social maltreatment within the communities where the novels are focused What appears to be the climax of the protest is the Sixa a camp ironically meant for the training of young girls before they got married. The exact opposite of decent training occurs there. The article ends on a bleak note... indicating that scholars in various societies are now confronted with extensive protests, which have made inroads into more expanded in fact, global protests of different dimensions. The article concludes thus: since oppressions and untoward behaviour patterns appear to have come to stay in the world, protest literature and general protest writing are bound to continue to be a part of human existence... our efforts to make the world livable.

Preamble

As shown in the End Notes¹, this article was first published in Modern Languages Association of Nigeria (MLAN) Journal as a part of the proceedings from the 7th Annual Conference of MLAN which took place in the University of Calabar from 20 to 23 April. 1983. The theme of the Conference was: "The Writer and the Critic". The Journal was edited by Dr. K. Echenim.

The publication is revisited here with minor adjustments and on request for the purpose providing an important background research in a young Department of English for protest literature scholars. After the adjusted version of this article published in 1983, there is a note on the extensions and inroads which have characterized the theme of protest recently.

Introduction

All literature worthy of serious consideration must reflect the type of society from which it emerges, the type of social climate that nurtures it and, perhaps, the time of its existence - a historical period. When, therefore, one speaks about protest writing as being generally

associated with South African literature, the point becomes clear in view of the racial conflict there precipitated by the South African apartheid policy. It is also generally known that South Africans inescapably develop and use a protest mentality or what L. Nkosi refers to as: ready-made plots of racial violence, racial apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning. 2 The immediate framework from which this protest springs is that the blacks who constitute about 72% of the population in South Africa are politically and socially discriminated against them, (the blacks), are not allowed to take part in the white minority government nor were they allowed general legitimate free existence in their homeland.

In his *Tell Freedom* (1954), Peter Abraham depicts the evils white minority oppression on an alarming scale; the blacks are in chains every moment of their lives. If they do not stay in their sordid black locations, they must carry passes on all conceivable occasions:

When Jim left his Pedi village in the Northern Transvaal he had to go to the nearest police station or Native Affairs Department. There he got a Trek Pass This permitted him to make the journey to Johannesburg. On reaching the city he got an Identification Pass and a Six-Day Special Pass...3

At least nine categories of passes are enumerated on this single occasion. The novelist goes on to talk about the sign - nay a nightmare - that haunts all blacks in South Africa: "All my life had been dominated by a sign often invisible but no less real for that, which said: RESERVED FOR EUROPEANS ONLY..."4

He makes the point that because of this callous white restriction he had to be born into the filth and squalor of the slums and generations had been born, had grown up and died amid similar situations. He then summarizes his life experience, to make it clear to the world the focal point of his protest:

Perhaps life a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa. Also, there was the need to write, to tell freedom, and for this I needed to be personally free...4

In Alex La Guma, we have a more biting, a more pungent protest as epitomized in his *A Walk in the Night*: all through, there is the feeling of anger, desire for revenge, crime, drunkenness and violence. Michael Andonis is dismissed from his job and he vows: "That sonavabitch. that bloody white sonavabitch, I'll get him".5 The unhealthiness of black locations - District Six at the centre- is described with an uncommon articulateness:

The breeze carried the stale smells from passageway to passageway until massed smells... became one vast anonymous odour, so widespread and all embracing as become unidentifiable, hardly noticed by the initiated nostrils of the teeming, cramped world of poverty which it enveloped.6

Other numerous South African writings like Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy*, Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, in their differing degrees, centre around protest as a realistic reaction to the South African situation.

South Africa apart, however, there are other regions and regional experiences that are legitimately covered by the protest theme in East Africa, for instance, it is well known that James Ngugi's novels generally centre on the sufferings of Kenyans in the hands of the colonialists and the various forms of struggle for freedom from domination, struggle by the Kenyans to belong to Kenyan hands! As Daiborne puts it. James Ngugi's work

illustrated a basic difference from that of his West African counterparts; it is closer to a "protest tradition, closer to South Africa, for he is almost obsessed by, the struggle for freedom in Kenya...7

Duthorne, however, has not made the point quite clear here because there is a lot in West African writing that has the protest texture: literature from Cameroun and particularly the novels of Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono, for instance. John thinks similarly when he states: "Mongo Beti's novels are protest novels having colonialism as the essential force which determines the climax of action and the denouement."8

This paper is an attempt to justify the extension of the coverage of protest writing through an examination of two of Mongo Beti's novels: *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and *Mission to Kala*.

Mongo Beti and the Theme of Protest:

General Publications on the Theme of Protest

After writing a short story - *Ville Cruelle* - published in *Trois écrivains, noir*, (1954). Mongo Beti, (real name Alexandre Biyidi), wrote the novel: *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, published in French in 1956 as *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*. This was followed in 1957 by *Mission to Kala* (*Mission terminée*) and in 1958 by *King Lazarus* (*Le roimiracule*). Fourteen years later, i.e. in 1972, Beti wrote *Main basse sur le Cameroun* (*The Rough Handling of Cameroun*).⁹ *Remember Reuben* was published in France in 1974 and a few weeks after *Perpetue et Phabitude du Malheur* (*Perpetue and the Habit of Unhappiness*) appeared. His last novel - *La ruine Presque cocasse d'un polichinelle* (*Lament for an African Pol*), appeared in 1979. All the six novels, the short story, (*Ville cruelle*), and the fiery *Historical Chronicle*- (*Main basse sur le Cameroun*) - are all evidence of Mongo Beti's determination which, by the French administrative practice, Africans were expected "to show loyalty to cultural and patriotic values alien to their own distinctive, traditional heritage".¹⁰ Mongo Beti has made it clear that the African values are good enough and that the values which distinguish Africa from other races will survive since they are the truly meaningful ones for Africans.¹¹

Beti sets the stage for his protest in *Ville cruelle*. In spite of its episodic nature, this short story is an attack on foreigners and their exploitative tendencies. The Greek merchants are here particularly singled out for attack. He refers to them as thieves. This initial protest against foreign exploitation is continued in all his later writing. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that Beti has undergone various forms of torture because of his crusade against colonial and neo-colonial inhumanity. One is quickly reminded here about the torture and humiliation suffered by other protest writers, (South African writers, for instance, who are all practically on exile and James Ngugi of Kenya who has served various terms of imprisonment for protesting against colonial oppression). Beti's *Historical Chronicle*, for instance, (a piece of work that has a texture very close to Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*), was seized by the French government five days after its publication and was placed on ban until late May

1976.12 For a detailed study of aspects of protest in Mongo Beti's novels we shall take a look at two of his best novels *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and *Mission to Kala*.

Protest in the Poor Christ of Bomba

The Poor Christ of Bomba is the story of the attempt and failure of Reverend Father Drumont to establish Catholicism and Catholic doctrines in Bomba and in Tala. It is also the story of colonial exploitation with the colonialists represented by M. Vidal, and to some extent Father Drumont. Beti overtly (and sometimes subtly) protests against the destructive activities of M Vidal and the dogged insensitivity and lack of insight displayed by the missionary-Father Drumont.

After three years, Reverend Father Drumont decides to leave Bomba mission for two weeks and revisit the people of Tala, "offering them another chance to repent, to abandon their vices and return to Christ", 13 With Denis. (the darling boy), and Zacharia (the cook), the Father sets off on the journey visiting Monbet, Timbo, Kota, Bitie and Evindi, among other villages. He (the Father), discovers to his surprise, that most of the villages had ignored his preaching and had gone on with their indigenous life patterns! Where a church had been established, it was either completely abandoned by most people or only perfunctorily looked after. At Evindi, for instance, everything was "rotten" (p.47). At Kondo it was a ramshackled sort of thing. "just shed got up with masses of palmfronds" (p.121). The men in particular stoutly resisted conversion to Catholic faith. In most cases, only children and women showed any form of interest in the Father's preaching. No amount of threat or physical encounter, (witness the cases of Sanga Boto (pp. 73-76), and the fire-brand (pp. 23-24), could convince the people to accept Catholic doctrines. At last, the Father returns to Bomba Mission and after nearly twenty years of futile endeavour, finally returns to his country.

Beti seizes every opportunity to put forward his protest against the Father Superior's big-headedness, insensitivity, short sightedness and short temper (p. 8) in a number of ways. For the Reverend Father, there are no half measures: the blacks must abandon their dances no matter how creative (pp. 55-56); they must not marry more than one wife no matter how much a chief needs additional hands to work on the farm, and no matter how much one needs children when the first wife is unfruitful (p. 65). These apart, would-be wives must be sent to the Sixa for a period of about three months for training in order to become good future housewives. The entire religious programme suggests an attempt to make the people of Bomba and Tala become what Tunteng describes as "the transformation of Africans into black Frenchmen", since they are persuaded to abandon their ways and adopt the ways of the colonialists and their agents. Perhaps it will be an advantage to emphasize that as Beti portrays them, the colonialist and the missionary are about the same. On the question of cultural dance which the Father wanted to stop by all means, someone asks:

Suppose the whites were dancing here tonight instead of us and you were passing by, would you rush in and break their trumpets and their guitars? But how should we live without our dancing? You whites have your cars, your aeroplanes, your trains... But we have nothing but our dancing. And now you want to take that from us. What could we do instead? (p.56).

Here Beti is clearly protesting against the simulation policy in French West African countries—a policy that thrives on continued subordination of African interest to French policies¹⁵.

It is also blameworthy to note that while Reverend Father Drumont discourages polygamy and breeding of children by women who are not properly married, he exploits the situation by charging high fees during the baptism of such children. The rates also change perhaps with changing economic situations or with the missionary's whims! One may be tempted to think that this was a way of discouraging the breeding of children outside normal wedlock. However, the Father, Zacharia and all others know that there is no changing of the natives they will always have additional wives and more children and children by unmarried women will always be welcome, especially if they are boys. So when the Father insists on higher fees for what he considers illegitimate kids, he was clearly embarking on what amounts to an economic exploitation. The catechist at Bitie (pp. 39-40), confirms this tendency to exploit. This is revealed in his discussion with the Reverend Father and the consolation the latter takes as implied in the view:

But it's not altogether so bad if they do take second wives, after at least getting properly married to the first one...And they do usually send extra children for baptism, paying a higher fee than the good Christians (p. 40).

To ensure that he does not miss the opportunity of collecting extra fees, the Father "always". (my emphasis) "writes on the baptismal records of such children "Ex fornicationortus" (p.40). Similar situation can also be observed in the case of an old woman who, without any means of livelihood, was compelled to pay cult dues (i.e. church fees!). Zacharias' constant chuckling with mischievous glee and comments about greedy priests in competition for money; and of course the Father's general attitude towards payment of church dues all suggest the missionary's economic motive and economic exploitation.

The Sixa

Beti's protest in connection with the Sixa is even more intense: girls sent to the sixa were supposed to be trained in Christian behaviour so as to become good future housewives. They were not, for instance, expected to have premarital sexual intercourse. (The sixa itself is a reminder of present day Catholic Convent, the opposite for boys being Seminary). Instead of expected Christian training, there are indications, all through the novel, that the girls were subjected to physical torment, forced labour, sexual exploitation and extremely insanitary conditions. It is indicated that Father Drumont, (even if he did not himself make up the song). taught the sixa girls to sing and to nurse the mentality to:

Work with a will
Then strive harder still;
And never give up,
But work till you drop (p.14).

The excruciating manual labour which the sixa girls were subjected to is partial explanation for the sex orgies that went on there. As Catherine explains:

..... if she refused Raphael would send her back to the heavy work, loading her with painful difficulties, insecurity and suspicion (p. 173)

The stark reality of promiscuity is brought out by Marguerite, one of the sixa girls who, being subjected to severe whipping protests

Fata, you're turing me unjustly you must know that every girl in the Sixa sleeps with someone here or from outside... why are you persecuting me? You're unjust... (p. 183)

Marguerites polite disdain has no equal in any of Beti's other works.

The sixa was also notorious with regard to sanitation. Dr. Arnaud's Report on the Women's Camp (pp. 199-202), shows that the sixa was absolutely uninhabitable: poor ventilation, the presence of all sorts of filth, diverse diseases. All these gave rise to the emaciation and haggard appearance of the inmates. Only the girls who had "only just entered the sixa" had the semblance of normal human beings. Yet, the Father Superior claims to have been ignorant of the unhealthy condition of the sixa! He claims to be unaware of the hideous orgies perpetrated under his "very nostrils!" Even with that claim (and indeed because of it), the unhealthy nature of the sixa as portrayed deserves nothing less than the most overt protest. And that is just what Beti had done.

With regard to forced labour, Beti is equally clear in his condemnation. M. Vidal, the colonial administrator, could not understand why the Reverend Father ever suggested the use of machines for the construction of the new road across Tala country. The Father seems to be sympathetic with the blacks in this regard and so considers the construction of road a "misfortune" since the blacks would invariably have to labour in the hot sun from morning till night. The reminder of this mixed blessing, (of the price that has to be paid for getting a road), is the construction of the Manding-Zomba road during time people "died in heaps" (p.41). This protest, while directly concerning the administrator, also extends to the Father Superior who compelled the sixa girls (through the agency of the sixa administrators like Raphael), to undertake work entirely beyond their abilities - "heavy labours, exceeding the strength of their sex" (p. 201). Two issues appear to form the background to this particular protest: the systems of "prestation" and the "indigénat"¹⁶. According to Neres, "prestation" is tax payable in the form of a definite amount of labour. With this provision, Africans could, until 1946, be drafted into brigades for compulsory labour, usually for public works. "Indigenat", on the other hand, was a special legal provision which gave authority to French administrators to try and sentence Africans on the spot. This background is further given credence when one considers, as John puts it, that **The Poor Christ of Bomba** covers the of the 1930s and the economic ventures of those periods." Thus, when M. Vidal uses 17 forced labour to construct and when he sends people to prison without any formal trial, he was doing nothing short of what was "normal" in the relationship between the colonialists and the Africans before 1946. Beti, like other intellectuals, must have found this both unjust and unacceptable. As a representative of the masses, and in keeping with the normal function of the creative artist in society, he had to protest the way he has done.

The Poor Christ of Bomba

Is also poised on pointing out that the garbled version of what constitutes true education is unacceptable to the Cameroonians. Denis' paternal father keeps on complaining about the slow progress that he (Denis), makes in school but consoles himself that even though Denis would not, as a mission boy, have the chance of going to school "to see the white priests at

close quarters would be the edition I could fee (p) This ties op with the attempt try the colonialists to give black Abicans the impression that the location suitable for Africs is the type suitable for them colonialist). This reality points to the general colonist condition of cultural imperialism of which asimilation is dy but a part of the system. This protest against a restricted view of education is, however, de pungent in Mission to Kala which follows.

Protest in Mission to Kala

Central to as dominating action in **Mission to Kala** is the issue of education Medza, the sixteen years old boy, is at the centre of every important action. He is exposed to education in the narrow see, (which is that acquired through learning in school), and also education in the broad sense, (which is experiencing). The author demonstrates the uselessness of theoretical education, the crises which are bound to result from growth and awareness and inescapable rejection of values which are alien to a people.

Jean Marie Medza returns to his village after failing the orals in his baccalauréat examination At home he is sent on a mission to bring back Niam's wife who had "decamped". The mission took him to Kala country where the parents of Niam's wife were. In spite of his failure in his examination, both the people of his village (and district) and the people of Kala hold him in high esteem. Though so young, he is considered the most suitable for the mission because he has "special thunder"- his certificates, learning and knowledge of white men's secrets." He accepts Bikokolo's entreaties and goes on the mission. While in Kala country, he is exposed to numerous experiences and returns to his village a mature person ready to reject what, to him, was objectionable.

Beneath the straight forward story lurk numerous protest issues: the education that the French colonialists gave Medza was suitable for the French. Medza was schooled in the ancestral wisdom of the whites, "not our ancestral wisdom". The lament here is that if our ancestral wisdom were taught in Medza's school, it would have been normal for him to do better than his white child counterpart (p.61). Again, the education Medza received involved an almost exclusive use of French Language with the consequent perpetuation of this medium after school days: "You'll speak nothing but their language" (p.82). There are other references to this question of medium and it seems to us a far-reaching protest when we consider the bilingual situation in the Camerouns: English and French are supposed to be used in all schools and public institutions but is practically only French that is used in all places. In the University of Yaounde for instance, more than 80% of all courses are offered in French. It is on record that the President of Cameroun in speaking to Anglophone audiences since federation, "not once has read a text, or said a word in English. The issue of trying to make Africans "black Frenchmen", therefore, resurfaces. The ability to speak French is enough to get anyone anything, anytime (p.15).

The content and medium apart, there is the problem of acquiring education that has no practical value. In Kala, Medza was put to the test-to explain a few things about what he had known. He was found wanting in the "real test of my knowledge - a test imposed by genuine circumstance..." (p.67). The situation in which one acquires knowledge that may never be used in real life situation is common in colonial and ex-colonial countries. Beti's message here seems to be that in truly independent nations such a situation should not be allowed to continue.

In addition to education, the question of religion which was dominant in **The Poor Christ of Bomba** is revisited in **Mission to Kala**. The conversation in Kala between Petrus son-of-God and Abraham the Boneless Wonder reveals Beti's protest against the colonialists' insistence on Catholicism as the only religion:

Boneless Wonder "Religion teaches us that "Sons-of-Cod: which religious Boneless Wonder: "Catholicism" Son-of-God: Excellent. I'm quite willing to hear you expound Catholicism, so long as you tell us afterwards what the other religions have to say, too".

Boseless Wonder: "Are there any other religions? The mirthless laughter provoked by this conversation is Beti's strong weapon, for the conversation is apparently an undisguised protest against lack of freedom of worship: to some people, it is strange to hear that in Kala there are other religions besides Catholicism imposed by the French colonialists.

Finally, the systems of "prestation" and Indigenat", with all their repugnant consequences, handled in **The Poor Christ of Bomba**, are revisited in **Mission to Kala**, (cf. P. 9). Zambo's view of life was "without illusion or ambition" (p. 45). Like Zambo, many Cameroonians had viewed life "as their ancestors" did and so were not aware of the terms of the October 1946 constitution which proscribed "prestation" in particular. Some chiefs and other agents of colonialism had continued exploitation of the uninformed masses. They, the colonialists, had "perfected a new system of oppression" (p.126). This reference is, apparently, to the neo-colonialists' inhumanity. It is against the **reformed** colonial oppression that Beti apparently concentrates his protest in his writings from 1972.

Conclusion

It has been shown in this paper that the theme of protest which, until recently, was restricted to South African writing can, and should, legitimately be extended to cover other regions of the world. In particular, this theme has been shown to have direct relevance not only to literature from East Africa represented here by James Ngugi but also literature from French-speaking West African States, (in this paper represented by Cameroun literature), with Mongo Beti featuring. It might even be possible to extend the frontier further and to include other works like Chinua Achebe's **A Man of the People** as being protest against corruption, greed, empty-headedness and pretence. But that must await future consideration. In the meanwhile, suffice it to note that there are certain common characteristics noticed in the three regions sketched in this paper. There is the existence of an objectionable phenomenon, an event or behaviour that is too glaring to escape the notice of the creative writer. There is the indication that the removal of the object of protest is bound to result in great happiness for the great majority of the people in that society. Finally, there is the feature that the protest writers are usually either imprisoned or are visited with threats of extermination. It is consoling that in all cases, neither the threat of extinction nor the passing inconvenience to which the protest writers are subjected is enough to deter their efforts: protest writers are known to continue their writing from their hideouts.

In Mongo Beti's **The Poor Christ of Bomba** and **Mission to Kala** the protest has been particularly effective because it is presented through the boyish conception (of the world) of

teenagers exemplified in Denis and Medza: it is the inexperienced who can be deceived; the mature know, and will always protest when oppressed

Extensions on the Theme of Protest: A Projection for Further Research

It is now generally known that protest has practically become a way of life for the majority of people on planet earth. Adebola (2014-1) quoting from Stauffer States: there is no common understanding of protest literature; the term has been used to thean almost all literature or no literature If we consider the fact that almost all nations of the world have become involved in one form of protest or the other protesting against terrorists, kidnapping, poor governance, natural disasters like landslides, flooding, poor manufacturing and fake drugs- then we can say that protest has become a universal phenomenon. Since writers from all nations mirror life in their environments, we can also be right to say that protest literature has made inroads into almost all nations of the world. Scholars in the field of protest literature are therefore encouraged to research into protest in as many nations of the world as possible, including those which had hitherto been stable and peaceful. The implication of these aspects of protests is that scholars can now focus attention on the post apartheid protests-such protests having more or less ended at about 1994, giving rise to wider protest issues.

The young scholar in protest literature thus has a wide field to choose from: political protests, social protests and even general protest. For protest literature all genres are open for research- the novel, poetry or drama. Protest literature and general protest writing will continue in the world so long as oppression, unkind acts and general inhumanity are a part of human existence.

End Notes

This article: "Aspects of Protest in Mongo Beti's Novels" was first published in Modern Languages Association of Nigeria (MLAN) Journal as a part of Conference proceedings of the 7th Annual Conference under the theme: "The Writer and the Critic". The Conference took place at the University of Calabar from 20-23 April, 1983. The publication was edited by Dr. K. Echenim

Nkosi (1965:216)

Abrahams (1981:178-179)

Abrahams 310-311

La Guma (1972:5)

La Guma p.48

Dathorne (1979:126)

John (1982-63)

I owe this translation to Dr. E. E. John

Neres (1962:41)

Dathorne p.297

John p. 112

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