

Crime and Criminality in African Literature

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Abstract

The essay investigates the extent to which African literary writers have used their literatures to document crime and criminality that proliferate in our society. It acknowledges that even though our literary writers have made ample documentation of certain crimes and criminality in their writings; nevertheless, it is of the view that such crimes as advance free fraud, drug-trafficking, prostitution, etc., seem not have been adequately reported in their genres. The essay enquires into such social issues and theories as crime, types of deviance, declining core values, drug-related criminality, advance-free-fraud, and drug-pushing. The essay is confident that literary writers are unique vigilante; efforts they make to document those facets of social malaise represent energies spent in the right direction. We insist that the literary work still represents the figurative mirror wherein we appraise ourselves. Consequently, while we use Chibuzo Asomugha's *A Step into the Dark* and Nick Kamels' *A Game of Vultures* for this study, we urge our literary writers to do more to document these social ills that confront us in a complex and confounding digitalized global village.

Introduction

The literary writer does not write in a vacuum. His society provides the raw material with which he writes as the watchdog of his society. Thus he mirrors his society by projecting the ills that bedevil it in fictive milieu. As a committed social critic he writes with a determination to improve the existing social status quo for the better. In the process, he entertains, teaches and informs in didacticism, the cardinal utilitarian functions of any literary work. Some of the social issues handled by creative writers who write on the African literature today are crime and

criminality spanning from the pre-colonial Africa through the contemporary.

A careful reading of these works in the three genres of literature reveals that little or inadequate attention is given to certain crimes which assume a wider dimension in contemporary Africa. These crimes are those of illegal commercialization in narcotics or hard drugs (cocaine, hemp, marijuana, etc.) and advance-free fraud, otherwise called 419. To the best of our knowledge, our creative writers have not done much to portray this moral scourge and cancer which eats deep into our social fabric in their publications.

To develop this topic, the following issues of social concern will be examined as they are germane to the creative writer and the literary critic as well as the (casual) reader interested in what our literary writers write in fiction:

- Crime and Criminality in Traditional African Society.
- Theories of Crime (and Criminality)
- Types of Deviance in African Literature.
- Traditional Values on the Wane
- Drug-Related Criminality in African Literature.
- Portrayal of Advance-Free Fraud in African Literature.
- Drug-Pushing and 419 as Twin Evils of Contemporary Realities.

Crime and Criminality in Traditional African Society

African Society has ideals and values which her people hold in high esteem. To uphold and maintain these values, certain kinds of behaviour patterns considered normal are expected from the members of the society. Those accepted values make the African society to prescribe code of conduct considered desirable for the continued existence of the society. The acquisition and maintenance of the code of conduct constitute the norm as we find in the normative practices. Therefore any member of the society who behaves in a manner that goes contrary to the normative practices is sanctioned. This implies that infringement

of these rules amounts to offence. There are, however, certain violations of the normative practices that are adjudged criminal. To this end, we view crime as static whereas criminality is performative and dynamic.

To ensure that societal values are enforced in order to make members of the society behave in the expected way, rules are made. Of course, these rules are unwritten as they evolved from a preliterate society. In effect, their maintenance is by social disapproval, i.e. by way of sanctions. (O, Donnell, 1977: 204) The values from where the people fashion their code of conduct vary from one society to the other. By implication, the accepted values of a given people which their *infringement* may amount to crime may not be so viewed in another society. However, there are values which have universal appeal. For instance, witchcraft, murder, adultery, theft and arson (Amadi, 1982:15-29) represent serious infringement of the values in the traditional African society and elsewhere.

It must be noted that there are certain crimes which are considered a desecration of the earth goddess, which the Igbo call *nso ala*. In some sections of the African society, they are viewed as taboos and they attract serious sanctions in order to propitiate the earth goddess. Some of these taboos border on gender (Anyachonkeya 2000: 149), while the others place prohibition on all members of the society.

Generally speaking, sanctions are placed on all social behaviours, some of which are approved (as positive sanctions) while some are not approved as negative sanctions (Radcliffe-Brown, 1971: 205). Thus, the negative sanctions are punishments on the offenders. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, the negative sanction placed on Okonkwo for committing female *ochu* is seven years self-exile which he has to serve in Mbanta, his material home.

Quite a good number of these crimes – if not all – have been documented in the (literary) works of African creative writers. They constitute important social issues explored in these literatures and our literary writers are painstaking in capturing

these crimes in their commitment to Mother Africa; thus they remind us where the rain began to beat us as a people (Achebe, 1982: 44).

Theories of Crime and Criminality

Various explanations have been offered for the continued dominance of crime and criminality in society. These explanations are embodied in the theories of crime. There are, for example, the physiological and psychological explanations which suggest that crime is a personal rather than a social problem. The theory, nevertheless, is controversial as the approach varies from those who believe that some people are innately wicked whereas some others think there is a genetic cause for criminality connected with the endocrine glands. (O'Daniel, 1977: 204).

Another theoretical account of crime, according to O'Donnel, has sociological base. The corpus of this theory attributes crime to the so-called 'culture-transmission theory'. It views crime as the culmination of a process of social learning. This explanation enjoys a wider acceptance as crime is acquired through socialization process of the naïve from the experienced deviant.

An American sociologist, Robert Merton, quoted in O'Daniel (1977:205-206), is the author of yet another theory of crime. Merton divides human society into five broad groups based on the people's adjustment to the norms of the society. The first of these five groups are those he describes as "Conformists" who accept the goals of their society and who go about determined to achieve these goals in the most generally acceptable manner.

The second category of people in this group is the people who Merton calls "Innovators". The innovators do not entirely accept either the goals or the means of realising them; rather they keep within the ambits of acceptable normative behaviour. In effect, the innovators may be regarded as an

eccentric (group); nevertheless, they may as well be instrumental in changing goals or even the methods of achieving them.

There are the “Ritualists” who exhibit unique adjustment to the norms of the society. The Ritualists do not believe in the goals of the society but, however, conduct themselves in the acceptable way society upholds as normative simply because most other people do similarly. It appears that most of the people who behave in a proper way have a bandwagon effect on the Ritualists. Apparently the Ritualists are the *laissez-faire* bunch, more or less.

The fourth group of people in society who adjust in their own way to the norms of the society are the “Retreatists”, according to Merton. This strange group tends to avoid a decision on either goals or the methods of realizing them. As a result, they adopt a withdrawal attitude from the society and its activities as much as they can.

The fifth and final group Merton out-rightly calls “Rebels”. These people may reject the goals of the society or the acceptable means of achieving them or even both. Merton thoughtfully and insightfully lumps the Innovators, the Ritualists, the Retreatists and the Rebels together, being the class of people in society from where criminality and criminal tendencies emanate. Could we speculatively assign the Boko Haram religious extremists to this amalgam of deviants? In other words, they are the deviants. It is only the conformists, according to him, who may be absolved from deviant behaviour. Merton clarifies that although all these modes of behaviours, with the exception of Conformists, are deviants; they do not follow norms and rules of the society. He adds that it is Rebellion that is most likely to lead to crime. He observes that Rebels may accept the goals of the society but resort to illegitimate means to arrive at them (*The Human Wed*, 1977: 205 –’06).

These five groups of people (as delineated by Merton) are fully documented in the literature of African literary writers. Indeed, it is largely among the four groups, except the conformists, that characters, who indulge in drug trafficking and

advance-free fraud, can come from. However, we do not rule out the fact that under certain extenuating circumstances, some people among the conformists could be involved in the two crimes of the corpus of this essay.

Types of Social Deviance Discernible in African Literature

The African literary writers delineate characters who inhabit the society of their texts and who belong to various social deviances. These criminal categories include the following as enunciated by Akubukwe 1997: 57-'8) "white-collar crime; organized crime; crime without victims; juvenile delinquency; noncriminal deviance."

White-collar crime, according to Akubukwe, is associated with the members of the middle and upper classes of our public service. This crime includes fraudulent deals (with the pen) and bribery at workplace. White-collar crime assumes a wider dimension that our literary writers are unrelenting in exposing various facets of it as salient social malaise that bedevil our contemporary African society. Chukwuemeka Ike (1991), for instance, in *The Search*, vigorously brings to the limelight the enormity of this social deviance among the political elite as well as other privileged members of the public service. Indeed, white-collar crime constitutes the bedrock of corruption we helplessly witness today in continental Africa and which go a long way in impoverishing the silent majority of the citizenry.

Organized crime is another aspect of social deviance we find in the pages of our literary texts. It threatens the very cohesion and stability of our society as the activities of those involved are feared to envelop the civil society. Organized crime consists of a network of syndicates who provide illegal goods and services to willing members of the society, such as drugs, stolen goods, child trafficking, etc. Those who pay for these goods and services or patronize them are also part and parcel of the syndicate network and who are themselves social deviants.

Other related organized crimes include kidnapping for ransom, abduction, gang rape, (suicide) bombing. There is no

doubt that it is in organized crime that we find criminals who engage in drug trafficking and advance-free fraud. It is astonishing to observe that some highly placed members of the society are culpable of organized crime as they aid and abet this inglorious business. In effect, such privileged members of our society, some of whom are political leaders in active service, retired patriots, public servants of repute, revered members of the intelligentsia, are essentially social deviants! Such “big shots” are the financiers of Boko Haram insurgents. To the discomfiture of sincere God-fearing citizens, it is these highly privileged people who flourish drug business and who are the kingpins in advance-free fraud.

As a matter of fact, these sacred goats are leading members of various secret cults; that is why cultism in our Ivory Towers may not be eradicated since they are the godfathers. And so our students, the future leaders, have the effrontery and temerity to become members of Buccaneers, Black Cats, Vikings, Mafia, Temple of Eden, Daughters of Jezebel, Pirates, and others, being the secret cults that dot (or do we rather say embellish?) our tertiary institutions. That is why our youths are daring in the devastating activities of cultism because their fathers are solidly behind them, urging them on. After all, have we not heard that a boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet? (*Arrow of God* 1978: 18). The scope or population of social deviants, no doubt, widens leading probably to anarchy and disintegration of the civil society. In view of this anomaly, we may not be in a hurry to expect anything better from our youths since society cannot give what it does not have and it would not give anything better in the existing social quo.

Crime without victims, so-called, because, (according to the corpus of this essay), the crimes that result from them have no sufferer, except, perhaps, the deviants themselves. Crimes that fall under this category are gambling and prostitution. The thesis of this social deviance is controversial. It is difficult to believe that gamblers and prostitutes are the sole victims of their

crimes. Indeed, the society and the members of their families suffer either economically, psychologically or in most cases, health-wise. This social deviance has been amply presented in the literatures of African literary writers and the criminality is unmistakably played as inimical to societal ethos.

Juvenile delinquency is yet another type of social deviance judiciously examined in the literary texts of our creative writers. One of the African literary writers has given adequate attention to this social deviance. He is Chukwuemeka Ike in *Our Children Are Coming!* The satirical message of the deviance exposed in this work would constrain us to describe the criminality as both juvenile delinquency and “adult” delinquency!

Noncriminal deviance includes mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, gay marriage, and others. Even when some of the deviance may be viewed noncriminal, it must be stressed that society frowns at and abhors some aspects of the deviance. They include homosexuality and alcoholism. They are stepping-stone to serious criminal commission. As a matter of fact, gay marriage is by law illegal in Nigeria! Besides, adherents of the Christian faith as well as Muslim insist that homosexuality is a criminal commission as their sacred book, the Bible, or Quran, pronounces it criminal by the Omniscient God or Allah, who forbids humanity from indulging in such unnatural sexual intercourse. Therefore, the so-called noncriminal deviance may not be construed as such as the name raises a lot of ethical questions in logic and practice. The various ramifications of noncriminal deviance have been laid bare and criticized in the works of African fiction.

Erosion of Traditional Values in African Literature

The permissive nature of our society is largely responsible for the crises of values we find today. Yet no society endures without a set of rules which prescribe its do's and don'ts. Sadly, these values experience lethal erosion and which accounts for the flourishing of crimes and criminality. Much has not been done in

this direction in the African literatures by way of exposing those ills.

African society is rich in what we may call core values which essentially determine the survival of any society. These core values, according to Okigbo (1983: 24-26), include purity and chastity, honesty and integrity, moderation and humility. The attributes of these values have been flagrantly desecrated by our permissive society. Their erosion threatens the very existence of the society. Our society is inherently becoming selfish and inconsiderate in pursuing its interests that virtually all the structural caveats set up to protect these values have become practically abandoned and jettisoned. Pre-colonial African society jealously guarded these values that it went to: “(e)laborate lengths to protect these values by means of oaths, rituals, taboos, witch-craft, preaching, death in extreme cases. (Those) societies insist on, and prescribe special rituals for expiating the guilt of those who break the rules (Okigbo, 1983:24).”

Having abrogated these structures that checkmate deviant behaviour and which protect these enduring values, the contemporary permissive African society now goes ahead to entrench its social agenda founded on “*me-ism*” and ruthlessness. Part of the result is absolute lack of altruism in the psyche of the citizenry. With the advancement of ruthlessness and “*me-ism*”, or egocentrism, we observe certain forms of extremism as a culmination of the social malaise. A greater majority of the African citizenry pursue their interests without any iota of ethical consideration. In effect, Machiavellian philosophy becomes their norm and maxim in the people’s pursuit of their endeavours. To this sad situation, Okigbo observes that:

There is mounting evidence that the doctor – no matter where he trains – pursues his fees even at the risk of the health of the patient; that the administrator – down to the lowliest clerk – openly buys and sells his services that the judge

dispenses justice according to the size of the purse of the litigants, that the priest lives a lie while he preaches chastity and purity. How else can we explain a situation in which the prophet cheats his priest, the priest his congregation, the judge the accused, the teacher the student, the doctor the patient, and the ruler his subjects. In a situation where everybody seems to rob and cheat everybody else, no system of values can hold for long (28).

We would have felt uncomfortable if Okigbo had delimited indignation to the professional health workers; happily, he has practically found people from all walks of life culpable of this ugly social phenomenon elaborately portrayed in Africa. Soyinka (1984) has captured certain aspects of this debilitating social imbroglio in horatian satire in *The Trials of Brother Jero*. In the same satiric mode, Anyachonkeya (2000: 12, 13) mocks and bemoans the contemporary bizarre society of Africa we are all participant observers in his poem, "Betrayal":

Dog has eaten bone hung about his neck.
Cockroach has committed what was blamed on
rat.
Lion has been asked to keep vigil over a trap.
Fathers have eaten sour grapes
Father has given his daughter unwanted baby.
Celibates have broken their sacred Vows
(celibacy, poverty, chastity and obedience) and
heaven
Has let loose.
The aged woman asked to baby-sit
A baby has confessed she has no Teeth in her
mouth.
Preachers have pleaded that their Words be
followed, alone.

Leaders have learned to shoot their Marks
without missing.

Ofo has ceased to be a potent Symbol of justice.

Everything walks in topsy-turvy A litany... of
paradox Betrayals!

Here is our Father Where the bizarre built

A haven of bliss

You either beat ME Or you join ME!

Drug-related Criminality in African Literature

Though drug-related criminality is becoming a disturbing social problem, it has not captured enough attention of our literary writers. However, a few literary writers have taken a bold step to bring to limelight the enormity of this social deviance. Some of the writers, emergent creative writers writing on contemporary issues, are Ignatus Omega Nwangwu, *Murder in Detention*; Chidi Asomugha, *A Step into the Dark*, and Nick Kamel, *Game of Vultures*. Ngozi Anyachonkeya's *Dagogo* or *The Romance of Risk* focuses attention on drug-related social deviance – secret cultism (and its adverse consequences on the youth and society) as its salient theme. Nick Kamel's *Game of Vultures* will not be included in our critical examination of drug trafficking; the author skilfully weaves in 419 social deviance and spurious philanthropy and which will be the next criminal commission that will be addressed along with other in this critical essay.

Drug trafficking is a booming business among those who perpetrate it as it turns them into overnight new-rich. This nefarious business is a typical example of organized crime involving a syndicate of underground power-brokers. So while they have their errand boys and girls who sacrifice their lives and integrity, they remain behind the scene and amass billions in hard currencies.

The story of *Murder in Detention* is an account of human tragedy; it is the pathetic and soul-devastating escapades of Uduak Eket who is sent to a gruesome and untimely death by

the very syndicate and patron that has provided her the necessary wherewithal to become a tragic drug trafficker. Indeed, her escapades from the cradle elicit great sympathies, the type of sympathies one could lavish for Moll Flanders in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, for Uduak and Moll Flanders almost have similar intriguing experiences. Uduak loses her parents under despicable and mysterious circumstances, circumstances that baffle even the most educated African and which explains why African world view should not be swept under the carpet in the name of alien religious influence and western education. Chukwuemeka Ike (2000: 370) shares this view as he justifies part of his motivation for writing in fiction, wherefore he incorporates raw materials from African cultural heritage (and world view). Ike declares what he sets out to accomplish in the process and declares: "It is an attempt to use fiction to explore some of our traditional beliefs in the supernatural, those beliefs which the white man and our western education made us sweep under the carpet but which continue to influence the lives of our people, including PhD. holders in the sciences.

Uduak Edet finds herself a prostitute (as Moll Flanders) under extenuating circumstances, for as she puts it when it dawns on her what type of inglorious business her bedfellow and friend, Essien, has introduced her to on their arrival to Lamas metropolitan City soon after they checked in at the Atlantic Hotel. She tells her tale of escapades:

Some minutes after the departure of Essien, Uduak stood up and bolted the door, she sat down on the bed and started weeping "if I had known", she said to herself "that this is the type of job to which I would be engaged in order to manage life, I would have preferred to stay and suffer anything in my uncle's house. How can I, Uduak, sell myself just to make money to become men's sexual object?" She remembered having told a boy who was trying to seduce her when

she was in her uncle's house that the greatest gift she could offer her husband would be her virginity.... She herself hated (prostitutes) not only for their low image in society but also for making themselves cheap and sexual objects in the society. She could not therefore reconcile her hatred for them and her invitation into the profession (32).

Whatever dirty gains Uduak may have made in a profession her very soul hates was lost completely as she contracts a very bad sexually transmitted disease and which treatment gulps everything, leaving her in penury. It is under this sad dilemma that Uduak is introduced to drug business by the leading member of this drug syndicate. Without doubt, she has made fantastic harvest from this business and which brings her to the elite class of the new-rich. Her popularity and generous philanthropy knows no bounds until again the cold hands of fate catch up with her, a tragic heroine. The moving and dramatic tale of Uduak's demise is captured in this way in the publisher's blurb: "Luck ran out on her as she was caught in the airport during one of her business trips. Cocaine was found on her, (and) fearing that she might expose other members of the syndicate which included top government officials, Alhaji Gidado and his business colleagues decided to silence her while she was in detention."

The account of the hired assassin paid to liquidate Uduak in detention goes this way. Alhaji Gidado has been mandated by his leading syndicate to eliminate Uduak in cell before she implicates them to security officials. Therefore, with:

the mandate given to Alhaji, he swung into action, He knows an ex-Central Intelligence Organization officer-Hassan - who had turned a hired killer. At the end of (Alhaji Gidado's) narration, Hassan asked him where Uduak was

detained. He was told it was at the Iron House Cell No 12. Hassan was very familiar with Iron House, having spent six years there when he was found guilty of fraudulent practice as an officer of the Central Intelligence Organization. That cost him his job. He told Alhaji that that could be done on the condition that he be paid fifty thousand pounds. Alhaji had no time to argue, he immediately accepted. With a lightning speed, he dashed straight to Cell No 12, with the electric cutter he cut the padlock. Before Uduak knew what was happening he had rained bullets on her head and dashed out and closed the door firmly (81, 83, 86).

Blessed are those whose sins are covered, goes a platitude. That is the end of the road for Uduak as presented in juvenilia satire of a true life of what happened in the Second Republic nation of Africa, often referred to as the hope of the black world, captured in fiction.

We want to enquire into another angle of drug business and critically ascertain how the drug barons often escape scot-free when their errand young men and women end up the scapegoats with an examination of Asomugha's *A Step into the Dark*.

The principal character is Fred Okoli, an unfortunate victim of drug trafficking. Fred has finished his university education, along with his classmates, Kunle and Irene. After their National Service, Irene has "been fortunate enough to secure a job in a bank" and "the pay was not bad" (14). His friend Kunle has not got a job, for he is "still trudging the streets of Lagos searching for a job. But there were so many little deals to live by that he was not suffering at all (14)."

But Fred appears the worst of after the National Service. He decides to go back to the University for a Master's degree in Military History as a last resort. Asomugha captures the

philosophic mood of ex-corps members at the end of their service as they embrace the ominous wide world, which informs Fred's resolve in going for additional degree of MA. We read Asomugha:

The end of the service year often marked the first tottering steps in the ominous terrain of the future. Only very few corps members walked into the soothing embrace of ready-made jobs. Yet a few privileged others joined businesses long established by their families. Another minority, after that a mere first degree would not grant them any meaningful advantage in the dog-eat-dog labour market, sought asylum in postgraduate studies. But an embattled majority lacking high enough connections to secure jobs, and also probably lacking the requisite qualification for postgraduate studies, surged into the labour market, ignorant most of the time of what it really was like. This group answered every newspaper advertisement of vacancies, hoping that miraculously they would at least be invited for interviews. Those people you would often meet with worn bottoms, eroded soles, ill-fitted ties and shirts, scuttling every morning to education service commissions, crawling at their knees, begging to be given teaching appointments (13).

The thrust of the excerpt above summarizes Fred's predicaments which push him into wading in the rain-cloud of uncertainty, going to take a Master's degree and which has even made it expedient for him to oblige Kunle's invitation to come down to Lagos to explore the beautiful opportunities the metropolitan city can offer well after his M.A. degree programme and yet no job has smiled on his way. A streak of

fortune, it appears, of Kunle's sudden wealth, is another factor which has lured Fred right from the school and while in Port Harcourt she keeps writing Fred to find out how he is doing as she is deeply in love with him, a relationship Irene is desirous to end in marriage. All these considerations jolted Fred; he leaves Enugu for the wild Lagos against his parents' approval.

Kunle is excited to see Fred. He promptly introduces Fred to his boss Alhaji in drug business. After a brief orientation, a passport is secured for Fred, which marks the beginning of his drug pushing business. Alhaji assures Fred that even if he is caught he would be released immediately. Soon Fred leaves for the airport along with Amina who gives him practical orientation on the job. Fred scales through the airport routine checks successfully, it appears, and boards the aircraft in readiness to be airborne.

But unfortunately, his accomplice in drug business, Amina, is apprehended and who in turn implicates him. Fred is recalled from the aircraft and rechecked; powdery substances are found on him. Fred goes into detention from where he is arraigned for a charge of drug trafficking before a military tribunal court. Meanwhile, Amina is mysteriously rescued from the mess apparently by Alhaji, the drug baron and nothing is heard about her again.

Everybody abandons Fred; nobody bothers to secure his release. It is Fred's father who hires a lawyer to defend him at the tribunal. Before handing down his sentence on Fred, the tribunal Judge observes:

The tribunal has listened to the brilliant submission of the defence lawyer (Barrister Dagogo Peterside and is deeply moved by the persuasive force of his emotionally charged defence. The tribunal appreciates that there are circumstances nurtured by our peculiar environment which may strongly tempt the individual to seek dubious means of survival.

However, no matter the circumstances that might be adduced to justify human action, the course of the law must be followed in order that our society, fragmented and unequal as it is, may survive. The course of the law is that the individual, not sociological circumstances, is responsible for his action or non-action (114).

The trial Judge continues his rather marathon observation to advance the substance of his thesis:

The grave consequences of drug use on entire generation of society is potentially annihilating. This is why cases such as this must be viewed with the objective seriousness they deserve, and Judged with commensurate sternness....The tribunal is most reluctant to send this promising young man to jail where the conditions...will only mould a harder criminal out of him....The tribunal appreciates the fact that there are numerous other younger Nigerians who have suffered even worse privations, but who have not yet sought survival in crime (114-115).

He makes his final submission before handing down his sentence:

In reaching judgment in this case, the tribunal has taken into consideration the defence lawyer's commendable defence effort and plea for mitigation. The tribunal has also considered the youth and the education of the accused. The tribunal is satisfied that the prosecution has proved its case beyond all reasonable doubts. The tribunal therefore finds the accused guilty as charged and sentences him to five years

imprisonment with hard labour. There is no option of fine (116).

And so Fred Okoli goes down a victim of circumstance while his sponsoring Alhaji drug baron escapes unscathed. He loses a bright future, taints his integrity, brings his family name to disrepute, and above all, mis-ses the hand of his fiancée, Irene, along with Fred's parent at the tribunal when the five year jail term with hard labour, without option of a fine, is handed down on him. Pity!

Advanced-Fee Fraud Criminality in African Literature

Advance-fee fraud criminality is becoming an endemic social deviance in the body polity of African society. The syndicates of this organized crime have become kingmakers to political leaders of the day in the African democratic process so much that they literally compete for recognition with the African statesmen, serving and retired. For instance, they have constituted themselves into a powerful bloc and who are guarded from the state security machinery. The syndicates travel on our highways with full security escorts in sirens just as some privileged political leaders do. Yet it is somehow disturbing to observe that their activities have not quite attracted the critical eye of our literary writers writing in fiction.

However, Nick Kamel (1997), attempts to give us a certain profile of their activities in African society. The aspects of their activities he satirizes in *Game of Vultures* are their flamboyant hobnobbing profile with statesmen in office and tantalizing philanthropy in government-sponsored public lunches where they dole out millions of ill-gotten wealth in their deceptive support of government programmes and policies, at times on certain aspects of social malaise they themselves are gross culprits. Kamel also exposes their money laundering posture which they use to ruin our economy.

The outstanding crime commissions which the 419 kingpins champion are cultism in the country's tertiary

institutions and drug trafficking. They overtly condemn those activities but are the clandestine leaders and patrons. Take for example, from the authorial voice, we learn that the customs officer who has caught Amina in *A Step into the Dark*: “did not even probe beyond the surface when the courier reeled off the names of the drug baron and her fellow couriers. She was surprised that the helmsman mentioned was involved in the racket, for only the previous night he had been the chief launcher at a government programme designed to stop drug trafficking across the nation’s borders (*A Step into the Dark*, 73).”

Thus, Chief Ndasá, one of the main characters in this fascinating novel, is a well-known 419 chief but who is intimately connected with the Head of State, Brigadier-General Lakoka. The Head of State is to address the National University of Korota which he is the Visitor and a lunch is proposed to fight against cultism. Of course, Chief Ndasá does not escape the Head of State’s team of entourage where he will normally spray money as he usually does. Thus, he mounts the podium during the 13th Convocation ceremony of Korota University; he begins in grand style:

Great Korotites, I recognize that the greatest problem that hampers the educational advancement of our youths is poverty, that is, the cash squeeze. Personally, I was born wretched. I breathed poverty, and ate poverty. Today, I have overcome poverty; money is no longer my problem. That is why I am basically a friend of the needy....I want to fight against poverty in this institution. I want every department /faculty in this university to supply me with the list of its indigent students. I want to award to each of them, an instant scholarship. I attach no conditions whatsoever. Each of the beneficiaries will receive ten thousand sasas from me annually.... Ladies and gentlemen, I consider it

necessary to endow some professional seats in this university. These will be three in number one each in the faculties of social sciences and engineering. I place at each a million sasas.... Finally, I wish to contribute my little quota towards the growth of this university. Without wasting further time, I announce a donation of ten million sasas to the University of Korota (135-'36).

Indeed, Kamel's *Game of Vultures* parades the themes of corruption, unemployment and lawlessness that infest the nation state of Pansata. These are the ills that beset the nation because of poor leadership style which has characterized the politics of most Third World countries. This work was written about the time the despotic late President, General Sani Abacha, was in power. Most of the characters satirized are prominent figures about this period, most of whom even had political ambition with the intent to wreck the national treasury as fraudsters if given the opportunity. One of them, for instance, engaged in "non-discriminatory tours on ... public ceremonies where he usually displayed philanthropic gestures" and which "had become an issue of discourse in various quarters in (Nigeria). Yet he pretended he had no political ambition" (131).

The menace of the fraudsters and their collaborators in government can be likened to neo-colonialists, who turn the wheel of political alignment backwards. Lamenting on this sad state of affairs, Oginga Odinga (1982: 250-251) lays bare his disillusionment:

The opportunist or career politician can be the ruin of his country. External forces, for their own ulterior motives, are waiting to exploit the susceptibilities of politicians. The object of colonialism is to change the alignment of independence forces in favour of imperialism, to

place power in the hands of those who will forsake the national interest to advance themselves. Manipulating office for self-interest... is a short step to corruption. The spirit of national reconstruction is killed. The man in the street ... is called upon to work hard, to sacrifice for freedom, yet he sees the ostentatious display of wealth by government leaders ... who earn salaries of astronomical sums compared with his earnings. The people begin to ponder the meaning of *Uhuru*.

Another dimension to the evil commission of these fraudsters is their desperation and ruthlessness in tracking down their victims no matter what. They throw their bait to their unsuspecting victims and invariably succeed. It is in this angle that Duruaku (1997) presents their activities in his play, *Cash Price*. Thus, the play portrays the problems that characterize the social structure of our society and anchor's its values on money primarily. In the process, the young men want ready cash, the girls and ladies are bent on making easy money and even (married) women are not left out in the rat chase for money. Most often, they compromise the dignity of their womanhood and lose their matrimonial peace at home base. The chief character in this play is Briggs, a 419 syndicate, who is all out to ruin and seduce everybody including married women. They succumb to his bidding. The following dialogue reveals the mettle in an evil genius we find in Briggs through the mouth of his boys:

JEFF: I can resist anything except temptation....

OBINNA: Supposing these girls were my sisters?

I won't take kindly to anyone passing them around like a plate of kola nuts and making video films of them for sale abroad.

OBINNA: Grow up Jeff. How else do you think Briggs

can afford all the money he spends. This is a syndicate. He's only a front.

JEFF: Are the victims aware of this filming thing?

OBINNA: Not really. But a couple of girls who are our agents sort of, know the score....(30).

Chinwe, a married lady, is one of the victims of this pornographic deal, having allowed her to be deceived by the alluring influence of money at the danger of her marriage. Jeff and Obinna bring the rest to our knowledge:

JEFF: Oh, that Chinwe? Don't do this to her, Obinna. She's a good Girl and she is married to Uche, that guy did me a favour in school, you know.

OBINNA: So what? I'm scared of this new direction; but I think I could play the two-birds-and-one-stone game. The chick gave me shit when I was trying for her at poly. This is payback time, my friend; Briggs has given me an idea. I'll drain her resources, move in like a good Samaritan, rope her in, then explore her before I pass her to Daddy

JEFF: Why is he interested in Chinwe? I mean she's married....

OBINNA: But she's so lovely....She's for him, not the video. That's Why I'll go through with it (31-2).

The criminal tendencies and dragnets of the 419 kingpins know no bounds and it does appear that one crime of theirs begets yet another.

Drug-pushing and 419 as Twin Evils of Contemporary Realities

These two awful crimes are twin evils in view of the social realities and dynamics which accompany them. From critical analyses we have conducted in the literary texts, it is observed that drug trafficking and advance-fee-fraud are organised crimes involving highly placed people in the society. This explains why it is an uphill task to obliterate the social evils completely. Any attempt to expose the sacred cows would result in anarchy and disintegration of society as these heavyweights have their loyalists in their myriads. Asomugha admits this fact in one of his authorial intrusions. He says:

Amina made to answer, but kept quiet. The officer did not mind. She never actually expected her to give away the name of her sponsor easily. Even if she gives the name, it was of no use as he normally would be a highly placed citizen, untouchable as it were. Usually, nobody probed to know who the barons were, and when one did, it was merely for the sake of knowing which and which of those publicly sacrosanct wealthy men made their money by wasting these desperate young couriers (*A Step into the Dark* 72).

The twin social evils bring the image of the nation to disrepute abroad. As a result of this, nationals who travel abroad are literally adjudged notorious criminals at sight and thus subjected to obnoxious treatments. In addition, deals in 419 and drug pushing involve mayhem. The syndicates are callous, selfish, ruthless and Machiavellian in intent. They are inconsiderate to the lives of teeming millions in danger of the harmful consequences of their evil business adventure. They do not mind what it takes to eliminate anybody on their way to achieve their diabolical acts. For instance, the customs officer

who, have apprehended Uduak, does not fare well as she also goes down. The author intones:

Two weeks later after the arrest of Uduak, Madam Rock was dismissed from service. She was alleged to have contravened the Standing Order of Customs Excise Department. Trade Unions, students, religious organisations and well-meaning individuals made several appeals to the government to rescind its decision and change it to retirement, but these yielded no dividend (*Murder in Detention*, 72). The insatiable passion of these syndicates in persisting in social deviance cannot be quantified. This is because of the intimidating millions they make without hassle. The author confirms: Have you ever felt the shifting demand for funds? It's terrible. *Needing money is like cancer*. It keeps eating away at you; following you about like a hungry dog; you go to bed, it's bothering you; you want to rest, it's growing at you ...Man, it's an experience I won't recommend to a friend (*Cash Price* 34) (Emphasis ours).

The continued menace of these social quagmires in our permissive society suggests a hopeless and irredeemable human society that in going downhill in corruption unless something drastic is done to reverse the ugly trend. It is this social milieu of hopelessness that Wole Soyinka (1995) satirizes in *The Beatification of Area Boy*. In this play Soyinka humorously lampoons the inefficiencies, according to Imo Ben Ubonkudom Eshiet (2000), that eclipse the system and theatrically demonstrates why the system fosters so much evil among its citizens. Sadly, to the millions of victims of drug trafficking and 419 criminality, represented in fiction by Chinwe (in *Duruaku's Cash Price*, Uduak in Nwangwu's *Murder in Detention*, and Fred

Okoli in Asomugh's *A Step into the Dark*), loneliness become their ladder to eternity and life, meaningless luxury. (Donne Chikere 2000).

It must be observed though that 419 criminality manifests itself in several ways. A chief executive, for instance, who arms himself with mystic or weird protection with which to intimidate his staff into submission, in order to push ahead in the achievement of his whim in his corrupt posture or sustain his corrupt profile, is in the deal. A boss, also, who all through stewardship masquerades pseudo-democratic posture, but at the twilight of his tenure begins to deny his staff their entitlements is in the game. A chief accounting officer, who pushes ahead to install his puppet to succeed him in order to cover his fraudulent deals and to protect his business interests is as well a clever 419, who must be caught up with nemesis, for when a ticklish person buries himself, one of his hand must invariably be up!

Conclusion

By way of concluding this critical essay, we want to pose certain hypothetical questions as a hunch to scholars in literary studies and as research guide in probing into the anatomy of these organized crimes in African society with a view to developing a loathing for them.

1. Why is our society inherently evil in venturing where angels fear to tread?
2. Why do highly placed people in society condone the criminality of drug trafficking and 419?
3. What has happened to our traditional values we hold so dear?
4. How may we curb the menace of drug trafficking and advance free fraud in African society?
5. What is the genesis of drug pushing and advance-free fraud in our society?
6. Why does 419 and drug trafficking seem to defy all solutions?

7. What are the causes of erosion of traditional values in African society?
8. What social re-engineering and moral rearmament need be done in our body polity to revive our eroded traditional values?
9. Why is African society inherently permissive these days?
10. What roles should our political leaders play to reverse the disturbing trend of our eroded values and in checking drug trafficking and 419 organized crimes in the society?
11. What has happened to the social structures of social control in the society?

All in all, Geoffrey Chaucer (c 1341: 260) proffers answer to a good deal of the *whys and hows*: *Radix malorum est cupiditas*.

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