

SOLEMNITY TO TRIVIALITY: DEATH, CAPITALISM AND THE WRITERS' IMAGINATION

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Abstract

One issue that has preoccupied writers of the novel in Africa is the interplay between capitalism and death. Death is an avenue for transiting the physical world to that of the ancestors in the African cosmogonic epistemology. Capitalism has added new vistas in the way African novelists explore the multi-dimensions in the motif of death in African narratives. This paper argues that African narrators have decolonized death from being only a solemn transition to the ethereal world of ancestors to reconceptualising death as a means of attaining wealth. Adopting the postcolonial literary theory, the paper uses illustrations from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995), Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1996), Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), and Toni Kan's *The Carnivorous City* (2016) to point out that the themes of transition, respect, greed, materialism and murder are enabling novelists to portray death as a path to material gains. While the techniques of flashback, contrast, symbolism and allusion create the necessary comic and aesthetic ambience to the shifting narrative of death, the paper concludes that as death becomes a means of survival in the physical world, the practicality of the concept of life after death is becoming difficult to comprehend.

Keywords: Respect, Capitalism, Ancestors, Transition, Survival

Introduction

This paper investigates the evolving representation of the issue of death as it relates to the change in the socio-economic status of the emergent states of Africa undergoing decolonization. Death, in the African philosophical and cosmogonic worldview, is seen as a transition from the material world to that of the ethereal world. According to several studies on the subject of death and the African worldview, death is the ultimate means of ascension to the world of ancestors which also can be referred to as the spiritual world (Mbiti, 1990; Nobles, 2006). The implication of this thought is that the cyclical nature of life in Africa encompasses both the spiritual and the physical. At, death, man transits to the spiritual stage when man becomes an ancestor. The ancestor can interfere with the existence of the living. This is why Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014) observes that "like birth, death is characterized by a series of cultural rituals and rites of passage which at times continue for the duration of the mourning period, as long as the living dead is remembered and continues to influence the action of the living. The mourning or grieving process cannot therefore be linked or limited to some time span in a discrete sense" (p.6). This view is hinged on the fact that the dead continue to live in another realm and in the memory of the living.

It has to be admitted that this traditional worldview of death is linked to the African communalistic school of socio-economic pedagogy. This limited view is reinforced by Chukwuedo and Ede (2019) that "death can only terminate the physical existence, but it cannot stop life from continuing in another realm" (p.96). Thus, from the above, the only destination death leads to is the ancestral world. To the living, death becomes ritual of loss and farewell to those dying. Whatever benefit death

provides for the living is embedded in the spiritual guidance from the ancestors which is not quantifiable. In this state of static cycling, there arises the need to reconceptualise the inter-relationship between death, the dead and the living. In the forefront of this imaginative decolonization of the philosophical basis of death are writers like Stoneberg-Cooper (2013), who observes that in the thanatology of death in African American literature, there is the concept of “the death of the disempowered” (p.17). Explaining the phrase, Stone-Cooper says that the phrase refers to “the group of imagined ancestors of persons inhabiting marginalized positions” (p.17). This implies that while hegemonic forces celebrate the death of their members in an elaborate way, the same hegemonic forces “deny and dishonor the dead of the disempowered, which functions to limit the circulation of counter hegemonic memory” (Stone-Cooper, p.17). This helps to clarify the argument of this paper that apart from being a transit route to ancestry, death also serves the purpose of material dialectics.

The thanatology of death and representation in literature has captured the interest of scholars in recent times. Kellehear (2007) in his study of the evolutionary pressures that give rise to the solemnity associated with the dead argues that these pressures originated in Africa. The critic notes that most of these evolutionary pressures are wholly limited to the African experience. Dodson and Billops (1978) investigate the integration of literature and history in the collection of funeral pictures of African Americans. They discover that the pictures serve as monuments for the remembrance of their African ancestry. This is encapsulated in Morrison’s quote of an African saying that “the ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember” (Dodson & Billops, Preface). The literary representation of death and its surrounding issues like the ritual passage is the subject matter of Bradbury’s work (1999). Bradbury asserts that among the issues that surround death is its representation in the arts. According to her, the literary representation of death is one of the most “essential components of this [death] ritual process” (p.2). In Africa, the study of deathart is also enlightening.

Mbiti (1969) observes concerning death that “to live here and now is the most important concern ... even life in the hereafter is conceived of in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter” (p.6). Mbiti’s view is transcendental in the sense that it is too practical for a religious belief; religion is usually hinged on the dual ideas of reward and punishment. Mbiti’s observation is therefore creating a path for the rethinking of the issues surrounding death in Africa apart from being a transit to the ethereal world. This may have informed Rickens (2017) to react that death has “something new which can bring into our own contextual frameworks and make sense of, in order to allow for an approach towards death that is based on foresight, community and holistic health” (23). Riken’s observation points to the direction this paper has taken that the ways African content creators have re-imagined issues surrounding death have changed from merely seeing death as a path to the world of ancestors to seeing death as a means to gain material wealth for the living. The paper deploys the postcolonial literary theory and draws illustrations from five contemporary African novels - Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995), Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley* (1996), Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), and Toni Kan’s *The Carnivorous City* (2016) - to point out the themes and techniques that makes the shift from solemnity to triviality and from loss to wealth possible.

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a classic about the rise and fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo. The story of Okonkwo resonates with the establishment of colonial indirect rule in the heart of Igbo land. The story of the hero of the novel is significant in as much as the novel becomes a documentation of the deadart of the Igbo people and perhaps, those who live in the pre-colonial times. The thanatrope of reverence which this paper refers to as solemnity is well documented in the novel. An instance is the events of the death of Ogbuefi Ndulue and his wife Ozoemena which highlights the twin motifs of transition and respect. The boundary between life and death is imaginary and it is situated between the relationship between the living and the dead. The representation of transition in the novel is tailored to show the respect people have for the sanctity of life and the awe for the life after death in pre-colonial Africa.

In life, both Ogbuefi Ndulue and his first wife, Ozoemena are so close. The bond between the couple is artificially broken when Ndulue dies after a long life. When the wife hears the news, “she rose from

her mat, took her stick and walked over to the *obi*". At the threshold to the house where her late husband lies, she kneels down and calls her husband thrice. The dead cannot hear the living and so Ozoemena returns to her own house. According to the narrator, later when one of the other wives "went to call her again to be present at the washing of the body, she found her lying on the mat, dead" (p.62). The implication of the strange death of Ndulue and Ozoemena portrays that the bond between the living and the dead extends to death and beyond. The solemnity of the events reflects in the decision of the elders of Umuofia to delay announcing the death of the husband who dies earlier until the wife has been buried.

This is the pre-colonial times when the events of dying and death are revered. After death, there are rites and rituals that accompany the burial of the dead in order for the dead to transit smoothly to the world of the ancestors. This is evident in the rites and rituals that accompany the death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu. Ogbuefi Ezeudu is the oldest man in Iguedo, Umuofia. On his death, "there are only three men in the whole clan who were older, and four of five in his own age-group" (p.111). This distinction becomes necessary so as to place the status of Ezeudu as a man who has lived an accomplished life. In such a case, the burial rites and rituals are all encompassing. According to the narrator,

The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There were coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to the ancestors. (p.111)

It is interesting that among the people of the south of the Niger, the funeral rites and rituals exhibit among other things, the appearance of masquerades who are the representatives of the ancestors. So it is in the burial of Ezeudu. Among the spirits who visited is the one-handed spirit. After eulogizing the achievements of Ezeudu, the one-handed spirit pronounced that "if your death is of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it, do not allow him a moment's rest" (p.112). The essence of this pronouncement shows the thin line that separates the physical world from that of the ancestors. There is the belief that the ancestors can help or harm the living. This is the reason behind the numerous rites and rituals which are performed to make the transition from the physical world to that of the spirit world easier while at the same time fortifying the ancestors to be more potent in their dealings with the living. This is the level of solemnity attached to death and the dead in pre-colonial Africa.

But it must be noted that the idea of the dead transiting to ancestorship is closely tied with the African belief in the communal system of living. Thus, Njoku (2002) argues that life in Africa is a communal affair. He explains further that the communal relationship comprises of man, other men in his society, the spirits, God and the land (p.169). But as Asuquo (2011) noted, "due to urbanization and western education, many Africans have moved to urban areas and have acquired western education. These have detached them from their traditional occupations and the land" (p.173). In this state, triviality or non-reverence becomes the norm as the struggle to survive economically takes the central stage. Asuquo refers to the above as "modifying and affecting the African concept of life, death and the hereafter" (p.175). This scenario is vividly captured in the story of Nefolovhodwe in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995).

Ways of Dying is the story of the hardship and suffering endured by Toloki and Noria in a racist and segregated South Africa. Among the characters through whom the narrator develops the story of change in the perception of death is Nefolovhodwe. Nefolovhodwe is the childhood friend of Toloki's father in the village before he moves to the city. Nefolovhodwe, in the voice of the narrator, "had learnt carpentry skills in his youth" As such, during times of loss, Nefolovhodwe "made coffin for our deceased brother or sister. His coffins were good and solid, yet quite inexpensive" (p.124). Even though the material benefit from building caskets is not regular, Nefolovhodwe "looked forward to the deaths of his fellow men – and women – for they put food on his pine table" (p.124). This is the crux of the matter. For Nefolovhodwe, death is beneficial and has become a means of survival in an

uncertain capitalist's environment. One of Nefolovhodwe's friends from the city advises Nefolovhodwe that he "could make a lot of money in the city. People die like flies there, and your coffin would have a good market" (p.125). As noted earlier, urbanity has a way of relegating traditional ideas to the background. The story of Nefolovhodwe is not different.

Once Nefolovhodwe settles in the city, the business of profiting from death blossoms; his creativity endows him with the invention of different types of coffins. There is the "Nefolovhodwe De Luxe Special, which was a much more expensive type" (p.126). It is this particular coffin that some corrupt undertakers usually steal after the close of the burial rites. According to the narrator, "... at night, unscrupulous undertakers went to the cemetery and dug the de luxe coffin up. They wrap the corpses in sacks, put them back in their graves, and took the coffins to sell again to other bereaved millionaires" (p.126). Nefolovhodwe knows that there is an "ingenious profit-making scheme" and that others are benefitting from death like him. The irony of it all is that for the bereaved, they continue to think that "their loved ones were resting in peace ... they were not aware that they lay in a condition that was worse than that of paupers who had to be buried by prisoners" (p.126). At this stage, it is not only the dead that are been cheated, even the burial rites and rituals are also desecrated. Toloki surmises the argument of this paper that in the narratives of African writers, capitalism has shifted the motif of death from solemnity to triviality when he reminisces that "Nefolovhodwe had attained all his wealth through death. Death was therefore profitable" (p.133). The takeaway from the story of Nefolovhodwe is that he is content with profiting from the burial rites and rituals of the dead. This contrasts with the case of Zaita and Dr. Booshy in Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*.

The story of *Midaq Alley* details the downward spiral of the lives of the inhabitants of Midaq Alley as they grapple with the shift from communal life style to a capitalist world. Among the characters in the novel are Zaita and Dr. Booshy. This paper singles out the two characters due to their importance to the argument of this paper. In the story, Zaita has a unique skill; he can create artificial beggars. Another trait of Zaita that catches one's attention is that he always "jumped with joy when he heard that someone had died. On the other hand, Dr. Booshy is an unlicensed dentist. Apart from removing rotten teeth, Booshy also makes gold teeth for patients. He also acts as a middleman who supplies Zaita with intended artificial beggars. There is another connection between Zaita and Booshy; they rob the dead.

In the analysis of the imaginative representation of the relationship between death, the rites and rituals of passage of the dead and the role of the profiteers from death in Achebe and Mda's novels, there is still a reverence for the body of the dead. But as death continue to be a source of wealth for the capitalist's minded individuals, the bodies of the dead become a source of wealth for the profiteers. Scoggin (2002) argues that in a capitalist economy, "capital have successfully naturalized the most nauseous of economies; according to the logic of equivalent exchange, the refuse of death – body parts, paper, waste, and dust –are never safe from being recycled and made to turn a profit" (p.99). Scoggin's statement helps to picture the progression from profiting from death and the rites and rituals of passage to the recycling of the body parts of the dead for economic benefit. This is where the story of Zaita and Dr. Booshy finds relevance in this paper.

Zaita and Booshy are partners in the recycling of the teeth of the dead for profit. As noted earlier, Dr. Booshy is a specialist in the making of gold teeth for the rich of the alley. So, when Abdul Hamid Taliby died, Dr. Booshy sees an opportunity to make some money through the retrieval of the gold teeth. He therefore, calls on Zaita to do the extraction. In the process, the two gold raiders are caught and imprisoned. When the news broke in Midaq Alley, the reaction is that of surprise and disgust. Meanwhile, the landlady of Dr. Booshy has changed her rotten set of teeth for gold ones. When she heard of the ordeal of the body of Taliby, "she was overcome with hysteria. Wailing in distress, she pulled the gold teeth from her mouth and flung them away, slapping hysterically at both cheeks. Then she fell down in a faint" (pp.228,229). Her reaction, like that of everybody else is that of "amazement and alarm" (p.228). Capitalism has pushed profiteers to ransack the body parts of the dead for commercial gains. As if ravaging the bodies of the dead is not bizarre enough, there is now the active

butchering of the living in order to satiate the urge to profit from death. This shift is part of the preoccupation of the narrator of the story of capitalism and death in Chris Abani's *Graceland*

Graceland is a narrative that details the struggles of Elvis Oke, a young boy from semi-urban Afikpo in Lagos. For the purpose of this paper, the story of Elvis, Redemption and Okon are selected to reflect the progression in the narrative of capitalism and death from the level of benefiting from the dead and rites and rituals of burying the dead to killing people to make money. In Lagos, Elvis meets a friend called Redemption. Later, both of them become drop-outs but their friendship blossoms. As drop-outs, Elvis and Redemption put their hands in several menial jobs, some of which are criminal in nature to survive until they accept to work for the Colonel.

The job the Colonel has for them is to escort goods across the border to a neighbouring country. The consignment consists of three huge coolers and six people who are tied. As the group travel along, while looking for beer for Redemption, Elvis discovers a grotesque view that holds him spellbound. In one of the coolers, "there were six human heads sitting on a pie of ice ... The second one held what appeared to be several organs, hearts and livers, also packed with ice" (p.237). The six escorts are drugged but one among them, Kemi, screams at the sight of the human parts. Her scream draws the attention of the people in the neighbourhood who become inquisitive. Elvis and Redemption use the opportunity of the commotion that arises to escape in a stolen vehicle. On the way back to Lagos after the narrow escape, Elvis inquires about the true situation of the "job". Redemption explains that;

American hospitals do plenty organ transplant. But they are not always finding de parts on time to save people life. So certain people in Saudi Arabia and such a place used to buy organ parts and sell to rich white people so they can save their children or wife or demselves ... de rich whites buy de spare parts from de Arabs who buy from wherever dey can. Before dey used to buy only from Sudan and such a place, but de war and tings is make it hard, so dey expand the operation. People like de Colonel used their position to get human parts as you can see and den freeze it. If we had cross de border yesterday, airplane for carry dose parts to Saudi Arabia so dat they can be sold. (p.242)

Redemption's explanation aptly guides one to the sense of the argument of this paper that as capitalism makes a foothold in African societies, so also the solemn worldview of the people about death gives way to that of triviality. Once, it is the dead and the burial rites that are turned to avenues for money. But in *Graceland*, it is human life that has become trivial to the extent that the livings are sent to their early death so that their parts can be sold for money. On a more bizarre twist, Redemption reminds Elvis about the "children we carry...". According to Redemption, "dere is too much damage to de organs as de Colonel de harvest dem. Also, not all survive de journey. So many of de parts are thrown away ... Yes, dose children will arrive in Saudi Arabia alive, den, depend on de demand, dey will harvest de parts from dem. Fresh, no damage, more money for all of dem" (pp.242,243). At this stage, it is pure killing of living humans to create wealth; waiting for their death is too long a wait for the capitalist. This view is reinforced with Okon's observation on the reason he quits the business of human spare parts supply.

Okon is one of the most vibrant characters in *Graceland* hunting the streets of Lagos for daily survival. At one time, Okon resorts to selling his blood to hospitals for money to survive. Later in the story, Elvis runs into Okon at the Bridge City. Okon looks promising and even urges Elvis to come and eat a meal on him. After the meal, Elvis asks Okon whether he still sells blood for a living. Okon replies that he quits that business a long time. At a time he is into selling of human parts. In the words of Okon, "we hijacked corpses from the roadsides and even homes which we sold for organ transplants" (p.308). Seeing the way Elvis feels about the strange narrative, Okon continues that "it is bad for a man's soul, waiting at the roadside like vulture, for someone to die, so that you can steal fresh corpse, but man must survive. When dey start to demand alive people, me I quit. I am not a murderer. Hustler? Survivor? Yes. But definitely not a murderer" (p.308). Okon's words enable us to draw a line between selling dead people's parts for money and killing for money. But for those

involved, the line is blurry. Capitalism has blinded and blunted the conscience of the profiteers and the only thing they see about death is that it is a means of making money. The present stage in the imaginative representation of capitalism and death in African narrative is seeing death as wealth. This is the view expressed in Tony Kan's *The Carnivorous City*,

The Carnivorous City is the narrative of the intrigues associated with the death of Soni. Soni is the younger brother of Abel, a lecturer at the Technical College of Education, Asaba. Soni has migrated to Lagos to "hustle". He becomes very rich in Lagos. He is married with a son. One morning, Abel gets a message that Soni is missing. Abel relocates to Lagos to search for Soni. The search does not yield any positive result; instead, Abel finds himself inheriting everything that belongs to his brother including the wife. The narrator sums up Abel's movement from poverty to wealth when he says that "two days earlier he was just a lecturer eking out a precarious existence in a hovel in Asaba. Now he was in a mansion in Lagos, wondering what has shifted in the foundation of things" (p.23). The shift has to do with the movement of death from reverence to irreverence in the worldview of a capitalist Africa.

In Kan's *The Carnivorous City*, humans are treated as articles that can appear and disappear at anytime. In the capitalist Lagos society, the dead are abandoned by the living as they hustle for daily survival. The shortest part to this abandonment is through the act of forgetting. For Abel in Kan's *The Carnivorous City*, the sudden change in his lifestyle as a result of inheriting his missing brother's belongings has created a chasm in his life. According to Abel, "he was living the good life but existing in a state of flux ... How to sleep in a man's bed, how to get warm at the sight of his wife, how to wear his clothes, drink his wine, play with his son, spend his money and not remember that he was still missing" (p.63). As Abel is torn between reverence for the dead and profiting from death, he symbolizes the tipping point in the representation of the idea of transition of death from solemnity to triviality in African novels.

Abel crosses the border of solemnity when he finally abandons all the morality he has for the dead due to the benefits accruing from death. In the words of the narrator, at the end Abel "realizes, or rather, finally admits to himself, that he does not want Soni to be found. Not ever" (p.241). As Abel settles down to enjoy Soni's wealth, the act of remembering and revering the dead becomes too much for him. In Kan's story, Abel does not only profit from death, death has been commercialized. The idea of death as a money spinner is encapsulated in an anecdote narrated by Walata, one of the characters in the novel. According to Walata,

A white man tell me once, art works can be a store of value. I don't know who the artists are but I get this Lebanese woman who help me to buy and she say if I ever need money she can help me sell. And she say, if the artist die I will get more money. So, maybe if I need money and I want to sell something, I will kill the artist first (p.235).

In Walata's hilarious anecdote, death is a harbinger of wealth. This is the sum of the idea of this paper; death has moved from a solemn occasion to a trivial avenue for material gains.

Conclusion

This paper has shown through illustrations from five African narratives that death has lost its reverence, and it is now a source for material dialectics. This is one of the graphic pictures of the African society's movement from communalism to capitalism. In the analysis of the stories, it is observed that it is not only the dead and the living that are being cheated, even the burial rites and rituals are also desecrated. The reimagining of the relationship between death and capitalism by African writers throws up a concern; what type of ancestors will those whose bodies, burial rites and rituals have been desecrated become? Even if the answer cannot be verified, the shift from reverence to material dialectics in the representation of death in African narratives is a probable response to the decolonization of the worldview of Africans about death by writers and it is being redefined at proffering practical answers to the imaginative tropes surrounding death and the afterworld.

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