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A Marxist Interpretation of the Dystopian Society in the African Novel

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Abstract. This essay attempts an evaluation of the African novel with the postulates of Marxism. Because of this interest, we are given the chance to probe into the worlds of two less canonised novelists within the aesthetic canon of African fiction—Nigeria's Biyi Bandele-Thomas and Lekan Oyegoke. In their respective works, both writers have exhibited artistic fervour for showing dystopian Africa as it is. Their fictional exemplars capture the despicable Nigerian societies either under the military regime or in the hands of the corrupt politicians. As both authors want us to believe, the era of money-seeking leaders in Nigeria has been the incontrovertible factor that further relegates the country to the political and socioeconomic background in world politics. The essay thus makes clear the Marxist initiative of the alienation between the *haves* and the *have-nots* of African societies.

Keywords and phrases: Marxism, Dystopian, African, novel

Introduction

Marxism is a conception presented by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their book, *The Communist Manifesto*. Since 1840, when Marx published his views about man and his socioeconomic essence, scholars of diverse fields, including literature, have fallen in love with his ideology. Marx's ideology and the activities of its apologists have come to be known as Marxism. Marxism has since been influential in framing the fundamental ethics of various fields of human endeavour, and it has been subjected to various modifications up to the state of its latest complexity as contained in the works of Lenin, Mao, Lukacs, Goldman and Brecht. These scholars display unambiguous enthrallment for literature in their works, and by implication, they have contributed to the dictionary of literary locutions, broadening the critical horizon of literature.

The conception of Marxism arose from the radical perception of human society, and its practitioners have been viewed as radicals. This conception of Marxism is why Marxists are called 'leftists', to indicate their stance as anti-bourgeoisie. The motivations of Marx and Engels lay in their discovery of the clear dichotomy in society between the haves and the have-nots. This demarcation results in what

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Marx tags 'continual conflict' between both classes. The genesis of the supposed struggle between the rich and the poor is basically traceable to the existential effort by the so-called have-nots to break away from the suffocating influences of capitalist manipulation of economic resources, which perpetually make the masses socially and economically depressed. This essay attempts an evaluation of two contemporary Nigerian novels as indicative of African sociopolitical dystopianism using the propositions of Marxist aesthetics.

Theorising Marxism in (African) Literature

The appeal of Marxism to African literature in particular and world literature in general is contained in its origin from political economy. Man is viewed by a Marxist as a social, economic and political being. Since the African novel has essentially evolved out of the writer's mandate to reflect sociopolitical and economic experiences, the postulates of Marxism may assist in its interpretation. Eagleton illuminates this with his explanation:

> Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies—the ideas, the values and feelings by which men experiences the society at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature. (1996: 12)

From this explanation, we can deduce that Marxism is not primarily designed for literature. As Eagleton has identified, it is a body of theoretical foundation that further explicates the complex nature and formation of men in society. In sum, therefore, as Forgas suggests,

> Marxist theorists do not constitute a school like the Moscow and Petersburg exponents of formalism, the Prague structuralists or the Tel Quel theorists in Paris . . . . Marxism is a living body of thought and a set of real political practices. (Jefferson and Robey 1985: 134)

Marxist criticism operates on the assumption that literature can be properly understood only within a larger framework of social reality. Because it seems that the African novelist is given to the portrayal of social reality, which evinces the realistic sociopolitical situations of the Third World, Marxism has much to offer the modern African novel.

Forgas identifies five theoretical models that form the perceptive horizons for a Marxist critic. These models are as follows:

(i) Lukacs's Reflection model
(ii) Macherey's Production model
(iii) Goldman's Genetic model
(iv) Adorno's Negative knowledge model
(v) Language-centred model.

Apart from Adorno's model, which is deconstructive in nature by having evolved from a negative response to Lukacs's model, the other four models have some commonalities. For instance, they all agree that literature is a process and that it results from composition within the sociocultural properties of the societal order. To corroborate this, DiYanni (2000: 2089) says that the Marxist critic often views the literary work as 'a product in relation to the actual economic and social conditions that exist at the time of the composition or the time and place of the action it describes'. Though all four models will substantially assist us in understanding the fictive states in the African novels, which are often created as pseudonymous fictive nations that are semblances of the real dystopian (post) colonial Africa, this work exhibits much preference for Lukacs's model, which identifies literature as a reflection of a reality outside it.

Lukacsian Reflection Model

The concrete pronouncement of Lukacs that earned him recognition as the foremost proponent of the reflection model of Marxist criticism is the following postulate:

> The more artless a work of art, the more it gives the effect of life and nature, the more clearly it exemplifies an actual concentrated reflection of its time and the more clearly it demonstrates that the only function of its form is the expression of this objectivity, this reflection of life in the greatest concreteness and clarity and with all its motivating contradiction. (1971: 52)

This critical temper is either directly or indirectly expressed in several of Lukacs's contributions to literature and Marxism. For Lukacs, literary form is that which reflects reality in 'the most objective ways.' Consequently, literary 'well-formedness' is perceived within this model as the most accurate portrayal of the external reality that to Marx himself is 'reflected in the mind of man and translated into forms of thought' (1976: 102). Forgas tells us that Lukacs's idea of reflection transcends that simplistic mirror-object relationship popularised by the mimetic model. This idea shows us that Lukacs's belief is that 'literature is a knowledge of reality, and knowledge is not a matter of making one-to-one correspondence between things in the world outside or ideas in the head' (Forgas 1985: 139). Through this perspective, we understand that literature subjects

reality to creative and form-giving processes that convert it to realism. We are informed that 'it is this model which Lenin used when he wrote about Tolstoy as the mirror of the Russian revolution'. (Forgas 1985: 139)

Lukacs, who was an important figure in the international communist movement until his death in 1971, patterned his critical thought after Marx's presumptions towards creativity. Marx opined that external reality is prior to ideas in the mind, as the material world is 'reflected in the mind of man and translated into forms of thought' (Marx 1976: 102). The procedures of translation into thought are inevitably complex, as Lukacs believes that the correspondence between the knowledge in literature and that outside of it is arbitrary. Forgas explains Lukacs's idea further when he asserts that,

> to be reflected in literature, reality has to pass through a correctly formed work of the writer. The result in the case of a correctly formed work, will be that the form of the literary work reflects the form of the real world. (Forgas 1985: 139)

Lukacs's perception of form indicates his distaste for the formalists' simplistic portrayal of the concept as the sum of the devices in a text. In fact, his idea of form is that the concept in itself is not to be looked at as either technical or linguistic, as it appears to the formalists. Lukacs will have us believe that form is nothing but the aesthetic shape given to literary content, manifested through the physical technicalities of narrative features, the relation of characters and situations in a literary work. In his analysis of Barzac's *Les Paysans* in *Studies in European Realism* (1972), Lukacs attempts a 'triangular configuration' that follows the trajectories of three social classes—the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the peasantry—perhaps in an attempt at fashioning a definitive correspondence between character situation and form. Lukacs believes that in the modern era of writing, literary pieces manifested in a 'complete dissolution of all content and all form.' Such dissolution is the function of the God-forsaken nature of the modern cosmology whose setting is so complicated in its tendency to evoke more questions than answers (1977). In Lukacs's terms, as Forgas reflects,

> What is being reflected in a correct work and failing to be reflected in an unmediated one is a whole objective form of reality, something which is far less immediate and tangible. A work which appears to be like life will thus not necessarily be realistic . . . , and a work which manifests distorts in appearance will not unnecessarily be unrealistic. (114)

Forgas is of the opinion that the reflection model has a fundamental fault that lies in the fact that it is not a theory of literature in general but of a realist literature.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, the model appears appropriate for our scheme of analysis in this essay, as most African novels have the outlook of the realist literature. We shall therefore consider our novels as the reflections of their authors' perceived dystopian societies emanating from their experiential worlds.

The novels selected for discussion appear to be set against the backgrounds of recognisable nations where 'the postcolonial world has been anything but utopian' (Booker 1995:58). Though the concentration here is on Bandele-Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* and Oyegoke's *Ill Winds*, similar conventions of dystopian setting may be found in other African novels, such as Kouroum's *The Sun of Independence*, Ouloguem's *Bond to Violence,* Beti's *Remember Reuben*, Soyinka's *Season of Anomy,* Achebe's *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, most of Ngugi's novels, Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Iyayi's *Violence* and Oyono's *Houseboy*, to mention just a few.

A dystopian society, as Oyegoke has implied, 'is that real, tangible, corrupt world of Foucauldian heterotopias' that is opposed to the 'Platonic idealist ideal republic' that is an instance of philosophical and socio-political utopia (2006: 9). A dystopian African society, however, is to be perceived not only as that essentially post-independence state grappling for stability but also as that pre-independence one which has always suffered the consequences of colonial bastardisations. There is definitely no gain saying the fact that African states are far from utopian, considering how far they are from the Edenic perfection that is signified by utopianism.

Lukacs, in 'Towards the Methodology of the Problem of Organisation,' devotes his analysis to the relations of politics in society. It is through this lens that he expresses his opinion about utopianism as, of course, contradistinctively positioned to dystopianism:

> The utopians, it is true, can clearly see the situation that must constitute the point of departure. What makes them utopian is that they must see it as a fact or at best as a problem that requires a solution but are unable to grasp the fact that the problem itself contains both the solution and the path leading to it. (1968: 296)

Lukacs evokes Proudhon's idea, expressed in in *The Poverty of Philosophy,* that utopians 'see in poverty nothing but poverty'. He reinforces the ideology that:

> As the proletariat advance along the road to revolution, poverty ceased to be merely something given: it became integrated into the living dialectics of action. (1968: 296)

This ideological model is entrenched in Lukacs's own dialectics of literature, and our adoption of his model in this study keeps us in constant touch with the portrayal of the selected novels as reflections of the societies their authors had in mind.

Most modern African novels are given to the portrayal of dystopian elements in post-independence Africa. These elements, for Negash, manifest functionally as the struggle for survival in a corrupt system where there is unmistakable 'disillusionment within political ideals, the preponderance of populist movements, and the attack on totalitarian system' (1999: 58). This attitudinal portrayal of dystopianism by the African novelists explains the choices of Oyegoke's *Ill Wind* (2004) and Bandele–Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* (1993). The yardstick for labelling the intrinsic societies of these texts 'dystopian' stems from the Marxist idea of the utopian (ideal) society. It will suffice to briefly evaluate the Marxist view of society.

The Marxist idea of societal utopianism manifests as a 'welfare state', and a utopian society strikes one as a society 'which maintains a wide range of social services, and this guarantees for all its citizens a certain standard of living' (Buah 1978: 122). The welfare state was Marx's design when he perceived human predicaments within various political institutions. Marx had observed a 'continual conflict' between two main classes—those who own the means of production and those who provide the labour. The former category is the minority, made up of people who own everything needed for their livelihood, while the latter, which comprises the bulk of the world's population, consists of people who have nothing they could call their own. According to Buah, the people in this category are often the impoverished, whose lot has always been:

> to work for their master, and to remain poor, earning just enough to keep bone and flesh together. In ancient times, they were the slaves: in the middle Ages, they were the *serfs*; and in the modern capitalist countries, they were the wage earners often called the working classes. In advanced books they are often referred to as the proletariats. (1978: 125)

The societal structure explicated above is somewhat patterned after extreme capitalism, and this it seems to capture the situation in the fictive states in the African novel as evident in the two novels selected for analysis.

The Dystopian African Society: An Example of Bandele-Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertaker*

Bandele-Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* is among the novels of the new breed African novelists of the nineties. Negash labels it 'migrant' literature by virtue of the author's 'indefinite' residence in London. Though Bandele-Thomas has also produced fiction set outside of Nigeria, a study of *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* is a revelation of the author's unimpeded connection to his Nigerian home. The novel exhibits a striking resemblance to Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* in the way its events are resonances of Babangida's reign of terror in Nigeria.

The novel is, in fact, a satire of the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida; the author scurrilously criticises the leader's tyranny and misrule as he also explicates the palpable divide between the rich and the poor as a product of the political syndrome. Bandele-Thomas creates a psychotic character, Rayo, a recidivist who challenges the authorities of his mother, his school, the police and the entire corrupt system presented by the setting. For organising a student protest, Rayo ends up in prison, where he is brutally tortured. After his release, he moves to Lagos and tries to survive as a freelance writer. With reference to the survival story of Rayo, Negash tells us that Bandele-Thomas's novel constitutes a surrealist parable about Nigeria's dislocated conditions, which are the direct result of bad administration. As such, *The Sympathetic Undertaker* reflects the sordid peculiarities and brutal realities of the postcolonial condition of the emergent, sovereign African societies in which the incorrigible craving for political power robs the masses of their rights. Bandele-Thomas's setting is a satiric caricature in which 'big and small despots inflict terror on the ordinary Nigerians' (Negash 1999: 83). Accordingly, Wright concludes, 'Bandele-Thomas combines an ultra-postmodern reflexiveness with graphic realism' (1997: 178).

The satiric outlook of *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* is further embellished with farcical stories and jokes that caricature the African political power players. For instance, in a session he calls 'Political Science Hour', Rayo attempts to entertain his schoolmates with the story of a politician who told the people he was going to build a bridge of incredible beauty. When, according to Rayo, the politician was asked, 'Why are you going to build us a bridge when we do not even have a river?', the politician was said to have replied as follows:

> My dear young man, learn to be patient from your elder. I was just about to say—before you brashly interrupted me—in order to put the bridge to use, we shall construct a river beneath it. (33)

This is an evidently sarcastic statement about the political manipulations and profiteerings that confine the postcolonial African society to a dystopian corner. The statement also further confirms the thick dividing line between the oppressor and the oppressed. The relationship between the politician, who represents the bourgeoisie, and the young man who questions him constitutes the interest for a Marxist who operates within the purview of the Lukacsian model. Thus, it is apt to operate in our analysis of the selected novels from Lukacs's standpoint, as expressed in *History and Class Consciousness,* that 'in Marxism, the division into classes is determined by position within the process of production' (1).

The nauseating and repressive regime in Zowabia makes Rayo voice his disillusionment against the decree that gags press liberty:

> But since thought had been out-lawed by the power that be so that even thoughts, not your words, had to be disguised—coated in layers of honey to their hears, I knew—was left with little choice but to believe—that even the codification system of my thought process had expired. Therefore, I was dead. (95)

Here, through Rayo's temper, Bandele-Thomas reveals similarity between the governments of Babagee and that of Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria, under which the gruesome murder of Dele Giwa, editor-in-chief of *Newswatch* Magazine, in 1986 stood as a statement of the government's hostility towards the freedom of the press. Bandele-Thomas's intention is clear in the manner in which he evolves his fictional 'Babagee' as the homophonic coinage of Babangida. Furthermore, we may be reminded of Soyinka's artistic device in *A Play of Giants,* in which the playwright satirically exaggerates the despicable level of illiteracy and ignorance of African leaders. In like manner, Bandele-Thomas creates Babagee and Mamagee as replicas of Ibrahim Babangida and his wife in their utopic oasis within the dystopian desert of Zowabia.

In addition, just as Soyinka in *A Play of Giants* exposes Idi Amin's illiteracy and lack of exposure in political matters, Bandele-Thomas portrays a vulgar and characteristically petty leader in Babagee. For instance, when Mamagee delivers a stillborn child, Babagee petulantly declares in a broadcast to the nation:

> The news has just reached us that my dear wife the first lady, who went into labour this morning, has had a still birth. . . . In effect, the greatest leader this country never had died unborn. . . . In recognition of this I do hereby declare the next seven days work-free, bearing in mind that the shock of the news might prove almost unbearable to many. (162)

With this portrayal of the president, Bandele-Thomas raises a germane question as to whether African leaders recognise any line of distinction between public government matters and private trivialities. For this reason, Negash says, 'the personal and the state concerns of President Babagee and the First Lady, Mamagee, are inseparable' (1999: 85). Quite often, Babagee is caught discussing state affairs with Mamagee in the most indecent and unserious manner, and through his loose talk, we are acquainted with corrupt intrigues of his administration. Negash explains further:

> Dictative Babagee does not hide from his wife how he deals with those who got in his way and what he has to do in the cause of the day. Of the Italian ambassadors' query about the disposal of Europe's industrial waste, Babagee intimates; 'quite a few million dollars, ours for the taking. Could be just what the economy needs. I told him I'd think about it' (136). He also tells her how he endured for thirty whole minutes 'these Jackasses in triplicate—these idiots from that perpetual pain in the neck, that imperialist propaganda machine called Amnesty International.' (1999: 86)

The Sympathetic Undertaker is, no doubt, support for Lukacs's belief that 'it is precisely the problems of organisation which languished longest as the half-light of utopianism' (296). The correlation between Lukacs ideology and the Neo-colonial African setting will go a long way towards explaining why Bandele-Thomas is swift to portray a society that is obviously bedevilled by its lack of political organisation, which puts power in the hands of louts like Babagee. Thus, there is the transplant of the gory political situations experienced in most sovereign African states in Bandele-Thomas' novel. Bandele-Thomas evidently portrays such socio-political dystopianism with characters who are driven into recidivism by the influences of indigenous and 'exogenous' political experiences; which may account for Rayo's abnormal tendencies.

Bandele-Thomas's commitment in the *Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* is reflective of the 'notorious trademark' of Nigeria's corruption, the preponderance of disorderliness as well as the 'fragmentation of community and culture' as evinced in the transactions between the political class (rulers) and the masses (ruled). These dystopian tropes are made evident in the emblematic dysfunctionality of the sadistic and brutal military government, which, according to Adelowo, is 'a kind of darkness on the normal, popularly acclaimed democratic system of governance' (2006: 132). In an interview, Bandele-Thomas himself admitted, 'I was purging myself from all sorts of devils'; this statement may help us truly capture the pessimistic undertone that spreads across pages of *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams*. As if endorsing Weiss's (1992: 9)

claims that 'exile can fragment the self, reconstruct it . . . , or fragment and reconstruct in cycle', Bandele-Thomas constructs a society of his imagination in which anarchy and political manipulation hold sway. The result is a fictive state that is far removed from the ideal welfare state. Thus, *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* is an instance in which the African intellectual decides to take inventory of the 'bad habits' that characterise post-independence African leaders.

The treatment of Bandele-Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* has allowed us the full perspective of the bizarre metamorphosis in Africa's political landscape. When the novel is added to the other African novels whose authors were enamoured by similar post-independence settings, we are acquainted with the phantasmic ploy used by the African writer to provide illuminating insights into Africa's fluctuating political terrain. This terrain makes it possible for the African novelist to reason, along with Dipoko, that:

> For the masses, happiness was, as it still is, a prospective dream. Better conditions of living, higher purchasing power, personal feeding, a share of all good things of modern like, from industrial products to learning: in short, a longing for better days to come . . . . (1969: 63)

What most of these novelists are implying in their works is that, as Onoge puts it, 'our crisis would be overcome if only the right men—and decent men—man the state apparatus' (1974: 403).

Keit Booker informs us that 'to find dystopian fictions that focus on Third-World experience one must, in fact, turn to the Third World itself' (1995: 61). Booker is, perhaps, conscious of the fact that most novels that emanate from Africa are mandated to reflect chaos. In most cases, the chaotic situations that interest the novelist are precipitated by the capitalist drive that characterises the postcolonial African society. Such reflection of society by the African writers are not surprising because, as Kortenaar puts it, 'Third world texts are national allegories where there is no room for private dramas' (2000: 228). This generalisation suggests that the responsibility of the Third World novelist is to present the picture of the social struggle in the face of neocapitalism. A study of Oyegoke's *Ill Wind* reveals the author's commitment to this responsibility.

Social Struggle and Neo Capitalism: The Wind of Reality in Oyegoke's *Ill Winds*

Ill Winds (2004) is a novel set mostly in an undisguised Lagos to reflect that the actual experience in postcolonial Nigeria is anything but utopian or ideal.

Oyegoke presents, according to Fawole, 'a valid and evocative view of society as a result of the radical changes precipitated by modernisation and urbanisation' (2006: 84). Because of the indubitable capitalist grip on society that *Ill Winds* reflects, there is the:

> mad rush to amass wealth by all means despite the unfavourable economic climate which has placed a deep gulf between the rich and extremely poor people in the society. (*Oye* Vol XIV 2006: 84)

This mad rush might have prompted what Oyegoke (2006) himself later labels, in his Inaugural Lecture, the 'Oshodifization of Lagos that has transformed the city into a vast distorted undifferentiated cultural land mass' where, in Palmer's terms, that conspicuous:

> breakdown of the traditional society and culture, the introduction of a cash based economy, the growth of education and the centralization of administration, have all inevitably led to a drift from the countryside to the growing cities which have been seen as the only center of advancement. (Palmer 1982: 41)

The aftermath of this 'breakdown' Palmer identifies as 'the now-familiar social problems, like . . . delinquency, prostitution, organized crime, housing rackets, filth and squalor' (1982: 41). These social problems also provide the focal target for Oyegoke in *Ill Winds*.

Oyegoke therefore lives up to the appellation of a 'contemporary' African novelist because of his aim to write about a kind of society that Newell calls the 'sprawling urban environment' (1996: 49). Truly, Oyegoke's setting captures an environment in which there is the symptomatic representation of 'urban anxiety; [and] sexually deceitful and financially cunning women' (Newell 1996: 49). *Ill Winds* seems 'at a glance' to be a collection of short stories, but the stories fit together like a 'jigsaw puzzle' to tell a single tale. The stories revolve around Papa Korede and Mama Korede and how both are blown to and fro by the 'ill winds' of the tidal forces of urban madness. The story starts as the 'moist winds' develop through the cyclone of betrayal, robbery, child kidnapping, thuggery and smuggling, and it ends on a 'strange night' when the puzzle of Korede's disappearance is finally solved.

The Janitor and his wife leave peaceful Iluni for cosmopolitan Lagos after their request for a child is granted and after they have given birth to Korede. In Lagos, where they live as Papa and Mama Korede, the couple's love life deteriorates and both parties end up with strange partners. Papa Korede elopes with another

tenant's wife, Mama Kudi, while Mama Korede falls for the stranger next door who provides gentle, massaging hands when the brutal ones of her husband disappoint. From these artificial pairings, two new couples emerge—Papa Korede (now called Pappy Kay) with Mama Kudi and the stranger next door (Chief Akakoko) with Mama Korede. The rest of the story does nothing but 'depict a society that has gone crazy in the search for wealth brought about by the government's concentration on urbanisation and the mad rush for wealth that has led to a carefree attitude which encourages individualism' (Fawole 2008: 84).

It is not surprising that there is a conspicuous difference between the Janitor in Iluni and his Lagos incarnate, Pappy Kay. Pappy Kay, the rich Lagos mogul, starts off as the humble Janitor and the narrator informs us that:

> The Janitor . . . seemed to be living happily with his young wife. Their one-room apartment was spacious—some one and a half times the size of an average room [in the city]. To supplement the Janitor's rather meager income, they kept a little garden near their house where they grew such things as tomatoes, peppers, onions, and a few other vegetables and cereals, and so saved up the money they would have spent on these things for other less accessible articles. Apart from this, it seemed enough, for any couple with moderate ambition, to have the kind of peace and quiet to be found in Iluni. (p. 52)

Evidently, the couple's lifestyle in Lagos, where the husband and wife occupy a congested room 'which they shared with rats and cockroaches' (10), does not compare favourably to their life in Iluni. The marked difference between the peaceful Iluni and the tumultuous Lagos is reflected in the description of the couple's room in Lagos, where,

> items of furniture and sundry pieces of luggage were piled one over another against the walls or pushed into available spaces under the big wooden bed. The room seemed about to burst asunder with numerous effects wounded into it. (10)

Fawole explains further:

> There is a sharp contrast between Iluni and Lagos, a densely populated cosmopolitan city—Lagos is chaotic and the standard of living for many is deplorable. (2008: 89)

In this comparison, we see what Lukacs calls 'the fundamental distinct' in Oyegoke's reification of the two worlds. The dominance of the Lagos setting in

the novel illuminates Oyegoke's quest for the 'value of the city dwellers'. Lagos, like any city, turns out to be a cover for all manner of questionable characters, like Chief Akakoko, whose fortune suddenly rises at the moment of the money ritual that claims Korede's life. The mélange of characters and their actions contribute to the dystopian tendency of the society in *Ill Winds,* and throughout the story, readers are confronted with variegated urban desolations. Oyegoke's aesthetics again confirms Lukacs's belief that 'the ultimate problems of human existence persist in the irrationality incommensurable with human understanding' (1968: 113). In this context, it is little wonder that many instances of disorderliness festoon the novel.

A further examination of *Ill Winds* confirms that the contemporary African novelist can radiate the adverse effect of extreme cosmopolitanism. The cosmopolitan capitalism is evident as 'most of the characters undergo transformation due to the diverse nature of the society on their lives' (Fawole 2008: 86). When, for instance, we see the people struggle for survival in busy bus stations where suspected pickpockets are regularly lynched and where thousands of people are waiting for, and struggling to board, commuter buses, we are bound to understand Oyegoke's assertion that the present trend of confusion is 'making everywhere to look like Oshodi [because] culturally and physically, Nigerian towns and cities now look alike: a monotonous unplanned sprawling village' (2006: 8). There is no doubt that this dystopian madness moulded the author's intention; we are alerted to the pending textual catastrophe from the first few paragraphs of *Ill Winds*:

> One gave birth to another but it was not important which: a wave of madness swept through the country and a climate of terror descended upon the people.
>
> It rose like the wind, the madness. It blew north, south, east and west. It blew through closed and open spaces, through residential areas and through market-places. It whirled along tarred and untarred motorways in the form of a metallic din rusting, hurling to left and to right, and zeroing in a snarl of smashed metal and rubber, trapping flattened out skulls and crushed bones, washed in blood. It was abroad during the day, at night it moved about in the dark, fuelled by a avarice–gun–toting, throttling and raping, maiming and mugging, killing to dispossess others of the tangible and the immaterial.
>
> The madness was a rush. It was a racing torrent: a general propulsion in the direction of property, a rush towards pecuniary

> and other assets accomplished vicariously through sweat and blood. (1–2)

Such instance of madness explicated in the excerpt above with many other commotions in the novel, reveals to us that *Ill Winds* further confirms Lukacs's idea of the modern world as a convoluted world of complicated cosmopolites where there are only questions but no answers. Lukacs would have us believe that the modern world is God-forsaken, and this notion may serve as an explanation for the societal pandemonium that the modern African novelist reflects in his work (Lukacs 1977). In the aesthetic development of *Ill Winds*, Oyegoke takes readers through the pre-capitalist world view (the agrarian Iluni setting) to the capitalist Lagos setting, which is driven towards materialistic self-expression. This aesthetic, according to Lukacs,

> has its root in the proffered difference between capitalist economy and pre-capitalist economy. The most striking distinction ... is that precapitalist societies are much less cohesive than capitalist. (1968: 80)

The African Novelist and the African Sociopolitical Reality

The tendency of the African novelist to exhibit the Marxist anti-bourgeoisie temper is properly explained by Ngugi in 'The African Writer and His Past'; it may be revealing to quote him extensively here:

> I believe that the African masses will build a place to feel at home. For they are not alone. In Asia, in Latin America, in Black America, the people are fighting the same battle. I believe the African novelist, the Africa writer, can help in the struggle. But he cannot do this if he insists on a liberal posture. He must be committed on the side of the majority . . . whose silent and violent clamour for change is rocking the continent. By driving into himself, deep into the collective consciousness of our people, he can seek the root. He has already done something in restoring the African character to his history, to his past. But in a capitalist society, this past has a romantic glamour gazing at it. . . (1971: 8)

Ngugi, a renowned Marxist novelist in Africa, perhaps draws his inspiration from what Lukacs has characterised as the evolution of the struggle of the proletariat in self-actualisation in the society:

> The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself by creating classless society through the successful conclusion of his own struggle. (1968: 80)

Ngugi's ideological position above no doubt, educates us considerably about the nonnegotiable commitment of the African novelist when it comes to the reflection of a society in which all developmental indices seem unkempt and where socioeconomic mishap is the order of the day.

Marxist critics often evaluate an author's sympathetic disposition in dealing with the downtrodden working class in the society. This commitment perhaps is why they jettison 'devoted attentions' to matters that concern literary form alone and subject aesthetic form to the whims of social and political interpretations. Abrams corroborates this position when he notes that the fictional worlds of writers oriented towards Marxism reflect scenarios that present the real world as 'constituted by class conflict, economic and social "contradictions," and the alienation of the individual under capitalism' (1999: 149).

For instance, Marxist evaluation of the African novel reveals the novelist's questioning attitude towards African democracy, and the reader may look inward to find that there is no such thing as democracy but 'democrazy', a derogatory coinage of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a Nigerian Afro musician, that explains the dictatorial, money-mongering tendencies of Nigerian leaders. We are thus made familiar with the breathtaking intensity of grotesque governance. Zeleze makes this clear when he states categorically that,

> At the beginning of 1990, the majority of African governments were dictatorship. According to the classification of Freedom House, out of thirty-two states it rated at the end of 1989, fourteen were 'not free', fifteen were 'partially free' and only three were 'free' that is, democratic. (1994: 474)

Kubayanda is also explicit about the political dysfunctionality in Africa when he argues that 'the African world of the last twenty-five years is characterised by a variety of dictatorial and oppressive systems' because:

> The regimes of Idi Amin, Jean-Bedel Bokassa, Macias Nguema, and Siyad Barre, among others, are classical examples of military hegemonic administrations in postcolonial Africa. Similarly the regimes of Sekou Toure, Milton Obote, and Hastings Banda are striking instances of civilian dictatorship. Postcolonial dictatorship in Africa concerns itself with repression which, in effect, means the arrest, exile, execution, or

> consistent harassment of dissident voices. The general result of dictatorship is an atmosphere of fear, hate and humiliation. (1990: 5)

Thus, we are made to separate 'democracy' from 'freedom'. If democracy is freedom, African novelists portray settings that are undemocratic, and hence 'unfree'. As such, while novelists like Iyayi, in *Violence*, cry out against the violence of inequality, injustice and capitalism, in an independent Nigeria, the likes of Fantoure (*Tropical Circle*), Oyono (*House Boy)*, Dardie (*Cimbre*), Rabeaivelo (*Interference*) and Sembene (*God's Bits of Wood*) look back to the source of the modern capitalist deprivation in the colonial past. Clearly, the revisionist tempers of Fantoure and the other anticolonial African writers are crucial to the understanding of their setting. These tempers have their sources in the Machiavellian manipulations of the sociopolitical and economic resources of the society by selfish leaders.

The radicals who are still advocates for the 'decolonization' of Africa are aware of the complications in modern African societies. Whether decolonisation is possible, we know that the proper explanation of the 'postcolonial' begins with the 'colonial'. Adejumobi could not have supported this fact better than she does below:

> In other words, if anything indeed is certain, it is that the colonial period will remain a potent backdrop against which African exploration of the postcolonial world will be analysed. (1996: 105)

Conclusion

This study has attempted to evaluate the African novel with a view to analysing the fictive societies in two novels. We have tried to identify the centrifugal forces that work against the capitalist bourgeoisie of the Third World society in the struggles of the downtrodden masses. This is a Third World Marxist approach, which, according to Hechter, is 'naturally concerned about analyzing patterns of uneven development in the world economy and tends to revolve around the dependency framework' (1979: 378). This assumption is, however, not too distant from the primary function of Marxism, which is concerned with 'socioeconomic and political analysis of capitalism . . . with its extremely important contributions to historiography' (Macgregor 1980: 487).

In writing this essay, we set out to conduct a sociopolitical analysis of the dystopian African society as portrayed by two Nigerian novelists, Bandele-

Thomas and Oyegoke. This interest leads to the explication of the paraphernalia of history that have been responsible for the rise of the dystopian societal structures presented in the novels. Both novelists exhibit a fervour for the portrayal of the dystopian Nigerian society created by the political and economic greed and ignorance of the leaders and by their dysfunctional bureaucracy. Our theoretical foundation rests upon the Lukacsian Reflection model of Marxist criticism. Though the authors of both the novels we examined here wrote from different geographical locations, they were united in reflecting what Lukacs calls the proletariat revolution. In Biyi Bandele-Thomas' novel, Rayo exhibits the recalcitrant posture that reflects the minds of the masses. For Oyegoke, the general rush to become rich constitutes the intratextual revolution of the proletariat. In both instances, what we experience is the aesthetic conformity with the expression of the proletariat's opportunity 'to turn events in another direction by the conscious exploitation of the trends' of dystopianism (Lukacs 1968: 313).

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