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Matter and manner: A postcolonial reading of Nol Alembong's *The Passing Wind* (1991)

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Abstract

This paper sought to examine the role of Anglophone Cameroonian writers who have had a persistent tendency for political and social commitment and change, in connection to the socio-political events of their society. Initially, Anglophone Cameroon writing was an instrument for celebrating the heroic magnificence of Western figures; later it was used for anti-colonial fight back. Presently, it is being used as an authentic weapon for depicting the postcolonial disillusioned state of the nation and other burning issues. In this paper, an effort is made to examine the way "manner" is used to bring out the blazing "matter[s]" in Cameroon, Africa and the world. In an attempt to examine Nol Alembong's view, selected poems from his collection titled, *The Passing Wind*, have been used to bring out tangible issues that have plagued Africa as a whole and Anglophone Cameroon in particular. This article adopts the Socio-Artistic Criticism and Marxism as its theoretical perspectives. This theoretical position is important as it focuses not only on the background from which the poems were written, but also pays close attention to the use of literary and linguistic tools in communicating meaning.

Keywords: Anglophone Cameroon, change, manner, Marxism, matter, socio-artistic criticism,

Public Interest Statement

The paper seeks to bring out some of the concerns plaguing different societies in the world and in Anglophone Cameroon in particular. The minorities in the society the writer presents are treated with little or no considerations while the majorities get the greatest share of the available opportunities. The writer, in order to communicate this uses “manner” (language) to expose the “matters” (concerns) troubling his society.

Introduction

Anglophone Cameroonians are individuals from different ethnic groups with varying experiences, but hail from the English-speaking sections of Cameroon. These group of persons are the minorities, who think, and have proven that they are not properly treated by the majority (francophones). From 1961 to present, the Anglophone Cameroonians, especially the intellectuals, find fault in the socio-political condition of Cameroon and the world at large, and therefore, try to make their voices heard by pleading/fighting for justice. This makes the writers from this part of the world to represent their plights in different write-ups. Alembong and Ambanasom are Anglophone Cameroonians, whose body of works are resourceful weaponries and hideaways in the representation of misery, inequality and cruelty tampering with the social order of the nation. While Alembong in his collection, *The Passing Wind* protests (through the use of language) against discrimination, subjugation and the absence of honesty in his society, Ambanasom, in his *Matters and Manner*, demonstrate how one can explore a writer’s style (manner) in order to bring out the thematic concerns (matter).

Shadrach A. Ambanasom’s Socio-Artistic Criticism has to do with the issues and techniques of presentation. “Matter” has to do with the theme/content while “Manner” has to do with the techniques or organization of language/form. According to Ambanasom, to get in to criticism you must take into consideration the following: 1) The text – Communicative experience, 2) Writer – Communicator, 3) The Critic and 4) Common Reader (Ambanasom, 2015, p. 66). Ambanasom thinks that in order to start reading a text, the critic must take into consideration the writer’s intention/purpose (p. 67). Without doing this, there will be no meaningful reading of the text. The critic should examine the effectiveness of techniques employed to articulate the subject matter/content. Many a time, one is pushed to ask questions like “which does the critic read first?” and “the answer is that he does not start with one before going to the other; he begins with both...” (p. 68).

Language remains an important medium through which we can classify, and direct understanding of texts or works of literature. Ambanasom admits a universal truth and beauty in distinguishing literature from other sciences and other fields of writing by stressing the significance and quality of language use when he states in his *Matter and Manner* that:

Literature is a whole expression of the beautiful; the competent creative writer uses language in a special way, careful in his selection, ordering and arrangement of words to achieve special effects. In this process, he reveals his stylistic quirks; he reveals his spirit, his capacities, his bias and attitude in a way that is not wholly possible with a writer of information prose. (2015, p.12)

The quotation in essence highlights the medium of expression (word choice and language) in relation to what is said (matter) and how it is said (manner). This is what makes the literature answerable to interpretations. In this study, we are going to use the four evaluative criteria that Ambanasom outlines in his book and Marxism to see how the poet, Alembong, employs techniques to articulate artistically his subject matter. The criteria are:

1) Effectiveness of Technique

Techniques constitute the ways in which an artist conveys his effect; that is the means by which he discovers, explores and develops his subject matter, conveys meaning and evaluates it. Ambanasom (2015) quotes Van Ghent who defines technique as "Vision" that is, the vision of a text embodies what is seen and writer's attitude towards what is seen. His tone reveals his attitude toward his vision – he may criticize or condemn it; he may glorify or praise it. Here, the focus is on language and its uses which help to develop the subject matter. For example imagery, rhythm, exaggeration, contrast, personification, metaphor, irony etc.

2) Artistic truthfulness

This criterion has to do with truthfulness dealing with imaginative experience, which is true-to-life (p. 51). Setting is crucial with regard to artistic truthfulness, the background in which the text unfolds is of great importance too, that is, the socio-political, socio-economic, socio-psychological (p. 51). If a fictional character behaves in a way that is believable, it is artistic truthfulness.

3) Readability

This is limited to linguistic features such as length and familiarity of vocabulary, complexity of syntactical structure, relationship or connection between words (p. 54). Understanding, speed and interest constitute this evaluation criterion. A choice of simple vocabulary items coupled with a less complex syntactical structure will lead to a reader's understanding and equally lead to increased reading speed (p. 55).

4) Social significance

Here, we look at a text as a product of the social and historical experience of the people producing it. In the evolution of the Cameroonian/African novel, we must not ignore its wider social context so as to arrive at its social significance. Such writings will answer what it means to be an Anglophone, Cameroonian or African.

Marxism

Marxism is an economic and political philosophy propounded by Karl Marx and Frederick Engel in their work *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). The central idea of this work is that the history of every society is that of class struggle. The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society based on the common ownership of the means of production and distribution of wealth. To Marx and Engel, private ownership of wealth breeds capitalism which is the exploitation of man by man. According to them, after the overthrow of the capitalist society, there should be a just and equal distribution of wealth.

Marxism came as a result of the dangerous work of capitalism. It is out to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism, and as such, gives power to the people. The proletariat

are now conscientized and empowered to improve their living conditions. To Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, an artist does not “create” something out of nothing, but “produces” a work that is determined by historical and ideological conditions (Eagleton, 1978). According to the Marxist critics, form and content should not be separated. Marxist-Leninism translates Marxism into the practical form (socialism). Marxist-Leninism believes that history is not only made by great people because without the proletariat, there will be no history. To Lenin, what is killing the proletariat is that they don’t know their strength. If they can be united and conscientized, they will definitely overthrow the bourgeoisie.

Poetry Analysis

This study analyses selected poems from Alembong’s collection of poems entitled *The Passing Wind* to see how different techniques are used to bring out prominent issues plaguing the Cameroonian society.

Firstly “The Game” is one of Alembong’s widely recited poems. The poem depicts the irregularities that characterize elections in postcolonial Africa in general and postcolonial Cameroon in particular. The poet perceives politics not as a game of numbers but as a game of manipulation wherein only the perfect manipulator finds himself with comfortable results of the game. “The Game” is a metaphor for Cameroon politics, when compared to a football match where in the referee manipulates the game in favour of his team. The referee here is the god of the match. This exposes the theme of corruption and injustice in Cameroon because the referee, a bourgeois, is only interested in what he will get at the end of the match. Alembong uses the football metaphor because the speaker’s country adores football.

“The Game” captures the complexities of postcolonial intrigues, manipulation, make belief, election rigging, deception and falsification of results. In the poem, the ruling party is both the referee and the player. The speaker of the poem laments the partiality of the referee in the lines:

The ball he gave them
For he feigned our fault
In the ground of play
And the penalty goal they had
In the ground of play (p. 26)

The above lines show that no matter how hard the other team tries to play, the referee still finds fault in them because he wants his own team to win. Finding fault in the other team is the manner which the referee uses to cunningly create an opportunity to favour his team, underlining favoritism and corruption in the playground and Cameroonian society at large.

It is not accidental that Alembong uses the football match metaphor. His intention for this is to satirize the ruling class. The present regime has been using football in Cameroon to divert attention while it continues with its despotic rule. This started in 1990 when the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon defeated the Argentina National team in the opening match of the World Cup in Italy. This was equally the same year that Ni John Fru Ndi and others were struggling to launch the Social Democratic Front (S.D.F.) Party in Bamenda. Cameroonians were only concerned with the world cup match in Italy. The government employs this political apathy and encourages the watching of the matches on television as

the authority manages to show most of the matches on Cameroon Radio Television. Football is used as a political tool to reduce social tension. This is clarified in Alembong's poetry, to a country where people hold football in high esteem, and most denizens would prefer watching football matches to news.

The repetition of the phrase "In the ground of play" in every stanza of the poem is used to lay emphasis on the impact of football in Cameroon politics. The ground of play symbolizes a place of injustice. The injustice can be seen in the reaction of the other team in the lines:

The crowd cries loud
And cursed and cursed
In the ground of play
But the whistle he had
And the power he had
In the ground of play... (p. 27)

From the preceding lines, one deduces that despite the protest of the crowd, the referee maintains the result of the match because he had both the whistle and the power, as lord of the match. Frantz Fanon observes that the intelligentsia who took over power at independence has turned out to be a gang of profiteers who are out to enrich themselves by any means. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* contends:

The intellectuals who on the eve of independence rally to the party now make it clear by their attitude that they gave support with no other end in view than to secure their slices of the cake of independence. The party is becoming a means of private advancement. They exist inside the new regime however and inequality of wealth and its monopolization. Some have a double source of income and demonstrate that they are specialized in opportunism. Privileges multiply and corruption triumph while morality decline. Today, vultures are too numerous and too voracious in proportion to the lean spoils of the national wealth. (1961, pp. 137 - 138)

The failure of the capitalist leaders, to make the promises of independence a living reality is an act of deceit that necessitates the launch of a political revolution that sets out to cleanse the state of impurities and to restore a new order based on equality, justice and social commitment. Morality of the nation is questioned as individuals have double sources of income, unequally distributed wealth and corruption strategies multiplying every day.

The whistle that the referee uses in the poem is a symbol of power and the Supreme Court. The whistle is the most powerful instrument in a football match just as the Supreme Court is the most important administration responsible in the proclamation of results in Cameroon. The whistle here as a symbol of power is connected to the Supreme Court which has the power to do and undo when it comes to the proclamation of election results. This means that, whether declaration is fair, rigged or unjust, it remains the final decision to be respected. This is reflected in the following lines where the force of the whistle determines one's fate:

For they ran here and there
In the ground of play
But the other stood still
Only waiting for the whistle
In the ground of play (p. 26)

These lines expose how indifferent and unmoved one team is, while the other struggles for the win. This is to prove that when one belongs to the ruling party, a win can always be guaranteed, while the opposition has to struggle rather than wait for the whistle like the others. One can see that the Supreme Court is in support of the ruling party in Alembong's country, and as a result, he can do all he can to ensure that his own party wins in elections no matter what the people say or do. During the 1992 election in Cameroon, there was the manipulation of the results as exemplified by Eckhard Breitingner in "Anglofou or Anglophone: Language and Literature and Alternative Discourse in Bilingual Cameroon" who posits that:

Nol Alembong's poem that was written before the rise of an organized political opposition and its ensuring repression by the C.P.D.M government and before the highly contested presidential election of October 11th 1992 expresses the feeling of Anglophones in Cameroon: the feeling of being caught in an antagonism with the Francophone, in a competitive game where the rules of their play do not prevail, a political game where fraud and cheating and use of sheer power dominates (Foster & Buchbeger, p. 472)

According to Breitingner, Alembong's "The Game" debunks and exposes the rigging of elections in postcolonial African societies in general. Alembong's collection of poems *The Passing Wind* published in 1991 and 1992; Cameroon had its first multiparty elections after close to three decades. The presidential poll was widely believed to have been won by one opposition party but this victory was stolen by ruling party. Alembong who is a seer or a prophet, prophesied what happened in 1992, 1997, and 2004, 2011 and which continues to happen in the Cameroon in "The Game".

The whistle in the poem can also be seen as an image which shows the various communicative mechanisms used by those in power to cajole, deceive and manipulate public opinion. This includes state owned media, newspapers and even the Supreme Court that declared the disputed presidential result of October 1992 in favour of the Cameroon's People Democratic Movement.

The alliteration in the line "the crowd cries loud" reinforces the social injustice that is practiced by the "power that be" causing the peasants to cry because the masses are aware and uncomfortable with the corrupt and unjust system. The issue of corruption is clearly seen when the team "stood still," evidence that they were not playing well but the referee manipulates the game in their favour.

Alembong's poem "The Passing Wind" is an eponymous poem with the title of the poem, also the title of the entire collection *The Passing wind*. The poem is pregnant with symbols and metaphorical possibilities. The title of the poem is characteristic of change. The change that the poem symbolizes is the change that the oppressed as well as Alembong hope

for. Alembong affirms that, one day, the wind of change will blow across Cameroon and the entire Africa to liberate the masses from slavery and hardship. Alembong at this point is optimistic. He thinks that a day shall come when the history of our country and the world at large would sustain some positive change.

Also, the “tree” in the poem can be a symbol of the dictators who have implanted themselves like trees that cannot be removed, but ironically, they are questioned by the masses considered lowly. The dictators plant themselves like trees and make the working class weakened because they (the masses) cannot make decisions for themselves but to listen to their oppressors. The totalitarians enjoying power are likely to be compared to the man Achebe mentions in *A Man of the People* when he says:

A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dried clothes, is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our new nation – as I saw it then lying on the bed – was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say “to hell with it”. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. (1967, p. 34)

These dictators were once in the rain with commoners, and now they are dried up and very reluctant to go back, as such, they prefer to remain in their comfort zones without thinking of the people who used to be in the rain with them; they tend to treat them even worst. Simile is realised in the line “it came limping as a child learning to walk”. Children learning to walk do it gradually, so is the wind of change which comes slowly but steadily. Change is constant but cannot just come suddenly because there must be some forces hindering its progress or people resisting change. Alembong makes us understand that, the change would come, but gradually. To him, solace shall come to Africa not like manner from heaven but through cooperation, endurance, adequate planning and judicious dispensation of time (ii)

There is also the use of personification in “The Passing Wind” in the line, “we saw our trees shiver in their shoes”. Trees are not animate but this one in the poem performs the act of shivering as a result of uncertainty and fear. The leaders who thought they had developed cool feet are frightened in the political dawn of awareness which came in from Eastern Europe. The leaders are now frightened because they know that the oppressed are aware of the injustices and are ready to fight back to ensure that there is change. Alembong in an interview has mentioned that some of the ideas he brings in his poem are meant to criticize the society with the overall intention to seek change. In essence, Alembong criticizes in the “The Passing Wind” not for the sake of criticism but to ensure that they change their bad rulership as the wind of change passes across.

In “May Day”, Alembong focuses in the necessity of the workers to fight for their salaries to be increased. The 1st of May should be a day for workers to ask for an increase in their salaries and not to go out to march like happy and comfortable Cameroonians. The poem is thus a mockery of the workers who are not adequately paid but go out there to march. The proletarians who should stay at home and reflect on how to better their low wages are the ones who go to the field to prepare the ceremonial ground while the capitalist

leaders only go thereafter to sit comfortably. They are described as having “bunion-belly” as evidence of good living. The workers on this day praise their masters who do not care about them as they “shower gold dust on their masters’ head”. The managers are also described with “eagle-eyes”. An eagle is a bird that feeds on other birds (a bird of prey), so too are the managers who feed on their employees.

From the presentation of this poem, one may understand that a writer and a politician have many things in common. This is because they play with words and with human action. The fundamental difference is that, writers see the people as subjects for conceptualization while politicians see them as objects for exploitation. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in his book *Writers in Politics* explains this relationship as follows: “The poet and the politician have certainly many things in common. Both trade in words. Both are created by the same reality of the world around them. Their activities and concerns have the same subject and object: human relationship” (p. 67). The primary difference between the writer and politician is that while writers perceive the masses as subjects of idealisation, the politicians see them as objects of use. It is with this eye that the politicians in “May Day” see the workers.

The first of May is the day reserved by the International Labour Organisation for workers to bargain their wages and evaluate their working conditions. Alembong satirizes the way the workers themselves go about it. The workers celebrate instead of reflecting on their conditions. In Cameroon, the workers are unreasonably overwhelmed to celebrate the day as a “Worker’s Day” without adept reflection.

There is contrast between the managers with “blown-up jaws” and workers who are described as “serf”. From the descriptions, there is evidence of good living by the managers. Ngugi calls such managers parasites in paradise as they get to extort food from their employees.

It is ironical that the workers work so hard, yet what they work for is denied them and instead used by the managers who do little or no job at all. The managers deceive them by printing t-shirts for them which they use to celebrate instead of fighting or reflecting on their precarious states. The poet persona suggests that they should preferably stay in their houses, reflect and bargain with their employers rather than go out there to march on such days. Alembong does not only criticise but also provides solution. He believes that, hope without struggle is unsuccessful, just as Ngugi in *The Barrel of a Pen* Posits that “At the very least, the pen should be used to murder their sleep by constantly reminding them of their crimes against the people. Our pens should be the voices of the people so that they give voices to silence (p. 69). In this light, it is realized that the reality of contemporary literature is predicated on social experiences.

In “Some Day for Sure”, Alembong is very optimistic that one day an egalitarian society will be realized. The working class is still very hard according to him, but one day, the chameleon will give up for the tortoise. He lays emphasis on the fact that those in leadership positions do not treat the masses fairly; instead, they manipulate them. Although the capitalist live on the sweat of the proletarian, the latter do not have a say in what they work for. Alembong demonstrates the level of corruption with the use of a picture. The speaker of the poem is very bitter with the rulers and policy makers who make policies only in their favour. They are careless about the masses as they exploit them beyond measure. Though undergoing marginalization, the speaker has hope that one day, the masses will overthrow the tyrannical rule in Africa as a whole, and Cameroon in particular. The title of the poem “Some Day for

Sure” gives hope to the oppressed masses. The speaker is confident that change will one day come in spite of all odds. The poem encourages the masses to come together because if they do, they will be as strong as the tortoise shell, and together, they will overthrow the capitalist.

From the imagery evoked in the poem, the tortoise is the symbol of the oppressed, while the elephant symbolizes the oppressor. The elephant is distant from the tortoise in terms of height and size. While the elephant is high up, the tortoise is very close to the ground, yet the elephant squashes it. The elephant can represent the francophones in Cameroon who have eight regions out of the ten, but still tend to exploit the resources of the two lone anglophone regions. An example can be seen in SONARA, which is found in the Anglophone zone, but most of its workers are francophones. Alembong, believes that one day, things will change, and a new society will be born.

The poet equally goes back to oral tradition as he alludes to the myth of the chameleon and the dog. The dog, a metaphor for the oppressor, thinks he can get anything at any time, and also believes that the race is his. Ironically, his expectations are not met because the chameleon, which represents the oppressed, wins the race and “drums the long awaited message of death”. This myth is used to demonstrate that no one is indispensable – the bourgeois class will one day be relegated to the margin just like the dog.

The poet makes use of a rhetorical question when the speaker says “But for how long will this last when the tortoise shell is hard to crack”. This rhetorical question is used to show that no matter the inequality faced by the oppressed from the oppressors, it will not last for a very long time because things will one day change for the better.

Furthermore, in Alembong’s “Science and Life”, the speaker brings out aspects of more inequality, where the leaders want to accumulate the nation’s wealth for themselves, and leave their citizens to suffer in poverty. This brings out the themes of capitalism and inequality which are clearly seen in stanza two in the lines:

But when millions of mouth
Are said to feast on meatball
In morphean paradise (as founded by Moses)
While one sees kwashiorkor children
Comb earthen streets for juicy termites. (p. 12)

From the preceding lines, one can see contrast between those who “feast on meatball” as opposed to those who feast on “juicy termites”. This contrast is used to bring out the aspect of discrimination and unequal distribution of wealth that exist in the speaker’s society. This is evident when the speaker adds that:

We were told that
If X is the sufficient cause of Y
Whenever evidence X occurs
There will be an occurrence of Y. (p. 12)

The “X” represents equality and “Y” nation building. This is because, when there is equal distribution of wealth in a nation, it would bring forth equality and as a result, nation building. According to Alembong, “When the parameter of something meets, that thing must

come out” (p. 12). That is, the cause of anything must lead to an effect. Ironically, the science proven in the poem is not taken into consideration by those in positions of power, because they tend to accumulate the nation’s wealth for themselves. They give people the impression that they are living in paradise, where there is plenty, but the question is, how come we have kwashiorkor children in the land of plenty?

To conclude, we can attest that Alempong in his collection, *The Passing Wind* satirizes, conscientizes and instils hope for the precarious conditions of injustice, corruption, inequality, exploitation, among others, faced by most African countries, Cameroon and Anglophone Cameroon in particular. Writing for both the oppressors and the oppressed, he has used an assorted variety of literary devices to bring out his experiences, enhance his thematic concerns and make his intentions heard.

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Biographies

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

Both authors contributed ideas to build up the paper.

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