

Justice and Human Dignity in African Literature: A Study of Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana*

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Abstract

Oral tradition, in the pre-colonial African society, occupied a significant position because it is the embodiments of the philosophy and wisdom of the people. Cautions and judgements were given using these principles as standpoints, and the socially accepted behaviours are equally fostered in them. In other words, they are laws which engender peaceful and harmonious co-existence of citizens. As a result of this, justice can be achieved, and human dignity preserved through the tenets of oral tradition. Particularly, this paper examines justice and human dignity in Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana*. With the use of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the paper explores the writer's presentation of Africans' view of justice and human dignity and the effects of violation of human dignity on both the individual characters in the novel and the society. The paper also assesses the techniques used by the writer in presenting these African norms in the novel. It is discovered that the system of justice inherited from colonialism is questionable. There are false testimonies and false accusations in law courts coupled with delays in hearings as well as partiality in distribution of justice. This type of judicial system is, therefore, condemned, and a call for *Gacaca*, a traditional system of justice is made. The traditional form of justice, together with the appeasement of the dead, is presented as the only means of achieving justice. This paper, in essence, advocates for return to the traditional system of justice as this will help in ensuring justice and maintenance of human dignity which will eventually bring peace and development in the society.

Keywords: Justice, human dignity, norm, psychoanalysis

Introduction

Africans, as a people, have their oral tradition which is the entirety of all the testimonies about the past orally handed down from one generation to another. These testimonies which include knowledge, memories, norms, values, and symbols generally constructed with the words of mouth possess a non-literacy nature because it is conceived in a non-literate society, and also has its foundation on anonymity where no particular individual is said to be an originator of any given form of oral tradition which include proverbs, riddles, folktales, folk songs, myths and legends, folk dance, etc. (Finnegan 2012). In the pre-colonial African society, oral tradition occupied a pertinent position because it embodies the philosophy and wisdom of the people. Admonitions and judgements are given using these principles as standpoints, and the socially accepted behaviours are equally imbued in them. In other words, they are laws; controlling regulations which engender peaceful and harmonious co-existence of citizens. Consequently, justice can be achieved, and human dignity preserved through the tenets of oral tradition.

These African norms, when violated, attract certain consequences which may hurt or hinder the peace and progress of the society. For instance, a society wrecked by a certain degree of conflict where human dignity is violated may find it extremely difficult to unite for progress if justice is not embraced. It is on this ground, therefore, that this Igbo proverb forms the basis of this research: *E gbuo maka iwe, e nie maka isi*. One killed out of anger is buried because of the stench from the corpse. This is to say that even when human dignity is unintentionally or coercively violated, justice should be given to victims as adequately as possible for a peaceful society, and for consequent progressive social change to reemerge because peace breeds progress.

Statement of the Problem

Violation of human dignity and denial of justice seem to be among the major factors that hinder peaceful coexistence and development in Africa. These acts of violations usually rear their heads when there are violent conflicts such as war. People involuntarily engage in some inhuman acts as a result of the conditions they find themselves. The victims of the ruthless acts are equally often denied justice because of the system of justice inherited from colonialism. This act of denial itself is often more insensitive and

the general outcome is a society bereft of development. This study, therefore, is an investigation into the African view of human dignity and justice as an appropriate means of achieving justice, and the study is carried out using Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda*, a travelogue on the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The novel will, in this study, simply be referred to as *The Shadow of Imana*. The study explores the writer's presentation of Africans' view on justice and human dignity. It also investigates the effects of the violation of human dignity on both the individual characters in the novel and the society, and equally assesses the techniques used by the writer in presenting these African norms in the novel.

Conceptual Framework

The concepts of justice, human dignity, and norm are reviewed for a better understanding of this study. Justice, according to Thomas Aquinas as quoted in Obioha (2011, p. 186) is "a perpetual and constant will of giving everyone his due". This bothers on moral rightness as regards ethics, rationality, equity, and equality. Obioha (2011) further explains that justice is the concept of giving one his or her due as well as an antidote to the vice of greed. Khechen (2013) elaborates Rawls's theory of justice where justice is seen as fairness. Justice either means lawful or just as unjust means either lawless or unfair. Justice is primarily conceived as the virtue of social institution. The right of every individual, he argues, is based on justice and this right which is indisputable cannot be superseded by the interests of society as a whole. Justice, therefore, is about right – treating people as expected on morality grounds.

Human dignity, on the other hand, is defined by Andorno (2013) as that which encapsulates the idea that every human being is distinctively valuable and therefore ought to be accorded the utmost respect and care. The consequences of the Second World War drew a great attention to this concept as the International community recognized it as the basis of every human right although the theory is based on Immanuel Kant's philosophy that man is an end in himself, with an inherent value that cannot be priced. In the words of Steinmann (2016, p. 1),

It is widely accepted that these elements root in Kantian moral ethics which holds that man's autonomy is based upon universal dignity, as a result of which man should never be used as a means to an end, but only as a means in himself.

Messetti and Dallari (2018, p. 283) have it that the concept was coined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and "is the foundation of all rights, such as freedom, equality, justice and peace in the world ...". They further opine that human dignity goes from a moral value fundamental to freedom or independence to right and a duty elevated with constitutional status.

Shultziner (2003) asserts that human dignity has levels of meanings. It functions as a justification for rights and duties in legal instrument, yet it is not just a legal concept. It also sums up a moral worldview which brings human moral worth as well as the variety of desirable moral conducts that are commensurable with human essential worth to the fore. Bauman (2007) lays emphasis on the inherently social nature of human dignity. This is to say that non-social beings cannot say to either have or lack this form of dignity. It is specifically attributed to man, and it is not lost but violated. A victim of rape, for instance, cannot say to have lost human dignity; it is only violated. Baumann (2007, pp. 6 – 7) explains it thus:

The concept of human dignity is a normative one: It comes with claims or rights that a person has with respect to treatment by other people. Human dignity is like a right in this respect: it does not go away if violated ... and it is not based on merit or accomplishment; the 'damage' done by violation is very hard to 'repair' (if at all) or to forget ... my human dignity has to do with how others treat me.

Norm, another concept under study, is defined by Gudykunst in Teilanyo (2015, p. 66) as the "guidelines of how we should or should not behave that have a basis in morality". Norms offer certain rules for behaviour; they are specific behavioural models, rules and guides. Though some norms are culture-bound in the sense that they describe attitudes, practices, or behaviours that are morally accepted by a particular culture, others are universal because they are widely found and accepted in many other parts of the world.

In other words, some certain behaviours which are considered important among Africans may have little or no importance in Western societies. Paluck (2009, p. 596) sees norm as a “socially shared definitions of the way people do behave or should behave”. This is in line with the part toed by Granovetter (2004) that norms are shared ideas about the proper way to behave. This explains the unique feature of norms: they are learnt, established, and utilized when there is a contact between persons.

Teilanyo, drawing a difference between norms and values, asserts that “values are the beliefs about what is important, while the norms are the behaviour and attitudes that support and indicate these values. It can also be said that values are manifested through norms” (2015, pp. 66 – 67). Norms, therefore, can be violated, and violations of any form have certain sanctions, and that make people to have some thoughts before violating them.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on Sigmund Freud’s proposition of psychoanalytic theory. In this theory, Freud, an Austrian neurologist, opined that the unconscious plays a major role in the behaviour, feeling, and words of individuals who are not aware of its presence or operations. Freud’s perception of the artist is that he is an unstable personality who writes out of his own neurosis, with the result that his work gives therapeutic perception into the nature of life not only for himself but also for those who read. Dobie (2012, p. 61) has it that “Freud recognized that the artist consciously expresses fantasy, illusions, and wishes through symbols, just as dreams from the unconscious do. To write a story or a poem, then, is to reveal the unconscious, to give neurosis socially acceptable expression”.

The tripartite psyche is another important aspect of Freud’s psychoanalysis because it is here that he described the mind as having three operative parts namely; the id, the superego, and the ego. McLeod (2016) has it that the id engages in primary process thinking which is primitive, illogical, irrational, and fantasy oriented. The ego which makes use of reason, on its part, seeks to consider the rules of behaviour. It seeks for other means through which the demands of id will be realistically achieved without any ugly effect on the society. This it does through either compromising or a postponement of id’s satisfaction. The third which is the superego is an agency that seeks to enforce the striving for perfection as it holds out to the ideal standards and moralistic goals of the ego. It can as well retaliate against the imperfections of the ego by inducing guilt (Dobie, 2012). The superego deals with the values and norms of the society.

This theory is considered appropriate for this study because there are revelations of the unconscious and the manifestation of the Freudian tripartite psyche as seen in Tadjó’s encounter with the genocide victims.

Data Analysis

Tadjó, in *The Shadow of Imana*, portrays African views of justice and human dignity. In the text, as perceived in the reports of various groups of people encountered by the writer, justice is pertinent for reconciliation in a country torn apart by war. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda did not just happen; it was traced to colonialism. The missionaries and explorers who invaded Africa in the nineteenth century developed a story which changed the national identity of Rwandans who were before then differentiated one from another on their modes of existence. The Tutsis were cattle keepers while the Hutus were crop farmers. Both groups co-existed until the colonial administrators introduced race into the nation, placing the Tutsis on a superior plane. This preference of one tribe over another by Europeans gradually began to breed hatred and series of crises until it got to the climax in 1994 when a great massacre took place (Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2014).

The genocide led to the arrest of many culprits who became prisoners in various prisons in the country. Stories from the prisons point to the fact that the system of justice inherited from colonialism is questionable. There are false testimonies and false accusations in law courts coupled with delays in hearings and extradition processes. The rights of these prisoners are denied them and their human dignity violated. The writer puts it thus:

Eighty-five men in a room with a small courtyard. They are not allowed out. When they see us arrive, one of them says immediately: 'All we can see is a bit of sky and the door to this courtyard. No books. Nothing to write on. Bibles, occasionally. One prisoner cannot testify in another's defence. Only those who survive the genocide can testify. It's a betrayal created between the courts and the genocide survivors. And what about those who have killed, but have also saved lives? The court should take that into account. Why is there no follow-up when someone appeals? Where are the copies of the judgements? Why don't we ever get visits from humanitarian organizations? Some people have pleaded guilty, so why have they also been condemned to death? What should be punished is false testimony, false accusations... We need to get angry with the political classes. They're living in exile. And when some high-ranking official is arrested, ..., there's no death penalty. It's only the little folk who are executed'. (Tadjo 2002, pp. 99 – 100)

There is a total condemnation of the western trial system as it is presented as a system filled with false testimonies, false accusations, tactical delays, and partiality. Female prisoners are sexually violated by prison directors that some of them become pregnant during their detentions. There is, therefore, a call for *Gacaca*, a return to traditional system of justice where the ancestors judge and mete out punishments; a system where citizens are given the privilege of passing judgements. Although the use of *Gacaca* is questioned due to the magnitude of atrocities committed by people during the genocide – the dead are part of those who need justice, and all the prisoners demand is fairness – there is a plan to extend to other angles so as to carry every victim along in this quest for justice. The writer's presentation of Africans' view on justice and human dignity extols appeasement of the dead. The dead too deserve justice because their dignity is violated. Tadjo describes their agitations as they manifest through the winds and rains as interpreted by the diviner, and proffers a necessary solution:

What we must do now is bury the dead according to our rites, bury their desiccated bodies, their bones growing old in the open air, so that we keep of them nothing but their memory, heightened by respect... We must bury the dead so that they may return to visit us in peace, and hide their decay and their blinding nakedness, so that they do not place a curse on us. We must give back to the images of life the right to assert themselves, so that these bones covered in dusts and violence will not bear the burden of the hatred which buried them. (Tadjo 2002, pp. 44 – 45)

The traditional system of justice is not only limited to the living, the dead are also acknowledged as a fraction of the society, and until everyone gets justice, only then are peace and consequent social progress assured. This, in essence, points to the fact imbued in an Igbo proverb that even when one kills out of anger, it is important that one buries the corpse because of the stench that will eventually ooze from it if left unburied. This is to say that whenever human dignity is violated for any reason at all, justice should be given to victims as adequately as possible for a peaceful society, and for an ensuing positive social change to return.

Another rationale behind this study is to examine the effects of the violation of human dignity on both the individual characters in the novel and the society. It is an undisputable fact that the massacre in Rwanda was a hit on human dignity. There was a horrendous violation of value and respect for human life that hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives in a space of one hundred days. The death of these citizens, as witnessed in the novel, affects the living individually and collectively. Those whose loved ones were killed in the massacre suffer some emotional hurt; the society, generally, feel the restlessness and wrath of these dead victims. Tadjo (2002, pp. 41- 42) puts it thus:

The wrath of the dead faced with oblivion, with broken promises, was only to be expected. For life was already pulling at the living from all sides and they no longer knew where to turn... The wind carried away their rage and pierced the eardrums of the survivors. Consciences were darkened by anguish, making the days and nights unbearable.

The living who are victims of violations such as rape, forced militia, over-crowded prisons, and feeding from rubbish bins suffer some levels of psychological pain. Anastasie, a rape victim wallows in hostile dreams, haunting instinctive terrors, and sleeplessness. Isaac, a boy who was forced to join the military, feel the same pain too. The events of the war breed in him the thought of running away from his country even when the war has ended, but another thought of having nowhere to go still keeps him in his town. He blames the adults who force them to kill as he struggles in hopelessness. Prisoners who are rotting in the cells and overcrowded prisons are another group of citizens whose human dignity is violated. They lament and wish their forced silence is broken. There are groups of children, too, who are orphaned by the war; those whose parents are victims of either the militia's guns and machetes or AIDS which rapidly spread in such situation. There are also those orphaned by family dislocation. These children are forced into adulthood, fending for themselves by rummaging the rubbish bins for food. They are described by the writer as having "the faces of miniature men and women" (Tadjo 2002, p. 86). Despite the forced adulthood, they are afraid of the society, retreating to lies to save themselves against the cruelty of adults.

One realizes the revelations of the unconscious and the manifestation of the Freudian tripartite psyche in Tadjo's encounter with the genocide victims. Freud's perception that the artist is an unstable personality who writes out of his own neurosis, with the result that his work gives therapeutic perception into the nature of life not only for himself but also for those who read also plays out in this novel. The novel, therefore, reveals the unconscious parts of both the writer and the characters, giving neurosis socially acceptable expression. The novelist, in the opening of the novel clearly states her mission for the travel to Rwanda: "I could no longer keep Rwanda buried inside me. I needed to lance the abscess, lay bare the wound and bandage it. I am not a doctor, but I could still try to administer first aid to myself" (Tadjo 2002, p. 12). The novel, therefore, is a therapy to the writer, the genocide victims, and the readers.

Stylistically, Tadjo combines poetic rhythm and fluidity of prose in weaving her story (Okoronkwo-Chukwu, 2014). The narrative feature of prose allows the writer to tell her story as clearly as possible, thoroughly highlighting those atrocious and cruel activities which occurred during the massacre. The poetic rhythm and the concentrated nature of many expressions in the novel portray the inexplicable nature of the war and its effects on both the individuals and the society at large. The use of symbols is another techniques employed by the writer. The rape of Mukandiri and her body which still has a blanket over its shoulders symbolically represents the bubbling city of Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda which "seems to have forgotten everything" about the war but dies in "fears buried beneath apparent serenity" (Tadjo 2002, p. 10). Okoronkwo-Chukwu (2014), writing about the raped body of Mukandiri, attributes it to symbolically represent the humiliation of the entire Tutsi people for it is only when her womanhood is debased that the message of humiliation can easily be understood.

The introduction of the soothsayer to interpret the wrath of the dead and his incantations, as well as the case made for the introduction of *Gacaca* system of justice and appeasement of the spirits of the dead bring in elements of African traditional beliefs in the novel. Worthy to note also is the journey motif typical of war novels. The writer, on her own part journeyed from one end of Rwanda to the other in her attempt to 'lance the abscess', capturing the morbid scenes in various genocide sites as well as the evidence of survivors which highlight the extent of violation of human dignity in the country. She, together with the war victims, moves from certain levels of ignorance to knowledge. There are quests to recreate new selves and a new society through the determination to attain justice for every member of the society, living and dead alike.

Conclusion

Exploration of justice and human dignity in Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* is the major concern of this paper. The paper explores the writer's presentation of Africans' view of justice and human dignity; and the effects of violation of human dignity on both the individual characters in the novel and the society. The paper also assesses the techniques used by the writer in presenting these African norms in the novel. It is discovered that the system of justice inherited from colonialism is

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This paper, in essence, advocates for return to the traditional system of justice as this will help in ensuring justice and maintenance of human dignity which will eventually bring peace and development in the society.

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