

Images of Subjugation and Echoes of Resistance in Selected Poems of Agostinho Neto

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Abstract

African literature in the colonial era captures mostly the horrible experiences of the colonized in the hands of white imperialists. Colonization in Africa constitutes an era of lasting memories of pains and sorrows in the annals of the history of the continent. It was a period of imperial bastardization of Africa by European countries. The partitioning of the region by Western nations led to the occupation of different parts of Africa by major imperial powers, like Britain, France and Portugal. Accordingly, each of the colonizers has a unique style of administration in their colonies. Unlike Anglophone colonized countries, Francophone and Lusophone regions witnessed more harsh and brutal encounter with the White masters. This is evidently captured in the protest literature of the continent. The immersion of agonizing imagery in Lusophone poetry lends credence to the painful reality of the people's fate under the weight of Portuguese grip on the region. This paper examines instances of the injustices suffered by the people of the region as seen in Agostinho Neto's "Bleeding and Germinating," "February," "Contract Workers" and "Prison Nights. It argues that the language of the poems, imbued with words like bleeding, blood, fire, chains and corpses, underpins the incidents that characterize the contemporary reality of the poet's society during colonisation. The research applies postcolonial theory in the exploration of the poems. This is based on its appropriateness to the interpretation of the works in relation to the focus of the study, following Frantz Fanon's postulations on third world countries and resistance to colonial domination, as stressed in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The research is focused on evaluating the adverse effects of colonization, its attendant resistance by the colonized, and how the lingering impacts of imperialism has kept the Lusophone region/Africa backward, even after years of decolonization. This way, the study introduces a new insight into the perception of the primary texts, different from existing studies, which were mainly focused on revolutionary aesthetics.

Keywords: Images, Colonization, Subjugation, Resistance, Freedom, Blood, Exploitation

Introduction

Lusophone poetry is replete with the peculiarities in countries like Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and Sao Tome, under the imperial administration of Portugal in the colonial era. Most of their works are often laden with protest language as a result of the suffering they passed through in the hands of the colonial masters. The oppressive government of the imperial masters compels the oppressed people to protest their unjust treatment. Elliot Ziwira observes that the African poet "... cannot help being combative, for his/her suffering calls for such; ..." (np). He is of the view that all the seeds of protest in Lusophone poetry are sown through the adept use of imagery and symbolism. It cuts across various works of writers from the region like in Antonio Jacinto's "Letter from a Contract Worker." The works depict the pains of the people in the hands of their oppressors. Lusophone African literature against colonial dominance is inherent in the manner in which they mount their exasperation and grievances in their poetry. This is justified in the manner in which the victims of imperial administration are singled out for subjugation as expressed by the personae in Agostinho Neto's poetry.

As seen in Neto's "Bleeding and Germinating," "February," "Contract Workers" and "Prison Nights," most of the poems of the authors in that period capture the generality of the people's feelings toward colonial rule and its attendant evils. Their works express such pains experienced by the colonized subjects. As conscious members of the society, writers from the region responded by using literature to ignite the people's consciousness and protest against their collective oppression. Russell Hamilton writes that:

In the 1950s and 1960s as the winds of change began to blow across Africa, socially conscious writers in the Portuguese colonies turned to modes of cultural expression that directly or indirectly challenged colonial rule. Growing anti-colonialism led to liberation movements and, by the early 1960s, armed rebellion in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. Writers from all five colonies increasingly produced works of cultural re vindication, social protest and combativeness. (33)

Hamilton's observation represents the mission of the Lusophone writers as they try to fight colonial injustice in the land. Similarly, writers from other African countries under European domination were strongly engaged in using their works to expose and combat Western imperialism. According to Simon Gikandi:

... what is now to be the heart of literary scholarship on the continent could not have acquired its current identity or function if the traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe had not taken place. Not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their works. (54)

The impacts of the colonial experience in Portuguese colonies are what inform the birth of Agostino Neto's poems under study. Hence, the choice of postcolonial analytical tool as relevant to the texts' interpretation. Postcolonial literature, according to Bill Ashcroft et al, "emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their difference from the assumptions of the imperial center" (2). In such literary productions are the pictures of the African experience told by the insiders themselves. The African experience is an integral part of the Lusophone African literature as obviously represented in the works of Agostinho Neto.

Neto's poetry has been read by critics from different perspectives. Such interpretations point to the aesthetic multiplicity of literary art. For instance, Irene Marques engaged the poetry of Agostinho Neto from the dimension of postcolonial consciousness. In her analysis of selected poems from Neto's *Sacred Hope*, she wonders: "can poetry carry enough sorrow, enough strength, enough fire, enough love, enough wisdom, enough care, and enough horror to penetrate the hearts and the souls of the oppressed and the oppressors so that both will desperately want to escape their sinister labels?" (5). She notes that as a great poet, Neto's artistry connects deeply with his political responsibility to the people of Angola. Her analysis of Neto's poems breeds overarching themes of "the oppression, apartheid, (un)civilization, and (un)Christianity brought to Africa by the Portuguese" (3). Marquis infers to her perception of Neto's "Bleeding and Germinating" that the poet tasks himself with "giving agency to the Africans that might feel powerless and trapped inside the oppressive colonialist system: he is showing them a way out of that system and encouraging them to be less afraid to fight for independence" (5). The critic insists that Neto's call to action in the majority of his poems is for Angolans to see the beauty of their origin and the havoc of the colonialists; and join in the fight for their collective freedom.

Colonialism and Agony of the Oppressed

At the surface level of Lusophone poetry, and particularly Agostino Neto's "Bleeding and Germinating," "February," "Contract Worker" and "Prison Nights" are the cries of torture experienced by the people of the region in the hands of the white masters. There are obvious depiction of pains emanating from the oppression and enslavement of the colonized. What is seen in the aforementioned poems replicate events in Edward Brathwaite's "Prelude." They are subjected to inhuman treatments as they are forced to work in fields and plantations just for the selfish interest of the colonial overlords. In "Bleeding and Germinating," the images of able-bodied men and women from the continent are painted as they are forced into slavery:

We of immense Africa
and above the betrayal of men
...anxious fervent mighty in roaring rivers
through the harmonious sound of muted
marimbas
through the looks youth of crowds
crowds of arms of anxiety and hope
of immense Africa
under claws (Lines 1-10)

The people are portrayed as being hounded into slavery by their captors. Their passage through "roaring rivers" reminisces the horrific experiences of African slaves as they were forced to Europe and America through the Atlantic ocean. They work day in day out, "bleeding in the estate sweat of the compulsion of / cotton fields" (lines 16 and 17). For the persona to describe Africa as being "under claws" indicates their state of captivity, like a prey on a lion's grip. It heightens the extent of the suffering of the blacks under imperial control. This is a kind of image that runs across Neto's poems as also discernible in his "On the Skin of the Drum." It is an exposition of the wickedness of man against fellow man. In like manner, "February" shows the gory image of the senseless massacre of blacks at the slightest provocation. Dead bodies of the victims are seen floating on the ocean. We read that:

It was when the Atlantic
by dint of the hours
returned corpses
wrapped in white flowers of foam
and the uncontained hatred of beast ... (Lines 1-5)

The graphic picture of the horrors of the horrendous deaths of the people is buttressed by Neto himself (in the subtitle of the poem, as *The Massacre of São Tomé*), which has remained indelible in the psyche of the people. The bodies of the deceased victims are left to be devoured by animals on “the beaches filled up with crows and jackals” (line 7). Colonialism is apparently a period of terror and misery for Africans. As seen in “Bleeding and Germinating,” what is encountered in the poem “February” further highlights the pitiful treatment of inhabitants of Portuguese colonies in Africa. The continent is described as “... the land burned by the terror of ages / enslaved in chains” (lines 10-11). The expression is an affirmation of the subjection of Africans into slavery.

The human figures represented in the poem are more or less depicted as slaves. Apparently, they are blacks from the Lusophone region, who worked as indentured servants under the strict supervision of their colonial masters. The system orchestrated the sustained exploitation of the colonial subjects by the imperialists. Like Britain, Portugal “... maintained control of its colonies and its wealth for a little longer, and also bolstered the conviction of white superiority. To justify slavery and indenture, [White] imperialists developed a teleological view of labor that was linked to hierarchical views of civilization and race” (Alison Klein 5). Consequently, black people, as evident in Neto's poetry, are subjected to harsh working conditions in their quest for survival. According to the speaker:

A long line of bearers
Holds the road
with rapid steps
and their grieving forms
they sprinkle the roadside dust
with their sweat .(Lines 1 – 6)

Significantly, the poet's use of language gives a pictorial imagination of the sufferings of the people in the hands of the White overlords. The diction “line of bearers,” “grieving form” and “sweat” points to the agonies of the black figures subjugated through the system of colonisation. It tells more about the inhuman conditions of the colonised people, and the life of servitude they witnessed as the imperial project lasted. The speaker laments that “On their naked backs” / “They carry heavy burdens” (lines 7 and 8). There was a period of harvest of tears and sorrows, emanating from their subordinate status to the colonizers. The imagery created out of the pitiful situation of the masses metaphorizes the painful experiences of blacks during colonial administration. The colonial masters administered their colonies with the utmost harshness. Their subjects are maltreated and incarcerated at the slightest provocation. This is evidently represented in Neto's “Prison Nights,” where the pains borne by the victims is projected. According to the speaker:

Next door
Someone groans
Fingers edged with blood
Streaming from nails broken by the *palmatoria*
(Lines 25 – 28)

Experiences of the victims of colonialism in Lusophone Africa replicates the oppressive government in apartheid South Africa, with the incarceration of opposing voices, as in Denis Brutus's “The Sun on this Rubble.” The image of oppression and pain is a significant motif that runs across a good number of colonial literatures. The phenomenon concretizes the harsh and ugly realities that characterize the African experience.

Similarly, the agonies of the people from Lusophone colonies, as in “Bleeding and Germinating” is presented as a common suffering endured by Africans elsewhere, irrespective of who their colonial masters were. It is first and foremost “the process of expressing the tensions set up by our modern awareness by the varied and often contradictory elements of the collective experience” (Abiola Ireto 212). The shared experience is part of what is encountered in Neto's poems. According to the persona:

Our cries
are messenger drums of desire
in the babel harmony of nations
our cries anthems of love for hearts
flowering in the earth like the sun in seeds

cries Africa ... (Lines 24 – 29)

All ethnic/national affiliations are hereby represented as partakers in the colonial fraud. In their wailings are sounds of a collective desire for relief from subjugation. They want a world where all men are united by shared humanity propelled by love for one another as contained in the above excerpt. The same desire for respite from pain is echoed in “February” even as they bury the dead. The persona stresses the need “for love / and for harmony / and for our freedom” (lines 22 - 24), despite the prevailing realities that elicit tears among the people.

In “Contract Workers,” Neto foregrounds the unbearable weight of oppression on the people. The pictures painted out of their life reinforces Simon Gikandi's assertion “... that the cultural and political force of colonialism in Africa was so enduring that writers concerned with the nature of African society could not avoid the trauma and drama that accompanied the imposition of European rule on the continent” (*African Literature*. 55). Apparently, the victims of European imperialism groaned over the weight of suppression inflicted on them by the White masters. This is obviously manifested in the life of servitude they are subjected to, making existence very miserable to them as they trudge on looking for a means to survive. The speaker notes that:

They go on
Eyes distant
Hearts fearful
Arms strong
Smiles deep as the deep waters.(Lines 9 – 13)

The above stanza reflects the true nature of the people's conditions in colonial Lusophone Africa. As subalterns, they are structurally excluded and are portrayed as second class citizens whose survival is dependent upon their total submission to the whims and caprices of the imperial lords. The colonized are exploited and impoverished. Hence, their resort to indentured service outside of their homeland. The contract workers' quest for survival separates them away from home and the warmth of their loved ones. What is more, “They go full of homesickness / and dread / - but they sing” (lines 16 – 18). The question of homesickness underscores the length of the workers' absence from home and its attendant nostalgia. The dreadful experiences of the people notwithstanding, the speaker reiterates that they sing. The idea of singing is significant in the sense that it foretells the victims hope for a better future.

In “Prison Nights,” the speaker bemoans the excruciating experiences of the inmates as a result of the wickedness of the oppressors. The victims are depicted as being forced into a tiny cell where life is made unbearable to them. This is portrayed in the persona's lamentation of his kin's subjection to terror by the imperialists. It further buttresses the agonizing lives of the black people during colonial era. Africans suffered “... deprivation of all human rights in the age of human rights, as though they were not counted among humans” (Naguib Mahfouz 122). The prisoners' tortures lend credence to Mahfouz's submission. In his voice:

who will sleep
when next door there are the madman's cries
that they are jumping from the window to wound
his flesh
over the fatigue of sleeplessness anguish and
expectation?
Who will sleep
when he hears his best friend go mad
there in the next cell
his spirit killed by torture? (Lines 35 – 42)

The above rhetoric is a pointer to the dehumanization of the colonial subjects, without justifiable provocation. They are hounded like games and stripped of every iota of human dignity.

The selected poems are depicted as the personae's expression of the agony of a people subjugated on account of their status as the colonized. It is a confirmation of not just the Lusophone experience of imperialism, but an insight into the horrible pictures of Africa's tortuous past relived in the continent's postcolonial literature. Agostinho Neto, like some of his contemporaries, has deployed his works to depict the reality they were confronted with as the people groaned under colonial dictatorship. Writers, who out of commitment used their writings in this manner, were able to conscientize the masses and spur them into actions to fight for their liberation.

Contours of Resistance and Freedom in Neto's Poetry

In Agostinho Neto's poetry, as in most protest African literature, the voices of resistance and quest for freedom reverberate. This is consequent upon the feeling of exploitation and maltreatment by the Africans in the hands of

the colonial masters. Fanon observes that “the great figures of the colonized people are always those who led the national resistance to invasion” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 69). Accordingly, African writers took up the responsibility of addressing the sufferings of their people through their works. In the words of Breyten Breytenbach, “in the poor and colonized countries the writer plays a more visible role: faced with acute social and economic iniquities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people” (166). Evidently, Breytenbach’s submission reflects on the upsurge of literary productions witnessed in the colonial as a reaction to the atrocious background of Western imperialism in Africa and other third world countries. Aloysius Ohaegbu notes that “as would be expected, African intellectuals schooled in Western European critical tradition but imbued with a new sense of independence and cultural nationalism joined the existing body of the critics of African literature with some sense of revolt ...” (“Defining African Literature” 3). The waves of revolution as seen in the writings of African poets, like Agostinho Neto, re-echoes the yearnings of the masses for respite from pains as they struggle with the existential limitations of colonial rule.

In Neto’s “February,” “Bleeding and Germinating,” “Contract Workers,” and “Prison Nights,” the speakers express their frustrations with colonization, and yearns for freedom from the oppressive colonizers. The people’s struggles to break the yokes of colonial chains are depicted in the poems under study. For instance, in “February,” we see the persona express the people’s zeal to confront their adversary with the utmost tenacity. Poised with the resolution to dismantle Western influence on them, the people, by their individual commitments, collectively battle the common enemy even at the expense of their own lives. And many paid the ultimate sacrifice for others to be free. According to the speaker:

It was then that in eyes on fire
now blood now life now death
we victoriously buried our dead
and on the graves
recognised the rightness of men's sacrifice
for love
and for harmony
and for our freedom
even faced with death by dint of the hours. (Lines 18 – 25)

It is shown that the people have strong desire to break free from imperial captivity. Hence, the persona's choice of the words such as fire, sacrifice love, and freedom, interspersed on various lines of the poem. In a similar vein, Neto’s “Bleeding and Germinating” embodies the voice of a persistent quest for freedom. Like the rest of the poems, “Bleeding and Germinating” depicts the speaker’s horrible experiences in the hands of the Whites. Consequently, he expresses optimism for a relief from pains despite the present hopelessness. He laments:

Our cries
are messenger drums of desire
in the babel of voices harmony of nations
our cries anthems of love for hearts
flowering in the earth like the sun in seeds
cries Africa
cries of the mornings when in the seas are ever
more
dead in chains
bleeding and germinating. (Lines 23 – 31)

The speaker’s use collective pronoun *our* does not only suggest the shared deprivation suffered by the people, but also undergirds the unity black subjects in their fight for liberation from enslavement. Additionally, the use of terms like “flowering” and “morning” reaffirm the message encoded in *germination* (or germinating) as used in the title of the poem. This is because germination conjures the image a planting, which fundamentally involves seeds dying to sprout again by bringing out a new shoot. Metaphorically, the existential struggles of the colonized evokes the biological cycle of seeds/planting, in the sense that to achieve a new world/nation, the oppressed have to with their lives so that the birth of a free society can be possible. Apparently, the speaker laments the death of their kin in the course of the struggle for emancipation. The sacrifices of the fallen heroes herald the emergence of their freedom, which is symbolized by images of flowering, sun and morning. Significantly, the title of the poem in itself is revealing. The idea of bleeding and germinating at the same time foregrounds the determination and resilience of the oppressed people in the midst of unending exploitation and torture.

Like in “February” and “Bleeding and Germinating,” Neto’s “Contract Workers” embodies voice of longing for liberation from the clutches of dehumanization. The contract workers are kept away from home as a result of long

stay in their work place, occasioned by the exploitative disposition of the imperial powers. Nevertheless, the victims express optimism about the future even in their deplorable conditions. This is depicted in the speaker's words below:

Long months separate them from theirs
and they go filled with longing
and dread
but they sing (Lines 11 – 14)

The last line of the above stanza reflects the people's expectations for a promising future. Their ability to sing despite the ordeals they are subjected to, portrays their irrepressible spirit and resolve to continue with their struggle for survival. This is the kind of attitude that keeps them moving in the moment of hopelessness. Their song is a sign of victory to come. This is replicated in Neto's "Prison Nights," the persona is obsessed with the glorious days to come. According to the speaker, "He is thinking of victory / and no sleep comes to his prison days / or dreams to fill his solitude" (lines 29 – 31). The victim's preoccupation with freedom reinforces the captivity of the colonized people, and the agonizing grip of the colonial masters on them. There is a kind of subjugation that portends death. This is particularly why the speaker likens the prison experience to a vault. He notes that:

In the sepulchral silence
of four walls without sun
he reads in the Bible
the hopeful gift of his mother :
"Blessed are they who hunger
and thirst after righteousness ... " (Lines 53 – 58)

The reference to sepulcher, which has a biblical connotation, does not only symbolize a final resting place for the dead or the cell, by inference, as the final destination of the victims. It denotes an emerging period of rejuvenation and hope for their collective freedom. The speaker reiterates that "... theirs shall be the country / and the love of their people" (lines 59 and 60).

Significantly, Lusophone poets deployed various means in their attempts to resist Western hegemony which have gained influence in African literary canon. Like other protest poets of African extraction, Agostinho Neto's oeuvre shows that "poetry is constructed with unique artistic devices bearing denotative and underlying meanings. Its various elements conjure up meanings that are otherwise multivalent and transferable to different contexts for various purposes. It presupposes that: "The role of poetry is, therefore, a major one, not only because it is more powerful than other forms of writing as a means of political mobilization, but also because it sustains, within the popular memory, national continuity". (Elias Knouri qtd in Harlow 34)

These diverse nature of poetic elements are used by the Lusophone African poets as tools of colonial resistance. The ascription of poetry as the most effective tool of resistance lies in the manipulation of diction and language. Maduka and Eyoh go in-depth to explain the usefulness of diction in poetic expression. According to the scholars: Poetry pays close attention to words to grind the particles of meaning out of each of them. Accordingly, the choice of words which is generally referred to as diction is central to their activity. Diction embraces various operations: the poet chooses his words in the context of the emotional association they generate in him and possibly in the reader (connotations; imagery/figurative language; symbol; myths; archetypes). (qtd in Babatunde, 18)
The choice of words employed by Agostinho Neto is codified within the matrix of different poetic elements like tone, imagery, symbolism and form, among others.

As a revolutionary poet, Neto finds the use of form as constraining to the free flow of his message through his poetic thoughts. This is why he lets go of form to embrace a simple style of writing to ensure the success of his struggle for liberation using his poems. He also believes that conformity to lay out European traditional poetic form of stanzas and lines will contradict his idea of cultural and colonial resistance. For the Lusophone poet, language serves as a potent element of resistance and liberation through various avenues like free verse, no specific poetic structure and lack of punctuation. This simple stylistic organization of words manifests in Neto's works, particularly the poems under study. For instance, in "February," one encounters a verse that flouts the principles of poetic structure, punctuation and capitalization, as shown below:

It was when the Atlantic
by dint of the hours
returned corpses
wrapped in white flowers of foam
and the uncontained hatred of beasts (Lines 1 – 5)

The reader encounters a worker who sings to narrate their sufferings and pains, as is the song of pain found in "Contract Workers." What is noticeable is a deliberate free flow of thoughts across the lines and stanzas of the poem. This defiant poetic structure was indeed a harsh resistance measure when one peeps into the level of censorship that the early Lusophone writers faced as Sovon Sanyal pointed out: "It was a real uphill struggle for the writers to reject the colonial values which were then highly institutionalized" (118). It seems that Neto wrote his poems to make prominent his rebellion against Western traditions.

Additionally, at the heart of the poetic elements lies the representation of the African historical experiences which is best shown with the use of imagery and symbols to induce a perfect call to action for resistance, as exemplified in Neto's "Hoisting of the Flag," where there is the presence of symbols of ancestral harmonies like "Ngola Kiluanje," the "sacred Ngola Ritmos" and "Queen Ginga." This is encountered in Neto's "Prison Nights" where the speaker makes strong allusion to historical places. It further strengthens the bond between the prisoners and their country home. His nostalgic utterances re-echoe thus:

On hot afternoons
when looks and voices fill the Cuca road
and up Lixeira way
or in the Hills of Maianga
from this land impoverished of all by fear
and enriched by certainty
resurrecting fire and magic
and words burning with impatience (Lines 1 – 8)

Their presence in the poem shows a deliberate attempt to resist the colonial eradication of the African cultural identity and heritage. In its case "February," harbours similar and familiar cultural symbols like the green island of São Tomé and corpses bearing weights of historical struggles and experiences.

There is a contractual use of visual imagery of a stormy torrent of blood and the growing of a dead seed in "February." This shows the dire prices paid for freedom and the consequent hope of rebirth. There are also tactile and visual imagery of "bodies steeped in shame and salt" and "white flowers of foam" to highlight the level of violence meted out on the people and their land. The savagery of colonialism is made more manifest through the imagery of "crows," "jackals" and "with bestial hunger for battered flesh." All these are a metonymic display of the sufferings of the people during colonization.

In "February," there is a contrast in tones of despair which gives way to that of hope and triumph to underscore the multifaceted nature of poetry of resistance. Thus, the images of hope, rebirth and restoration are essential elements of poems resistant poems as seen in the primary texts. Neto, in "February," uses the "green land" imagery to allude to the glitter of hope for the people, as in "We must Plant," where the metaphor of the new tree of national independence serves as a ground for renewal of hope by every citizen. The same image and metaphor of "tree" is used by the persona in David Diop's "Africa." The image/symbol of tree in the poems is seen as young which symbolizes the rise of Africa that had been cut down by imperial incursion. The personae believe that they will rise to see freedom from bloodshed and bitterness at the point of the country's independence.

As an active protest poet during colonization, Neto's works depict his solidarity toward the fight for the emancipation of Africans from foreign invasion. He concurs with Aimé Césaire that a patriotic poet should write "about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out" (Césaire, 21). Accordingly, Neto has proven to be faithful to his historical background in his utilization of his literary prowess to address the challenges of his people, specifically as it concerns the African experience, in relation to colonial encounter.

Blood as a Symbolic Image in the Poetry of Agostinho Neto

Often encountered in Lusophone poetry is the immersion of blood across the lines and stanzas of the poems of Agostinho Neto as evidently shown in "Bleeding and Germinating," "February," and "Prison Nights." The presence of blood imagery symbolizes the dehumanizing experiences and pains suffered by the people. It shows the level of maltreatment the colonial masters meted out to the people of Portuguese colonies. In "Bleeding and Germinating" for instance, we see how they groan under heavy burden, working without being taken good care of:

bloody with pain and hope grief and strength
bleeding on the earth disemboweled by the blood
of hoes

bleeding in the estate sweat of the compulsion of
cotton fields . (Lines 13 – 17)

This is a clear picture of their predicament in the hands of the colonialists. They are “bleeding and germinating” (line 22). The metaphor evoked in the victims’ condition of bleeding and germinating at the same time is the resilient nature of the Africans. They have been suppressed enough to die, but instead they are seen struggling to survive amidst the challenges of their marginalization. A similar situation is noticeable in “February.” The persona decries the ugly state of affairs and the unwarranted death witnessed by blacks. Their state of mind is one weighed down by the images of life and death. According to the persona:

It was then that in eyes on fire
Now blood now life now death
We victoriously buried our dead
and on the graves
... (Lines 18 – 21)

They are not deterred by the attempt to exterminate them. The living, despite, the physical and mental agony they are facing, see their victory in their ability to accord their dead relatives a deserving burial. It is a way of foregrounding the people’s belief in the tradition of burying the dead ones in order to ensure the peaceful repose of their souls.

It is important to note that in the midst of their travails, they yearn for peace and freedom among Africans as the same people united by common heritage. Their dreams are to see a continent “germinating under the soil of hope / creating fraternal ties in freedom of desire / of anxiety for concord” (lines 51-53). Their desire for a free Africa stems from the fact that they believe in the binding power of love to humanity. It is not about Africa alone, but the world as a place for mutual understanding and cooperation among all. That is why in the face of victimization:

Our eyes blood and life
turned to hands waving love in all the world
hands in the future-smile inspires of faith in
the vitality
of Africa earth Africa human (Lines 45-49)

The plea for a peaceful human race of all colours is predicated upon the fact that everyone is the same by being human. The persona is interested in a world where everyone will be inspired by the firm belief that the strength of life is based on the earth as the original and collective *mother* of all human race. The people stretch their hands and appeal to all, including their persecutors, to embrace love for one another. In “February,” the persona stresses the kind of fraternal ties that bind them together. Even those buried on the graves:

recognized the rightness of men’s sacrifice
for love
and for harmony
and for our freedom
(lines 22-25)

The death of the fallen comrades is subtly understood as a price paid for the people’s freedom from their oppressors. They are massacred as they protest and question the rationale behind imperialism. The resistant they put up yields positive results made possible by the blood of their slain kith and kin. The living ones are hopeful that the sacrifices of the heroes past will, through them, see to the restoration of the land. The personae reiterate that “In us / the green land of São Tomé / will also be the island of love” (lines 29-31). The image of green signifies life, hence, prefiguring the survival and rising of the race in a bid to overcome their present suffering

In “Prison Nights,” the images of death and blood are evoked, which coincide with similar incidents in “Bleeding and Germinating” and “February.” The elements are symbolic of the level deaths, physical and psychological injury undergone by the masses as represented by the speaker. He laments that:

On these hot afternoons
and on moonlight nights
-when in a dirge the drum mourns a corpse
and girls sing-
there is a lead cell on the shoulders
of our brother
our blood our spirit

(Lines 9 – 15)

The above lines underscore the severity of their existential travails. In addition, one encounters violent patterns of bloodshed/sacrifice and victory in the aforementioned poems. The situation reaffirms Emmanuel Ngara's postulation that "independence cannot be given on a platter; it calls for suffering, endurance and sacrifice," (Ngara 104). Hence, the spilling of blood, vis-à-vis the flowing of water that one encounters in Neto's "February." This binary induces the hope of liberation for the colonised who must be resilient in their defiant struggle for independence. It serves as an ideological tool that shapes the narrative in the direction of strengthening the African spirit. The application of postcolonial theory in the interpretation of the texts validates Bill Ashcroft et al's assertion that "we use the term post-colonial to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (*The Empire Writes Back* 2).

Conclusion

A close reading of Agostino Neto's "Bleeding and Germinating," "February," "Contract Workers" and "Prison Nights" reveals the depth of the racial antagonism against blacks, particularly in the Lusophone region. As captured in Neto's poems, the victims of colonial invasion suffered both racial subjugation, exploitation and subordinate status. The sustained encounter with blood in the poems points to the severity of the pains experienced by the people as they try to resist colonial injustice. As typical of Lusophone protest poetry, the aforementioned poems are charged with forceful atmosphere, with tones that incite the people into immediate action toward a fight for their collective emancipation from imperial domination. This is because his writings were instruments of social consciousness and rebellious awakening, not just to them, but also to contemporary generation of Africans in the face of neo-colonialism. Significantly, the engagement meaningfully contributes to existing literature on Neto's oeuvre, as well as postcolonial discourse; and can serve as a source of research material to prospective scholars.

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