

The Audacity of Hope in the Novels of Joseph Edoki

Prof. Jude Aigbe Agho

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma

Abstract

That African literature of the twentieth century was, by and large, the product of the large scale despoliation and subjugation of Africa by European imperialism is hardly contestable. Western colonialism saw to it that Africa was plundered and her culture and resources were sequestered by rapacious white colonizers during the period of the colonial encounter. African literature sprang up to interrogate this trend by first refuting the myth of cultural superiority on which colonialism itself was founded and, by extension, it became a willing instrument in the hands of African writers to fight for the decolonization of Africa. This necessarily made much of African literature of the twentieth century lachrymal and protest laden. Neocolonialism has also deepened this culture since independent African states and nations have been mired in corruption, crass materialism, bad leadership, bad governance and the concomitant disillusionment of the African people. Rather than maintain a regenerative stance and be involved in reinventing Africa along the lines of positive development, much of African literature of the past century was concerned with weeping and protesting over the scenario we have painted above. However, Joseph Edoki in his novels, *The African Dream* and *The Upward Path* supports the reinvention of Africa in the twenty-first century by using his novels to support democracy, good governance and the regeneration of Africa and the value system of Africans, as prerequisites for repositioning Africa to be able to face the challenges of the new century, thus infusing his fiction with hope. The very nature of this hope, which Edoki's fiction radiates, is the focus of this paper.

Introduction

Joseph Edoki is a new generation African writer who till date has published three novels: *The Flight Ticket* (1994), *The African Dream* (2005) and *The Upward Path* (2008). Although his first novel is largely unpopular, his second novel has been quite popular and has elicited from critics favourable critical commentaries¹. This is largely because the novel significantly departs from the threadbare theme of protest which most of the novels written by African writers of the twentieth century typify. True enough Edoki is peeved by the stupendous corruption of Africa's political elite and the consecration of graft, crass materialism, bad leadership and bad governance as the entrenched modes of life of this class as shown in novels such as Achebe's *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* or Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, to mention just few examples of novels with bleak and irredeemable portraits of post-colonial Africa, he transcends the righteous indignations of these writers by infusing his novels with hope about the potentials of Africa and the need to project the continent as one that is capable of making positive contributions to the world at large, unlike the pessimistic and unsavoury portraits that we find in other novels and the international media concerning the African continent. Edoki's third novel is a sequel to the second and both are bold attempts at reinventing Africa in the twenty first century to prepare her to take her rightful place among the world's continents.

The predominant depiction of Africa as a retarded continent battling with all manners of problems, ranging from its infestation with the gory experiences of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism has necessarily foisted a lachrymal culture in the literature that has evolved in Africa since it has predominantly directed attention to the effects of these experiences on the people. In fact, Charles Nnolim has pontificated on this subject and as he avers "From its beginnings written African literature in the 19th and 20th centuries ... was an unhappy one. It was lachrymal. It was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation, following Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism" (1). A corollary to the above view is the fact that in writing about these experiences African writers as diverse as Achebe, Soyinka, Armah, Ngugi, Iyayi, Sembene, Osundare, Osofisan, La Guma and others tend to reflect their frustrations by steeping their writings in pessimism, which has grown to define the tapestry of modern African literature, especially the entrenchment of social criticism as its predominant mode of depicting reality. This development is quite disconcerting as it gives the literature a reactive and anti-establishment outlook, thus also emphasizing its claustrophobic nature, seeing that it operates on a very narrow canvas.

In fact, Femi Osofisan has been bothered by this development, especially with regards to modern Nigerian fiction which has so much ensconced itself within the web of pessimism and hopelessness engendered by the failings of the ruling class in Nigeria. As he says:

But my opinion is that the works which are being produced at the moment in Lagos ... are too negative, too filled with pain and bitterness and savagery: and hence enervating and destructive in their vision. As brilliant and captivating as it all is, in terms of style and the manipulation of words, this new literature falls short ... of the humanistic ethos that our culture has always

upheld, and been justly celebrated for. It is a literature of alienation, but of alienation as a kind of gratuitous jouissance rather than as a road to catharsis. (78)

This view also applies to most of the new and old novels written by African writers in other countries of the continent. However, scholars are having a rethink about the negative and destructive picture protest literature holds out to the world about Africa, African institutions and the African people. As Osofisan says again in the afore cited article: “There is a need to counter this new literature of incurable angst with another that offers a more positive perspective of life, a literature that will encourage us to struggle and not be beaten down by despair” (79). Nnolim has also stressed on a new direction for African literature in the 21st century when he says: ... a new image of the African personality needs to be fashioned to reposition Africa for the take-off of the 21st century. We need a new spiritual reorientation, a new creative hope to give artistic impetus to a new world order. Our writers, in this new epoch of globalism dominated by a technologically oriented new order must create a new Africa, a new spirit of optimism, an Africa full of promises, able to feed its teeming populations, with a healthy and vibrant people, not dependent on Europe and America for sustenance. (3)

Joseph Edoki appears to have taken a cue from the above views and has structured his novels to reflect this new direction of writing that Nnolim envisions for African writers in the 21st century as I will try to demonstrate in the next section of this essay.

The Audacity of Hope in *The African Dream* and *The Upward Path*

As it is evident from the trend of our discussion above, what distinguishes Joseph Edoki from most other African writers is the fact that although his novels treat some of the themes that most of the novels about post-colonial Africa written by Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, Armah and others handle, he does not degenerate into the web of pessimism that runs through the novels of these other writers. Indeed, like I said elsewhere while discussing *The African Dream*, the novel:

while treating some of these same themes, goes beyond a mere cataloguing of societal ills and the frustration of the masses of African people due to the visionless leadership of the African ruling class; it demonstrates the possibility of good governance and sterling political leadership emanating from Africa Thus, *The African Dream* is clearly a peculiar kind of novel; it is a work of visionary reconstruction designed to foster a culture of good governance, selfless leadership and transparency in governance. By its patently patriotic and nationalistic anchorage, the novel attempts a demystification of the view, popular among many, that Africa is the haven of corrupt-prone governments by showing the possibility of having a clear-headed, focused and target-getting government in Africa. The novel thus proposes a blueprint for the regeneration of democratic governance in Africa. (Agho, 2006: 29-30)

Taken together, Edoki's second and third novels appear as tailor-made to propagate his belief in the redemptive capacity of literature to become a channel to proselytize the tenets of democracy, good governance and good leadership in Africa. In *The African Dream* Dr. Amedumego Fernando, a 34-year old philosophy lecturer at the Apex University in Savannah and the novel's protagonist, coming from a background asphyxiated by poverty, deprivation and lack, envisions for his country Savannah a clear-headed government that will put the country back on track after the despoliations and purposelessness orchestrated by past governments, especially those of Sir Afiam Dodo, General Edgar Mollan and the incumbent Colonel Allison Aile. Although somewhat idealistic on account of his youthful exuberance, fate and the tenacity of his faith in what he can do if given the chance propel the protagonist to the centre stage in the political evolution of his country. From his initial ambition to run for the presidential election in his country as an independent candidate, Fernando is adopted as the presidential nominee of the Conservative Convention when the party became embroiled in internal wrangling due to dissatisfaction over allocations of ministerial seats and undue antagonism between the two most influential chieftains of the party: Chiefs Ikoyiko and Dan Looker. The latter chieftain, who makes it possible for Fernando to become his party's presidential nominee, also works out an outright merger with the socialist party of Sule Umonte to ensure victory at the polls for Fernando.

Fernando's presidential victory is an embattled victory since he was only invited to the Conservative Convention for the presidential election, having been an erstwhile independent candidate. Now as president of Savannah, he does not truly belong to the Conservative Convention, which has an overwhelming majority in both arms of the National Assembly of the referent country in the text. Die-hard members of opposition in the Senate, especially Chief Ernest Chicom, the Senate president and his clique, are set to frustrate the effort of Fernando with the threat of impeachment within his first year in office or, better still, to stifle him with funds to execute his people-oriented programmes such as free education, free medical healthcare programme and gainful employment for the masses of the people. Tasking and daunting as these problems appear, Fernando is determined to make a success of the mandate given to him by the Savannese people as their president.

As president, Fernando leaves no one in doubt about his altruism. He is ready to make the necessary

changes that will transform the lives of the citizenry through exemplary leadership. He not only runs an open administration, ready to make himself available, not only to the members of the elite class alone, but to the truck-pushers, carpenters, market women and other 'dregs of humanity' in the society; he is ready to fight the monstrosity of corruption and triumph over it. As against the practice of past Heads of State of Savannah getting a yearly gratification of one million dollars from Chief Ralph Ozidi, Chairman of the Merigo Chambers of Commerce and Industries, Fernando rejects the offer, saying: "I don't need that kind of gift, okay? I suggest you donate the one million dollars to our schools and research institutes or to the 'Poverty Society of Africa'" (241).

This no-nonsense disposition, which signals the dawn of accountability in governance in the referent society in the text, is replicated in many other circumstances by Fernando. For example, Mallam (Sir) Chief Isa Megadu, the building contractor who offers to buy a private jet for Fernando and who had earlier given a whopping sum of fifty million pounds to Angela, the president's wife, all to unduly influence Fernando to award him a ten billion pounds building contract, is rebuffed with the president also unashamedly returning the bribe accepted by his wife. This is clearly a vivid demonstration of his pre-election campaign dictum, which he articulates thus: "I believe in a noble cause and for this cause I am set to pay the supreme sacrifice. I am prepared to live and die for my fatherland. I am prepared to lead and to leave behind a good legacy ..." (75).

The author necessarily imbues Fernando as a leader with practical resourcefulness. He is a calculative and forthright leader who knows the usefulness of planning. As a first step towards addressing the problems of hunger, poverty and unemployment in his country, he directs his ministers to furnish him, on a daily basis, with the number and names of jobless youths in the country as well as the varying prices of common foodstuffs in different parts of the country. These are the raw data he requires to formulate an enduring economic blueprint to transform the lives of the citizenry of Savannah. To stem the tide of materialism in the people and re-orientate their age-long mentality foisted by the wanton corruption and primitive accumulation of wealth exemplified by the members of the ruling class, Fernando designs a blueprint for accentuating the creative ingenuity of the Savannese. Monetary rewards and honours are given to inventors to encourage technological growth and productive agriculture is given a boost under his green revolution programme in order to achieve food sufficiency and eradicate hunger and poverty in the nation. Not only this, he revolutionizes education in the country by making primary and secondary education completely free of charge. Hospitals are refurbished and filled with essential drugs in order to minister to the healthcare needs of the citizenry.

In carrying out these reforms orchestrated by his government, Fernando relegates his family to the background, thus emphasizing his selflessness. Not wanting to be misconstrued by his people or become the subject of sensational journalism, he refuses to build a house for his father or even for himself during his tenure. Again, he is able to curtail the pressures from his wife who sees nothing wrong in enriching himself while in office. Just when his wife's attitude was getting out of hand, especially after the holocaust contrived by the opposition threatened to smear his image, he detains Angela, his wife, in a confinement and eventually divorces her. This underlines the fact that the reformation programmes that Fernando outlines to transform the nation of Savannah must first start with his own family. Once this is achieved, the larger nation is ready to follow the leader all the way.

To combat the problem of corruption in a country already used to the practice of illicit enrichment by its public servants is a gargantuan task. But a transparently honest leader, which Fernando exemplifies, must also not shy away from this monstrous problem, which has become the bane of most Third World nations all over the world. Savannah is a country with a sad history of corrupt and inept leadership. As the narrative voice in the novel tells us:

The story that is now history is about General Edgar Mollan, a former Head of State of this country who used his privileged position to amass stupendous wealth. While in office, the dictator made sure every major government contractor paid twenty percent of the contract sum awarded to him into his foreign bank accounts. ... This meant all the contracts had to be inflated, executed poorly or abandoned. When the Head of State left office, he had accumulated over ten billion U.S. dollars in his foreign bank accounts. (68)

This corrupt enrichment is replicated in the other successive regimes and even by those like Chief Halle Bashal who had served in various other capacities in previous governments. It is for the same reason that the National Assembly, under the leadership of Chief Chicom, tries to frustrate the passing of the appropriation bill, wanting the president to bribe the members before the bill is passed; an action which makes the president to suspend and eventually imprison the members of his legislative arm of government for being corrupt.

To build on this sanitization exercise, Fernando constitutes a probe panel to try all those who had served in previous administrations, either as Heads of State, governors or heads of government parastatals. He instituted the process of asset declarations, personally appearing before the panel to declare his own assets, forfeiting to the state those assets his detractors had clandestinely registered in his name. Assets corruptly acquired by all past civilian or military leaders of Savannah are confiscated by the state and monies recouped from frozen bank accounts owned by them are used to improve the lot of the citizenry.

For his unparalleled display of selflessness and his success in bringing joy to the life of the average Savannese, the people re-elect Fernando for a second term of four years as president on an independent platform, and even when a military junta headed first by Sergeant John Kadenya and then by General Maxwell Sokpan disrupts his government through a coup d' etat, the Savannese people rise to his defence, many losing their lives to reinstate him to power. Again, the Savannese people, desirous of honouring Fernando and ensuring that he continues to rule them press for amendments to the Savannese constitution to enable the president have a third and possibly a fourth term in office. Although the National Assembly of Savannah accedes to the request of the citizens, Fernando refuses to give his assent to the amendment, believing that "No leader is indispensable. There are so many people who can do far better than what I have done. After all, if I hadn't the chance to prove myself, nobody would have known I could do it" (434).

This is a particularly important lesson to African heads of government who want to cling to power forever, even when they have become unpopular. The Zimbabwean scenario where President Robert Mugabe, after 32 years as president of Zimbabwe, is reluctant to allow room for other candidates to take over or share power with him, or Egypt where Hosni Mubarak was forced, through a major revolt by the people, to relinquish power after 30 years in the saddle as president, or Laurent Gbagbo, the ousted Ivorien president, who refused to willingly hand over power to Allasane Ouattara, who was the truly elected president of Cote d' Ivoire and had to be hounded out of office by the fighting forces of Ouattara and the French military contingent are particularly instructive. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo is not left out of the list of power-hungry African leaders. It is on record that, after successfully completing two terms in office, he tried albeit unsuccessfully, to institute a third mandate by constitutional amendment. The revolutionary and populist revolts that have unsettled sit-tight and despotic governments in other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Yemen and Bahrain in recent times are further noteworthy examples.

Africa as a continent has been inundated by rapacious, despotic and self-serving heads of government who need to be educated about the virtue of truly serving as servants of the people while in government. By enunciating a model of governance, as we have discussed above, which is overly practicable in Africa, as an alternative to the festering problem of bad governance, inept leadership and absolutism in power wielding by African political leaders, Joseph Edoki, the author of *The African Dream*, performs a cardinal responsibility; "that of a visionary reconstruction of the society with an eye set on solving basic social problems in Africa" (Agho, 2006: 41).

The Upward Path, set in the same Savannese nation that has been transformed by Fernando, is clearly a sequel to *The African Dream*. Because of the monumental transformation carried out by Fernando and improved upon by other successive governments who have followed his example, the referent country in *The Upward Path* is a self-sufficient nation, both materially and technologically. It is a country that is enjoying the fruits or dividends of scientific and technological researches, an agrarian revolution and general transformation of the lives of its citizenry. Not only has abject poverty been banished from the lives of the common Savannese, the economy of the country is growing at a supersonic speed with a zero level unemployment and inflation rates. There is a general contentment in the citizenry; there is a zero level crime rate in the towns and cities and every average family has a car and other necessities of life. Here, cassava farmers like Mr. Nkomo and Mr. Bello socialize at the Macedonia, a five-star hotel and have unhindered access to ministers and other government functionaries. Hard to believe as all these are, Edoki wants to show through them that when a country is well planned and its leaders are transparent, honest, forthright, democratic and not corrupt, and there is good governance and good leadership, the standard of life of its citizenry will be high and the cost of living will be affordable.

The novel details the visit of Mr. Gaga, a Rwandan-American researcher, from America to Savannah, an African country, and his reluctance to accept the statistics of development about the country's economy and transformation because it does not align with what is bandied about Africa's poverty in the western world. Even while listening to the news from a local television station while staying at the Macedonia, the news about Africa, which meets his expectations, is that with items like "the famine in Ethiopia has grown more teeth and is biting harder The poverty in Chad has developed more wings and is flying higher The rebels in Sierra Leone have killed more soldiers and civilians ... Meanwhile African leaders meeting in Mogadishu have set up a committee to find out why more Africans are going to bed on empty stomachs" (1-2). It is, therefore, no surprise that he rejects the statistics provided by the Director General of the office of National Planning Commission about the self-sufficiency and the economic indices of progress and development of Savannah because it proves the general view about Africa in the western world wrong.

In trying to further demystify Gaga's condescension, which is emblematic of the foreign westerner's view of Africa's development, Edoki makes Gaga to travel from Merigo to Yakabo to meet an acquaintance to a friend, Mr. Bello who resides in a farming community known as Greenville in the New Dodokido town. Here, according to the narrative voice: "no burglary incident had been recorded in Timbuktu Street in ten years. And the same could be said of many parts of New Dodokido. 'With job vacancies all over town,' a police officer had

once observed, only a psychopath would risk his life attempting to break into another person's house" (15). Mr. Bello, his host, is a farmer, but he drives a Toyota Land Cruiser jeep and his farm which sprawls over several hectares is mechanized and modern. His very lavish reception for Mr. Gaga and even his edifice surprise the latter to the extent that he ponders "American and European farmers can't even afford this. There must be something ugly underneath this beautiful scenery. Nobody can convince me that African farmers can afford such luxury flats ..." (22). Gaga's wonderment is further shown when his host enquires about his assessment of all that he had seen and he says "I am afraid, it's far above our standard" (23).

This is the same story everywhere. In the Greenville community, there is no power failure, even Mr. Bello's daughters born ten years before Gaga's visit had never seen a candle before, since there had never been power failure since they were born. Notable Savanese inventors and scientific geniuses are rewarded by their government and their discoveries and products are patented. Even Gaga's visits to the Poverty Society of Africa, the Dodokido Aeroplane Project and the Research Village; all show a robust government's support for research, which is the engine of growth. Even self-employment is funded by government. The secret to this splendor is revealed to the doubter, Gaga when Mr. Bello tells him that it is not so much the availability of mineral and natural endowments that has made Savannah self sufficient, rather good planning is the secret to the wealth and sufficiency of the referent country in the novel. As he says: "Our country is different ... We earn so much money from the sale of crude but instead of using the foreign currency to import food, we channel the earnings into farming, research, education and industrial development" (48). This is a pointer to good governance and it reinforces the point made earlier that good governance and good leadership bring about economic prosperity and good standard of life as well as an affordable cost of living for the people.

The enormity of Gaga's discoveries about Savannah, the African country that he is visiting as an American researcher, jolts him out of the lethargic recesses of his earlier fixations concerning Africa. Instead of the horrendous spectres of war-ravaged communities, women and children and the sprawling poverty which he had hoped to find in Savannah, he finds wealth, splendour and good and maximal and equitable utilization of resources by the government to foster good development and bring about peace, a crime-free society and a satiated citizenry. He not only jettisons his research, which he now finds to be based on faulty premises; he extends his three-month visit to the country by deciding to live, work and possibly find a home in Savannah. As Gaga himself says:

... For how long shall I continue to shy away from the truth? ... If I fail to state the truth, my journey to this country would be a waste of time and money... The truth is that the development experts' strategies have failed to take the people of Africa out of poverty, hunger and disease. But as simple as the Savanese model is, it has succeeded where the experts failed... Food for today's survival, research for tomorrow's development ... The beauty of the model is that it has made the country so beautiful Coming from an advanced nation and with degrees from Harvard, I thought I knew it all.... But today, I know better I am convinced the data I have collected cannot support my premise. Therein lies the problem... (111)

It is gratifying that the author, Joseph Edoki makes this possible through the marriage between Gaga and the delectable Ibis.

A critical assessment of the audacity of hope in Edoki's fiction reveals that while the hope raised in the reader as a result of Fernando's stupendous achievement is believable and practicable in *The African Dream*, it sounds romantic, utopian and a will of the wisp in *The Upward Path*. The picture of Africa presented in the latter novel is that of an Eden-like world which is quite idealistic. In fact, coming after *The African Dream*, *The Upward Path* looks anti-climatic and suffers from the burden of trying to overstate what has already been too well stated in the earlier novel. Although, it is useful to encourage African leaders to pay attention to the development of the continent and imbibe the rubrics on good governance, good leadership, transparency, accountability and eschew corruption, as yet there is no basis to compare the economy of any African nation with that of America, for example. In reality, Gaga's later defection from his erstwhile opinions about Savannah, even as an American returnee to Africa, will be hard to accept.

However, Joseph Edoki's effort in *The African Dream* and *The Upward Path*, two novels which support the reinvention of Africa in the twenty-first century and canvass for the propagation of democracy, good governance and the regeneration of Africa and the value system of Africans as prerequisites for repositioning Africa to be able to face the challenges of the new century, is commendable. These novels are inspiring and project "a forward looking utopia for Africa." This kind of vision, according to Nnolim, "should project a truly independent Africa, politically stable, able to feed her starving peoples, standing side by side with Europe and the west, possessing enough coercive force to earn her respect in the international arena, and become the last refuge for the oppressed all over the world" (5). This is precisely what one finds in Joseph Edoki's *The African Dream* and *The Upward Path*.

Note

1. See the Works Cited section for the titles of previous essays on this same writer written by me.

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