

THE MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SELECTED AFRICAN LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews how print and electronic media is portrayed in selected African literary works. The ideal role of the media is examined as it relates to governments and society. Also the real function of the media in imaginary states is discussed showing how media operations are affected by political, social and economic factors. It is discovered in the texts reviewed how detrimental the muzzling of press freedom can be disastrous to development. Literature mirrors society and the discussion illuminates the contemporary problem of censorship, unhealthy media operations and the suppression of media freedom.

KEYWORDS: *Role of Media Censorship Political Interference Professional Reporting*

Article History

Received: 24 Sep 2017 / Revised: 07 May 2018 / Accepted: 26 May 2018

INTRODUCTION

The media is an important organ of society, which is ideally a source of valuable information for society. It plays both political and social functions. It is a source of news and information for citizens and also serves as an intermediary between the state and the people by providing information that serves both.

In *Aeropagitica*, John Milton's defense of press freedom in the English parliament, Milton writes:

They who to States and Governours of the Commonwealth direct their Speech, High Court of Parliament, or wanting such accesse in a private condition, write that which they foresee may advance the publick good.(1)

The media is therefore potentially and ideally is therefore informative and ideally provides a basis for reflection on national affairs or social issues, making it an inevitable entity of society. Yet it can be a tool for distortion of information and manipulation. Milton is quick to note the ups and downs in media operations and is quick to note the various dispositions in the media. He says that:

I suppose them as at the beginning of no meane endeavour, not a little alter'd and mov'd inwardly in their mindes: Some with doubt of what will be the successe, others with fear of what will be the censure; some with hope, others with confidence of what they have to speake.(Aeropagitica, 1)

LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

Literature is a mirror of Society. It is an imitation of reality. The Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato call this imitative quality of literature mimesis. Literature imitates society and social domains such as media are no exception.

In Defence of Press Freedom

In both the past and the present literature has examined the role of the media. Various literary texts have presented and have evaluated the role and functions of print media. In his defense of press freedom, John Milton in *Aeropagatica* alleges that press freedom had been curtailed in history. He cites an example of Greece, and the Middle Ages where censorship was rife in the Christian Roman Empire.

In the same speech, he describes the dangers of curtailing press freedom, arguing that “Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but hee who destroys a good booke kills reason it selfe.” Describing the power of the written word, he says that books “being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men”, meaning they can stimulate thinking and action. He warns about persecuting writers. He argues that “we should be wary of therefore what prosecutions we raise against the labours of public men, how we spill that seasoned life of men preserved and preserved up in books”(Aeropagatica, 3)

Milton argues that if a text is to be rejected “it must first be examined, refuted and condemned” rather than prohibited before the ideas have been expressed. (Aeropagatica, 3). Therefore he guards against prejudice and in favour of evaluation of the contribution the text makes.

The Media in Society-A General Overview

A number of works have portrayed the media both as a tool for nation-building and also as an instrument for manipulation. One European text that discusses the role of the media is Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the people*. In *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen presents the media as unstable, siding with those from whom they can gain. Hovstad and Aslaksen, who work for a Norwegian coastal town’s newspaper, *The Herald* keep on changing sides for material gain. At first they provide space in the paper for Doctor Stockmann who writes many articles that sell the municipal baths to tourists thus creating wealth for the town.

When Doctor Stockmann makes his discovery that the town’s baths were contaminated and responsible for the outbreak of serious illnesses among the tourists and locals, they promise to give him space in the paper and support him against the mayor and his team because they foresaw the financial gains that would flow to them because Dr Stockmann had family ties with Morten Kiil, a wealthy man. Hearing this Dr. Stockmann remarks that “from today onwards *The Herald* will be my artillery”(Stockman in *An Enemy of the People*).

The Herald, the town’s newspaper which Dr. Stockmann used to glorify the town’s economic booster, the Municipal baths, and now would be a forum for dissemination of health information. The magnificent baths described as the “main artery of the town” would now be described as a cesspool. Hovstad, the Editor of the *Herald* newspaper with friends, promise to print his article about the pollution of the baths and its negative impact on both the local people and tourists but change over to Peter Stockmann when they discover he can offer something better. The paper carries Peter’s propagandist version of things.

In my communication to the "People's Messenger," I have put the essential facts before the public in such a way that every fair-minded citizen can easily form his own opinion. From it you will see that the main result of the Medical Officer's proposals--apart from their constituting a vote of censure on the leading men of the town--would be to saddle the ratepayers with an unnecessary expenditure of at least some thousands of pounds. (Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*)

In another literary work, *Animal Farm*, Orwell uses symbolism to portray the way media can mask reality. He used a character called squealer, who manipulated the animals on the farm using rhetoric, half-truths, blackmail, lies and changing of the commandments to misinform the gullible animals. Squealer justified every action by the ruling pigs using propaganda techniques. Squealer also enticed the animals into believing that Napoleon's rule was better than the former regime under Mr. Jones.

The Media in African Literary Texts

In African fiction the role of the media in society is portrayed as inconsistent. Achebe, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, pictures newspapers as slanted image-builders for politicians but through some foils he presents the other side of media operations. Chris, who later became the commissioner of information, plays a double role both as an image builder for politicians and later a critic. He builds up Professor Okong until he attains the position of minister. Oriko testifies:

I was editor of *The National Gazette* at the time and he approached me with a proposal for a weekend current affairs column. I was mildly enthusiastic and although I was aware of the reservations some of his academic colleagues often expressed about his scholarship, I proceeded to build him up as a leading African political scientist, as editors often do, thinking they do it for the sake of their paper but actually end up fostering a reek baby. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, p.7)

Chris Oriko gives us a glimpse of how professor Okong, now a puppet of President Sam rose to great heights under dubious conditions. He narrates how he wormed his way into academics and finally attained his professorship. It is clear from the narration that his higher qualifications were dubious. Still he goes ahead to build him for his own reasons until he receives presidential recognition. Chris narrates that Okong Rose from a humble religious background leaping from a low academic achievement to a great feat of professorship. Chris comments:

But he too was tough and overcame all his difficulties. Augmenting his slender resources by preaching and wrestling he graduated in record time by passing off his Grade Three Teachers' Certificate as the equivalent of two years of Junior College. Four years later he was back home with a Ph.D. in his bag, and went to teach at the university. (*Anthills of the Savannah*,7)

Achebe presents Oriko as an image builder for politicians. Okong is finally appointed minister and becomes a staunch supporter of Sam's dictatorship and this makes him regret later in the text having supported Okong. The newspaper is therefore presented as a tool of the politicians to build up their image and keep themselves secure in power. On his move to build up the so-called professor Oriko narrates:

But I imagined that a person like Professor Okong without having any clearer ideas than either of us would be helpful in putting whatever came into our heads into popular diction and currency. And so he was number one on my list and His Excellency appointed him Commissioner for Home Affairs. He had his day and then went into partial eclipse. But I hardly think he is due for prison. Naturally Okong never upset the politicians; he kept their constituency amused. I didn't mind, either. I had enough contributors like Ikem to do all the upsetting that was needed and a lot that wasn't. (Anthills of the Savannah, 2)

The Perverted Function of the Media in Anthills of the Savannah

Okong became a staunch critic of the overthrown civilian political structure. He described them of poor governance and celebrated its collapse in the space he was given in the paper by Chris. He is not due for prison because he speaks in their favour. The paper therefore facilitates his growth and the growth of the new political dispensation. He claimed they had gone too far and this had led to the overthrow of the system. He welcomed the new regime which was military in nature. He contributed these views to the paper.

But on the very next day after the politicians were overthrown Okong metamorphosed into a brilliant analyst of their many excesses. Apparently he had scored another hit by describing the overthrow of the civilian regime as 'a historic fall from grace to grass!' (Anthills of the Savannah, 2)

The Problem of Censorship

Ikem Osodi is presented as a professional journalist who would write against the wrongs of the politicians as well as the good things they did. He 'upsets' politicians. However, there is political interference on the media, which threatens press freedom. His fiancée Elewa fears for him because of what he writes. Okong sees Ikem as a threat and advises the president that Ikem was conspiring with the Abazonians to ask for help because after the drought because he too was from Abazon. The politicians saw the Abazonians as rebellious people. He interpreted the drought as God's judgement on the Abazonians for their rebellious attitude. His propaganda has a religious nuance, a characteristic of dictatorial regimes.

Chris on page 11 of *Anthills of the Savannah* explains:

My friend, Ikem Osodi, was always at me for running that column. He said Professor Okong deserved to be hanged and quartered for phrase mongering and other counterfeit offences. But Ikem is a literary artist, and the *_Gazette_* was not there to satisfy the likes of him; not even now that he sits in the editorial chair! A fact he is yet to learn (Achebe, *A Man of the People* p.11)

Though castigated by Mr. Okong, Ikem is a pro-people journalist. Because of this Sam asks Chris to fire Ikem because he thinks Ikem's writing is too critical of his administration. When Chris is asked to fire Ikem, he refuses but the president goes ahead and suspends him.

While investigations continue into Ikem's link with the Abazon agitators he cannot continue to edit the *_National Gazette_*. But I must still do things properly and constitutionally no matter the provocation. That's why I have sent for you. I want you

as Commissioner for Information to issue a formal letter suspending him with immediate effect.'

Chris does not approve of Ikem's suspension and asks the president how he expected Ikem to work as a journalist. He asks what he would have done. But Sam argues that although Ikem's suspension had made him popular, he still wanted to suspend him once more to teach him a lesson. He alludes that someone overzealous was behind the proposed suspension. The Commissioner of Information refused to suspend Ikem. Below is their conversation:

'It would appear that his suspension from the *'National Gazette'* had pushed his popularity rating, already pretty high, right to the top of the charts. Even more remarkable than the size of the crowds was their patience. But first of all I want him suspended from duty and barred completely from the premises of the *'Gazette'*. Is that clear?'

Chris with his eyes now open refuses to suspend Ikem for writing objectively about events in the society.

'No it is not. I am sorry Your Excellency but I will not write a letter suspending the Editor of the *'National Gazette'* simply because some zealous security officer has come up with a story ...' 'I see I have been...(Anthills of the Savannah, 86-91)

When Chris refuses to suspend Ikem, the president through the SRC suspends him. A letter is sent to Ikem's house through a police officer not long from the time the president discussed with Chris. The novel reports:

The letter to Ikem which was hand-delivered to his flat by a police despatch-rider that afternoon had been signed by a certain Chairman, Board of Directors of Kangan Newspapers Corporation, publishers of the *'National Gazette'*. A certain chairman because the board and the corporation in question had been moribund for the past three years or more. Ikem had never met the said Chairman or seen a single letter signed by him since he took up the editorship. Incredible!(Anthills of the Savannah)

When Chris is fired it is reported on television that Ikem had been fired and that was the first news item presented in a slanted way. This shocked Chris because he least expected this to happen. Also in a celebrating mood by the newscaster, six leaders from Abazon who were said to have marched to state house without a police permit were arrested. News reporting is therefore compromised and slanted. Chris narrates:

Yes, in another development, according to this smug newscaster dispensing national anguish in carefully measured milligrammes, six leaders from Abazon who were involved in a recent illegal march on the Presidential Palace without police permit as required by decree had been arrested. And (in the same development) the office of the Director of SRC had informed the Crime Correspondent of KTV that the six men who had made useful statements were being held in BMSP.(Anthills of the Savannah)

There is therefore censorship, where political pressure requires journalists to write what is in the interest of the ruling elite. Only pro-government material is acceptable. Ikem's coverage of the Abazonians, whom the president regards as rebels because they present their problems to him, sets him at odds with the powers that be. Moreover, when Ikem holds a meeting after his dismissal, he is deliberately misquoted by the Government-owned *Gazette*.

Thus there are three sides played by the media, on one hand as a deliberate image-builders for gains and on the other hand compromised critics for fear of victimisation, a threat to press freedom. However, Ikem provides a character foil being different from the other journalists writing about the politicians' atrocities.

The Press in A Man of the People

One text that portrays the role of the media in society is Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe paints the media negatively. At the beginning of the novel he says Odili, the main character, explains that after the expulsion of the MPs in favour of the Minister of Finance's proposal about how to improve the economy, the Newspaper carried a pro-government –slanted version of the news using negatively charged words.

The Daily Chronicle, an official organ of the P.O.P, had pointed out in its editorial that the miscreant gang, as the dismissed ministers were now called, were all university people and professional men...Let us now and for all time extract from the body politic all those decadent stooges versed in textbook economics and aping the white man's mannerisms and way of speaking. We are proud to be Africans. Our true leaders are not those intoxicated with their Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard degree but those who speak the language of the people. Away with the damnable and expensive university education which only alienates an African from his rich and ancient culture and puts him above his people. ...this cry was taken up on all sides. Other newspapers pointed out that in Britain where the miscreant gang got its so called education a man need not be an economist to be chancellor or exchequer or doctor to be minister of health. What mattered was loyalty to the party.(Achebe, *A Man of the People* 2)

Even after, in a flashback, when a newspaper man visits Chief Nanga, he gives him money for fear of being negatively covered in the next edition of the paper.

Kongi's Harvest is another text that gives us a picture of how the media works in Africa. In Kongi's Harvest, Soyinka presents the newspaper as a propaganda machine that is used by the dictator Kongi. It is used as "the government loudspeaker as a mouthpiece to disseminate messages that are dictatorial and misleading." The worth of the news is thus trivialized when Soyinka says "There is a lot of words in a penny's paper". Achebe and other writers labour to show that newspapers and other media write depending on whether or not they have something to gain from covering a particular politician. Newspapers act in an unprofessional ways because they want financial gain, like in *An Enemy of the People*, or they are politically influenced Like in *The Gazette* or they support those holding political power or even when the press freedom is under stringent control like in the case of the *The Chronicle* and the *Gazette*. If they have no financial gain or they are under strict control, they report in a slanted manner and select only what is favourable for the paper or those who pull the reins.

The print and other media employ propaganda techniques in building politicians as Chris has done for Okong, or the slanted reporting as in the *Chronicle* in *A Man of the People*. Achebe also argue that the media is either suppressed, manipulated or censored in order to achieve political ends. Divergent voices are suppressed and intimidated so that they do not paint an accurate picture of things so that positive impressions are created even where the status quo is threatening and upalatable.

However many writers present foil media men who represent the professional way of journalism. In a man of the people, we have a newspaper that present at the end of the novel the real problems facing the country. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem presents an ideal journalist and reporter and Chris by and large presents a professional ministerial stance towards the media. As Milton puts it, judgement as to what is worth must be based on truth and value and not what the regulators subjectively and with prejudice think is worth.

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