

Conflict and Its Manifestations: The Colonizer-Colonized Relationship in Albert Russo's *Princes And Gods*

- Lata Mishra

Roland Barthes in his avant-garde essay, *The Death of the Author* (1967) points out:

... a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the viewpoint of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (1967: 146).

The political upheaval and constant threat of violence that marked the first few decades of independence, forms the backdrop for Albert Russo's much celebrated novel, *Princes and Gods*. The novel, concerns to some extent, with the character and history of the highlands of Rwanda and Burundi, the end part of Africa to be reached by Europeans in the colonial expansion of the late 19th century. It describes the various, often violent struggles between different races, classes, languages, and geographical regions. In the years of struggle for freedom are produced millions of refugees, many lives claimed leading to a nearly permanent state of tension between the colonized and colonizers. Historically German, invaded Rwanda in 1897. At the same time they claimed Burundi, a separate kingdom to the south. The two separate kingdoms were jointly known as Ruanda-Urundi. *Princes and Gods*, a Greco-African thriller, published in 2000 was nominated for The 2000 International Frankfurt Book Fair Awards and won the British Diversity Award in London. A blend of history and literary fiction, the novel marks the author's literary talent that incorporates myth, magic, and fantasy into his narrative.

This piece of fiction can be associated with several categories of literary fiction, including postcolonial fiction, postmodern literature and magical realism. Equally significant as the incorporation of mythical and fantastical elements into his fiction, is Russo's uniquely global perspective on the English language. Russo's novel hums with an eclectic mix of prose styles, which echo the rhythm and slang of English as it is colloquially spoken in Africa. Familiar English words get combined in new and unusual ways, and long, unbroken sentences run on freely, sometimes spanning a page or more. The author has appropriated the English language for the purpose of expressing the African culture for a non-African reader.

The inspiration Russo draws from both ancient and contemporary African culture is also notable in this fiction. Elements taken from

traditional African mythology and religion thread themselves through the novel. A young American missionary, named Oswald Radcliffe, in the story, reflects upon the conflict between man and nature as he opens the novel appreciating the purity and beauty of the land:

In the foreground the landscape unfolded its immaculate expanse, virgin as the first dawn of Creation...And between the trees, like a tarred umbilical cord, lay the road into Buja. (PG:09).

Though the positive contributions of western colonial powers are described by the author, in terms of governance, Christian missions and trade, that enhanced the expressive dimensions of the African tribes, but the paradoxical nature it had for the natives is also not missed at.

Behind these passive looks, tribal hatred is brewing...everything here is counterfeit...cinerama in Ektachrome...a decor in *papier mache*, which a single spark could inflame...(PG: 10).

The subjugation of the indigenous identity through the colonial power relations is explored in detail. Conflict between man and man is delineated as the author deals with colonizer- colonized relations. The history of tribes is described in detail by the author. The natives of the region comprised the Tutsi, tall cattle-rearing people who originally hailed from the upper areas of the Nile and won over the Hutu, who lived here by farming. Gradually the Tutsi became the aristocracy and the Hutu their vassals. Colonizers took advantage of this class divide and dug it deeper. After German rule, Belgium was granted in 1924 a mandate to administer the colony. In the novel, the events unfold in the years just before when Rwanda got independence. The novelist creatively depicts the break down and acculturation of the culture of the colonized under colonialism, till a new sub-culture emerged which was neither pure nor completely removed from the mother culture, but that which lived under the servility of the master culture.

The historical novels of the nineteenth century through devices of realism rendered the ways of life, the conditions of time and contemporary worldview, but that was the period of faith in realist art. Realism was the faithful portrayal of life without idealisation or exaggeration. Postmodern fiction supposes that the principles of fiction decide writing of history. Reality includes perceptions from the most subjective to the most fantastic. At one level, *Princes and Gods* is an effective pastiche of the mid twentieth century realist novel. It tells an engaging story of love between Damiana Antoniades, wife of much reputed German businessman and Dimitri Stravos, an unmarried German cinema owner who is involved in multiple flings, set in a period of political upheaval in 1960's Rwanda. Damiana has many admirers and lovers owing to her reputation earned as 'a hot number'(44). The novel begins with the graphic depiction of passionate lovemaking of Oswald and Damiana. This histographical novel is beautifully constructed with a faultless replication of twentieth century patterns of speech and period details.

Dimitri's character develops from his odd jobs to earn a living to getting rich and living a life of Casanova. But his desperate attempts, in the end, to get disentangled from his own doings and escape, points to Sartrean existentialism that begins with the recognition that human existence is pointless, as there is no inherent purpose to life and insists that one's responsibility is therefore to determine the meaning of one's life for oneself by making committed, responsible choices, as an American missionary, Oswald does in the novel. The cruel, pitiless, obsessive face of human love is exhibited in the Dimitri -Damiana relationship.

Russo's engagement with the past is always critical and self-conscious, and its gripping narrative is accompanied by a carefully imposed meta-fictional framework which enables the writer to build in his strategies for composing the novel as it is. His novel is more of a rewriting, where each text directly or indirectly makes reference to other texts as Barthes in, *Theory of the Text*, puts it:

any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognizable forms: the text of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it. [...] Epistemologically, the concept of intertext is what brings to the theory of the text the volume of sociality (inYoung, 1981: 39).

Russo is most interested in the novel's characterization, that is, its portraits of African people. Unlike some novelists from the west who permitted only grunts or at the most some crude gabble to Africans, Russo grants the capacity for language to Europeans and Africans alike. The author, certainly, holds those advanced and humane views appropriate to the liberal tradition which requires all men of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Rwanda by the colonizers. Through the character of Chrysostome, Apollo, Yohanna and Denis, the author shows the typical African Great Lakes region tradition and thinking of the tribes and he also uses their point of view to show the slow changes of their villages and society in general after the coming of the missionaries. Storytelling was a mainstay of their tradition and an integral part of the community. Through stories Chrysostome presents ancient Burundi culture before Oswald.

The folk tales are woven within the fabric of the main story. Each story illuminates community values in both the context and the form of storytelling. Tutsi, the dominant tribe uses many proverbs in the society. Proverbs may be regarded as an oral and rural style of speaking. They are highly practical and didactic. They emphasized their supremacy by floating proverbs as:

Should a prince, by a stroke of destiny, fall in distress, he will retain his dignity and never will he be tied up in any sort of bondage.' (79).

Hima tribe is humiliated and reduced to being despicable:

Cure his eyes and the next day he will give you a dirty look.

Hutu, the working class is denigrated as:

If a Hutu feels that you like him, he will go so far as to call you his brother, so beware!(79).

Patnaik writes,

[c]ultures that employ the oral mode of communication are more likely to value compressed succinct expression. What better vehicle of communication than the proverb, which by its very nature penetrates to the heart of the situation and character, lending at the same time, to succinct thought a freshness of expression and ingeniousness of idea. (68)

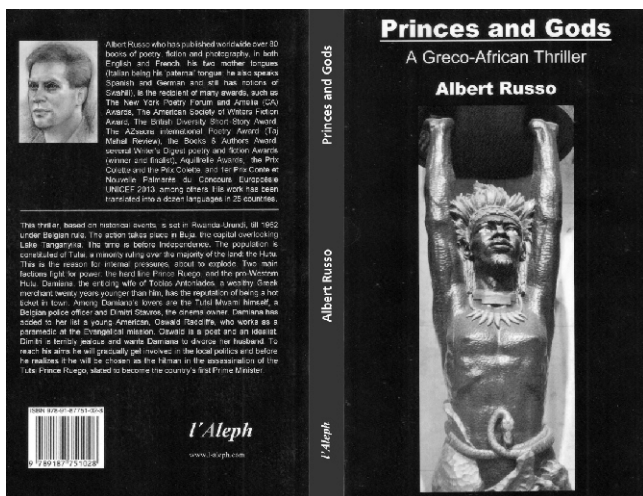
With such a language Tutsi exercise political power over Hima and Hutu tribes. *Princes and Gods* thus becomes a rich source of the indigenous customs, beliefs, myths, legends, rituals and proverbs of Africa. These aspects are used both overtly and inherently in the form and constitution of the novel to depict how they mould the life and consciousness of the people. The strain and tension of the colonised are reflected through the character of Apollo and others, who symbolize the situation of the Africans under anxiety and stress in a fast changing social situation. A controlled tension between the general and the specific is built up by maintaining a balance between the social and individual perspectives. At the societal level, the local characters symbolize the long-established African past which this society desires to safeguard. Such characters seem rigid and reluctant to change as the characteristics of their culture. The novel is a third person narration, episodic in nature with non-linear plot that evolves through shifts in time and space. Use of myths, legends, storytelling and proverbs evolve the story.

From a sociological perspective, this work is significant and crucial to an understanding of political, cultural and religious complexities that fused to bring about the division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The author succeeds in passing on his message to his audience through effective and skilled characterization. Though the author directly exposes the characters to his readers, but he also provides enough space to them to draw their own conclusions from what the character him/herself does or thinks, or what other characters think about him. As Damiana is directly introduced as: "they met an alluring young woman who showed by the way she stared at some of them, a strong personality."(43). Then, further the author leaves the readers to explore, when Damiana on the very first meeting with the police officer, invites him: "Do you know that little beach just behind the old airfield?"..."I shall be waiting for you at the beach. five-fifteen."(55). Dimitri reflects the public opinion as: "...all of these men devouring her with their eyes as though she were some call girl...(100). Damiana though externally strong is a nervous character, as readers find that on a slightest provocation she is agitated anxious, unnerved, demoralized and shaken. While her husband Tobias is steady, calm, unflinching and steel-nerved. Russo's characterisation of Mwami is centrifugal; that is, he constructs the events of the narrative to unfurl such that Mwami is removed from

the centre. This decentering of the protagonist weakens him and in turn fades away the Africans he is made to represent. His lack of intuition, reflection and foresight lead him into acts of transgression that brings to him disgrace, dishonour and sorrow of his son's death. Credibility and plausibility of *Princes and Gods* is unchallenged as the author's characters agree with the setting and subject matter of the narrative as advocated by L. P. Wilbur in his *The Seven Key Elements to Fiction*. In its sheer exuberance and sprawling range of cultural sources, as well as its attempt to include as much of Africa's vast cultural identity and history as possible, *Princes and Gods*, is a rich mosaic, a complete reflection of the life and character of the subcontinent as any single novel could possibly provide. Conflict between man and man, man and nature, man and society and man against his own self are dealt with in this novel.

References :

- Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin. (1988). *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Barthes, R. (1967). The death of the author. *Aspen*, 5-6.
- (1981). The theory of the text. *Untying the text: A poststructural reader*. In. R. Young (Ed.), 31-47.
- Patnaik, Eira. "Proverbs as Cosmic Truth." *Africana Journal* 13.1-4 (1982): 98-103
- Wilbur, L. P. *The Seven Key Elements of Fiction*. London Robbert Hale, 2001.



Every page shows the author's fascination for the Eden-like land and his sadness of what men made of it.

Introduction by Professor Moshe Liba

polyglot, writer, poet, artist and
former Ambassador to eight African Countries.