

## **Social Realism and The Interrogation of the Postcolonial Nation in Alobwed'epie's *The Death Certificate* and *The Day God Blinked***

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the question of nation and nationhood in Alobwed'Epie's two novels. *The Death Certificate* and *The Day God Blinked*. The major objective is to assay the complexities and numerous variables involved in the definition of the postcolonial nation. We should however bear in mind that the postcolonial nation is more or less the post independent construct forged from the unholy marriage of sorts to which the pre-colonial nations were subjected by the colonial nations. Against the backdrop of the tenets of postcolonial theory and new historicism, this paper argues that the postcolonial nation is now plagued by the reconstruction of the tribal, ethnic and political barriers that render post independent nations a bewildered and confounded set up of political rhetoric rather than the fruits of the promise that independence projected. This essay further argues that the failure of the post independent leaders leave the post independent societies plaintive.

**Keywords:** Nation, Nationhood, Plaintive, Independence, Colonisation, Post Independence, Postcolonialism.

Postcolonial writers apart from questioning the unjust power relationship that exist between the colonizer and the colonized, chronicles the dejected and dysphobic condition of the postcolonial states. This is just part of the tenets of post colonial theory. It should be recalled that African /postcolonial literature has undergone a number of stages. The primary objective for this movement has been to salvage the colonial from the dictatorial rule under which they have been submerged into by the colonial masters. To concur this idea, John Mcleod in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* quoting Frantz Fanon notes that:

The colonized location is often a perversely organized one, geographically divided to cement and maintain the imaginary differences between the colonizer and the colonized --- colonialism transformed place, reorganizing and restructuring the environments it settled; and it also changed the people involved – on all sides- who lived in the colonized locations. (2)

This demonstrates that the postcolonial writers have an enduring propensity for social and political commitment. Their texts mostly reflect and refract the socio political events in their societies. Ayo Kehinde underscores that

Initially African literature was a tool for celebrating African grandeur; later it was used for anti colonial struggle and cultural assertion. Today it is employed as a veritable weapon for depicting and interrogating the postcolonial disillusionment in African nations. It could be said that African literature is always chained to the experiences of the peoples of the continent. (5)

In this paper, an attempt is made to examine and interrogate the discourse of postcolonial decadence in Alobwed'Epie's *The Death Certificate*, and *The Day God Blinkered with an objective of* presenting the dysphobic, realistic, disintegrated and the nervous condition in which the colonized have been subjected to in the postcolonial state. This essay will further lay threadbare the paradox of nationhood within the post independence set up. The colonized seem to be living in a 'nervous condition' to burrow from Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. It is observed in Alobwed'Epie's prose text that postcolonial pains in African nations are imaginatively captured and questioned with apt narrative devices which could be saluted. The colonized could be held responsible for the mess in which the colonized find themselves. Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* shares the same view when he states that "you have failed, you have gone wrong, says the modernist orientalist. This of course is also V.S Naipaul's contribution to literature that the victims of empire wait on while their country goes to the dog" (xxii). This poses a problem because the colonial thought that the departure of the colonialists was a panacea to the plethora of African problems. Far from it, the colonialists are still living in fattening partnership with the figureheads that they have forcefully put in power against the dictates of democracy that they preach. Instead of serving the masses, they are rather serving themselves and their masters who have put them in power. Mcleod thinks that:

Colonial wealth would not have been possible without the killing, enslavement and exploitation of colonized peoples – the multitude whose interests and rights were more often than not ignored by colonial authorities. To be blunt, the fortunes and success of modern Europe – perhaps of modernity itself- depended squarely on the pecuniary pursuits of empire. Empire, colonialism and colonized peoples are not marginal, or additional, to the history of Europe, but lie at its very heart ; just as the European nations have irreversibly altered the histories of the terrain and populations they colonized. (2)

Like I mentioned earlier, Alobwed'Epie is among the postcolonial writers who has made an attempt to mirror the decayed state of things in an imaginary African postcolonial nation. The population of this nation seems to have resigned to fate. The dilapidating and excruciating painful life of the colonized is painfully x-rayed here. It could be said that Alobwed'Epie has adopted a mirror-writing technique. *The Death Certificate*,<sup>1</sup> is set in Ewawa in Dande, a fictional locale in Africa. Like most post independence writers, Alobwed'Epie's novel is a representation of the dysphoric condition of the colonized by an autocratic, ethnocentric and dictatorial regime. Characters who paint a vivid picture of the dilapidating state of this postcolonial state are; Mula,

Nchinda and Djock. These are peoples who represent the majority of those languishing in abject poverty in this fictional locale. They are from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> provinces. Since tribalism has eaten into the fabrics of the nation and they do not belong to the ruling provinces, this explains why they do not have any share in the national cake. They have been abandoned at the periphery life. Most if not all the ministers come from the first region which is the seat of the economic and political power. Given that they are from the governing body, that is the centre, they heartlessly and unscrupulously embezzle state money for their selfish interest. Manyaka Toko Djockoua underlines that they are involved in "beggaring the natives of other provinces and the country"(55). Mula in a conversation with Nchinda, thinks that there is no hope for their country. He makes it very clear in the following symbolic statement thus:

The traffic lights installed at different points of convergence ceased to function two weeks after installation. Now, their bulbs dangle out of their broken lamps like the withered anthers of hibiscus flowers. With either traffic lights nor traffic police, drivers exhibit idiosyncratic skills in driving through this beehive of traffic light. (3)

This gives the impression of pessimism. It is an indication that nothing is going to move forward for the nation. This is confirmed in the description that Mula further relates to us. He declares that:

Massa, iam pondering over the symbolism of this square. The Engineers who designed and executed the plan of the square were either guided by the divine hand of God or the cursed hand of the devil. It may be the two co-ordinated their activities, but the devil had an upper hand. (4)

The allusions to the devil have taken centre stage. This is in relation to the management of the state affairs. Mula underlines that "this country is jubilating on a volcano of mismanagement, corruption and embezzlement. There is pus in our boil, it will burst" (12). The nation is not moving well. A number of things have gone wrong. Ndjock emphasizes that "The nerve centers of the nation are completely paralyzed"(13). This explains why total frustration looms in the atmosphere. The citizens represented by Mula, Nchinda and Ndjock are dejected. This is part of the reason why Achille Membre thinks that Africa is responsible for its own failures. He notes this *On the Post Colony* thus:

Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature' or, When it is, it's things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for mankind.(1)

Our leaders are therefore responsible for the malaise and difficulties in which we find ourselves. The continent is not advancing. There is no progression but regression. Mbembe further underscores that the gap between the govern and the governed is very wide. Consequently there is a lot of subjection. Those who are closer to power belong to the system

while those who are not are marginalized. He relates this thus:

...In Africa both before and after colonization, state power enhanced its value by establishing specific relations of subjection, something must be said about the relationships between subjection, the distribution of wealth and tribute, and the more general problem of the constitution of the postcolonial subject.(24)

This makes us to think that it is not only good to look at what really constitute the state, but to ask serious questions about the forms of power and its manifestation. I think that the contract between the rulers and a majority of the ruled is no longer respected. Like I pointed out earlier, only the citizens of the first and second provinces are living well. Given that tribalism is prioritized to the national interest, the citizens of the eight and nine provinces are abandoned at the periphery. This explains why Ndjock, Musa are so embittered. They do not see any reason why they keep on questioning and interrogating the powers that be. This falls in line with one of the tenets of postcolonial theory. It questions the entire colonial process from the time when the colonizers began misrepresenting the colonized in their writings, through the time of actual formal colonization to the post independence period. This explains why Ndjock and Musa have to get into investigative journalism. Homi Bhabha further opines that "Post colonialism criticism bears witness to the unequal and even forces of cultural representation involved in the context for political and social authority within the modern world"(Qtd in Lazarus:3) This means that the task of postcolonial theory is much but invariably seek to call the different facets of colonialism into question. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Conner concur this point when they affirm that "postcolonial writings desire to contest the power of the colonizer, and assert the authority of the oppressed subjects" (8). These authors are not just talking about the powers of the colonizer but that of those who took over from the colonial master. In this context, I am referring to those of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> provinces. They think that they have a birth right to the management of state affairs. They treat their fellow brothers and sisters with a lot of disparity. The events around which the story unfolds in *The Death Certificate* are Mongo Meka's journey to Kabon, his feigned death, a consequence of his embezzlement of 550 million frs., Jacqueline Diwona's craving for a befitting state burial to her brother and Antoinette Yvonne's second marriage to Roger Girard, the son of French Cultural Attache. These are all the events that culminate in pushing Mula to finding out why things are being managed without any sense of direction. This shows that there is no patriotism. There is no spirit of nationhood. When one reads Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation, you would realize that it is a real paradox. Anderson states in his *Imagined Communities* that:

A nation is ---an imagined political community ---and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never now most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.(6)

This is exactly where the paradox lies. There is no sense of patriotism, togetherness on the part of those managing the state in this imagined community. They do it as if it were a private affair. The Ewawain government that privileges tribalism and corruption has rather victimized those at the periphery. Those at the centre (the first and second provinces) are living in affluence and in total disregard of the marginalized lots. Rather than resigning to fate, Musa and Njock decide to get into investigative journalism in order to find out what is going wrong with their country. Morals, religion and patriotism have lost its value. Nchinda in a conversation tells Mula that "Mula I think I should agree with you that these fellows of the first province are going to rake this country" (12). The fake death of Mongo Meka is treated with much importance. His death is announced on national radio by the president himself. Reaction to the announcement varied from contemptuous sighing to violent swearing and throwing of objects/. One seller of envelopes in front of the post office smashed his pocket radio against the wall of the central post office. Perhaps it was aimed at the ghost of Mongo Meka (14). This shows disgust and anger against tribalism. They think that it is misuse of national radio. The national treasurer is not the president of the country. All the sons of the soil led by the minister of Territorial Administration have all come together to contribute money for his burial. The total amount contributed goes up to 523700000 frs and rounded up to 600000000. This demonstrates the gross extravagance and injustice that governs this postcolonial state. Millions are living in abject poverty meanwhile a few live in total extravagance. This is shocking to Mula. His anger and pessimism is recapitulated in the following statement thus: "Secondly, to donate 600 000 000 Frs. To bury one single Ewawain while thousands remained without food and shelter, was very questionable" (23). This is a real paradox. The masses are really dejected. Many are grumbling. One notes that these difficulties have been explored with a view of highlighting it, has contributed to postcolonial pains and anger. The dissonance between the characters are vividly presented by Alobwed'Epie in this novel. Ndjock summarizes his worries in the following lines thus:

The steam that burns the cook is not meant for him. It is meant for what is in the pot. This country is cooking but instead of the cooked being cooked, the cooks are being cooked. I returned from the Meka's compound seething with anger. This morning when I was about to have a nap, my radio coughed and there was... (33)

Ndjock's tone here is rather ironical. He thinks instead that those who are suffering ought to be the ones to be dying. This is partly because they have been dehumanized. Those who are close to power are the only ones who are favored. They seem to have a birth right to the national resources. To confirm this view, Shadrach Ambanasom in his book review emphasizes thus:

The closer one is to the centre of power and influence, the more satisfied, or less censorious one is with regard to the system; and the reverse is true, discontent emanating from the periphery. Criticism

is thus proportional to the distance from the centre, and the prerogative of the marginalized. No wonder then that the greatest critics of the government come from the marginal 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Provinces. However, the distance here is a kind of cultural –ideological entity, measurable not necessarily in spatial but in ideological terms. (The Post)

Ambanasom thus underscores the fact that when one is nearer to power, he/she definitely will condole with the mess of those who will power. As fate will have it, they are the ones dying. Ironically, another son of the soil who helps in pulling down the regime is Mbaneko. He is compensated with 375000000 for having composed an anthem for the president and raised to the rank of Major General. With an insatiable desire for wealth, he joins a gang that raids the Water Company Headquarters. What we have realized is that success is rather based on ethnic origin. This is an officer who is supposed to be in charge of the protection of citizens and their properties. Alobwed'E pie's use of irony here should be saluted. This goes to show the decayed nature of this postcolonial state. He exposes this fictional state as filled with filth, decay, contradictions and conflicts. A lobwed'Epie's presentation can only be likened to that of Ayikwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. He in the technique of mirror-writing, shows the failure of this postcolonial nation to provide opportunities to the population. The thematic focus of this novel is the foregrounding of exploitation of the masses, betrayal of public confidence, highly decadent and tribalistic society that breeds only anger especially to those who do not belong to the First Province. The world of the novel is marked by dissonance, frustration and incompatibility on the part of the youth. Alobwed'Epie in his writing here is amongst the generation of writers who has made an attempt at demonstrating post independent disillusionment. This falls in line with Mcleod's view in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, When he says that:

The previous generation of writers had sought to develop narratives of resistance against empire and to imagine a national consciousness for emerging African nations. However, the ethnic tensions, widespread poverty and oppressive regimes in many emerging African nations, as well as the continuing dependence on Europe, led many writers to question the whole project in their writing...(67)

There is no hope in the horizon. The citizens have lost confidence in their leaders. This has led to lack of trust for one another. And this makes one to think that post independent societies are a time bomb only waiting for the right time to explode. This is contrary to Anderson's view about patriotism. He tells us that:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals (particularly in Europe) to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism, poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts-show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. (141)

The nationalistic spirit and oneness in voice that ran through our veins at the dawn of independence has suddenly disappeared due to greed and favoritism. The leaders work in fattening partnership with those who protect them in power. Alobwed'Epie in *The Day God Blinked* like in *The Death Certificate* continues with his mirror writing technique. *The Day God Blinks*<sup>2</sup> seems to be a sequel to *The Death Certificate*. This novel succinctly demonstrates how some human beings chart out their lives in despair while others live in luxuries. He presents the continued failure of leadership after independence. Nationalism which sought for independence and the interest of the state at heart is now built on hypocrisy. Neil Lazarus in *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in Postcolonial World* confirms this thus:

Nationalism, that is to say, has been seen as constituting a kind of return of the repressed. The sheer destructiveness of developments in Rewanda, Liberia, Chechnya, the Caucasus, and in what only a few years ago was still Yugoslavia, has been taken to reveal a fundamental truth about nationalism in general: not merely that it is chauvinistic, but also that it only ever results in the violent intensification of already existing social division. (68-69)

This is what obtains in most post independent nations. The division amongst the citizens are felt at the socio economic and political levels. Socially, the citizens seem to live at the periphery of life. They seem not to be part of national cake, meanwhile there are others who have more than enough for themselves. The basic needs that a human being needs for survival is not available. This is blamed on poor leadership and poor management. This imaginary African country is so rich in terms of natural resources. But since the leaders think that they have a birthright to its management, a lot is wasted and embezzled thus leaving the population in total misery. Lucia the protagonist in *The Day God Blinked* is a victim of bad governance. She acknowledges that the judicial system of this country is so bad that it cannot be compared to that of any country in the world. It is true that Lucia is guilty of a crime that she has committed as a result of poverty. But her rights as a human being needs to be respected. When I look at what happens to her at the police station, it tells me that these all men of the underworld. Lucia recounts her story thus:

At the police station, I was dragged out of the van and taken to an apparently drunken ASP. He eyed me sideways and pulled at his coarse graying whiskers, then belched impishly. ...officer, teach her how a child dies and the body is thrown into the lake...Then, the heavens closed against a sinner. (2)

Lucia is given the beating of her life. She is treated without any human face. She is locked up in a crammed cell. Lucia further recounts her situation thus' I don't know for how long I remained in the cell .The days and the nights were the same. One second was one hour, one hour was one day, and one day was one week. In fact, I lost track of memory" (19).

This is the treatment that is meted on Lucia. These are corrupt officials who do not have any respect for anybody except money which sometimes is unduely earned. They arrest the innocent. There

is no major crime in this country to which the police are not the perpetrators or witnesses. The population is fed up with the police. The narrator thinks that if it were not of the intervention of kleptocrats to neutralize the forces of law and order by making them co-plunderers of Ewawa economy, there would have been a take-over. (4)

These presupposes that the leaders are protected by the forces of law and order. The angry population cannot lead any uprising. They will be subdued by the ever ready forces who have been trained to kill the innocent. As a result of poor governance, corruption has eaten into the fabrics of the society. This is much felt at the judicial and the educational systems. When Lucia in a conversation tells the juge that she has been detained for years without trial, she is told that she ought to have somebody to follow up her case. The juge underscores thus:

How do you find your stay in prison? You should have had even a boyfriend to follow up your case. You see, there are too many cases before us and only those that are pursued are tried fast. Do you say you don't have even a friend? That is horrible, he remarked. (22)

This shows the decayed nature of the judicial system. Nothing is moving well. When the court is so corrupt what will be the fate of the population especially that of the lowly? (43). I see most of the problems of Ewawa are directly or indirectly related with the way Ewawa is governed on the one hand, and the way the laws of the country are interpreted by the courts on the other hand. A lot of pessimism looms in the air. This is as a result of bad governance. The health sector like the educational sector as presented in this text is also limping. The narrator makes us to understand that this nation seem to have been abandoned to itself. In connection to the corpse of her son that has been kept by the state, Lucia shows her bitterness in the following lines:

What state? A state that can't provide vaccines for children, that has hospitals without medicines, and brutal police that beat to kill innocent citizens? A state whose leaders deprive victims of disasters of supplies? What state? What state, officer? Does it take the death of my child for the state to show concern for him? (8)

This gives the impression that the state is in total decay. The leaders do not care about the health situation of its citizens. A few who belong are obliged to go out of the country to treat themselves. The medical officers are not only incompetent but also corrupt. They do not treat anybody in the hospital without any identification. The educational milieu is also highly corrupt. This is partly because there are too many jobless citizens. Those who have certificates are hopeless. Lucia has written competitive exams several times and passed but will always fail the orals. In a conversation with Parson, She tells us that it is because 'I was expected to give a bribe of 1000000frs' (49). But those who are not as intelligent as she is will always have their names on the list after the publication of the results. She further recounts her story thus after getting frustrated with those exams while leather headed ones, class-repeaters, pass with the aid of their parents' loots, positions or tribal origins" (51). Students get into professional schools depending on whom they know. In Ewawa,

privileged people pass exams before they sat them and that made nonsense of exams in Ewawa. This can only be a characteristic of an impoverished nation. The leaders do not have any love for their country. It is shame how some people can be mean when possessed by the devil of greed and power. It may not even be shame. It is standard practice that if one wants to be promoted or retained in high post in Ewawa, he must be morally bankrupt; that is, steal, or gravely offend the population (53). It is really paradoxical that one should be promoted for having managed poorly. Ewawa is one of the most corrupt nations in the world. In addition the Ewawians are the most heavily taxed people in the world. Ewawa is the only country in the world. Ewawa is the only country in the world that is fighting economic crisis by reducing salaries thrice and increasing the prices of all other commodities (61). This has led to hatred amongst the Ewawians. It could be said that this country is brooding on a time bomb. Although the world acclaimed Ewawa as the most peaceful country in the world, they knew that Ewawians had just resigned themselves to their fate(93). This state of affairs show that the misconception of the idea of governance has become the predicament of the masses. There is an abuse of the contract between the governing and the governed. The citizens of this imaginary African nation are living at the thresh hole of death. These novels show an account of severe suffering which has been dictated by poor leadership characterized by intrigues, corruption and falsehood. Thus pushing some of its citizens to the margin. This shows that the nation that Alobwed'epie presents to us is farfetched. The citizens are so disconnected that there seems to no sense of solidarity. The notion of nation here becomes doubtful. This is confirmed by Clara A.B Joseph quoting Homi Bhabha in her paper 'Nation Because of Differences' in the following lines "Nation is defined as a unifying entity, and yet the various representations of the nation reveal division and disruption at the strategic junctures so that the definition is rendered either meaningless or controversial" (57). Catherin Hall in 'Histories, empires and the post colonial moment further underscores that:

In the late twentieth century questions about cultural identity seem to have become Critical everywhere. 'Who are we?' 'Where do we come from?' 'Which "we" are we Talking about when we talk about "we"?' Such questions are always there, intimately connected to but distinct from the insistent questions of origin that engage every child, but they have a new salience in the contemporary moment. The global changes of the last fifty years have involved the movements of peoples on an unprecedented scale, the break-up of empires and decolonisation, the creation of the New Europe and other new power blocs, the destruction of old nations and the reformation of new ones. Such shifts, taking place on such a scale, are profoundly destabilizing. They provide the context for the contradictory tendencies which surround us – globalism alongside localism, new nationalisms and ethnic identities alongside the international communication highways. Questions as to roots and origins haunt the imaginations of disparate peoples across national and inter-continental boundaries. (64)

From the nanalysis above, this paper has interrogated the idea of nation , nationhood and further shown that Alobwed'Epie adopts a mirror writing technique to portray the short comings of this postcolonial nation. It has made an attempt at identifying and examining the different variables that are involved in the definition of a nation and the postcolonial nation. I have come to the conclusion that the idea of a nation is very controversial. It is a figment of the imagination. However, I have demonstrated in this paper that, not until the spirit of oneness is further encouraged , there will rather be divisions giving that the post colonial states are built on tribalism and hypocrisy. Until this is done, the postcolonial nations like the Ewawain society in the texts under study will only be a time bomb only waiting for time to explode. This is because the centre can also be decentred.

### End Notes :

1. *The Death Certificate* is one amongst a series of Alobwed'Epie's novels. It was published in 2004 BY EDITION CLE in Yaounde ,Cameroon.
2. *The Day God Blinked* was published in 2008 by Langa Research and Publishing Initiative group in Bamenda, Cameroon.

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