

A Geocritical Study of Selected Works of Ahmadou Kourouma in Relation to the Contemporary Security Challenges in Nigeria

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Abstract - *Realism in the African literature manifests itself in several forms and strata: some simple, some interwoven, some outrightly complex. Geocriticism is a realist study focusing on geographical setting captured in literary texts in order to unravel the interplay between geography, people and cultures. Here, it is aimed at analyzing the complexities of the consequences inherent in the artificial and arbitrary colonial boundaries imposed on Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885. Geography of course deals with physical land and territorial features, but no geography can be detached from the culture of the inhabitant people. This paper therefore examines through two works of Kourouma: **The Suns of Independence** and **Allah is not Obligated** some implications of cross-border geo-cultural relationship among the affected peoples. This has enabled the research study to appraise the contemporary security challenges in Nigerian in relation to the geo-cultural affinities of nationalities spreading across the Nigerian boundary lines into neighbouring countries.*

Keywords: *Geocriticism, Kourouma, Boundaries, Nigeria, Security Challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the time literary criticism has liberated itself from the limitation of stereotyped elements of analysis such as themes, settings, characters etc, through the introduction of ever-evolving theoretical approaches, literary studies have increasingly become challenging and complex but enriching.

Postmodern and postcolonial literatures, a part of which African literature is, have, through the instrumentality of the diverse theories, turned volumes of works that have made the understanding of creative works of literature not only easier but more interesting.

African literature, in particular, now enjoys the privilege of critical and analytical study from Africans themselves, with the advantage of original, authentic and informed hindsight, as opposed to early criticisms on works of African literature done mainly by Europeans with either biased or uninformed conclusions. Even though the new theories or approaches to the study of literature are mostly European-evolved, yet the application, adaptation and contextualization of such theories to the facts of the African literature, have made the study of African Literature enriched and enriching. This has enabled literary scholars to go back on relatively old works of African Literature for greater in-depth analysis and conclusions.

The works of Ahmadou Kourouma [1] taken in totality are a mixture of the old and the new. If **The Suns of Independence** [7] is a relatively old text, the same may not be said of **Allah is not obliged**, for instance, with the relevance of issues raised therein to contemporary African political and social life.

Moreover, through the instrumentality of a theoretical approach, a creative work of literature can be made contextual and new. Geocriticism is one such theory when it is applied to the works of Ahmadou Kourouma.

Geocriticism seeks to use elements of geography for the study of works of literature. It

is premised on the fact that every work of fiction is set on a particular space. It seeks to unravel the distance between fiction and reality on the geographical indices inherent in a work of literature. This work seeks to use the notions of geocriticism to the study of Ahmadou Kourouma's [1] *The Suns of Independence* and *Allah is not obliged*. The choice of these two novels is informed by two things; firstly, the fact that one of the two, *The Suns of Independence* is set in the early days of post-independence Africa and the second, *Allah is not Obligated* is much more recent in content and context. Secondly, because the two novels discuss national boundaries, land borders, cross-border life and movements, elements which are very germane in geocritical studies.

Inferences and parallels would be drawn from the contextual realities in the fiction of Ahmadou Kourouma's [1] novels and the geopolitical and space realities in Nigeria as they affect the current security challenges in the country. Conclusions and recommendations would be drawn from the discourse.

The Notion of Geocriticism

Geocriticism, understood broadly, offers an approach to reading literary texts that emphasize their engagement in a spatial or geographical milieu, and this in turn may enable novel ways of studying literature and culture.

Geocritical scholars study space as it affects relations among nations, among cultures, and among ethnic nationalities existing on both sides of boundary lines. They examine hybridity, heterogeneity, freedom, mobility and transgressions in a globalized world, in times of peace and in times of war, as reflected in works of literature.

Space, Henri Lefebvre [2] tells us, is a tool for thought and action. Space enables and space constrains. Alongside history and metrics like race, class, and gender, space demands our attention as a foundational feature of social production and struggle. In the decades following Lefebvre's provocatively suggestive text *The Production of Space*, interest in spatial studies has burgeoned across academia, and literary

studies are no exception. Though still relatively nascent, spatial literary studies have already been established on firm grounds by works like Robert Tally's [4] *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*.

These and other writers have already made a case for the necessity and usefulness of spatial or geographical focused criticism as a way to enunciate "The dialectical nature of the relations between texts and their real world referents" (Prieto). Yet as Tally [4] suggests, geocriticism is a heterogeneous field, and even as Westphal's [5] ground breaking text lays out a detailed analytical method, it also "invites others to engage in a debate, about the nature and practices of spatial literature studies [4].

For sometime after its inception geocriticism focused mainly on modernist assumptions about space in wars, transgressions uncertainty; until scholars like Dustin Crowley [2] took these tendencies, providing some balancing.

Refracted through the work of cultural geography and political ecology, transgression and boundedness became relational and dynamic concepts that are themselves not inherently liberatory or repressive, but are (like Lefebvre famously insisted) social products, equally subject to cooption and sharing by forces of power and resistance.

Using this alternative understanding of space and borders, Dustin Crowley [2] took geocriticism beyond categorical and essentializing assumption about particular kinds of space, instead opening up possibilities for analyzing in the same nuance the often ambiguous and complex geographical representations of postcolonial writers like Nigerian author Chris Abani and Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiango. He chose to focus on postcolonial literature for two reasons. Firstly, postcolonial literature in general (and African Literature in particular) has not been much explored in geographical analysis to date. This despite the second reason: that Westphal [5] and others point directly to postcolonial theory as a body of thought informing their own work on the oppressive or resistive nature of space. It would seem to beg the question, then, whether the

literature itself bears out the claims that have been drawn from the theory.

The Suns of Independence

The story of *The Suns of Independence* is woven around Fama, a legitimate Malinké prince who failed to acknowledge that the geopolitical equation had changed with the emergence of two different nations on the territorial integrity of his ancestors, the Horodougou Kingdom. He failed to weigh the implications of the existence of a border post on the route separating Togobala Village in the People's Republic of Nikinai from La capitale now situated in the Republic of Ebonies. Fama was too conscious of his princely status, too ignorant and illiterate to *grasp* the fact that super powers at the time were engaged in a cold war, a fight for supremacy which caused suspicion and tension among sister nations. He could not believe that he could be obstructed from moving freely, in the land over which he was dreaming of even becoming king one day, by any so-called border post.

Though Fama was neither a smuggler nor an agent of one nation for the destabilization of the other nation, though he could claim to legitimately belong to the two countries, the fact remained that the situation on the ground necessitated border closure and stoppage of cross-border movements as a result of suspicion of coup-d'état plotting between the two sister countries sharply divided by ideological differences.

The same way Fama felt insulted for being prevented from going through the border post, so also millions of Africans today would feel embarrassed to be asked to fill any formality before visiting a family member, attend a ceremony, go to farmland or go for buying and selling at the other side of most African border posts. This is because of the arbitrary nature of the African boundary demarcations. The Berlin Conference of 1884/85 just sat over a sketch of land map of Africa and used uninformed, uncertain, ignorant data and parameters to create nations out of hitherto existing peoples and kingdoms.

The margin between facts and fiction in *The Suns of Independence* is narrow. If the countries' names remain fictitious, the names of persons and of tribes like Fama, Salimata, Malinke, Horodougou point to the author's country, Côte d'Ivoire. Moreover, Guinea People's Republic being the only country in the sub-region at that time under the influence of USSR and the Eastern Block, the reader knows for sure that the People's Republic of Nikinai is Guinea and the Ebonies Republic is Côte-d'Ivoire.

Indeed, the cultural interwoven nature of peoples and tribes as portrayed in *The Suns of Independence* is a reflexion of the picture of the inter-border or cross-border existence of most border tribes in Africa. Just like the Malinké people spread from Côte-d'Ivoire to Guinea and Mali, so also one finds, for instance, the Hausa-Fulani people in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Tchad, with the attendant political, economic and security implications to the countries so affected.

Fama at least chose, as a prince, to go through a normal open and decent road, a less princely personality or someone with unclean motives could have taken any of the unmanned and uncontrolled exit routes across forests to get to the same destination.

Allah is not obliged

Allah is not Obligated [6] is set on a real war context where everything had collapsed. The war which engulfed two nations, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and which *implicated* the entire sub-region, took the collaborated efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with the assistance of other international agencies to quell.

If in *The Suns of Independence* fiction is felt to a great extent, here in *Allah is not Obligated* the margin between facts and fiction is very much narrower. The author made absolute efforts to present the facts of history the way they offered themselves. One comes across not only the names of countries, organizations and places involved in the crisis, but also the names of personalities and warlords involved in the war and its resolution, as well as dates verifiable in history record books. Indeed the mention of Liberia, Sierra Leone,

Liberia, ECOMOG, the ECOWAS intervention force, Alhaji Koroma, Foday Sankoh, Charles Taylor, Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson etc. is enough evidence to classify *Allah is not obliged* more as a history book than a literature text.

Unlike in *The Suns of Independence* where there were official border posts between the nations involved, here in *Allah is not Obligated* where everything had collapsed including governance and security at all levels, and where the territories were divided into pockets of areas of influence under the control of warlords, border management could not have been an exception. In fact, in this case mushroom levy and taxation posts were erected along land demarcations of each warlord, mainly for extortion purposes.

Hence, the journey of teenager Birahima with his criminal mentor and guide, Yacouba, across the border into both Liberia and Sierra Leone was not a difficult exercise as thousands of refugees crisscrossed both legal and illegal routes everyday anyway. Their own crossing could not have attracted any special attention.

The 10 to 12-year-old Birahima was lured into the whole scenario by Yacouba with the promises of getting cheap materials and money. He was too young and too ignorant to reject the overtures of criminality by the time he became a child soldier carrying gun. This is a reflection of the fact that thousands like Birahima, younger and older than him, would have crossed the international boundary lines into either of the two countries ravaged by war, getting involved either willingly or not in a war the causes of which they knew little or nothing about. Birahima lost his childhood innocence, became radicalized, took part in cross-border killings across about three nations.

Both the tight border post in the case of Fama in *The Suns of Independence* and the broken and in-existent border control in the case of *Allah is not Obligated* underscore the fact of the importance of proactive and effective border control for adequate security.

Unlike in the case of Fama where Boundiali his native village could be located on the space map of the novel, here in the case of Birahima, the author says he hails from a village somewhere

at the Guinea/ Cote-d'Ivoire border. This means that Birahima's nationality is even uncertain and he could rightly have claimed to belong to either of both countries.

Nigeria as a Case Study

Nigeria is a West African country surrounded in the North by Niger and Tchad, in the South by the Atlantic ocean, in the East by Cameroon and in the West by Benin Republic. The total length of the Nigerian boundary lines is 4,047km, definitely a vast country by all standards [3]. The Minister of Internal Affairs, Abba Moro, admitted on February 6th, 2014 in an interview (www.Informationng.com) that the country could only boast of 84 official border posts to control the 4,047km border line, adding that there existed over 1,487 unofficial, illegal routes across the boundary lines round the country.

These facts tacitly imply that even in times of peace the country is open, making mobility in and out quite loose, and the land vulnerable. Both genuine and illicit movements, both peaceful and dangerous crossings must be going on daily basis, especially when one considers the relatively stable and prosperous economy of Nigeria compared with the economies of the countries surrounding it.

Moreover, just like it is in the case of Ahmadou Kourouma's [1] novel where the heroes ethnic nationalities overlap into neighbouring countries, so it is with Nigeria where you find the Hausa-Fulani, not only in northern Nigeria, but also in Niger, Thad, Cameroon and Benin; the Yorubas of south west Nigeria are also in Benin Republic, Ibos of the south east are also found in Cameroon, to mention only the major ethnic groups. All this heterogeneous, interwoven and overlapping existence affects mobility, relationship, economic activities and, of course, security. Considered against the backdrop of the current security challenges in the country where in the North-East insurgents cross at will in and out to operate, the facts of the ineffective and inefficient border control comes to the fore. Yet, in this case one cannot talk about a full-blown war like in *Allah is not Obligated* where everything had collapsed.

Moreover the situation cannot be compared with that of *The Suns of Independence* where suspicions of plotting to stage a coup-d'état was rife between the two countries, a situation which necessitated the closure of border, thereby preventing the innocent and harmless Prince Fama from crossing and moving freely within the territorial integrity of the kingdom of his ancestors.

Nevertheless, the security challenge in Nigeria, though localized, is serious enough to warrant a drastic proactive step to arrest the situation or curb the effects. One is conscious of the fact that on daily basis nomadic herdsmen move freely in the large expanse of land in that part of the country. Most of these nomads sometimes hardly know whether they are inside of one country or another in the forests. This certainly makes it difficult for policy makers to take steps, but the gravity of the situation requires that something must be done to check transgressions in order to prevent some of the attacks on villages along the border. Happily enough, it took the galvanized and combined efforts of the Nigerian, Nigerien, Tchadian and Cameroonian troops to be able to contain the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents which had fast deteriorated into a regional terrorist threat.

CONCLUSION

It was only suspicion and rumours of sponsored coup-d'état between the two countries in *The Suns of Independence* that led to border closure. It was the failure to control their boundaries that led to the collapse of institutions and the state of total confusion that engulfed Liberia and Sierra Leone in *Allah in not obliged*.

The failure of Nigeria to institute border closure since the beginning of the insurgency in the north east is probably because of the localized

nature of the security challenge or it is in the spirit of 'big brotherliness' with which Nigeria relates with its neighbours. But it is the opinion of this study that the authorities should not wait until there is total anarchy as in the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone, which took the intervention of ECOMOG, the West African force, led by Nigeria to arrest. The level of transgressions at the Nigerian boundaries should be controlled. This is despite recent campaign successes. More official border posts should be built across the boundary line round the country, and such posts should be well-manned with necessary modern tools to function. Indeed, Nigeria should maximize the benefits of advancement in communication technology to enable its immigration, customs, police and military forces to synergize and get results faster.

Moreover, the collaborative efforts between the four countries already implicated in this war against terror, which has been established, must be intensified for faster and more a comprehensive success.

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