African Independence: A Switch to New Colonial Masters in *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born*

If there is one thing that will last for a very long time in the history of African continent, then that thing will be colonialism. It will remain in the history of Africa forever because its aftermath is seen even today, many years after these countries are proclaimed to be independent. But, is it true that Africa is independent? Is it true that colonialism has ended in Africa? The main idea that I will discuss here is how independence in Africa was only a switching of the African nations from one kind of colonial masters (Western imperialists) to another kind of colonial masters (Emerging class of the African leaders).

In this perspective, colonialism should not be only considered as: "The large-scale transfer of laws and legal institutions from one society to another, each of which had its own distinct sociocultural organization and legal culture" (Merry, 1991). The definition given by Ronald Horvath works well in the perspective of this paper: "It seems generally, if not universally agreed that, colonialism is a form of domination – the control of individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups. The idea of domination is closely related to the concept of power" (46). This definition does not establish colonialism as the case of one nation gaining control over the other, as in Merry's definition above; rather it is a matter of individuals or groups having jurisdiction over another. If one group of people exploits and oppresses another group, it is enough to be colonialism. The situation existing in Africa now fulfills all the requirements to be called colonialism. The Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and Ngugi wa Thiong'O's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, set in

Ghana and Kenya respectively can well state the situation which is broad in most of the African countries.

Scholars use the term ‘neo-colonialism’ to refer to what the Western imperialists do after the declaration of independence to their former colonies. They still control African countries in many aspects; this time, not by force but with a free-mind-permission from the African leaders. They still control the economy of most African nations, and they have a set of rules and policies which are still applied in Africa. They, in fact, exploit the continent’s resources while calling it ‘international cooperation’. I am not looking on the ‘neo-colonialism’ with such a perspective of Africa being, until today, controlled by the West. My concern is on this kind of colonialism which takes the black African leaders after independence to be the successors of the colonial governments. I call them successors because they are just doing what the Whites have been doing before independence, by throwing away the expectations of the Africans to get equal rights and opportunities in their countries.

One needs to refer back to the struggles against colonialism to explain that idea. One needs to show the significance and expectations of independence to draw the conclusion as to whether they are attained or not. The attainment of Africans expectations is the only thing that can confirm whether Africa is free from colonialism or not.

Fighting for independence can only be conceptualized as demanding dignity and freedom over exploitation, taxation, land alienation and forced labor. People resisted the new system of living where an African would die while working. They started demanding their independence. This was not easy until after the Second World War when the spirit of nationalism increased among the people. To attain independence, few people had to sacrifice their lives so that the rest

would have better life. It was just like sowing a seed which has to die first so that it could germinate and produce many other seeds. Just as Kihika says in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*:

> You think we don't fear death? We do….. But a few shall die that the many shall live. That's what crucifixion means today. Choose between freedom and slavery and it is fitting that a man should grab at freedom and die for it. (217-218)

What one can see here is that, people who were fighting for independence knew that it was be something that would take their lives. However, they meditated the number of people who would be freed after their death. This made some people spend the rest of their life in the forests organizing the guerilla wars against the colonial governments. Many of them were tortured, others were killed in the battle and others were arrested and detained. Some of them were killed in the public to deter others from joining the fight. Ngugi, for instance, uses Waiyaki who was buried alive and Kihika who was hanged in the public market, to signify those who sacrificed their life for the freedom of all people:

> Waiyaki had been arrested and taken to the coast bound hands and feet. Later, so it is said, Waiyaki was buried alive at Kibwezi with his head facing into the centre of the earth, leaving warning to those, who, in after years, might challenge the hand of the Christian woman whose protecting shadow now bestrode both land and sea. [K]ihika was hanged in public, one Sunday, at Rungei market not far from where he has once stood calling for blood to rain on and water the tree of freedom. (15, 21)

It was not that all African countries got their independence by fighting just like in Kenya. Some of the countries did not experience the same; Tanzania, Ghana and Uganda, just to mention few, got their independence through constitutional means. However, there is one thing common in these two groups of countries: they all had the leaders who sacrificed themselves to make sure that their countries achieve independence. Most of them experienced the same tortures and threats. Be it military fight or constitutional fight, no one knew what would be his destiny;

they only knew the destiny of the people they were struggling for. For them, it was not them but the people. Jommo Kenyatta of Kenya, a Mau Mau fighter, was more or less like Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who only led the independence discussions and mobilization of people. What we see in both of them was the desire of freeing their people no matter what would happen to them.

After years of struggle, the yokes then were broken. It started in one country after another. Once a country got the independence, it joined the struggle in another country. The joint aim of these heroes of Africa was to see the whole continent freed. The scene started in Ghana in 1957 after the work done by Kwame Nkrumah. "On March 6, 1957, Ghana gained its independence from Britain, becoming the first sub-Saharan African colony to do so. Over 100,000 people crowded into the Polo Ground, in Accra, the capital city to watch the proceedings. There was tremendous excitement in the air as the Union Jack was lowered and the new Ghanaian flag – the red, green and gold – hoisted in its place" (Lazarus, 1990:1).

This would be the day all people had waited for. It was like a mother who was waiting to give birth to a child, after toiling for nine months; she would be very happy the day she see her baby on her own hands. She would have only imagined the look of the baby, the color of the face, the sex and other good traits. Now the child is on her hands for her to raise it up and support it to be one of the inhabitants of the world. It was, in fact, a happy moment.

On the independence day, thundering speeches would follow; speeches which might have never been heard within the ears of many people in those countries even till today; speeches which were confident, full of eloquence, with cheering in every utterance; speeches which would recite the new hope to the new country in a new era. They were speeches of the heroes of

struggle; those who helped their nations to reach that beautiful day. It would be after the sworn of the new president. The speech of Kwame Nkrumah was the speech of the first African president:

> At long last the battle has ended! And thus Ghana, your beloved country, is free forever. And here again, I want to take the opportunity to thank the chiefs and people of this country, the youth, the farmers, the women, who have so nobly fought and won this battle. Also I want to thank the valiant ex-servicemen who have so cooperated with me in this mighty task of freeing our country from foreign rule and imperialism! .... From now on we are no more a colonial but a free and independent people! …. We are not waiting; we shall no more go back to sleep. Today, from now on, there is a new African in the world, and that new African is ready to fight his own battle and show that after all the black man is capable of managing his own affairs. We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are that we are prepared to lay our own foundation. (Lazurus, 1990:1)

The same thing was to happen in many countries later. There followed the independence declarations in other countries. Guinea got her independence in 1958, followed also by Nigeria in 1960, Tanganyika (now Tanzania mainland) in 1961, Uganda in 1962 and Kenya in 1963. The flags of the colonial masters would be lowered, and the new flags with new colors to symbolize new ideologies, were raised.

From this time, people hoped for changes: they expected respect after a long time of disrespect, freedom after decades of bondage, voice after decades of dumbness, better life after years of toiling. All they expected was the country that would break all shells of classes, and the country that would be led by indigenous and that would respect dignity and equality in sharing the resources in their countries. Lazarus explains their expectations that: “independence did not just signal the end of colonialism; it signaled also the emergence into the world’s stage of what Nkrumah called “the African personality.” With the passing of the world-historical era of

colonialism a new world-historical era would dawn. In this new era, the slumbering giant of Africa would awaken and leave the imprint of its decisive action upon the world" (Lazarus, 1990:2-3)

Ngugi published his novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, in 1967 four years after Kenyan independence while Armah published his novel, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, in 1968 just ten years after the independence of Ghana. One should not draw a conclusion that it was too early to complain. Maybe, at that time, one would assume that; but the situation seems to be the same or even worse in some countries, more than fifty years after independence. What these writers describe in their novels is the situation which was happening at that time, and prediction of the situations that would happen, in most African countries, several years to come.

Things went contrarily to the wishes and expectations of many people. The expected freedom was not seen in any way. Life they were facing was not different from the life they lived when the white men were bruising them. What people saw was the "carbon copy" of the white men's regime; it was colonialism in a black face. White people reappeared in masks of black people, and this time, harsher than they were in the previous.

Many African leaders have created independence for the royal families and number of politicians while the majority is suffering. Many people have fallen in a deep pond of poverty while few people are living a lavish life. There are classes of people in the societies, and the gap between these classes seems to be too wide. From this fact, I draw the idea here that, the independence of Africa was not the real independence but rather a shift from the colonial masters from foreigners (whites) to indigenous (blacks). This is because the evils of colonialism such as

classes, exploitation, autocracy and low wages are still prevailing in these countries which are now known as independent countries.

The difficulty in realizing this comes when most of the people condemn imperialism in bases of color. The fact that people are exploited is still there but is being overshadowed by the color ideologies. Sarcastically, people did not fight colonialism because of being oppressed, exploited and humiliated but because who was doing that was a white man. Now, a black man is doing what whites were doing but it is not regarded as colonialism because it is a black man. Ngugi in one of his papers, Writing Against Neo-colonialism, wrote of this connection of colonialism and colors that:

> The vocabulary by which the conflict between the colonial labor and the imperialist capital was perceived and fought out ideologically consisted of whites and blacks images, sometimes freely interchangeable with terms "European" and "African". The sentence or phrase was "…..when the Whiteman came to Africa…" and not "….when the imperialist, or the colonialist, came to Africa…", or "….one day these whites will go…" and not "….one day imperialism or imperialists will go…." Except in few cases, what was being celebrated in the writing was the departure of the Whiteman with the implied hope that the incoming Blackman by virtue of his blackness would right the wrongs and heal the wounds of centuries of slavery and colonialism. (Olaniyan, 2007:159).

What Ngugi is saying here, which I also accept, is that the attainment of independence was considered as the removal of the whites out of Africa than the freedom from the chains of imperialism. People rejoiced the defeat of the white man, just to be puzzled that they were not to fight whites but colonialism. They were being influenced by the life they had lived before the coming of the whites where there were equality and respect amongst themselves. They could not realize that many people have been spoiled, and therefore, the spirit of loving one another was no longer there. We can further notice this by looking at Mau Mau guerilla war in Kenya against the

colonial government. The name, Mau Mau, shows how people connected their suffering with whites (color) and not imperialism. These words were coined from Swahili phrases, Mzungu Aende Ulaya, Mwafrika Apate Uhuru. It translates as "a white man should go to Europe so that the African can achieve independence." From this, we see that people were fighting whites and not imperialism. This brought this class of people who would overrule the countries just like the whites.

"In nearly all of the literature of the 1960's, radical writers as different in other respects as Armah, Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o tended, in seeking to account for the stagnation of postcolonial society, to focus on the parasitism of the African political elite. In the work after work, we find the elite exposed in all its ruthlessness and vulgarity: there is its ethic of conspicuous consumption, its corruption, its greed and crass materialism, and above all there is its atrocious lack of vision" (Lazarus, 1990:20).

Ayi Armah shows the complaint of the people about the discouragement that happened shortly after independence. People had grand expectations for the new government which was formed after independence but now things seem to have gone contrarily. This is how Teacher, one of his characters in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, says: "We were ready here for big and beautiful things…. The promise was so beautiful. Even those who were too young to understand it, all new that at last something good was being born. It was there, we were not deceived about that" (81, 85). All the hopes and dreams of people in Ghana were gone and in its place stands regret and betrayal. People could not see what they dreamt about and, therefore, the meaning of independence was not realized by people.

Tamara Sivanandan writes about these expectations and the situation fifty years after independence:

> It is distressing therefore, to consider the situation of many of these post-colonial societies some fifty years later, and to reflect on how little of that apparent promise has materialized…. What is to be found rather, is increasing division and oppression on the basis of class, ethnicity, religion and gender; the failure of the economy to provide basic necessities, never mind prosperity, for the mass of the people; lack of democratic participation by the masses in the political sphere and the continued - often increasing – structural dependence, economically, politically and ideologically on Western imperialist powers. (Lazarus, 2004:42)

The validity of this quotation lies on the truth that most of African countries are driven but not led. They drive the country the way that would favor them and their own tribes while leaving the rest to suffer. Nepotism has taken part in African politics, and wars and political instabilities are majorly caused by these leaders. Autocracy is experienced among many African countries, fifty years after independence; democracy is a new term as decisions come from the top leaders.

Some Africans are patriotic, just like those who fought for the "first independence". I call it "first independence" because most of the countries, as I stated earlier, are still under colonialism and therefore, they still have to fight for the total independence. People who wish to bring changes are tired of seeing majority spending days without eating any food while the class of politicians is driving beautiful cars worthy several hundred thousand US dollars. Due to this, they cannot tolerate it, and therefore, wars, killings and coup d'état are vehemently experienced. They are raging wars to fight for the 'second freedom' from the oppression and exploitation of the leaders.

Ayi Kwei Armah portrays the central character, known only as the man, to be passive, desperate and pale. He sees all the evils – corruption, poverty, classes, exploitation – but he cannot think the way to change the system. Even when he is himself directly affected by the system, he just let things go in any way. He lives a wretched life, without better housing and bedding but he does nothing to rescue himself from that situation. He hates corruption and everything that is thereof but he keeps silent and do nothing. Armah uses also Teacher, who ran away from the responsibilities at his homestead just because he thought that he could not bear the problems anymore. They represent the majority who cannot oppose the exploitative nature of their leaders though they see that their government is rotten.

However, we can see them in a different way from those who were passive in the "first colonialism". They might have been in the "first colonialism" and thus, just like the rest of the citizens, they expected to see changes after independence. They represent Africa that has great visions and hope. Now the hope had been taken away and instead, despair takes its place. Teacher tells us that, "It's not a choice between life and death but what kind of death we can bear, in the end. Have you not seen there is no salvation anywhere?" (56). These words are echoed a decade later by the Kenyan playwright, Francis Imbuga, in his play Betrayal in the City, when one character, Mosese, complains of the same thing saying, "It was better while we waited. Now we have nothing to look forward to. We have killed our past and are busy killing the future" (31-32).

What we see in current African leaders is that they are doing what they fought against. They are just doing the exact things the colonial whites were doing. It was yet incredible that the leaders like Nkrumah who fought for this independence are portrayed to do the same things they fought against. They have created classes and only few people can enjoy the fruits of

independence. Teacher's observation, in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, is critical in explaining this matter:

> True I used to see a lot of hope. I saw men tear down the veils behind which the truth had been hidden. But then the same men, when they have power in their hands at last began to find the veils useful. They made many more. Life has not changed. Only some people have been growing, becoming different, that is all. After a youth spent fighting a white man, why should not the president discover as he grows older that his real desire has been like the white governor himself, to live above all blackness in the big old slave castle? And the men around him, why not? What stops them sending their loved children to kindergartens in Europe? And if the little men around the big men can send their children to new schools, why not? (92).

One amusing thing here is the Teacher's use of words "big men" and "little men". This shows the classes among the same people of the same race. These classes were there before independence but in a new face. During colonialism, these names would not be used. Instead there would be the words "white man" and "black man". Now the countrymen have brought the same thing again – no difference between yesterday and today. Teacher complains that: "He (president) lives in a way that is far more painful to see than the way the white men have always lived here….. There is no difference then. No difference at all between the white men and their apes, the lawyers and merchants, and now the apes of the apes our party men" (89). Teacher's feeling is that the Nkrumah's Party men, such as Koomson, who once seemed to be fired with revolutionary zeal, have lately become indistinguishable from the pre-independence imperialists. Koomson, the representative of the "new" Ghana, has assumed a life-style identical to the life-style of whites before independence.

Ngugi, writing about Kenya, use his pen to yell the same cry as that one of Armah. He tells a story of Kenya, where classes have existed only three years after independence. Clifford Robson, writing about Ngugi's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, says: "The hopes for a New Jerusalem expressed

prior in The River Between achieve some fulfillment in *A Grain of Wheat*. December 12 1963, marks the day of independence, the end of colonial government – Uhuru. However, Ngugi makes us realize that a declaration does not produce change overnight, and that, although Independence Day marks the end of one struggle, it is also the beginning of another (struggle)" (66).

Interestingly here, it seems that even those people who devoted their life to fight for independence in the country were not remembered any more. The fruits of independence were shared only among the people who had no any part in fighting for independence. Those people, who spent their lives in the forests during the Mau Mau, are not remembered and celebrated again. New people, who emerged from nowhere, have taken control of the independent Kenya, monopolizing the whole land, while leaving those who fought for independence landless and desperate. Ngugi's character, Gikonyo, before he was betrayed by the M.P. in a piece of land he wanted to buy, shows his feelings to Mugo:

> It is people like you who ought to have been the first to test the fruits of independence. But now, whom do we see riding in long cars and changing them daily as if motor cars were clothes? It is those who did not take part in the movement, the same who ran to the shelter of schools and universities and administration. At political meetings you hear them shouting: Uhuru, Uhuru, we fought for. Fought where? They are mere uncircumcised boys. They knew suffering as a word." (80)

This shows how people who never fought for independence gained the power over the country. It is like a person who is spending money he never worked for. He would use it extravagantly because he does not have that feeling of suffering for that money. These leaders had never had the passion of helping people like those who sacrificed their lives in the forest. Instead of working for the people, they worked only to feed their own bellies. *A Grain of Wheat* tells us that, "Few M.P.s had offices in their constituencies. As soon as they were elected, they

ran to Nairobi and were rarely seen in their areas, except when they came back with other national leaders to address big political rallies" (71).

The pride of the leaders proved to the public that their own people were just like the colonial masters. People were crowded in the offices to seek assistance but the M.P was not even in office. Gikonyo was one of people waiting to see this M.P to help him get a loan to buy a piece of land, which eventually would be taken away from him by the same M.P. "After an hour or so, the M.P. arrived. He was dressed in a dark suit and carried a leather portfolio. He smoked a pipe. He greeted all the people like a father or a headmaster his children. He went into the office without apologizing. People went in one by one" (72). Here, was another arrogant master. The only difference was he was a black man. One woman was complaining that: "It is like trying to meet God" (72). Education was still a problem, especially for the common people who had no money to send their children abroad for school. People were arrested for failing to pay the poll tax although they had no jobs: "Last Saturday they came and arrested my man because he has not paid taxes. But how does he pay poll tax? He has no job. Our children have had to leave school because no money…" (72).

Independence was meant to be beneficial to all citizens. The great irony is that, post-independence leaders use this independence for their own benefits. The spirit of nationalism is dead and the spirit of individualism and selfishness germinated in its place. Oginga, the first Vice President of Kenya who later withdrew himself from Kenyatta's government, shows his deep mourning for this change:

> Kenyatta's cry to Kaggia before a vast crowd at a public meeting 'what have you done for yourself?' is a sign of the depths to which our spirit of national sacrifice for uhuru has sunk. Is there no need for national sacrifice? Has uhuru given the people what they need? The landless

> don't think so, nor do the unemployed. There are fewer people in jobs today than there were in 1960. (310)

Africa has not yet attained its independence. African independence can only be compared to a person who leaped over the ashes just to land his foot on a heap of burning charcoal. The situation is worse now than when these novels were written. Most of the African governments are governments of few people while the majority suffers in despair and hunger. Tribalism has increased just to divide people in privileged and unprivileged groups. People do not have a voice; their democracy rests in the hands of few people who decide everything for all people. Ballot stuffing is used to keep these merciless governments in power, disrespecting the people's right to vote and choose the leader they wanted.

Independence is, therefore, meaningless and the so called independence just marked another phase of colonialism. This shows that the independence ceremonies celebrated in 1960's were not real independence but rather the switch from one colonial master to another colonial master. Now the situation seems to be even worse than it was before the so called independence. It is true that it was better while Africa waited, because people had something to look forward to, something to dream about, something to desire and something to hope for. Interestingly, Africa have already killed her past and now, she is busy killing her future. The struggle for a true and virtual independence is required once more; the independence that will bring the true freedom to all people.

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