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**The Crisis of Under-Development and the Failure
of the Elite Class in Adebayo Williams' *The Year of
the Locusts***

Uwasomba, Chijioke

Department of English
Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria
Phone: +2348037058775

&

Oluwole Coker

Department of English
Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

The crisis of under-development has been a source of concern to many scholars of different hues because of its devastating impact on the countries within the periphery. In the search for the explanation and resolution of this phenomenon in Nigeria, both social scientists and creative writers have been very active. This paper, using Adebayo

Williams' The Year of the Locusts explores the issues of under-development and argues that the novel, instead of creating characters that can change their condition and by extension that of their people engages in a game of satire against the elite of the society. These characters are incapable of creating the needed change in their society. The essay concludes that in spite of the large cynicism that hallmarks The Year of the Locusts, it is still a genuine effort in addressing the spectre of under-development in Nigeria through the novelistic form.

Key words: Crisis, Under-development, Elite, Writers, Novelists, Individualism

Introduction

The Nigerian state is characterised by a lot of crises and challenges manifested in corruption, unemployment, illiteracy, low life expectancy, conflicts of many magnitudes and dimensions, poverty, irresponsible leadership among other debilities. Given the apparent inability of the state forces to coherently grapple with the situation, many Nigerians, especially the intelligentsia class have come to see the state as incapable of projecting itself as a true defender of national interests. The state is grotesquely corrupt and inefficient that its moral authority over its citizens has evaporated. This essay among other concerns, attempts an explication of how the Nigerian novel as represented by Adebayo Williams' *The Year of the Locusts* has responded to the phenomenal crises of under- development in Nigeria

In examining *The Year of the Locusts*, the essay takes into account Raymond Williams' (1976) strong view that the novel genre is a medium among many in which men seek to master and absorb new experience by discovering new forms and rhythms, grasping and reconstructing the stuff of social existence in the living substance of perceptions and relationships. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, like many other writers has demonstrated in his creative and critical works that the writer is a product of society, and therefore has a responsibility towards it, wherein he unequivocally says in his prison memoir,

Detained (1981) that literature is not "...something belonging to a surreal world, or a metaphysical ethereal plane, something that has nothing to do with man's more mundane, prosaic realm of attempting to clothe, shelter and feed himself" (6). In Nigerian literature, particularly the novel genre has intervened in the interrogation of the Nigerian state and the values that it espouses and defends. In doing this the writers' works are implicated along different artistic and ideological temperaments. This is not surprising taking into consideration the role of literature in society especially a society that is battling with the primitive baggage occasioned by underdevelopment and outright dependency. According to Ngugi (1981):

Literature has often given us more and sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's development. The novel in particular, especially in its critical realist tradition, is important in that respect; it pulls apart and it puts together; it is both analytic and synthetic (72).

Right from its inception, the Nigerian novel has been concerned with the problems of the country. It was part of the reaction to slavery, imperialism and colonialism which have become issues that define Nigeria. In most cases, writers take positions that challenge the leadership of the country and insist on the way forward. Evidently, the class of rulers who took over the mantle of leadership from the colonialists knew what to do with the new reality of independence. But there was (and there still is) economic handicap. Like other African states the Nigerian state was structured to depend on the developed economies of the western capitalist countries. Incidentally, the unequal economic relations have placed the country at the receiving end. This situation has become aggravated by the character of leadership as the leaders have succeeded in enriching themselves at the expense of the people.

The upshot of the above is that the Nigerian state has been reduced to a centre of struggles for private primitive accumulation by the forces and individuals that are in charge of it. It has become an anti-developmental structure which suffocates the people and destroys their hopes and aspirations as its activities encourage and deepen the structure of under-development and dependency.

Definition of Terms

To further deepen our discussion, it is important to quickly define the following terms: *Crisis*, *Under-development* and *Elite*.

Crisis, according to Herman (1969), is “a situation which disrupts the system or some parts of the system. More specifically, a crisis is a situation that creates an abrupt or sudden change in one or more of the basic system variables” (411). Reschar (1974) sees it as a transitory phenomenon which points “toward a moment of decision for life or death, not toward a stable condition of things” (91). Ogban-Iyan (2004), using *The Illustration in Heritage Dictionary and Information Handbook* as a guide, defines crisis to mean:

A turning point; and unstable relation in political or economic affairs in which an abrupt or decisive change is pending... a sudden change in the course of an acute disease either towards improvement or deterioration (261).

The implication of the above is that the advent of a crisis in any given system creates an upset; destabilises set goals and creates tension; disrupts the natural scheme of things; threatens the normal course of events, and endangers hopes and aspirations. A crisis situation for an individual or a country for that matter poses great concerns and challenges that need to be sorted out with serious attention

Under- development on the other hand is the product of industrial revolution which started in England in the seventeenth century. According to Okolo(1987), “African underdevelopment is a consequence of the world-wide expansion of capitalism and the

integration of Africa into the world of capitalism” (67 – 68). Underdevelopment can be understood only as a means of comparing levels of development. When the surplus values of production are transferred from their areas of origin to serve foreign lands and their interests, the effect is under-development but when otherwise, the effect is development.

In conceptualising under-development, Rodney (1986) captures it thus:

Today, our own pre-occupation is with the differences in wealth between on the one hand Europe and North America and on the other hand Africa, Asia and Latin America. In comparison with the first, the second group can be said to be backward or under-developed. At all times, therefore, one of the ideas behind under-development is a *comparative* one. It is possible to compare the economic conditions at two different periods for the same country and determine whether or not it had developed (21).

Rodney goes further to insist that a more “indispensable component of modern under-development is that it expresses a particular relationship of *exploitation*: namely, the exploitation of one country by another” (21 – 22). This state of affairs engenders economic backwardness and dependency. An under-developed society is wracked by all kinds of suffocating debilities that stunt its growth and development vis-a-viz the developed countries. This means that a country that is gripped by the crisis of under-development is in every sense lacking in what it takes to live a fulfilled life.

It is true that in our conceptualisation of under-development, the foreign factor appears crucial, but this does not in any way diminish internal forces and pressures, especially in an era of neo-colonialism. Structural dependence, political instability and elite collaboration and collusion with imperialism are chronic symptoms and defining characteristics of under-development. The orientation

and activities of these internal elements and forces deepen the crises of under-development .Booth (1981) summarises it thus:

The economy of the “developing” country is not permitted by its developed trading partners to generate its own momentum, of goals appropriate to the needs of its people as a whole. Instead it is cajoled or coerced by trade agreements and development projects into functioning as a supplier of raw material and purchaser of high technology and surplus manufactures. Within this system, members of the indigenous bourgeoisie perform the essential function of agents or middle-men to foreign interests, for which they are rewarded with wealth and political (and sometimes military) support (16).

The crisis of under-development presents itself as a crisis of the economy, or more precisely, a development crisis. This crisis manifests in the long and continuing decline of real income, the swelling tide of unemployment, debts problems, declining productivity and growth rates, violence, insecurity of all shapes and stripes, illiteracy, galloping inflation, increase in the prices of goods and services, irresponsibility of the state and elite forces, government’s abdication of its responsibilities in all areas of the economy occasioned by the withdrawal of subsidies and the enunciation of policies that promote privatisation at the expense of the poor. Ake (1989) has captured it thus: “It is at least as much as a crisis of the state as it is a crisis of the economy” (43).

According to Parry (1976) “elites” are the decision makers of the society whose power is not subject to control by other bodies in the society, and they are also the sole source without which society may fall apart. Mosca (1934) is of the view that “below the highest structure in the ruling class there is always another that is more numerous and comprises all the capacities for leadership in the country” (404). He insists that this minority of the populace has the

responsibility of shaping the tone of the society and that without the existence of the elite class, it would be impossible to have a social organisation. This means that the elite class has a historic responsibility to shape society for the good of all. Mosca and Pareto believe that in any society, whether developed or developing, there exist two classes—a class that rules and another one that is ruled. To the elite theorists, the elite is a very strategic force in the making and stabilization of the society.

The Year of the Locusts as a Metaphor of the Failure of the Elite Class

Adebayo Williams' *The Year of the Locusts* is a novel that explores the various dimensions of crises and contradictions that a neo-colonial formation is faced with. Given the enormity of the problems the society is confronted with, most of the characters if not all become negated in the end because of their inability to heroically and responsibly respond to the challenges of nation-building. It is true that the novel is set in a university environment, but the issues that the writer of the novel explores are overwhelming and national in character and dimensions. The writer's focus is on the activities of an eccentric, no-nonsense, snobbish and non-conformist university lecturer known as Dr. Joseph Ademola, 'Dale for short. 'Dale, the protagonist of the novel has spent a greater part of his life fighting professional misconduct and immorality, but succumbs to a grave temptation when he falls in love with one of his female students called Titi. This affair leads to his psychological and emotional disintegration and eventual suicide.

'Dale, who presents himself to the society as a just and sane person, is cruel to his wife as he does not give the latter the emotional satisfaction she deserves as his wife. He is also indifferent to his only child and daughter, Lolu who has begun to say unprintable things about him. In 'Dale's absence his house is always full of joy, but his presence brings with it fears and unhappiness. The narrator reports his wife as saying thus:

‘Sshhh, he may just be around the corner,’ she said hushing her daughter up. ‘He is not a crazy monkey. He had some ideals, a noble vision. I just thought that he would need a solid and dependable woman to cushion him against the world’.

‘I can’t see what you did wrong there’ her daughter had said (*The Year of the Locusts*, 63).

Right from the beginning of the novel, ‘Dale is presented as a man who is psychologically troubled by unhappy memories. He remembers his mother who had died twenty-six years earlier: “Twenty-six murderous years”!, he groaned to himself in ill-tempered depression’ (*The Year of the Locusts*, 1). He was from a poor background. His father was said to have fallen from a palm wine tree having been drunk as usual and died. He is always at logger heads with people. There is always violence in his voice and expression. His mind continuously torments him. He always raves. In spite of all that his wife, Mrs. Ademola does to satisfy him, Dr. Ademola is always on the war path. He wants his wife and others in the house not to mention the name “Locust”.

Outside of his house, he is seen fighting everybody. At the beginning of the novel, we see him fighting the university administrators. He hates administrators because he thinks they are too bureaucratic and corrupt. In the bar where he has gone to drink, he raves at the steward:

“Go and find it. I mean it. Go and find it at all costs. Tell the other fools there to get the Whisky and Soda now. If I should come to that damn’d bar many of you will regret the day you were born” (*The Year*, 68).

Because of the way he carries on, it is not surprising that he is made a butt of jokes and gossip. People ignore the message of his valedictory day lecture at a local secondary school in which he condemned the irresponsibility of the government and focus on his queer and

disheveled looks. One of the women in My Fair Lady Saloon (sic) asks why he looks unkempt and unhappy: “But why is he looking like someone who has just escaped from the asylum? the other lady said, eyeing the picture of “Dales’s angry visage with amused disapproval” (*The Year*, 59).

It is obvious that the society being portrayed in the novel is experiencing both economic and moral crises that require a battling collectivity to address and confront head on. The decay in the University of the novel is a manifestation of the general collapse in the larger society of the novel. The economy of the society is in the hands of the elite group Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2007) has dubbed “a class of natives, already conceived and born by colonialism” (160). This group, in spite of the education and exposure of its members takes orders from their metropolitan masters in the running of the affairs of their country(ies). The ills of their society did not emerge because of their moral failings but as a result of the role(s) played by the ruling and elite classes in the management of their society. There is no unanimity and sincerity of purpose by the elite forces and a few people like ‘Dale who stand out from the maddening crowd resort to individualist heroism.

There are hints of nepotism and ethnic bias in recruitment against the Registrar of the institution. The society of the novel is one in which “block heads” like Mr. Sanni, a former student of ‘Dale are made Commissioners. The society is over run by a self-conscious mediocrity. Earlier in the novel, we are told of how ‘Dale’s father was harassed by tax collectors. He was not provided with employment or opportunities that would have uplifted his life, yet he was clobbered here and there by tax collectors. The most annoying to him was that these tax agents were rogues: “It is the tragedy of the world we live in that criminals and rogues like you are law-keepers”, ‘Dale’s father said (*The Year*, 1). We are told of two hefty men who visited ‘Dale to warn him to stop his campaigns against corruption: “... we just come to advise you to stop poking your big nose into Maintenance affairs because it is not your father’s money that anybody has stolen” (*The*

Year, 60). In the valedictory day lecture given by ‘Dale at a local secondary school, he warns of the consequences of a system that is deeply enmeshed in crisis:

In a few months time, one or two of you will be dead, either shot by armed robbers or as armed robbers themselves. This is what we mean when we say that the society is on the verge of a moral and economic breakdown. Unfortunately, nobody can, or will do anything about it. In fact, I say it without any fear of contradiction that many of your fathers ought to have been shot much longer time ago (*The Year*, 59).

Many lecturers are involved in all sorts of misdemeanours and reprehensible activities. The “ATICO Scandal” reveals that a local transport service which had hitherto enjoyed preferential treatment on campus is a business concern jointly owned by a grave, eminent Professor and a local business man. The elite at all levels of the society exploit the system to their benefit. Dr. John is described by ‘Dale as an impudent racketeer. In all of these, even ‘Dale who postures as the moral conscience of the society in question is found wanting as can be seen in his failings. D. J., Dr. Jackson, Abass, among others are all gossips in spite of their status as respected University dons. Instead of rising to the challenges facing them and their country, they waste their time on gossip, drinks and other pastimes that are not ennobling. Most of their discussions border on frivolities that cannot in any way be of help to their society.

As can be seen from the above, in *The Year of the Locusts*, we are dealing with a crop of national elite who are confronted with serious national challenges but who appear very weak in responding to the grave issues of their society. Our concept of the elite in this presentation is taken from the point of view of Mosca and Pareto (1994). From the perspective of Mosca and Pareto given the position of the elites in the society, they are supposed to direct the society to fulfill its goals. They do not even have the moral fibre. ‘Dale, who had

earlier on told his friend, Dr. Jackson that he had had enough drinks, still goes ahead to drink more and gets himself foolishly drunk. He abandons his wife and engages in trysts with his student, committing suicide when he realised that the relationship is no longer a secret affair.

The implication of the above observation is to the effect that these characters who constitute the elite of their society are suffering from the crisis of petit-bourgeois radicalism. A good number of them are opposed to the shenanigans going on in their society but lack the correct methodological and ideological template to address the problems of their society. Confronted with the impotence of the ruling and petit-bourgeois elites of their society, the corruption of the leaders at all levels of governance, ‘Dale and his colleagues and friends do not know what and where to turn to. In the novel, there are hints about the crises and contradictions that are part and parcel of an under-developed country. According to Dr. Jackson, those who have the guts for criminality have become the super-rich of the society: “No, no, no! I was only telling you that in an under-developed country where everything has gone completely whacho you don’t need more than the guts of a burglar to be super-rich” (*The Year*, 162 – 163).

‘Dale, in his testament to Dr. Jackson before committing suicide also acknowledges the limitations and hypocrisies of their society: “The tragedy of this age is that the worst criminals become the arbiters of law. Frauds cry to heavens against frauds. Traitors point accusing fingers at traitors... We are faced with a grave situation” (*The Year*, 181). One would have thought that with the recognition of the grim situation confronting their society, these elites should have organised themselves for the needed change that their society requires. ‘Dale, the moral crusader thinks that he alone can fight and restore the health of his society. He distances himself from ideologues like Segun. In fact, he says that he hates ideologues like Segun, observing that Segun, a redoubtable Marxist scholar should go to Angola: “Let him go to Angola”, ‘Dale said in malicious disgust” (*The Year*, 28).

The Year of the Locusts reminds us of Wole Soyinka's *Interpreters* in which about half a dozen intellectuals who give dynamism to the novel engage in an interpretation of their country (Nigeria) by their various self-interpretations. We see not only their varying degrees and levels of agony, despair and disillusionment over the lot assailing them and, necessarily, their country, but also their impotence before this rot. It is not surprising that at the end of the day they remain incapable of delivering their society because of their aloof and self-interested interpretations. They represent in every material particular, Nietzsche's superman. Such characters cannot bring a genuine change in their society. They are free radicals whose consciousness is characterized by a deep feeling of disillusionment.

'Dale's case is a practical demonstration of the failure that comes with individuals who see themselves as constituting an Island unto themselves. No man is an Island. Dale foolishly forgets the implications of the story of the strange man in the clan who was told of the approach of locusts and against all pleadings and entreaties; he went to drive them away single handed from the surrounding farms to his own peril. 'Dale's mother had told him this story when he was a child. But instead of taking it to heart and as an article of faith, he allows his effete individualism to direct his actions. As much as we identify or disassociate ourselves with 'Dale and what he represents, it is clear that 'Dale's failings point to the failure of the elite in the society that is being portrayed in the novel. The novel tries to show that to understand the problems of a society and correct them, one must transcend individual daring and exuberant one-upmanship and work with the collective.

The Year of the Locusts is full of cynicism; portraying the counter elite as irresponsible as those they are criticising and incapable of leading any change. Williams does not give hope for change as the leading characters as epitomised in 'Dale are not change agents but noise makers. There is no doubt that *The Year of the Locusts* is influenced by the critical realist tradition with its petit-bourgeois consciousness and conservatism. The administrative wing of the

university is seen as being corrupt and the academics and some of the students are not above board. Apart from Titi who ends up in a sexual relationship with 'Dale, another student, Funmi Martins is notorious for her dalliances with men who are even older than her father. Colonel Wabi is said to be dating her. The novel is awash with the crises and contradictions buffeting a neo-colonial country (Nigeria) but the characters lack the capacity of challenging the status quo with a view to changing it. Williams' characters remind us of Soyinka's interpreters who retreat into cynicism, individualism, or into empty moral appeals and even into committing suicide as 'Dale engages in *The Year of the Locusts*

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