

Book Review

Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto*

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Title: The Price

Author: Paul Amechi Ifeanyi

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When Dr. Paul Ifeanyi called me on phone, informing me about this book and requesting that I go through it, my first thought was of editing. My mind quickly skidded to editing because editing is one of the numerous services my Resource Centre (Prof. Ezenwa-Ohaeto Resource Centre, Awka) offers to our clients. Not until he came in person with already published book did I understand that my assignment might go beyond editing. As I looked on the compact and beautifully packaged book handed over to me and as I expressed joy and excitement over another great achievement by him, a lot of questions inadvertently quickly ran through my mind, even as I was still discussing with Dr. Ifeanyi both on the assignment he has given me and other issues.

The Price; what price? Who paid the price? On what and for what reason would anybody dare pay any price again for this country assuming that the story was set in Nigeria? Is it really worth it? Would anybody in this country, especially the leaders, appreciate any kind of price paid for whatever reason and in whatever form for this country where nepotism, un-patriotism and corruption have become endemic? A country without any kind of structure put in place for appreciating excellence? Is any kind of price really worth it? Then I turned to the blurb and the lead impression I got was a doomed country that is bedeviled with corruption of all sorts: indiscipline, brazen embezzlement of public funds by people in authority, injustice, and all kinds of unchecked vices. I also came across an incorruptible lone-crusader, Prof. Armeh, who wants positive change in the mist of social rot. My curiosity was deeply

aroused. I wanted to find out if the lone crusader, under expected pressure, eventually succumbed by joining in the all for all looting, whether he stepped aside or kept the fight alive till the end. I knew the answers to my inquiry and curiosity have been placed on my palm, so with a sigh of relief I did a mental calculation, given my schedule, on when to begin the journey to the discovery of answers to my numerous questions.

The novel turned out to be a story of multiple facets: a love story, a story of an unreserved corrupt, disarrayed, misguided and mismanaged country that lacks focus, patriotism by the leaders and security. A story of disappointments and aborted hopes, of disenfranchisement and horror! A story of abuse of all sorts!

Nevertheless, the credibility and authenticity of *The Price* could be located in its ability to capture a realistic and convincing setting, a setting the readers can identify with, its fictitiousness notwithstanding. The country of Kwashi (the country where the narrative is set) was aptly delineated by the writer that one may be tempted to name a particular country. His diction exposes the reader to the various elements of theme, characterization, narrative technique and so on. He uses language to distinguish between characters so that the reader knows when a professor or DPO is talking, when a criminal or Medical doctor is talking and when a married person or otherwise is talking. His adoption of omniscient point of view provided him with the freedom he needed to move in time and space, moving from one location to another (most times, taking his reader from the present to either the far past or far future and back) is professionally and tactfully handled. The author craftily achieved this using his protagonist, Prof. Armeh and his wife, Alice, when he took the reader back to how they met in America earlier before they found themselves in the mess called Kwashi where their shared agony started. He also employed this style in the story of Jim and his friend, John.

The story is filled with imageries. A lot of mental pictures which help the reader to create mental affiliation with the settings, plots, actions of the characters and the characters themselves which

draw the events closer to him/her to the extent that he/she tends to practically ‘hear’, ‘touch’ and ‘smell’ them.

The novel, *The Price*, begins with a devastating but captivating event of a very short but loaded letter written by a dreaded secret cult, The Mask, to the protagonist, Prof. Armeh, informing him that they have kidnapped his daughter and that they had warned him repeatedly to stop interfering in their business. They further requested him to “resign from the Council and leave the city before 12.00noon tomorrow.” The letter goes on to instruct Prof. Armeh that:

Until further directives, stay away. We’ll be watching you and when we are satisfied with your conduct, your daughter will be released to you. Any attempt to play a hero, your daughter dies! Consider this the final warning (Ifeanyi 5).

The tone of this letter is instructive on two notes:

1. The writer is a representative of a secret cult who must have been aggrieved by Prof. Armeh’s unwavering stance in the face of the cult’s threats.
2. The language level of the writer of the letter is not indicative of a person from the lower rung of the educational strata. He is obviously reasonably educated.

We will later meet with OJY, a blood thirsty beast who is the founder and leader of this deadly and most notorious group, *The Mask*, one of the numerous gangs that “cultivated their ties with international crime syndicates. It was highly specialized with great team work, hierarchical structure, planning, and centralized authority, was richly funded and specialised in kidnapping”

(Ifeanyi 19). We shall later be confronted with the facts of his background; an only son of a multimillionaire, one of “the people who ran down Kwashi’s economy through embezzlement and money laundering” (Ifeanyi, 259). OJY just came back from the

United States of America; a well educated young man. Circumstances later led him into meeting with a three-man gang with whom he later initiated and became the leader of *The Mask*, a group that terrorized and held Kwashi to ransom for years and to which some members of the Ruling Council belong. (This makes a strong statement about Kwashi's educated but unemployed youths). It was this group that kidnapped Prof. Armeh's only daughter.

Beko, Prof. Armeh's best friend and a member of the Ruling Council, just as most members of the Council, is a member of *The Mask*. The gullibility of the Ruling Council has profoundly shrouded their consciences that they have become very cruel, shameless, insensitive to people's feelings and untrustworthy. They do not mind taking over a widow's only estate. It is that bad. They have just connived and kidnapped the daughter of one of them who dared and insisted on fighting their corrupt tendencies.

The Price is a story of dangerous risks taken by kwashi's youths out of desperation and frustration who embark on journey to the Western world. Some die of starvation in the hills and forests while taking illegal routs to the countries of their destination. Some freeze in the extreme cold weather, while some are devoured by wild animals. Those who eventually make it have to contend with the gruesome requirements for contract marriages and acquisition of citizenship. Their grisly experiences are better read from the novel than told.

The multi-faceted nature of *The Price* also involved gender matters. The writer exposed a lot of domestic violence meted against women even when the women have poured all their substances; material and non-material into the relationships. It tells of heartbreaks and rapes, of child abuse and child soldiering, of war and starvation, of terror and horror, and of looting and smuggling. It is about rotten or non existing infrastructure and dishonest police force among others.

The story of *The Price* is filled with numerous intricacies of embedded sub-stories that unfold into a complete engagement by keeping the reader into turning the pages till the end. The

captivating pace of the novel accelerates as it climaxed during the Ruling Council meeting at the notice of the Council's Chairman's demise. Prof. Armeh is requested by the Council members to head the Council till next election is held but instead of receiving congratulatory handshakes from his colleagues, he is presented with a box containing his daughter's lifeless body. To worsen the situation, he comes to a devastating realization of the unbelievable, and heart shattering involvement of his best friend, Mr. Beko, a fellow Council member's involvement in the kidnapping and the eventual death of his only daughter. This is Prof. Armeh's 'reward', 'the great price' he unwittingly paid for choosing to be incorruptible even in the face of all kinds of pressure, for standing for justice and fairness till the end to save his country, Kwashi, from the hands of the leaders who have turned themselves into deadly parasites, sucking the country to paralysis.

If we take the situation in Kwashi as mirroring Nigerian situation (at this point, one could not help thinking of the numerous sagas in the National Assembly, the current being that of the budget padding), we would arrive at the conclusion that our country, Nigeria, has increasingly and deeply been dehumanized by bad leadership and bad governance that have resulted in murky and misplaced values and ideologies, of cupidity and shameless dishonesty, of unaccountability and irresponsibility, of day light stealing of public funds by the leading class which brought us to where we are today; very under developed. A book of this nature offers us a valuable opportunity to re-examine our priorities and our values in order to discover viable means of becoming humanized again. For instance, what Oguejiofor, a foremost African philosopher terms "trans-valuation of our national values." (19) He asked salient questions pointing to people we foist as our heroes and where they stand in terms of corruption. In his own words:

most nations consciously project their heroes to serve as sources of inspiration to the young. In Nigeria our heroes are those who either have acquired large wealth

regardless of the means or those who succeeded in occupying important positions. A look at Abuja is a revelation. The streets of our capital city are named mostly after politicians who are not necessarily free from corruption... (19).

My personal take here is that, such destructive acts are reversible and the right time to do so is now we are singing of change, believing we are really sincere about it. There are other important issues Nigerian leaders could pay attention to if Nigeria must be saved; Reorganizing the whole system and granting full autonomy to the sensitive sectors such as the judiciary, universities and media should not be delayed further. The government must realize the importance of granting complete autonomy to these sectors.

Back to the novel, the level of corruption in Kwashi, a fictional African country is representative of most African countries, particularly, of Nigeria our dear country. The level of corruption in Nigeria is staggering, very bewildering and the most unfortunate part is that the few honest citizens are forced out of the helm of affairs by the nefarious practices often witnessed among our leaders. Those sincere persons that are courageous enough to penetrate the corridors of power, instead of being encouraged are either threatened out of the way or they pay dearly just as Prof. Armeh, the protagonist of the novel *The Price*, experienced. This novel opens our eyes to the devastating effects of societal lawlessness, of insecurity, of materialism, and of un-patriotism. The validity of this novel, *The Price*, lies in its power of exposing varied societal ills ranging from domestic violence to corruption in high places.

Needless to emphasize Nigeria's lack of capable and good leadership built on patriotism and excellence, which are the panacea for underdevelopment. The dysfunctional system observed in Nigeria has, for decades, extolled mediocrity and celebration of criminality and for us to make any head way towards development there is need to institute viable and transparent structures that have the capability of checkmating excesses and corruption in the society

especially at the leadership cadre. The core message of *The Price*, therefore, is that corruption thrived in Kwashi because the country fertilized the ground on which corruption was nurtured into maturity by not putting requisite structures in place so the leaders became looters of public treasury entrusted in their care, they became brutal by forming formidable local and international criminal syndicates to eliminate and maim any individual and/or groups that may dare confront them. This led to the birth and strengthening of “strong men” and weakening of the necessary socio economic structures of the country.

President Obama reminded African leaders that “no country is going to create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves... no person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery...that is tyranny.” In the same vein, John Kerry spoke about corruption during 2016 World Economic Forum and cited the Nigerian situation. He rightly observed that one of the reasons why the Nigerian military was unable to protect its citizens against the menace of Boko Haram is because “much of the military budget was finding its way to the pockets of the generals....” He went on to explicitly state that there is:

...nothing, absolutely nothing more demoralizing, more destructive and more disempowering to any citizen than the belief that the system is ripped against them and that the people in the positions of power are to use a diplomatic terms of arts, crooks who are stealing the future of their own people and by the way, depositing their ill gotten gains in ostensibly the legitimate financial institution around the world. Corruption is a social danger because it feeds organized crime. It destroys nation states. It imperils opportunities, particularly for women and girls. It facilitates

environmental degradation, contributes to human trafficking and undermines whole communities. It destroys the future. Corruption is a radicalizer because it destroys fate in legitimate authority. It opens up a vacuum which allows the predators to move in and no one knows that better than violent extremist groups who regularly use corruption as a recruitment tool. Corruption is an opportunity destroyer, because it discourages honesty and accountable investment. It makes businesses more expensive to operate. It drives up the cost and public services for local tax payers and it turns a nation's entire budget into a feeding trust for the privileged few....

Perhaps, it is important to inform Kerrey and the world that this is just an isolated case from numerous brazen criminal acts among our leaders and that in fact, the game is vested/personal interest, not national.

While searching for viable means for tackling Nigerian socio-economic problems, may I suggest that our leaders should commit resources to the development and celebration of fundamental human capacity that is founded on basic morality. Basic morality embraces such factors as discipline, honesty, enthronement of meritocracy and fairness. These are the bedrock of development which corruption destroys and without which, we shall remain under-developed, the much talked about change mantra notwithstanding. In fact, Obama, in one of his speeches noted that "change requires more than righteous anger. It requires a programme organizing." May I also suggest to our leaders to look further inward. Look into the Nigerian citadels of learning where researches in all endeavours of life are constantly carried out. The results of those researches are lying fallow in the universities and Polytechnics. Our government has failed to realize the

unquantifiable benefits derivable from those findings toward national development. Take America for example. Lee Kuan Yew, one of the Singaporean seminal figures in his book *From Third World to First* noted that Americans’ “strength is in their talent nurtured in their universities, think tank, and in the R & D laboratories of their MNC’s . And they attract some of the brightest minds from the world over....”(499) The issues of corruption, its consequences and many more are the crux of the matter of this book, *The Price*.

I, therefore, strongly recommend this book for every African as the issues raised in this book point blankly to the socio-economic problems of all African nations. However, I particularly recommend it to all Nigerians. In fact, the Federal and State Ministries of Education should seriously consider this book a must read for senior secondary classes. It will help to open their eyes, in a more practical way, to these ills ravaging our society they also live in and understand why the country has refused to move ahead in terms of both super and infrastructures. It will then help them to decide early enough if they would want to leave the country as it is or do something drastic to improve on it now and/or in future when the mantle of leadership would have been handed over to them.

**Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto Department of English Language & Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka CEO of Prof. Ezenwa-Ohaeto Resource Centre, Awka. nezenwaohaeto@gmail.com*

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