

OPPRESSION AS POLITICAL IDEOLOGY IN TIYAMBE ZELEZA'S SMOULDERING CHARCOAL

Ablavi Mandirann Amegnonka¹, Monfaye Koffi², Panaewazibiou Dadja-tiou^{3*}

Kara University, Togo.

*Corresponding Author
Panaewazibiou Dadja-tiou

Kara University, Togo.

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Abstract: Using Marxist literary criticism, this paper aims at exploring and showing that Tiyaambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* is depicting postcolonial African realities in terms of the misuse of power and the ideology of personal cult. The work has revealed that oppression has become an ideology and a working tool for the new African leaders in their quest for eternal power. These contemporary African leaders use their position to maltreat the masses and at the same time maintain them in abject and voiceless position. The unique choice these downtrodden masses have is to keep quiet and content themselves with their pitiful created conditions. The study has furthermore shown that poverty has also become a creative means to control these masses. Rebellion and resistance against these heartless leaders are some of the appropriate means the masses need to get out from these inhuman conditions in which they live.

Keywords: Oppression, poverty, ideology, African leaders, Africa.

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Introduction

For a creative work to be functional, it must address issues affecting Man and his society. African literature in these last decades puts Man and his society at the center of its preoccupations. Knowing that man is an integral part of human society and literature being a product of this society, African writers such as Benjamin Kwakye, Ahmed Yerima, Tiyaambe Zeleza have therefore devoted part of their writings focusing on human issues. "Literature is a society's sublime means of self-expression that exposes its make-up and is, thus, essentially sociological. It puts Man at the center of its interests and is used by writers as means par excellence for curing social pathologies" (P. Dadja-tiou, 2021, p.314). It is in this same perspective that Tiyaambe Zeleza sets his novel entitled *Smouldering Charcoal* in which he exposes and explores the oppressive ideological strategy put together by the new leaders of Tiyaambe's fictional society. In this novel, the Malawian writer shed light on the strategies used by the power holders in this fictional Malawian society to maintain and to control the majority voiceless masses.

Many studies in African literature have shown that the poverty and the underdevelopment of Africa are partly due to the fact that the ruling class in charge of the continent's affairs lamentably failed its mission. Personal and egoistic ambitions took over on the common interests of the majority. Conscious that many studies have been conducted on this issue, it is of our view that there is still a need in conducting this particular study. Hence the

topic "Oppression as Political Ideology in Tiyaambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*". This paper purports to explore and highlight the different strategies used as tools of domination and impoverishing Africans as well as their various countries. Marxist literary criticism is the theory used to scrutinise this study with the aim of providing solutions to this continental plague. Marxist literary criticism in this work is defined as "Marxist critical theory is a species of critical theory that emphasizes how social class establishes hierarchical power structures. Both Marxist critical theory and critical theory in general advocate for various means of combating oppression and increasing the freedom of marginalized or oppressed groups", (<https://study.com/academy/lesson/marxist-criticism-definition-examples.html>)

1- Manifestation of Oppression in *Smouldering Charcoal*

According to *The University of Michigan School of Social Work*, oppression is "the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, a group or an institution [which] occurs at all levels and is reinforced by social norms, institutional biases, interpersonal relationships and personal beliefs." (<https://socialwork.uw.edu>). Oppression as the above definition stipulates, goes in line with the situation prevailing in Tiyaambe's fictional unnamed society. In this fictional Malawian society, oppression manifests itself in a number of ways, including lack of freedom of expression, lack of the right to strike, corruption, imprisonment and social injustice. The very framework of the work is built around a banned strike by workers in a bakery who want to demonstrate legitimately to demand an

improvement in their working and living conditions. As appeared in the novel, Tiyyambe's society is the one in which illustrates the devastating injustice inflicted on society by the ruling classes. Leaders in this society have settled a system of ruling based on dictatorship. It is a system in which many restrictions are set with the sole objective to prevent the oppressed society from expressing itself. Workers, no matter their poor conditions have no right to express themselves. This restriction and privation of human right are manifest and are illustrated by the proscription of the strike, which has by the way, led to socio-political tensions and a deterioration in the living conditions of the workers.

Freedom of expression which is an inalienable right of individuals in a country, allows everyone to express their feelings and their points of view on the various issues affecting their life and that of the republic, without of course, jeopardizing the freedoms of others. Generally, freedom of expression in a country is measured by the ability of journalists to express themselves without constraint and restriction. Journalists should not normally be biased. They should treat the news with professionalism, without fear of reprisal from the authorities.

In *SC*, Chola, the main character of the novel, is a young journalist who, after his university studies abroad, has a burning desire to return to his country to serve and put into practice all the knowledge he has acquired at that prestigious university abroad. He is very surprised to find that the editor of the magazine where he works never gives him opportunity to freely exercise his mission as a journalist. On the contrary, Chola finds himself in a situation where the editor is constantly dictating the editorial line of his paper. With this editor, the only choice Chola has is to write articles in the praise of the political leader. Pursuing his zealous mission, the editor in his tireless efforts to convince the journalist, has it that "I am not criticising you, you know. I am simply reminding you of the rules of the game. Remember that it is those up there who *read* the papers" (*SC*, p.20). It is safe to argue from this so-called reminder of the editor that the situation prevailing in this depicted society epitomizes the generalized situation in Africa after independence.

Before this pitiful situation, Chola, as a been-to, undergoes in his country, the only feeling Chola could have is his total deception and disillusionment. As a patriot, Chola thought he could contribute to the development of his country through the positive criticism of his various newspaper articles but great was his deception to realise that realities in Africa differ. This, of course, leads to a series of arguments between him and his editor, and in the following lines he reflects deeply on the purpose of his career:

That was the way he felt about his career, a burnt-out dream; burnt on the stake of compromises for the sake of survival. it was an ugly word. I sounded so raw, basic, animal-like. it also signified the reality of living in a world where one's inner visions and the values of the outside world are irreconcilable. (*SC*, p. P16).

As can be read here, it is a sense of powerlessness and resignation about personal dreams and ambitions that drives Chola. This is also the case of many young Africans who, at the risk of losing their livelihoods, are forced to betray their ideals and abandon their principles. The ideology of oppression eats up the dreams of the people, especially the youth, and there is a cult of mediocrity. The worst are celebrated, while the best are despised. A totalitarian or oppressive regime is first and foremost a regime based on lies,

where people are kept in a state of lies and deception, ideologies and indoctrinations that work to the advantage of the political leaders, all this devoid of any objectivity. In this perspective, Achebe complained about a similar situation in his country in the following terms: "An absence of objectivity and intellectual rigour at the critical moment of a nation's formation is more than an academic matter. It inclines the fledging state to disorderly growth and mental deficiency." (C. Achebe, 1983, p.14). In this sense, the masses are kept misinformed, or rather suffocated, by false information that is fabricated from scratch to make them have blind faith in the political leaders. Chola explains what matters most to his editor as follows:

For him what mattered were sterile facts and hearty accolades to those up there, as e always put it. Any form of interpretation smacked of criticism and, if too deep, potential subversion. So the papers were churned day after day full of pictures of the Leader and bold headlines calling the nation's attention to his latest activities, sayings coughs and all, coupled with repetitive reports of the latest development achievements. (*SC*, p.21)

One of the characteristics of an oppressive regime is a single way of thinking, where all people are forced to see things in the same light as the political leaders. No one is allowed to have an opposing viewpoint or a viewpoint that is contrary to the trend or movement of the regime in power. No one is allowed to criticise or express opinions contrary to the way the government is run. This is often manifested in the obligation to belong to a single political party in the country. The freedom to choose or belong to the political party of one's choice is thus suppressed. All citizens are obliged to belong to the same political party, at the risk of being beaten and assaulted. This is the case of Chola, who is brutalised for not having a membership card of the ruling political party. The following passage from the book illustrates this point.

Every citizen of the country was supposed to have a Party membership card. The Youth Militia carried out searches any time they wanted to, particularly during periods of political tension and unrest, which were quite frequent, and also after new cards had been issued at the beginning of each year. All this was done in the name of rooting out subversive elements. (*SC*, p.17)

However, Chola's deep desire to retain a degree of freedom of choice in political matters has led him on several occasions to be confronted with these checks, which have tested his patience and loyalty to his own principles. It is also important to stress that these checks on membership cards are often carried out in a very violent and muscular manner by the militia of the ruling party, as the following passage shows: "You are not moving until you show us the card! They thundered (...) I said I forgot it (...) You liar! Get out! You know this country belongs to our Great Leader, and yet you forgot the card. Who are you trying to fool?" (*SC*, p.17).

The above passages show that belonging to a political party, as portrayed in the work, is not a matter of choice but of obligation. Thus, by applying Marxism, Chola finds himself on the side of the powerless in opposition to the powerful who hold the absolute power and set the rules of the political game in the country. He has no choice but to submit to these rules if he wants to preserve his life. The bravest who try to defy the oppressive laws of this regime are simply tortured and murdered. This is the case of Dambo, Chola's "closest friend, a highly competent lawyer, but above all, a

man who believed in doing something about things he disliked, and there were many such things" (SC, p.18).

As the portrayal of the character makes clear, Dambo is a very ambitious young lawyer with clear and elaborate ideas about how to build his country. On his return from abroad after his study, and with a deep desire to help build his country, he initially allied himself with the powers that be, with the intention of transforming and changing things from within. But he is disappointed, because Dambo has the opportunity to see for himself the horrors of the current government, the manipulation, the corruption and all the strategies put together to maintain the oppressed people forever. As underlined by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: "A Neo-colonial regime is, by its very character, a repressive machine...To maintain itself it shuts all venues of democratic expression." (N. W. Thiong'o, 1993, p.71). To his friend Chola, Dambo expresses his disappointment as follows:

People must be aware that the system we have at present is evil. It serves the rich and the powerful at the expense of the masses. It is not as if it is it's the will of God, if you see what I mean; it's the creation of greedy men, and anything which men can make, men can also destroy and build something better in its place. (SC, p.77)

From then on, Dambo retreated into seclusion and launched a clandestine movement to liberate his country by rallying his fellow intellectuals who had returned from abroad. This initiative is an abject failure, leading to the tragic assassination of Dambo, whose body is found floating in a river. "Dambo's face was mauled beyond recognition. Alipo's clouded eyes searched the body before her for any sign that this was indeed her husband's body". (SC, p.76) And even after his death, his soul will not rest because members of his family are arrested and sent to prison to pay for his sins.

Dambo was buried the next morning(...) Chola and Catherine left for the city shortly afterwards. They would later learn that a number of people from the village were taken to the *Boma* for questioning by Special Branch, including Alipo and Dambo's father. One of Dambo's uncles eventually end up in detention (...) (SC, p.121).

All this points to the poisonous climate of oppression that pervades the work. And the technique used by Tiyaambe Zeleza is designed to show just how deadly oppression can be for the citizens of a nation, especially the youth who sacrifice their lives for a better future of their countries. In this perspective, Ikenna Nzimiro finds that: "Blessed are the youth of renaissance Africa who see in truth a virtue of virtues, and sacrifice even life so that falsehood and its concomitants may be eradicated from the face of earth." (I. Nzimiro, 1978, P. 298).

Another significant manifestation of oppression in the novel is the manifest desire of the ruling authorities to suppress any attempt to strike. As mentioned above, the plot of the novel revolves around a strike initiated by workers in a bakery who are overwhelmed by the miserable living and working conditions in which they find themselves. The strike is crushed in a bloodbath and the strikers are imprisoned in worse conditions. This attitude of the authorities towards demonstrations or strikes is deliberately designed to discourage any workers who want to demonstrate or strike. Repression is therefore used in this context as a massive deterrent to prevent workers from exercising their legal rights. In

this way, Tiyaambe Zeleza succeeds in conveying his message that the ideology of oppression adopted by certain leaders in post-colonial Africa poses a serious problem for the emancipation of the people. This justifies the initial reluctance of some characters, especially Mchere, to join the strike of their own accord. As a child, he witnessed the brutality with which the police arrested his father after an almost identical demonstration. As he explains to his friend Bota: "I had never seen such brutality before. Yes, I saw my own father beaten, his clothes and his face bathed in blood, handcuffed, powerless and unable to defend himself (...). We weren't even allowed to go and see him in prison." (SC, p.66). Sadly, this is exactly what happened to him, as he and all his fellow strikers were imprisoned and Mchere suffered the worst torture of his life. Repression and the abuse of human rights is thus used by those who hold power as a means of control. They give poor wages to workers and forbid them to go on strike or to claim good salaries in any way just to keep them in poverty, which also is another political ideology of power control.

2- Poverty as a Weapon of Control as Seen in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*

The more severe the poverty, the more malleable the voter. Why alleviate poverty when one can wield it as a weapon?" Fernandez, Paragraph6.

The above words by Fernandez which open this discussion illustrate well some political ideologies where leaders create and use sufferings to their advantage. The extract reveals that in many political systems, leaders willingly keep their populations in abject poverty in order to better have control over them. These forgone words come to strengthen our view that sufferings and misery of the population as represented in the novel *Smouldering Charcoal* by Tiyaambe Zeleza are wilfully creative and man-made. In this novel, the reader discovers that many factory workers live below poverty rate. The description of the living conditions of Mchere and his family for example delineates misery and suffering and gives an over view of the conditions of life in the whole country as represented in the novel. At the right beginning of this artistic work, one can read: "He (Mchere) was woken up by a rat. He shook violently as the rat jumped from his thin blanket and disappeared into a corner." (SC, p. 2). This description at the opening of the novel foretells the reader about the misery that prevails in this created post-colonial African country. Mchere as a worker, competing beds with rats, infers nothing than poverty. His family's life is purposely created by the writer to lay emphasis on the unclean and miserable living conditions of the working class. Mchere for example is a civil servant but hardly can his family have a meal per day. Such miserable living conditions cannot assure peace and love. Consequently, quarrel and instability become a routine in his family for many unsatisfied needs as listed in the following passage:

Can you give me money for food, there is nothing in the house. She sneered at him. By the way, the landlord came last night for his rent,...

I put that bucket there to collect the rain from the leaking roof of yours! She screamed,... grandma and the two boys...opened their eyes when Nambe was looking in their direction. As usual, they had been woken up by the now ritualistic morning quarrel. (SC, p.5)

This passage makes plain that there is no peace in that family of Mchere. The inability to meet end needs keep both parents in a constant stress and irritation, showing thus that when people are

hungry, they cannot unite to do something. Mchere's family as a microcosm of the whole society in which he lives, reveals the abject poverty in which people live. Showing that poverty is a wide spread sickness in the country, the narrator describes:

On both sides of the road there were shacks built of mud, grass, metal sheets, cardboard, and anything else that could provide temporary permanence. These rickety structures harboured disjointed human forms, not people, surrounded by mad dogs, rats, and inhuman stench. The old men and women died in their sleep, or were stabbed to death, thanks to a few coins they had hidden in the ground, young girls prematurely bore children in quick succession, children who would neither know their fathers nor the shape of blackboard... (SC, p.16)

This description of the poor conditions under which the majority in the created country of Zeleza live, comes to confirm what we underlined above that Mchere's family is simply a microcosm of the environment in the whole country. In Zeleza's novel, citizens lack the minimum necessary to keep them as humans. Deeply plunged in their hunger problems, they no longer have all their minds to think and fight for anything else more than to have their basic needs met. They become like skeletons as they cannot feed correctly. Death awaits them at any corner as their young people become murderers, thieves and robbers, installing terror in the country. The political leaders thus use poverty to keep people from thinking, voicing and finding ways and means to fight their bad governance. A poor person who is busy on how to get his or her primary needs cannot think about what conference the politicians have held and what they have said. Being severely traumatised by the system, they lose the capacity of thinking about anything else than doing all things necessary to get food. In that situation, many are easily used by the leaders to do their dirty works, like killing and vandalizing, voting the bad person for a little gift. This can be seen in the behaviour of the young people in the novel who for some coins, accept to harm citizen to the benefit of the leaders:

The road was infested with the party's youth Militia in their bright green uniforms and caps. Badges of the Leader's face glittered on their shirts. ... It was not power that they possessed but destructiveness. Violence flowed in their veins like poisoned blood, draining them of meaning and purpose and leaving them with spasms of death. Chola quickly produced a K1 note. ... Chola was in many ways lucky that he has not suffered a worse fate. Others were beaten to death, their houses burnt, or women raped and children barred from school, if they did not possess the almighty card. ... (SC, pp.17-18)

This passage shows that leaders keep young people and their families poor in order to utilize them to oppress their opponents and to reach their political. With no well-paid job or no job at all, these young people are ready to do any of the politicians' dirty jobs for some coins. Youths in the country join politics or serve politicians not to improve their communities and the situation in education, health, infrastructure and environment, but to enrich themselves and use the resources to say they are smart. They are thus in the service of those heartless people who as would say Mercy Yodele, feel like:

Let's keep them poor, so they can sell their birth right when they are hungry". So, when it is time for elections, a politician will promise money or food items, get then

PVCs and make them vote for them. We cannot really blame them, no one wants to see their children hungry or be hungry themselves. The same tactic was use during the protest, they got hoodlum to infiltrate the protest, destroying lives and properties. (Endsars: Poverty is a powerful weapon Mercy yodele November 7, 2020)

So poverty is thus a political choice and creative. It can be eradicated if there is political and social will. As would say Gandhi, "poverty is the worst form of violence." (H. Gandhi, 1985, p.5). Because it leads people to the loss of their dignity and peace of mind. It prevents people from moving to the right direction. Some like Mchere in the novel lose focus and think only about their stomach. With instability and misery in the whole nation, if one happens to have a job with a little salary; he or she will be protective of this little gain instead of fighting for better conditions with the risk of losing the little he or she has secured. In the novel, out of that fear, the reader remarks that Mchere did not show much interest in the strike of the bakers though he shares the idea of claiming their rights for the betterment of their living conditions. He is preoccupied by how to immediately feed his family than how to join the other in a strike with the risk of losing his job "Mchere was now worried about how he would raise money... if they did not get paid that Friday as a result of the strike. But even more important was the question of how he would feed his family. The children could not eat noble intensions or justice." (SC, p.48)

In the foregone quotation, one reads about Mchere's fear and what leads to his inaction even when he is fully aware that there is a need to act, or to protest against low salary, inhuman treatments at work and many other things which lead to the misery of the majority. Mchere represents the majority of African masses, especially civil servants who instead of coming together to fight for higher salaries and better working conditions and environment, part ways as each and every one is overwhelmed by the fear to lose the little one they have. And this situation is very profitable to leaders who work to keep the populations in the status quo by intimidating and jailing those who dare protest even killing them. Mchere and some of his co-workers face that horror as they tried to protest against their low wages at the bakery. Some were jailed and many Killed. This repression makes workers more and more vulnerable and easily corruptible. They more the leaders impoverish and disempower the populations, the more malleable they become and ready to make some dirty compromise. Among the compromises, we have betrayal. In order to solve their problems related to hunger, some people accept to betray their fellow in exchange of some money or something else. Confirming how hunger has turn people into hypocrites and untrustworthy, Bota one of the political prisoners in the novel remarks "they can easily be bribed, even with food." (SC, p.125) If a population reaches the level of poverty where one can use food to make them do bad, to bribe them and bring them to betray their fellow, then an investigation needs to be made to see if this pitiful situation is not serving somebody. Reinforcing the assumption according to which, political leaders willingly create poverty, Fernandez argues that:

The most sinister interpretation leads a full circle to poverty being used as a weapon of control. Imagine a prosperous population being bribed by-election candidates, simply a formula that will not work. With poverty, on the other hand, some kilos of rice and canned sardines plus a smattering of cash, the electorate becomes susceptible to manipulation of the worst kind. Hence, we have the

political leadership that we have, one that is bought and paid for. The more severe the poverty, the more malleable the voter – brilliant, elegant, simple, brutal, but effective. Why alleviate poverty when one can wield it as a weapon? Fernandez prph1

These words of Fernandez inform that poverty of the population is a gain to the leaders, as they can easily bribe and use these poor people to seat their reign without being worried. In the same vein, accusing the leaders of wilfully starving their populations, Kouakou N'guessan has this to say: "the poisonous government (that) only serves starvation within abundance, squalor, diseases, barbarity, poverty, exploitation, degradation, abuses and corruption to the people who just demand for the minimum to survive" (K. N'guessan, 2018, p.3)

The above quotations maintain that leaders wilfully keep the populations in abject poverty to the extent that they cannot come together and organise a rebellion to overthrow the blood thirst leaders. Whenever they try to unite, one will because of hunger, betray the others to the leaders for a personal gain. There is no country without trials and tribulations but as seen above, some trials and tribulations are programmed and used to the benefit of those in power. Dambo who later becomes one of the protesting Movement's chief theorists tells us why the oppressive system that eventually murders him must be destroyed in the following words,

People must become aware that the system we have at present is evil. It serves the rich and the powerful at the expense of the masses. It is not as if it's the will of God, if you see what I mean; it's the creation of greedy men, and anything which men can make, men can also destroy and build something better in its place. Capitalism and all its bastards... should be eradicated once and for all (SC, p.77)

The above words make plain that the miserable living conditions of the masses are well planned and implemented as political weapon of control. Danga, a pro-government confirms that in his attempts to explain why workers should earn low wages.

You surely don't believe the country can develop by giving everyone exorbitant salaries, do you? Denga wanted to put Chola on the spot. Chola looked startled. You would support strikes wouldn't you?.....like the one that is supposed to be going at Nkate Bakery tomorrow. Chola looked at him suspiciously. How do you know that? 'one of my tenants in my servants' quarters works there. He spoke like a scandalised priest. (SC, p.23)

Arguing that the country cannot develop when exorbitant salaries are given to workers, this character unknowingly confirms that it is willingly and strategically that the governors keep the population in misery. The passage also reveals that the leaders profit on that situation of starving the population as they can get some of them like Denga on their side to spy and betray the other who organise to protest against the wicked government. To confirm that starving the population serves the government to divide and rule, the only strategy to destroy unity, the narrator remarks:

Yes you are right, they are traitors. They have been imposed upon us by politicians. It is no secret that none of the union's leaders has ever seen an oven in his life. Is it any wonder then that they are more interested in preserving their well-greased pockets than in representing our interests, fighting alongside us? No! (SC, p.27)

This passage reveals that because of hunger and misery, the workers cannot fully organize to stand against the rulers and bring about a positive change. Many in their groups are easily bribed. Poverty stands thus as a strategy to implement the strategy of divide and rule. It destroys unity as many of them will take bribes and join hands with the ruler against their fellow workers. The leaders are thus using poverty to implement their strategies of divide and rule. Claiming that everyone cannot have good salaries because of the development programs, is a confirmation that the leaders are aware of the need of positively changing the living conditions of citizens but they keep money for the so called development. Is there any development when the population suffers? Claiming that the incapacity of the majority Africans to succeed in overthrowing the bloody leaders and have access to good governance is the result of easy gain and betrayal which has become a habit, a character states:

You have missed the point. I thought there were also throughout the ages notorious African who sold their people into slavery, or collaborated with the invaders to subjugate our people. And do the afternoon, or the peasant who tills the ground from sunrise to sunset, is poor because he or she doesn't work hard enough? (SC, p.23)

This passage makes it clear that betrayal is the master reason why the brave who stand against wicked rulers cannot reach their goals. It states, the poverty is alarming in many African countries not because the populations are not hardworking but simply because starvation is rooted as a political system. Leaders are starving the populations with the intention to totally control them.

Conclusion

This work on Tyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* has shown that oppression has become an ideology and a means of domination and exploitation of the masses by the leaders of Zeleza's fictional society. It has also shown that poverty gnawing this society is intentionally created by the leaders in order to achieve freely their hidden ambitions. These contemporary African leaders use their position to maltreat the masses and at the same time maintain them in abject and voiceless position. The unique choice these downtrodden masses have is to keep quiet and content themselves with their pitiful created conditions. Rebellion and resistance against these heartless leaders are some of the appropriate means the masses need to get out from these inhuman conditions in which they live.

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