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**A Parable of the African Condition: The Interface
of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Biyi
Bandelet-Thomas's Fiction**

Ayo Kehinde

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A Parable of the African Condition: The Interface of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Biyi Bandele-Thomas's Fiction

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Abstract

The emergence of postmodernist fiction in Africa has become both a literary phenomenon and an answer to the all-important question of evolving a style that adequately presents the subject matter. Plagued by the density and morbidity of societal ills, the African novelist rises to the challenge by coming out with a new style that literally oozes out with the chaos and disorder s/he observes in her/his society. The contemporary African novel can thus be perceived as going through a period of stylistic innovation. This innovative artistic thrust is not inadvertent; rather, it is a reflection of the socio-historical realities of its enabling society. Thus, the contemporary African novel is mostly couched in postmodernist mode in an attempt to signify the anomic

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nature of the African postcolonial milieu. It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that this paper attempts an examination of the blend of the features of Postcolonial literatures and Postmodernism in the contemporary African novel. Bandele–Thomas's *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond* and *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* are used as the launching pad of the discourse. A thorough analysis of both novels reveals that Bandele-Thomas's fiction is considerably shaped by the discursive strategies of both postcolonialism and postmodernism.

1. Introduction

Just like every human endeavour and every phenomenon in the modern period, the contemporary African novel is going through a stage of stylistic innovation. This innovative stylistic thrust is not fortuitous; to a certain extent, it is a reflection of modern technology, modern social relationships and the overall economic and political situations of the continent. African fiction is reacting to the outlooks of the age. The novels are becoming more and more abstract, thematically and stylistically, as a signifier of the deep doubt that humanity, in general, has about himself.

Postmodernism signifies not only the extreme practice of modernism, it also involves diverse attempts to break away from the modernist form, which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional (Earmath, 1990: 565; Orr, 1990: 621). Post-

modernists inscribe literary conventions ranging from liberal humanism to post-structuralism and at the same time strongly contest them in view of a critical deconstructive re-evaluation. Indeed, postmodernism has succeeded in highlighting the intricate relationship between formal autonomy and the historical/political context in which it is embedded, though only by offering provisionally and contextually determined answers (Ogunsanwo, 1995: 43).

In postmodernist novels, there is no sequence except the reader's sequence, no identities or events except those involved in reading the text. To Brooker (1992: 175), postmodernism describes "a mood or condition of radical indeterminacy, and a tone of self-conscious, parodic skepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual and political life". In the same vein, Boehmer (1995: 86) sees postmodernism as signifying interest in the provisional and fragmentary aspects of signification; its concern is said to be with the constructed nature of identity. In short, postcolonial and postmodern critical approaches cross in their concern with marginality and ambiguity; disintegrating binaries and all things are parodied, mimicked and borrowed. Corroborating the assertion of Boehmer, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989: 122) declare that there is an intertextual link between postmodernist and post-

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colonial texts. To Sanchez (1997:48), postmodernist fiction privileges postmodern playfulness and magic realism, and it can be used for political purpose (48).

To the extent that Bandele-Thomas's fiction is replete with some of the thematic and structural signifiers of postmodernism and postcolonialism, it can be regarded as an attempt to defamiliarize the seemingly trite convention of realism in the African novel. In alliance with Balogun's postulation on modernism, it is not necessary for a novel to have all the features to qualify as a postmodernist or postcolonial novel but it must have them in sufficient combination as to make its postmodernism or postcolonialism quite obvious (1982:70).

The textual analysis, in the next segment of this paper, of the novels of Bandele-Thomas, should suffice as a validation of the observation that his fiction can be seen not merely as postmodernist playfulness but as having important postcolonial implications. He is, through the postmodernist nature of his fiction, calling attention to the postcolonial tribulations of his nation.

2. Bandele-Thomas's Novels: Old Wine in a New Bottle

Every writer necessarily draws on literary tradition however selectively, and Bandele –Thomas is no exception. In child-

hood and youth, his imagination was deeply affected by reading stories of writers such as Getrude Stein, Claude Simon, James Joyce, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Virginia Woolf. A lot has been said about the problems facing Africa and her people. This issue has been of interest to sociologists, psychologists, historians, administrators, politicians and creative writers. One thematic thread runs through the views of the scholars. In the main, they mostly reject the continent as it is presently. They pillory the rulers for their ineptitude, corruption, general misgovernance and betrayal of trust, and lampoon the ruled for their gullibility and complacency. Bandele-Thomas has also made his own modest literary contribution to the discourse of the socio-political and economic problems of Africa through his postmodernist novels. He has been able to imaginatively chronicle the disorienting effects of neocolonialism in his continent in general and his nation in particular. He relies much on postmodernist aesthetics in his literary reconstruction of the postcolonial pangs in Africa with a view to deconstructing the popularly held notion that postmodernism and commitment are strange bedfellows.

Adesokan (1994: 6) attests to the claim that Bandele – Thomas's novels evince some traits of postmodernism. He posits: "In either novel, he evolves a narrative style that is postmod-

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ernist and too even to improve characterization". Actually, the human condition portrayed in Bandele-Thomas's novel is essentially and ineradicably absurd, and this condition is better adequately represented in the postmodernist style, which is both innovative and experimental. Bandele – Thomas believes that man now lives in an anomic world in which communication is impossible, and illusion is preferred to reality. Apparently in the two novels, he abandons linear plot, plausible character development and rational language, which are few of the hallmarks of the conventional novel. Drawing on his journalistic skills, he sets his stories in immediately recognizable neocolonial African contexts.

Within the flux of interest, we can identify a view on Bandele-Thomas's fiction: he is a conscious artist, an accomplished writer who successfully integrates the content and form of his fiction in such a way that they become unified artistic expression of reality. He does not allow commitment to overwhelm the artistic merits of his stories. His novels exhibit some stylistic and philosophical assaults of postmodernist techniques. In both novels, we meet Bozo and Rayo respectively; their anguished burden is to observe, record and make sense out of the chaos of their societies. Actually, Bandele-Thomas's fiction attempts a mostly unsentimental and undisguised de-

picture of how the young generation of neocolonial Africa has come of age through an embittering experience that leaves them lost and floundering in a world they cannot comprehend. The following quotation from *The Man Who Came in from the Back of Beyond* captures the postmodernist vision of Bandele – Thomas:

...Piss off, man. Piss off to your
shattered dreams, your failed WAEC paper
and the nihilistic frustration that forced
you into the police force (57).

Actually, the fiction of Bandele-Thomas, from the perspective of postmodernism, presents a society devoid of purpose, a society cut off from its religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots. In this society, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd and useless. The society portrayed in the novels is not conducive to the progress of the citizens. It is a society where hopes are frustrated. The hostile setting in turn produces quasi-picaresque characters. The world portrayed in his novels is one where everybody has run berserk; it is a planet of shattered hope and post-independence disillusionment. Thus, the phenomenon of ‘madness’ seems to be a central leitmotif in the novels of Bandele-Thomas:

This was the home of the mad; some of these people had once been sane, some had been professors in universities, heads of

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international companies, and artists at the height of their careers. They had everything anybody could have wished for in life. They had had fame and money, security and peace in their lives. Yet they had suddenly lost track of sanity *The Man Who Came* (p.95).

Bandele-Thomas, in his fiction, abandons the conventional forms of fiction, which are based on clear-cut plot, well-defined characters and the use of language that is generally comprehensible to the reader. This is with a view to depicting the social realities of the African continent. What the reader encounters in the novels is similar to what he experiences in dreams and nightmares. The most obvious postmodernist message of Bandele-Thomas's fiction is the revelation of the absurdity of lives lived without an awareness of the basic existential realities of life. It expresses the feeling of deadness and mechanical senselessness of such 'unconscious' lives. For instance, in *The Man who came in from the Back of Beyond*, Abednego is involved in an incestuous act with his daughter (Rebecca). This is absurd; it reveals the human condition in a world that has been denied the basic certainties of faith due to a decline in religious belief and moral rectitude.

Following a basic tenet of postmodernism, the generic tightness between fiction and (auto) biography is exploded in Bandele –Thomas's fiction. In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Bandele-Thomas spoke of having

dropped out of Primary and Secondary Schools. He also did not complete his studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Some of the exploits and ordeals of Bozo, in *The Man who Came in from the Back of Beyond* and Rayo, in *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, to some extent relate to some true-life experiences of the novelist himself. Among these 'quasi-autobiographical' events are the expulsion of Bozo from Kagoro Secondary School and Rayo from the University.

Another postmodernist technique used in Bandele Thomas's fiction to foreground the endemic neocolonial ills in his nation is the complex centre of consciousness. The stories are seen not from one major point of view or perspective, or from the consciousness of one character; instead, the stories are seen from the consciousness of different people in society. Actually, the novels of Bandele-Thomas are unique for their complex and unconventional point of view and for their narrations that are replete with extended use of stream of consciousness. The enduring complexity of plot structure in Bandele-Thomas's novels lies in the multitude of digressions and stories-within-a-story. In his fiction, Bandele-Thomas makes use of fragmented narration. In each of the two novels, the reader encounters an authorial voice who integrates the diverging, but ultimately complementary voices of other narrators- Bozo

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in The Man Who Came in and *Kayo/Rayo in The sympathetic Undertaker*. This method of narration is effective - it is a way of signifying a sense of abnormality that is curiously consistent with the problematic reality and psychotic states of the characters. *The Man Who Came in* is told from the perspectives of Lakemf (the curious secondary school pupil), Maude (the erratic school teacher), Abednego (the man who commits incest with his daughter), Bozo (the radical son of Abednego), Mitchell (the Indian hemp dealer) and Maria (the adopted child of Mitchell). This technique makes the story look like a rambling collection of reminiscences, and it effectively captures the bewildering amalgam of woes in African neocolonies.

Also, *The Sympathetic Undertaker* has no organic plot structure; rather, it is episodic and oblique. As the story progresses, some flashbacks ensue. One of these is Rayo's visit to a hospital to get a cure for his malaria. In the episode, the reader is introduced to the revolutionary posture of Rayo. Because of his abnormal behaviour, in the hospital, his mother "dealt Rayo a few strokes on the buttock. But instead of crying, he only doubled up with laughter" (9). Also, within the main story line, the reader comes across certain issues like the school days of Rayo, the origin of the name "soso man" and the like. Through these digressions and flashbacks, Bandele-Thomas

is able to comment freely on the socio-political and economic situations in Africa. He is able to make use of these radically postmodern strategies to depict a period of mounting crisis in a postcolonial nation. The turbulent post-independence period depicted in Bandele-Thomas's fiction is very gloomy.

Bandele-Thomas's fiction also patronizes the postmodernist style of stream of consciousness as a literary weapon to expose the foibles of the African neocolonial rulers. In both novels, we encounter some long passages of introspection. In the postmodernist manner, the narrator enters the minds of the characters, commenting freely on their thoughts. At times, the narrator in *The Man Who Came in* penetrates into the minds of Maude, Bozo, Mitchell, Lakemf, Deborah and Maria. This is an effective postmodernist device for discovering the predicaments of various sets of people in the referent society; it also caters for vivid narration. For example, through the use of stream of consciousness, the reader is aware of Bozo's utter disgust at the hatred his father has for him:

So he does hate me, Bozo thought bitterly.
So he hates me so much because I made
him impotent. Me, make somebody, impotent.
That's crazy; I don't have a magic wand!
I didn't make anybody impotent
(*The Man Who Came in*, p. 35).

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However, the use of stream of consciousness reaches its peak in *The Sympathetic Undertaker*. Right from the beginning of the novel to the end, the reader comes across long passages of introspection in Rayo's/ Kayo's mind. He/she is introduced to some subtle and overt ideas of revolution in the character's mind. Bandele-Thomas employs the techniques of stream of consciousness to represent the overall state and process of consciousness in the character. This postmodernist technique captures the spectrum and flow of Rayo's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle freely with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations. In the scene where Rayo, Danhaya, Sam and Lai dump Toshiba in a cemetery after drugging him, Bandele-Thomas makes use of stream-of-consciousness technique to a very great advantage. The reader is temporarily transported to the surrealistic realm of existence:

Rayo felt his head begin to grow bigger and bigger by the second. And he broke into a wail that rang louder and longer than the stray dog's. He felt his head enlarge like a giant balloon until it outgrew even his body (46).

Towards the end of the novel, the novelist makes a judicious use of the postmodernist method of stream of consciousness to depict the feeling of Kayo when he is brought to Mama Soso who is supposed to heal him of his supposed madness:

... I could feel the ants crawling above again
on my head. My brain swivelled furiously around
like the agitated hips of an nkpokiti dancer.
I could feel myself disintegrating. Defleshed.
Only the bones and the skull and the skeletal remained
(198/199).

Dream technique, like its postmodernist kin (stream of consciousness), is effectively used in Bandele-Thomas's novels. In *The Man Who Came in*, Bozo is described as a dreamer; he has nightmares in his sleep:

He had nightmares and died many times in his
dreams but he would always wake up in the
dead of night sweating in the biting cold,
whimpering like a baby, his whitening tongue
running unpleasantly over the cavities in his teeth,
his eyes shining in the dark, pepper – red-
like a man with conjunctivitis (101).

The Sympathetic Undertaker is an extended dream. In this 'dream' Bandele-Thomas imaginatively chronicles the socio-political outlook of the contemporary African society; the

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dream motif is also used to achieve some measure of magic realism and to forecast future events. In this novel, the novelist, through the technique of dream, makes unusual incidents look more credible. It is a common artistic fact that, in the twilight world of dream, anything can happen. After his long dream, Kayo (the narrator) declares: "My left foot hit a bedpost as I ran breathlessly into the dawn" (201). The dream technique, among many other related thematic and stylistic functions, encourages the occurrence of most surrealistic scenes in the novel. The technique signifies one of the fundamental tenets of postmodernism- an attempt to make it new. Bandele- Thomas therefore rejects the conventional method of total realism - his fiction is a fusion of surrealism and realism. The subtlety of Bandele –Thomas fiction resides in the way he utilizes dreams, not in the dreams themselves. In the dreams, he is able to foreground some contemporary socio-political preoccupations in Africa.

To some extent, Bandele-Thomas fiction relies on magical realism. The themes and subjects are often imaginary, somewhat outlandish and fantastic, and have a certain dream-like quality. In this technique, there is a mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the bizarre, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellane-

ous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable. This postmodernist skill is an effective weapon in the hands of postcolonial African writers. According to Ogundele (2002:123), "in the last decade or so, the postcolonial African novels that have had the most impact have been those employing marvelous or fantastic realism". The use of magic realism in Bandele-Thomas's fiction offers his readers apparently recognizable historical realities in postcolonial African societies. He tries to negotiate the boundaries between myth and modernity. Therefore, his texts are obviously amenable to postcolonial readings. An instance of the use of Magic Realism in *The sympathetic Undertaker* will suffice as illustration:

And sure enough, scarcely before he finished the words, a gruesome figure, tall as a tree and thin like a rope, popped up from behind the tomb directly in front of them... The figure stood silently before them, swinging languidly in the breeze, headless. It had a human form but its body seemed to be made of withered grass (41-42).

The gruesome figure described in the above quotation is redolent of the *Spiritus Mundi*, the sphinx - like, savage de-

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ity, which ushered in a new millennium in W.B Yeats's "The Second Coming". It is an icon of a horrific and corrupt society that any neocolonial African state actually is. It also connotes that neocolonialism, as a historical phase in Nigeria is another turn of painful existence in the African nations. Bandele-Thomas therefore seems to be an apostle of the cyclical theory of history. Like the colonial period in Africa, turbulence, restlessness, pains, disillusionment and disappointment mar the current postcolonial epoch.

In Bandele Thomas's novels, intertextuality is also effectively deployed to a very great extent in order to underline some specific socio-political and economic points. This technique is informed by the postmodernist aesthetic of stylistic promiscuity and indeterminacy; it is also an enduring feature of African traditional oral narratives, which are always a minefield of quotes from legends and myths. Therefore, intertextuality, in Bandele-Thomas's novels, is in part a return to the oral resources that the postcolonial writers rewrite for socio-political purpose. This comes in forms of borrowing and influences. To the postmodernist writer, the printed text of a literary work should not be regarded as the work itself, rather it should be seen as a mere representation of the work. Thus, *The Man Who Came in* and *The Sympathetic Undertaker* are

constructed as a mosaic of quotations. In the spaces of the texts, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another. The following example is drawn from *The Man Who Came in*:

I feel so high
I even touch the sky
Above the falling rain,
I feel so good
In my neighbourhood
So here I come again,
I've got to have Kaya now, Kaya Kaya (68).

The above verses are borrowed from Bob Marley's track called "KAYA". And the following quotation is partially borrowed from Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*: "you ever heard of Nelson Mandela? Bozo asked. "Never heard of the guy", the man replied. "Too bad", Bozo replied. "But it's No Easy Walk to Freedom!" (128).

The following excerpt from *The Sympathetic Undertaker* also demonstrates the use of intertextuality in Bandelete-Thomas's fiction:

In "The African Child" Laye says that in his Village a boy became a man on the day he was circumcised (7).

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The above passage is a quotation from Camara Laye's *The African Child*. In fact, in postmodernism, the reading of a text does not lead to the construction of a 'model' or a 'structure', or poetic law but reveals "fragments, views from other texts, codes which disappear and mysteriously reappear" (Oyegoke, 1991: 158). Postcolonial African writers, in order to examine the universalist and particularist outlooks of the problems in their nations, have often patronized intertextuality. This inevitably leads to the homogenization and globalization of human experience as well as an erosion of the barrier between high and low culture. In this postmodern world, man lives in a mass culture, a global village. Bandele-Thomas, like other postcolonial writers, therefore takes the images for his stories, their narratives and their formulations of desire and measures them against his real experiences of the existentialist problems of neocolonial African societies.

Code mixing is another form of stylistic promiscuity employed by Bandele-Thomas in his fiction. This involves the amalgam of two or more languages in a speech act. In this regard, one finds at least two languages functioning side by side simultaneously. In his fiction, Bandele-Thomas makes use of such a "damn-the-critic impressionistic, daring... experimentation" (DasyIva, 1992: 66). He mixes English, Yoruba, Pidgin and

Igbo for stylistic and thematic effects. This is an instance of postmodernist poetics known as Linguistic Eclecticism. In *The Man Who Came in*, the reader finds numerous examples of code mixing: “Then she threw her hands in the air and screamed, Ole! Ole!! E ba mi mu ole!” (16). This utterance is a mixture of the English and Yoruba languages. The items in Yoruba literally translate thus: “Thief, Thief, help me arrest the thief!”

Also, in *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, the following example of the use of code mixing, among many others, is identifiable:

Aya ho ho ho
aya aya
aya ho ho ho
aya aya
patapata we go die for road oh
aya aya aya ho ho ho
Aya aya (128)

The above is one of the songs rendered by the fifty caroused soldiers while beating the stationmaster of Kafancha Railway Station. We can conveniently assert that the use of code mixing in Bandele-Thomas’s fiction is not inadvertent; rather it is a signifier of the instability and indeterminacy plaguing the contemporary African society. It is also an artistic solution to

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the problem of extreme multilingualism in Nigeria, in particular and Africa, in general. The use of code mixing aims at reaching the downtrodden masses that are the target audience of the writer. Since the level of literacy in most African nations is still at its lowest ebb, because Bandele-Thomas does not believe in idealism, as a realist, he freely communicates with the oppressed in their own indigenous languages and the Pidgin.

Closely related to the postmodernist technique of code mixing in Bandele – Thomas's fiction is that of language experimentation. In his novels, Bandele-Thomas deviates, a lot, from the conventional lexico-semantic, graphological, and syntactic structures of English. The language of the novels of Bandele-Thomas is intensely richly poetical and obscure. In fact, his avant-garde experimentations with language are proving very interesting and increasingly innovative. For example, the following grammatical items (mostly phrases) are used as sentences to portray the fragmentary and complex nature of the contemporary African society in *The Man Who Came in*:

“Or maybe not enough adrenaline in my veins” (21);

“Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah blah” (33); “A Christian” (49).

Also, in *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, some phrases are used as sentences to portray the anomic nature of the contemporary African society. In Bandele-Thomas's fiction, language is, at times, given a subordinate role and reduced to meaningless fragments. This technique is to connote a breakdown of communication between the reader and the implied author; it is a pointer to the meaninglessness of language and phatic communion in modern society. Some examples of language experimentation in *The Sympathetic Undertaker* are the following: "Giant castles and tiny castles and medium castles" (114)- these are noun phrases used as a complete sentence; "Everywhere" (165)- this is an adverbial phrase used as a sentence. Again, in this novel, language goes awry: "Still he had secretly hoped that one of them would perform a miracle and suffer *their* way through to that degree" (171). In this excerpt, there is a grammatical error arising from the breach of a rule of concord. "His" is the correct pronoun that should have been used in that context instead of "their". This error might be intentionally committed to suggest that in neocolonial African societies there is lack of perfection; everything is surely in disarray.

Parody, a postmodernist technique, is also in Bandele-Thomas's novel. As a form of satire, the purpose of parody is

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corrective as well as derisive. In *The Man Who Came in*, one of the best examples of the use of parody is in the scene involving Lakemf and his friend, Yau. The two boys mimic, a court scene:

Certainly took your time, didn't you? 'Yau Accused, glancing at an imaginary watch on his wrist. You're precisely two hours late'. The defendant pleads for leniency, your Honour, on grounds of being a first-time offender'. I donned an imaginary wig (137).

The above instance of parody might look facile and melodramatic, but if we examine its double-discursive nature we would discover that behind this melodrama lies a pungent satirical humour. The two boys, in this parody, expose their school principal's foibles to ridicule. They satirize him for embezzling money from the school treasury.

In *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, parody is also used. For example, Rayo is depicted as a parodist in the novel; his forte is in making people laugh. He is a natural mimic, whose favourite target is his school vice principal. He also mimics the atrocities committed by some boarding students in their hostels. With this technique, Bandele-Thomas is able to depict man, in neocolonial African setting, as an absurd being living in an absurd world, an actor forced to make choices in an es-

entially meaningless milieu that functions as a colossal and cruel theatre of the absurd.

Moreover, Bandele-Thomas fiction makes use of pornography, which is an important aspect of postmodernism. In his novels, pornography has moved from the periphery to the centre of the literary scene (Fielder, 1992: 40). In his novels, there is an insistence on foul language and an obsession with obscenity, which is, obviously ends in themselves. An example of pornography from Bandele-Thomas's *The Sympathetic Undertaker* will suffice:

I ran my hands all over her – her breasts stood high, and proud and faintly bristly at the tips. I ran my fingers down, down over the lush hair growth that serenaded the tips of her vagina (23).

The use of pornography in Bandele Thomas's fiction is to portray the emptiness, corruption and meaninglessness of the society. Postmodernist fiction does not seek to cover the reality of existence under any illusion but strives to present the true vision of life.

Apart from its being pornographic, Bandele-Thomas fiction is scatological. This has also been the assertion of Ake (1995:9). His fiction has a steady focus on the Nigerian body politic, in

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particular, and the African's in general; a leitmotif of his novel is the issue of regeneration. He uses obscene and faecal images to paint a gloomy picture of the body polity of the post-colonial African continent. The following gives an espousal of Bandele-Thomas's employment of scatological imagery in his novels:

Maria would never forget the *nose-bombing*,
Belly, splitting *stench* which always heralded
Her brother's arrival from work... The
Latrines along a lot street... thus had
large bowels (emphasis ours, *The Man Who Came in*, p. 83).

In Bandele-Thomas's fiction, scatological imagery is an artistic weapon used for satirizing the filthy nature of Nigerian cities. In fact, despite the efforts of such agencies like Federal Environmental protection Agency to rid the country of dirt, Nigeria is still rated as one of the dirtiest countries in the universe.

The fiction of Bandele- Thomas is also eclectic. He avoids the conventional style of fiction writing, which formally and totally brackets off the occurrence of snippets of other genres in a prose work. In his novels, the reader encounters some features of drama and poetry. His fiction is polygeneric. With this technique, the radical postcolonial novelist is able to foreground effectively some neocolonial African palavers which

include political insanity, general indecent behaviour, intolerance, religious bigotry, stealing, tribal antagonism, corruption, and the like. An example of the use of verses in prose, in *The Man Who Came in*, is the following:

A king he was
And none were in doubt
When at night he went to the flicks
With his gang of hoods to watch
Bruce Lee Mean Bimbi Barrow;
He knew how to kick (59).

Another postmodernist practice used in Bandele-Thomas's fiction to comment on the neocolonial decadence in his continent is the occurrence of alternative beginnings and endings. This is used in *The Man Who Came in*. The novel can be read as begun in either Chapter One or Chapter Two. Chapter Two also has the conventional status of a complete novel. In this chapter, there are about fourteen sub-chapters. Chapter four also resembles a novella; it has four sub-chapters. This is an experiment or innovation in prose style. It portrays Bandele-Thomas's fiction as anti-tradition. It is also a peculiar African oral narrative feature imported into the European-derived written form. The list of African writers using and expounding features of verbal autochthonous discourse is enormous. Bandele –Thomas also partakes of this new literary orienta-

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tion in contemporary African fiction. To a great extent, he has helped in keeping and maintaining his indigenous culture.

There is also collapse of originality in favour of repetition in Bandele-Thomas's novels and an effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life. For example, in *The Man Who Came in*, Maude informs Lakemf that the story he has just told him, as well as the manuscript he has read, is nothing but a "truthful lie" (135). This is a postmodernist technique often employed to shock the reader into awareness and to defamiliarize him/her from the story. Indeed, Bandele-Thomas believes that there is no originality or rigid structure in art. In *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, the reader is shocked by the revelation, at the tail end of the story, that the entire stories in the novel are nothing but a dream. Also some of the chapters in the novel are depicted as pastiches from Rayo's notes (Chapters 5, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21 and 23) rather than original figments of the author's imagination. This is a form of alienation or distancing effect used to draw the attention of the reader to the fictionality of the work of art. Indeed, Bandele –Thomas privileges the metafictional form of prose literature. Garuba's (1996: 136) definition of metafiction is quite relevant here: "Metafiction is the term used to describe that kind of fiction in which the writer consciously and constantly draws attention

to the fact that we are reading a work of fiction". Bandele-Thomas's novels are very unique in Nigerian prose literature because they are in the forefront of few Nigerian novels to aspire to the status of the metafictional. McHale (1987:39) rightly asserts that one of the enduring features of the post-modernist novel is the focus it displays on its own structure, that is, its self-reflexivity.

Furthermore, in Bandele-Thomas's fiction, we encounter 'playfulness', rather than 'seriousness'. The boundary between art and everyday life is erased. At times, one thinks one is watching a melodramatic piece when reading any of his novels. For instance, the class scene, involving Maude and his pupils in *The Man Who Came in*, is highly melodramatic:

'No you twittering idiot, it's not an oxymoron'
someone said 'metonymy'. No Pauline, it's a
Paradox, 'you mean a parable'. 'Shut up
You two, it's a synecdoche... (4).

In *The Sympathetic Undertaker*, the technique of playfulness recurs. This is mostly actualized through the use of an adulterated form of Pidgin English. Waugh (1992:202) has once opined that playful irony is a thrust of postmodernism. With the technique of playfulness, Bandele-Thomas is able to laugh off the problems in his milieu. He uses the strategy as a

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device of evasion that is he refuses to dwell on the problems and history of his nation in a very direct way. Rather he comments on the neocolonial decadence in a circuitous way. This is because the problems of most African nations are so vast that to dwell on them directly is to attempt being too alarmist. Things have degenerated to such a low level that certain people prefer to die than to remain alive in the postcolonial hell. Since many other African writers before him had used apparent realism to record African tribulations, Bandele-Thomas prefers to use the postmodernist method of evasion to comment on the postcolonial woes. This is an instance of old wine in a new bottle. Also, to efface the boundary between art and everyday life, the postmodernist novelist makes references to contemporary issues and famous personalities in his enabling society.

Conclusion

The employment of postmodernist aesthetics in the contemporary African novel has been examined in this paper, using Bandele-Thomas's fiction as a launching pad. A thorough analysis of the texts has revealed that the budding novelist has shown a consciousness of the need to portray the socio-historical realities of his society in his fiction. Quite interestingly, the novelist does not allow political commitment to affect

his art negatively. Some aesthetic practices commonly associated with postmodernism are also used to aptly express the predicament of people in neocolonial African milieus in Bandele-Thomas fiction. The privileging of postmodernist techniques in his novel is not merely a quest for stylistic experimentation and innovation; rather it occurs against a background of chronic instability and disillusionment in the society that produces his works. Actually, in his prose works, Bandele-Thomas has been able to reflect the endemic instability in his country, and by extension the entire African continent. His postmodernist fiction is unavoidably political. Although the radical postmodernist novelist has not yet arrived at any sort of coherent theory of salvation for the neocolonial impasse in his nation, he does seem to endorse the idea that the oppressed masses might provide a directive for the future. Although the hope he imaginatively renders for the masses are embryonic, it is crystal clear that the neocolonized/recolonized masses, rather than the neocolonizers, have a better chance of victory, through revolution.

In sum, the exploration of the prose works of Bandele-Thomas has revealed that the postcolonial novelist has got what it takes to be a unique writer. Indeed, his novels get some novelty of form, language, effect and tone. The entire canvas

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of his fiction has such tones and outrage, shades of despair and many passages of pessimism in life and man's future. Bandele-Thomas's fiction comes to the reader of the contemporary African novel hot from the foundry of his restless imagination. He is a natural and talented novelist who is ready to take the reader on any subject that touches the downtrodden masses of the African continent; he has an uncanny instinct for visiting the obscure corners of African neocolonial societies. He is making a path for himself in the territory often neglected and avoided by some of his peers and his eldest statesmen, driven by very personal interests and obsessions.

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