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LIMITATION AND POSSIBILITY:
THE INTELLECTUAL AS A HERO-TYPE
IN PETER ABRAHAMS' "A WREATH FOR UDOMO"

The intellectual is a hero-type in African literature. In playing the social reformer, he uses various strategies in reacting to pressures emanating from the prevailing socio-political order. The nature of these strategies depends on the intellectual's attitude to the confrontation between his inner rhythm and the outer forces represented by the socio-political authority. The term „inner rhythm,” as we have pointed out elsewhere, “includes not only the intellectual's consciousness of the political situation but also his desire to play Prometheus by objectifying this consciousness in the form of political activism.”¹ The attitude to political authority varies from intellectual to intellectual could take any form within the spectrum ranging from conformity to non-conformity.

A common pattern runs through the activities of the intellectuals fighting against colonial institutions in Africa: the intellectual is at first a conformist who enthusiastically embraces the life-style of the European; he then becomes sharply aware of the inadequacies of the colonial institutions and, consequently, identifies himself with African cultural values which he has been taught to despise; he finally becomes a non-conformist who may decide to fight against the colonial regime in order to assert the dignity of the African, or, feeling shattered in spirit recoils from any form of political activity.

Dadié's Climbié and Kane's Diallo are typical. Climbié is at first fascinated at the idea of getting a French-oriented education so that he would qualify as a civil servant in the French colonial administration; he succeeds in getting the job but finds that the colonial regime destroys the basic human rights of the African; he then becomes an activist and plays a leading role in organizing the farmers to get adequate pay for their work; he is imprisoned as a “meneur,” an “anti-français”; at the end of his prison term, he becomes so frustrated with the colonial situation that he decides to sell all his books and embrace the values of African culture.

¹ Ch. T. Maduka, *Intellectuals and the Drama of Social Change: The Writer's Insight*, Kibara 1978, p. 46—47.

Climbié moves from the position of conformity to that of non-conformity. By inspiring to become a well-qualified civil servant, he portrays himself as a naïve intellectual who unwittingly becomes a part and parcel of the colonial system; at this point, there is no perceptible tension between his inner rhythm and the outer forces since he has accepted the socio-political ethics of the established order. Then comes a period of alienation from the system when he realizes that

tout chez l'Européen dans ce pays est un reflexe d'auto-défense: auto-défense contre le climat d'abord, ensuite contre les hommes les manoeuvres, l'intellectuel, l'enfant qui part à l'école, et plus encore contre les tam-tams.²

He therefore becomes a militant non-conformist but in this confrontation he succumbs to the forces of the socio-political order. He does not, however, lose his life like Oumar Fayé of Ousmane Sembène's *O Pays mon beau peuple!* Defeated, he moves into a position of withdrawal by rejecting the European cultural values. At this point, he resembles the Romantic hero in European literature, who, alienated from the cultural mainstream of his society, builds up his own values which run counter to the norms of social convention. Climbié's personal values derive their force from the African way of life which the colonialists treat with contempt:

Tam-tams des funérailles et tam-tams des jours de fêtes! Vous avez beau jouer le 14 juillet et le 11 novembre, vous avez beau répéter des refrains émaillés de mots français, vous demeurez spécifiquement africains et retenez les gens au bord de l'abîme sans fond de la dépersonnalisation.³

Samba Diallo of Kane is another example. He is an intellectual who cannot reconcile thought with action. He at first naïvely accepts the values of European culture, but after taking some advanced courses in philosophy he discovers that the European philosophy of life lays too much emphasis on material wealth. This discovery plunges him into a state of moral paralysis: he becomes a non-conformist who is neither a European nor an African; his unwillingness to perform the religious rites of his people, as he was expected to, leads to his eventual assassination. Diallo is an intellectual hero whose highly developed socio-political consciousness has impelled him to stare tragically and impotently into the face of his destiny. He is not like Climbié or Fayé, who combine thought with action.

It is necessary to mention a character who, although facing problems similar to those of the Climbiés, Diallos and Fayés, is pitted against forces of a peculiar nature. He is Gama, one of the protagonists of Lewis Nkosi's play *The Rhythm of Violence*. In this work, Nkosi visualizes the South African racial situation in terms of a nightmarish human experience generating a rhythmic pattern of life with violence as its motivating force. Piet and Jan, the white policemen, are portrayed as symbols of the machinery of violence

² B. Dadié, *Climbié*, [in:] *Légendes et poèmes*, Paris 1966, p. 222.

³ *L. c.*

put into being by the white minority government. They believe that "all Natives are bloody stupid"⁴; accordingly, Africans could be shot at will like animals. "Yah," says Jan, "it's kind a funny, you knou, like shooting wild duck!" and Piet boasts of being able to "shoot any number of Natives without getting sick. No emotions! I shoot them academically!" (p. 7—8). Their everriding concern is to guard their power jealously. As Jan puts it, "anybody can go to sleep on this bloody continent but the white man. Always he must stand guard!" After all, the white man's regime has to be perpetuated: "We'd just go on ruling this land and the Natives would do like they're told! Forever!" (p. 15, 10).

A multi-racial group of militant students decides to challenge the system by blowing up the City Council at a time when the lawmakers are holding a meeting. "From now on, we are serving notice on these arrogant men that we can no longer tolerate white domination, subjugation and repression at their hands" (p. 8). Tula, Gama's brother and one of the planners, makes a hectic, last-minute effort to disrupt the plan so as to save the life of the father of a white girl whose acquaintance he has just cultivated during a multi-racial social gathering. When others begin to waver over the carrying out of the project, Gama stands firm:

People mean something to me. That's why I am involved in this. Because I care about people! Hundreds of black people have been shot down mercilessly by these brutes! You don't remember that. No! And you talk about caring for people! For one white man you want to put off something that's important! Something that might mean the beginning of a change in this country. You call that caring about people? (p. 60—61).

Tula thinks otherwise and tries to put his desire into action, but he fails in his plan and becomes one of the victims of the blast. The police then begin a witch-hunt for the "criminals." The author thus suggests that Gama and his comrades might eventually be arrested and put to death.

Gama is a non-conformist intellectual hero whose inner rhythm tries to overwhelm the pressures from the outer forces. The outcome of his confrontation with the regime is left open-ended at the end of the play: Nkosi suggests that Gama might either run out of the country or stay to face the consequences of his action. In any event, Gama is an intellectual who, unlike Diallo, fuses thought with action; he thus resembles Climbié and Fayé. However, he differs from them in one respect: his alienation from the established social order and his subsequent political activities operate completely at the level of non-conformity, whereas the confrontation of Climbié and Fayé with the French colonial regime is characterized by a movement from conformity to non-conformity. This difference could be explained by the fact that the whites of *The Rhythm of Violence*, who are setters, are so systematic and ruthless in suppressing the values of the Africans that the revolutionaries are forced to

⁴ *The Rhythm of Violence*, [in:] *Plays from Black Africa*, ed. F. Litto, New York 1968, p. 14. All references to the play are from this edition.

assert their humanity along non-conformist lines. Nonetheless, Climbié, Fayé and Gama share the common quality of failing to emerge as victors in their confrontation with the outer forces.

It is in this respect that Abrahams' Udomo is quite different, for he not only succeeds in fighting against the colonial regime but also becomes the Prime Minister of a new country. The dynamics of Udomo's heroism encompasses his alienation from the colonial regime as well as his determination to overwhelm the forces that stand as barriers to his dream of making Panafrica a powerful state. His heroism derives both from his inner attitudes and from involvements with the double pressures of the colonial government and of the nationalist forces in Panafrica.

Udomo's inner rhythm has two important characteristics: it reveals first, Udomo's alienation from the socio-political values of the colonizer; and second, his determination to play a leading role in the fight for the emancipation of the African. Udomo is highly concerned about the future of Africa. As he points out earlier to his girl-friend, Lois, Africa:

is a little liker a heart. You've seen the shape of her. It's like a heart. Africa is my heart, the heart of all of us who are black. Without her we are nothing; while she is not free we are not free, we are not men. That's why we must free her or die.⁵

Africa is thus the soul of his being; it is an all-embracing force that ensures the full flowering of his potentialities as a man; it is the symbol of the dignity of the African. Udomo's dedication to the liberation of the continent is total, since its emancipation implies the breaking down of the chains that deny him his manhood. Time and again Udomo makes reference to this all-consuming urge in him. For example, on his way back to Panafrica, he broods over the role he is going to play to bring about Africa's freedom:

Mother Africa! Oh, Mother Africa, make me strong for the work that I must do. Don't forget me in the many you nurse. I would make you great. I would have the world respect you and your children. I would have the sun of freedom shine over you once more. It was for this I left you for so long and lived in strange lands among strange people and suffered and was abused and was cold and hungry. It was in order to come back to free you, to free all your children, and to make you great among those who now look down on you. They do not understand your dark ways. For them you are something to be exploited, and your children creatures to be held down. Now this must end. I will end it if you help me. I cannot see you but I can feel you out there in the dark. Tomorrow I will be with you. My name is Michael Udomo. Do not forget it: Michael Udomo, the instrument of your freedom... (p. 122-123).

Here Africa is conceived as a mother that guides the steps of her child from infancy to adulthood. Udomo implores her to give him her protection so that he will successfully carry out his mission of a saviour. This total surrender to her influence adds some force to Udomo's burning desire to gain some strength from the all-powerful Mother. Abrahams' invocation here

⁵ P. Abrahams, *A Wreath for Udomo*, London 1956, p. 155. All further references to the novel are taken from this edition.

is not unique in African literature. Many African poets have invoked Africa as a mother who should shield her sons from the ravages of colonialism. For instance, David Diop's poem *Afrique: A ma mère* enumerates in a plaintive tone the injustices meted out to the African by the colonialists, Camara Layé's *A ma mère* and Senghor's *Femme noire* achieve the same effect: literally they deal with the protective role of the African woman but in doing so womanhood is made to symbolize Africa's innate power to withstand the forces of colonialism.⁶ Abrahams uses the motif to portray Udomo as a sincere nationalist and social reformer.

Udomo's political activities reflect his desire to liberate Africa from colonial domination. For example, he becomes delirious over the words of a paper he has typed for the liberation movement:

He wrote steadily for a long time. Then he closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair till the drunkenness caused by the words he had written passed (p. 155).

On failing to receive any news about Adebhoy's political activities at home he becomes extremely restive; when he finally receives a letter from Adebhoy, he feels disappointed because nothing significant has happened in the political scene of Panafrica (p. 99). He even wears tattered clothes to demonstrate his willingness to sacrifice anything for the cause of African freedom.

In short, he feels alienated from the world of the colonialist. His socio-political consciousness operates at the level of confrontation. Accordingly, he and his colleagues reject the policies of the colonial government and make plans to challenge them openly. Udomo knows that he is taking great risks since his political ambitions run counter to the vested interests of the colonial administrators. The brutal suppression of the nationalist insurrection in Pluralia clearly shows to what extent a colonial regime can go in trying to perpetuate its privileged position.

Despite the formidable power of the colonial administration, Udomo refuses to adopt the attitude of either Dr. Endurra or Tom Lanwood. Dr. Endurra is a very influential personality in Panafrica: he is the secretary of the Chiefs' Council; the cousin to the king of the southern people; and the African member of the Governor's Council. He and the Governor are great friends, hence he is much respected in European circles. His inner rhythm does not run counter to the forces of the prevailing social order: he is not only a conformist who cooperates with the regime in order to enhance his personal prestige but also an opportunist who is a traitor to the cause of his people. Thus he resembles Dr. Bledsoe of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* whose conformity to the norms of the socio-political order dominated by whites is motivated by a spirit of personal gain. When the invisible man fails to live up to the image of the obedient student who would ensure the security

⁶ See D. Diop, *Afrique: A ma mère*, [in:] *Anthologie africaine et malgache*, eds. Hughes and Regnault, Paris 1962, p. 166; C. Layé, *A ma mère* [in:] *L'Enfant noir*, Paris 1953, p. 1; and L. S. Senghor, *Femme noire*, [in:] *Poèmes*, Paris 1964, p. 16.

of Dr. Bledsoe and his white benefactors, he is sacked from the college and given a letter which will make it impossible for him to get any job from any employer. Dr. Endurra is also like Bledsoe in that he serves as an agent of the colonial administrators who use him to maintain the *status quo*. For instance, when a riot erupts as a result of the revolutionary activities of Udomo and Adebhoy, the colonial officials make a concerted effort to make use of Endurra's influence in quelling it. Smith gives us an insight into this when he discusses the problem with Jones: "I had a word with Endurra this morning. He and one of the chiefs will tour the area and make them see senses" (p. 138). Again Endurra tries to out-British the British in the task of blunting the edge of Udomo's political activism; as far as he is concerned, Udomo is a rabble-rouser and an irresponsible political agitator.

Udomo is not an Endurra nor is he a Tom Lanwood. Thomas Lanwood is a non-conformist who is basically a political thinker. Udomo recognizes him as his political godfather because he has received a lot of inspiration from his writings. The younger intellectuals generally consider Lanwood as an intellectual who restricts his revolutionary activities to academic talk about revolution and does little to bring it about. Mhendi's comments are pertinent:

Tom's the luckiest, though. For him it's an impersonal game of chess. He doesn't really care about people. He hates imperialism impersonally and wants African power impersonally. I was the flag-waving type when I went home. Blood will flow, I thought then, God, how it's flowed... (p. 28).

Again Mhendi makes the following observation while conversing with Udomo:

Tom's an old man now; as near sixty as not to matter. He's been dreaming and writing about the African revolution all his life. It's all become very simple in his mind. This is his first day here and he's still superimposing the vision of his books on it. This is his life; this is all his dreams come true (p. 204).

Udomo himself, who "wondered if Lanwood had read all the books" in his room (p. 42), believes that he is "not much good except for writing and speaking. Useful as a figurehead. Nothing more. But we can use his name" (p. 124). Udomo, unlike Mhendi, views writing and making speeches as forms of political action even though they are not as efficacious as direct political involvement in the revolutionary struggle.

Lanwood is portrayed as a pathetic figure in the novel. He is alienated from the colonial system, yet he often behaves more like an Englishman than an African because of certain mannerisms he has acquired during his long period of stay in Europe. He has a lot of ideas about revolution, yet he cannot translate them into action. At the beginning of the novel, we see him as a frustrated, ageing revolutionary who has lost the enthusiasm of his youthful days. Although he seems to have regained his moral force during the conference on colonial affairs where he openly challenges the British delegation with fiery zeal, he is seen at the end of the novel as a shattered man who cannot withstand the opposing forces of life. Dispirited, he leaves Panafrica

for England. A double victim who is rejected successively by British and Panafrican cultures, he is a "rebellious" conformist who, frustrated by the turn of political events, becomes an anti-hero whose inner rhythm has been crushed by the outer forces.

As for Udomo, he is both a thinker and a man of action. His conversation with Lois on top of the mountain where there was once a Saracen village, gives us an insight into his notion of heroism:

[Lois] And what is the worth of that conquest?

[Udomo] It is proof that they were men and because they were men they had to act (p. 94).

Udomo is a determined and fearless intellectual whose aim is to totally eliminate the factors preventing Panafrica from becoming a very strong nation. He does not hesitate to take part in any form of political activity. For instance, he once led an unsuccessful student strike against the French colonialists (p. 21). On coming to England, he successfully infuses new blood into the moribund revolutionary group that functions under the leadership of Lanwood:

His coming has affected the whole of the group. Before he came they had been a group of wishful dreamers. Now an organization had come into being. And they had plans rather than dreams (p. 111).

Furthermore, on his return to Panafrica he intensified his political activities: he meets with three merchants who "after a week of discussions" agree that each of them would pay "five hundred pounds into starting a paper" (p. 145); as soon as he perceives that the merchants have started thinking of withdrawing their support for a proposed strike in Panafrica because of possible repercussions to their business, he begins a campaign of open defiance to them. Through his organizational efficiency, his people agree to take an oath of secrecy (p. 172), an act that contributes significantly to the formation of the political party African Freedom Party. The colonialist, unable to contain the activities of Udomo, eventually grant independence to Panafrica.

Udomo's rhythm has succeeded in driving the outer forces represented by the colonial regime into moving at its own pace. In other words, the tension between it and the political authority is resolved in Udomo's favour.

Udomo's victory enables him to become the Prime Minister of Panafrica, a role that gives him the opportunity to impose his value system on the society. He invariably becomes the centre of a conglomeration of forces that work for and against the prevailing social norms in Panafrica: he favours the idea of transforming Panafrica into a western style industrialized nation, whereas his colleagues fight for the preservation of the African way of life even at the expense of technology. Udomo, again, shows himself a man of boundless energy who prefers confrontation to either compromise or withdrawal. He courageously takes the decision to cooperate with the whites of Pluralia in order to have access to their technological manpower. And this at a great price: he is forced to hand over his comrade-in-arms, Mhendi, the Pluralian na-

tionalist to the white racists of that country. Paradoxically, this decision compromises his position as a fervent nationalist. From this perspective, his inner rhythm has slowed down to move at the pace of the outer forces represented by the white racist regime of Pluralia. An uncompromising, non-conformist anti-racist leader turns out to be a conformist working for the interests of the white racists. His brand of conformity differs, however, from that of either Dr. Endurra or Dr. Bledsoe, for his decision is not motivated by selfish considerations. It is an act of compromise brought about by what he sees as an inevitable political situation: the necessity of getting technological help from the white regime of Pluralia, an aid that is indispensable to the future glory of Panafrika.

Of course, the decision is in itself an act of confrontation against his colleagues who insist on maintaining the cultural identity of Panafrika at all costs. Despite his having been forced to speak with a solitary voice because his political allies have virtually deserted him, he doggedly sticks to his principles, and this with an unbelievable moral courage. His opponents, stunned at the way he clings tenaciously to power, get him assassinated. Thus by making friends of his white enemies he turns his African colleagues into enemies and, accordingly, fails to impose his will on the society. The forces of his inner rhythm succumb to the overwhelming pressures from the Panafrika cultural nationalists. Udomo is caught in the cross-fire of irresconcilable forces.

It is pertinent to ask whether he has the image of a martyr. Does he indeed merit a wreath as the title of the novel suggests? It is not easy to give a straightforward answer to this question because Udomo's strengths and weaknesses combine to make him a controversial figure. On one level, he is a hard-working, dedicated nationalist who makes a lot of sacrifices for the cause of African independence; this quality commends him as an admirable personality who wins the respect of the reader. On another, he is a quick-tempered leader who clings impetuously to decisions that a level-headed leader could easily modify in the face of stiff opposition from his colleagues. This moral flaw is compounded by the fact that Udomo also has too much faith in the rightness of his judgments; in other words, he stubbornly believes that people who differ with him are necessarily wrong in their ideas about the social issues in question. This flaw can explain, at least to some degree, the genesis of his intellectual error which eventually spells his doom—the decisions to industrialize Panafrika at the expense of her cultural heritage, and especially to hand over Mhendi to the ruthless white racists of Pluralia. Ironically, in trying to save Africa he is in fact destroying it.

Abrahams portrays Udomo as a hero whose heightened socio-political consciousness impels him to think of his society in terms which the dictates of political reality cannot accommodate. As a boundless optimist out to translate his ideas into action, he finds it impossible to reconstruct his society in the image of his ego. In other words, his inner rhythm eventually suc-

cumbs to pressures generated by the inscrutable forces of politics. He is a tragic hero, that is a victim of an impossible situation; on the one hand, he is sincerely committed to safeguarding the identity of the new nation, but on the other, he cannot achieve this goal without industrializing the nation, a phenomenon that destroys the very identity he sets out to preserve. Of course, Abrahams assumes, somewhat erroneously, that industrialization is synonymous with westernization,⁷ an assumption that leaves Udomo with no possible option of industrializing the nation within a framework that does not threaten the cultural identity of the nation. This notwithstanding, Udomo is sympathetically portrayed as a leader whose dedication to the cause of the survival of his people is unquestionable. He is therefore a hero with more strengths than weaknesses. He merits a wreath for his role in creating a new form of socio-political consciousness in Panafrica.

Abrahams seems to be suggesting that the African revolutionary intellectual who, as a thorough-going nonconformist, wants to create a new social order in the image of his ideas has to contend with formidable forces which are capable of turning him into a character of contradictions who would eventually perish as a political activist. However, if he solidly identifies himself with the cause of the masses (in spite of his shortcomings) he is likely to emerge as a martyr whose spirit will give direction to the society's quest for survival. The individual, although capable of leaving his mark on history, is in a way powerless to determine the outcome of political events.

OGRANICZENIE I MOŻLIWOŚĆ:

INTELEKTUALISTA JAKO BOHATER POZYTYWNY POWIEŚCI PETERA ABRAHAMSA „WIENIEC DLA UDOMO”

STRESZCZENIE

Typem bohatera pozytywnego w literaturze afrykańskiej jest w zasadzie intelektualista. Włączony bardzo aktywnie w nurt walki o reformy społeczne, posługuje się on bardzo urozmaiconą strategią działań będącą przeciwstawieniem się naciskom ze strony porządku społeczno-politycznego. Charakter tej strategii zależy od postawy reprezentowanej przez intelektualistę w zasadniczej konfrontacji zarysowanej między jego „rytmem wewnętrznym” a siłami przeciwstawnymi, uosobionymi w ośrodkach władzy społeczno-politycznej. Termin „rytm wewnętrzny” zawiera w sobie nie tylko pojęcie świadomości intelektualisty nastawionej na sytuację polityczną, lecz również pragnienie prometejskiej obiektywizacji stanów świadomości w postaci aktywności politycznej. Przy tym zaś postawa wobec ośrodka władzy politycznej może się kształtować bardzo różnie w kręgach intelektualnej społeczności i prowadzić do bardzo rozległej skali zachowań od konformizmu do niekonformizmu.

Wspólną formą działań bohatera literatury afrykańskiej jest walka przeciw kolonialnym instytucjom w Afryce; równocześnie jednak intelektualista, a szerzej — inteligent jest pierwszym, który nawet entuzjastycznie skłonny jest przyjąć europejski styl życia. To wszakże dopiero począ-

⁷ See Ch. T. Maduka, *Colonialism, Nation-building and the Revolutionary Intellectual in Peter Abraham's A Wreath for Udomo*, "Journal of Southern African Affairs", Vol. II, No. 2 (1977), p. 254—255.

tek zagadnienia: inteligent zaczyna dostrzegać zasadniczą odmienną nowych form w stosunku do urzędów i obyczajów afrykańskich, a w rezultacie tym mocniej odczuwa potrzebę zidentyfikowania się z afrykańskim systemem kultury, który początkowo skłonny był lekceważyć, a nawet mieć w pogardzie. Następnym takim procesem zachodzącym w mentalności inteligenta jest kształtowanie się postaw niekonformistycznych i stanowcza decyzja walki z systemem kolonialnym w imię godności Afrykanów albo też gotowość podjęcia określonych form aktywności politycznej w duchu afrykańskiej odrębności i indywidualności.

Protagonista *Wienca dla Udomo* Petera Abrahamsa ma charakter szczególny: w walce przeciw reżymowi kolonialnemu odnosi on wielki sukces i zyskuje stanowisko premiera nowego rządu w nowym państwie. Ogromny dynamizm heroizmu Udomo ukształtowany w jego walce z systemem kolonialnym prowadzi go do podjęcia pełnych determinacji działań zmierzających do przezwyciężenia sił stojących na przeszkodzie realizacji jego marzeń przekształcenia idei panafrkkanizmu w określone, potężne państwo. Ten właśnie nieprzejednany heroizm prowadzi do wytworzenia dwu odmiennych postaw, co daje w rezultacie podwójny nacisk ze strony rządu kolonialnego oraz powstających tendencji nacjonalistycznych w ruchu panafrkkańskim.

Gra przeciwstawnych tendencji wyzwala siły grożące nawet tym, którzy przyczynili się do ich uruchomienia zarówno w nurcie zachowawczym, jak i w orientacji panafrkkańskiej. Ostatecznie dochodzi do tego, że gdy Udomo uzyskuje stanowisko premiera Panafrki, jego „rytm wewnętrzny” ugina się pod naciskiem trudnych do zidentyfikowania sił politycznych — stąd plan skrytobójstwa Udoma uknuty przez jego przeciwników politycznych.

Przełożył Jan Trzynadłowski