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Fanning Despotism through Ethnicity in Hama Tuma's Selected Short Stories

Odhiambo G. Otieno

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Linguistics, Languages, and Literature,
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Dr. Elizabeth Odhiambo

Lecturer, Department of Linguistics, Languages, and Literature,
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Abstract:

Despotic leadership continues to thrive in Africa partly because modern despots employ various strategies that project a veneer of democracy which conceals their despotic tendencies but enhances their grip on political power. This paper engages with Hama Tuma's six short stories to explore how the leadership entrenches their power through negative ethnicity. The stories have been purposively sampled from the twelve short stories in Tuma's anthology, The case of the criminal walk and other short stories. The critical analysis of these stories is anchored on the theory of hermeneutics of suspicion. The paper argues that Tuma both unmasks and laughs at the chicanery of the despotic leaders who deploy the ethnic card in their manipulation of the masses to fasten their stranglehold on power.

Keywords: Despotism, ethnicity, Hama Tuma

1. Introduction

The leadership, in the texts studied, ensures that the nation has a multiple of deep fissures along ethnic lines which consequently lead to disintegration among the masses who then find it extremely difficult to counter the oppressive regime. One social ill that has eaten into the social fabric of the society depicted in Tuma's short stories is negative ethnicity. The meaning of the term 'ethnicity' remains relative although many scholars hold that it refers to a group of people who share a language, culture, ancestral lineages and a common government or rulers (Abbink, 1997; Vaughan, 2003; & Aalen, 2011). According to Glazer and Moynihan (1975) as cited in Vaughan (2003), ethnicity designates a group of people who 'contrast themselves or are contrasted by others on the basis primarily of sharing certain cultural criteria such as language, beliefs and values, religion or history' (p.43). Ethnicity is therefore a cultural interpretation of descent and historical tradition by a group of people, as opposed to others, and expressed in a certain behavioral or cultural style (Abbink, 1997). Essentially, it gives a people a sense of socio-cultural, regional, and political identity. Inherent in the definition of ethnicity is the issue of contrast since it maps out one group's unique features that set it apart from another or other groups. Though it suggests cohesion for the group that shares certain traits, it also portends exclusion or marginalization of other groups and possibly conflict depending on what either divides or unites various ethnicities. Using hermeneutics of suspicion, this paper contends that Tuma suggests that the despotic leadership slyly use the ethnic card through a well-choreographed pattern to lord over the masses even as they attempt to tune the perception of the ruled to accept such dictatorial machinations as serving the interests of the masses. In exposing the undercurrents of negative ethnicity in his fictitious but prototypical Ethiopian society, Tuma mocks the authoritarian leaders and their cronies who enjoy their power and privileges by oppressing members of other ethnicities, this paper holds that Tuma is contemptuous towards the desperation of despots who often masquerade as democrats yet their leadership styles remain authoritarian. The material for this paper has been generated from six short stories including: 'The Case of the Criminal Walk', 'The other Son', 'Sheratonians', 'The Man with another Face', 'The Coward who hid his Eyes', and 'The Garbage Baby'.

2. Fissuring the Nation for Political Expediency

In Ethiopia, ethnic identity is enshrined in the constitution in the form of ethnic federalism (UNICEF, 2015; Ewnetu, 2014). To Abbink (1997), it is the normative identity on the basis of which the new State prefers to deal with its citizens in many spheres of life, especially the political and economic. For instance, Abbink notes, for one to register for the elections, they have 'to state their ethnic identity' (p.2). Ewnetu (2014) adds that constitutionally, the country is divided into nine Kiliils (regions) based on settlement patterns, language, identity and consent of the people concerned. This notion of federalism has been artistically recreated in Tuma's short stories to explore how it often disadvantages the majority of the populace while the leadership deliberately uses it to maintain their grip on power. It is brought out as a handy and pliable tool for socio-political exclusion by the authoritarian leadership.

The leadership in Tuma's fictional world restricts the movement of the masses but is still keen on convincing the citizenry of their prized freedom. It is contradictory that in 'The Case of the Criminal Walk', the accused is brought in the dock because of having walked outside his Kilil – designated region – without the official permission of the government. Intimated in this context is the fact that the citizens are huddled together in Kilils which are ethnic enclaves and hence the government has physically disintegrated the masses along ethnic lines. Being kept within the confines of a Kilil suggests that the citizens are oppressed since they subsequently lack the freedom of movement beyond their home kilils. The prosecutor says that the prisoner has "opposed the rules and regulations that have set up the ethnic kilils all over Ethiopia and liberated the people to freely move inside and only inside their own region" (Tuma, 2006, p.58). From the standpoint of hermeneutics of suspicion, the people only have a semblance of freedom as they can move freely within their kilils but on close interrogation, this is a freedom that is checked and limited by the State. The motive of the leadership in caging the people within the kilils is suspect. Indeed, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have held that actions are veils that hide the intentions of the people (Harcourt, 2011). The leadership in this case is intent on projecting a free society yet it is totally oppressive. The narrator posits that the kilils 'liberated' the people to freely move though without straying beyond the boundaries of their designated regions. In essence, the leadership fears the integration of the nation and so ensures fragile bonds exist between citizens of different ethnicities so that they can easily lord over them. From classical Marxist dialectic, the proletariat accounts for the exploited majority of the citizenry and their integration would not only raise their awareness about their common exploited status but also shore up their numbers and open the possibility of acting in a manner that would upset the prevailing socio-political order (Leiter, 2004). Besides, the crossing of the kilil borders – which is illegal – is symbolic of the yearning of freedoms by the citizens that the oppressive leaders are not willing to accord the masses. Those found wandering outside their kilils without the express permission of the leadership are deemed as criminals and are, in this context, symbolic of the citizens who attempt to seek higher ideals of democracy and freedom while those who keep within their kilils are prototypical of the subjects who have resigned to the authoritarian leadership due to one reason or the other.

The authoritarian leadership is so apprehensive of the unity of the masses that it goes to whatever height to ensure that the various ethnicities are alienated from each other. The government witness even invokes the authority of their oral tradition in support of ethnicity. His use of the proverb 'the origin of the horse pulls it more strongly than any rein or harness' (Tuma, 2006, p. 67) is meant to emphasize the centrality of ethnicity in the life of the people. The author mocks such leadership when they buy and institute modern scientific tools and machinery to maintain inter-ethnic clefs. For instance, in 'The Criminal Walk', the accused is reported to have failed the "Weyin Test" which is a battery of blood tests and psychological questions to determine one's ethnic identity in case they are in doubt. Both the test and the leadership are mocked. Through this test, the audience encounters a government that is dogged by insecurity, dictatorship, and hunger yet it jealously guards its fractured nationhood. Some of the components of this test are outrightly ridiculous. For example, culprits nabbed outside their designated kilils are taken through word association to determine their true kilil and the 'highly trained doctor' in charge of the test tells the court in Tuma (2006):

When we say Ethiopia most of those who pass the Test mention items or things that do not exist like democracy, dinosaurs, security, enough food etc. ... The Weyin Test unmasks the illusion and fake identity parading as national oneness. The family, the village, the clan and ethnic origin – these matters. One country, one nation, is fraud (p. 67).

From the perspective of hermeneutics of suspicion, beneath the talk of the nation lies certain desires, fears, and drives (Osborn, 2012). While the citizens hope that by breaking the dominant shackles of their kilil they will usher in the larger nation hence a more powerful force against dictatorship, it is out of the silent fear of the masses that the despots wish that the ethnicities remain dismembered from the common sense of nationhood for easier administration. The concept of the nation therefore remains hazy, false or at best imaginary as postulated by Anderson (2006) who argues that the nation is an imagined socio – political community since 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow – members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (p. 6). Tuma's fictional world in which freedoms of association and movement are only viable within the ethnic enclaves satirizes a leadership that ensures that the nation largely remains an imagined reality. Suggested here is that Ethiopia as a nation is therefore nearly utopian to the average villager who lives his entire life restricted in his native kilil.

A person to whom the title of judge has been bestowed ordinarily ought to be a totem of justice. In putting a judicial system in place, the authoritarian leadership sets the stage for the masses to visualize an independent, fair and functional justice system in this society yet the presiding judge betrays all these expectations. Judge Hagos, while pronouncing the sentence against the accused in 'The Criminal Walk', unconsciously, and in line with the Freudian slips, reveals the motive of the government in keeping the people within the boundaries of their kilils. He says in Tuma (2006):

Ethnic identity and alignment on ethnic basis are as African as the tsetse fly. The right to have our own specific identity and to define ourselves in opposition to others is a right we gained through hard struggle. The colonialists divided us into different entities and lumped us in anomalies they call countries (p.68).

It therefore unfolds that ethnicity is for the purposes of antagonism which he asserts, albeit ironically, was a fruit of independence from the colonial masters. This is inconsistent with the contextual realities since Ethiopia was never colonized (Kurtz, 2007). As such the leadership is merely absolving themselves from the possible negative effects of ethnicity even as they continue to benefit from the same. The authoritarian leadership would rather have animosity between different ethnicities than a united country. The judge's statement implies that African authoritarian leaders, like colonial governments, alienate the citizens from each other for easier administration and manipulation. Furthermore, he faults colonization for complicating leadership in Africa by the creation of the African countries which perhaps have

presented them with larger geographical areas and people of variegated ethnicities to manage. In essence, the leadership favours a disintegrated nation as the fort of a stronger authoritarian government.

Judge Hagos is an agent of the despotic system. In drawing a parallel between the tsetse fly and Africa on one hand and ethnicity and Africa on the other hand, the judge unconsciously lays bare his repressed knowledge about the social ill of ethnicity. Hollway and Jefferson (2004) hold that 'what gets unconsciously transmitted is more significant than the conscious component' (p. 108). The tsetse fly, an insect mainly found in Sub Saharan Africa, bites and sucks the blood of both animals and humans spreading sleeping sickness to the later. The judge seems to suggest that ethnicity is inherently African just like the tsetse fly. Essentially, the tsetse fly is a harmful insect and its comparison to ethnicity insinuates the possible socio-political harm of ethnicity. The judge unknowingly speaks about the effects of ethnicity. It is used by the leadership to exploit, antagonize, and oppress the masses. The judge further blames colonialism for the creation of amorphous entities called nations hence bemoaning the postcolonial implications on the African States including those that were never colonized like Ethiopia. Since Ethiopia lacks a colonial history (Kurtz, 2007), judge Hagos' sentiment is a displacement of the possibility that authoritarianism partly finds its roots in the African indigenous culture. However, according to Anderson (2006), the creation of 'nation-ness ... was the spontaneous distillation of a complex "crossing" of discrete historical forces ... with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations' (p. 4). In the case of Africa, the boundaries of each nation were defined by the colonialists who bundled a group of ethnicities within an administrative region. Subsequently, some of the challenges of nationhood can be attributed to colonial legacies even for those countries without a colonial history.

Antagonism along the ethnic fault line is common in the society depicted in Tuma's texts. Ethnicity is used to fuel conflict even in government offices by selfish and schematic leaders. Sewyew Tesame, in 'The Coward', is physically tortured for six consecutive days on trumped up charges only to be told later that he is innocent and that it was a mishap orchestrated by the deputy minister in his ministry. The explanation is that the security officers had been ordered to arrest one Sewneh Tadele but the deputy minister directed the security men to Sewyew's office. Intimated here is that somebody accidentally confused the name Sewyew for Sewneh though this can be read as a deliberate and conscious case of reverse spoonerism intended to absolve the leadership and falsely portray it as innocent. Clearly though, this was a scheme by a senior prison official to sow seeds of discord between Sewyew and the deputy minister who are members of the same ethnic community. The senior prison official, who hails from a minority ethnic group yet they occupy senior positions in government, does all these because he perceives Sewyew's tribe as a threat to their continued stay in power particularly because they are outnumbered by the members of Sewyew's ethnic group. This is therefore a transparent instance of the majority being dictated on by the minority and any attempt at upward mobility by the ruled is thwarted by the machinations of the authoritarian ruling class. This speaks to what Nietzsche has described as the drive to self-preservation which he underscores as 'one of the disguised forms of the will to power' (Leiter, 2004, p.37). After Sewyew's ordeal at the hands of the unfeeling security officers, the officer charged with the responsibility of executing the plan reports in Tuma (2006) that he has implicated the deputy minister and that Sewyew has believed his fictitious story about the confusion of the names upon which his senior prison official retorts:

And he will now have his grudge against the man... which we can use. They are both from ... (the official mentioned the nemesis ethnic group). Divide and rule... they outnumber us and we have to use all means to stay on top (p. 93).

Out of the realization that they are the minority despite occupying prominent positions in government creeps in the feeling of insecurity by the leadership. These leaders' resort to ethnicity thereby surrounding themselves with members of their own ethnic extraction to assuage their fears of being isolated or lonely at the top. Of utmost importance to the authoritarian governments are the security dockets and institutions. In the 'Son', the narrator says that the leadership had put in place a mono-ethnic based government and was busy staffing the State bureaucracy and the key posts with members of their own ethnic group from the North. 'They' also 'controlled and run (sic) the Criminal Investigation Department as a whole and the Homicide Department' (Tuma, 2006, p.9). The same scenario is witnessed in 'Another Face', where the Prime Minister and his principal assistant - Mulugeta - a longtime friend and advisor 'both hailed from the same street in a northern town' (Tuma, 2006, p.140). The Prime Minister persistently sees the face of Mengistu in the mirror. He insists that he detests the face since he associates it with dictatorship. This is a matter of a guilty conscience bubbling with a lot of repressed material but his confidant - Mulugeta - counsels that that this could be a 'mezewir' cast on him by some notorious wizard. This is a ridiculous piece of advice that is equally ridiculously pursued by summoning all famous witchdoctors from the Prime Minister's own home region to change the effects of the 'mazewir'. The Prime Minister believes his problem can only be solved by witchdoctors from his own ethnic community and as such is suspicious of the other witchdoctors from other communities who of course are also under him by virtue of his being the head of State. Discrimination based on ethnicity therefore infiltrates even the leadership's need for health services that border on psychological problems. When all his efforts to get a competent witchdoctor from his ethnic community to treat him hit a snag, he does not seek help from the others because he has his fears and instead, all the other members of the profession from other ethnicities become culpable because they do not share the ethnic identity of the Prime Minister who then ensures that they are all arrested and imprisoned. The despot's level of insecurity is further mocked when the authorities resort to recruiting a street urchin, Kifle, as a joro tebi - an informer - in 'The Garbage Baby'. Kifle's main qualification is that he is a member of the privileged ethnicity.

After ringing themselves with members of their ethnic group, the authoritarian leaders switch to modes of self-preservation. In some cases, negative ethnicity is used to perpetuate and, if need be, cover up for crimes against the citizens or the opposing groups. The leadership is implicated in criminal activities but they are so sophisticated that even

other senior government officials who would ordinarily be aware of such crimes either remain clueless or are used to cover up the tracks of the criminals. In essence, it is the interest of the leadership that matters and when their interests are seriously threatened by their political opponents in pursuit of political power, high stakes murder which are never investigated to their conclusive ends are witnessed. In Tuma (2006), Captain Berhanu, an outlier in his place of work, ethnically speaking, confesses that he knew that in his country:

The big criminals were almost all people in power, away from the prying eyes of any CID captain. Political murders were plenty but they were investigated, or rather shelved aside, by the political police that was almost entirely made up of the members of the elite ethnic group. Where criminal cases involved in one way or another, any member of the elite group, officers hailing from that region also handled the cases (p.11).

It is therefore reiterated that in cases of investigations especially where the government has been involved in such crimes, carefully selected and ethnically 'correct' officers are dispatched on such errands to ensure that the perpetrators of such crimes remain unknown to the public. The public is deceived into believing that something is being done though these actions are always in vain.

Negative ethnicity also encourages mass looting of the public resources by those who are strategically placed or the allies of the leaders because the looters are assured of protection and favour by the top leadership. Indeed, Posner (2005) in a study on ethnic politics in Zambia notes that 'the lesson that the president will favour his own ethnic group has become an axiom of politics' (p.97). Consequently, ethnicity does not only derail development but it also leads to skewed development across the nation. In 'Son', while Captain Berhanu is investigating the cruel murder of Ato Mulu Negew, it is revealed that the police force lacks some of the very basic tools for their trade. Development is equally skewed in favour of a given select tribe hence alienating the other ethnicities as noted in Captain Berhanu's cynical comment 'everything to the North and no cent for gloves' (Tuma, 2006, p. 16). The author therefore mocks the greed and insensitivity of the leadership that is characterized by raw ethnic jingoism at the expense of the common good of the nation. Captain Berhanu adopts a very contemptuous attitude towards his bosses especially his immediate superior whom he believes is incompetent and is only in his current post because he is related to people in higher offices. According to the Captain, his superior was 'a desk-man who had been catapulted from being a civilian to a colonel's post in the Criminal Investigation Department because his wife was related to some bigwig in the Prime Minister's office' (pp. 12 - 13). One's ethnic inclination then determines how they relate with the power axis. There are insiders and outsiders who then become beneficiaries and the disregarded respectively. The captain, Berhanu - who is not a member of the choice ethnic group which in this context is representative of the authoritarian government - could be saying all these out of the bitterness of being an "outsider". He is neither a relative to nor a member of the privileged ethnicity and as such is mourning his lack of belonging or perceived exclusion from the centre of power. Hailing from the select ethnic extraction is accompanied by some privileges.

The leadership, in its ethnic garb, having fenced off the other ethnicities from the centre of power, exploits and manipulates members of these other tribes to help the leadership acquire a national face. Although Sewyew, in 'The Coward' is an educated man - courtesy of a German scholarship corruptly arranged for him by a relative in the ministry of education - he was faced with the reality of ethnicity because he hailed from the ethnic group designated more or less as the enemy of the new government. For him to get a job in this government, he has to let go of his principles, in case he has any, and live with the exploitation. The narrator says in Tuma (2006):

Since some members of his own ethnic group were allied to the new masters from the north and were gathered in an official group controlled by the ruling cabal. The population referred to this group rather derisively as "condoms" of the ruling party. Sewyew was not perturbed by this - wasn't the condom saving lives in these terrible days? (P. 82).

This excerpt accentuates the fact that in an authoritarian set up even the educated who should unconditionally contribute to the development of their nation have to either stoop to or be soaked into ethnic ideologies to get jobs. Significantly, the State's motive of including these other ethnic communities in government is at variance with the motive of the members of the other ethnicities for joining government. While the government's concealed desire is to use these people to gain a facade of an all-inclusive and responsive State, members of the sidelined ethnicities embrace the government because they hope to get jobs and consequently improve their lot materially. It is however absurd that the conscience of the educated is not troubled by such machinations as supported by Sewyew's rationalization with respect to the significance of the condoms in the modern society. The architecture of this union is built on a lie since the new government is using and dumping the other ethnic communities at the opportune moment as is brought out in the imagery of the "condoms" which though could be very important, at a particular time, in 'saving lives' has to be dumped after use. The life saved in this case is the political power or office of the authoritarian leadership. Like the pleasure gained by the users of the condoms, it lacks commitment or unity of purpose, it is laced with mistrust and dishonesty and is only temporary. The authoritarian but manipulative leaders conceal their real intent which is to use other ethnic groups to continue enjoying the perks of leadership. Ethnicity is therefore a card that is used by the ruling class to exploit the public for the purposes of retaining political power and the niceties that come with it.

The social relationship among citizens is hugely impacted on by the forces of negative ethnicity engineered by authoritarian leadership. The leadership is brought out as repressive and with several spies at its disposal hence fear and anxiety among the citizens. It is hinted that being in the company of a citizen from the elite ethnic communities can amount to security. In 'Sheratonians' the six Sheratonians only realize a bit too late the mistake they made in composing a group of friends without an individual from the elite ethnic group. They come to this realization after one of them, Muktar, has been picked by the government security agents. In their apprehension, it occurs to them that the composition of their group is incomplete security wise. Dr. Alex, to stave off the impending danger, says 'the most urgent thing is to recruit a

new member from the elite ethnic group. Fast. It is protection' (Tuma, 2006, p.168). It is clear that this must be done with urgency yet this is just a social group of friends who regularly meet in a restaurant for some general discussions over some drinks. Ironically, it is the same people who are from the 'politically correct' ethnic group that help the government spy on the activities of even the smallest social rings in the country and as such enhance the suppression of the citizens. In 'Sheratonians' it is reported that the blue room is replete with spies and indeed, Romy warns Tadesse, 'be careful what you say ... those four there are spies and it is not only the Ghion that is bugged' (Tuma, 2006, pp. 150 – 151).

3. Conclusion

The despots therefore tactfully deploy the ethnic card to enhance their stay in power. They are mainly overwhelmed by their apprehension towards the integration of the masses which they endeavour to scuttle through various repressive and selfish tricks. First, the despots remotely ensure antagonism between individuals of other ethnicities especially if such individuals pose a threat in the leadership ranks. Secondly, since the despots are the minority, they develop a sense of insecurity and resort to ethnicity in the hiring of government officials especially in the key government dockets like security. This is further buttressed by the engagement of spies who are kept prowling in both private and public spaces and who in turn cause fear and anxiety among the citizens. Thirdly, after ringing themselves with members of their own ethnicities both as government officers and spies, any dissent from the public is met with repression clothed in arbitrary arrests, torture, and high stakes murder that are never conclusively investigated though the masses are deceived into believing that something is going on and that the government is committed to the pursuit of their common good. Finally, to cement their grip on power, the despots selectively hire submissive members of the other ethnicities in order to give the government a superficial national face thereby tuning the public perception into believing that the leadership is nationalistic.

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