

## CRITICAL REALISM IN ADAMU KYUKA'S THE UNKNOWN VULTURE

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### **Abstract**

Adamu Kyuka is one of Nigeria's 21st century writers who have painstakingly taken the bull by the horn, as he writes to expose the social ills that have thwarted the smooth-existence of the Nigerian society. Thus, as a committed literary writer, he has through the lens of realism x-rayed the prevalent socio-economic and political situation of the Nigerian polity in his literary works. *The Unknown Vulture* too, which is his recent literary production, realistically gives a depiction of general human follies that have more or less hampered the progress of the society; hence, such follies are quite the oddities that have constituted a clog in the wheel of progress of Nigeria as a nation. The paper, therefore, concludes that until such social vices which are more or less, considered as social ineptitude are eradicated from the African society and the Nigerian society in particular, human progress and development will still be a mirage for as long as humans exist on the surface of the earth.

**Keywords:** social ills, political situation, mirage, realism

### **Introduction**

The entire human society is characterised by excessive social and political forces created by man for some selfish and egocentric reasons. Such forces evolve through an innate

inexplicable instinct and natural motive and systems that are capable of generating subjugate and destructive tendencies that can dwarf smooth and peaceful human existence on the surface of the earth.

In the light of the above background, writers all over the world, have made it a point of duty to depict in their literary works, such socio-political and economic quagmire that have permanently put the human society in a moribund state. In this regard, most, if not all literary writers have seen the need to realistically present and represent human society, by way of giving an exposition of the things that humans and human nature have brought to bear upon the society negatively.

It is in this regard that we see Adamu Kyuka's commitment in realistically writing about the Nigerian situation in his *The Unknown Vulture*. In this sense therefore, he is seen to occupy a vital place among his people of Nigeria as he carries out the all-important herculean task of being a chronicler of his society and environment. In the light of writing from this sort of perspective, Zulu Sofola writes that, "the artist by this fact occupies a vital place in the life of his community and as a mediator between his people and their divine reality and as a motivator for the well-being of his people" (7). Again, as a literary writer, what Kyuka succeeds in doing in his *The Unknown Vulture* as a novel, is what Walter Allen writes in the following expression:

We find here a close imitation of man and manners; we see the very web and texture of society as it really exists, and as we meet it when we come into the world. We are acquainted with the motives and characters of mankind, imbibe our notions of virtue and vice from practical

examples and we are taught a knowledge of the world through the airy medium of romance. (14)

The preceding excerpt demonstrates the fact that the writer through the medium of the novel, is bound to carry out the task of unveiling the oddities and follies that are associated with human nature within the human society in concrete and realistic terms. It therefore means that, this task can be carried out even at the expense of the writer's life and it doesn't matter whether or not, his writing hurts. This is of course, the basis upon which Alexander Solzhenitsyn gives an outburst of a depiction of realistic tendencies of the evils that were perpetrated during the years of Stalin's harsh rule in Russia. This outburst of his reads:

I have always felt that to write about the fate of Russia was the most fascinating and important task to be performed. For my entire life, I have had the soil of my homeland beneath my feet. Only its pain do I hear, only it do I write (30).

Solzhenitsyn's thought about the fate of Russia reveals certain fundamental issues about the writer and his society. First, for a, consistent and effective attack on operators of repressive forces, the writer must not only come from the dehumanised society, but also must have been directly affected by the social forces that bring pain to any or entire parts of the society. Second, no writer is capable of bringing sanity to a society outside his own unless he has successfully overcome the inadequacies that engender passion and bring pain in his homeland: Third, since the oppressed is incapable of helping himself out of the forced predicament, the writer owes it a duty to speak for him and demand on his behalf that a thing of joy is meant for all.

### **Realism Conceptualised**

Realism as a literary theory can be seen as an accurate detailed unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary

life. It is a theory that is in total rejection of imaginative idealisation in favour of a close observation of outward appearance; it rejects also the artificiality of both the classicism and romanticism of the academics. It instead, believes in the objective reality and revolt against exaggerated emotionalism, truth and accuracy therefore, becomes the hallmark of realism. Realism aims to observe objectively and document the daily joys and sorrows of ordinary people in a particular or given society.

The concept of realism is a 19th century product with the term realism being first used in literary circles in the 1850s, which means that realism came to the fore about one and half centuries ago. This shows that realism as a theory pre-dates other literary concepts of post-modernism, structuralism, romanticism, deconstruction and naturalism.

Luc Herman writes of the recognition of realism as a literary theory that, “in the 1850s, a relatively small number of French, German, and English authors explicitly promote realism in their critical writings. These programmatic realists wanted their stories and novels to illustrate their story” (3). With this, Herman succeeds in throwing light on the origin and recognition of realism as a literary theory, hence, its importance in the contemporary literary times.

On his part, George Becker writes of realism in the following expression:

It is a bundle of tendencies, some of which concern the form, others the content of the narrative. As it relates to form, it is, if you will, and in a very general way a transcription of facts, based on documents, or observation and experience. As relates to content, it is the ability and the desire to express all aspects of life.... (4)

Becker in the above excerpt depicts that a realist writer may have to rely more on observation as opposed to the romanticist dependence on invention and imagination. The realist techniques therefore, seek to document human values that are quite concrete and can be confirmed. Thus, realism is an aesthetic mode which broke with the classical demands of art to show life as it is by especially portraying the average of the society, the common place, the middle classes and their daily struggles with the mean verities of everyday existence -these are the typical subject matters of realism.

In discussing realism, Raman Selden and Widdowson Peter have it that,

A novel may conduct a reader towards a more concrete insight into reality, which transcends a merely common sense apprehensiveness of things. A literary work reflects not individual phenomena in isolation, the reader is always aware that the work is not itself reality but rather a special form of reflecting reality. (76)

### **Critical Realism Discussed**

Critical realism is one of the branches of realism which seeks to give a complete depiction of life verisimilitude, which is the very criteria by which we judge a proposition to involve the same recourse to correspondence with reality. Critical realism thus, present situations or events that have relevance, bearing and relationship to the physical world we see around us. In a discussion that dwells on critical realism, Roger Caldwell examines it from the epistemological viewpoint. To him, he feels that a scientific text is understood as being at par with literary text. To this, he contends that:

Critical realism, then, rescues us from the postmodernist nightmare and restores us to

reality. We cannot manage without the concept of truth. There is (as most of us thought all along) a preexisting external reality about which it is the job of science to tell us. True, we must be cautious about claims to objective reality, alert to ideological distortions and aware that the world is a messier, more complicated place than the account of physicist would suggest. (222)

This excerpt suggests therefore, that critical realism is an art that operates on the basis of a realistic conception of the natural sciences. Thus, this critical epistemological perception of the world has fundamental significance, as it postulates a distinction between the physical world (physical body and physical environment) and the phenomenal world (phenomenal body ego and phenomenal environment). Caldwell further presents this thinking in the following expression:

In memory and in the belief in history, referent of present thoughts is a world of things and events believed to be existentially real and independent of any intuitions, present or past. An actual past or future is not given in any datum but when one speaks, as David Hume did, of having or of being a succession of perceptions one posits the existence of a temporal series of events and thereby instantiates in existence one or more essences. (262)

The just seen quotation shows that the physical world is represented more or less accurately by sensory and memory processes in the brain. At this point, one is able to distinguish between the phenomenal facts and the brain correlates. Critical realism therefore, seeks in its representation to be more comprehensive by attempting honestly to give a composite picture

of everyday life and existence, and to unveil motivations that are less than admirable. Since the writer uses literature as a weapon towards depicting the realistic socioeconomic and political panorama inherent in his time and space, there is no way that literature can be divorced from critical realism.

Throughout his work, Adamu Kyuka maintains strongly a critical realistic posture of high-powered light-hearted portrayal of the critical realistic elements and sometimes appears a bit docile in order to achieve his aim of making the powers that be to see reason with him in the pursuit of fair play and justice in a menacing Nigerian society. Kyuka's light-hearted treatment of serious situations makes him share with Dennis Brutus of South Africa, the virtue and attribute of using love in the expression of the agonies in their respective communities. Of this sort of light-hearted treatment of serious situations, Adrain Roscoe writes:

It is remarkable that a man who has suffered the worst inhumanities which the Whiteman have inflicted on Africa, including forced labour and a bullet in the back, should protest in so quiet a voice, in such measured tones, in such unpretentious, verse. Where violence or screaming despair might be appropriate from an artist in Brutu's position, his characteristic response blends dignity with patience, and calmness with reason, determined always that emotionalism must never triumph. Even when his oppressors are discomfited, we find modest joy rather than thumping triumphalism, joy that is almost embarrassed and self-conscious. (157-158)

Since the critical realists concern themselves with the social panorama of their people, by using their literary pieces and artistic

proWess to create awareness through a representation of life the way it is, without being prescriptive in their dealings with human conditions, Kyuka qualifies to be referred to as a critical realist writer.

Socialist realism in the Soviet Union for example, is hinged on the five pillars of truthfulness, historical presentation, representation, revolution and above all creates awareness to the people. Critical realism shares all of the above with socialist realism except that it is not linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers and the peasants of the society in the spirit of socialism. Thus, Kyuka strives to create verisimilitude in his writings and then leaves such to work on the sub-conscious minds of his readers. He does not attempt to show the way forward like Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane and Olu Obafemi do in their writings. He is a silent achiever who employs a non-violent means to achieve an exposition of the falsities of life and the inadequacies of the Nigerian society with conscientious exactness.

In the bid to present exactly the human follies, Kyuka does not appear like other Nigerian writers who have been mentioned elsewhere in this study and therefore, what he does essentially in his writings is what F. Odun Balogun describes or speaks of Omotoso in the following expression:

Since in Omotoso's view it is not compulsory for a writer to be an activist, the only other way for him to serve the cause of revolutionary social change is by giving moral support to progressive revolutionary elements in terms of the ideas expressed in his work. This probably implies awakening social consciousness in his readers, criticising societal ills, highlighting the situation of the wretched, insulted, injured, dejected,



neglected and rejected and also satirising exploiters, oppressors and tyrants all of which actions will help undermine an inhuman system thereby paving the way for positive change. (101)

### **Polemics of the Text**

In his presentation and representation of events in his *The Unknown Vulture*, Kyuka makes sure that the emotional and psychological involvement of the reader, which help in conducting the mind of the reader round the ordeal of major characters in the novel, lend credence to Kyuka's critical realistic representation and presentation of situations and experiences, as they relate to the sympathetic conditions of the villagers especially during the period of their great catastrophe caused by the invasion of locusts on the land. Thus, as Kyuka depicts the inglorious conditions of these villagers, especially too, as they strive in the face of great hunger and starvation to survive, he makes sure that one's heart stops for a while and then stays arrested as one goes through the epistemological and critical realistic portrayal of events in the novel.

Kyuka's themes range from love for money, materialistic, tendency of humans, hunger to suffering, the insensitive posture of government and the heinous and dastardly acts of the police and the judiciary. He proves his artistic prowess in the text, as it captures in its entirety the daily realities of the type of life lived by the less privileged of the society especially the rural dwellers of various Nigerian communities. A great degree of disenchantment is portrayed as Kyuka gives a realistic depiction of the sort of attitude that money mongers are fond of perpetrating, and how through the power and authority their money accords to them, they tend to use it as an opportunity to suppress, oppress and exploit others who are but the less privileged and the downtrodden

of their various communities. Using Jacob's love for money as a point of reference in the text, Kyuka writes that:

Somebody had joked that if Jacob were to faint, money should be placed on his chest to resuscitate him instead of the cold water usually thrown on a person that had fainted. If it was feared he had died, money should be shaken by his ears and if he did not stir then he was dead and nothing could bring him back to life. (14)

A lot of people who are like Jacob the major character in the text, more often than not, capitalise on situations that present themselves and then make money to the detriment of the generality of the people. Again, in their bid to make such unscrupulous money, they do not give a hoot as to whether or not such acts of theirs offend other people's sensibilities. It is in an expression of this sort of attitude that Kyuka through the barrel of his pen writes that, "everything has its season and wise men ride on the season to become rich. This is the season of death. It is up to you who is well placed to take advantage of the season and become rich" (17). This is the philosophy that Jacob believes in, hence, his dishing out this as a piece of advice to his younger brother. Still, to depict the level with which against all odds people would do anything to make money, Kyuka writes, "the issue today my brother is what can earn money. If you are to pray for anything at all, pray for money because eventually even the Reverend Father will ask for money before he prays to God to have mercy on your soul when you die" (18).

All those who capitalise on any available opportunity to make money are basically the ones the writer symbolically refers to as the unknown vultures that are quite unknown by people. In a bid to chronicle the fact that the society is filled with this sort of

people and for the generality of the people to be wary of such, Kyuka writes:

What is important is for my brother to know we will all be unable to earn a living if we don't feed on each other's miseries. The doctor to me is a vulture feeding on the diseases of other men. So is the lawyers feeding on the troubles of others. The barman feeds on the spirit of drunkenness in the drunk. The Reverend Father would not eat if there were no sins. Our stomachs move all of us to feed on carrions of different kinds. Without all those things we consider bad providing a livelihood, life would be impossible. We are all vultures my brother if you don't know. (18)

While discussing with his younger brother, Jacob's strong desire towards money making, irrespective of the negative effect it might have on the name of one's family, he concludes that, "fortune is a woman if you don't know. You have to woo her well before she agrees to marry you" (20). This means that one has to know and master the strategies to be devised in order to make money against all odds. No wonder, Jacob says of the world that, "it is a world of opportunities and not of sentiments. No one eats sentiments; but we are fed by the opportunities we have exploited" (28).

Still, using the character of Jacob in the text, Kyuka depicts vividly the fact that a lot of people in life have the belief that making of money whether legally or otherwise, is the ultimate in life and for life. In a critical realistic expression of giving people the desired power and authority as people conceive it to be, Kyuka writes that, "money is the instrument you use to control people. When you part with it without strings the way he had done today, you lose control of the person you have parted with the money to" (45-46).

To Jacob in the text, making of money is an art automatically in itself. Whether it is acquired legally or not, it demands some level of craftiness, which to him it does not matter either ways. He feels that no matter the means money is acquired, it gives the owner pleasurable satisfaction as, “there was nothing he cherished like people coming to his house, bowing before him, seeking one favour or the other” (46). This sort of pleasure he derives with his interaction with people, due to the powers that money gives him makes him cultivate within his sub-conscious mind, that master-servant, king-subject, and paternalistic relationship with the people of his community.

Indeed, in Kyuka’s critical realistic depiction of the evil that is associated with money within the human society, he gives a crystal view of Jacob’s philosophy about life generally which constitutes ninety five percent of the sort of love people the world over, have over money, not minding the fact that it is money that gives rise to so many social vices that take place in the human society. Often times, and feeling like a colonial slave master, Jacob “would sit on his chair acknowledging their greetings with the head and hand while a faint smile of satisfaction hung from his lips” (46), in his daily interaction with his fellow villagers, who usually crowd his home seeking for one financial assistance or the other due to the hunger and sufferings that the catastrophic effects of the attacks of locusts on their crops, have caused them. They are virtually turned into beggars on their land, begging only for food that can put their stomachs into temporary silence.

The dire desire for money in an unscrupulous world, makes everyone whether old or young to begin to think only for themselves as “everyone you see is out to protect himself. No one is ready to risk himself for the benefit of another. It is a grossly selfish world” (47), where everyman is to himself and for himself but God for us all. This makes it possible for the haves of the

society to survive even in the face of the most dangerous calamity, at the expense of the rejected and dejected of the earth who are left with only one option — that of sucking their mothers' breasts.

In yet another of his critical realistic portrayal of a social vice that hampers the smooth sailing of society, Kyuka touches on the insensitive posture of government and governance within the Nigerian society in particular and Africa in general. Kyuka succinctly presents this scenario during a visit to the cemetery by the earth priest and members of the community, where one of them exclaims that, “like locusts, our government has no mercy” (63). This statement is necessitated by the fact that, “locusts come to steal and plunder. I suspect when locusts attack they create a thieving tendency in the people they leave behind. The people begin to behave like the locusts. Locusts like barbarians leave behind a culture of looting” (63).

Just like those who are being affected by the attacks of locusts, the government's total neglect of the needs of the people can be measured and compared on a par with the attacks of locusts. But the author in his craftsmanship quickly moves to submit that, “we ought not to fear the teeth the government bares at us. Government is like the hyena. It fears you even as it charges at you” (64). Kyuka here, encourages the people not to be afraid of government. That if need be, the government can be confronted whenever it is deemed not meeting with its responsibilities towards the people since, “even the government is opportunistic. It is taking advantage of the ignorance and docility of our people to steal our money, ripping the people off without the rebuke of their conscience - that is if people in government in this country have conscience” (66). The above is a realistic depiction of the fate of Nigerians especially before the present democratic dispensation that was ushered in after the 2015 general elections.

The draconian and non-chalant attitudes of the past administration unto the people were comparable to that of lions and hyenas that more often than not, devour their preys at any slightest opportunity to do so, without any bit of conscience on whether or not, their preys be pitied.

Again, Kyuka as a way of demonstrating that he is indeed a socially committed writer, moves his literary searchlight to the heinous and dastardly acts of the police and the judiciary. We were taught long ago as children in our government text books and by our government teachers while in our secondary schools that the judiciary is the watchdog of the society. But now that we are old with a matured sense of reasoning, we are able to see for ourselves the realities on ground. How can the judiciary be the watchdog of the society, when all we see of them is using a sledge hammer on the downtrodden in their dispensation of justice? How can the judiciary be this that has been ascribed to them when all we see is a judicious dispensation of justice in favour of the haves of the society, to the detriment of the generality of the people, especially the have-nots?

Even though we are discussing Nigerian situation in particular, it will not be totally out of place to discuss this same situation on a universal basis, as this qualifies literature as a universal phenomenon. The sort of picture that Kyuka paints of the judiciary in his text reminds one of the sympathetic type that Franz Kafka presents of the European terrain in his literary work titled *The Trial*. In it, we are met face-to-face with one of the social ineptitudes of the judiciary. Kafka exposes the ordeals of the protagonist of the text, known as Joseph K., a senior bank clerk. He is unexpectedly arrested under a circumstance that can best be described as being highly incongruous for an offence he knows nothing about, by two unidentified agents of the law. He is not

however, taken away, but left at home to await instruction from the authorities that be.

Joseph K. later visits the court on invitation where he pleads his case. But to his surprise, he finds in this kangaroo court pornographic pictures instead of law books. He returns home and is visited by his uncle who is a friend of a lawyer. The uncle who seems distressed about his situation, asks him to visit the lawyer for a possible bail-out of his situation. K. discovers to his amazement that the advocate is simply "a capricious and unhelpful character. He returns to his bank and finds that his colleagues are trying to undermine him. All efforts to justify himself prove abortive even when one of his bank clients advises him to see Titorelli, a court painter who is believed to have official judicial connection, and then knows the workings of the judiciary and its processes. K. learns through Titorelli's knowledge that not a single defendant has ever been acquitted.

The court as Kafka depicts it, is an inhuman and a bureaucratic embodiment of law as the law seems inhuman and unjust precisely because it is such an abstract expression of justice. The court is therefore, a system run by humans who inevitably corrupt the law for their selfish motives. The judiciary together with its law courts, make the whole process of judicial dispensation a paradox as most if not all, the lawyers and judges involved in this process, have real lust for money.

Thus, no matter how K. tries to free himself from the court, he only finds himself being dragged deeper into its web. His fate attests to the desolate wisdom that we are always before the law. Anyone who thinks he can exist outside, or without or beyond the law, maybe the most deluded person on the planet earth. Since Joseph K. could not escape the claws of the law, he finally surrenders even though he does not still know what his offence is. On the last day of his thirtieth birthday, two men arrive to execute

him. He offers little resistance suggesting that he realises this as being inevitable for him. They lead him to a quarry where he is being killed like a dog.

In the bid to relate this ugly experience of K. Kafka takes the reader through a scenario where K. is taken to a quarry at night by his two unknown assassins, where he narrates thus:

Then one of them opened his frock coat and out of a sheath that hung from a belt girt round his waistcoat drew a long, thin, double-edged butcher's knife, held it up, and tested the cutting edges in the moonlight. Once more the odious courtesies began, the first handed the knife across K. to the second, who handed it across K. back again to the first. K. now perceived clearly that he was supposed to seize the knife, as it traveled from hand to hand above him, and plunge it into his own breast. But he did not do so; he merely turned his head, which was still free to move, and gazed around him. (285)

In order to complete the task of a description of what the assassins have started on K. as contained in the above excerpt, Kafka again reports that:

But the hands of one of the partners were already at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife deep into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them immediately before him, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act. "Like a dog!" he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him. (286)

We have all along been taught that the police is our friend. But the reality on ground in our contemporary Nigerian society in



particular and the human society in general has proved otherwise of these two teachings. Before our very eyes, lawyers, judges and the law courts have become sources that help in sucking the little blood that is left in the veins of both the accused and the complainant. The same thing goes for the police. Whether one is the complainant or the accused, they must make sure that they take from you the least wealth that your last blood can produce, thereby, leaving you more or less, like a withered plant during a season of drought. It is of this sort of behavior in both the judiciary and the police that Kyuka writes:

But now both the police and the courts were moneylenders and pig merchants like him looking for opportunities to squeeze money out of anyone in distress seeking their assistance. If he reports to the police, before they give him the protection he needed, the people would have descended on his house and carted away all he had. The court was even worse. It would take him ten years to get judgment from the court and he would have to feed the judge and his court clerks for all these years. It was far cheaper to feed the village for two weeks than the judge and his court for ten years or even more. (70)

In the author's strong desire as a critical realist writer to further give an exposition of the court's incongruous way of extorting money from their so-called clients, he writes that, "trying to get justice from the court is like trying to draw water from a well with a sieve. There is no point asking a blind man to find needle for you or a cripple to fetch water for you from the river" (89).

Jacob's attitude towards his people in the village that is more or less refractory in nature has earned him the hatred of the entire members of his community. From the manner in which the

earth priest and the earth god, Bosuu pass their judgment on Jacob, it shows clearly that for all those who would usually capitalise on opportunities to exploit others, they would in one way or the other have a repercussion effect that would be more deadly than the pains they have caused their victims. Thus, posterity would definitely judge them and there shall be no hiding place for them. A good example of this, is what members of the past government are currently experiencing. This experience marks the u-turn of life.

### **Conclusion**

From the preceding pages in this study, we have been discussing critical realism, hence our assertion that Adamu Kyuka is a critical realist writer. We have tried to identify this fact by looking at Kyuka's presentation and representation of facts and events as they affect the body polity of Nigeria. The body of this study reveals that Kyuka uses his novel through content and form with which he gives his critical-realistic comments about his Nigerian society.

The study therefore, reveals in totality as far as content is concerned, varied thematic concern and preoccupation. In this regard, we are able to discern themes that touch on the socio-economic and political life of the Nigerian citizenry that have thwarted the smooth growth of the Nigerian economy. Thus, his themes are themes that centre around human follies. From the findings of this study, we are convinced that Kyuka sees these thematic preoccupations as being major epidemics and social maladies that dwarf, haunt and hunt the lives and very existence of Nigerian people in general and Africa at large.

Again, Kyuka does not only give a picture of the causes of Nigerian socio-political and economic crises but also gives a critical and realistic presentation and representation of these

crises. He therefore does not attempt to delve into a socialist realist viewpoint.

As we can see in this study, Adamu Kyuka is not a socialist writer, as Ngugi, Iyayi, Obafemi, Ousmane and Osofisan are, but his work proves that a writer can be a critical realist writer and yet champion the cause of change in the society. This he can do by giving moral support to progressive elements through the ideas expressed in his work. This Kyuka does by awakening the social and political consciousness of his readers, exposing the situation of the masses, the peasants, the oppressed and neglected, criticising societal ills, and indicting the exploiters and the oppressors with the aim of undermining an inhuman system.

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