
Whether Losing, Whether Winning Musings in Political Realism as a Political Reflection on the Imperative of History

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Abstract: Every committed writer has as his/her responsibility to address the socio-political, economic and cultural concerns of his society. The Anglophone Cameroonian writer has done that in poetry, drama and prose. However, G.D. Nyamndi, besides his prose and dramatic works which are basically fiction that is based on facts, has decided to take Anglophone Cameroonian literature to another dimension, namely, the essay. The essayist's approach is very scientific and empirical in the sense that he/she tends to behave like a scientist, and every word, phrase, clause or sentence that he/she uses is thoroughly scrutinized. Samuel Johnson says proper words in proper places. Using the new historicist critical theory to interpret, analyze and evaluate Nyamndi's *Whether Losing, Whether Winning: Musings in Political Realism*, this paper reveals that Nyamndi in his essay has held his literary mirror closer to social reality than his fictional works. The paper concludes that the essay is the best instrument that can be used to gauge the socio-political and cultural climate of any society.

Keywords: Politics, Realism, History. Reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Whether Losing, Whether Winning is a philosophical essay which is fraught with socio-political, economic and cultural issues. Literary criticism, there is always a distinction between a creative writer and an essayist. But before we delve into their differences, it is important to define literature. According to Aristotle, literature is the fictionalization of concrete historical evidence. Here the creative writer fictionalizes ideas and tries to recreate history based on history. While this is the perspective of a creative writer, the essayist's approach is very scientific and empirical; he/she tends to behave like a scientist, and every word, phrase, clause or sentence that he/she uses is thoroughly scrutinized. Samuel Johnson says proper words in proper places.

From the above introductory statement, It is evident that in the course of writing *Whether Losing* *Whether Winning*, the author religiously respected the four stages required in any scientific inquiry, namely, observation, hypothesis, experimentation and theory. That explains why it took G.D. Nyamndi roughly fourteen years to come up with this essay.

The second reason for this delay in the publication of this book is due to the fact that the author was interrupted by two significant events in his life, namely; the publications of two important novels: first, *Facing Meamba* which has been described by critics as the most profound in terms of its artistry and ideology;

and secondly, *The Sins of Babi Yar* which debunks the perversion of justice in contemporary Africa. Here, the magistrate who personifies the judiciary institution is there to pervert the very justice he is to dispense. He is confused between commerce and culture as he thinks justice is for the highest bidder, and of course, he is sent to where he rightly belongs- prison.

This essay titled, *Whether Losing, Whether Winning Musings in Political Realism* can be described as a political reflection on the imperative of history because it demonstrates the importance of history in any literary endeavour and brings clearly to focus where “the rain began to beat” Cameroonians.

It was Frantz Fanon who argued in *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1963:166) that “Each generation.” in *The Wretched of the Earth* who argued that “Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it.” As we peruse Nyamndi's text, we shall assess and judge if he has uncovered his mission and fulfilled it or has betrayed it.

The prolific and embittered Anglophone Cameroonian writer, Bate Besong opined [4] that a writer without a sense of history is like the Aesopian lion devoid of teeth. And the South African writer Nadine Gordimer metaphorically expresses the same phenomenon in these words: a writer must master history the way a man has mastered the body of his wife. The grandfather of African literature, Chinua

Achebe thinks that ... (1975:78) thinks that *an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant-like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames* [1].”

Finally, the Kenyan celebrated writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Writers in Politics*, argues that every writer is a writer in politics, but the question now is whose politics. With this in mind, it will not be surprising if the author preoccupies himself with socio historical, cultural and political issues in the text under review since all of these are interwoven.

As the author rightly puts it, the short cut to the future is via the past. (2) A projection into the future is another way of returning to the past. And historians often say that if we do not know where we are going, at least, we should know where we came from. That is where the significance of the title of this paper resides.

In the classification of literary composition, a plethora of them exist, namely, history, biography, autobiography, rhetoric, oratory, censure, reflection and persuasion. George D. Nyamndi’s book combines four of such literary elements, namely, history, reflection, oratory and rhetoric. That is why I describe the book as a political reflection on the imperative of history. Generally, historical compositions are essentially meant to teach, instruct and to please, while reflection is meant to conscientise and raise awareness on societal issues. Oratory and rhetoric are meant to persuade, convince and move the audience. These are seen in some of the political speeches and addresses delivered during the author’s presidential campaigns which are included in this book. Cardinal Tumi’s discourse during the third convocation ceremony of the University of Buea, Cameroon also falls in this category. And this is exactly what G.D. Nyamndi set out to do in the text; that is to inform, educate, conscientise, persuade and convince.

Whether Losing, Whether Winning Musings in Political Realism is a political reflection on the imperative of history, and it borders on Nyamndi’s political philosophy with regard to good governance. It also reveals his psycho-moral formulation as regards the amelioration of the human condition by tracing where the “rain began to beat” us Cameroonians, to borrow from Achebe. It is true that other writers might have commented on some of the thematic concerns addressed in this book, but our interest is in Nyamndi’s ability to unify these diverse themes into a coherent ideo-aesthetic statement.

The book is divided into six chapters, and it treats a gamut of issues ranging from history, politics, culture, religion, campaign addresses/speeches, crime, gender, the plight of the youth, football, elections, the

Anglophone problem, etc. At the heart of these concerns is the crucial relevance of history.

The book clearly establishes the link between history and literature. The truth will always shock those who have lived their lives in the comfort of lies. As we have observed above, there is no future without the past. The author is worried about those who have deformed and distorted history for personal gains. He defines history from a purely new historicist critical standpoint when he opines that Cameroon’s history has suffered because it has been subjected to a pluralist interpretation that has led to regrettable deformation and distortion. The author frowns at and condemns historians whose mission is to distort Cameroon’s history. This is the ideo-historical framework which prompts and conditions the author’s reflections in this book. Nyamndi perceives this distortion of history as an act of tragic impatience and intellectual arrogance. National concerns should not be equated with political convenience; the author seems to be intuiting.

And because of the multiple narratives that issue from Cameroon history, Bernard Fonlon argues in *The Genuine Intellectual* (1978:84) that, “History can be false not only when lies are told, but also when essential facts are left out. Significant events are, therefore, the material from which History is made”. So many lies have been told about the history of Cameroon. Take for instance the UPC fighters in the 50s who fought against French imperialism in Cameroon; they were stigmatized as terrorists, subversive elements and Maquisards; but for others, they were nationalists whose mission was to decolonize Cameroon and free her from the shackles of the French oppressive machinery. For example Gahlia Gwangwa’a (1995:21-22) in his collection of poems entitled *Cry of the Destitute* describes those fighters as heroes of Cameroon’s independence in his collection of poems entitled *Cry of the Destitute* describes those fighters as heroes of Cameroon’s independence.

Whether Losing, Whether Winning is approached in this review from a purely new historicist critical standpoint/ perspective. What is therefore new historicism? It is a critical theory which emerged in the 80s as a counter discourse to new criticism which laid emphasis only on the linguistic beauty of a text.

If there is new historicism, there is also old historicism. According to Peter Barry, new historicism involves the parallel study of literary and non-literary texts which old historicism had ignored. The word parallel encapsulates the essential difference between this and earlier approaches to literature which had made some use of historical method. These earlier approaches made a hierarchical separation between the literary text which was the object of value, (more important than the historical text) and the historical background which was merely the setting and by definition of lesser worth [2].

The practice of giving 'equal weighting' to literary and non-literary material is the first and major difference between the 'new historicism' and 'old historicism'. *Whether Losing, Whether Winning* is approached here against the backdrop of the new historicist critical criteria as the author demonstrates the interface between form and ideology which is seen in his treatment of societal issues which border on politics, culture, history, religion, the problem of unemployment with their attendant effects of brain drain, crime wave, hygiene and sanitation, roads infrastructure, women and the economy.

In rejecting the views and positions of traditional historicists and new literary critics, the new historicist literary critic advocates the fact that literary texts are cultural artefacts that can tell the reader something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because the literary text is itself, part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning. The new historicist literary critic, therefore, perceives every work of art as the product of an interaction between the artist on the one hand, and a variety of social, political, cultural and historical determinants on the other. Hence, in appreciating *Whether Losing Whether Winning*, unless the theoretical criticism is conjoined to the experience of a definite social grouping whose position renders them revolutionary; our reading objectives will not be attained.

The position of new historicism, therefore, provides a counter-discourse to the American text-based approach known within the literary circles as New Criticism. The new critic gave an intrinsic analysis of literature, thereby treating a literary text as an autonomous, self-sufficient and self-sustained entity quite separate from society, history or any external causal agent. The new historicist literary critic, on the other hand, takes the contrary view and contends that literature is not an abstract or metaphysical object; it is the product of a particular socio-historical and cultural context and should, therefore, be interpreted against the backdrop of this context, and *Whether Losing Whether Winning* falls squarely in this category. That explains why the author hammers on history, politics and other crucial social concerns. Nyamndi's reflection on the social realities of his country ties with Ngugi's contention [8] that a writer should be engaged in everything under the sun: from politics to religion and the conservation of wild life; from politics to birth control, from communism to capitalism.

New historicism's approach to history contrasts sharply with that of Old historicism. This is because while new historicism emphasizes the blending of ideology and aesthetics, old historicism focuses only on the socio-political and cultural issues of a society.

Again, new historicists were not comfortable with the traditional historians' view of history. The questions posed by both traditional historians and new historians are quite different, and this is because these two approaches to history are based on very different views of what history is and how researchers/critics can know it. Traditional historians do ask the following questions: (1) "What happened?" and "What does the event tell us about the history?" In contrast to this view, new historicists ask the following questions, "How has the event been interpreted?" and "What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?" As opposed to the new historicists' stand or view on history, the traditional historicist believes that history is a series of events that have a linear, causal relationship: event 'A' caused event 'B'; event 'B' caused event 'C' and so on. In short, the traditional historian believes that history is progressive, that the human species is improving over the course of time, advancing in its moral, cultural and technological accomplishments. The traditional historicists, therefore, believe that history is both a presentation and representation of facts. As a counter-discourse to this ideological posture of history, the new historicist literary critic argues that history is essentially an interpretation of "facts". Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* argues,

[...] our understanding of what such facts mean, of how they fit within the complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which they occurred is, for new historicists, strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact. Even when traditional historians believe they are sticking to the facts, the way they contextualize those facts (including which facts are deemed important enough to report and which are left out) determines what story those facts will tell. From this perspective, there is no such thing as a presentation of facts; there is only interpretation [3].

The new historicist literary critic believes that reliable presentations and representations of history are difficult to produce. The following factors account for this: the first reason is the impossibility of an objective analysis. Like all human beings, historians live in a particular time and place, and their views of both past and current events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture. Traditional historicists may believe in their objective presentation of facts, but their views and comments of what is right and wrong or important and unimportant will strongly influence the ways in which they interpret events. Thus, the old historicist literary critic is neither a transcendent commenter nor an objective- chronicler because he/she is always implicated or influenced in the course by a particular ideology which helps to construct the object of knowledge. It is this subjective interpretation of the

history of Cameroon by some historians based on their political leanings that has resulted in the deformation and distortion of this history which Nyamndi condemns in *Whether Losing Whether Winning*. To the author, those who manoeuvre and manipulate situations, distort historical facts and plot negative thoughts are doing a disservice to this nation. Nyamndi thinks that those who distort history for the sake of positions have mistaken commerce for culture and the collection of coins for the cultivation of minds.

History like the author himself puts it, is the key to our identity. According to the author there are three fundamental moments of Cameroon history, namely, the independence of East Cameroon on the 1st of January 1960, the UN Plebiscite of 11 February 1961 and the independence of British South Cameroons on the 1st of October 1961. These historical epochs must be revisited to ascertain where the rain began to beat us. Going by this, the Anglophone Problem is re-articulated by delving into its historicity. The author sees this problem as institutional emanating from two decisions made after reunification; namely, the 1972 referendum that dismantled the federal structures and the 1984 presidential decree that nullified the unitary state. The death of the federal state in 1972 resulted in the lack of security for the Anglophone Cameroonians (151).

The book also preoccupies itself with the fundamental laws of the land. The author's argument is that the frequent modification of a country's constitution can bring about instability in that country. Drawing largely from the American experience, Nyamndi cautions the powers that be to handle the Cameroonian constitution with care because that is the foundation on which this nation, called Cameroon stands. The American constitution has been amended 27 times, and the last time that it was amended was in 1961. If the constitution which is the fundamental law of the land is not handled with care, then it is not worth the paper on which it was crafted.

Crime and social misdemeanor are some of the concerns that the author handles in this book. As a symbolic embodiment of the strict conscience of the society, Nyamndi perceives crime as an index of underdevelopment. Crime in any society can interrupt the rhythm and harmony of people and of their environment; and the consequences of this are devastating: distrust, loss of integrity, insecurity and threatened economic climate. There is a saying that a rambunctious child whose id has not yet been brought under control by ego and the superego is full of the devil. Id is governed by the pleasure principle, and this is what pushes both the youth and adults to engage in crimes. Ego on the other hand is governed by the reality principle; and the superego is governed by the morality principle. This Freudian conflict between passion and morality has resulted in crime.

The author is emphatic on how crime can be checked and perpetrators brought to book. Some of the criminal activities that poison the very fiber of the society and even the human spirit are: deceit, jealousy, hatred, envy, lust, embezzlement, corruption, bribery, tax evasion, murder, theft and violence.

Cardinal Tumi's convocation discourse which adds to the rhetoric and oratorical part of this book is mind blowing and mind searching. As a consequence, this review will be incomplete without revisiting Cardinal Tumi's Convocation discourse in the University of Buea in 1998 which is presented in the text in its entirety. This is because the discourse focused on the Truth, and history is the twin brother of truth.

Cardinal Tumi's convocation discourse of 1998, titled "The Truth" dwelled on two types of truth, namely, the ontological truth and the scientific truth. Even though the man of God was addressing the students of the University of Buea on 21st of December, 1998, he was directly and indirectly talking to all of us. The fundamental questions raised in this discourse are many in number but varied in nature, but the most important ones are: How many of us have been economizing the truth? How often do we tell the truth in both private and public lives? How many of us have built our reputations on the ruins of others? How many of us have lied against our colleagues in our various offices for promotion and appointment? How many of us, especially teachers and Lecturers have made categorical assertions when in doubt, without proper investigation? How many of us have falsified documents in order to stay in the public service? The man of God concluded his discourse with the following:

Truth is that virtue that necessarily carries with it the joy and the splendor of spiritual beauty. Truth is beautiful in itself. You may be naturally and physically beautiful, but if you are a liar, you become ugly, and your beauty, which should be an image of the spiritual beauty of its creator, becomes disgusting and repulsive. (129)

When lies are told in the place of truth, pathways become pitfalls; human hearts are menaced by terror; happiness and success become elusive; there is endless struggle, instead of fulfilment, drudgery instead of pleasure. Reading through this book it is clear that Nyamndi's ideological and historical visions clarify certain concepts, reveal truths and propose a change in mentality and attitude.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be argued that by using the essay to comment on the human condition in the Cameroonian setting, G.D. Nyamndi has moved a step further than creative writers because he tends to approach reality scientifically and empirically.

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