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Ken Saro-Wiwa's art and the aesthetics of non-silence

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CHAPTER FIVE.

Ken Saro-Wiwa's Political Satires and the Hegemony of Corruption in the Postcolony.

> …in Nigeria honest men were prisoners and the thieves, free men.
>
> – Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Prisoners of Jebs*.

One of the prominent features of postcolonial African states is what Achille Mbembe (2001) has called "The banality of power" – the tendency of the power elite to exercise political power in a way which arrests development, breeds corruption, aborts the common good and cheapens the very essence of governance itself. This situation has created what one might call the *hegemony of corruption*, that is, the preponderance in the postcolony of a miscellany of institutional malfeasance, such as kleptomania, ethnic cronyism, nepotism, institutional gerrymandering and other social pathologies which continue to make Africa a hard site for accountable social and political practice.

In reflecting on the manner in which political power is constituted in the African postcolony, then, Mbembe contends that the "postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of

proportion…" (P.103). Following and modifying Mikhail Bakhtin (1965)[8], Mbembe identifies obscenity, the grotesque and an insufferable tendency for excess as some of the visible indications that frame relations of power in the postcolony.

In this chapter, I examine how political and moral corruption are textualized and dramatized in two of Ken Saro-Wiwa's political satires, namely, *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrook's prison*. Since, as we shall see, these narratives contain a litany of part historical and part imaginative representations of political corruption in the postcolony, I will show how the writer uses satire and allegory as part of his figural modalities to dramatize and critique how power in all its myriad forms is banalized and misused by those who capture and come to exercise it in Africa. But, crucially, by examining and interpreting the dramas of power as we find them in and out of Saro-Wiwa's texts, I hope to show how marginal imaginative discourses dysfunctionalize dominant utopia through the ideas and disidentificatory practices of insurgent characters.

Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Prisoners of Jebs* was written first in serialized form in the *Punch* Newspaper in Nigeria in 1977, and later revived in the *Vanguard*

[8] Mbembe's perspectives derive mainly from the work of The Russian critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. See Bakhtin's: *Rabelais and His world.* (trans. Helene Iswolsky)Bloomington, Indianna University Press, First Midland Book Edition, 1984. See particularly the chapters "The Grotesque Image of the Body and its Sources" (303-367) and "Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum" (368-436). Throughout this discussion however, I am concerned not so much with the grotesque bodily images of power as with the larger problematic of political and moral corruption and how these are textualized and artistically de-routinized in the texts under analysis.

Newspaper where it featured on a weekly basis from November 1985 to January 1987. The writer draws ample allusions from the political and economic happenings in Nigeria and by extension Africa, while creatively mediating these to suit his fictional purposes (see Author's note in *Prisoners of Jebs*). As Saro-Wiwa imaginatively chronicles the regular run of corruption in society, the narrative stream of *Prisoners of Jebs* flows almost seamlessly into a counterpart narrative, which he publishes as *Pita Dumbrok's Prison* in 1991.

In the *Prisoners of Jebs*, the writer systematically treats the phenomenon of corruption through the allegory of an island – called Jebs – built ostensibly by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) where elite prisoners from various countries of Africa would be kept to brainstorm on ways of finding answers to the economic, political and moral morass into which the continent has sunk. The site of the prison is Nigeria, first because it is the most populous African country and more significantly because it has the largest number of prisoners – its entire political class having been sacked and many of them jailed for corruption by the *ancien regime*. The contract for the construction of the prison is similarly awarded to Nigeria by the OAU, in recognition of that country's legendary profligacy in the spending of its petro-dollars. In order to create the semblance of a truly continental prison, however, Nigeria chooses to locate the prison on a dredged-up island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

From this point of the narrative onwards, Saro-Wiwa takes the reader on an incredible discursive climb on the mountain of corruption that is Nigeria. The Nigerian officials award the dredging of the proposed prison island to the Dutch at double the original cost in what comes to be called the "Double Dutch" in Nigerian contract parlance. The cost of building the prison itself is similarly over-inflated and re-awarded to the Bulgarians after the first awardee, Chief Popa, a Nigerian, absconds with the mobilization fee. Although the inexperienced Popa seeks the help and expertise of the Bulgarians, we are told:

> The Bulgarians were not impressed. They wanted the contract directly and not by proxy. They sent the Chief back empty-handed. The Chief returned home, abandoned the contract, went into hiding and that was that. The Nigerians made a show of looking for him. A solitary policeman was dispatched to trace him. He had no means of transportation, he said, and ended up in a bar somewhere in Ikorodu, a few miles from Lagos. And that too was that (3).

Indeed, as we find many more of such instances of unconscionable graft, the Jebs prison begins to emerge more and more like a parodic slice of the Nigerian state itself. This is so because since the prison draws its basic moral impulses from the larger Nigerian society, whatever happens in the Jebs prison occurs because such is already an accepted ethic in the Nigerian moral economy. The story of

Prisoners of Jebs ends with the eventual attack and apparent sinking of the prison into the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean by the Nigerian authorities. But one prisoner, Pita Dumbrok, a journalist, survives the attack on the prison and escapes to Nigeria.

Through this survivor, the writer retrieves the Jebs story under the new narrative name of *Pita Dumbrok's Prison*. This stretch of the narrative focuses basically on Pita's public memorialization of events in the Jebs prison, and the complex and tragic drama that his revelations generate. As the story ends, Pita is killed through a parcel bomb sent by the head of the country's ruling junta. And like a blast from the past, the Jebs prison re-emerges in the narrative as an island of tyranny.

One useful way of understanding Saro-Wiwa's *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrok's Prison* will be to recognize their double aesthetic character as narratives of anomie and as narratives of hope. As we read these narratives, it is possible to identify and track this dialectical tension between anomie and hope as they manifest in at least three different but interpenetrative levels of theme, technique and characterization. This means, for example, that if we are dismayed at the thematic level by the sheer immensity of moral decay reflected by the writer in his narratives, our hopes are revived by the equally pitiless caricatural censure the writer intrudes into his representation of corruption in society. As we shall see, the entire movement of these narratives is framed by this dynamic duality for even

where we find instances of oppression; we also find an active impulse in certain characters in the novels who resist repression.

Among the many facets of corruption covered by the writer in *Prisoners of Jebs* is the over-inflation of contract values, and the miscarriage of justice through kangaroo tribunals and courts. As we have already noted, Chief Popa is the ultimate *incorrigibilis* in the arena of contract scams. Although he has neither the technical know-how nor even the basic equipment to build the Jebs prison, he was awarded the contract. As he runs away with the money meant for the project, acquiring bogus chieftaincy titles and throwing wild street parties, the contract is again re-awarded to the Bulgarians at many times the original cost and the prison is finally built:

> Thus was the Jebs prison built at many times its true cost. It was a truly beautiful prison with manicured lawns, clean cells in dormitory blocks, administrative offices, football fields, clinic and other civilized facilities. The Nigerians were very proud of their contribution to the erection of Jebs. They bragged about the numerous millions they had spent on it. But everyone knew the true story, so no one listened (3).

As the corrupt government is overthrown in Nigeria and a new government takes over power, Chief Popa is finally arrested and sent to the Jebs prison.

But once in prison, Chief Popa takes on a new role as the self-serving sycophantic adviser to the Director of the prison. Always in close collaboration with the Director who soon proves himself to be an incompetent and venal official, Chief Popa reveals the full range of his moral depravity. While other prisoners had cause time and again to criticize the Director on the inefficient manner in which the prison was run, we are told that Chief Popa's relationship with the Director was mainly opportunistic:

> Chief Popa was a great organizer and threw himself into organizing a faction whose duty it was to defend the Director at all times. For his effort, Chief Popa was rewarded with the Director's ear. In this ear were bags of rice, cartons of corned beef, cartons of milk, puncheons of alcohol, crates of tobacco and sundry other good things of life. Popa grew fat on the Director's ear (10).

Mbembe has identified flattery and the frequent adulation of the putative perfection of the wielders of power as part of the pleasures and liturgies of power in the postcolony. As Mbembe puts it:

> To ensure the reproduction of such an economy of pleasure, the posts and palaces and public places have been filled with buffoons, fools and clowns at various levels, offering a variety of services – journalists, insiders, clerks,

> hagiographers, censors, informers…, praise singers, courtiers… Their function is to preach before the fetish of power the fiction of perfection. Thanks to them, the postcolony has become a world of narcissistic self-gratification. (P.123)

But flattery is not offered by the postcolonial subject for its own sake. As we find amply illustrated in *Prisoners of Jebs*, praise has its rewards. For his flattery of power, Chief Popa lands himself right at the centre of a system of patronage from which he draws immense gratification for his sustenance.

In his book *The trouble with Nigeria*, the writer Chinua Achebe suggests that "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership….the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership"(1). We find a classic example of this failure in the Director of the Jebs prison. The Director is corrupt, avaricious and criminally covetous. Just as important public offices in Nigeria are never occupied by individuals on the basis of their ability to perform creditably, so too was the Director of the Jebs prison appointed on the basis of clannish interests that needed to be protected. The very values that underpin the selection of the Director are outlandish and tend to confirm that corruption is indeed the cornerstone of public office in the dark world of the narrative. For instance, when the time comes for the appointment of the

Director, we are told that there was an initial reluctance and hesitation by people to apply for the job because of a fear for responsibility. But when a decision is made to "sweeten" the position of Director by attaching unconscionable perks and privileges to that office, a deluge of applications pour in:

> It was therefore made clear to all that the Director would be in charge of all employment in the prison. He would have a special ration of "essential commodities" every week. The accounts of the prison would not be audited until a year after the Director's tenure of office had expired. The Director would have free housing, a prison vehicle for his use, another vehicle for his wife for the purpose of shopping, and yet a third for his children. Since, in Lagos, even numbered cars were in use on specific days and odd-numbered cars on other days of the week, it meant that the Director would have six cars at his disposal.

Now, an important part of the hegemony of corruption in society as reflected in the narrative is the phenomenon of *excess.* In the *Prisoners of Jebs*, the writer conveys this excess to us by presenting the tiny but significant details such as we have seen in the many perks and privileges attached to the office of the Director. It is from these minor acts of excess, the writer seems to say, that the monster of corruption is bred. This is illustrated by the fact that as soon as he assumes office the Director, already used to unearned comfort, begins what for him must have

been an urgent task: to loot the treasury of the prison. He mismanages both the abundant food supply and the finances of the prison to such an extent that soon enough, the prisoners begin to complain of shortages. But much like what most African political rulers would do when caught in the web of popular disaffection, the Director moves quickly to avert a revolt by the prisoners by convening a diversionary talk-shop where the inmates debate myriad issues that concern Africa, while momentarily forgetting their own particular deprivations in the Jebs prison.

Another dimension of corruption that is captured in the narrative is the phenomenon of institutionalized miscarriage of justice in society. Courts or other judicial institutions are always pejoratively termed as kangaroo institutions if they pervert the course of justice and become dispensers of injustice. Here, the writer uses allegorical personification as a trope to concretize judicial corruption by creating the character Joromi the Kangaroo to represent judges and other judicial officers who dispense judicial travesties that plague most postcolonial societies. Joromi is presented in the narrative as a kind of anthropomorphic character. This means that he has obvious animal features as well as posseses every conceivable human attribute.

In the narrative, the Kangaroo presides over two notable cases, one in a court of law and another on a football pitch in Jebs Prison where he functions as the referee

in a highly contentious football match. And in both cases, Joromi dramatizes his deplorable skill as an averter of justice. Indeed, the image of the corrupt judicial officer is a recurring image in the writings of Saro-Wiwa, suggesting that he has little faith in a judicial system in which custodians of the law obtain bribes in order to derail the course of justice. But this acute faithlessness in the supposed servants of the law may have been forged both by general perception and by the writer's own personal experience. As an activist and writer, Saro-Wiwa had been arrested, arraigned and detained several times in prison custody, and had come to closely observe the perversions prevalent in the justice system. Some of these perversions have been imaginatively reconstructed by the writer in his novels such as *Lemona's tale*, where a court judge sexually exploits and actually impregnates a state prisoner on death row. In his detention diary A *Month and a day*, Saro-Wiwa has also recorded how judicial officers serve the course of dictatorship. He speaks of "… the magistrate writing in her book/ punishment she knows is undeserved/ the moral decrepitude/mental ineptitude/ lending dictatorship spurious legitimacy/ cowardice masked as obedience" (221).

Knowing first hand the danger posed to society and human dignity and freedom by the phenomenon of corruption therefore, Saro-Wiwa deploys such rhetorical devices as satire, parody and high burlesque to expose and ridicule institutions of corruption. As an expressive literary device, satire is a combination of mockery and ridicule executed through a caustic wit. Through satire, the writer is able to

confront society with its vices and follies, and seeks to discredit these by using trenchant spoofs and send-ups. But beyond ridicule, satire also functions as a cultural corrective by which the artist tries to reset society's moral compass, by suggesting an alternative path through which society may regenerate its more positive mores. As any judicious reader of Saro-Wiwa's *Prisoners of Jebs* may notice, throughout this narrative, corrective social critique sallies forth right from the grooves of ridicule.

In his study of *Prisoners of Jebs*, for example, Amen Ahunuwangho (2000:63-74) has examined Ken Saro-Wiwa's use of language as a tool for the effective representation of a socio-political landscape denuded of moral values. His essay explores how Saro-Wiwa's use of a range of communicative strategies enhances his witty swipe at the cultural decay of the Nigerian society. In a similar way, Angrey (2000:95-106) argues that Saro-Wiwa's use of humour and sarcasm succeed in the way in which those devices expose the ugly underbelly of society. Placing Saro-Wiwa's novel within what he calls the Voltarian or Diderotesque tradition where art seeks mainly to propagate moral truth and liberty, Angrey explores the seriousness of purpose which undergirds the writer's humorous representation of an otherwise debilitating and pathetic malaise

As we have noted earlier, in his attempt to ridicule a corrupt justice system, the writer creates a Kangaroo image which he both animalizes and personifies. We are

told that the Kangaroo has a"…head the size of a sheep, large ears so it could hear the smallest sound, long, powerful hind legs and rather small forelegs or hands…" (51). But as a half-man the Kangaroo also presides over cases and, as we find, has a large pouch around its waistline – something of a secret vault in which handsome sums of bribe money is stored. The Kangaroo visits the prison and here, the writer spends considerable attention on the perversion of the Kangaroo. The prisoners learn of the arrival of the Kangaroo and are terrified,

> Because apart from his power over individuals, he was a terror to the social fabric of individual nations. Because society exists on the notion that there is right and wrong and that the demarcation between them is clear and unmistakable. But when the Kangaroo makes it possible for right to become wrong and vice versa, then the nation reaps a harvest of turmoil. (55).

But beyond his minor temporary triumphs however, the Kangaroo is brought to retributive justice. He falls ill in Jebs prison, and is hospitalized. Through his sickness, the Kangaroo's vulnerability and frailty is exposed and mocked. As the writer describes his state in the hospital, we sense a hint of aesthetic premonition on the death of the Kangaroo (57). The Kangaroo survives his ill health however, but is apparently blasted into oblivion along with the Jebs prison at the end of the narrative.

Now considering all of this aesthetic criticism of society's institutions, it strikes us as a telling paradox that Ken Saro-Wiwa was in the real world ultimately convicted of spurious charges by a kangaroo tribunal set up by a morally decadent military junta. How can the paradox implied by this cruel inversion of fate be explained, and what is its augury for the creative imagination?

Here, it may be contended that the role of the conscientious artist in every society is to imagine a sane moral trajectory on which society may move and have its being. But to do this, the artist must cultivate the sensitivity to feel the slightest nuance of injustice, and demonstrate the courage to denounce oppression. This is perhaps the only way in which an artist can maintain creative integrity and contribute to the creation of a more humane world. Femi Osofisan (1997:35) seems to be canvassing a similar creative fidelity to justice on the part of the artist when he says: "Without the impulse for justice, for compassion, for laughter, the lungs of artistic creativity will starve of oxygen, and atrophy, and usher in the death of our human civilization".

But sometimes, as the exemplary fate of Saro-Wiwa shows, the impulse for justice may lead to a painful and personal tragedy. Yet, a writer's idealized premonition on the death of injustice remains his finest prophetic gift to his society.

Throughout much of his literary production including his secret detention letters and diaries smuggled out of prison, Saro-Wiwa demonstrates a consistent distaste for the interference of the military in the political affairs of any society. We have already seen above how in his *A Month and a Day* he lampoons judicial officers for lending "spurious legitimacy" to dictatorships. But it is in the *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrook's Prison* that we find the most sustained aesthetic critique of military politics. In both narratives, the writer conducts his most incendiary attack on dictatorship through his characters, and so it is to these characters that must now turn in order to see how the novels lines of conflicts are drawn, and how questions of domination, identity and freedom are projected and then struggled over in the narratives.

The central character of the Jebs series is Pita Dumbrok. But Pita was introduced into the narrative series in rather serendipitous circumstances. In the "Author's note" of *Prisoners of Jebs*, Saro-Wiwa tells us that when a young journalist, Pita Okute, wrote a "rude and incompetent" review of the writer's first novel *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa in an uncommon exercise of artistic license imaginatively sentences Pita to serve time in the Jebs prison. While in prison, Pita undergoes something of an ideological metamorphosis – from an almost moronic observer of events in a bird cage, to an ideologue for justice and for a responsible and accountable government. As the stench of corruption and moral depravity in the prison

becomes stronger and more reprehensible, the more Pita's sense of propriety and justice is wounded forcing him to take a stand against injustice and corruption.

For example, when the Director of the prison becomes pompous and arrogant as to begin to stockpile implements of war with which he was to engage Nigeria in a rumoured salvation war, Pita decides that something must be done to save Nigeria from its moral and cultural dereliction. Although Nigeria may be reeling from misrule and moral vandalism, Pita thought, it still held an attractive promise of greatness and "remained the main hope of the African continent, of Black people throughout the world." (146). Seized by this great sense of optimism and patriotism, Pita dedicates his life and effort to bring about a new Nigeria. As the narrator puts it:

> Pita had come to know that grumbling, fear, indolent worry and endless cynicism had no place in the new Nigeria of his dreams. Action was called for, action backed by thought, in concert with like minds, of whom he knew there were many. To this he dedicated himself… He longed for an opportunity to return to Nigeria. He vowed that whenever he got back, he would apply himself rigorously to engineer change, even in his little way. He would set an example for others to follow. He would persist and persevere while he lived. He had reason to hope that some day, his beloved

> country would fashion a civilization that would contribute to the mainstream of human history (147).

This is the first significant point in the development of Pita's character in the narrative because having subjected him to a deliberate process of social tutelage during which Pita was able observe the many ills of society, the writer is finally ready to invest his character with the rational and ideological agency with which he may imagine and bring about a new social order. Henceforth, Pita's ideas so lucidly expressed above are to form the core of the ideological and moral manifesto by which he must organize his interventions in the world of the narrative. This is why we are told that these ideas changed Pita so "completely, even the Director was to notice the change" (147). Through this piece of information, the writer tries to hint us that the illicit narrative of corruption and injustice dominating the universe of the story was about to be challenged and changed, and that Pita would function as the new moral centre of the novel.

As the story unfolds, Pita's role as the narrative's moral voice becomes stronger. His role as umpire in a game of football in the prison is particularly instructive here. These games of football were organized by the Director as a further attempt to divert the attention of the prisoners from their worries about the maladministration of the prison. But this is a sick and illogical game governed by unjust and contorted rules. It is a game where losers are awarded undue victory,

and the very essence of justice is mocked. In the first game, the Nigerian prisoners were ranged against the rest of the Jebsian prisoners with the Kangaroo and Pita Dumbrok as the officiators. After much bizarre argument and intimidation during which the Nigerian side drastically changed the rules, victory is awarded to the Nigerians rather than to the Jebsians who actually scored the only winning goal. Characteristically, the Kangaroo upholds this obnoxious decision despite the loud protestations of Pita Dumbrok and the Jebsian side who walked off the pitch in disgust.

The second game repeats the same horrendous injustice, but tends to dramatize a more nuanced and identitarian character to the injustice of the game. Here, the Nigerian prisoners from the three majority ethnic groups known as the "Wazobians" are pitched against their compatriots from the minority groups known simply as "Others". Again, because the rules are convoluted and unjust the "Wazobians" win by sleight of hand, thus denying the "Others" of their rightful victory. As Pita Dumbrok was in jail for rejecting the outcome of the first game, the Kangaroo was the sole arbiter in the second game. This is how the narrator describes the end of the game:

> The Wazobians celebrated noisily all the way to their dormitories. The Others grumbled timidly about the way they had been cheated of a game which they had drawn if not won outright. The Director, Chief Popa and the

> Kangaroo ordered them to stop grumbling or they would find no food to eat and water to drink. The Others obeyed without further ado (161).

Now, it seems evident that these football games are in fact allegorical idioms through which the writer conveys the injustices and oppression embedded in the larger society. His use of the football idiom, a game with supposedly clear, unambiguous and universally applicable rules, is poignant and effective because it makes the breach of those rules strikingly offensive to our sense of propriety and fair play.

But as we have seen, there are also specific artistic projections of majority ethnic triumphalism and minority subjugation implicated in the soccer idiom, just as we find it in the real world. The Wazobians as we encounter them in the text represent the three dominant ethnic groups namely, the Hausa, the Ibo and the Yoruba in Nigeria. To be sure, the word "Wazobia" is an aggregation of three monosyllabic words taken from the three dominant language groups – "*Wa*" is Yoruba, "*Zo*" is Hausa, while "*Bia*" is an Ibo word. Translated, all three words mean "come" in the English language. But beyond linguistic aggregation, the writer's message is that an aggregation of the elite factions of these three ethnic groups also constitutes the rapacious and dominant core of Nigerian political reality.

As we find in the narrative the privileges these dominant groups enjoy are, like their artistic soccer victories in the text, dubious and illegitimate. These privileges are at the expense of smaller and vulnerable groups. Through the subjugation of minority communities as piercingly demonstrated through the soccer metaphor in the text, the writer enables us to see how corruption and domination in Nigeria are ethnically framed. Similarly, through the unconscionable change of the rules of the soccer game by the dominating groups and the complicity of the Kangaroo in the text, the writer underlines both the immorality and illogicality of hegemonic "common sense".

But the politics of domination does not go unchallenged as the oppositional intervention of Pita Dumbrok shows. By contesting the obnoxious decision of the Kangaroo, Pita was saying in effect that he was against *politics-as-usual*, the kind of rogue politics which steals a people's rights and happiness and replaces it with sorrow and want. Pita's revolt more of which we are to see later in the second narrative *Pita Dumbrok's Prison*, reflects the impulse in all oppressed people to refuse domination and their preparedness, if necessary, to endure any suffering or privations which such resistance may attract.

As the tension between the military authorities in Nigeria and the Director of Jebs reaches a decisive point, Jebs prison is invaded and blown into the sea with all its

inmates except Pita perishing with the prison. As the sole survivor of the attack, Pita escapes the ruins of the prison by swimming to the shores of Nigeria.

Once in Nigeria, Pita finds himself once again in the eye of the storm as his serialization in the media of his experience in the Jebs prison is stopped by a military government too embarrassed by its own misadventure during the invasion. Angered by the junta's draconian measures against freedom of expression, Pita becomes openly critical of military misrule and is soon arrested after a massive manhunt. During his interrogation by Captain Ita, a security officer, Pita questions the legitimacy of the military in government and characterizes their intervention in governance a "great betrayal". He says:

> Ever since their initial intervention in the politics of the nation, look what has happened: they not only led us into civil war, they've not only led us into civil war, they've not only decimated themselves, but they have been without a vision for the country. They've failed to fight corruption and disorder, which is the only reason their intervention has been welcomed; indeed, they have immersed themselves in corruption and caused confusion enough to benefit by it. They have now formed a dangerous club of wounded men, alas, and I am afraid that if they are not stopped from further infecting the body of the nation, they will lead us all to perdition (*Dumbrok's Prison*: 201).

Throughout the story line particularly in *Dumbrok's Prison* where his character is most fully realized, Pita is used to represent the idealistic and courageous critic of oppression who is ready to sacrifice himself for the betterment of society. When for instance his friend Asa reminds Pita of the dangers posed by the oppressive system, Pita's reply reveals this self-sacrificing sentiment: "Danger? Slavery? You mean? Death. And I would want to fight it single handedly, if necessary" (209).

But Pita serves an even more symbolic purpose in the narrative. Through him, we see the nature and limits of idealism revealed, just as we also see the power of ideas to instigate feelings of revolt in individuals and groups. For example, when Pita and Asa go underground in order to avoid harassment by the state security goons, Pita writes and circulates a revolutionary "letter" to his compatriots in which he recounts the proud history of Africa, and identifies foreign interests and their local collaborators as being responsible for Africa's ruin. Pita then calls for a search for the Jebs prison where he believes the seed for a renascent society had been sown by some progressive prisoners who opposed all forms of domination. Pita's ideas expressed in his letter actuate other journalists like Andizi and Biney to begin a search for the Jebs prison. Obviously influenced by Pita Dumbrok's idealism, Biney says:

> I dream all the time… I dream of a job for all young people; I dream of a good education for our people. I dream of a higher standard of living, I

> dream of peace, I dream of progress. I dream of a world where caring will be living, of a world where we'll all hold hands and share, a world which will banish wars, hunger and disease *(Dumbrok's Prison*: 142)

Actuated by this vision of an ideal world, then, Andizi and Biney set out on a quixotic search for the Jebs prison at the ultimate cost of their lives. If on the surface the deaths of Andizi and Biney in their search for the Jebs prison represent the limits of idealism or even the death of utopia, their dream of an "Other" world symbolizes at a deeper level a hopeful and refreshing imaginative template of a just world to which we may aspire. Through their dreams, it seems, these characters strive to annihilate the tyranny of the present. Biney's admission that his "dreams" derive from "Reading Pita Dumbrok. Thinking Pita Dumbrok Analyzing Pita Dumbrok", underlines the power of ideas to influence people into positive action (*Dumbrok's Prison*: 143).

But besides Pita, another character through which the writer canvasses his ideas on military politics and issues of governance in general is his urbane and outspoken female character, Asa. A journalist and later wife of Pita Dumbrok, Asa had come to know about the workings of the military through her intimate love relationship with Rear Admiral Vicko, the naval officer who had led the military offensive on the Jebs prison. Asa had known Vicko in her youth but meeting him years again

years later in her young adulthood, a relationship had developed between them. But this was an affair doomed to fail because of ideological differences.

As their relationship develops, Asa becomes increasingly critical of the military institution which Vicko represents. When for instance Vicko excitedly tells her of his successful 'conquest' of the Jebs prison and the capture of an important prisoner (who turns out, in fact, to be Pita Dumbrok), Asa deprecates the promotion which Vicko's "success" might fetch him. She tells Vicko:

> I should feel ashamed, if I were you, to be styled an Admiral knowing that my entire command has but one or two creaky and unseaworthy vessels, that we cannot service these vessels because we lack spare parts, that we cannot go on training missions because there are no funds, there are no enough barracks for my officers and ratings and so on and so forth. In these circumstances, your promotions appear to me to be like games children play (*Dumbrok's Prison*: 161).

Throughout her uneasy affair with Rear Admiral Vicko, Asa never fails to criticize the oppressive military institution. On occasion, she tells Vicko in quite caustic terms that "sometimes you look silly in those uniforms" (161), and on another occasion she says to him "you make me sick, and I think the sooner you stopped intervening in the lives of the people, the better the country will become" (182)

It seems clear that the writer uses the relationship between Asa and Vicko to launch a moral inquest into the failure of the state, and to reveal the role of the military in that failure. Through Asa, the writer tries to ventilate what is in effect a collective moral rebuke on the political adventurism of the military in Nigeria and much of Africa. But the military earns this rebuke when they intervene disastrously in the political affairs of the country, acting extra-legally and limiting the people's freedoms through restrictive decrees. In the narrative, the military authorities impose censorship on the press by forbidding the *Daily Observer* from publishing any story that might embarrass the junta. When the investigative story on the Jebs prison prepared by Asa for the newspaper was barred, her editor tells her ominously: "we have instructions not to publish your story on the Jebs prison" (*Dumbrok's Prison*: 173). At the same time, and in the same fashion, Pita Dumbrok's serialization is stopped from appearing in the *Quarterly Messenger*.

Within such a totalitarian context therefore, Ken Saro-Wiwa's use of idealistic and self-sacrificing characters to challenge and provide a rational counterpoint to dominant rationality is very much consistent with the tendency in marginal narratives to project a different perspective on society. This different view frequently comes across to us as something of "higher dream" to which oppressed people aspire and work towards. This is why in the face of the insufferable realities that confront them, Saro-Wiwa's characters such as Pita, Biney, Asa and Andizi seem so consumed in some kind of positive aesthetic trance, dreaming and

working for a better society with infectious and ultimately suicidal passion. When, therefore, Biney tells us that he “dreams” of a world where hunger and deprivation would be banished, he is invariably inviting us to share in a new imaginary away from the cruel cannibalism of dominant order of things. It is these “dreams”, in short, that serve as the ideological lamp by which marginal discourses are guided as they negotiate their detour from the dark world of hegemonic thought.

Now, if as we have noted, Pita Dumbrok’s revolutionary ideas actuated Asa, Biney and Andizi to spearhead a struggle for societal change, the effect of these ideas are even more profound on Captain Ita, Pita Dumbrok’s interrogator. As soon as Pita and Asa emerged from their hideout, it falls to Captain Ita to interrogate Pita on his “subversive” activities against the state. But meeting face to face with Pita during the interrogation session, Captain Ita gains the boon of an ideological reawakening. While in military service, Captain Ita along with some of his colleagues had been wrongfully detained and tortured on the false allegation of plotting to overthrow the government. Although he narrowly escaped death by firing squad himself, Captain Ita’s best friend, Alade, was convicted and publicly executed by the authorities. Captain Ita was summarily discharged from the armed forces thus terminating his career, despite his innocence. Interestingly, all of these circuitous allegations and trials had followed an entirely flawed process, presided by vindictive officials who simply wanted to perpetuate their power.

When therefore during his interrogation Pita Dumbrok speaks of the unjust social system, of the misuse of power by those who hold public office and of the necessity to change the prevailing decadent order, he was invariably speaking to Captain Ita's experience of injustice, and evoking in him a feeling of *déjà vu*. When Pita tells him of the despicable role the Kangaroo had played in averting the course of justice in the Jebs prison, Captain Ita is jolted into a spiral of remembrance of a fraudulent judicial process that had victimized him and claimed the life of his best friend. This is how Captain Ita himself explains his feelings at this point of the interrogation:

> Pita's words here sounded very familiar. My mind went back to the court-martial and the picture of my friend, Alade, tied to the stakes and the message which he asked me to deliver to his aged parents. I did not say anything for some minutes. My silence must have said something to Pita. He asked me for water. I got up to fetch him it. I found that the refrigerator in the outer office no longer worked and had to send one of the messengers for a soft drink. All that while, the picture of the Kangaroo danced in my brain. And I saw the picture of my friend tied to the stakes. I was very upset (Dumbrok's Prison: 193).

Revulsed by an unjust system that literally grinds innocent and well-meaning people to dust, Captain Ita defies his security bosses and controversially sets Pita

Dumbrok free from detention. Justifying his decision to his boss, Alhaji Biga, Captain Ita says: “I won’t sit here and watch injustice practiced on an innocent man. I interrogated Pita Dumbrok. He has nothing but love for this country. He wants nothing but a better country” (*Dumbrok’s Prison*: 272). A bitter disagreement erupts between Captain Ita and his bosses over his refusal to re-arrest Pita Dumbrok, but also because of previous animosities. As events unfold, Captain Ita kills Alhaji Biga and Rear Admiral Vicko in an act of vengeance.

Throughout *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrok’s Prison* as we have seen, Ken Saro-Wiwa uses his characters to dramatize the complexities of nation formation, as well to reflect the tussles that ensue between the progressive and regressive forces at play in society. Through the actions and reactions of his many characters, the writer conveys the image of a volatile moral community in which power is contested and the struggle for a better society is worth dying for. Using his idealistic characters, Saro-Wiwa enables us to have a mental glimpse of an alternative utopia of the ‘nation’; but significantly it is also through the experiences and travails of these characters that the writer conducts much of his artistic expose` of the degeneration of society.

For example, as they embark on their search for the Jebs Prison, Andizi and Biney pass through seven islets where they are confronted by one striking form of moral disorder or the other. In the first islet, the “islet of laziness”, Biney and Andizi

encounter an unusual community where the people endure unspeakable hardship and starvation right in the midst of abundance. The land is fertile and their trees are fruiting in full bloom, but the inhabitants are too lazy to even harvest the riches of their land and they depend entirely on strangers from whom they beg for food. As soon as Biney and Andizi arrive on the shores of the community, the inhabitants of the community set upon them with begging bowls saying: “Please give us some oranges, we haven’t eaten in a long time. There has been a great famine in the land” (*Dumbrok’s Prison*: 223). Biney and Andizi are shocked for “it was incredible that they should be begging for that very staple food which hung in abundance all around” (223). But moved by pity, the duo fell to feeding the entire community:

> It was quite a task feeding all the inhabitants of the islet, for as soon as the news got round that a great feast had been organized by strange men from across the seas, every single inhabitant of the islet came forward to partake of it. And no sooner had they had an orange each than they lay on the ground and slept. Only the first man whom we met remained awake to thank us for our kindness. (*Dumbrok’s Prison*: 224).

Through this pitiable incident at the islet, the writer tries to expose and critique the dependency syndrome that plagues most postcolonial African states.

The rest of the six islets we shall call respectively the "islet of filth and revelry", the "islet of religious discord", and the "islet of thieves, the "islet of majority domination" the "islet of ignorance" and the "islet of money worship". As their immoral tags suggest, each of these islets is a symbolic location for depravity.

In general artistic parlance, allegories work through the use of symbols and other figural forms of representation to comment on specific aspects of human life or existence. Thus the figural forms that are used become indirect reflections or dramatizations of the virtues or vices of the subject of imitation. An allegory is therefore "the expression of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence"[9]. George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* a narrative in which the writer uses animal characters to dramatize the inner failings and hypocrisy of the communist ideology, is considered to be one of the most powerful allegorical novels of the twentieth century.

Further, because allegories typically embody of elements of mockery, imitation and criticism, they are regularly used by dissident writers in their attempt to expose the moral limits and deficiencies of dominant order of things. In short, whenever it is used by marginal writers, an allegory functions as a weapon of symbolic exposition of aspects of society through mockery and caricature. In this

[9] See: "Allegorical Interpretation Today" in *The Watchtower* June 15 2005, P.12.

way, allegory serves as a tool of critical engagement with society's dominant ideology.

In the particular context of *Prisoner's of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrok's Prison* respectively, we find that Saro-Wiwa uses the allegory of the Kangaroo to reflect the miscarriage of justice in society, in much the same way as he employs the allegory of the islets as his artistic modality to uncover miscellaneous aspects of a society at odds with itself.

Through the trope of the islets of perversion in *Dumbrok's Prison*, the writer is able to artistically spotlight different facets of moral corruption in society. In the islet of majority domination for example, Ken Saro-Wiwa enables us once again to see the unjustness of a community where the daily pleasures and rhythms of life are rigged in favour of the strong at the expense of the weak. Here, the writer does not only reveal the crass inequality that marks the relations between people in society, but he also uses the body as a *sign* of social disproportion and inequality. Hence we are told that in this islet the powerful are "Fat people" who "blow farts, pollute the atmosphere and drive the Thin People away" (252). The "Thin People" of course are those who are brutalized and decentred by an unjust system, they are those whose plight poses a critical moral question to society. If the "obesity" of the powerful is a signifier of criminal excess, the "thinness" of the weak represents an acute scarcity of justice and equity in society.

It is interesting that the writer spotlights the ills of society in a manner that makes them appear to us as ugly scenes in a travelogue. As the characters row their boat from one islet to the other, the ills of society strike us one after the other as narrated motion pictures through which we are able to see a universe in the middle of a moral meltdown. I suggest that this allegorical technique is particularly effective because it not only helps to concretize the different images in our minds, but it also compels us to take a stand and repudiate the moral odiousness behind those images.

But perhaps more importantly, by using the adventures of such positively idealistic characters as Biney and Andizi to expose the various facets of a deformed society, the writer is able to directly enlarge the critical agency of the oppositional characters in the narrative. For example, it is thanks to these characters that we are able to know the specific inner failings of society, and can therefore avoid the hazy and imprecise understanding which a generalized gaze at society often dooms us to make.

As we have seen, the world of *Prisoners of Jebs* and *Pita Dumbrok's Prison* is a world of struggle. Throughout these narratives we find this internecine interface between the competing cosmologies of oppression and opposition, hope and anomie as well as death and an Apollonian love of life.

But throughout these tussles, in a manner consistent with marginal narratives, the writer *takes sides* against domination. Using satire, parody and allegory as some of his artistic devices, Saro-Wiwa tries to uncover the failings and illogicality of dominant order of things. Wherever he ridicules and satirizes unjust social systems, he invariably challenges us to re-imagine and reinvent an alternative order where equity and freedom may thrive. Through parody and allegory the writer manages to process reality to us indirectly and artistically, and thus spares us the raw and inordinate force of the original. And his humour even as he narrates the inner logic of an unjust world helps to lessen our pain – the pain of recognition of horror.

But in the end, it is through his insurgent characters such as Pita, Asa, Biney, Andizi and others that the writer mainly concretizes the oppositional ideology of his art. By working consciously outside and against the dominant episteme, these characters enable us to see that it is possible to perceive and experience the world differently. That some of these characters could actually endure all kinds of intimidation and deprivation, and eventually die for the cause they believe in, can only be seen as a moving parable on the unflagging commitment of dissident narratives to uncrown the discourses of oppression.

Finally, in a striking case of art prefiguring life, these narratives actually presage events in the life of Ken Saro-Wiwa himself. Saro-Wiwa always criticized the

Nigerian state for oppressing its minority citizens and communities. Like Pita Dumbrok, he knew the power of the written word and enlisted it in his struggles for equity and justice. And like his character Pita, Saro-Wiwa's life was snuffed out by an illegitimate military junta. Yet even in death, the ideas of Ken Saro-Wiwa continue to shape and inspire struggles for social and ecological justice not only in his native Nigeria but in the world at large. And therein lay the redemptiveness of his death.