

Contextualizing Postcolonial Niches in the Poetic Genre: A comparative Analysis of Mathew Takwi and Martin Carter

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Abstract

Colonialism where ever it happened left similar challenges for the citizens of the postcolonial state. Be it in Africa or the Caribbean, the war against colonialism was fought heavily with the pen as with the gun and other tools. With the end of colonialism, drastic changes were expected in all areas of life as citizens were free to govern themselves. Since these changes have never taken place, the ills of colonialism are yet to be addressed and leaders in the postcolonial era have either become puppets of their colonial masters or tyrants who have no respect for the lives and needs of citizens. Consequently, the works of protest poets are even more relevant today than they were half a century ago. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the poetry of two such post-colonial poets: Mathew Takwi, a contemporary Cameroonian poet best known for his dissonance, radicalism and unconventionality, and Martin Carter, an award-winning Guyanese poet and one of the most important poets of the Caribbean, best known for his *Poems of Resistance from British Guiana* (1954), his political activism and his revolutionary vision. Though both poets are temporally and geographically far apart, their responses to prevailing societal circumstances are similar. Theirs are voices resisting and dismantling imperialist structures and advocating the common humanity of human beings—the kind of protest that the world may need now more than ever before. Using the Marxist theory, this paper contextualizes post-colonial niches in the works of these two poets, advocating a new vision not only for the Caribbean region but also for Africa.

KEY WORDS: *colonial, post-colonial, neo-colonial, liberation, structures, society, revolutionary*

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Introduction

Poetry as a genre of literature is as old as creation itself. It has existed since the moment when Adam upon seeing Eve exclaimed, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called woman.” Since the beginning of time, therefore, poetry as an art form has been impacting lives at different levels. However, Dalleo (2006) argues that poetry has often been seen as fictional, weak and unreliable, since it is based on the flow of emotions. Leacock (2010) adds to this misunderstanding when he argues that the end of the poet and poetry itself is at hand because of its inability to make meaningful contributions to the society. and other scholars are therefore turning their attention to the auto-biography and or other genres of literature which capture society in a more obvious manner. But, Kimmel (2000) argues that poetry reaches deep into the essential questions of human existence and that poetry probes underlining issues with which other genres hardly engage. Understood in this context, poetry becomes the core of literature, by reason of its fundamentality to the distillation of meaning from human lives.

Kimmel goes even further, to explore the notion that life itself may be regarded as a poetics of agency. This notion highlights the importance of poetry in life in that it constitutes a frame for the understanding of human existence. When in “Choruses from The Rock” poet T. S. Eliot asks, “Where is the Life we have lost in living” (l. 11), his question implies that merely being alive is not poetic; rather, living with meaning captures the essence of poetry. It would seem, then, that the value of poetry resides in its ability to aid the quest for the production of meaning. Certainly such an observation deserves further engagement as we examine specific examples of the genre of poetry. Unfortunately, much of the critical discussion of colonial literature overlooks or marginalizes this facet of poetic reality: the ability of poetry to promote meaning by subverting colonial ideologies and structures that inhibit the search for the meaning in (and of) human lives. This paper focuses on the poetic deliberations of writers who

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seek to restore forgotten niches of poetic discourse so that poetry might better achieve what may well be regarded as its highest aims: the production of meaning and the liberation of human consciousness. Put another way, these poets produce meaning by accelerating the drive for social justice and humane nation building.

Despite the literary accomplishments of writers like Takwi and Carter, poetry has emerged as “one of the only forms of public communication that struggles to engender financial subsistence of its agents, (Sherry and Schouten 2002, p. 218). Somewhat ironically, poetry and academic research may be two of the few media that can be trusted (more or less) to represent “truth” on individual and collective levels. In performing this function, poetry creates niches of meaning that drive individual and societal change. Slowly but surely, as Sherry and Schouten also suggest, poetry has moved from the periphery of social and imaginative thought to center stage as every discipline is scrambling to make use of it—including medicine, mathematics, and education, among others (p.218). To Sherry and Schouten writing poetry is a variant of qualitative research since “it involves gathering data, particularly observational data from both external and internal environments” (p. 208). This dimension of poetry is particularly relevant to a discussion of Takwi and Carter in that they both produce data which “take the form of very specific sensory images [that are] derived variously from sources distant as well as immediate, [sources] such as memory, objects and artifacts, ambient environment, photographs, commercial media, other texts, interpersonal interactions, and conversations either initiated or overheard by us” (p. 226).

It is important to note, then, that an analysis of the post poetry benefits from (and is foregrounded in) the conception that poetry is a sub-scientific field of inquiry with knowledge construction processes that can be verified. Such a definition of poetry all but dismisses the notion of poetry as mere subjective opinion. Still, Scigaj (2015) laments that that the social scientific treatment of poetry or poetics often concentrates

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on the social use of discourse, effectively slighting the expressive aspect of the arts as reflections on profound human experiences. Perhaps presaging the need to resolve this apparent contradiction Stern (1998) applies a strategy of coupling a historical account of poetic criticism with a sampling of contemporary poetry written by consumer researchers. This undertaking would seem to demonstrate that poetry is a vehicle of researcher reflexivity as well as a form of research inquiry in its own right.

These niches of poetry, some of which have remained dormant or under-utilized, come in handy as weapons of war for both Mathew Takwi and Martin Carter as they engage with and seek to dismantle colonial vestures. As we will see, Takwi and Carter recall oft-forgotten niches of poetry to advance both the cause and the course of decolonization in countries still plagued by colonialism and neo-colonialism. Their poetry can be seen both as an agent for decolonisation and as a vehicle for the expression of complicated human thought and reason developed through other forms of research. To them, poetry is a vehicle for social action, scientific truth, research, transformation and decolonisation.

Further Contextualizing Mathew Takwi and Martin Carter

A few observations about the careers of these two post-colonial poets would supply a more extensive context for our discussion. Mathew Takwi is a distinguished member of the International Society of poets and the Secretary General of the Anglophone Writers Association, ACWA (Ngeh, Mbuh, & Stanley, 2015). Takwi has won several national and international literary awards, and his books include but are not limited to the following: *People Be Not Fooled: A Collection of Fifty Poems*, *On Their Knees: Poems of Assertion*, *Gaining the Game*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *Breaking the Barracks* and *Messing Manners*. Martin Carter, on the other hand, was a Guyanese poet and political activist. Widely regarded as the greatest Guyanese poet, and one of the most important poets of the Caribbean region, Carter is best known for his poems of protest, resistance and revolution (Dalleo, 2006). A few of his earlier

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publications include *The Kind Eagle* (1952) and *The Hidden Man* (1952). For his efforts in poetry, he was imprisoned by the British government in Guyana under allegations of "spreading dissension." Following his release from prison, Carter published his famous collections, *Poems of Resistance from British Guiana* (1954) and (much later) *Poems of Succession* (1977).

The colonial histories of both Cameroon and Guyana—the homes of Takwi and Carter, respectively—are well documented. While Carter wrote about Guyana during the colonial and post-colonial era, Takwi is a contemporary poet writing about neocolonialism in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general. Both poets engage in brutal critiques of the governments in power, and attempt to point out a pathway for the citizens to dethrone colonialism. These two revolutionary poets have used various poetic niches to shape the course of decolonisation, whether in its crude form (the overthrow of foreign rule) or in its less obvious form (the shading away of the legacies of colonialism). Takwi and Carter are both driven by the sheer force of their will: their commitment to produce poetry that improves social conditions in their respective society. Their poetry explores niches of social action, scientific truth, research, transformation and colonial history, in an attempt to uncover meaning in the individual and collective life of the society and to promote the people's understanding of the nature of their social, economic and political condition,

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In their poems Takwi and Carter effectively frame the experiences of their societies, taking their ideas and images beyond the realm of the creative imagination and into the zone of lived experiences. This fact is evident in Takwi's "Redress" (2004). In this poem, Takwi points out the recklessness of Cameroonian leaders—how they incessantly squander the resources of their nations as they ride in "sparkling limousines" (. 3) while "depravity cuts through the people" (1.5). Thus Takwi laments that the place of equality in democracy has disappeared and that the masses have been

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relegated to the background. The concluding image in the poem—in which the persona would like to “hit [the President’s] glittering glass table” (l. 12), which has been bought with the tax payers sweat, reveals the persona’s loss of patience with the masses who “embrace the President’s “messes.” In the poem the sharp-edged metaphors (depravity cutting through people and the anticipated shattering of the glass table) clearly articulate the eviscerating nature of the political leadership. It is in response to this kind of leadership that Cameroonians all over the world are currently advocating for a federated Cameroon. This response illuminates the socio economic landscape of the nation, where the president has been in power for the past 34 years and has only visited some provinces twice in thirty-four years, while failing to visit other.

Takwi further articulates the depravity of this landscape in a poem titled “When Shall We Dance,” where the persona points out the woes of election malpractices and wonders when Cameroonians will finally be able to dance to the dying tunes of “election misappropriation” (l. 3). According to Golder and Wantchekon (2004), this corruption is a common phenomenon in Africa, where three quarters of elections are dictatorial while more than 30 African nations since 1946 to 2000 have never had any clear attempt at democracy. By the end of the poem it is undeniably clear that for Takwi, social action is the most important poetic niche, the creation of a space for dancing to the dying tunes of such practices as unjust appointments to high offices, tax evasion, and blatant misuse of public funds. “When Shall We Dance” also makes clear that not until these corrupt practices have ceased will African be able to shout, “At last we have been unchained/From bondage” (ll. 18-19). This ability to capture everyday experiences of the masses bridges the divide between imaginative and scientific truth and, consequently, evokes niches of reality that other genres are not equipped to explore simultaneously from within and without.

Furman, Lietz, and Langer (2006) argue that the educational world need research methods that can communicate contextual, complex and affective realities while at the

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same time appealing to the needs of everyone in society, especially people with no formal skills and no knowledge of research. They add—and Takwi demonstrates—that that poetry has proven itself as a tool for communicating not only the affective but also the representation of both concrete and emphatic data which would otherwise prove difficult to be effectively captured and expressed by other tools. By capturing socio-political realities in ways that are verifiable scientifically, Takwi makes poetry a tool for communicating the complex or abstract in ways that every individual can relate to. Moreover, by using enjambment throughout the six sections of the poem, Takwi doesn't only engage logic (syllogistically styled arguments or, in this case, deductive reasoning), he also presents the argument in ways that capture the cadences of everyday speech: “When shall we stop yawning/With cracked lips over the stomach and/Gracefully fox-trot in our ever-green land?” (ll. 12-14). Additionally, the free verse he uses takes his poetry out of courtyards and theatres, where they can be recited, to the streets, where the common man can make use of it.

Like Matthew Takwi, Martin Carter directs poetry back to its primary niche by calling for improved living experiences of individuals and communities. For Guiana and the Caribbean, such improvement would call for an end to the maliciousness of political leaders, and also an end to the many-leveled miseries of the people. Thus for Carter poetry becomes a vehicle for the expression of frustrations and pain as well as the voice of freedom. In the poem “University of Hunger” (Carter, 2006), for example, this expression of pain becomes starkly geographical, even elemental: “The plains of life rise up and fall in spasms./The huts of men are fused in misery” (ll. 5-6). When, in the same poem, the “Twin bars of hunger mark their metal brow/ twin seasons mock them/ parching drought and flood” (ll. 15-17), the reader appreciates the unpredictable nature of life in Guyana while at the same time being made aware of the predictable fate of the impoverished masses who live there. The reader also appreciates that the oppositional relationship between “drought and flood” in the same land captures the huge hiatus between the rich and poor and concretizes the fact of social and economic

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injustice. In another of Carter's poems, "I Come from the Nigger Yard" (2006), the persona's depravity and marginalization assumes paradigmatic proportions: "I come from the nigger yard of yesterday/leaping from the oppressors' hate/and the scorn of myself." (ll. 1-3). Indeed, thanks to the arresting imagery in these lines, the poet is able to encapsulate in one thought the entire history of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and their deleterious effect on the individual psyche. The emblematic quality of the persona's pronouncements endows the poem with relevance as it fuses history and modernity. When one recalls the image of huts being fused with misery (in "University of Hunger") and associates it with the image of the persona "leaping" from the oppressor's hate as well as from his own self-scorn, the poem becomes a mandate for a post-colonial perception of self.

Clearly, then, both Takwi and Carter promulgate the need for their respective countries to be purged of oppression and marginalization. They both seek redress, social action, transformation and the alleviation of poverty to empower the common man for a better life. It is therefore not surprising that both poets adopt—rather, embrace—revolutionary postures and occasionally dive into the crux of consciousness: what it means to be human. To do this, Carter (re)enacts daily experiences and displays a level of lyrical elegance commensurate with his sense of human urgency and his ability to project his revolutionary vision across the ravages of history. This ability is evident in "Till I Collect"(Carter, 2006), where the persona states,:

The fisherman will set his tray of hooks
and ease them one by one into the flood.
His net of twine will strain the liquid billow
and take the silver fishes from the deep.
But my own hand I dare not plunge too far

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lest only sand and shells I bring to air

lest only bones I resurrect to light (ll. 1-7).

This is a double-edged scenario, for it obviously refers not only to the act of fishing as a metaphor for communal living but also links (and compares) this act to the interior journeying of the persona in the hope that something precious may be resurrected within the self, even at the risk of restoring only useless vestiges an impoverished past. Thus the scenario is expressed in a manner that reveals the potential of the persona for engaging and inspiring revolution activity—for reminding the people of the impoverished (muddy) nature of their colonized experience. No wonder Carter was jailed for his attempts to raise this kind of individual and communal awareness: The people are left to dabble with the worthless while oppressors continuously consume their hard-earned resources imaged as ‘silver fishes’. Thus the Guianese situation, as dramatized by Carter, is comparable to what is known in Cameroon today as the Anglophone Problem, which is the inspiration for Takwi’s writing.

Generally speaking, Carter’s poetry remained concerned with addressing the historical legacies and social conditions of people living in Guyana and the Caribbean. His poems consider pertinent issues ranging from slavery (the denial of freedom), to the political call for Guyanese liberation, the social concern for individual liberties, and a philosophical inquiry into the freedoms of expression gained through language. Takwi, on the other hand, reverts to philosophizing on the nature of human beings and on Cameroonians’ perception of each other. When Takwi, for example, intones in a five-line poem, “Man in/ Man not/ Man on/ Man is/ Man,” he is indicting, in effect, the capitalistic ideal of neo-colonial Cameroon, where people do all they can to trample on others so as to change their own individual status in society. The pursuit of this ideal, Takwi illustrates, is eating the nation like a cankerworm. Cameroonians must recognize that standing *with* others and not standing *on* others is the true essence of humanity.

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To throw further light on this parasitic situation, Takwi frowns at the shameful acts of mismanagement and corruption among leaders at different social and political levels. In the poem ‘Corruption’ (2004) Takwi rails at policemen raising their hands to control traffic only to receive bank notes as they let defaulters go free and also at ministers awarding state contracts to ghost companies while receiving “swollen envelopes below sparkling oval tables (9-10). The result of this inequitable practice is poor service delivery as every government worker seems to be bent on giving and receiving “swollen envelopes” to get certain things done or not done. Also in “Redress” Takwi demonstrates, by painting images of poverty and desolation, how leaders ineptly disregard their duties. These images are particularly effective when the persona strives to show the president “pictures of leaking thatched roofs and/ Oozing sores of wrinkled-faced youths” (ll. 6-7). The corruption seems endlessly pervasive and profoundly disgusting as in “Haven of Peace” (2006) Takwi makes a veritable litany of accusations:

In Africa’s piece of shackled peace
Democrat chieftains stuff wooden ballot boxes in advance
Fierce looking khaki-boys with raised nozzles
Stand for peace to flow like maggots twisting
To tunes of nearby rotting fetus”
A haven indeed (. 5-9)).
Mutilated bodies and arm strong beggars
Litter lakey streets of demonic hamlet of pieces of peace” (ll. 5-12).

In a poem entitled “Again” (2006), The accusations culminate in biblical and beautitudinal irony: “happy are the poor in veracity for theirs is the kingdom of the serpent” (?).

All of Takwi’s accusatory images are meant to expose the degrading nature of life in Cameroon and to invoke in the individual the desire for social action, freedom

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and change. By using images from different social classes, Takwi ensures that his message is understood by all. A scrutiny of the above extracts will reveal that he speaks in very particular Marxist terms to all elements of society—from the proletariat, to the bourgeois, to the machinery/superstructure of the state. Therefore, Takwi’s poetic process achieves its vigour and vitality from the manner in which Takwi demonstrates that masses are undermined by the procedures and policies of the state.

In Takwi’s poetry the references to governmental corruption are legion. But they become more than a mere compilation of accusational detail. They work together to create—and we do an injustice to Takwi if we do not underscore—the overall ambience that the poems evoke. At the risk of being redundant, we need to emphasise how Takwi’s various and variegated images pile upon each other to create the very ethos that he seeks to undermine, to shine the spotlight on the myriad political structures that he wishes to dismantle. Thus it is useful to elaborate on more of these accusational details: He sounds a warning to the masses about leaders who use deception to canvas votes. He makes the readers picture these leaders as they move around in “motorcars-of-motorcars” while the masses crisscross the land with their “leggedise bends” (tattered legs); he magnifies the image of these leaders as they flash “glittering bank notes of low mettle and sprinkle cheap insect-infected grains of rice and maize;” he makes the reader hear the “sudden shrill voices of vote hunters quiver aloud on splendid rostrums” and the “sweet bitter songs of pseudo promises” as they “vibrate and reverberate quaking a ropy jobless vomiting varsity graduate to last breath while tearful wrinkled parents pull ragged wrapper over his head.” Takwi’s aggregation of images re-enacts the prevailing circumstances with moral ferocity as he reveals his utter disdain for these leaders and his desire to spark such disdain in the hearts of the people.

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Similarly, Carter captures the horrific realities of Guyana in with similar disdain. And Carter's images aggregate with equal visionary aplomb as he laments of the eviscerating nature of brutal political leadership and the level of debasement to which the people have been reduced. In "This Is the Dark Time, My Love" Guyana is swarming with ferociously powerful and dangerous individuals who have scared even the sun into hiding. Even red flowers "bend their heads in awful sorrow" because "it is the season of oppression, metal, and tears." All the people see is "the festival of guns, the carnival of misery," and "everywhere the faces of men are strained and anxious" as they wait for "the man of death...the strange invader," who is always "watching you sleep and aiming at your dreams" (ll. 4-12). Clearly, for these people, life has lost its meaning. Just as clearly, they need to stand up to their oppressors.

Conclusion

Though oceans and cultures apart, Takwi and Carter engage the brutality of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Advocating for individual and national spaces that are freed from violence—be it physical, psychological, social or epistemic—these two poets explore niches of being and becoming. In so doing, they demonstrate that decolonization requires the will to take a penetrating and unsparing look at historical and contemporary structures that impede the process of individual and societal liberation on social, moral, economic and political levels. The dismantling of such structures, they insist, is a trans-continental necessity and it is in such dismantling—and in the simultaneous cultivation of spaces of freedom—that poetry finds its primary and most compelling niche.

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