

Prison and Reason: Reforming Penitentiary Conditions in Alobwed'Epie's *The Day God Blinked* and G.D. Nyamndi's *The Sins of Babi Yar*

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to analyse the treatment of inmates within the repressive state apparatus. It interprets perpetuations of bio-politics within the penitentiary system as portrayed in Alobwed'Epie's *The Day God Blinked* and G.D. Nyamndi's *The Sins of Babi Yar* and proposes recommendations to reform the disciplinary and punitive mechanisms enacted by the state and its agents upon inmates. The work critically observes that rather than serve its purpose of discipline, punishment and rehabilitation, the prison, an element of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), serves as a coercive tool and a terrain for the perpetuation of biopolitics thereby producing recidivism, more delinquents and plunging families and society into jeopardy. Based on a postcolonial reading of the text with critical thoughts from Michel Foucault's discourse on prison systems, the paper argues that a reform of the perpetuations of biopolitics within and beyond the incarceration system of the postcolony is needed. This will effectuate subaltern emancipation because the coercive approach on inmates has been counter-productive. The study found out that the absence of rehabilitative measures like gender considerations, privatization, infrastructural provision of social amenities, access to family and pastoral care has increased recidivism and calls for their inclusion in the treatment of inmates.*

Keywords: prison, repressive state apparatus, gender, biopolitics, torture, power.

Introduction

Nelson Mandela once said that “no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens but its lowest ones.” One of the subjects that has preoccupied postcolonial literatures and discourses has been structures of

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power or state machineries of power. Several sub-Saharan African writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Nadine Gordimer, Amadou Kouruma and Bate Besong, have articulated issues of power and repression in their works. This issue preoccupies contemporary African literature because African states still experience diverse forms of repression as articulated in their fictional and non-fictional pieces. Though every state has its peculiar mechanisms, there is some interconnectivity in the painful experiences of subalterns in these states. The topicality of prison literature for the past decades has made it considered a sub-genre in itself since coercive mechanisms of the state apparatus are traceable in most contemporary texts and society as well. Literature written by prison inmates, ex-convicts or people who have empathetically observed and experienced incarceration in one way or the other from without keep increasing. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to analyse the perpetuations of biopolitics in the treatment of inmates by, and within the repressive state apparatus as depicted in three Cameroon literary works: Alobwed'Epie's *The Day God Blinked* and G.D. Nyamndi's *The Sins of Babi Yar*.

The problem that propels this discourse is the critical observation that rather than serve its purpose of discipline, punishment and rehabilitation, the prison, an element of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) according to Louis Althusser, serves as a coercive tool and a terrain for the perpetuation of biopolitics, thereby producing more delinquents, recidivists and eventually increasing state disability. The paper has as objectives to show various perpetuations of biopolitics within the state's coercive mechanisms as represented in the texts under study and to propose recommendations to reform the disciplinary and punitive mechanisms enacted by the state and its agents upon inmates. It hypothesizes that the inhumane treatment of inmates has multiple effects and a reform of the perpetuations of biopolitics within and beyond the incarceration system of the postcolony will effectuate subaltern emancipation.

The theoretical framework used in analyzing these texts is Michel Foucault's theory on the state apparatus. Michel Foucault's theory on the repressive state apparatus is established in his conception of "biopolitics" and discourse of power articulated in his groundbreaking work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (1975). The prison (repressive state apparatus) to Foucault is not a marginal structure at the city's periphery but an integral part of the city where the diverse coercive mechanisms meted on the citizens are also perpetrated on inmates. He terms these strategies and mechanisms which autocratic regimes violently use to manage and subject human life processes as "biopolitics". Foucault posits that punishment cannot be separated from the body. He compares the prison to factories, schools, barracks and hospitals

because the perpetrations of biopolitics contained within the incarceration system is derived from the society beyond these walls, precisely in such institutions that have cruel mechanisms of control, classification and examination. Foucault holds that the perpetration of biopolitics on inmates is not different from that undergone by citizens. However, one of the ways to reform the “carceral system” would be to make public what happens within, he suggests. The state focuses on public torture and execution of inmates’ body, regulates and divides the soul into smaller parts in order to restore public order and neglects rehabilitation.

Many critics have preoccupied their discourses with state perpetuations of biopower. Some of them are Dibussi Tande who has attempted “an overview of Cameroon Prison Literature from Albert Mukong to Titus Edzoa” (2012). Tande reviews most autobiographical and historical texts, letters, diaries, reflections and essays of (former) Kondengui and Tcholliré inmates of French and English descent. Also, Charles Teke’s “Metaphors of State Disability in Cameroon Anglophone Literature” demonstrates that “the body has always served as a state for political codification and inscription, as a performative site of torture and violence.” (Teke, 181). Ironically, the systematic perpetrators of torture and the greatest violators of human rights have often been the very ones who pretend to universally champion human rights. In a similar article, Ndi Shang critically examines and elaborates on “Body Politics and the Figure of Death” in Sony Labou Tansi’s *The Shameful State*. His critical venture confirms the view that biopolitics is a reality in the African political scenario and not an abstract phenomenon. In an attempt to depict the “situation of the prisoner who falls under suspicion of a crime against the state,” John Maxwell Coetzee in his article titled, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa” sadly asserts that “the torture room thus becomes like the bedchamber of the pornographer’s fantasy where insulated from moral or physical restraint, one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limits in the performance of vileness upon the body of another (1). The treatment of female inmates has also been a concern to several feminist and gender critics. A review of several works like Helen N. Fontebo, Macleod, Berzins and Cooper indicates that in most states, women in prison tend to have been ignored.

Biopolitics and African Penitentiary Conditions in Selected Texts

The misery some inmates go through cannot be overemphasized. Charles Teke outlines some coercive activities of the repressive state apparatus upon inmates. They are affected by “confinement in claustrophobic spaces... incarceration and stifling conditions; space in total darkness – loss of time consciences and the outside world – at times loss of sight – types of

underground imprisonment; water cells and immersions; torture chambers – electronic and other manual gadgets like pincers, nails, knives etc. (*Metaphors of State Disability*, 188).

Shechem, the protagonist in *The Sins of Babi Yar* has experienced diverse forms of torture by the coercive forces of law and order. We are told that “as a journalist you lived with your one leg permanently in confinement. You were picked up for saying too much, for saying too little; at times for not saying anything at all” (20). Having experienced detention momentarily, Shechem prepared his mind to be ready for assault and “his body ready for torture” (21) because his preparedness mitigates the suffering. Shechem prepares his mind and body for torture because he has observed and understood that,

Police cells were torture chambers from which you emerged diminished, no matter how strong you were in the mind and the body, so you never allowed yourself to be dragged into them by surprise. You ran ahead of the brutality before the gun-butts and boots smashed into your skin; you gave up your blood before it was drawn, sacrificed your dignity before it was defiled. You beat the arrest (21).

It is disillusioning that certain professions like journalism have become automatically victimized by the repressive state apparatus. In Cameroon for example, teachers, lawyers and journalists in the North West and South West regions have been victims of arrests, torture, detention and even death due to the ongoing socio-political crisis since 2016. It is disheartening that the notion of the police cell being a “torture chamber” has been normalized to the extent that being arrested without experiencing any form of torture becomes a miracle. It is sad that mere suspects get arrested and kept in police custody are tortured and punished without any trial to determine their guilt or innocence. This is a clear picture of not only the texts under study but also most African states, where the repressive state apparatuses seem to have taken an oath to use the body of the subject as a site for the articulation of biopolitics and inscribing the hegemony of the regime in place that empowers them.

Furthermore, the omniscient narrator of *The Sins of Babi Yar* makes us understand that Mbake Jarvis, the Sanko Prison Superintendent, “had the power of life and death over his detainees” (87). There could not be a better expression in the novel that summarizes Mbembe’s definition of necropolitics. We find the warders exhibiting the “performance of power” when they mercilessly murder inmates, including Levi, Shechem’s friend alleged to have attempted to escape. In a lamenting rhetorical question, Shechem wonders why an agent of the repressive state would shoot “down a man who is just inches away from sure surrender?” Shechem, the

protagonist, supposed mouthpiece of the author or voice of the subalterns, says the prison superintendent would “have made all the difference if he’d resisted the man’s injunctions and instead insisted on having the bleeding body taken to the prison infirmary for examination” than carry “his wounded friend, not his dead friend to the brick-walled dump” (189) where “no prisoner ever entered...and came out again” (187) because it is a dumping ground for massacred prisoners. This instance of pathos depicts and represents the perpetrations of biopolitics within the incarceration system of African repressive states. Having shot the body of Levi Mu’tum from a short distance, the warder moves closer to the bleeding inmate who struggles for survival. “The warder could not pretend that he did not know who he was killing. He knew...the man could not claim ignorance” but rather dragged the bleeding Levi “by his two legs deeper into the hut and dumped him between two other corpses that were beginning to get bad” (187) to bleed to death. When the life or survival of an inmate depends on heartless warders, then the so called ‘human rights’ or ‘rights of prisoners’ which the state claims to respect is another deceit. When an inmate’s family does not even have the opportunity to bury their dead but lose them in some “brick-walled hut” where hundreds of decayed corpses and skeletons lay, then it becomes a dire need to revamp the nature and purpose of the prisons in Africa. It is important to note that the manner with which inmates of Sanko are tortured, massacred and dumped into the hut is a historical allusion to the situation at Babi Yar where over six million Jews were massacred by Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler.

The intensity and perpetrations of biopolitics are in several levels. These levels differ based on the intensity of people’s ‘crimes’ or based on the location of their arrest, detention or torture. We discover that the degree of torture meted on inmates in Tole and Sanko prisons does not equal the penitentiary coercion at the capital. The latter is more severe, barbaric and intentional in determining whether inmates or subjects live or die. Unfortunately for Motine Swaibu, the gallows which he initially prepared for subalterns becomes his fate and doom. We are told from the omniscient point of view that,

the man had been arrested and taken to the capital where it was most unlikely he would return to Tole again. ...there was no reason to think that the criminal would survive the sentence awaiting him in his new place of detention. Maybe the man was already even dead – firing squad or electric chair or poisoning: all these were inscribed among the legal instruments of the capital. One of them may have been used on him (178).

This shows clearly that detention or incarceration in the Capital is not too different from a suicide mission. It has greater dimensions of excruciating pain. However, the instance above ironically involves one of the perpetrators of torture. Indeed, those who live by the sword die by the sword.

In *The Day God Blinked*, Shechem is denied access to his wife and daughter. He only sees his wife in the courtroom during his trial and is not even given an opportunity to say a word to her. This deprives them of emotional and psychological relief. It is against human rights for one to be arrested and not given the right to attorney but kept to face darkness, coercion and incarceration without any fair trial or judgment. It is sad to note that sometimes, inmates' accessibility to family is possible but under severe financial constraints. Warders usually extort money from families before allowing them to spend time or have access to their incarcerated relatives. An anonymous informant explained to us that she and her parents have not been able to see her brother in Kondengui prison ever since his arrest a year ago. She regrets the fact that,

Only the wife is permitted to see him just because there are a lot of processes to go through before you see him so we just pass through the wife.... The people request for money; you lose money in all the processes. I don't know where the money goes to.... I'm not comfortable because there was one point in time that I went to Yaoundé just because I wanted to see him but I could not see him; I'm not happy that I've not seen him for a year.

The informant added that her brother in detention advised that rather than pay money to the various warders before being granted access to see him, they should rather send the money through his wife since she's the only one permitted to see him. This shows the extent to which deplorable prison conditions can not only frustrate the family of inmates but make some inmates prefer money in order to survive than see their loved ones. While we appreciate the fact that the state grants him access to his wife, we must frown at the corrupt and exploitative warders or penitentiary agents who extort money from traumatized family members before granting them access to their loved ones in prison.

From her postcolonial feminist and sociological study of Cameroon prison conditions, Helen Namondo Fontebo also concurs that "the government of Cameroon is ignoring the sanitary needs of the female inmates" (*Prison Conditions in Cameroon*, 273). These views of theirs are articulated in the texts under study. In the *Day God Blinked*, Lucia says inmates lacked sanitary items and many stunk with faeces. Due to such temptation, she is lured into drug trafficking by

Setania who rescues her by providing her sanitary needs as a woman. Thus, if only particular inmates have access to sanitary needs while others gnash their teeth with skin diseases, then the state of the carceral system is only getting worse. Adequate healthcare services should be rendered to all inmates. Helen Fontebo suggests that warders stop embezzling, medicine, toiletries and other facilities freely offered to inmates by NGOs and Religious bodies and that warders be motivated fairly enough so they do not get tempted to enrich themselves at the expense of inmates' wellbeing. Based on Lucia's report in *The Day God Blinked* that toilets were blocked since inmates cleaned their faeces with pants and handkerchiefs. These pathetic conditions in the texts mirror the state on African prisons.

Lucia resists the pressures of certain vices thanks to her determination and value for womanhood. When asked by Setania to smuggle drugs through her sexual organs, Lucia decides to give a deaf ear. Her choice of words imply the angry tone with which she resists such an absurd demand. She says, "that's rubbish. I can't go on a self-degrading spree. I better die of hunger than do what spites womankind. Yes, I can't degrade myself for forty pieces of silver...I was never to be coaxed into any trade that would dishonour my kind and me" (16). This instance renders an image of the fate of inmates who may not be bold enough like Setania to resist such an abuse of womanhood. It therefore implies that there are probably countless female inmates in the overcrowded prisons who need therapists to help them break away from complex vices and understand their self-worth.

Solo, a journalist with *Sunshine Journal* recounts excerpts of an interview he conducted on Adamu, an ex-convict of the Buea Central Prison. In his report, he says "the 200 capacity prison of Buea built since 1933 is today harboring close to a thousand inmates amongst which are close to 50 ladies" (*Sunshine*, "Prison Life is Hell on Earth" p. 4). In the *Day God Blinked*, the first person narrator, Lucia, tells us that Setania "had been awaiting trial for ten years" (13). Even when Lucia is sentenced to death, efforts to appeal her case seem futile and even her execution tarries. When arrests become more common than court trials, the prisons only become crowded and the postcolony becomes more doomed. Lucia is only relocated from the cubicle to other cells but never taken to court. Other female inmates face a worse predicament. Such laxity in African court cases as symbolized in the texts under study ought to be revamped. Shechem, the protagonist in *The Sins of BabiYar*, is taken to court from Sanko prison since they realize that as an educated journalist, he knows his right to attorney and may cause problems if they delay his trial. Thus, the poor and unknowledgeable inmates become the worst

victims because even their social status cannot vindicate them. This leaves an impact even on their loved ones.

Gender and the Impact of State Power

Perpetrations of biopower and the cruel conditions of incarceration of inmates has tremendous effects on the inmates, their families and society in the long run. The primary victims of incarceration are the inmate themselves. This is because the prison's primary purpose is to "discipline" and or "punish" arrested victims, before rehabilitating them to be better citizens upon their release. Thus, it is normally expected that inmates receive punishment, discipline and appropriate rehabilitation with regard to the degree of their crime. However, most Cameroonian and African prisons as fictionally represented in the novels under study, seem to have focused solely on punishment (which is even barbaric, inhuman and exaggerated) and paid little or no attention to discipline and rehabilitation which determine the attitude of the inmate when he or she is set free and becomes an ex-convict.

According to feminist criminology, a female inmate is the "woman in trouble" (Snider 198). From the perspective of gender, the female inmate has dual disadvantages: she is first of all incarcerated for having transgressed domesticity and then for broking the law (*Ibid*). Helen Fontebo supports this view when she adds that "the female inmate is portrayed as having "outwitted" gender norms, family norms and work norms. Moreover, she is seen as a failure as a wife/partner, mother, daughter and worker" (Fontebo 12). These views show that the female inmate is not treated with fairness but is rather made to face a plurality of coercions by a society that has imposed cruel tasks on her at the expense of her rights as a human and woman. In *The Day God Blinked* for example, Lucia's father and mother first consider her to have broken the family law by getting pregnant. Second, they consider her to have transgressed the church principles especially as a catechist's daughter. Finally, they join society to render her guilty of murder without trial and eventually disown her. Such impulsive patriarchal behaviors should not be meted towards the girl child. On the contrary, more attention should be titled towards the girl child and the female inmate in order to understand their peculiar vulnerabilities and challenges. It is even ironical that the female warder asked to watch Lucia while in the hospital treats her cruelly instead of empathizing with her as a fellow woman.

Another gender consideration is that male and female prisoners should be placed in different separate camps within the incarceration system. In the Ewawian prison in *The Day God Blinked*, Lucia, Setania and the other female inmates are separated from the male inmates. The

case is similar in the Sanko prison in *The Sins of Babi Yar*. Sociologically, some male inmates are being convicted after cruel acts against womanhood and may still be very dangerous threats to women if they have not successfully undergone therapy. Having a woman around them could be extremely dangerous. Also, male inmates who have not satisfied their libidinal demands for a very long time could be easily tempted to carry out a mob rape on a female inmate. This explains why momentary access to inmates' spouses is essential because it will quench their natural drive for sex and reduce further atrocities towards female or same sex inmates as some male inmates get compelled into sodomy. Since they are in the same camp within the prison, it is difficult to ascertain who victimizes the other. However, there could be further separations between male inmates, especially between the majors and minors, so that the dignity of [African] manhood can be respected.

In Alobwed'Epie's *The Day God Blinked*, Lucia, the protagonist, is falsely accused of murdering her son and dumping his body into the lake. Eventually, she is dumped into prison without any trial to prove her guilt or innocence. While in prison, she gets in contact with all sorts of inmates: those who are as innocent as she is, and others who committed felonies that landed them into jail. One of such complex inmates is Setania who has been in prison for almost a decade pending trial. The latter, having been prone to the harsh prison conditions, does not only continue in crime but introduces Lucia to drug trafficking. With the compliance of a few warders, they both smuggle drugs like marijuana in and out of the prison. Her business partners out of the prisons are Wardens, Ministers, Directors, Commissioners, Generals, and Bankers who are supposed to be exemplary leaders but ironically partner with her in smuggling drugs. Setania "had got most of the rare drugs inmates demanded" (*TDGB* 15). In a bid to maintain her loyalty to Setania who saved her life while in prison, Lucia is compelled to partner with her in crime, precisely the smuggling of drugs. Lucia says:

we had to stuff our private parts with the rare drugs and after crossing the check points, rush to the toilets to deliver....We stuffed our apples with capsules of marijuana, cocaine, and other drugs....Our guards, that is, the usual warders who all benefited from Setania's trade, allowed us in without checking us. Once we got in we rushed to the toilets and laid the capsules (15).

Thus, the prison increases recidivism; it transforms some innocent inmates into delinquents. It is pathetic that Lucia, a vulnerable girl, gets into the prison innocently accused but becomes a drug trafficker while in prison. Having escaped compromise in Ewawa society, she gets

compelled to compromise in order to survive in prison. It is further ironical and even appalling that prison warders rather help inmates in crime, instead of ensuring discipline, punishment and rehabilitation of inmates. Michel Foucault, in his theory on the repressive state apparatus equally questions the credibility, supposed purpose and function of the incarceration system. In *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, he argues that “prisons do not diminish the crime rate” (265) but rather increase the rate of recidivism because ex-convicts are not [effectively] rehabilitated but left with greater chances to return to crime. Foucault adds that the prison is “supposed to apply law, and to teach respect for it; but all its functioning operates in the form of an abuse of power” (268). Based on this Foucauldian thought, one realizes that it is more efficient and profitable for the state to place people under surveillance than to subject them to some exemplary punishment in a bid to discipline other scapegoats. Foucault holds that punishment be intended to express and restore the sanctity of the law which has been broken, not necessarily to ‘reform’ the offender which is even done reluctantly.

Lucia further states objectively that “those fellows should be in prison, not me” (50). It is pathetic and ironical that those molesting inmates or suspects are guiltier of injustice, corruption and even assault and murder. Mvondo Kabi establishes repressive rule even within the Ideological State Apparatus like the school. From Lucia’s narrative viewpoint, we learn that Mvondokabi does not only build himself a five million francs castle, but “embarked on building a three billion francs Chinese wall round the place...with the aim of hemming in protesting students, capturing them, and torturing them in the 5th District Police Station where he had arranged with the Commissioner to deal mercilessly with insurgents” (51). Lucia even adds that Mvondokabi, the despot rector, “did not only target students. He targeted even the academic and clerical staff who dared protest against the non-payment and drastic cuts in salaries. He summarily dismissed the clerical staff... suspended the salaries of professors that ‘militated’ in the Professor’ Union- a union he had banned. He called in troops to brutally suppress student riots.”

To further buttress ineffective rehabilitation and emphasized state power on inmates, Muma Ben Solo, a journalist with *Sunshine Journal* recounts excerpts of an interview he conducted on Adamu, an ex-convict of the Buea Central Prison. In his report, he says:

the 200 capacity prison of Buea built since 1933 is today harboring close to a thousand inmates amongst which are close to 50 ladies who have committed serious atrocities common amongst which is the stabbing to death of their husbands, drugging of sugar

daddies and trying to escape with their money, conspiracy in act of armed robbery and just to name a few....some mates attempt if not make love to fellow mates to satisfy their sexual desire, since they can't have access to the female mates, they smuggle or steal their pants just to see, smell and feel a sexual drive....to smell a female pant in prison can cost one person close to 25frs (*Sunshine*, "Prison Life is Hell on Earth" p. 4).

These pathetic images paint an appalling picture of how men gradually transform into beasts within the incarceration system. Adamu, further testifies that "smuggling and smoking of marijuana is the order of the day" (p. 4) coupled with threats and torture from fellow mates. Muma says the ex-convict finally confessed during the interview that "*prison no be fine place my brother*" (the prison is not a good place my brother) because "not all who go there body and soul come back the same as they went" (*Sunshine*, p. 4).

This newspaper report aligns with some characters' experiences in the works of Nkengasong, Alobwed'Epie and Nyamndi. Their texts are artistic representations that symbolize state prisons in Cameroon like Kondengui in Yaoundé, Buea Central Prison, New Bell Prison in Douala and Tcholliré in the North, as well as Robben Island in South Africa, Gautanamo Bay and several others whose cruel conditions override their rehabilitative efforts.

Another effect of ineffective incarceration on inmates is health defects. Many prisoners get infected with fatal diseases. Those fortunate to be released still struggle to heal themselves of diseases gotten from the prisons. Lucia in *The Day God Blinked* uses vivid descriptions to present to us the unhygienic conditions of the repressive state apparatus. She admits that were it not for Setania's help, she would certainly have been contaminated by some of these infections, considering the poor nature of toilets. Setania buys her soap and other toiletries which she uses to maintain her dignity and hygiene as a woman. In their paper titled "Prisoners of their Sex: Health Problems of Incarcerated Women," Resnick and Shaw pinpoint that female inmates are more susceptible to diseases than men, especially gynecological problems. From a feminist perspective, they reiterate the need for appropriate health services for women in prison.

It is also important to note that part of the health problems of female inmates stems from substance abuse. A case in point is that of Setania in *The Day God Blinked*. She smuggles cocaine and other illegal drugs in and out of prison by hiding them in her vagina. After one of her nocturnal operations, she successfully sneaks into prison without being caught.

Unfortunately for her, she immediately goes to sleep and forgets to remove these drugs from her sexual organ. In her sleep, her body absorbs these substances to the point that she quietly dies in her sleep while in the prison.

Furthermore, some inmates suffer assault from fellow inmates and even from some warders and police sergeants. This is one of the most painful effects of state power on inmates, especially the female inmates. Lukas Muntingh subdivides assault in the incarceration system as “inmate-on-inmate assaults, official-on-inmate assaults, and inmate-on-official assault” (*Reducing Prison Violence*, 6). In *The Sins of Babi Yar*, we learn of the “rapist sergeant,” who is killed by Tendo, an inmate who shares Shechem’s view that “there was no greater crime than rape” (139). The manner with which police officers of Ewawa frequently torture Lucia on her breasts in *The Day God Blinked* also symbolizes their libidinal but censored cravings for her sexual organs. Since they do not have the opportunity to assault her, they take advantage to touch her sensitive parts in the course of brutalizing her. It is such barbaric perpetrations of biopower that make Achille Mbembe sadly assert that “whenever the state is regarded as the final arbiter of right and truth people are delivered up to be crucified” (*On the Postcolony*, 160). In her study of the conditions of six prisons in Cameroon, Helen Fontebo condemns acts of sexual abuse on female inmates (*Prison Conditions in Cameroon*, 215).

Again, poor incarceration conditions have transformed some inmates into escapists upon their release. Such is the case with Shechem in *The Sins of Babi Yar*. Upon his release from Sanko prison, he decides to start writing articles on poor children, the less privileged and orphans. This is an escapist tendency considering the fact that he knows the political scenario of Tole is not very stable and needs the attention of truthful journalists like him who will call a spade a spade. So, cruel prison conditions make former inmates seal their lips for fear of returning into such an isolated and cruel life if they attempt to speak the truth.

Also, state power on inmates leads to psychological malfunctioning. Shivani Tomar’s succinct study on “the psychological effects of incarceration on inmates” (2013) observes that “delusions, dissatisfaction with life, claustrophobia, depression, feeling of panic and many other instances of madness, stress, denial, nightmares and inability to sleep, phobias, substance abuse, criminal activity” (67) amongst other psychological issues are effects of incarceration on inmates. She further argues that the prison victim or inmate may face some short term challenges such as guilt, shame, suicidal tendencies as well as the fear of becoming, or having become homosexual. Releasing such people into the society years later could be very dangerous if they are not rehabilitated.

Families are also affected by repression meted on their loved ones in prison. State power frustrates family members of convicts. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault clearly states that “the prison indirectly produces delinquents by throwing the inmate’s family into destitution” (258). Rose Smith et. al. support this view when the findings of their study shows that “prisoners’ families were vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption following the imprisonment of a family member” (1) especially if the victim was the breadwinner or source of hope for the family. Such is the case in G.D. Nyamndi’s *The Sins of Babi Yar*.

In *The Sins of Babi Yar*, Shechem’s wife (Bertha) and daughter (Kun) become destitute due to his absence from home as the breadwinner. To make matters worse, his enemies, those responsible for jailing him at the Sanko Prison, attempt to exploit his wife. Shechem concludes that his wife must have fallen into the temptation of infidelity. The fate of Shechem’s wife and daughter ties up with the view of Rose Smith that the failure of criminal justice and social welfare policy have combined to “impoverish, disadvantage and exclude prisoners’ families, and their children in particular” (*Poverty and Disadvantage among Prisoners’ Families*, 2007, 1). Levi’s wife also faces severe trauma due to his imprisonment, torture and eventual murder by an officer in Sanko prison. We are told that Levi’s wife, Yolanda “did not even know that he’d been shot and abandoned to rot among other corpses in a lonely hut” (184). Nyamndi’s use of pathos here is to depict the plight of families whose bread winners are [innocently] incarcerated. In essence, poor prison conditions and senseless torture of inmates plunges society into a social quagmire as more delinquents and recidivists are released who were never rehabilitated.

In as much as the negative impacts of the cruel prison conditions are alarming, incarceration has also been of positive influence to some inmates. According to Decree 92/052 of 27 March 1992, as quoted in Helen Fontebo’s work titled *Prison Conditions in Cameroon*, the penitentiary system in Cameroon has as goal to protect society from criminals, punish wrongdoing and rehabilitate offenders through labour, training and counselling. In the American context, Andrew Skotnicki argues that lack of adequate material, personnel and financial resources hinders the state’s realization of such goals (*Religion and the Development of the American Penal System*, p.2). This shows that not just Africa but even the West have issues of penitentiary dysfunctions. However, in the African context, money or lack of resources has seldom been the problem but corruption, mismanagement and embezzlement perpetrated by agents of the repressive state.

Although little focus has been given to the rehabilitation of inmates, there has been some positive impact of incarceration on the lives of some inmates; some persons have left the prisons better than when they came in with regards to crime, psychological or spiritual maturity. Many tend to repent from crime because they fear returning to solitary confinement in prison and face such degrading and inhuman conditions. Others have become converts and committed Christians thanks to pastoral care and spiritual emphasis rendered to them by churches. Some inmates have had sessions of therapy and counselling which helped them deal with addictions and turned away from crime.

An instance of spiritual growth of the inmate can be traced in *The Day God Blinked*. Although the Parson acts as an agent of the “religious ideological state apparatus” (Althusser 1971) trying to compel Lucia to plead guilty, his presence is nevertheless a sort of strength to Lucia. Though he is subjected to the state’s hegemony, Parson offers Lucia the opportunity to make things right with God before her execution. He equally provides her company and builds hope in her by promising to invite international organizations and lawyers to defend her in court. Such encouragement, comfort, prayers and motivation to a hopeless female inmate will not merely boost her hope for a release but equally augment her faith in God. It is rather ironical and unfortunate that Lucia is provided pastoral care whereas she is innocent, while the notorious criminals and inmates like Setania who need spiritual rehabilitation are neglected.

Reforming Penitentiary Conditions in Selected Cameroonian Novels

Diverse strategies can be enacted to reform the deplorable conditions of prisons. These strategies ought to be affected by a collective effort. Empowerment, capacity building and therapy are essential in this reconstruction project. Education of inmates is a necessity. Having thousands of prisoners without access to education in the course of incarceration will only increase the statistics of illiterates in society upon their release. Inmates who were students before committing the crime that landed them in jail could be given opportunities to pursue their academics while in detention. This will make them assets upon their release and not liabilities and future threats to the society. In Cameroon, Buea Central Prison inmates sit in for public exams like the G.C.E. The government should be commended for this effort in respecting their right to education. Unfortunately, Lucia in *The Day God Blinked*, is a university student, but does not receive such rights while in detention. Incarceration is meant for imprisoning the body, so the mind should not starve but be fed with constructive knowledge, else the inmates will receive cruel knowledge from inmates who were, or are, murderers, terrorists, sodomites, cultists, embezzlers and so on.

Educational may not necessarily be formal; it could be vocational –skilled-based. One of the deficiencies in Cameroon prisons which Abraham Akih and Yolanda Dreyer observe in their work titled *Deficiencies in Pastoral Care* is that they are neither productive nor rehabilitative. They argue that the objective of these prisons “should be to transform prisoners through work, education and vocational programmes that would enable them to become self-reliant” (6). They further observe that most “prisoners do not have enough land to produce their own food. They are malnourished, live in congested cells and do not receive life skills training whilst incarcerated” (3). Not every inmate needs intellectual education. Most of them would need vocational training in areas that would enable them to develop certain skills, become productive, responsible and helpful to themselves, their families and society before and upon their release. In *The Day God Blinked*, Lucia says prisoners used to be taken to the houses of ministers for manual labour. This is a good aspect of punishment and labour for the crimes they committed. However, they should be trained in other areas of their competences so that they could be productive to assist themselves purchase some basic needs while in detention. They should be integrated into vocational sectors like designing, woodwork, craft, animal husbandry, and other forms of agriculture. By so doing, they will be completing their punishment and helping themselves financially at the same time. Also, it will make them less idle, give them a certain degree of responsibility and obviously reduce the rate of newer crimes they get engaged in whilst incarcerated.

It is unfortunate however, that some warders and prison officials embezzle the agricultural produce of inmates while some sell sewing, wood and other industrial machines and use the money for personal use (Fontebo, *Prison Conditions in Cameroon*, 273-4). It is also sad to note that some inmates are very corrupt and partake in such corrupt acts of theft (*Ibid*). If vocational training must be effective therefore, the prison officials and inmates must be committed, responsible and accountable.

Most African prisons lack infrastructural social provisions. Abraham K. Akih and Yolanda Dreyer justify this claim when they posit:

Prisons in Cameroon are in a bad state of repair. Overcrowding, poor living conditions, inadequate medical care, slow access to justice and an arbitrary system of prison discipline are some of the problems...Manipulation, distrust, despair, bitterness and hostility are rife in most Cameroon prisons. The prison experience is often traumatic and threatens the psychological core or emotional balance of inmates (*Deficiencies in Pastoral Care* 3).

Their view is in line with Atabong's who underscores that:

prisons in Cameroon are treated as dumping ground, waste basket, garbage dump of those society does not want to see. The prison environment is both a dumping ground for the destitute and a crash course in crime for delinquents. (Atabong, qtd in Akih and Dreyer, 1).

Some critics support the Foucauldian thought that “prison conditions are deliberately unpleasant because that should act as a deterrent to future offending behaviour and crime” (Akih and Dreyer, 3). This is true but to a lesser extent because being entrapped and separated from the world, coupled with hard labour is enough punishment for inmates, so making them vulnerable to afflictions, diseases, addictions, infections and abominable acts is a backlash to the rehabilitation objective.

NGOs, human rights organizations and religious bodies can build, maintain or replace damaged social amenities to better the conditions of inmates. They could embark on larger projects like building water tankers, boreholes, drainage patterns, toilets and workshops within the penitentiary confinements.

Privatizing the penitentiary system is another alternative to improve prison conditions, considering the failure of the state in respecting its prime purpose discipline, punishment and rehabilitation. In their paper titled, *Privatizing prisons: Rhetoric and reality*, they argue that privatizing the prison system, “will improve conditions for prisoners, reduce costs for the state and facilitate innovation. Privatization will bring about competition and new management techniques with the possibility of better quality for less money and more efficiency because of less bureaucratic ‘red tape’ and a higher motivation to control costs” (6). Nevertheless, we must not make prisons to become so comfortable that it defeats its very essence –that of discipline and punishment.

Some Non-Governmental Organizations have taken it as a duty to partake in prison reform. They provide attorneys for inmates as a means of making their trial or liberation fair given that some inmates cannot afford a lawyer. Such is the case with Lucia Ntang who says:

I have no lawyer...Even if I am given another five years I shall be unable to hire a lawyer, for one thing, I have no money, I have no parents, nor capable friends. For another thing, if I get a lawyer he will concoct facts and tell lies to free me from court

decision. But if I defend myself, I shall tell the truth and allow the court to take its decision (25).

Lucia's words put an interrogation mark on the integrity of some lawyers in contemporary society, most of whom have sold their consciences to support the state in perpetrating biopolitics on subalterns.

Furthermore, we are told by that narrator in *The Day God Blinked* that "International, especially American and European charity organizations provided assorted gifts in food and soft drinks though most of them ended up in the houses of the prison authorities" (36). However, one is questioning the ironical return to the West for help whereas Africa has the resources and competencies to solve these problems. In as much as NGOs have a vital role to play in reforming the incarceration system and to better the conditions of inmates, not all of these NGOs are trustworthy. Some are capitalist constructs with a hidden agenda and selfish motive. Lucia, the protagonist in *The Day God Blinked* says:

While the victims suffered, the ruling clans capitalized on the catastrophe and asked for foreign aid. As the aid poured in, they devised ways of swindling it. Doctors abandoned their specialties and became AIDS specialists overnight in order to have their share of the booty (*TDGB* 48).

Such NGOs are symbols of capitalism and hegemony. However, a few goodwill and religious non-profits are purposeful about bettering the conditions of inmates.

Again, volunteerism can better prison conditions in Africa. David Duncombe points out that "prison chaplains and volunteers, through their ministry of presence, could have a positive impact on the lives of inmates" (*The Task of Prison Chaplaincy*, 209). He sees volunteers as potential partners to assist not just NGOs but also the clergy and chaplains involved in prison ministry. Many unemployed African youths and graduates are quick to demand from the state like *Oliver Twist* (which is their right to an extent) but it was high time they started asking themselves what they have offered to their nation as Abraham Lincoln once put it. They can teach, train, provide psycho-social and even medical support to inmates involved in substance abuse, homosexuality and so on. Trained counselors and health experts have much to offer to prisoners. Lee Griffith submits:

given proper guidance and opportunities to develop themselves, many prisoners are capable of being transformed to become people with a sense of purpose and direction

in life. Prison officials should be motivated, protected and equipped for the often-dangerous work they do. All people, including prisoners, should receive care and be treated with dignity (*The Fall of the Prison*, 171).

Hardcore addicts like Setania in Alobwed'Epie's *The Day God Blinked* definitely need skilled therapists to break out of their addictive snares. In Sanko prison in Nyamndi's *The Sins of Babi Yar* likewise, we find no traces of a therapeutic program for the inmates. This should not be the case because it rather increases the chances of recidivism upon their release from detention.

In the same vein, pastoral care must be emphasized. William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle define pastoral care as "helping acts, done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in a context of ultimate meaning and concern" (*The Shape of Pastoral Care*, 4). Those involved in pastoral care bring resources that range from material provisions to abstract resources like wisdom, comfort, counsel, and so on. Abraham K. Akih and Yolanda Dreyer, having done a succinct study on Cameroon prisons and churches and opine assert that "most churches in Cameroon have no pastoral care programme for prisoners. The churches in general are not yet committed to this kind of work" (1). They further argue that "changes and reform of the penitential system will be difficult if not impossible without collaboration with other institutions and resources, which include the different faith communities and faith based organizations" (1). It is sad to note therefore that, in spite of the religious proliferation in Cameroon for decades, just a handful of these churches have prisoners at heart. The Bible commands Christians in Hebrews 3:3a, "remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them," (ESV) but many hypocritically keep a distance from the prisons, ignorant or negligent of the fact that "pastoral care by faith communities could play a life-changing role in the lives of people incarcerated in the prisons in Cameroon" (Akih and Dreyer, 2). No wonder, in *Prisoner Without a Crime*, Albert Mukong, the author, laments at the fact that religious groups seldom consider it an order from above to attend to the prisoners in the BMM and those in the detention centers whereas these are the ones who suffer most.

Akih and Dreyer further argue that,

pastoral care can make a difference to the lives of people in the prisons of Cameroon and could also provide much needed support to those who work to improve prison conditions, such as penitentiary staff, human rights groups, civil societies and non-governmental organizations (2).

In *The Day God Blinked*, the presence of pastoral care is eminent in the character of the Parson. We see him constantly visit Lucia while she is in prison. Such a visit from the church could be of great encouragement to an inmate. However, the Parson's constant visits are questionable because they seem to be more political than spiritual. He seems to be an agent of the "Religious Ideological State Apparatus" (Althusser 143) that sides with the state to repress the masses via religious manipulations. This is evident when he keeps persuading Lucia to plead guilty in spite of the true and pathetic experiences she narrates to him. Thus, pastoral care should be strictly apolitical but genuinely pastoral. Unlike the Ewawian prisons in *The Day God Blinked*, pastoral care is completely absent from the Sanko prison in *The Sins of Babi Yar*. This should not be the case if the prison is actually meant to discipline, punish and rehabilitate inmates. Rehabilitation cannot be very effective or complete without pastoral counseling considering the profundity of certain crimes. The state must therefore give room to accommodate the religious and private sector rather than by denying them access to prisons or making the process stressful for faith communities. It is also important to note, from an afrocentric cum theological perspective, that "prison chaplaincy in Africa requires an indigenous African-based theology to effectively address the therapeutic needs of prisoners. Authentic pastoral care models that are relevant to the context are necessary." (Akih and Dreyer, *Deficiencies in Pastoral Care*, 6) given that certain predicaments of inmates have their roots and remedies in neglected traditions. Abraham Akih adds that "in African traditional courts, inmates were not sentenced to be imprisoned but were rather helped to reform" (*An African Pastoral Perspective on Prison Chaplaincy*, 7). Africa has traditional rulers, esteemed sages. Cameroon has Sultans, Fons, Nfons, Chiefs, amongst others. Should such persons face the same coercive conditions as other inmates while in detention? Does the respect given to them as cultural monarchs end outside the penitentiary system? The modern African legal system has customary courts where such person are tried and sentenced with such special status or considerations in given indigenous contexts. In essence, priority should be placed on rehabilitating and reintegrating inmates while less attention be on the cruel punitive measures that have been the order of the day in most African penitentiary systems.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a vivid exposure of diverse forms of torture and authoritarianism enacted by African regimes as represented in the texts under study. It has depicted manifestations of biopolitics particularly to inmates. Many are tortured literally whilst others

are systematically tortured such as being denied certain privileges like food, water, access to family, medical attention, protection from violent or abusive inmates, and so on. The neglect of rehabilitation and emphasis on punishment has not helped the situation. It has rather produced more delinquents or recidivist who in turn make society unsafe. Apart from this deplorable state of African prisons, women are given less attention despite their vulnerabilities. They easily get infected due to poor hygiene in prisons. Others like Lucia are used to smuggle drugs in and out of prison. This dysfunctional state of the penitentiary in Africa calls for a reform. This reform cannot be handled by the government alone but must be a collective effort. Private organizations, religious bodies, volunteers, psychology and medical experts, human rights advocates and even the subalterns must put hands on deck to revamp this abandoned locale of the society. If these reformatory strategies are enacted by the nation, stakeholders and inmates' conditions will be better and they can easily reintegrate and contribute to nation building upon their release.

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