Defective Body Symbolism as a Countenance of Despotism in Hama Tuma's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

Postcolonial Africa faces many governance problems chief among them being dictatorship. Literary artists try to expose the follies of the despots; however, such endeavours subject them to deep conflict with the political leadership who perceive them as malcontent voices of dissidence. Many literary artists consequently employ various literary devices to indirectly project such despotic socio-political settings to stave off the possibility of explosive confrontation with despots. This paper engages with Hama Tuma's twelve short stories that employ symbolism of the human body. The stories have been purposively sampled from the thirty four short stories in his anthologies: *The case of the socialist witchdoctor and other stories* and *The case of the criminal walk and other stories* to examine his dissident mettle. The critical analysis of these texts is hinged on the theory of hermeneutics of suspicion which is grounded in allegorical hermeneutics that significantly coalesces in the skepticism of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. The trio perceived consciousness as false necessitating interpretation to unmask hidden meanings. The paper argues that Tuma disapproves of despotism and succinctly voices his standpoint by effectively deploying defective human body symbolism to express his contempt for despotism in Ethiopia. He exposes the flaws of despotic establishments through physical and physiological handicaps of the characters in authority or their surrogates while favourably presenting those characters that antagonize them.

Keywords: Dissidence, despotism, defective body symbolism.

1. Introduction

The African continent is bedeviled by many problems ranging from leadership incompetence, destructive wars to political chicanery and

corruption (Ogbeide, 2011). The strand of Africa's failure of leadership has largely been engendered by dictatorship which has led to several conflicts between the masses and the ruling class. Literary artists often craft their literary texts based on such experiences to the chagrin of the leadership. The rift between literary artists and the political rulers has been a constant since the childhood of humanity; when Plato conceived his Utopian State, the poets were the first casualties (Edmundson, 1997). In pre-colonial Africa, Ruganda (1992) posits, the traditional bard shared an uneasy co-existence with the rulers. The literary artists' trade of social critique has therefore existed since the orate society and the role of the modern African literary artist is only a perfected continuation of this tradition. The political elite and the literary artists are almost always at loggerheads because, to Ruganda (1992), both are merchants and manipulators of the performed and/ or the written word and both seek to capture the same constituency – the masses. In engaging with the socio-political misgivings of despotism, the despots often subsume the literary artists to have crossed the proverbial red line culminating in far reaching consequences for the artists including imprisonment, torture, exile, or even death. To avoid direct confrontation with the despots, literary artists adopt various literary devices when they set out to attack the despotic structures in the society. For instance, Mthatiwa (2012) demonstrates how through the use of animal characters Mapanje successfully exposes the evil, brutality, and viciousness of dictator Banda and the 'stupidity, fickleness, and untrustworthiness' (p. 5) of his close associates. Moreover, in his analysis of Niyi Osundare's *Waiting laughters*, Taiwo (2010) argues that the proverbs and elements of cumulative repetition from the Yoruba oral poetics are used by the writer to foreground the hypocrisy, insensitivity and injustice that characterize most despotic regimes in Africa.

The prevailing socio-political conditions of a given context therefore influence the linguistic choices that literary artists make in the course of crafting their texts. Ethiopia practices democracy but many local and foreign bodies often condemn it for being undemocratic (Demeke, 2014). She has been accused of illegally or arbitrarily detaining her citizens, lack of independence of the judiciary, unaccountable police force and lack of respect for the freedoms of association, expression, and assembly. However, the Ethiopian government is yet to demonstrate any significant progress in enhancing the citizens' freedom. The Human Rights Watch (2014) report observes that this government has amplified oppression on the people to the extent of possessing the technical capacity to eavesdrop on virtually every single phone call and Short Message Services in Ethiopia. It is against such a backdrop that Tuma writes and those critics who have discussed his use of style concur that he employs political satire quite effectively in a bid to convey his messages (Fantahun, 2006; Ogude, 2000).

Symbolism is another device that can be profitably deployed by an artist to engage with the despots. The term "symbol" is generally understood as anything which signifies something. Abrams (1999) posits that 'the term "symbol" is applied to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself' (p.311). In the same vein, Ricoeur defines symbols as 'all expressions of double meaning, wherein a primary meaning refers beyond itself to a second meaning which is never given directly' (Ricoeur 1998, p. 33). Consequently, a symbol may suggest a cluster of meanings. Since symbols constitute the revealing substrate of discourse (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 299) and hermeneutics of suspicion is characterized by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 6), symbols point to other meanings which though contextually suggested, may not be overtly given. A symbol then can be an object, a person, situation, action or event that has deeper meaning in context. They may contribute to an intrinsic system of meaning by allowing a writer to represent abstract ideas in personal terms consistent with the world they inhabit (Nabukonde, 2012). Symbols can therefore be deployed to concretize the images of the political leadership and contexts to voice dissidence. Using hermeneutics of suspicion, this paper argues that Tuma's symbols carry an apparent face that the despots willingly hawk to the citizens and the real side that the authorities would wish to hide from the public. In demonstrating how Tuma uses various human body defects to project despotic leadership in Ethiopia, this paper holds that these symbols express Tuma's spiteful attitude towards the despots hence the dissident mettle of the author. The material for this paper has been generated from twelve short stories including: 'The Case of the Prison Monger', 'The Case of the Criminal Walk', 'The other Son', 'Sheratonians', 'The Man with another Face', 'The Incurable Hedonist', 'The Coward who hid his Eyes', 'Death of a Renegade', 'The Case of the Presumptuous Novelist', 'The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor', 'The Case of the Professor of Insanity', and 'The Anderibi Story'.

Defective Human Body Parts as a Visage of Despotism

The physical and physiological attributes of most characters in Tuma's short stories reinforce characterization. His descriptions of characters appear to project despotic leadership and those opposed to their regime in contrasting shades. While the traits and demeanour of those in positions of authority are skewed towards the negative, those characters that are antagonistic towards the leadership are favourably portrayed. Attributes like squinted eyes, height, body weight, beauty or ugliness have been used by the author to draw distinctions between the leadership and the ruled. On one hand, characters who occupy positions of authority; for example, judges, court prosecutors, security officers, heads of State, government ministers, political party officials and

their affiliates have been ascribed to ridiculous behaviour, physique, and looks hence pointing to the author's contemptuous attitude towards the leadership. On the other hand, the prisoners and the accused characters in court generally exhibit balanced physical traits and composure. Essentially, Tuma creatively uses certain disorders of the human body to highlight the deficiencies of the despots in such a way that despotic rule is equated to a malfunctioning human body.

Of Ugly and Handsome Characters

In consonance with Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque which is characterized by the exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions to critique socio-political vices (Bakhtin, 1984), Tuma deploys traits of ugliness and handsomeness to satirize authoritarian leadership. The rulers and their close associates are generally crafted as physically ugly. To begin with, majority of the characters in positions of authority are described as short and fat or plump thereby suggesting laziness and greed of the despotic leadership. In 'Prison Monger', the narrator cites St. Gebre the Poor's manuscript which he says 'read like a how-to-live-satisfied-with-an-empty-stomach manual' (Tuma, 1993, p. 116) to mock the authoritarian leadership since despite the manuscript having 'warned of how one can get fat and lazy by not exercising the mind' (p. 117), the leaders are brought out as fat insinuating their laziness and intellectual idleness. Similarly, in a veiled mockery of the justice system in the society depicted in Tuma's stories, the custodians of justice are portrayed as lazy, indolent, sycophantic and lacking in independence. The prosecutor in 'Criminal Walk' is described as 'a fat man with a sweaty face and a whining voice' (Tuma, 2006, p. 57). His sweaty face connotes someone who is either struggling or straining to perform his duty, perhaps, due to incompetence hence the anguish or unhappiness conveyed through his whining voice. Indeed, he can hardly remember what the accused is charged with until he refers back to a piece of paper. Besides, his proposed jail term of seventy six years for one accused of shoplifting sounds both unrealistic and unreasoned. Tedele, the chief prosecutor's deputy in 'The other Son' is described as 'a short and a plumpy man with a goatee that made him look ridiculous' (Tuma, 2006, p. 20). Through him, the author projects a dysfunctional justice system. His being short corresponds to his inherent deficiencies, ineptitude, and consequent submission to the authoritarian system. That he is also plump connotes a sense of softness that borders on indolence since he is unable to question why things happen the way they do around him. For example, while commenting on why Ato Mulu had been released even after being accused of killing a host of people including Abeje Biru, he says 'so many cases are pending and his may not have been that significant … the order for his release came from above

and who am I to object?' (p. 21). This means that the court system is clogged with many cases hence inefficiency. Moreover, suggesting that a murder case may have been insignificant projects a person who is "short" in conscience and sense of humanity. Tedele's ineptitude is further emphasized when he admits that his actions are dictated by higher powers and that his brief is limited to taking orders. In ridiculing such short and fat characters, the author exposes the justice system as compromised and ineffective and its existence in a despotic setup a mere façade. It hardly relies on the law but on individual prejudices and whims of the judicial staff to pass its judgment. After being insulted by judge Aytenfistu, the accused in 'Prison Monger' responds in kind referring to the judge as 'a fat pig' and an 'ignorant fool' (Tuma, 1993, p.122) who spends half of his time on the bench sleeping. Indeed, the judge loses his composure – becomes "short" in tempers – and serves the accused with a ten-year sentence hence granting the wish of the prisoner who has previously opposed the court's intention of sentencing him to freedom. The 'fat pig … ignorant fool' slur befits the judge, an agent of despotism, since he lacks diligence and has been outwitted by the prisoner to the extent that he recedes to redeeming his individual sense of pride at the expense of the law.

Tuma also lampoons the elite who have been compromised by the despots. The 'plump' doctor in 'Criminal Walk' who is in charge of the *Weyin Test* - a battery of blood tests and psychological questions to determine one's ethnic identity - is said to have acquired many years of training in the USA and Israel. Despite his many years of training, his conscience allows him to administer an oppressive test meant to domesticate ethnicity and consequent disintegration of his country at the behest of the authoritarian leadership. Likewise, Dr. Alex, a local based elite who openly expresses hatred for his foreign based colleague elites is described in 'Sheratonians' as 'a short flabby university professor … once a radical intellectual' (p. 153). The description implies that the professor has lost his intellectual edge and sense of organization. The phrase 'once a radical intellectual' succinctly suggests a bygone phase. It is indeed reported that Dr. Alex's 'students enjoyed hearing him lecture in a slurred voice' (p.155) insinuating that he had become ineffective after trading his firebrand intellectual mettle for drugs, alcohol, women, and the dictatorial regime. The author bemoans the commitment of the intellectuals who lose their focus on positive values of the society and instead support the oppressive regimes at the expense of their principles. Like Dr. Alex, such scholars lose their independence and become errand boys of the authoritarian rulers as the narrator says of Dr. Alex 'he became the behind the scene political advisor of the new rulers in addition to teaching at the run down university in the city' (Tuma, 2006, p.154). The descriptions of these characters therefore convey a lot more meaning than just height or physical

attributes thereby suggesting the deficiencies of the despotic systems that these characters align themselves to.

The description accorded the leadership and their close associates often functions to mock such characters. In 'Another Face' the Prime Minister is troubled by the sight of Mengistu, a former dictatorial Prime Minister, whenever he looks at himself in the mirror. Although he wants to distance himself from the dictator image, his conscience betrays him by consistently presenting Mengistu's face in the mirror. He summons his close confidant and tribesman, Mulugeta, and asks him whether his face has changed. In a bid to appease his boss, Mulugeta reassures the PM by saying 'we all change, the lean and hungry look we had in the forest is long gone' but the PM quickly reprimands him 'I am not asking you to state the obvious' (Tuma, 2006, p. 140). This interlocution intimates that they have both gained body weight as a result of their privileged position and the Prime Minister's sentiment affirms that one becoming fat while in a position of leadership is not news. Indeed, in most African societies heavy body weight is associated with power and privilege. The leadership is therefore crafted as selfish, greedy, and corrupt especially when Mulugeta says that not long ago they had 'lean and hungry look' yet the narrator now reports almost sympathetically that one morning the Prime Minister 'woke up alone in his bed and dragged his plump body to the sumptuous bathroom of the palace' (p. 139). His movement is painted as clumsy, strained, and cumbersome due to overweight. The author further deploys hyperbole to mock the avarice of the leadership by drawing a parallel between the Prime Minister's voluminous body mass to the unnecessarily exaggerated luxurious palace bathroom to laugh at the wastefulness of the selfish and authoritarian leadership. His body weight obstructs his movement just the same way his otherwise cosy bathroom has the mirror which keeps tormenting him with the image of Mengistu. His cumbersome body weight is oppressive and restrains his movement the same way despotism stifles the freedoms of the masses. The defiant mirror corresponds to Nietzsche's supposition that the first cause of an individual's tribulations is ingrained 'within himself, in guilt, in a piece of the past' (GM III, p. 20). It presents the PM's unconscious which is a reservoir of one's experiences (Harris, 1992) and is aware of the fact that this leader is as good a dictator as his predecessor although he would like to hoodwink the public with a false conscious.

The main character in 'Incurable Hedonist', Shasho Mamo, whose lifestyle only compares to the government officials is described as 'a dwarfish man, plump with a pot belly, protruding eyes, a bulbous nose, a neck with an underdeveloped goitre' (Tuma, 1993, p. 125). He is therefore short and fat in a very ugly way that readily projects a scaring and haunting image of the despotic leaders hence expressing their destructive potential. His fatness equates to one suffering from goitre and so greed makes him pass for a sick

person. Mamo is accused of living a luxurious life akin to that of the leadership. The author proffers a common charge sheet for both Mamo and the authoritarian leadership. The hedonist knows nothing but pleasure hence the attributes of "dwarf" and "fat" are deliberately used by the author to deride a government that is unable to attain the ideals of democracy but is instead blinded by the pursuit of its own economic and emotional satisfaction at the expense of the masses and this is what defines the ugliness of the despotic State. Nietzsche has argued that the drive to self-preservation is but a disguised form of the will to power (WP, 774) and when Mamo is finally charged with the crime of being a pickpocket, he parallels a government that is driven by self preservation through stealing from its unsuspecting victims to sustain its body mass – power. Similarly, the narrator talks of Sewyew in 'The Coward' in Tuma (2006) as a man who was 'short and plump, with a nose like a parrot's beak over a perpetually pursed slit of a mouth' (p. 69). Indeed, Sewyew is "short" in many ways. He lacks independence and strives to appease the authoritarian leadership at all cost. He bootlicks the authorities, domesticates the prejudices of the leadership and even readily marries a wife from the right family always hoping for political favours. Being a close associate and an employee of the State, his behaviour is prototypical of the leadership and how it unfeelingly exploits members of the public. His greed and selfishness making him a beneficiary of corrupt government deals like his scholarship to study in Germany and later a job with the government lends credence to his being described as plump. Most importantly, in spite of him being described as ugly, he still deludes himself that he is handsome. This spells the hypocrisy of the despotic leadership who are conscious of their misrule but still strive to front a false image to the public.

The author plays with the binaries of handsomeness and ugliness to express his disdain for the authoritarian leadership. Since the leadership is aware of its ugliness, it attempts to conceal it and pass for what it is not hence hypocrisy. While the adjectives 'short' and 'fat' are derogatorily deployed to connote deficiencies and limitations of the leadership, 'tallness' and 'slight build' suggest handsomeness and are associated with those championing the cause of justice and good governance. Indeed, some characters are short but aspire to be perceived as tall; for example, the Renegade in 'The Death of the Renegade' 'walked tall and proud though he was short and had a slight physique' (Tuma, 1993, p.150). From this description, the character projects a false conscious and actually in the story he begins as a fighter for the democratic space in his country – hinted in the symbolism of his athletic body – but later embraces the despots hence his wanting height. The prosecutor in 'Presumptuous Novelist' engages the accused who is a literary artist on one of his stories entitled 'The King who Wore Platform Shoes'. The story is about an excessively rich and powerful king who is however unhappy because he is

short. Consequently, he wears platform shoes but this still does not remedy his feelings of inadequacy. He then decides to liquidate all people taller than himself and this leads to a rebellion of the tall. The king's height is symbolic of his limitations as a leader which continues to unsettle him hence his envy for the tall. His excessive riches that do not make him happy suggest the vanity of greed and subsequent unchecked accumulation of material wealth. The platform shoes are pieces of other temporary and ostentatious solutions that the leadership resorts to but which are equally hollow and cannot bring any meaningful satisfaction to the leadership. The author uses the King's obsession with physical dominance to critique the loss of focus and the wrong perception of leadership by those in power. The failures of the king stir feelings of insecurity and consequent futile attempts at repressing his opponents. From a Marxian standpoint, the rebellion of the tall symbolizes the joining of hands by the masses to revolt against the selfish and oppressive leadership.

Both the King who wore platform shoes and the Renegade above aspire for tallness. The author seems to associate tallness with the standard values and norms of democracy. Characters who are opposed to despotism in Tuma's short stories are generally cast in the positive light; for instance, Gudu in 'Prison Monger' improves his life by consistently outwitting the authoritarian system and is described as 'a healthy, athletic figure indeed' (Tuma, 1993, p. 67). Often such characters are crafted in the mould of handsomeness. Another example, Yibabe Yitbarek, the accused in 'The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor' is described as a tall and thin middle aged man with a fuzzy Afro and his 'handcuffed wrists … did not seem to have done any hard labour at all, other than holding a pen or perhaps the flute.' Besides, he had a round, cherubic face and 'it was obvious that this lucky devil needed no love potions to ensnare the ladies' (p. 36). The author portrays Yibabe as an attractive handsome man. He is thin, tall, and has a round face which is antithetical of the despotic leadership brought out as short, fat, and with a face dotted with bulbous features. Yibabe's hands proffer an intellectual who is most probably a literary artist – either a writer or a musician who vaguely identifies with the African continent as suggested by his hair do. In the story, he antagonizes the dictatorial government pointing out failures of the leadership. He is accused of having made people to believe that he is a witchdoctor who, like Nietzsche's ascetic priest 'who knows hidden things' (GM III, 20), has solutions to the problems of the desperate masses but he insists that the people thronged his "shop" because 'I gave them sober advice and counseled them to live better. If they flocked to me … you should question the situation which made them go to such an outlet' (Tuma, 1993, p. 47). The people's desperation to the extent of seeking the intervention of a witchdoctor is, according to the accused, occasioned by the hopeless atmosphere created

by authoritarian leadership. His argument is therefore a direct indictment of dictatorial leadership in his society. Even when the characters who oppose despotism are diminutive in size, the author avoids the use of the adjective short to describe them. In 'The Professor of Insanity', the accused is reported to have made thousands of the masses to act insane rendering the situation absolutely difficult for the authorities to contain. The narrator describes the professor of insanity as 'a small, round shouldered man … a face a little bit angular yet square enough to suggest honesty, small mouth, full lips' (Tuma, 1993, p. 85). In 'Prison Monger', the defence attorney to the accused is described as 'a small man with a haunted look on his face' (Tuma, 1993, p. 59). The adjective 'small' appears to have been deliberately used instead of 'short' not in the sense of inadequacy or deficiency but to draw a parallel between the might of the authoritarian leadership and the effect of the efforts by the common citizens to access justice in society. The fact that the author projects those opposed to authoritarianism positively (handsome) while the leadership itself is negatively described (ugly) clearly exposes the idiosyncratic leaning of the author – he disapproves of dictatorship and indirectly says so in the very unkind but sometimes flattering images used to describe the authoritarian leaders and their sympathizers.

The Shewrara Image as a Projection of Despotic Indifference

Majority of Tuma's characters who occupy positions of authority are brought out as physically or physiologically challenged and these challenges speak to the failures of the leadership. The main character in 'The Coward who Hid his Eyes', Sewyew, is squint eyed; a condition that is termed a *shewrara* in his vernacular. Like the despotic leadership in the story, he hails from the privileged class and ethnicity and he considered himself superior in 'looks, class, ethnic origin and intelligence' (Tuma, 2006, p. 70). Much as he considers himself handsome and irresistible, the narrator suggests otherwise by contemptuously describing him as 'short and plump, with a nose like a parrot's beak over a perpetually pursed slit of a mouth' (p.69). The meaning of the word 'handsome' is relative; nevertheless, Sewyew's description hardly fits within the frame of someone who is handsome. He believes he belongs to nobility yet his actions are largely speckled with ignobility particularly what he does in his private spaces. The narrator says in Tuma (2006) that Sewyew patronized the bars and brothels of the City, went alone to the dark, small kiosks owned by extremely poor women 'almost all smelling of butter and sweat, who charged a pittance for a night of sex' (p.70). While Sewyew publicly fronts an image of nobility, his private sexual escapades paint him as immoral, exploitative, and disrespectful towards both himself and the helpless women folk. He actually reveals that he hated himself for stooping too low especially in his sexual liaisons but it made him happy that he was avenging

himself against the powerless prostitutes. His craving for vengeance against the prostitutes is also illusory since he does not say exactly why he hates the prostitutes whom he gleefully patronizes. It is therefore a cover up intended to sanitize his unbridled sexual immorality. Since he does not hide his alignment to nobility, his character brings to the fore a leadership that is hypocritical and careless about the plight of the underprivileged masses and would unconscientiously trample on the rights of the masses. It is often difficult to tell where a squint eyed person is looking at any one time and so they are able to steal glances at someone unnoticed. Hence, they can pretend not to have seen anything at all while they have actually taken in so much. Sewyew's eye sight is thus used to symbolize his hypocrisy – he both ignores the social ills around him and denies whoever he really is. The narrator notes that Sewyew was simply indifferent to the plight of the suffering poor in the society. His squint eyes are therefore symbolic of his indifference which prevents him (the ruling class) from noticing the plight of the suffering masses. The narrator laments about Sewyew's attitude reporting that he 'never considered himself one of the masses or a kin to the serfs … his heart did not beat for the downtrodden and he shed no tears for the impoverished (Tuma, 2006, p.73). It is ironical that he did not want to be associated with the suffering masses yet he visited the women (prostitutes) from this class in the dark for cheap sexual satisfaction. Sewyew's personality is symbolic of a conceited and hypocritical despotic leadership recklessly determined to exploit its citizens whom it has neither respect nor feelings for.

Through Sewyew, the author invites the despots back to reality so that they are able to appreciate their failures. For instance, one of the prostitutes paid Sewyew back in kind by asking him whether he was a *shewrara* and, in utter surprise, he shouted at her 'what do you mean cross eyed?' (Tuma, 2006, p.70) This question jerks him back to reality and rallies him to 'see straight' and stop his pretence. After the pricking question, he hurriedly jumped off the bed and rushed to the small cracked mirror on the cracked mud wall. Both the cracked mirror and wall are symbolic of the biting poverty in this house which had not occurred to Sewyew until the moment he is asked the disturbing question. Moreover, the cracks on the mirror and the wall are also symbolic the exposure of Sewyew's conscious cover up. Just like the despotic leadership, he had been living a lie deceiving himself that he is perfect. The narrator reports that soon after the reality lay bare right in front of him, 'he could tell the woman had spoken the truth. His eyes were a little odd; he had to admit they were cross. He decided there and then to wear dark sun-glasses and never to take it off' (Tuma, 2006, p 71). His decision to permanently wear sun-glasses further reinforces his attempt to tuck away the reality. Hiding behind dark sun-glasses shows the inner fears and anxieties of the regime. The leadership is tough on the surface but weak deep within. Subsequently, it

adopts an array of strategies to cover up its soft underbelly for fear of being unmasked for whoever they really are and consequently dethroned.

Sewyew's spirited efforts at living a lie exposes him to severe ridicule particularly in Germany where he bought more fashionable dark eye-glasses which of course he never removed from his eyes lest he revealed his real self. His first girlfriend, Ursula, had burst out laughing when he undressed and still kept his glasses on. Consumed by hatred and unconscious rejection for self, he became cruel and beastly with Ursula. Sewyew comes out as masochistic especially because he decides to bed Ursula not just to make love to her but make her life a taste of endless pain. Sewyew even named his genital organ *Jegnaw* 'the patriot' and with the sadistic passion of a despot proceeded on a sexual romp of its own kind which, according to him, was aimed at redeeming the Ethiopian honour. The narrator says 'that he used his penis like his forefathers had wielded their spears against the invading troops of Benito Mussolini' (Tuma, 2006, p. 69). His objective was to hurt as much as possible. True to his mission, while in Germany, he used and abused Ursula before sending her away, then Helga, Getrude, Anna and so on until he left the country. His feeling of nobility after such senseless sexual adventures connotes an attempt at compensating for his feeling of insecurity and inadequacies. Ideally, it is all vanity to purport to achieve pleasure by harming or abusing others sexually. His talk of patriotism is only a smoke screen for his selfish and inconsiderate character. Sewyew's sexual exploits are symbolic of the blind extravagance of the despotic political class who, driven by greed and selfishness, proceed on plundering the country without regard for the citizenry.

The author crafts Sewyew in the mold of the opportunistic, cowardly and spineless political elite who consciously renege on their tenets so long as they gain materially. Sewyew's privately scoffed at the radical citizens and dismissed Marxism as gibberish. Indeed, 'what others would call cowardice, he named caution, his opportunism was presented as tact and his tendency to be servile as politeness and good upbringing' (pp.73-74). Sewyew therefore rationalizes all his actions suggesting that he is conscious of his drives and fears which he deliberately keeps away from the public arena even as he presents a false script about himself. He is therefore a double faced opportunist that is prototypical of the despots who project different faces depending on the circumstances. For example, Sewyew himself is appointed to certain positions in government when the authorities need his services but he is equally a victim of torture when the circumstances demand it.

The despotic leadership has a high affinity for Western ideals often at the expense of their own African traditions. Sewyew is an example of those people that are alienated and full of ethnic pride. He spoke English and German as foreign languages but spoke none of the local languages save for

his mother tongue. The speaking of the two foreign languages gave him 'class' which automatically put him above the masses while his mother tongue, he assumed, would reinforce his primitive racial pride setting him above the average ethnicities in his country. The character of Sewyew is therefore symbolic of the leadership that elevates the foreign cultures at the expense of the local traditions. They however deny the fact that alienation has white washed their own being rendering them hypocritical. In addition, the sense of ambiguity evident in the Ethiopian autocratic government is insinuated here; in spite of lacking a colonial history, influential people in government circles seem to be drawn to the Western culture as is witnessed in Sewyew's liking for foreign languages at the expense of the local tongues.

The Wendagered Space and the ambivalence of Ethiopian Despotism

Human beings are ordinarily born either male or female unless there is a birth defect. In '*Anderibi*' the main character who doubles as the narrator is born dotting both male and female sexual organs and accordingly referred to as a *wendagered* – a hermaphrodite which basically occupies the in-between space half-way from both the male and the female genders thereby 'constituting a wild anatomical fantasy' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 345). Encrypting the *wendagered* space, at its nascent stage, is quite a teasing affair. It is difficult to conclude whether there is more of the male than the female (a He-woman) or the reverse (a She-man) or still if it is an alloy of the antimonies of male and female sexes in equal ratio (a male-female). The narrator says that the mother always reminded 'him' that as a *wendagered* 'he' was peculiar, 'a male-female, a He-woman, a She-man. She warned me never to piss, relieve myself or be nude in the presence of other children' (Tuma, 2006, p. 44)

Although the narrator is neither expressly male nor female, he carries, or is made to carry himself as a boy during his childhood thus illustrating the preference for sons in the society represented in the story. In another attempt to curve out the *wendagered* space, the mother decides to give the child a gender neutral name *Gero* 'which was neither a boy's name nor that of a girl's, and thereby safe by being something you cannot pin down to one category' (p.45). By naming the child *Gero,* the mother consciously conceals the sexual orientation of the child. Besides, the name *Gero* and its neutrality is a conscious move to rebrand *wendagered* for the purposes of achieving acceptability or belonging hence conformity which is a requisite in a dictatorial system. This therefore highlights the society's preference for conformism. The question of identity is further reified as slippery and fluid. It is something that the child needs to keep to himself and unknown to others yet this is who he or she is hence hypocrisy. There is in this case a confused sense of identity which typifies the Ethiopian despotic regime. Through a children's play song, the *wendagered* is invited to identify itself in Tuma (2006)

'Wendagered who are you really/ Do you stand or sit to pee, who are you/ Can we see?' (pp. 44 – 45). Ogude (2000) argues that in Ethiopia, 'Mengistu's legitimacy seems to have lain in its association with the Russian Communist State' (p. 88). Socio-politically therefore, the *wendagered* signifies the despotic government's ambiguity especially in its adoption of a revolutionary ideology that leans on Russian socialism. The regime ends up with a laughable mongrel approach to leadership that is stuck somewhere between these foreign ideologies and home grown dictatorship. The song above projects a citizenry that, in its curiosity, may be perceived as both unfeeling and sadistic. However, the author in this case presents a society that is faced with an amorphous kind of leadership and in their attempt to understand the rulers, they have to invade even their most private spaces and will not relent until they clearly fathom it for themselves. The attempt of the despots to pass for democrats is therefore a flop since the author mockingly implies that the result of their effort, captured in the image of a *wendagered*, remains vague. Due to humiliation and a barrage of epithets hurled at him, *Gero's* mother took 'him' out of school when 'he' began 'his' sixth grade telling 'him' that she did not want 'him' to waste away or kill 'himself' because others made 'him' suffer. Though the mother's move can be construed to have been informed by love and care for her child, it also suggests the removal of the dictatorial regime due to the pressure from a persistent public as is reflected in the mother's decision to take the child out of school in a bid to evade the prying society.

Through the image of the *wendagered*, the author further exposes a society that mistreats the powerless. *Gero* is persistently mocked and abused by his age mates. Tired of derision and burning with the desire to conform, *Gero* joins the bandwagon of the cruel, sadistic and malevolent gang led by Mesfin who personifies the authorities. *Gero* only achieves this by lighting a torn piece of cloth and setting a mouse's tail on fire before setting it free to the amazement of the gang. Henceforth, he gained the respect of the gang and he became just plain *Gero* dropping the tag of *wendagered* among the age mates. The fate of the mouse in *Gero's* hands and his subsequent invitation to the hall of fame by his sadistic peers is symbolic of the common citizens' plight in the hands of the cruel rulers in this society who torture and maim citizens to acquire and sustain recognition and power. The author therefore satirizes the level of callousness and exploitation of the masses by the despotic leadership in society.

The despots are roundly derided through the experiences of *Gero*, the prostitute. The leadership is brought out as dependent on the citizenry although they abuse their relationship with the masses through their untamed greed culminating in the exploitation of the common citizens. It is ironical and indeed sarcastic that they prized the *wendagered* in the dark and in private but shunned her in public. She loudly laughs at the hypocrisy of the men who

approached her with awe and readily paid much money for just few minutes of pleasure with her yet 'on the street, none of them gave me any sign of knowing me at all, passing by with hurried walks, eyes cast in any direction but towards me' (Tuma, 2006, p.49). Among the men accused of hypocrisy here is Mesfin, the ex-bully of the street who had now become a *kebele* chairman, among a host of other *kebele* chairmen. They are men who wielded power in the society and hence they personify the ruling class with all its instruments of power. Since the powerful clothe their pursuit of self-interest in the garb of morality and justice (Leiter, 2001), they endeavour to provide a false front to the public. As a way of showing his unquestionable authority in his society, Mesfin engineered the arrest and temporary detention of *Gero* and warned her that prostitution was a vice that the leadership was determined to wipe out because it was a sign of bourgeois decadence. The outward moral firmness and warning to *Gero* and even her temporary detention are only a perfectly coated scheme to subdue *Gero* into submission. Indeed, Mesfin's words in public completely contrast his actions under the cover of darkness and the narrator reports that Mesfin himself sneaked and slept at her place to her consternation. When Mesfin did not visit her place, the other powerful officials did yet they did not pay for her services. The 'prostitute' symbol is also ambiguous. On one hand, the position of the prostitute is symbolic of vulnerability and it shows how the powerless are exploited and oppressed by the hypocritical ruling class. The rulers understand that their happiness depend on a submissive and powerless citizenry. The ruled, just like *Gero*, at times are conscious of their being exploited but due to their powerlessness decide to remain loyal even when they inwardly detest such actions. On the other hand, the 'prostitute' tag which is symbolic of the exploited ordinary citizens is brought out by the author as possessing certain hidden powers over the despotic leadership. The leaders heavily rely on the masses for their survival as is suggested in their flocking of *Gero's* house in a bid to quench their sexual thirst. The author therefore projects a submissive and exploited populace that has the ability to usurp the powers of the despotic regime albeit in subtle ways.

Conclusion

This paper has critically analyzed how Tuma uses defective human body parts to indirectly register his scorn towards the despots in the Ethiopian society. The paper opines that Tuma's descriptions of his characters' physique, temperaments, behaviour, and looks appear to project despotic leadership and those opposed to their regime in contrasting shades. While the traits and demeanour of those in positions of authority are skewed towards the negative characterized by various challenges like shortness, laughable fatness, squinted eyes and general attributes of ugliness, those characters that are antagonistic towards the leadership are favourably portrayed coming out as handsome, tall,

and possessing athletic body structures. This paper has argued that through certain symbolic disorders of the human body Tuma indirectly but effectively chides the failures of the despots in society by creatively highlighting the deficiencies of the despots in such a way that despotic rule is equated to a malfunctioning human body.

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