

The Vision of Power: Joyce Cary and African Women

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JOYCE Cary's four novels about Africa stand midway between two literary traditions. They are part of the body of European fiction written about Africa by British colonial administrators or by early missionaries. These books also look forward to the present tradition of African literature whose emergence dates back to about the middle of the twentieth century. Cary's books share in the former tradition not only because of their evocation of the African environment, people and values, but also because such an evocation is channelled towards the entertainment and education of a foreign audience. His works however have this characteristic — that Cary tries to understand and analyze actions and events from the point of view of his characters. Thus far does Cary come close to the present mood of African literature, one which aims at achieving some degree of realism or authenticity in the depiction of characters and events. Unlike his predecessors, he has minimized the emphasis on exotic descriptions, romantic exploits and exaggerated modes of behaviour, but has replaced this attitude with a personal vision which searches for preconceived ideas and local traits at the expense of human traits. Since such a vision is conditioned by a series of determined notions about the African peoples and environment, it militates against the objective assessment of events, facts and characters.

Aissa Saved and *The African Witch* are marred by the above-mentioned shortcoming. These two novels grew out of Cary's experience in Africa, his years of colonial service in Northern Nigeria which began in 1913 and ended in

1919. While it is a dangerous practice to look for direct links between an author's life and his work one occasionally discovers helpful connections in ideas between the political views of a writer and his literary works. Cary's *The Case for African Freedom* and *Power in Men* bear such a relationship to *Aissa Saved* and *The African Witch*. These political works show a realization on his part at some point during his contact with Africans that the colonial rulers needed to allow Africans some form of freedom or individual choice in the running of their own affairs. He felt the only alternative to such a step would be resistance and violence. Cary explores this fight for self-expression in *Aissa Saved*.

The attempt to realize this belief in fictional terms proves a failure, for as much as Cary supports the importance of individual freedom in his political works he failed in *Aissa Saved* to convey this idea convincingly, that is, as a general human phenomenon rather than as a local form of mass hysteria. This failure is crystallized in the characterization of Aissa, the heroine of the book. She obviously is meant to represent the response of the typical African mind to situations of stress, though Cary wrote that his intention was to show how individuals come to terms with the fundamental injustice of the world. What Cary succeeded in doing was depicting what he considered the response of a primitive people to a religion imported from outside. This was why he chose Africa as the most natural setting for the work. In Cary's words:

The attraction of Africa is that it shows these wars of belief, and the powerful often subconscious motives which underlie them, in the greatest variety and also in very simple forms. Basic obsessions, which in Europe hide themselves under all sorts of decorous scientific, theological or political uniforms, are there seen naked in bold and dramatic action.¹

A pertinent observation to make at this point is that Cary found the insignificant religious wars of the Yanrin district of Northern Nigeria fraught with more violence

than the religious wars of the Middle Ages and following centuries in Europe. Perhaps the present state of unrest in Northern Ireland would have convinced him that religious and political differences do not always assume a decorous facade in Europe. Another important observation about Cary's African novels is that in them violence often seems to originate with and be perpetuated by women.

Both *Aissa Saved* and *The African Witch* have female protagonists, a fact which can hardly be considered unconscious. Such a choice not only satisfies Cary's own conception of freedom as power but also enables him to go beyond the question of freedom and power in all men to that of freedom and power in women. He constantly betrays a deep fear and suspicion of women's potential for violence. His belief was that Africans in general when confronted with the unexpected become uncontrollable and difficult to rescue; that the African's feelings are strong and need release or they explode. Cary further claims:

But women, more even than men, are passionate and revengeful in despair. Since they are conscious, especially in Africa, of minding their own business, and working very hard at it, they are especially critical of those whom they suppose responsible for public business. Women's risings in Africa, such as the Aba Riots of ten years ago, have always been marked by extraordinary ferocity and resolution. No one dare expect that if and when the African finds himself, as he thinks, the fool of the world, starving, diseased, enslaved among nations infinitely more prosperous than any yet known, that the women will not cry out too, "Flog us — kill us" or as an alternative rise and flay, kill, torture the rich whites. The mood of suicidal despair is also the spite of the rebel.²

In another passage on women he writes:

They have behind them not only the whole force of tradition, and the sympathy of all other women in the same case, that is to say, the huge majority, but something even more formidable, the profound responsibility which every woman feels towards her home and her children.³

Commenting on the source of women's action he says:

Men as well as women, of all races, mix a great deal of feeling with their thought. But many African women might

almost be said to think with their feelings which is probably the original method.⁴

The preceding passages summarize Cary's interpretation of the cause, nature and success of the Aba Riots. The events of those riots seem to have haunted his imagination and later grew into the type of obsession with violence which is given full expression in *Aissa Saved*.

Aissa Saved was published in 1933. Its theme of religious war, its "primitive" setting in a Northern Nigerian district and its mixed community of Christians, Moslems and Pagans offer perfect ingredients for the exploration in human terms of violence and irrationality as Cary saw them in his contact with Africans. The conflict among the population eventually becomes polarized into a test of power among the different gods the inhabitants worship. God, Allah, and Oke are prayed to in turn to bring an end to the drought which has made life impossible for their worshippers. The British involved in the conflict are split into two camps, each claiming to possess the better formula for the realization of their "civilizing" mission. Bradgate, the District Officer, represents the administrative arm of the British Government while the Carrs represent its religious arm. The unravelling of this plot takes the form of fighting, maiming, sacrificing of humans, orgiastic experiences, confusion and bloodshed. All the gruesome and ghastly horrors committed in the book are supposed to be the result of the inability of Africans to understand the true message of Christianity. Aissa, a half-breed Fulani girl and female monster created by the Carrs, a missionary couple in Yanrin, is the leader in this war of devastation. She herself eventually sacrifices her only son, Abba, in a rain-making ceremony designed to prove the superiority of the Christian god.

As simple as this story is in outline it is noteworthy, as M. M. Mahood has pointed out, that Cary employs in his narration more than seventy characters, all but four of whom are Africans. Many of these characters are physi-

cally deformed or old. Among the participants at the Oke festival are "debtors, beggars, prostitutes, lepers, diseased wretches, ruptured children, syphilitic girls, idiots and outcasts".⁵ Despite such a multiplicity of characters the plot of the book remains static and monotonous. Violence of one form or the other seems the only visible action. The grotesque scenes of savagery and suffering are simply variations on this predominant theme of violence. Abba is sacrificed while Ali and Musa are butchered, all in the name of religion. Religious intolerance is hardly the greatest weakness of the African people.

Cary has claimed that his book is not about the savageries of juju and debased Christianity, but about the fundamental injustice of the world and how both pagans and Christians respond to it in their different ways. Within the context of this book these two aims are not contradictory since both are realized through violence, nor do the Christians vary in their response from the pagans. This type of insistence on violence as the most natural and human mode of response stems from Cary's own conviction that the African setting "just because it is dramatic demands a certain kind of story, a certain violence and coarseness of detail, almost a fabulous treatment, to keep it in its place."⁶

Aissa is presented as the embodiment of this violence. Flamboyant, and violent in response to the least suggestion, Aissa makes her way through the book as a psychotic fluctuating between extremes of emotion. She is depicted as incapable of any response on the rational level. She is gay, sensual, ecstatic and hysterical — the incarnation of that religious abandon which Cary constantly associates in his books with Africans.

Questioning the depth of the African's religious belief Cary writes:

The question is how sound is the faith; how will it stand the great knock; how deep does it send its roots into reality?⁷

From this statement a reader is tempted to wonder whether in Aissa's case it is faith or demonic possession that is involved, unless of course both experiences are one and the same thing to Cary. Cary has made Aissa the personification of religious "enthusiasm", that phenomenon so hated by eighteenth-century Rationalists and their admirers. Aissa is nowhere near the creative free individual Cary intended to portray; creativity hardly consists in a series of orgiastic experiences. She regards Jesus as her husband and Holy Communion as the consummation of her marriage to Christ. Although she suffers extensively (when, for instance, her leg is amputated) it is difficult for the reader to identify with her, since in her usual state of frenzy she seems incapable of experiencing real human joy, sorrow or physical pain. The author denies her even that basic maternal instinct that would make any woman fight to preserve the life of her only child. Rather we are told that Aissa allowed her only child to be sacrificed "to Jesus". Such unnatural responses render her incredible as a character. A passage which describes Aissa in one of her moments of demonic and later divine possession should substantiate the foregoing comment. It recounts Aissa's overwhelming joy during her first Communion:

What would Jesus do inside her? What would he feel like? What would he say? She perceived a faint warmth in her stomach. She brought all her mind upon the place. She held her breath. But the feeling had gone already. Where was it? She found it again deeper and further in. It grew quickly, it was like the morning sun whose rays grow stronger and warmer every minute; it passed through the cold muscles; it passed outwards through the whole body in waves of heat burning out all her cold wickedness. It was making her like Jesus himself; pure so that she did not want Gajere any more; brave so that she was not afraid of the pagans, loving so that she loved Jesus with all her heart, happy so that she had never been so happy.⁸

From this passage to the end of the chapter Aissa is presented as an uncontrollable fanatic. She celebrates her union with Jesus by singing and dancing. Then, in a vision, she is reproached by Jesus, who accuses her of not

fighting for Him. In response to the accusation Aissa beats her chest with her fist; she springs up screaming that she would die for Jesus' sake. Mrs. Carr, unable to check Aissa's hysterics, goes in search of the bromide previously used to quieten the mad Shangoedi. Before her return, Aissa jumps on to Nagulo's shoulders and, carried through the midst of an excited crowd, she leads her band of wild Christians to Kolu, a pagan town, which the Christians burn and loot. The scene is full of action, but of a very unrealistic nature.

Such a steady reliance on the wild and the irrational makes the issue of Aissa's salvation debatable. Aissa is not saved in any physical or literal sense since she is caught and subjected to extreme torture after all her followers have escaped. From the spiritual point of view she is also not saved since the sacrificing of Abba does not guarantee her salvation: Cary does not tell us whether the sacrifice was offered to Aissa's good or bad spirit. From a sceptical point of view the question of salvation is in fact rendered irrelevant by Aissa's character. Throughout the book Aissa construes Jesus in mundane, concrete and immediate terms. She is depicted as totally incapable of comprehending the transcendental possibilities of her relationship with Christ. Perhaps Cary realized the unacceptability of such a version of salvation when he appended to Aissa's experience the final vision in which she sees her dead son in Heaven riding on the "Holy Goat". This strategy also fails to convince, for the experience is one of fantasy induced by hysteria and does not constitute any form of spiritual victory of belief over death. Aissa is in fact not even mentally equipped to appreciate the vision. Her own vision could not classify her as either a mystic like St. Teresa or a martyr like St. Stephen, neither of whom was such a mindless sufferer. If on the other hand Cary meant her action to be regarded as a form of creative expression that goal has also not been achieved since the artist des-

troys only to rebuild. Aissa always seems capable of destroying but never of rebuilding.

As a character in a work of fiction she is over-manipulated by the author, hence she comes out as unreal and incredible. The irony of her fate is that despite her mindlessness and destructiveness she perhaps is saved, especially if she cannot be held responsible for her own acts; she is a psychotic after all. The responsibility for her actions must be placed on the Carrs, whose convert she is. They have created a monster whom they cannot control. However, Aissa does finally merge into the general violent landscape of the novel, and by inference of Africa, for the reader is given the impression that violence is not just the result of religious differences but an indelible mark of the African environment. Aissa is the symbol of this idea. The myth of African emotionalism to which Cary subscribes is fully exploited in this novel. Aissa stands for the local, the typically African. This insistence on the local at the expense of the universal prevents the novel from transcending its immediate setting. Michael Echeruo claims that Cary has given his readers the true image of the "African mentality" as it is portrayed in European fiction:

Scene after scene depicts the unthinking, childlike stupidity of the converts, their wild, almost animal delight in clearly purposeless action, their fervent devotion to the white masters and their complete incapacity for sustained concentration of either mind or body to any task in hand. Conveniently too, the characters are so chosen that they are necessarily incapable of either thought or circumspection, and in particular, are saved from all adult responsibility either to themselves or to their community.⁹

Such is the degree of suggestibility with which Aissa in particular has been created. She is in addition not just any African, but Cary's typical African woman. Her thought-processes function on a very literal and simplified level; her intellect is feeble; her response to religion is violent and uncontrolled just as her emotions are un-governed. Hers is what Echeruo has called "a religion of

feelings and nerves." Aissa's type could be easily found among Freud's abnormal female patients but is very unlikely as heroine of an English novel.

Much more significant than Aissa's character in isolation is the fact that women feature prominently in the final holocaust of the book. Aissa's followers are mainly blackguards, criminals and rejects of society. Shangoedi the demented midwife plays a significant role, so does Aditutu. It is perhaps not surprising that Professor Mahood was the first critic to remark on Cary's bias against women. She says:

A striking feature of this final holocaust is that all its atrocities are performed by women. Shangoedi and Aditutu catch Musa by a ruse and cut his throat; Zeggi is hacked to pieces by women in the Christian attack on the palace at Yanrin; Ali is tortured to death by the demented Shangoedi and her mob. The self-reliant characters in the book are nearly all men, the self-surrendering women.¹⁰

Cary's outlook seems to have been influenced by his experience of the Nigerian women's riots in 1929, and it is not surprising that both Aissa and Elizabeth, the heroine of *The African Witch*, are leaders in war.

The African Witch, perhaps more than *Aissa Saved*, supports the claim that Cary's vision of African women was conditioned by the events of the Aba Riots. Despite Cary's insistence that *The African Witch*, especially the women's war in it, was not modelled on the Riots there are resemblances between some aspects of these disorders and the war in the book:

Like the witch, Elizabeth, the leaders of the Aba Riots used leaves carried from village to village for the purposes of their mobilization. The Ibo women's declaration that the District Officer was born of a woman, and as they were women, they were going to see him becomes the song of the women in the novel. And the official enquiry ended, as it does in the book, with censure of the unfortunate District Officer who felt compelled to fire into the crowd of frenzied women who "believed themselves possessed by the spirit of womanhood and so inviolable".¹¹

The leader of the women is Elizabeth, whom Cary has called a witch, but who in fact is a priestess, albeit a very

powerful one. She is the one who exposes witches and brings them to justice. Calling her a witch is perhaps Cary's way of emphasizing the formidable nature of her authority, especially since she wields this authority not only over men but also over the god whom she is supposed to serve.

The African Witch is also set in a district of Northern Nigeria, Rimi. Again the atmosphere is one of dissention, treachery and war, as in *Aissa Saved*. The war is fought on a religious, social and political front. The Emir's senility has given rise to political intrigue, which ends in a war of ascendancy. Aladai, the Christian contestant, is mission-trained and Oxford-educated, though such advantages do not seem to have influenced Cary's depiction of the role he gives Aladai in the book. His education and qualities of leadership have been sacrificed to Cary's antipathy towards the educated African (such as Mr. Johnson). Cary has succeeded in the episode at the Scotch Club in depicting the threat posed to such a minority group of rulers by the emergence of a talented and enlightened member of the ruled. Unfortunately he allows Aladai to disintegrate psychologically and emotionally under the strain of the narrow-minded racism of Rackman and his clique. Humiliated, disillusioned and embittered, Aladai is not allowed to apply his reasoning to the shocking event; Cary rather makes him join a fanatical and bloody sect. Conveniently, Aladai dies in the ensuing battle. Cary has once more sacrificed realistic character portrayal to his personal image of the African people.

Elizabeth, Aladai's sister, is handled in the same way. She is the priestess of the most powerful oracle in Rimi and her role in the book is central. Her political awareness stands out in her support of Aladai throughout his struggle with Rackman's clique. She is interested in the political future of Rimi and understands that her brother's victory would guarantee the preservation of the traditional culture within which she wields great authority. Such

self-interest is understandable, but when it comes to demonstrating her power Cary sacrifices objective character assessment to sensationalism. Yet Cary testifies to the naturalness of such a power:

In Africa, a juju priest has a power over life and death which resides in him personally. He has knowledge and training; he has to be initiated, like priests elsewhere, but he must also have a quality of power. A woman may have the quality as well as a man, and then she becomes a priestess. The power is real

But Elizabeth was greater than her uncle (from whom she inherited the juju throne) because she had been trained for the women's juju as well as inheriting the men's. Also she was an organizer. She had great power in Rimi. It was only limited by modern scepticism, infecting some of the townspeople, and by the Mohammedan and Christian preachers.¹²

This passage shows that Elizabeth is a normal priestess within the African context. She is expected in this capacity to defend Rimi tradition against the onslaught of Mohammedanism and Christianity. Such a position explains the harshness with which she treats Akande Tom, her supposed husband, when he enters the juju house dressed in European clothes. This dress is literally torn from his body. She in addition organizes and leads the militant opposition to Sale, the Mohammedan claimant; and she does this efficiently and without bloodshed. To have allowed Elizabeth to carry her success to the end without bloodshed would have nullified Cary's belief in blood as the basis of all African religions. His picture of her is full of contradictions: he presents her as an intelligent woman, sensible and practical, yet the god she serves and the tactics she employs for the detection of witches are totally irrational. How does a reader reconcile this fundamental irrationality with her calculated organization of the women's war? Her actions in the book show that she is endowed with shrewd common sense backed with self-confidence. In her person she is also formidable:

She was a woman who seemed, in her height and proportions, bigger than the largest and most powerful men. In fact she was probably about five feet ten in height, and

fifteen or sixteen stone in weight, not of fat, but of bone and muscle.¹³

Like Aissa she is sensual:

She wore a black velvet cloth tightly wrapped round her below the armpits, and almost touching the ground. This cloth made her seem like a moving pillar. Its dead black, which appeared greenish in the sun, contrasted with living tints of the black flesh, which changed at each motion, flashing copper, golden, blue-brown in different angles of brown.

The woman was far gone with child but this, in her slow movement, added to her monumental dignity.¹⁴

The final portrait of her is a memorable one:

The lanterns hung on each side of the yard showed her in strong light and shadow; and exaggerated her size, her huge shoulders, the wide flamboyant curl of nostrils, lips and jaw. She looked like a Rimi idol, carved by one of their craftsmen and polished with oil and blood offerings; enlarged to the size of a giant. She was as still as wood. The enormous whip across her knees made a tapering line of gold in the lantern-light; a horizontal base for the mountain curves of muscles.¹⁵

In addition, her presence is said to freeze on the spot the smiles and laughs of all spectators at the juju house. The description gives the impression of immense power, influence and authority; but hers is a sinister type of power and influence, the type that strikes terror of an absolute type, one untempered by admiration. It is as a consequence of this dark power that she transforms Akande Tom into a beast without a name; a beast which first shuffles like a baboon, then chatters like a monkey, then grows flatter and creeps like a lizard, with its legs spread like those of a frog. In the final stage he becomes a snake:

Tom lay motionless and soft. His tense muscles had relaxed; his thighs bulged against the earth. As he lay with his head under the blue shirt he seemed to have lost shape; to be spreading like a flattened boneless mass — a black jelly, protoplasm.¹⁶

Elizabeth is Cary's ultimate vision of African womanhood, she is an image meant to be contemplated in terror rather than identified with. Cary handles her portrait in a way that betrays his obsessive fear of the power of

African women. A character who starts out as a priestess, a ruler and a mother, all of which are normal positions for women in African societies, ends up as an Amazon relishing sheer power, cruelty and revenge. Her treatment of Tom shows pleasure in oppression and in mindless, wanton cruelty, a trait which coincides with the author's image of Africans in general.

Cary has therefore not been very successful in his characterization of Africans, though he is much more successful than his predecessors. He has failed to portray the Africans authentically, mainly because of his inability to suppress his belief in the myth of racial superiority — a myth which holds the African to be irrational in his response to religion and politics and the European calm and controlled. In *Aissa Saved* and *The African Witch* Cary's African characters — especially the women — are forced to fit into an already constructed set of beliefs.

NOTES

¹Joyce Cary, *The African Witch* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951), p. 10.

²Joyce Cary, *The Case for African Freedom* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1944), p. 48.

³*Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵Molly M. Mahood, *Joyce Cary's Africa* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 54.

⁶Cary, *The African Witch*, p. 11.

⁷Joyce Cary, *Aissa Saved* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952), p. 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 153-4.

⁹Michael J. Echeruo, *Joyce Cary and The Novel of Africa* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1973), p. 73.

¹⁰Mahood, *Joyce Cary's Africa*, p. 117.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹²Cary, *The African Witch*, p. 33.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 308.