

FINDING A FRAME FOR THE NATION FROM THE RUBBLE OF WAR: THE CASE OF SOUTH SUDAN

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This paper reflects on the project of imagining a South Sudan nation out of the fragmentation and the trauma of war. The paper argues that fiction is a viable avenue for envisioning the transformation of a war ravaged society into a nation. The paper locates its argument in Jeffrey Deal's novel: *The Mark*.

Keywords: Trauma, memory, representation

Introduction

I believe that a thought system of a people is created by the most powerful, sensitive, and imaginative minds that that society has produced: these are the few men and women, the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time, who form the consciousness of their time. They respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening, what has happened and what will happen – Okot P' Bitek

In his assessment of the place of literature in society, Okot P' Bitek, a Ugandan poet, underscores the salient role that writers play in "producing the fundamental ideas" which form the basis upon which society is governed or organized. In his opinion, the writer is the "foundation of society" "given his capacity to produce and sustain the fundamental ideas which are used by "the political chieftain, who comes to power with the aid of his soldier and rich business brethren" to then "put these ideas into practice in ruling or misruling society." (p. 39). To this end, Bitek (1986) holds the view that creative works of art have a very central place in society since they "constitute the mental pictures which guide men's lives, which make them human." He further believes that the creative works of art "sustain and promote the laws" that determine the existence of any society. (p. 40). The arguments that I advance in this paper about Deal's representation of nation formation in *The Mark* spring from my shared belief in Bitek's ideas as expressed above, about the capacity of the writer to imaginatively innovate the ideas that can reengineer feelings of communal belonging/s in a war traumatized society such as South Sudan. I discuss how Jeffrey Deal innovatively

grapples with the imagination and rendition of the South Sudan nation against a myriad of the challenges that have been witnessed in this society.

Struggles of South Sudan

South Sudan has suffered catastrophes of a monumental nature. Its journey of liberation has been long and arduous. Its history of the struggle for independence stretches over a period of approximately 200 years. This is a long period that starts around 1821 with the invasion of the country by Muhammed Ali, the Ottoman Sultan's viceroy in Egypt. Throughout the 19th century, the South was raided to supply slaves for the Muslim north, Egypt, and the Middle East. In 1898 Sudan was re-conquered by a coalition of British and Egyptian forces. The British showed bias as they modernized the North and largely neglected the south. When the British ended their rule of the Sudan in 1956, they conspired with North Sudan, with the support of Egypt to hand over South Sudan to North Sudan as a colonial territory. This turn of events was not taken kindly by the South who felt aggrieved by the continuation of colonial policies that were antagonistic to their wellbeing only that this time the new colonial masters were the northerners. The Southerners found themselves being treated as second class citizens in their own country by the northerners and this animosity between the South and the north set the stage for the civil wars that were to follow.

The new North Sudan colonial masters marginalized and internally colonized their fellow countrymen. They subjugated them culturally by attempting to strangle their African cultures and imposing Arabic culture and Islamic values as the identity of the new Sudan. Khartoum sought to enforce nationhood through coercion and the south rejected the Arabic



identity that was being shoved on them. With these events, the Sudan embarked on a 40-year war with itself that only came to an end with the referendum of 2011 when the South Sudanese chose to secede from the North and become a sovereign state. The common enmity against the north had galvanized a sense of oneness and a unity of purpose that sustained the forty-year war.

The current condition of South Sudan is summarized by Jok (2011) who has this to say about the new nation:

South Sudan is coming into existence after long wars of liberation, inheriting poor infrastructure, a volatile political climate, limited capacity for governance, weak state institutions, a financial crises, violent ethnic divisions, and an uncertain regional and international political atmosphere. For some time, it thus likely will be driven more by the euphoria of independence from Sudan...and the history of an extremely violent conflict with the north than by its practical abilities as a nation-state. (p. 2)

Frahm (2012) is of the view that South Sudan has always found unity around the desire to fight “an aggressive and often predatory ‘other’- be it the central government or a rival in the south” but there has never been a genuine sense of nationhood arising from “internal dynamics of unifying around a positive common denominator shared ancestry, language, destiny, etc.” (p. 27).

South Sudan’s unity is therefore founded upon the common history of oppression by colonialism through external powers and the internal oppressive rule of the north. Its sense of nationhood has thus not been built around ethnic homogeneity but rather by a common shared historical experience under different oppressive regimes.

The South Sudanese unity against northern oppression was a unity founded upon what Jok (2011) refers to as “a negative energy” driven by a collective desire to come together in order to forge a joint onslaught on the excesses of the Khartoum based government. There is a lot of skepticism as to whether the new South Sudan nation will be able to continue holding together now that there is no more common shared oppressive enemy.

Jok (2001) argues that the new South Sudan’s potential as a nation is not certain but just “a matter of speculation”. He further contends that while on

paper the new South Sudan state is existent, the reality on the ground however is that political rivalries that are based on ethnicity, the disappointment among the people following the failure of the government to lift them immediately out of their misery, cultural diversity, among other reasons are threatening to rip this nation into pieces.

Currently, the excitement of independence in South Sudan has burned out and has now been replaced by despondency and a sense of uncertainty as to what the future holds. Disappointment has taken over as local militias, rebel movements and tribal warfare, has become the norm threatening the stability of the new nation. The leadership of the new nation has also been ridden by rampant corruption, exclusion on ethnic lines and nepotism. At the moment, South Sudan is at the cross roads.

With no more external aggressor to join hands and fight, South Sudan as a nation has turned against itself. To borrow and paraphrase the words of (Eyerman, 2001) used in a different context, the exasperating yoke of colonialism which painfully served to instill a sense of oneness under suffering among the south Sudanese has fallen off the body of this weary nation, and like a worn out beast of burden South Sudan has stood in its trucks scarcely able to know what to do with the independence that it has fought so hard to win. South Sudan is like a failed revolution that had no clear agenda. The nation seems set on a mission to self-destruction given the manner in which it has turned on itself.

Fictional Representation of Societies

Given the sad state of affairs in the fragmentation of South Sudan as stated above, how then does Deal imaginatively conceptualize the South Sudan nation in the aftermath of these atrocious history? Before I venture to answer this question, here is a quick run of scholarly opinion regarding the fictional representation of societies riddled with tragedies of this nature:

Lang (1988) in “The Representation of Evil” posits that the danger with failing to artistically capture catastrophes artistically is that they could begin to appear as if they are unreal, never happened, and hence they can begin to be regarded as mythology (p. 92). Art gives these events substance; otherwise they can easily become anonymous. Long notes that by writing fictionally regarding these events, art helps to

avoid the unfortunate tendency to speak of such events “in mystical terms, to link the events to the incomprehensible, the mysterious, the insane and the meaningless.” (p. 92) Ultimately, Lang is of the opinion that “the representation of a horrible event, especially if in drawing upon literary skills it achieves a certain graphic power, could serve to domesticate it, rendering it familiar and in some sense even tolerable, and thereby shearing away part of the horror.” (p.180)

There are both negative and positive driving forces behind the conceptualization of South Sudan as a nation as presented by Deal (2013) in *The Mark*. We begin by discussing the negative motivators and then later examine the events, situations, and characters the author points to as positive images that have the potential to propel the members of these diverse and multi ethnic community to imagine themselves as a nation.

Negative Driving Forces Behind the Conceptualization of South Sudan

The *Mark* is a novel set in South Sudan. Although the text largely centers on one of the South Sudanese tribes, the Dinka, the author addresses how this group of people perceive themselves first as members of the Dinka nation and then as members of the wider South Sudan nation.

The action of this novel takes place against the backdrop of the perpetual threat to the Dinka by the Laraap, the Khartoum government, in an endless, repetitive and senseless war which society has come to christen as “the evil thing” (p.1) because of its alien and intrusive nature to the society. The narrator represents a society traumatized by the effects of cyclical waves of war. The Anyanya war, also referred to as “the venom of the snake”, is referred to as “an evil thing that threatened our souls” (p. 2). It is a war that the South is fighting against the North leaving “death in waves like summer clouds” (p. 1) Because of its ubiquitous presence, the society has also symbolically likened war to “a creeping darkness that enshrouded our land” (p.11). The impending Anyanya war has produced trauma and uncertainty in society:

The second Anyanya was still a small thing and had not yet spread to our lands, but as I think back to this time I think a deep part of us knew we had to brace ourselves to be strong against it. No words formed in my mind or came to my ears of the time of devastation to come, but somewhere inside of us I think we all felt it

looming across the horizon. (p. 8)

The *Mark* can be classified as a heroic narrative built around the heroic journey of the protagonist, Thon who embodies his nation because his destiny is intertwined with his nation’s. He exemplifies the accepted thoughts, actions and norms of the Dinka of whom the story is largely about. We agree with Ryken (1974, p.45) who holds the view that the hero in a heroic narrative “expresses an accepted social and moral norm; his experience reenacts the important conflicts of the community which produces him; he is endowed with qualities that capture the popular imagination.” We also share in Ryken’s view that the story of the hero is designed to “embody the philosophical views of the culture producing it” (p. 45) Since this narrative is constructed around the hero, Thon, his actions symbolize those of the nation that has produced him. Consequently, we can be able to discern the nature of the nation by paying close attention to the hero’s actions and response to situations. Equally, the representation of foil characters, characters that provide a parallel and/or contrast to the hero, thereby accentuating the hero’s traits, (Ryken, 1974) in the text is a useful lead to the author’s perception of nation formation in South Sudan.

The Dinka and South Sudan nation that Thon is a symbol of is traumatized and its sense of nationhood draws from what Jok (2011) would refer to as a “negative energy” whose motivation is the desire to join hands and fend off outside aggression. Its sense of nationhood is built around a common lived experience of violence and repetitive wars. The narrator laments the overbearing influence that war has in serving as a focal point for the formation of the image of the Dinka and South Sudan sense of national belonging when he complains that it is as a result of these wars that he is compelled to receive the mark which forces him onto a path not of his own choosing. (p.1). Koor, the narrator’s father, has also been obliged by war to abandon his family and commit his life to the course of the liberation of his society. He tells Thon: “this war is my life now. It is all I know.... it is what has been thrust upon me and it is now who I am.” (p. 198)

Because of the hovering threat of war, initiation (receiving the mark) is represented as a very central symbol of one’s allegiance to the nation. The mark, seven cuts parallel to the ground made on the forehead, is a gruesome ritual among the Dinka that represents one’s commitment towards the ideals cher-



ished by the nation. It implants an indelible mark on the initiates' consciousness, and establishes a solid relationship with his nation. The initiate becomes "a man of men (a *Muonyjang*), husband and father, protector and guide to the people." (p. 14). He holds a position that is irreversible and not transferrable as it engrains the identity of his nation into his conscience and he cannot henceforth transfer his nationality or his loyalty to another community or society.

The grisly manner in which the mark is administered requires the initiate to demonstrate the highest level of bravery by persevering through the excruciating exercise of receiving seven cuts on his forehead "without flinching, without tears or any sound." (p. 9) thus guaranteeing the nation of the initiate's identification with and commitment to its aspirations and his dedication to the furtherance of its image. The dignity attached to the initiation ceremony gives Thon and Matak the contentment of belonging to the "best place in all the world." (p. 30)

The crowd that gathers to witness the initiation ceremony participates in the imagination of their nation's image. The bravery exhibited by the initiates while receiving of the mark percolates to the crowd to become one of the identifying images of the South Sudan nation. The initiation ceremony becomes a site for the nation to parade men and women whose counsel and virtue are the bedrock of the ideals by which the members define themselves. The ceremony therefore engages the attendees in an act of imagining their nation. They begin to perceive themselves as members of a nation who, as Anderson (1994) postulates, inhabit a world that they share in common through a "deep horizontal comradeship." For Anderson, such a nation exists in the mind of a people in whom their lives the image of their communion.

Additionally, this rite of passage imprints an image of newness and hope in the collective psyche of the imagined nation amidst the death and looming destruction of the impending Second Anyanya. As Thon Bol receives the marks of the Dinka Agar, the members of the nation as a collective sigh in anticipation of triumph as they participate in forming a national image of bravery against the looming adversity. If Thon Bol is to fail the test by displaying any cowardice, the entire nation will disapprove of his assuming the office of the bearer of the nation's image. This is something he is quite aware of:

I must pass the test without flinching, without tears or sound-I thought....I will show the clan

that I am the one who would face death for them, thrust and receive the spear for them. The second Anyanya was still a small thing and had not yet spread to our lands, but as I think back to this time I think a deep part of us knew it was coming, knew we had to brace ourselves to be strong against it. (p. 8)

According to the author, internal aggression from the neighboring clans such as the Atuot is no hindrance to realization of the South Sudan nation. Anderson (1994) proposes that a nation's borders are elastic. This is evident when Matak concedes that despite being a Dinka Agar, he would rescue an Atuot kid under attack from a crocodile out of instinct and out of the character of the man that he is rather than the man he would like to think of himself. (p. 49). The author also suggests that nations are arbitrary since despite of the rivalry between the Atuot and the Agar, he presents cases of intermarriage between people from the two rivaling nations. Accordingly, the writer suggests in the text that war is responsible for the existence of arbitrary and imaginary mental images that distinguish between the members of the wider South Sudan nation namely: Dinka, the Atuot and the Neur.

The author employs certain characters, to borrow Ryken's (1974) terminology as "foils" to provide a contrast to the hero (who is a symbol of the nation), thereby amplifying the nation's positive image. One of such characters is Chol who, Although Dinka, is represented as aggressive, a killer of children and believes in hatred as an avenue of asserting his nationhood. The author identifies with Thon and Matak who practice their membership to the South Sudan nation through peace and brotherhood with other surrounding communities. Chol's clan believes in killing young girls and attaining fortune through magic. Throughout the text, Chol's actions are depicted by the author not as heroic but as cowardice and these actions are an antithesis to the actions of Thon and do not constitute the image of the South Sudan nation that the author is endeavoring to fictionally reconfigure

Besides Chol, the author points to other characters whose actions are a betrayal to the collective conscious and shared image of the Dinka and the South Sudan nation. One of such characters is an anonymous Dinka man who is simply identified as "the man" to signify that he is not the only one with

these traits. He is a member of a cartel that works in collusion with Joseph Kony, the Ugandan leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), to abduct girls from Sudan and take them to Uganda for sacrificial rituals believed to enhance the supremacy of this rebel movement. It is through such clandestine abductions that the Dinka society is duped into entering into war against their neighboring clans, the Neur, believing that they have a hand in the disappearance of Dinka girls. The author here underscores the role of foreign conspiracies in the destabilization of the Sudan nation. He seeks to discredit the image attributed to the Dinka as a combatant nation by revealing the LRA's role, led by Joseph Kony, in interfering with the Sudanese nation through fomenting enmity between neighboring clans and consequently orchestrating the cyclical wars that have created societal disharmony.

Positive Driving Forces Behind the Conceptualization of South Sudan

Besides the negative forces that have played a role in arousing a sense of South Sudan nationhood as discussed above, the author also points to positive motivators to the imagination of the people in this region as members of a South Sudan nation. For the fact that this novel is a product of a period in South Sudan's history marred by war and its traumatic effects, the author nevertheless points the reader to the other positive aspects from which the people perceive themselves as a nation. By projecting pictures of a society governed by high family values, hard work and loyalty, Deal (2013) engages in what Sicher would refer to as the construction of a more useful collective memory that can serve as the focal point for the formation of new national liaisons.

According to the author, the sense of pride and resilience against colonial and postcolonial aggression is one of the values at the centre of the people's imagination of themselves as a nation. In Maciek's words:

We Dinka have lost more battles than anyone can count. We have lost men, women, and children. Before the British, the Laraap carried us away as abeed, slaves. They occupy our land for only a short time. But we always retake the land in the end. Before the British, the Turks came and ravaged the land, killed many. During that time and before, the Egyptians raided us. The slaves they take away are but flesh and blood that our strong Dinka

women replace. The land has never been truly conquered and we Dinka have never lost a war. They always invade and we always fade away. We always return to the land and the invaders always leave. It is our curse and our blessing, this vast land. This is the way Nhialic protects us who live at the center of things where all life began (p. 131)

Besides this, upholding high family values, hard work and loyalty to the ideals of the society among both men and women is greatly celebrated as a hallmark of one's membership to the Dinka nation. According to the narrator, the longevity of the nation is spurred by the strength of women and their commitment to raise strong families and also hard work on the land. These are the virtues that the author points to as images of the South Sudan nation.

According to the narrator, the nation draws its membership from the shared confidence in the leadership of Totems and elders. An example of such icons is the Beny Bith (Master of the Fishing Spear) who is a holy prophet among the Dinka. The holder of this office has immense powers and plays a big role in guiding society. The writer draws the attention of the society to the role that Nhialic, the Beny Bith, and other institutions play in the past in enhancing unity in the nation amidst the trauma of the civil wars.

The people are also presented by the author as imagining their nationhood from a collective belief that they share a land that sits at the "center of the world". (p. 1) Due to poor seasonal patterns, they have a collective nomadic pattern of life that makes them move around in search of water and grazing grounds. This shared pattern of life has marked their identity and facilitated their imagination of themselves as members of the same nation since it has been in existence "since men began to mark time, or so think those who live there." (p. 2).

The people are also presented as collectively imagining themselves as members of a nation through their agricultural practices. They have Sorghum as their staple food crop and cattle rearing as a major occupation. The shared patterns of naming stand as one of the key components that helps establish social connections among the Dinka. This exercise is not done haphazardly but people's names symbolize events in the environment, seasons, animals and the beliefs that the nation cherishes. Through naming one's bond to the nation is formed since



they are given an identity that enables them to associate to a significant event in the society. The narrator, for example, identifies himself as Thon, named “after the bull which was the most prized of the cattle that my grandfather gave for my grandmother, a bull that would not be castrated”. He is also referred to as Bol to signify that his birth occurred after his mother birthed twins. Naming is done in line with the names of cattle.

Hard work and strength are also presented by the author as elements that foster the imagination of the South Sudan nation. The narrator describes his mother very glowingly as a very industrious woman. Despite having given birth to many children including three sets of twins (p. 22), she is still able to grow very tall sorghum and “her millet bent under the weight of fat seeds.” The narrator considers his father’s offer of twenty-eight cows and seven goats as dowry for his mother as meager for the industrious woman that his mother has turned out to be.

Dinka people as represented in the text also imagine their membership to their nation as revolving around their shared kindness and hospitality. They are portrayed as a virtuous people and according to the narrator, for example, they watch over each other’s cattle and no one watches over his own without taking concern over the plight of the rest of the cattle even though they do not belong to him. (p. 35)

The author represents nature as an important and a controlling image to South Sudan nationhood. He presents nature as having a stronger gelling force to the nation’s membership as opposed to the civil wars that are ravaging South Sudan. The author endeavors to influence society into perceiving the beauty of nature as being more foundational to South Sudan nationhood as opposed to war which should be regarded as marginal and intrusive. Thon’s admiration for his membership to the nation is reflected in his words to Matak when he tells him that both he and Matak are “content to be in the best place with the best friends and the most beautiful cattle in all the world.” (p. 30) One way through which the people display their adoration and attachment to nature is through songs. Songs sang in praise of the cattle, the personality oxen, the sun, Deng, the divinity of the clouds and sky, the greatness of Nhialic, all serve to instill pride in the singers and root their membership to the nation. Deal in *The Mark* presents a society whose countryside is inhabited by beautiful birds such as “Piak Piak” (p. 20) which follows the movement of the cattle so as “to snatch up the insects that they disturbed.” Small swifts, with sleek wings dart in and out

of tree tops. The night is punctuated by the occasional whooping of hyenas and the air is filled with the constant bellowing of the many cattle that the Dinka keep.

Finally, we can also note that the author presents South Sudan as a nation imagined by its members out of their love for upholding the law. For instance, whereas the narrator is bestowed with leadership roles during his initiation, he is still expected to subscribe to the laws by which the society is governed. There is a clear hierarchy of power with the elders, the Beny Bith and the chief settling grievances arising among members. The upholding of societal laws during the dispensation of justice as portrayed by the author in the case against Chol presents South Sudan as anchored in justice and not as popularly projected as a society averse to order and the rule of law.

Conclusion

For the fact that war shatters and fragments social relationships thereby engraining what Ofer (2009) would refer to, I wish to borrow and paraphrase him as a negative identity in the national psyches of the citizens of these societies, this paper has explored how the Jeffrey Deal imaginatively visualizes the transition of South Sudan into a nation. *The Mark* has availed a space, not just to help this society to make sense of its past history but also to help the members project their future potential of restoring the fractured sense of communal belonging/s.

Deal has championed, to borrow words from Kurtz (2013), a restorative visions for the society given the manner in which the narrative alludes to the hope for healing and renewal in the aftermath of war. He espouses a pragmatic vision that acknowledges the challenges inherent in South Sudan. By and large, Deal endeavors to innovatively create favorable memories of South Sudan’s past history that promote harmony and healing as avenues of achieving coalescence

The writer does not romanticize the possibilities of achieving nationhood in South Sudan by overlooking the tensions and anxieties that impede this process. He has not superficially treated South Sudan’s catastrophes in the obsession to chart a way forward towards nationhood.

In my reading of the text, I have come to the conclusion that Deal does not imaginatively envision

the becoming of this war traumatized society into a nation through the encouragement of the total forgetting of the past.

In a sum, Deal in *The Mark* demonstrates that the development of a national character in South Sudan after the ravages of war and the fragmentation of society is achievable.

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