

Humour and Irony in Kourouma's Novels

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Abstract. In a flavour of humour, Kourouma draws a trajectory of the lives of his heroes to portray the irony of life in each case. From Fama in *Les soleils des indépendances* to Birahima in *Allah n'est pas obligé*, including the King of Soba in *Monnè, outrages et défis*, as well as President Koyaga in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, the life story of the protagonist in each case ended the opposite way to their initial expectations. This is in spite of all their efforts put in, both in the overt and in the covert, to achieve target. And in all the cases, the protagonists kept hoping for the best until their eventual ironic turn of events. This is the thrust of irony and humour in the four novels which this study has highlighted: the irony of the disillusionment being experienced by Africans as against the high hopes and expectations promised by the independence of the 1960s.

Keywords: Kourouma, humour, irony, satire, African literature,

1. Introduction

Reading any of the four novels published by Ahmadou Kourouma in his life time is never a boring, exercise. This is because the author has a way of making light issues of intrigues and episodes, even the most serious or tragic of them, to the amusement of readers. While reading Kourouma, one may smile from time to time; one may even burst into outright laughter at intervals. It is not that the writer trivializes the message of the sundry unfortunate experiences of the African continent at the various stages of her history. In fact, behind the satirical humour in his works, beyond the sarcastic posture, the reader grasps the import of the author's artistic creativity and the sociopolitical message therein. And indeed, since satire in literature is a work intended to show the foolishness or evil of some establishment, society or practice, in an amusing way, then, the entire work of Kourouma can be classified as satire.

This paper aims at bringing out the humour and irony, especially the humour in the ironic denouement in these four novels of Kourouma, namely: *Les soleils des indépendances*, *Monnè, outrages et défis*, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* and *Allah n'est pas obligé*.

The trajectory drawn by Kourouma to his main characters in the novels under review is such that the end reflects in each case a contrary picture to that anticipated by the protagonists. It is this irony of life laced with humour in the life and fate of the heroes of Kourouma's novels that this paper is out to elucidate.

2. Humour and Irony

Humour is a stylistic device which intends at causing amusement. It is a literary tool that makes audiences/readers laugh. The writer uses different techniques, tools, words and even full sentences and plots in order to bring to light funny sides of life.

Humour is one of the most effective weapons to please the audience, as it develops characters and makes plots useful and memorable. It plays many functions in a literary work. It arouses interest among readers, sustains their attention, helps them connect with the characters, emphasizes and relates ideas, and helps the readers picture the situation. The most dominant function of humour is to provide surprise, which not only improves quality, but improves memorable style of a literary piece.

In her *Humour in Literature: Three Levels*, Teresa Gloss (1989) posits that humour, depending on the level of comprehension of the audience to which it is directed, may be divided in three levels for analysis. The first is a universal, comic humour that can be understood by everybody without regard to culture or formal education. Humour at the second level is

sexual, political or religious jokes that require a higher level of understanding and maturity. The third level of humour requires a high command of language and its stylistic devices. The audience for this sophisticated humour is cultivated and refined. The main channel of expression of humour at this level is iron. Indeed, it is humour fed with irony that this work seeks to unravel in the denouement in each of the four novels of Kourouma.

Irony, on its part, consists in using words and plots which are clearly opposite to one's meaning, usually with an amusing purpose. In his work titled *Psychology of Humour*, Martin, R. A. (2007:13) says that "irony is where the literal meaning is opposite to the intended". In essence, irony is a literary technique that depicts an event or a plot where what appears on the surface to be the case, differs radically from what is actually the case.

Irony can be categorized into different types, including verbal irony, dramatic irony and situational irony. Situational irony, which is the type in focus in this study, describes a sharp discrepancy between the result expected and the actual result. The situational irony in this work is the irony of the fate of Kourouma's protagonists.

The focus of this work on both humour and irony is not misplaced. In fact, irony is interwoven with humour in the four novels to give lasting images in the mind of the readers.

The irony in focus here is mainly the irony of fate (l'ironie du sort), irony of the fate of Kourouma's heroes. In fact, the build-up of the central intrigue in each of the novels is anchored on the irony of the fate of the protagonist. Irony of fate or irony of life exists when the courses of events have the opposite result from what is expected; usually a bad result.

Fama in *Les soleils des indépendances* started with high hopes about independence for his country from colonization and fought for it, but he ended up being disappointed and disillusioned. In *Monnè, outrages et défis*, the King and people of Soba kingdom put in everything, both spiritual and physical, to ensure that their kingdom is not overrun and conquered by the French colonial invading army, only to be defeated easily like a band of mice preventing an army of cats from passing.

So also, in *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Birahima had all the high hopes of salvaging his corrupted and depraved childhood by going to Liberia only to end up in more vices and in worst crimes as a child soldier in the civil war. He came back home empty-

handed having escaped narrowly from death. Even in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, if President Koyaga had known that the so-called purification ceremonies he was to undergo would end up in such far-reaching revelations about his dictatorial and oppressive regime, he would have opted otherwise.

3. *Les soleils des indépendances.*

In the case of Fama in *Les soleils des indépendances*, the future of princes like him was guaranteed and bright; then came the colonial enterprise which, in the French colonies, put an end to such hopes. But the independence which he hoped would, after the ills of colonization, restore his privileges and rights, also ended up transforming him into an aggrieved and bitter man, and indeed into a beggar who had to comb funeral and naming ceremony venues to feed and survive. The following passage is descriptive enough of the irony of the fate of Fama:

Like a distant storm the suns of independence had given warning of their coming, and at the first gusts of wind, Fama had shed everything: trade, friends, women to use up his nights and days, his money and his anger in railing against France, the father and mother of France. He wanted revenge for fifty years' domination, and for the loss of his birthright. What then did independence bring Fama? Only the national identity card and the party membership card. (Adrian Adams, 1968: pp.13-14)

Fama even suffered imprisonment and deprivation in the era of independence. These happened to him in spite of the prayers to Allah and the diverse sacrifices offered to the gods of his ancestors in order to boost his chances of getting a fair share of the national cake. A form of syncretic fatalism which Kourouma ridicules in most of his works:

What had he not done to be co-opted? Prayers night and day, all kinds of sacrificial offerings, even a black cat down a well (Adrian Adams, 1968: p.14).

Moreover, the way Kourouma makes Fama to transport himself around town in the peak of poverty and joblessness, in his flowing gowns, while still claiming to be the only authentic and legitimate Doumbouya prince alive; the way he enjoyed accolades and eulogies from griots and praise singers; that feeling of pride in the eclipsing glories of feudal Africa; all these add to the humour in the text.

It is thus an irony of fate that prince Fama who was born to enjoy honour and privileges, wealth and women to now become a vulture of sort in the very domain of his ancestors. That is why the author says of Fama that, if given a choice, he would have

preferred a return to the colonial period in spite of the negative side of it:

That was why if he had been free to choose his own poison Fama would have chosen the colonial period, even though the French had deprived him of his inheritance. (Adrian Adams, 1968: p.73)

This feeling underscores the failure of the political independence in meeting the aspirations of the teaming populations of Africa which Fama represents here.

The peak of irony in the fate of Fama is the fact that it was his dead body that was carried to his Togobala village where he had dreamt of spending the rest of his troubled life as the customary chief. A tragic denouement indeed; but one so made by Kourouma, to strike at two points: the barrenness of the African post-colonial political era and the impracticability of a return to the retrogressive pre-colonial feudal Africa.

4. *Monnè outrages et défis*

It is in *Monnè, outrages et défis* that Kourouma ridicules Africa's syncretic fatalism the most. The people of Soba offered sacrifices to the ancestors in order to prevent or at least overcome and defeat the advancing colonial forces. The marabouts and other witches did vigils. Dozens of goats, sheep, cows, and fowls were killed to appease the gods of the ancestors. Even a dwarf and an albino were killed as sacrifices.

And when the oracles were not giving early signs of accepted sacrifices, king Djigui offered to turn to Allah:

Puisque les mânes des aïeux se montrent incapables de nous accorder ce que nous voulons, demandons-les à Allah (Kourouma, 1993: p.14).

(Since the gods of our ancestors are proving powerless in this matter, let's turn to Allah.)

But despite the hopes raised here and there by the clerics, despite the fact that the king rode on horseback around the capital to announce that their prayers had been answered, and despite the sundry funny roadblocks and barricades built on the main way to the capital to prevent any attack, the French colonial forces entered into Soba unceremoniously, without causing any fracas.

Les Nazariens étaient entrés à Soba par la colline kouroufi,...Ils l'avaient escaladée comme s'enjambent le seuil de la case et les cuisses d'une femme éhontée, s'étaient saisi de l'arsenal sans tirer

un coup de fusil, sans tuer un poussin! Sans effarer une seule poule couvant ses oeufs! (Kourouma, 1993: p.35)

(The whitemen had entered into Soba through the kouroufi hill... They climbed it as one climbs the doorsteps of a hut or the laps of a shameless woman; they seized the arsenal without firing a single gunshot. Without killing a chicken, without frightening a single hen hatching its eggs.)

The dramatic and comic way Kourouma made the kingdom of Soba to fall despite the confidence and optimism of the king, elders and people of the land in their efforts, draws attention to the need to also be practical, objective and pragmatic in approach to issues of life, rather than leaving things to faith and fate alone.

The ironical picture in *Monnè, outrages et défis* is basically the fact that a people who hoped and believed strongly in self-determination and self-governance ended so soon being the subjects of the higher and more adventurous colonial enterprise.

Thenceforth, the king and the people had no other choice than to endure the sundry *monnew*: insults and sufferings, in the hands of the new masters. From the exploitation of natural resources of the land, to the circumscription of able bodied citizens as "tirailleurs" to support the French war efforts, the *monnew* were indeed devastating. And all these are pictured by Kourouma in his characteristic sarcastic style. The western hypocrisy into which the colonial enterprise was molded is adequately depicted by the author in the way the king Djigui was made to travel to France with the promise of building for him, in his domain, the likes of the railways and train coaches he saw overseas: something to massage his pride for him in order to get more resources out of his land. A scenario almost similar to that of old Meka in *The Old Man and the Medal* of Ferdinand Oyono which ended in disgrace and regrets to the old man. Sets of utopian promises were showered on him in the midst of the steady and systematic installation of the colonial administration with relevant institutions; a process which deprived him of almost all the few privileges left for him, making him just a figure-head, a man of no consequence in the affairs of the land of his ancestors. Though he attempted a protest, it was to no avail. That was why one of the griots comically warned him of the consequence of a resistance in the face of the challenges, in the following proverb:

C'est en trop voulant se débattre que la chevrette serre encore plus la cordelette avec laquelle on l'a attachée au pieu", (Kourouma, 1998:138)

(It is in attempting too hard to free itself that a goat tightens the more the rope with which it is tied to the stake).

Also in *Monnè, outrages et défis* one hears echoes of the funny interpreters of the colonial era, who either embellished, added to or subtracted from what they were asked to interpret, or even out-rightly said something different entirely, to their interlocutors, their fellow Africans.

These Africans who by virtue of their little Knowledge of the Whiteman's language but who saw themselves above their pairs, contributed to the suffering and exploitation of their own people, and therefore became accomplices in the colonial evil.

Soumaré is the interpreter in *Monnè, outrages et défis*. He has a curious and comic way of lightening up even the most tragic issues. For instance, while explaining to the King Djigui the importance and the compulsion in the payment of the newly introduced tax called "impôt du prix de la vie" (life tag tax) which the village tribal leaders must pay on every living citizen in their areas, he says the use of pepper and naked fire would not be spared on them in efforts at getting them to pay the money at all costs.

Soumaré démontra comment les chefs qui n'avaient pas d'argent praviendraient quand même à payer l'impôt du prix de la vie. Ils seraient enfermés dans des cases où on les enfumerait avec du piment et, si la toux ne parvenait pas à leur arracher l'argent, on mettrait des braises sous leurs pieds et dans leurs mains. Avec le feu, le piment... (Kourouma, 1993: p.59).

(Soumaré demonstrated how the chiefs who did not have money would somehow succeed in paying the life tag tax. They would be locked up inside some huts where they would be smoked up with pepper and, if coughing could not snatch the money from them, we would put live charcoal under their feet and in their hands. With fire and pepper...)

5. *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*

The third novel, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, woven around the life story of military dictator Koyaga who planned to metamorphose into a democratically elected leader, is not spared either, of the same ironic and humorous verve typical of Kourouma. The most voluminous of the four novels, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, aims at ridiculing the very many devices, manipulations and intrigues used by post-independent African sit-tight

dictators to perpetrate themselves in office. The sarcastic picture in the novel can be seen clearly when one compares the status, influence and powers of Koyaga with the rather insulting yet revelatory nights of a so-called purifying ceremony he had to go through. A person of the caliber of a Head of State, President and Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, made to sit in the mist of illiterate traditional hunters and griots with Maclélio, his Minister of National Orientation, his friend in the crimes, by his side, and made to hear, night after night the many atrocities and crimes he had committed, without being able to object or protest, is certainly a pathetic and comic scene to behold. He descended to that level in his attempt to retain power at all cost. The way the hunters' griot, Bingo, and his assistant in the oral art, Tiécoura, punctuated their statements with the pronoun "you" and the possessive adjective "your" while revealing the series of "uncleanness" that must be washed away from the President's life, made the latter to look like an accused person placed in a court dock who is overwhelmed by the avalanche of count-charges being reeled out against him:

Your officials barely have time to think for the whole of your regime, they are lost, drunk on public Carnivals. The country celebrates the day of your initiation and those of your father and mother... The commemoration recalling the death of your father is known as the feast of the victims of colonialism, one of the most important feast days in the year. You play an active role in all the religious feasts, pagan, Catholic, Muslim and Jewish, all of them are paid holidays. The frequent visits of your peer-dictators and fathers of nations-rally the school children...the task force. (Wynne Frank, 2006: 359-360.)

Moreover, here also, like in his other novels, Kourouma satirizes the fatalistic disposition of Africans to issues, even of leaders of the caliber of President Koyaga, who kill any kind of sacrifices or undergo any form of rituals to protect themselves, remain invincible and prolong their grip on power. And therein one comes across the picture almost palpable of dictators in the mould of Eyadema of Togo, Hassan II of Morocco, Mobutu of Zaire, Houphouët Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire and Abacha of Nigeria, all late now. Apart from his main jujuman Bokano, Koyaga had a rather queer, mysterious and even suspicious relationship with his mother considered as the other force behind his mystic powers. These two ensured the dictator's survival of the many attempts at his life, both the genuine and the phantom coups:

Ah Koyaga: you were spared, you survived thanks to your mother's dark powers and the bloody sacrifices

and the benedictions of the marabout Bokano. (Frank Wynne, 2006: 316)

Referring to the childish and funny demonic relationship of President Koyaga with his mother while relating an air crash involving Koyaga in which all other persons on board perished except Koyaga who mysteriously disappeared and was found at home in the arms of his mother after a long search, griot Tiécoura says:

The dictator of a thousand soubriquets lay in the arms of his mother, very much alive and in one piece, and smile on his lips. Weeds never die... (Frank Wynne, 2006: 318).

The irony in the whole drama is that in spite of all the efforts, in the physical, the spiritual and the supernatural, dictator Koyaga did not succeed in entrenching and perpetuating himself in power. The result he got at the end of it all was not what he expected, even after confessing all his incredible atrocities in power. An ironic humour fit for dictators and demagogues of Koyaga's mold all over the world.

6. *Allah n'est pas obligé.*

Birahima in the last novel *Allah n'est pas obligé* left home for Liberia upon the hope of finding his aunt there and upon the promises of better life made by his grandmother:

Grandmother tried to encourage me, to persuade me to leave Balla, by telling me that in my aunt's house in Liberia I would have rice and meat with "sauce graine" to eat. I was happy to be leaving because I wanted to eat lot of rice with sauce graine. Walahe! (Frank Wynne, 2006: 28)

And more than the words of the old woman, the flowery promises of Yacouba, the international jujuman who was to take him there, convinced Birahima to go:

One morning, he came to see me, took me aside secretly and told me things in confidence... Wonderful things. He said they had tribal wars in Liberia and street kids like me... had every American dollars. They had shoes and stripes, and radios and helmets and even cars... I shouted Walahe! Walahe! I want to go to Liberia. Right now, this minute. (Frank Wynne, 2006: 37)

But ironically and unfortunately, contrary to his high expectations, Birahima was soon to discover that he could only boast of his kalachinkov and the sundry crimes committed with it. His confession:

"In all tribal wars including in Liberia child soldiers small soldiers are not paid. They kill and carry away whatever they like. They massacre the inhabitants of

towns and villages, and keep whatever seems good for them to carry. (Wynne Frank, 2006: 45-46)

The use of the small boy, Birahima, to relate, with the touch of innocence and inexperience, the many atrocities of war, including the sexual escapades of senior soldiers, the cheating, plotting and deception among the soldiers even within the same factions, all these add to the tragi-comic and ironic feeling that pervades the novel.

Humour in *Allah n'est pas obligé* is mostly woven around the main characters and what they represent in the global picture of the post-colonial African tragi-comedy called civil war. One of such clear images is that of Colonel papa le bon (papa the good one). The name connotes and announces positivity and goodness. But this representative of Charles Taylor in a region of Liberia, who claims to be a priest (he wears a soutane, keeps a temple and preaches from both the Bible and the Quran), indulges in worse crimes than any other person around him, an irony of sort. Beautiful women never went untouched (Wynne, 2006: 60, 76, 81). He often drank whisky and fermented palm wine to the level of drunkenness (Wynne, 2006: 86)

He engaged in occultism by patronizing Yacouba, the jujuman (Wynne, 2006: 74-75) and was also a collector of all kinds of taxes and custom duties within the regional borders under his control (Wynne, 2006: 77). He was also a judge who used the church as courtroom as well as execution arena (Wynne, 2006: 82). When one puts all these conflicting attributes together in one man, who nonetheless died a funny death (Wynne 2006: 87), the tragic but ironic and comic message of Kourouma is fully grasped.

7. Conclusion

This work has established through the four novels considered that the use of humorous irony has enabled Kourouma to achieve his aim of the satirical depicting of the socio-political experience of Africa in both the colonial and the post-independence periods. The stylistic devices of humour and irony not only make the reading of these novels enjoyable but also impact lasting images and an almost indelible impression upon the reader's memory. There are many types and categories of humour and irony, but the one employed here is the ironic humour drawn from the fate that attended to the efforts of the main characters in the works reviewed. The negative turn of events that Kourouma's heroes experienced against high hopes and great efforts, is a picture of the disillusionment and barrenness of the much

heralded political independence granted Africa in the 1960s. Instead of stability and progress, it is conflicts and wars that Africa gets in return; instead of democracy and freedom, Africa keeps fumbling from system to system. Yet, Africa has all that it takes to make a leap economically, socially and politically. Natural and human resources abound everywhere on the continent for Africa to join the league of stable and developed regions of the world. But ironically several decades after independence from colonial rule, Africa remains poor and backward.

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