Negotiating an AlternativeNation in Anglophone Cameroonian Literary Discourse: John Nkengasong’s Socialist Realist Vision in *across the Mongolo*

Dr. Andrew T. Ngeh

Department of English, University of Buea, Cameroon
ngehandrew@yahoo.com

Abstract

The main thrust of the argument of this paper is predicated on the premise that the various socio-political mutations that Cameroon has undergone from 1961 to 1984 has left many Anglophone Cameroonians with the feeling that they are socially isolated, economically exploited and politically marginalized. Thus, this paper seeks to proffer an alternative political agenda as intimated by John Nkengasong in his *Across the Mongolo* -2005. Using the New historicist critical theory, this paper revealed that Nkengasong recommends a new political system, an alternative nation that can only be built from a socialist realist perspective.

Keywords: Negotiating, Alternative and socialist realist

Introduction

From 1961 through 1984, to the reintroduction of multiparty politics in Cameroon in 1990, the Republic of Cameroon has witnessed a series of political changes. The 1961 Plebiscite saw the Southern Cameroons joining East Cameroon to become a Federal State. In 1972, after the May 20th Referendum, Cameroon became a Unitary State (United Republic of Cameroon). In 1984, by Presidential decree, the word “United” was deleted for just the Republic of Cameroon, being the original name of the former French independent Cameroon. According to ‘Epie, (1993) this move was aimed at eliminating all elements of the former two Cameroons:

This politico-historical development was aimed at eliminating all faces of the former divisions. That was of course, wishful thinking as the division between Anglophone and Francophone remains indelible at the linguistic, cultural and even political arenas. (p.51)

It is this radical transformation that places Anglophone Cameroonians at the disadvantage that inspires this article to proffer an alternative political vision for Cameroon.

This paper sets out to demonstrate Nkengasong’s alternative political vision in *Across the Mongolo*. That notwithstanding, one of the issues this paper addresses is to identify, isolate and highlight some of the socio-political factors that prompt this search for an alternative nation in Cameroon. Secondly, the paper attempts to ascertain the role of the novelist in this quest for an alternative political agenda. Thirdly, the paper also attempts to establish the dialectical and symbiotic relationship between aesthetics and ideology, and how this relationship enhances Nkengasong’s ideological posture. Finally, the paper attempts to ascertain the authorial ideology and social vision in the novel under reference.
For this paper to be clearly comprehended and understood, certain key terms are worth defining. This is in keeping with Bernard Fonlon’s submission (1982) in “The Idea of Literature” that the first principle of any scientific discourse is the definition of one’s terms or concepts so as to know “clearly and precisely right from the start” what these terms or concepts mean (179). These terms are “Negotiating”, “Alternative”, “Nation”, “Anglophone” “Socialist Realism.”

The first term to be defined is “negotiation”. This word comes from a Latin word negotiate which means to carry out business or a transaction. Roy J. Lewicki et al (1999) in their book entitled Negotiation define negotiation as “…a more formal process that occurs when two parties are trying to find a mutually accepted solution to a complex conflict” (p.6). The aim of every negotiation is to proffer a solution to a situation of conflict. This particular definition will be used in this paper because of the on-going conflict between the Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon.

The second concept is alternative. The word exists both as a noun and an adjective. Etymologically, this term is derived from a Latin word, alternare which means one or other of two. Basically, the qualifier alternative has to do with the seeking for something new to replace an old one. This definition falls within the paradigm of the current dispensation in Cameroon. There is a feeling amongst Anglophones in Cameroon that the system in place has failed to produce the desired effect because the two cultures are incompatible. Consequently, Nkengasong proffers an alternative nation for Anglophone Cameroonians wherein there will be justice and liberty.

Nation is yet another term worth defining in this article. The word nation is derived from two Latin words: natio and nationis. The first means “to be born” while the second means “being born in a race, group or community.”Essentially, Reo M Christenson (1999) et al in Ideology and Modern Politics define nation as a relatively large group who feel they belong together by virtue of sharing one or more of such traits as a common race, a common language, a common culture, a common history a common set of customs or traditions” (p.20). In the case of Cameroon, the people do not speak a common language and they do not have a common culture. This provides a tableau and platform for the socio-political and cultural conflicts which this article attempts to address.

The term “Anglophone” is another important concept worth defining. The people and area known as Anglophone are the former Southern Cameroons known today as South West and North West Regions. In this article we borrow a leaf from Epie’s understanding of the concept of Anglophone. According to this critic,

In political circles, the use of the term Anglophone varies considerably depending on the setting, the audience and the mood of the speaker. In Cameroon usage, the term is used to designate the opposite of Francophone on the one hand, and on the other, to designate people native to the S.W and N.W provinces. (p.49)

The term Anglophone in this study, therefore, refers to those Cameroonians whose parents are either from the North West or South West Regions of Cameroon. This means that these people share a common history and cultural heritage.

The last concept to be defined in this article is socialist realism. According to The New Encyclopaedia, Britannica Vol. 9, “The primary theme of socialist realism is the building of socialism. In portraying this, the writer must, while admitting imperfections take a positive and optimistic view of his society keeping in mind its larger historical relevance” (p.312).

Maxim Gorky in his article “On Socialist Realism” spoke of the necessity of critical realism and of the essential presence in literature of “third reality”, the reality of the future (1971:p.38). It is this third reality that John Nkengasong is recommending in his novel.
The breadth of socialist realism and its vision emphasizes a true reconstruction of life, which is conceptualised in socialist perspective. Georg Lukacs (1972) has observed that, socialist realism portrays “the totality of a society in its immediacy and to reveal its pattern of development” (p.99). These definitions will be utilised for the understanding and appreciation of this article.

All these definitions emphasize the fact that socialist realist literature instils hope and optimism in the oppressed and mould their consciousness. Consequently, a socialist realist writer must be politically on the side of the oppressed. In the case of Nkengasong’s novelistic vision, his sympathy lies with the Anglophone Cameroonians who are politically marginalised, socially isolated and economically exploited.

The writer is both a moral legislator and political adviser. Considering that the Francophone dominant regime in Cameroon does not always give a listening ear to the plight and plea of Anglophone Cameroonians, there is a feeling amongst Anglophone Cameroonians that they are not fairly treated in this bilingual country. Consequently, the problem addressed herein is the plausible possibility of raising the socio-political consciousness of Anglophone Cameroonians with regard to the insensitivity of the political leadership in Cameroon. In this light, the following research questions are relevant. Can literature provide directives to the powers that be? Can literature shape and negotiate for a new political dispensation? What novelistic techniques has Nkengasong employed to bring out his ideological posture? What is the role of the novel of conscientisation and revolt in Anglophone Cameroon?

From the questions posed above, this study hypothesizes that Nkengasong’s socialist realist vision in his novel is an attempt to negotiate for a new political dispensation for Anglophone Cameroonians since the present Francophone dominant regime has failed to address their problems. He is therefore politically active on the side of the marginalised Anglophone Cameroonians.

The Philosophy of Socialist Realist Art

The concept of socialist realism marks an important advance in the development of Marxist aesthetics on literature and art in general. Socialist realism according to http://www.l.evengenvaertcentre.be/ is a soviet artistic doctrine, realistic in its nature which has a purpose the furtherance of the goals of socialism and communism. Basically, some of the features of socialist realism include: optimism and hope, conscientisation and revolt. Chidi Amuta in The Theory of African Literature (1989) outlines the following characteristic features of socialist realism. He contends, “…the essential attributes of socialist realist expression include(a) the use of simple and accessible language(b) a sympathetic portrayal of characters from the oppressed,(c) a sense of patriotism defined in terms of concern with the struggle of socialism”(p.140). Socialist realist writers must be politically active on the side of the oppressed.

Maxim Gorky, (1972) the doyen of socialist realism summarizes these socialist realist features thus:

... it is clear that in addition to the necessity of studying the language and developing the ability to select the simplest, most graphic and colourful words from a literary language, which while perfected to a high degree is nevertheless littered with empty and ugly words, the writer must also have a good knowledge of the past history and of the social phenomenon of contemporary society in which he is called upon to fulfill his dual role of midwife and grave-digger (pp.32-33).

Finally, Es’kia Mphahlele (1974) contends that African writers especially critics must always “hammer their theories out of their social realism”. To him, amongst other things, social realism comprises the following:

...the continuous dialogue between the present and the living traditions that first inspired the negritude movement; the imperatives of our modern existence and those we have inherited from our ancestors; the colonial oppression...the violence, poverty,
the nagging antithesis between capitalism and socialism….this dialogue will certainly determine in time the direction of literature (p.84).

Nkengasong’s novelistic vision is informed and influenced by these socialist realist aesthetics as outlined above. It is difficult to appreciate Nkengasong’s novel without taking cognizance of his Marxist background. The novelist’s quest for change is facilitated by the education of the oppressed and marginalized symbolized by Ngwe and his YAM (Young Anglophone Movement).

Theoretical Considerations

The critical theory that has been employed in this paper is New Historicism. This critical theory gained currency in the literary academia in the 1980s as a counter discourse to the American text-based approach known as New Criticism. Critics of New Criticism gave an intrinsic analysis of literature, thereby, treating a literary text as an autonomous self-sufficient entity quite separate from society, history or any external causal agent. The new historicists, however, take the contrary view and contend that literature is not an abstract or metaphysical object; it is the product of a particular socio-historical and cultural context and should therefore be interpreted against the background of its context. Hence, its interpretation can only be meaningful and relevant when the historical circumstances under which the text was created are taken into consideration. Proponents of this approach to criticism include, Laurence Lerner, Jerome McGann, Irving Howe, Paul Ricoeur, Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher.

In summation, the co-relation between literature and history, in the area of New Historicism, is a reciprocal relationship. This approach connotes that it is not only history that influences literature; the reverse can also be true. This explains why Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray (1979) in The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms state: “New Historicist critics assume that works of literature both influence and are influenced by historical reality, and they share a belief in preferentiality, that is a belief that literature both refers and is referred to by things outside itself”(pp.239-240).

It is for this reason that this particular critical theory was chosen for this paper. Both the historical and environmental realities have contributed immensely in shaping and directing the authorial ideology and social vision in Nkengasong’s novel.

Finally, one of the major submissions in the foregoing contention is that new historicism rejects the old historicist idea of questioning only the literary text but encourages a pluralist reading of other non-literary texts relating to political, social and cultural spheres where the text emanates. Hence, the interpretation and evaluation of Nkengasong’s novel will be done against the backdrop of this critical approach.

Across the Mongolo

A writer is an interpreter and active commentator on contemporary realities. He is also both a political adviser and moral legislator. John Nkengasong in his Across the Mongolo attempts to recreate history based on history because literature is the fictionalization of concrete historical evidence. Some African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Sembene Ousmane have consciously interpreted contemporary African experience in terms of socialist realist philosophy, and Nkengasong has just borrowed a leaf from them.

The novel traces the travails, plight and predicament of Ngwe Nkemasaah who did all his primary, secondary and High school studies in the English state of Kama, but subsequently finds himself in the lone Francophone university of Besaadi in the Francophone state of Ngola where the only medium of expression is French. He went to read Law. The novelist uses this journey motif to comment on the human predicament experienced by a section of the fictional Federal Republic of Kamangola. Here the challenges and difficulties he encounters are enormous. Thus, out of frustration, Ngwe galvanizes some of the Anglophones from the state of Kama who experience the same problem. This culminates in the formation of the Young Anglophone Movement (YAM) which questions the hegemony of the
domination of the Francophone of Ngola. Ngwe would eventually end in a traditional psychiatrist because he suffers from a mental breakdown caused by the system in place.

The analysis of this article is done under four thematic clusters: dreams as nightmares, political repression and the quest for identity, conscientisation and revolt and hope and optimism.

**Dreams as Nightmares**

Ngwe’s dream to become like Babajoro turns into nightmares. Pa Ndi Nkemasaah, Ngwe’s father had told him the importance and relevance of education in this global world. That was when Ngwe was still in primary school. Thus, Ngwe’s dream was to acquire the type of education that Babajoro did acquire before being what he is. Listen to Ngwe’s father and Ngwe’s response:

Do you know who is called Babajoro? “No papa”, I told him. Ngwe’s father explains:

He is the man who owns this country. He does anything and has everything that no man living in this world can think of. He flies in aeroplanes, and goes to the latrine in the white man’s country. All this is because of what? Book. So put your head in book as you are doing and become like Babajoro…. (p.14).

Ngwe’s father’s word of encouragement stimulated Ngwe’s ambitions and fired his dreams to become like Babajoro, the President of the Federal Republic of Kamangola. The irony here is that Babajoro never went to the university. Thus, the dangerous insinuation here is that the destiny of the people of the Federal Republic of Kamangola is in the hands of an illiterate.

Kamangola is a bilingual country where French and English are the two official languages spoken, but in the lone university of Besaadi in the Federal Republic of Kamangola, the only medium of instruction is French; even the few Anglophone lecturers who teach in this university try to do so only in French. Ngwe is frustrated and humiliated in the University of Besaadi where he spent six years and left without a degree; rather, he leaves the place mentally unstable as he ends up in a traditional psychiatrist. In his *The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression: An Introduction*, (2007) Shadrach Ambanasom argues that;

Ngwe goes through a great deal of humiliation, degradation and grinding frustration which inflict on him traumatic stress disorders that several times, bring him close to a nervous breakdown before he is finally done in… However, for all his tenacity onto his ethic of hard work and honesty, after six years in the university, and even changing faculties, his academic endeavours end in failure, leaving him with zero degree (p.246).

Within the Cameroonian context, Ngwe is a dense symbol with metaphoric possibilities; he symbolizes the plight and travail Anglophone Cameroonians went through in the lone university of Yaoundé at the time. All lectures were delivered in French regardless of the presence of Anglophones in that university. This novel was written with awareness of a literary tradition (socialist realist art), and its conventions in which the appearance of feelings is a highly crafted art. Again, the title of the novel, *Across the Mongolo* was inspired by River Mungo which symbolizes the unification of the two Cameroons in 1961 after the 11 February Plebiscite. Furthermore, history in this novel is shown to be a construction based on perspective, knowledge and attitude at various times.

Ngwe’s traumatic experience in the University of Besaadi reveals that this marriage was incompatible; hence it tends toward complexity, violence and obscurities. Consequently, there are signs of crisis, tensions in this marriage and a growing awareness of frustration, pains and rejections. All these challenges and difficulty started even at the level of registration. Ngwe’s documents are rejected; and what is particularly lamentable is the breakdown in communication between Ngwe and those who are in charge of the registration process. This is Ngwe’s predicament at the registration desk: “Relevez de notes, monsieur!” The registration officially barked. Ngwe stared at him blankly,
fidgeting in his mind and trying to understand what he meant. “What, sir?” He asked. He sighed and flung the documents at him (p.60). This explains Ngwe’s revolutionary vision when he forms the Young Anglophone Movement. This might seem a proper, if irritable, response to the superficiality and cosmetic reformation which those who support the present system in Cameroon profess.

Finally, Ngwe’s illusion which turns out to be nightmares is concerned with psychology, especially the anxieties of someone who has lived in two different cultures and retains difficult-to-explain emotions resulting from his past. Paradoxes are a feature of the hero’s past life linked to the present in strange and unpredictable ways. While Ngwe perceives life as a nightmare and not a dream, he thinks that this can still be changed to reform the society since every reality begins with a dream and not a nightmare. This is the constant theme in Nkengasong’s novel. And this is the overall philosophy of socialist realist art. That is, the theme of social dynamics which is ushered in by dialectic.

The second thematic concerns addressed by this article are political repression and the identity crisis. These two themes are some of the very serious themes treated by the novelist. Most Anglophone Cameroonian writers harp on these themes.

**Political Repression and the Quest for Identity**

Two major thematic concerns addressed by Nkengasong in his novel are the themes of political repression and the identity crisis of the people of Kama. The novelist uses the journey motif to comment on this human predicament. The hero’s region, Kama is thesis or his point of separation, the University of Besaadi in Ngola his antithesis, because this is where his illusion turns into disillusionment. The synthesis is the point of his arrival in Kama. This triadic dialectic is a stylistic device exploited by the novelist to bring out his ideological posture. His journey is that of self-discovery. It is in the University of Besaadi that Ngwe realizes that he does not have an identity. He does not exist and must define and redefine his existence and beingness. His sojourn in Besaadi plays a vital role in his psycho-moral formulation.

The very first confrontation of political repression and cultural crisis is during Ngwe’s journey to Ngola. Immediately he crosses River Mongolo, that symbolic river separating the English speaking (Kama) from the French speaking of Ngola, the atmosphere is hostile. The law enforcement officers symbolized by the gendarmes in their red berets are very brutal and hostile. Ngwe narrates one of such unfortunate incidents in one of the checkpoints in these words:

*Piece! Identite! Impot!* The voice sounded with such violent authority that I was scared. I opened my eyes slowly. Three gendarmes wearing red berets scammed about the window, ordering furiously. One took the documents of the vehicle from the driver, moved away….One of the gendarmes checked the identity cards and the tax tickets….A passenger of about sixty years of age was asked to descend from the vehicle. The photograph on his national identity card had moulded off and his face could not be clearly seen. The old man did not understand French. He was dragged out of the car (p.38).

There are striking explorations of the grotesque and macabre. This incident in the excerpt above brings out the brutality of the law enforcement officers and the cultural crisis. The old man of sixty years in the text whose identity card is questioned is one of those who experienced the unification of Kama and Ngola to form the Federal Republic of Kamangola. Just as the old man’s identity is blur, so too is the cultural identity of the people of Kama. Like the Night soil men in Bate Besong’s *Beasts of no Nation* who clamour for their identification papers, the old man in Nkengasong’s novel also wants a clearer identity card. Within the Cameroonian context, the Anglophones in Cameroon have been annexed and assimilated; they are missing culturally speaking. The sixty year old man had lived and experienced the unification saga and its callousness. There is disillusionment in the text.
Concern with history and memories takes varied forms. Nkengasong often appears to be carrying on a quarrel with both French colonial and contemporary Cameroonian society. The French language is perceived in this novel as an instrument which plays negatively on the psyche of Anglophone Cameroonians. Besides the brute force of the law enforcement officers, the French language is an instrument of psychological torture as seen in the abusive and insolent ways it is used on the Anglophones.

The brutality with which the students’ uprising is suppressed is seen in the massive arrests and detention and the insolent French language used on students whose protests seem legitimate. The students are protesting because they have not been paid their bursaries. Ngwe’s predicament and experience during this period of unrest is a promethean testimony. Hear Ngwe and the brutal police officer:

“Element subversif! Tu bouge je tire”, said the policeman, tightening the grip on Ngwe’s neck. Ngwe pleaded, “Please sir, I speak the truth my God!” The police officer shouted, “C’est uneAnglo meme. La tu est morte”. (108) As Ngwe is licking his wounds, the Francophone police officers continue to rain abusive words on him like: “Anglofou esclave, idiot, salad, Anglo!” (108) In this circumstance, the author observes that “Now Ngwe has come to naught. Naught. Trapped, killed because he refused to listen to his mother’s plea and wanted to seek knowledge where it was available”. (p.111) The theme of life in Nkengasong’s fiction as change, which is a fundamental principle in socialist realist literature, and the sub theme or motif of the continuity of a continually changing individual identity recur throughout the novel. The final plaintive cry of Ngwe summarizes the techno-military and repressive regime of Babajoro:

I would not have been in the custody of brutal men who had killed me and yet refused me death. Babajoro’s policemen had no human feelings. Babajoro himself had no human feelings and he had instructed them to roast me for dinner to teach university students that he, Babajoro, had never been at a university, not even a secondary school, but he possessed power that few people in the continent had the courage to wield (p.111).

Within the Cameroonian context, the revelation of Babajoro’s character in the above excerpt is reminiscent of the first President of Cameroon, the late Amadou Ahidjo who had administered Cameroon with an iron fist. Political opponents were not spared; they were always arrested and molested. The theme of political repression and cultural crisis symbolized by Ngwe’s predicament are part of a sensibility which, rejecting spirituality and abstract systems, views personal experience within the perspectives of the intellectual, philosophical and psychological Ngwe becomes that cultural hero in search of his own way, representative of the contemporary Anglophone Cameroonian in a rapid changing society. The author has demonstrated his wide and intensive reading of Cameroon’s history in his novel.

Finally, the hero’s predicament which culminates in the formation of the Young Anglophone Movement (YAM) is a demonstration that there are values, good in contrast to evil and the good should be one’s guide. Ngwe’s outlook in Nkengasong’s creative imagination is that of socialist realism, with its belief in such universals as the individual, justice, equality, freedom, rationality and skepticism. In fact, Ngwe’s continuing defense of freedom, of democracy, of liberty has been central to his life in Besaadi. These are the features of the alternative nation Nkengasong proposes in Across the Mongolo.

Conscientisation which means educating and raising the awareness of the dregs of the society has as its end product revolution. Hence, the third thematic concerns discussed here are conscientisation and revolt.
Conscientisation and revolt

According to Femi Osofisan, “man can change his society if the right decisions are made. There is no reason why we should not be able to move our society from its present chaos. And this is one of the fundamental duties of literature”. (qtd in Takem, 1990, 174). Since Nkengasong is concerned about change for the interest of the Cameroonian masses in general and the working class in particular, his novel becomes instructive. His novel becomes a viable means of effecting the necessary critical awareness in the consciousness of the audience of the socio-economic and political malaise overwhelming their society. The primary virtue of literature is its subversive change hidden behind the façade of entertainment. This liberation aesthetics finds expression in Nkengasong’s novelistic vision. His thought represents the response of a creative mind and sensitive conscience to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed English-speaking people of Kama, symbolized by Ngwe.

In his Preface of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (1970) contends that critical consciousness is anarchy, and that critical consciousness may lead to disorder. (p.17) Conscientisation refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. Ngwe’s predicament in the University of Besaadi is not first construed as a socio-political and cultural marginalization of the Anglophones of Kama until Minister Wankili, an Anglophone junior Minister of Special Duties speech during the celebration of his appointment. On this occasion, two important events took place which completely changed and radicalized Ngwe’s thought pattern. The first incident is Minister Wankili’s speech in which he shocks the audience that his office is meant to serve Babajoro and not even the state. He warns and cautions the Anglophones of Kama that his office is not meant to solve the Anglophone problem. The narrator summarizes the speech thus:

He thanked everyone who had honoured his invitation for the dinner. To him, he said, the appointment to the high office was a dream come true and he not realize his dream without inviting his friends to share with this reality. He said he was using the opportunity to thank His Excellency, the President of the Republic, President Babajoro for the exacting task and confidence bestowed on him….He warned that his office was not a gossip house for Anglophone complaints or a place where he would solve Anglophone problems. His duty was to serve His Excellency, President Babajoro and not discontent political factions (Pp.133-134).

This particular speech of this junior Anglophone Minister leaves Ngwe with the impression that the Francophone government of Kamangola uses Anglophones against Anglophones to assimilate and to clearly wipe out the Anglophone culture and traditions. This treacherous speech completely radicalizes and conscientises Ngwe. With increased experience and awareness, there is a greater depth of critical consciousness. In dialectical thought, word and action are intimately interdependent. Minister Wankili’s speech is one of the reasons that pushed Ngwe in forming the Young Anglophone Movement which questions the hegemony of the Francophone dominant government.

The second event which radicalizes and conscientises Ngwe is the conversation and discussion between Doctor and Chief, two Anglophone elders. These two elders are so disappointed with Minister Wankili’s speech that they want the younger generation to take the destiny in their hands and change the system. Fortunately or unfortunately for Ngwe he overhears all what is being said between these two. Hear the dialogue between Doctor and Chief:

You see, Chief ….I have often said that our Anglophone brothers lobby for political posts simply to enrich their wives’ pots of soup. Do you hear what a minister would invite people to his house to tell them?

It is a shame, Doctor. We can’t really get out of this muddle with this mentality. This is clear evidence that the Francophone government uses our Anglophone brothers to
destroy us, to ruin our heritage, to assimilate us, to clearly wipe out Anglophone traditions from the face of this country. (p.135)

According to Ambanasom, “That conversation marks a turning point in the life of Ngwe; he will never be the same person again. Its immediate effect on him is his resolve to form the Young Anglophone Movement (YAM), aimed at educating the Anglophones about their rights and full citizenship, and not to be contented with any second class status or an assistant citizen” (p.247).

The two elderly Anglophones perceive ministers like Wankili as spies who are paid to monitor and denounce activists like Ngwe and others. According to them, “The younger generation had to do something. It is not because an old man has lost his teeth that the young men will not eat the bones” (p.137). Perhaps the most touching of the comments of these elders is the passionate appeal for the younger generation to take the destiny into their hands and change things.(p.137) This conversation fired Ngwe’s passion to change things. The formation of YAM constitutes a threat to the Francophone oppressive regime. Although a meeting convened by Ngwe, the Young Anglophone Movement leader to review the final strategies of Babajoro leaked out, this move by Ngwe and the other YAM members is a demonstration of the fact that the dawn of awareness has come. That members of YAM are arrested, tortured and molested is indicative of their strength. The novelist avers:

Spies were planted all over the university campus and any Anglophone who was least suspected was arrested, tortured, and detained. Francophone students used the opportunity to settle personal conflicts with Anglophones. They directed the spies to cause the arrest of innocent Anglophones and of course, the obvious thing was ruthless torture and detention. (p.144).

Although members of YAM find themselves in this stretch of quagmire, they have made their point. Nkengasong’s novelistic vision reawakens memories which he would prefer to forget. Being a novelist, Nkengasong seems to be saying, is painful; the pain produces a novel which is whatever claim one has on eternity; it is this hope that heals. After years of struggle in the University of Besaadi, Ngwe’s success is an illusion; symbols of achievement are actually monuments of unhappiness.

Within the Anglophone Cameroonian context, Ngwe’s predicament is a metaphoric representation of the Anglophone problem in Cameroon. The formation of YAM is reminiscent of Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), a movement formed by radical and progressive Anglophones to protest against Anglophone marginalization in Cameroon.

Finally, the role played by Dr Ambo, one of the Anglophone lecturers contributes to the psycho-moral formulation of Ngwe and sharpens his critical perspectives. He always encourages the Anglophone students to operate and function as a family. His empathy and sympathy with the Anglophones do not earn him dismissal; rather, he is subjected to the teaching of tutorials and not even main courses. He works out a scholarship for Nwolefack to study abroad so as to come back and face the challenges ahead.

The last themes discussed in this article which are fundamental features of socialist realism are hope and optimism. These two themes reinforce the major crucial political question which Nkengasong seems to be asking in the novel: what can the oppressed and marginalized Anglophones do to appease an embittered history? The answer is blowing in the wind: struggle. The novelist demonstrates a heightened awareness of pain and thinks that the only way to assuage this pain is through struggle.

**The Fundamental Political Question: Hope and Optimism**

In socialist realist dialectics, it is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed and the marginalized wage the struggle to resolve the contradictions in
which they are caught. This struggle, the novelist seems to be saying, must be empowered by hope and optimism. In his *The Power of the Poor in History*, (1983) Gustavo Gutierrez contends that:

To struggle without hope would be futile, leading to cynicism or despair: To hope without struggle would be irrelevant, cheap and self-defeating. But to struggle while affirming hope is to have a future and to be more empowered by it for the present (p.155).

Nkengasong thinks a committed novel should be tendentious and heroic. In the novel, Ngwe’s heroic exploits in Besaadi, his mental breakdown and his restoration to sanity signify hope and optimism. Those characters like Ngwe are in the text means that all is not lost for the marginalized people of Kama. In a proverbial language, the novelist expresses his hope and optimism thus: “It is not because an old man has lost his teeth that the young men will not eat the bones” (p.137). This means that even though the older generation of the Anglophones in Kama has failed, the future of the English-speaking of Kama lies in the youth. The novelist avers:

It was clearly the place of the younger generation to raise their voices and ask for their rights. Their future had been auctioned and they had to fight to retrieve it. Their elders were limping to their graves with their guilt. However, how was that to save the situation? It was clearly the place of those whose future had been auctioned to act, those whose destiny had been auctioned in exchange for inconsequential political posts to act (p.137).

The self-conscious and alienated people of Kama and the contemporary world of rapid socio-political awareness, personal freedom and insecurity, moral relativism and the need to create one’s own world and ethics constitute Nkengasong’s novelistic and socialist realist vision. This is, by way of negotiating an alternative nation for the Federal Republic of Kamangola, an extended metaphor of Cameroon.

**Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, it is important to restate the thesis of this paper. The thrust of the argument of this paper is that John Nkengasong in his novelistic vision adopts the socialist realist philosophy to negotiate for an alternative nation for Anglophone Cameroonians since the present system has failed woefully. The novelist’s thesis is that for any meaningful change to be effected, conscientisation and revolt are fundamental requirements; for there cannot be any progress without struggle. Fundamentally, socialist realism is change-oriented.

**References**

**Primary source**


**Secondary sources**


