

**LOSS OF INNOCENCE AND UNCERTAIN DESTINIES IN POSTCOLONIAL
AFRICA: A REAPPRAISAL OF AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S *QUAND ON REFUSE
ON DIT NON***

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of lost innocence and an uncertain future as portrayed in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse on dit non*, a poignant exploration of the socio-political turmoil in postcolonial Africa. The novel vividly depicts the devastating impact of war, corruption, and systemic failures on the continent's youth, symbolizing a generation robbed of its potential and burdened with an uncertain destiny. The past forms the foundation for the future; this is why it is said that 'a man who does not know where the rain started beating him will not know where it stopped'. Through the experience of the child soldiers, Kourouma critiques the erosion of traditional values, the disintegration of familial and societal structures, and the manipulation of the vulnerable ones in the face of political instability. The narrative's evocative style captures its characters' psychological trauma and moral vagueness, offering a microcosmic view of Africa's challenges. By exploring these interconnected themes, this paper underscores the urgent need for systemic restructurings and the reclaiming of agency to envision a more hopeful and sustainable future for Africa.

Keywords: Innocence, Uncertain destinies, Postcolonial and Future.

Introduction

Africans welcomed the dawn of independence with immense hope, feeling a collective relief after years of colonial rule. The sounds of freedom resonated throughout the continent, filled with aspirations for self-determination, economic growth, and a cultural revival. Prominent leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, and Léopold Sédar Senghor envisioned a new era, one where Africans could shape their futures, liberated from imperial oppression. Yet, as the initial celebrations of independence subsided, the challenges of postcolonial governance began to emerge.

Instead of bringing about stability and progress, independence often led to political turmoil, economic mismanagement, and widespread disillusionment. While the structures of colonial rule were dismantled, they were frequently replaced by authoritarian regimes emerging from military coups and one-party states, perpetuating the same oppression and exploitation that Africans had fought against. This situation fueled ethnic and regional tensions that eventually erupted into civil wars, with corruption becoming rampant. Leaders who once advocated for independence morphed into dictators, desperately clinging to power and turning against their people.

Quand j'ai su que la guerre tribal avait atterri en Côte-d'Ivoire...(La République de Côte-d'Ivoire est un Etat de la côte occidentale de l'Afrique. Elle est comme toutes les républiques foutues de cette zone, démocratique dans quelques domaines mais pourrie jusqu'aux os par la corruption dans tous les autres.) pg 11

English translation

When I found out that the tribal war had reached Côte d'Ivoire... (The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire is a state on the western coast of Africa. Like all the doomed republics in this region, it is democratic in some areas but rotten to the core with corruption in all others.)

The economic promises of independence are yet to be actualized as many African economies remain structurally dependent on former colonial powers, exporting raw materials while importing finished goods in a cycle of economic dependency, thereby deepening poverty and leading to prevalent unemployment, dwindling infrastructure, and a growing sense of hopelessness among the youths.

This disillusionment in the postcolonial context is a prominent theme in African literature, with writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Ahmadou Kourouma using their works as powerful instruments for critique and self-reflection. Kourouma, in particular, highlights the grim realities that postcolonial African nations face, where the youth are often trapped in cycles of conflict, exploitation, and uncertainty. In his novel *Quand on refuse on dit non*, Kourouma presents a poignant depiction of this disillusionment, telling the story of a child soldier to symbolize the shattered dreams of a continent still striving for stability. This perspective allows us to explore how the themes of lost innocence and uncertain futures in postcolonial Africa are intricately woven into the narrative fabric created by Kourouma.

Definition of keywords

Innocence

Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines innocence as "freedom from legal guilt of a particular crime or offense; freedom from guilt or sin through being unacquainted with evil: blamelessness." Innocence is therefore the state of being untouched by corruption, deceit, or the harsh realities of the world. It is the unpolluted purity of a child's laughter, the unwavering trust in human goodness, and the blissful ignorance of life's cruel complexities.

Banville, in his work *Shroud*, portrays innocence as a delicate and often deceptive state, shaped by one's personal history and self-view. He suggests that innocence transcends simple notions of purity or naivety; it can also signify a kind of ignorance, either enforced by society or consciously upheld by individuals to evade confronting uncomfortable realities. Innocence is stripped away in the face of war, suffering, or disillusionment, yielding to the weight of knowledge, pain, and survival. Once it is lost, it can never be fully regained.

In the African literary tradition, especially in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse on dit non*, innocence takes on a richer significance beyond its usual ties to purity and naivety; it emerges as a fragile and often transient state, molded by the brutal truths of war, politics, and societal upheaval. In Kourouma's story, innocence is not simply the lack of guilt or corruption but a vulnerable condition that is inevitably broken by the harshness of lived experience, whether that involves war, dictatorship, or disillusionment with independence and governance.

The novel centers on Birahima, a child soldier, whose journey reflects the profound loss of innocence. Initially, he embodies the classic idea of innocence, marked by youthful naivety and fragility. However, as he is plunged into the chaos of war, his innocence is sacrificed in the name of survival. The story highlights that innocence is not merely lost but is forcibly stripped away, replaced by a toughened realism necessary for endurance. Morrison, in her writing, reinterprets innocence as a multifaceted idea that is often influenced by race and gender. She demonstrates that certain groups can be denied innocence due to existing social hierarchies, especially in the realms of slavery and oppression. Her work suggests that innocence transcends a simple moral condition and serves as a political tool used to either justify or condemn individuals.

From the viewpoint of many African literary writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Kourouma, innocence is frequently depicted as a state of being that is unsuspecting.

Uncertain destinies

An important concept discussed in this paper is uncertain destinies. This term describes futures that are unpredictable, unstable, or influenced by external factors beyond an individual's control.

It conveys a sense of ambiguity, where one's fate is in constant flux due to circumstances like war, political upheaval, economic challenges, or personal struggles.

In African literature, especially in works such as Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse on dit non*, uncertain destinies capture the unpredictable paths of individuals facing postcolonial instability, civil conflict, and the erosion of traditional structures. Characters like child soldiers or displaced persons often find themselves vulnerable to political chaos and social unrest, leaving their futures uncertain.

Uncertain destinies illustrate the existential challenges faced by characters in many African literary works, where the legacies of colonialism, systemic corruption, and personal hardships render the future unpredictable and often perilous. This concept emphasizes the tension between hope and despair, action and powerlessness, underscoring the notion that destiny is not solely a matter of choice but is often shaped by external circumstances.

Postcolonial

The term postcolonial refers to the historical, political, cultural, and literary conditions of societies that have undergone colonization and are now dealing with its consequences. It includes both the time after a nation gains independence from colonial rule and the ongoing effects of colonialism on identity, governance, economics, and cultural expression. Edward Said connects postcolonialism to Orientalism and discourse, suggesting that it involves breaking down colonial structures and examining the ideological and cultural legacies of empires. Leela Gandhi describes postcolonialism as an intellectual movement that critically engages with the cultural, political, and historical impacts of colonialism and imperialism. In African literature, postcolonialism serves not just as a time marker but as a perspective through which writers and scholars assess the lasting effects of colonization. Postcolonial literature frequently critiques the ongoing influence of colonial ideologies, the difficulties of nation-building, and the tensions between indigenous traditions and Western modernity. Authors like Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ahmadou Kourouma, and Wole Soyinka delve into the complexities of postcolonial societies, addressing issues such as political corruption, identity crises, and the quest to reclaim indigenous heritage while contending with the remnants of colonial rule.

Postcolonialism serves as both a historical fact and an intellectual lens, allowing us to comprehend how nations that were once colonized continue to evolve and redefine their identities in a world still marked by the legacies of colonialism.

Future

The future refers to the time that lies ahead, filled with events, possibilities, and outcomes that are yet to occur. It represents both an abstract concept of time and a realm of potential, influenced by individual choices, societal changes, and unpredictable external factors. Often contrasted with the past and present, the future embodies hope, uncertainty, and the unknown. In literature, the future is explored in various ways:

In postcolonial African literature, it often reflects the uncertainties faced by newly independent nations, the lingering effects of colonialism, and the ongoing struggle for self-determination.

In everyday life, the future is seen as a realm of aspirations, planning, and anticipation, where individuals and societies project their hopes and fears. Whether perceived as predetermined or flexible, it remains a crucial aspect of human existence, influencing our decisions and dreams.

Theoretical framework

To establish a strong theoretical foundation for this article, we will integrate postcolonial theory and Bildungsroman theory, as they resonate with the themes of innocence, uncertain futures, and the postcolonial experience in Kourouma's novel.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is crucial for grasping the socio-political context of *Quand on refuse on dit non*, as the novel depicts Africa's challenges after independence, including dictatorship, civil wars, and the disillusionment faced by the youth.

Postcolonial Theory and the Loss of Innocence in Postcolonial Africa

Postcolonial theory offers a valuable perspective for exploring the themes of lost innocence and uncertain futures in *Quand on refuse on dit non* by Ahmadou Kourouma. Pioneered by thinkers like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, this theory examines the lasting impacts of colonialism and the intricate realities faced by societies after gaining independence. In Kourouma's novel, this lens allows for a deeper understanding of how historical and political turmoil influences both personal and collective feelings of disillusionment. The protagonist's loss of innocence reflects the widespread sense of betrayal experienced by many African nations that, despite their independence, find themselves trapped in neocolonial systems and internal strife. Kwame Nkrumah, in his work *The Last Stage of Imperialism*, posits that:

"Africa is a paradox which illustrates and highlights neo-colonialism. Her earth is rich, yet the products that come from above the earth are poor."

Kourouma's story delves into the shift from youthful dreams to stark disillusionment, reflecting the journey of Africa after gaining independence. The main character, Birahima, embodies the experience of many young people in postcolonial Africa, as he navigates a reality filled with political corruption, violence, and betrayal. Birahima remarks:

Pour survivre, les planteurs africaines décidèrent de créer un syndicat agricole dès que l'autorisation en fut donnée aux colonisés. Ils mirent à la tête de ce syndicat Houphouët-Boigny.

A partir de cette date, l'histoire de la Côte-d'Ivoire se confond avec l'histoire personnelle de Houphouët-Boigny

Moi, petit Birahima, j'ai cherché dans mes dictionnaires, j'ai trouvé le sens de discrimination. Mais j'avais déjà compris que l'histoire de la Côte-d'Ivoire se confondait avec celle de Houphouët-Boigny. Ce qui signifie que s'ouvraient en Côte-d'Ivoire « les soleils de Houphouët-Boigny » les soleils, d'après l'Inventaire des particularités lexicales du français en Afrique noire, signifient ères. Pp 66-67

English translation:

To survive, the African planters decided to create an agricultural union as soon as they were granted permission to do so. They placed Houphouët-Boigny at the head of this union.

From that moment on, the history of Côte d'Ivoire became intertwined with the personal history of Houphouët-Boigny.

I, little Birahima, searched in my dictionaries and found the meaning of discrimination. But I had already understood that the history of Côte d'Ivoire was intertwined with that of Houphouët-Boigny. This means that in Côte d'Ivoire, "the suns of Houphouët-Boigny" were rising. According to the Inventory of Lexical Particularities of French in Africa, suns mean eras.

Postcolonial theory highlights how these challenges stem from a colonial history in which Western-style governance structures were imposed, failing to resonate with indigenous socio-political systems. Consequently, newly independent nations faced instability, creating an uncertain future for their citizens. The protagonist's journey serves as a metaphor for the shattered hopes and

unfulfilled promises that accompanied decolonization. Additionally, the postcolonial idea of resistance is crucial for understanding the novel's critique of governance after independence. Frantz Fanon's insights into the dangers of national consciousness are particularly pertinent, as Kourouma portrays African leaders who maintain colonial hierarchies instead of dismantling them. The young protagonist, once brimming with hope, continually faces the disillusionment of his ideals at the hands of those in power and expresses uncertainty "Je me sentais comme un étranger dans mon propre pays." P. 12

English translation: "I felt like a stranger in my own country."

Bédié pensa au retour à la terre. Mais la terre était occupée par ceux qui la travaillaient, comme l'avait voulu Houphouët-Boigny. Voilà l'Ivoirien sans emploi et sans terre dans son propre pays. Pour faire face à cette situation catastrophique, Bédié fit sienne l'idéologie de « l'Ivoirité » p. 106 - 107

English translation:

"Bédié thought about returning to the land. But the land was occupied by those who worked it, just as Houphouët-Boigny had intended. Thus, the Ivorian was left without a job and without land in his own country. To address this catastrophic situation, Bédié embraced the ideology of 'Ivoirité.'"

The novel underscores the repetitive cycle of oppression, showing how those who were once colonized can become enablers of new forms of subjugation. The theme of lost innocence reaches beyond the individual, capturing the disillusionment of an entire generation disheartened by the failures of postcolonial leadership. In their article "Aporia and Ambivalence in Armah and Kourouma's Novels: A Deconstructive Study," Njoku A. and Ezeamaka J. examine the experiences of two characters, Juma and Abena, in *Two Thousand Seasons* who share their sorrowful stories as returnee slaves and criticize the kings and leaders forced upon them by their enslavers, who drastically altered their fates from being free-born to becoming victims of circumstance.

Our chiefs, our leaders, they have bellies and they have tongues. Mind, they do not have. That is the white destroyers' happiness; that is why the white destroyers will exhaust their long knowledge of murder to keep our rotten chiefs, our bloated leaders on top of us. No one sold us but our chiefs and their hangers-on (p.146).

Postcolonial theory highlights the importance of marginalized voices, allowing us to see the resilience woven into Kourouma's narrative. Although the protagonist encounters uncertainty, he retains a sense of agency. His journey acts as a form of resistance to prevailing historical narratives, offering a different viewpoint on African identity and destiny. Birahima embodies hope:

Moi, petit Birahima, j'ai tout retenu sans tout comprendre. Ce que je n'ai pas compris pour le moment sera bien compris avec mes dictionnaires quand je serai fortiche pour le brevet élémentaire et pour le bac. Pp 87

English translation:

I, little Birahima, have remembered everything without fully understanding it. What I don't understand for now, I will figure out later with my dictionaries when I become skilled enough for the elementary certificate and the baccalaureate

Through storytelling, oral traditions, and linguistic creativity, Kourouma reclaims African identity, pushing back against both colonial and neocolonial narratives. Thus, *Quand on refuse on dit non* transcends being merely a novel about loss and uncertainty; it also embodies the continuous fight for meaning, identity, and self-determination in postcolonial Africa. Their experiences are similar to those of other returnees, hence "Their talk, like ours, was always of the terrible treachery of chiefs and leaders, of greed of parasites that pushed us so far into the whiteness of death" (TTS 145).

The Effects of Loss of Innocence and Uncertain Destinies in Postcolonial Africa

Postcolonial Africa has experienced significant social, political, and economic transformations that have deeply influenced the lives of its people and communities. A notable outcome of this era is the loss of innocence, affecting both individuals and society as a whole, alongside the uncertainty of futures in a swiftly evolving landscape.

The theme of lost innocence in postcolonial Africa is prevalent in African literature and reflects contemporary realities. It manifests in several ways:

a) The Betrayal of Ideals

Numerous African countries achieved independence with the hope that liberation from colonial rule would lead to a new chapter of prosperity, unity, and self-governance. Yet, the years following independence were frequently marred by corruption, authoritarian regimes, and economic struggles. This reality shattered the optimistic belief that independence would automatically resolve Africa's challenges. In Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, the protagonist, Odili, initially believes in political change but later realizes that post-independence leaders are as corrupt as their colonial predecessors. Birahima remarks:

Depuis, cela continue. La corruption est devenue une constance de la société ivoirienne. Houphouët-Boigny l'a laissée s'établir. Parce qu'il était lui-même corrompu, corrupteur et dilapidateur.

Houphouët-Boigny fut un corrompu. Dès le pouvoir, tous ses proches et amis devinrent des milliardaires. Il se mit à faire des investissements dans la propriété familiale. P 92

English translation:

Since then, it has continued. Corruption has become a constant in Ivorian society. Houphouët-Boigny allowed it to take root because he was corrupt, a corrupter, and a squanderer.

Houphouët-Boigny was a corrupt leader. As soon as he came to power, all his close associates and friends became billionaires. He began making investments in family-owned properties.

b) Child Soldiers and the Brutality of War

Civil wars and ethnic conflicts in postcolonial Africa have stolen the childhoods of countless young people. In countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte-d'Ivoire, children who are recruited as soldiers are stripped of their innocence and are compelled to engage in acts of violence. Ishmael Beah's memoir "A Long Way Gone" narrates how young boys, once innocent, became killers due to war and manipulation, and the same is the story of Birahima.

Voilà Birahima, un ancien enfant-soldat qui a fait la guerre du Liberia. Il buvait, fumait, se droguait. Maintenant la grâce d'Allah est descendue sur lui. Il a tout cessé" disait-il en souriant. P.32

English translation :

Here is Birahima, a former child soldier who fought in the Liberian war. He drank, smoked, and did drugs. 'Now, by the grace of Allah, he has stopped everything,' he said with a smile.

2. Uncertain Destinies in Postcolonial Africa

The unpredictability of life in postcolonial Africa arises from political instability, economic challenges, and the lasting impacts of colonialism. After gaining independence, many African nations encountered coups, military rule, and civil conflicts, which complicated individuals' ability to plan for their futures. Citizens frequently find themselves under governments that change policies without warning, leaving them unsure about their paths ahead. In Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, the character Koyaga embodies the rise and fall that mirrors the instability of numerous African political systems. Furthermore, the anticipated economic growth following independence has often fallen short for many African countries due to mismanagement, corruption, and neocolonial pressures. Consequently, many Africans seek better opportunities abroad, often facing uncertain prospects in foreign lands. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* delves into the experiences of Africans who leave their home countries, unsure of what the diaspora holds for them.

Conclusion

The themes of loss of innocence and uncertain destinies are central to many historical and literary narratives in postcolonial Africa. Although independence brought hopes for new beginnings, the harsh realities of political corruption, violence, economic hardship, and cultural conflicts have resulted in widespread disillusionment and instability. African writers use their works to shed light on these challenges, providing critical insights into the continent's history, current situation, and prospects. Despite these difficulties, African societies are continually evolving and redefining themselves, carving out new paths in a rapidly changing world. The resilience of African people, their innovative spirit, and their rich cultural heritage offer a glimmer of hope in times of uncertainty. *Quand on refuse on dit non* stands as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggles faced by postcolonial Africa, capturing the dual tragedies of lost childhood and uncertain futures. Kourouma's novel is not only a literary gem but also a historical document that encourages readers to reflect on the past while imagining a more stable and equitable future for Africa's youth. As the

field of postcolonial studies progresses, his work remains a vital resource for understanding the intricate issues of decolonization, power, and identity within the African context. Ultimately, Kourouma's novel does more than recount a sorrowful history—it compels its audience to envision a different future, one where the innocence of youth is safeguarded and where Africa's destiny is shaped not by past failures but by the strength of its people.

Recommendations

After a thorough examination of the theme "loss of innocence and uncertain destinies in postcolonial Africa: a reappraisal of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse on dit non*," this paper suggests the following approaches to address pressing issues and restore hope:

1. Strengthening Education and Historical Awareness

There is need to implement strong educational systems that cover both colonial and postcolonial African history and literature. This will help younger generations grasp the past and its influence on their present. Encouraging critical thinking about colonial legacies and leadership failures will empower youth with essential knowledge.

2. Promoting Stable Governance and Political Accountability

Africans must build stronger democratic institutions to prevent political instability, corruption, and exploitation, all of which contribute to uncertain futures. Young people should be motivated to engage in governance to foster a sense of ownership over Africa's future.

3. Protecting Children from the Effects of War and Conflict

Both government and non-governmental organizations must enforce international and local laws to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and ensure that rehabilitation programs are available for those affected. It is essential to provide psychological and social support to children exposed to violence, helping them regain hope and stability in their lives.

4. Creating Economic Opportunities for Youth

Governments should focus on creating jobs, offering vocational training, and supporting entrepreneurship programs to help young people avoid despair and criminal activities. When youth and young adults have stable employment, the likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior decreases.

5. Using Literature as Tools for Healing and Resistance

African writers should be encouraged to continue exploring postcolonial issues through their creative works. Literature works, such as Kourouma's, should be included in both academic and public discussions to raise awareness of historical injustices and motivate change.

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