

Analysis of the Depiction of Corporal Punishment in Two Ugandan Novels and Its Effects on Students

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Author MN conceived the research idea, conceptualized it, selected the novels for the study, did the literature search and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. She invited contributions from the other two members. Authors JJO and CWG read through the draft and re-directed the flow of the manuscript. The manuscript was presented to a peer group symposium at the department and further ideas for improvement were generated and incorporated. The manuscript was revised taking into consideration the recommendations from peer reviewers. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the portrayal of corporal punishment in Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* [1] and Julius Ocwinyo's *Fate of the Banished* [2]. The researchers investigate the issues and challenges surrounding the students who are subjected to corporal punishment as portrayed in two Ugandan novels within the framework of post-colonial theory. This study has used a qualitative content analysis of two Ugandan novels followed by identification of the key words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts to unfold subjective interpretation of the novels. Qualitative content analysis was used to investigate how corporal punishment has affected the students. The study found that corporal punishment produces fear, timidity, submissiveness and violence and is the root cause of school dropout, as evidenced by characters in the two novels. It is concluded that fear, timidity, rebellion and violence are

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consequences of corporal punishment in the school setting. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and all the stakeholders should endeavor to end corporal punishment in schools because it diminishes a child's capacity to grow up as a responsible person.

Keywords: Corporal punishment; education; schools; dropout; fear; rebellion; violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the depiction of corporal punishment in schools as portrayed by two Ugandan authors and how it affects the learning of the students and their behaviour later on. Two Ugandan novels are used - Ocwinyo's *Fate of the Banished* [2] and Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* [1].

Corporal punishment in schools can be defined as intentional inflicting of physical pain to the student in the hope that it would change his/her behaviour. This comes in form of caning, kicking, choking and slapping. One can also use belts, sticks, pins to cause pain to the student [3,4].

This study is done within the framework of post-colonial theory which focuses on how literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities of the colonized. It is built on the concept of resistance associated with views about human freedom, liberty, identity, individuality, etc., which differ between the colonized and the colonizer.

The pioneering scholars of postcolonial theory are Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and their successors such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty. This study will focus more on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" as expressed in terms of age and class. The term subaltern is used in the context of oppressor-oppressed, superior-inferior relationships [5]. A subaltern class is the inferior or oppressed and is based on idea that those with power speak for those without. The subaltern debate picked momentum in India where those with hegemonic power imposed their ideas on the supposedly inferior and claimed to speak for them.

Using Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" [6], corporal punishment as portrayed in the two Ugandan novels, is discussed in the context of oppressor (teacher) versus oppressed (student).

1.1 Background of the Study

Several studies suggest that teachers, parents and students themselves believe that corporal

punishment in schools helps to improve performance and that it can correct bad behaviour of the students [7,8]. However, a number of research highlights that many students do not agree that corporal punishment helps them improve their behavior or learning but causes fear and rebellion. Corporal punishment by the teachers is reported to cause violence in students [9,10].

Ngugi Wa Thiongo is one of the writers who condemn corporal punishment in their works. Since Ngugi is an international figure it is very important that two of his novels are used to illustrate this subject under study. Ngugi depicts Teacher Lucia in *Weep Not Child* as epitome of terror to students because she gives students corporal punishment. The omniscient narrator describes teacher Lucia's appearance while administering corporal punishment as ugly:

The teacher wore a white blouse and a green skirt... Njoroge however, feared her, when two days later she beat a boy, whack, whack! (Bring the other hand) whack! whack! whack! The stick broke into bits. Njoroge could feel the pain. It was as if it was being communicated to him without physical contact. The teacher looked ugly while she punished [11].

The beating of Njoroge has psychological impact on him. As a result Njoroge now fears teacher Lucia and the fears has impacts on the learning process of the student.

Ngugi continues to present the teacher denying the students to express their opinions or beliefs in class. Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat* opposes teacher Muniu's teaching against the circumcision of women which he calls a heathen custom. Kihika challenges him by saying that the Bible doesn't say so. At this time, "some of the boys hid their faces, excited yet fearing that the wrath of the teacher might reach them." [12]. This does not go well with the teachers and church elders:

....The teacher had therefore decided to whip the child 10 times on his naked buttocks in front of the whole assembly - this

for the sake of the boy's own soul and others present. After beating, Kihika would have to say thank you to the teacher and also recant his words of last Sunday [12].

Teacher contemplates to administer corporal punishment to communicate to Kihika and the rest of students the supremacy of the teachers' opinions and beliefs. The corporal punishment is also made to scare children from asking questions and to kill their cognitive abilities to question. Kihika rejects this punishment whose purpose is to humiliate him and destroy his personal dignity and therefore abandons school.

1.2 Problem Statement

Even though a school is a place of learning where students acquire civic, emotional and cognitive development, it has come to be associated with pain, torture and suffering through corporal punishment as portrayed by two prominent Ugandan novels. Corporal Punishment in schools therefore poses a threat to the education system in Uganda and needs to be exposed and dealt with.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several authors in the literature noted that corporal punishment may lead to undesirable outcomes for students [13,14,15]. Smith et al. [15] noted that a number of negative development for students who have gone through corporal punishment are anti-social behavior, poor attachment and lack of parent-child warmth, mental health, depression, alcohol abuse and poor academic achievement. In addition, Linke [14] argued that corporal punishment teaches a child that problems can be addressed through physical aggression.

According to Arab Naz, et al [16] harsh disciplinary measures used by authoritarian teachers to discipline children lead to anti-social behavior, and contribute to academic failure and social rejection. Corporal punishment reduces self-esteem and create depressed mood, resulting into criminal behavior among the youth [17]. Scandnavian countries like Norway, Denmark and Finland have long banned corporal punishment in schools [16] bearing in mind that it is a source of school violence [18]. To Graziano [19] if we are legally prohibited from striking other adults, why should we strike a child?

Physicians and pediatricians have noted that corporal punishment does not work to correct

negative behavior of students permanently [20]. Teachers, who use harsh treatment to discipline students, may succeed in making them conform to their standards but resentment will be reflected by the student's behavior sooner or later. Kaur [21] has noted that an often punished child will be a problematic person tomorrow because the child being sensitive reacts to the behavior and disciplinary practices of adults either at school or at home.

Furthermore, Straus [22] reports that corporal punishment has the ability to increase the anti-social behaviors, such as aggression, and violent acts inside and outside the school. Corporal punishment is further known to inflict physical pain and mental harassment, and makes the child to feel helpless, worthless, depressed, guilty and inferior, stressed and lose self-confidence [23]. It is also known to be associated with a variety of psychological and behavioral disorders in children and adults, including anxiety, depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem, impulsiveness, and substance abuse and aggression [24,25].

To Carroll [26] students who are exposed to a high degree of physical punishment are more likely to become aggressive when they grow up. Corporal punishment is associated with decreased confidence and increased feelings of humiliation and helplessness [27].

Given that several studies have found the consequences of corporal punishment to be so numerous as discussed above, we found it necessary to pursue this subject within the Ugandan context using two prominent novels. Before that we discuss the study methodology, which now follows.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative approach to explain how the two Ugandan novels depict the concepts, themes, characterization, and literal elements on corporal punishment. We used qualitative content analysis which involved identification of the presence of particular words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts to unfold subjective interpretation of the novels. Qualitative content analysis was used to investigate how corporal punishment has affected the student. The study analyzed and identified themes or patterns, characterization, symbols and figurative languages to provide knowledge and

understanding of the phenomenon under study [28].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Depiction of Corporal Punishment in *Fate of the Banished*

Corporal punishment is not the best way to reprimand students. In most cases it makes students think that school is place of torture because of the kind of pain they get. For Ocwinyo to depict the teacher as a cause of student's failing of Primary Leaving Examination is an indication that the student's failing or passing depends largely on the teachers. The readers would expect the teacher to use encouraging words so that the students love the last moments of their time in primary school, as they transition to the next level of education. But Ocwinyo makes the readers to see that what the teachers do is completely different as seen below:

They began to threaten you with failure at the end of primary school course and frequently took a kiboko to you, giving you the kind of hiding that had your buttocks smarting the whole day [2, p.47]

Through Erabu, Ocwinyo makes the outside world know that corporal punishment is a daily thing at school. *Kiboko* is a Swahili word for a cane. Erabu says that his teachers *frequently took a kiboko* and made best use of it keeping the students' buttocks *smarting the whole day*. If the students' buttocks are in pain the whole day how do you expect them to sit and learn when in pain?

The caning is not just done once in a day as narrated by Erabu but often. The caning is assumed to open the minds of the students so that everybody passes the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE). Ocwinyo even compares the failing of the Primary Leaving Examinations with the disease worse than leprosy combined with HIV/AIDS:

They now frequently talked in terms of strokes of canes and made you feel as if failing the Primary Leaving Examination was a disease worse than leprosy and HIV combined and that if you ever had the misfortune to fail such exams, then you should go to the nearest swamp and drown yourself [2, p.47].

This comparison of exam failure to the two diseases is to justify that corporal punishment is the best medicine if you want to survive exam failure. But experience shows that caning is not the medicine for passing exams. In fact the most frequently caned students are more likely to fail examinations.

Ocwinyo depicts the teacher who is threatening the students as lacking the skills of dealing with the learners. When the students fail a test or are depressed because of too much work, and need encouragement, Ocwinyo's teachers resort to the cane. To them it is a time of giving many strokes of the cane to the students. Ocwinyo's depiction of corporal punishment exposes what is taking place at school. It is a warning to the parents that as they take their children to school they should be concerned how their children are treated as it may turn out to be the root cause of school dropout.

Even with frequent canning of Erabu, he is not able to pass Primary Leaving Examination well as depicted below:

At the end of the year, Erabu sat the Primary Leaving Examination and almost failed to make Division Three. Still his father, who loved education, succeeded in securing him a place in a rural government school - one of the so called "Third World Schools" - but no amount of persuasion could make Erabu join it [2, p.48].

Then his father tried threats but to no avail. Next he suggested Erabu should enroll in a technical school and learn at least carpentry or bricklaying or tailoring, but Erabu adamantly refused. He told his father bluntly that he was fed up with school... [2, p.48].

Erabu's father, an ardent lover of education, not knowing how much his son has suffered at school, secures for him a place in a rural government school. He persuades him to join it but Erabu refuses. The father tries to use threats but to no avail. Thirdly, he proposes a technical school for Erabu so that he can learn carpentry or bricklaying or tailoring but Erabu adamantly refuses. All these are because of Erabu's nasty memories of school, caused by corporal punishment.

Erabu fails to speak back to the teachers to explain how corporal punishment is not helping him to learn and pass examinations. The position

of the student is best explained by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak" [6] where the colonizers have made the colonized to believe that they cannot talk for themselves – that they need the colonizers to talk for them. Here Erabu represents an inferior class (student) who cannot speak back to the superior class (the teachers). It is the superior class (the teachers) who know what is best for the students and speak for them. The superior determines how many strokes of the cane to administer and the inferior has to simply accept without question or dialogue.

Even the family seems to fall in the inferior-superior relationship as portrayed in the relationship between Erabu and his father. When Erabu is threatened by his father to continue with secondary education, the only thing he tells him is that he is tired of school. Erabu needed to sit his father down to discuss his experiences at school but the inferior-superior relationship status threatens him to believe that he cannot negotiate with him.

Another character depicted by Ocwinyo is Apire, who as a student (inferior) tries to talk back to the teacher (superior) and suffers for doing so. He is shown that he has no business trying to advise the teacher. The teacher rudely responded to Apire in the following way:

Apire, I did not spend three years at university and nine months in teacher training so that I could later be insulted by my students... some of you seem to come from families in which very little respect is accorded to the parents. Apire if I'd been your father, would you have tried to remind me about what you imagine is my duty? ... Stand up when I'm speaking to you! [2, p.84].

Apire eventually drops out of school because of corporal punishment. Apire, as a Subaltern tries to advise the teacher but he is met with a very rude rebuke by Teacher Turkey. He is ordered to stand while talking to the teacher and is reminded never to dialogue with a teacher because he has nothing to offer [6].

Teacher Turkey indirectly mentors Apire that the best way of solving problems is by inflicting pain to the offender and this is how he does it:

The words and hands lashed out simultaneously. Apire's ears buzzed and he felt his head swell with shame... Now get out

of my class! Turkey rapped out and headed for the entrance door... [2, p.85].

The teacher combines abuses with the slap on Apire's ears and orders him out of his class. Apire finds himself in a state of confusion as he is lost in another world. As Apire heads to the exit of the classroom, he thinks of retaliating and breaking the rule of "Can the Subaltern Speak", [6] and indeed he does it in a meditated manner:

Apire had got down slowly from the lab stool, on which he had been sitting, shifted slightly, putting first one foot, then the other, on the floor, then he had come out from behind the long bench into the centre aisle. As he shuffled towards the entrance door, his face was dark and convulsed with the kind of raging fury he hadn't felt for long time, but still he wasn't thinking of hitting Turkey. No he had not thought of hitting Turkey at all! [2, p.85].

Apire comes down the stool, calculating his movement, but burning with anger because of torture from the teacher. He expects the teacher to have some respect for the learners but in vain. Apire's face turns dark, the muscles shakes violently as he heads for the door. Ocwinyo depicts Apire as a student with no intention of fighting the teacher but the circumstances creates a lot of fury in him. The teacher Turkey on the contrary was very naïve:

[He], ... thought that all those shifting muscles on Apire's face were only a reflection of the shame and embarrassment he must be feeling about being slapped in the presence of his fellow students [2, p.85].

Ocwinyo's description of how Apire looks is not usual. Apire feels ashamed and rejected. Could it be that the purpose of this corporal punishment is to cause public shame to the students who are the inferior class? [6]. The naïve teacher is able to see this in the face of Apire but did nothing. One would expect the teacher to apologize to the student for embarrassing him before the fellow student, but he does not.

In extreme rage Apire approaches Teacher Turkey and made a spectacular showdown:

His right hand jerked upward and connected with Turkey's chin, taking Turkey by storm... Apire went wild, his stout figure a whirl of motion, jabbing, kicking, even butting

Turkey's nose with his fore head. Twin streams of crimson blood gushed out of the teacher's nostrils [2, p.85].

Ocwinyo portrays Apire as one who is collecting himself at this time of pain to revenge. Apire falls on teacher Turkey like a wild cat, ready to pay back. Apire's retaliation is an indication that corporal punishment and disrespect by teachers is not right. The retaliation of the inferior (student) on the superior (teacher) answers in the affirmative Spivak's questions of "Can the Subaltern Speak"? [6] Indeed the subaltern has spoken through action and given a lesson that one cannot oppress the weak forever. This is a lesson to the adults that just as the young ought to respect the old, the old should respect the young.

4.2 Depiction of Corporal Punishment in *The Invisible Weevil*

To Okurut, corporal punishment is depicted as a practice common among the mathematics teachers. Could it be that the methods the mathematics teachers use are wrong. How can all the students fail to understand the subject? We would expect the teachers of mathematics to think of their methods of teaching so that they come up with suitable way of teaching this subject. Why should the mathematics teachers be harsh? Do they know what the problem is with the subject they are handling? This is how Okurut puts it:

The mathematics teachers were particularly harsh or were it because most students did not understand the subject? They would give them a few hours in which to cram the multiplication tables may be an evening. The following day, they would be ordered to recite them. On one particular morning, the teacher was extraordinarily harsh [1, p.36].

Making the students to cram mathematic is not the best way of teaching. The students should be allowed to use the discovery methods of learning instead of cramming. One can conclude that the teachers are harsh because they lack skills of teaching mathematics. Because of fear of corporal punishment the students hate the subject. The moment the students' mind is not at ease, the learning will not take place. This requires the teachers of mathematics to be equipped with good teaching methods and accompanied with encouragement to love the subject.

Okurut depicts the Mathematics teacher as shouting at Goora. Shouting can be associated with anger. When the mathematics teacher shouts at the student, could it be that he lost his ethics as a teacher. This shouting of the mathematics teacher could also be a result of frustration in life. May be he does not like what he is doing, this is reflected in his voice as he calls Goora to recite the multiplication table:

Goora, come in front and recite the multiplication table for the number six, shouted the mathematics teacher. Goora, Nkwazi's best friend got up trembling. She went to the front of the class and stood rooted to the spot, speechless. Well, what's the matter with you? Start. ...Goora seemed to have lost her speech [1, p.36].

The teacher's shouting causes Goora to tremble. Could this be what goes on in the whole class of mathematics? Okurut's depiction of the choice of words: "shouted", "trembling", "rooted to the spot", "speechless" portrays an environment of insecurity or danger. Goora is trembling because of fear of terror coming to her and the class. Goora standing, in one place is a sign that she is frozen. This is the environment corporal punishment creates. When the subaltern have no opportunity to speak, they freeze but for how long? [6].

Goora also looked at the teacher like a frightened rabbit because of the cane. In Okurut's own words:

She looked at the teacher like a frightened rabbit. The teacher's cane rang out, its impact on the buttocks resounding in the classroom. "Stupid girl, recite the table", he shouted [1, p.36].

Goora receives corporal punishment as the teacher's cane rang out accompanied by abusive words, "stupid girl". Why should a trained teacher be this harsh to the student? Does he expect the student to love this subject in midst the harsh environment? Could it be that Okurut depicts the teacher using bad language and caning to bring out the invisible (or indeed visible) weevil in the school? Belonging to the inferior, subaltern class, the students have nothing to say to the corporal punishment because of the brutality of the superior.

As Goora is being punished, her friend Nkwazi starts to cry uncontrollably. The teacher calls her

to go to him to recite the table and if she fails she would have something better to cry about. Unfortunately she has written the number six table on her palms from where she is reciting. She succeeds in reciting to the end but the teacher sees something scribbled in her palms and calls her:

"You"! Think that you are very clever; do you? Show me what is in your sweet palms, he said with an evil glint. Come on, open your palms, he said between clenched teeth. He hit her fist hard and it uncurled and he saw the multiplication tables... [1, p.36-37].

Okurut portrays the mathematics teacher using sarcastic language as a mockery, because the teacher tells Nkwazi to open her sweet palms but the teacher is saying this with *an evil glint* and *between clenched teeth*. No wonder he hit Nkwazi fist so hard and it opened. Why fight an innocent young girl in such a cruel manner? One would ask, do you think Nkwazi deserves all this harsh treatment? This kind of environment cannot make the students to learn well.

5. CONCLUSION

Corporal punishment is one of the bad practices that Ocwinyo and Okurut unearth in schools. A harsh environment full of corporal punishment is not ideal for learning. It only creates fear and timidity. Teachers are trained to create a friendly learning environment for students to facilitate learning but the reverse is depicted in the selected works. From the postcolonial theoretical perspective there should be a dialogue between the weak (students) and the strong (teachers) who mirror the subaltern-superior relationships in schools. If the weak are not given opportunity to dialogue and express themselves (speak) they will reach a point where they will revenge. Teachers should do everything to support learning, especially education of the girl-child, if not, the girls get frustrated and end up in early marriages. All stakeholders should ensure that corporal punishment is minimized, if not abolished.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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