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Le Trône des Illusions (*The Throne of Illusions*), by Étienne Fakaba Sissoko. 1st ed. L'Harmattan, 2025. 235 pp., ISBN: 978-2-336-53008-6.

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Book Review

Le Trône des Illusions (*The Throne of Illusions*), by Étienne Fakaba Sissoko. 1st ed. L'Harmattan, 2025. 235 pp., ISBN: 978-2-336-53008-6.

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In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, some writers and intellectuals turn to literature to expose what others, under self-censorship, overlook. This is a form of resistance literature, also known as committed literature (*littérature engagée*). It is a tradition where the writer functions not merely as an observer who writes for pleasure but as a catalyst for social transformation. In Mali, one such committed writer is Étienne Fakaba Sissoko. Sissoko is best known as a researcher and nonfiction author. He has published more than twenty books and several academic articles. Recently, however, because of his country's burning issues, he has embraced fiction to reveal what nonfiction dares not tackle. Literature thus became a strategic choice for Sissoko after he discovered the limits of nonfiction. His debut novel, *Le Trône des Illusions* (*The Throne of Illusions*), represents a conversion of academic writing into creative writing. It aims to express lived political reality in West Africa. This stance led him to jail and then to exile, much like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. As an economist and university professor, Sissoko brings an insider's gaze to the mechanics of state failure amid the resurgence of coups in West Africa. *Le Trône des Illusions* functions as a "mirror of the real" (14). It uses satire to diagnose systemic rot within modern African governance. The novel also provides an autopsy of dead democracies in a region that has become the epicenter of recent military coups in Africa.

The novel portrays the burning issues of a fictional republic named the "Republic of Gayma," a nation blessed with vast resources—gold, uranium, oil, and fertile land—yet cursed by decades of bad governance. Gayma serves as a microcosm for African states where the dream of independence has devolved into a cyclical "eternal return" of military coups (21). The story centers on the ideological collision between two foils. The antagonist is General Makossa Sini, a self-proclaimed "savior" of the nation. His name in Bambara ironically means "perishing tomorrow." The protagonist is Sabu, a university professor whose name means "cause," deriving from the Arabic word "sabab." Through writing, Sabu believes he can be the cause of change in the Republic of Gayma, while convinced that Sini will perish tomorrow because of his tyranny and bad governance. Unlike traditional hero narratives, Sabu's resistance is rooted in the "noble tradition of the pen" (13). His main occupation, in addition to teaching at the University of Gayma, is writing for the clandestine journal, *Kulékan*, which means "squeal" in Bambara. *Kulékan* becomes a platform for voicing the unspoken truth, the squeal of a suffering and agonizing nation.

The story begins with Sini's "cold precision" in seizing power under the guise of "the savior of the nation" (26). The narrative then meticulously follows Sabu's descent from intellectual critic to political prisoner after he refuses a strategic offer to become Sini's prime minister—a move intended to buy his silence. By refusing this offer, Sabu, as a committed writer, sides with "the robbed" against "the robbers" as advocated by Ngũgĩ in *Writers in Politics* (1981). Rather

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than betraying the resistance, he prefers going through dehumanizing routines in the Zandjara prison. This prison is a site of profound psychological and physical torture. While Sabu is isolated there in the "Woefolo" (the first woe, in Bambara), a cell also called "la fosse des brisés" (the pit of the broken) (87), the narrative shifts to Merlin Makarty. Makarty is one of the architects of the regime, the "King of Illusions" (49). He orchestrates digital propaganda to turn lies into truth and "manufacture consent"—a practice explained by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent* (1988). The tension peaks as an underground resistance movement, founded by Sabu and called the "Great Convergence," prepares its final assault to topple Sini. Sabu first leverages his public trial as a tribune to awaken Gayma's collective consciousness (176).

As already hinted above, *Le Trône des Illusions* is theoretically grounded in the discourse of committed literature or combat and resistance literature as defined by pioneers, such as Leo Tolstoy in *What Is Art?* (1898), Jean-Paul Sartre in *What Is Literature?* (1948), Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Writers in Politics* (1981). The novel also illustrates the role of the intellectual as defined by Edward Said in his 1994 book *Representations of the Intellectual*.

Through Sabu the protagonist, Sissoko employs Sartre's concept of words as "loaded pistols" and writing about current issues as "firing" and "action by disclosure" (Sartre 23-24). Sabu presents *Kulékan*, the clandestine journal, as an ammunition belt: "every word we convey is a bullet against the regime, but a well-aimed bullet must be carefully prepared" (38). Likewise, naming the reality in Gayma becomes a heavy blow against propaganda, stripping that reality of its "innocence." This makes the reader unable to ignore it once it is revealed. In *Le Trône des Illusions*, Sissoko exposes the bitter reality: the unprecedented surge of insecurity, the collapse of healthcare, the apocalypse of education, and the energy crisis. The people are left with only "three hours of electricity a day" (35). This situation contrasts sharply with the opulent, royal lifestyle of Sini and those who benefit from his regime. Sissoko also explores surveillance through the character of Makarty. By employing an "army of bloggers" and "videographers" among influencers to flood social media with patriotic hashtags and slogans, the regime weaponizes the digital gaze, labeling dissidents as bad citizens and "traitors" (57). This creates a culture of monitoring that serves as a modern tool for political control.

Commitment has a price: victory, prison, or even assassination. Sabu ends up in prison, yet he refuses to give in. He is also ready for all other scenarios; therefore, being in jail does not break his spirit. By putting him in a cage, the regime cannot jail his ideas. He transforms the prison into a new opportunity for reflection, intellectual productivity, and growth. In Act 4, Sabu describes the prison as a "laboratory of ideas" and resistance (131).

Describing Sabu's detention, Sissoko portrays a generational dialogue. On one side is Bango Diouf, an elder statesman of the "Autorail" generation, who values constant and slow progress (124). On the other side is the "TGV" generation (Generation Z), youth who demand rapid and radical change (123). This dialogue provides a sophisticated critique of the failures of the first waves of democratization witnessed by the "Autorail" generation. It also emphasizes the burning issues of the "TGV" generation, whose uprisings are often hijacked by the military as a shortcut to seize power. This process eventually leads to the death of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Regarding its form, the novel borrows from drama, essay, oral tradition, and religious discourse. The plot unfolds as a classical tragedy in six acts, while the stylistic choices are deeply intertwined with its commitment to African oral traditions. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe writes that in Africa, "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (7). Implementing this tradition, Sissoko punctuates his prose with several African proverbs that

serve as philosophical anchors, such as "The tree that falls makes more noise than the forest that grows" (21, 132). Alongside the African wisdom in proverbs, Sissoko quotes from both the Bible and the Quran. He is aware of the inseparability of religion from politics in sub-Saharan Africa despite constitutional secularism. Both proverbs and verses from sacred books foster the narrator's multifaceted ethos. They highlight commitment not only through a political perspective but also through moral and religious lenses. This approach corroborates Tolstoy's definition of committed art in *What Is Art?* (1898). This hybrid style gives Sissoko more freedom to explore the current issues more deeply, while mirroring the real.

However, despite the novel's political urgency and rhetorical soundness, it overlooks a serious democratization paradox. Sabu's intellectual commitment, while essential for disclosing the regime's failures, ultimately requires a military "trigger" in the form of the dissident Yigo and other military figures to topple Sini. The Great Convergence, the resistance movement he founded, agrees to engage in civil-military collaboration. Yet it advocates democracy and claims to oppose the military's confiscation of power. This reliance on the gun to topple the gun risks fueling a vicious circle. One undesirable system may end up being merely replaced by another that is worse. That would happen if the military dissidents with whom the Great Convergence collaborates decide to betray the movement's ideals and hijack the fruit of the resistance. Furthermore, when it comes to the form of the novel, one may feel that Sissoko's style tends to verge on the didactic. Some readers might find that his dialogues about politics and governance sound too much like a lecture, a lesson, or an expository essay with multiple quotes and African proverbs used as evidence. This leaves little room for the reader's own interpretation.

Nevertheless, these critiques do not diminish the work's importance. Sissoko's choice of this particular style can even be a strength. The intellectual, after all, is someone who can easily articulate "a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public" (Said 11). Tolstoy also confirms this. He claims that any work of art that is intelligible only to a small group while remaining unintelligible to the plain masses and disconnected from societal issues is either "prostituted" art, bad art, or not art at all (Tolstoy 190).

Therefore, *Le Trône des Illusions* remains more than a portrait of a coup. It is an excavation of how African people, in quest of a savior of the nation, may be easily tricked by political opportunists, whether military or civilian. Sissoko provides a model for reading contemporary African literature beyond aesthetics, stressing social diagnosis and political autopsy. His debut is a reminder that while a throne of illusions may crumble, the mirages of salvation offered by opportunistic "saviors" remain a constant threat to true liberation. Through Sabu, Sissoko argues that a nation's freedom will only endure if it is "nourished every day with justice and solidarity" (230). Overall, the novel confirms Étienne Fakaba Sissoko as a vital voice in contemporary African fiction. It demands a criticism as intellectually rigorous as the resistance it depicts. Through this bold debut, the "noble tradition of the pen" finds a powerful new advocate in the struggle for West African dignity (13).

Notes

- *Le Trône des Illusions* was originally written in French. All translations are the author's own.

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