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Disillusionment and Commitment: a Reader – Reception Study of Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road*

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Abstract

This paper attempts a critical study of Elma Shaw's Redemption Road (2008) with regard to thematic content which plays a central role in the political structures in the re-interpretation of the novel. The paper investigates literary elements that Elma Shaw has employed to communicate disillusionment and commitment as its literary focus. The study also explores the imminent troubling indications of anger and frustrations manifested in many characters. It, therefore, analyzes the text from the realm of Reader-Reception Theory from the perspective of Hans Robert Jauss, who stresses the concept of "horizon of expectations" in the interpretation of literary texts. It is found in the text that the ability of the critical reader to discover theme of a work stimulate him / her literary studies to address global issues, local people and places, exploring various identities and cultures as well as current polemics. Also, extreme violence which culminated in the Liberian Civil War (1989-2003) would not grant full liberty to the so-called marginalized group; rather, it exacerbates the living condition of both the privileged and the suppressed. Thus, the entire nation is now back at square one, after the citizens have built and then ruined their own society.

Keywords: Commitment; Disillusionment; Politics; Textual Interpretation and Thematic Preoccupation;

Introduction

The representation of the themes of disillusionment and commitment is quite complex in Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road*. The objective of any literary text

is to communicate. The theme is the main literary device through which authors communicate the central topic of a work. This complex thematic presentation



of social issues in different contexts, affecting specific group, obliges readers to follow the different kinds of plot structures, work through the conflicts the story presents and deduce how issues should be solved. According to Child and Fowler (2006, p. 239), “a theme is always a subject, but a subject is not always a theme; it is branch of the subject which is indirectly expressed through the recurrence of certain events, images or symbols”. Indeed, the entangled nature of a theme, which an author builds a story around by creating characters and actions to dramatize the idea, makes readers face the novel’s vantage points on known problems, or new problems of which they were unaware.

In a way, Elma Shaw’s *Redemption Road* reflects the basic themes of the novel in a combination of emotions and impulses that have been rejected from awareness but still influence its characters’ manner of acting and conduct. These fundamental themes are disillusionment and commitment; they are abstract ideas stated implicitly in the novel. They have not been repeated in the plot structure like a motif. Cuddon and Habib (2013, p. 448) note that “motif is one of the dominant ideas in a work of literature; it is a part of

the main theme. It may consist of a character, a recurrent image or a verbal pattern”. Essentially, *Redemption Road* by Elma Shaw exposes the themes of disillusionment and commitment without elaboration. Unlike motifs that could be discerned easily because they are explicit in the novel, the themes of disillusionment and commitment are not recurrent. Thus, readers have to read the novel critically in order to decipher them. For this reason, the meaning of the text, according to the writer’s intent, lies in the ability of the reader to develop critical thinking to discover a basic theme in any literary texts.

With this in mind, most readers of Elma Shaw’s *Redemption Road* become acquainted with either the subject matter or motif rather than the theme. For instance, in their novel analysis of Elma Shaw’s *Redemption Road*, Iluebe (2023, p. 104) and Agbada et al (2004, p. 523) conclude “the novel exposes the themes of war and the evils of war respectively”. Essentially, Iluebe has interpreted in his analysis that war levels and ruins Liberia’s economic development and reduces humanity via brutalities. Similarly, Agbada et al analyzed *Redemption Road* and affirms that the novel is about the



Liberian civil war. And one of its major themes is the evils of war portrayed in the use of arbitrary violence on innocent people. All things considered, their interpretations of Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* have dwelt more on the subject matter and motif rather than theme.

Readers confusingly acquiesce that the major theme of the novel is war or civil war. However, war or civil war can be both the subject matter and in some cases, the motifs. Let us take the case of Commander Cobra, the antagonist who acts brutally against other characters, including the central character, Bendu. His continual appearance and actions in the novel exposes motifs of killings and cruelty, and by extension, civil war which is the subject and motif of the novel. In that case, the reader would be unable to perceive the meaning of Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* on account of his / her inability to locate the themes of disillusionment and commitment, thus leaving out gaps in their interpretations of the novel. Theme refers to the writer's perception about life or humanity which he or she shares with the reader. It is something deeper than subject matter. To substantiate that, Morell (2006) contends that "theme, which is a conceptual distillation of the story, is

considered as the fundamental element of fiction which unifies other elements and creating textual cohesion (2006, p. 263).

The author is more concerned about the subject matter which is informed by the theme. On the other hand, the critic is concerned with theme, the underlying idea in the novel. It is important to note that a theme provides a unifying point around which plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols and other elements are developed. In other words, a theme is central topic of a text, which holds all its elements together, and giving them meaning.

There have been a number of critical literary studies conducted on Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* (see Daniels, 2023; Debusscher and Almagro, 2016; Ballah and Kumar 2025). However, none of these works have examined Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* related to its thematic preoccupation which exposes the disillusionment and commitment in the novel. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by linking the text's meaning with its theme.

Synopsis of the Primary Text

Published in 2008, Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* tells the story of Bendu Lewis, a Liberian woman whose memories of war



leaves her tortured with regret and anger. It starts with Bendu at her grandmother's memorial, flashback to the Liberian civil war (1989 – 2003) where she pushes her granny's body in a wheelbarrow until the old woman dies. Then a gang of rebels capture Bendu. She is trained as a fighter, abused by warlord Commander cobra and offers her Samson, his deputy. Bendu Lewis becomes Samson's war wife and she gives birth to a daughter. At the camp, captives are being beaten, tortured and beheaded. Bendu escapes abandons her illegitimate child and later set up her work with non-governmental organization help war survivors while internally coping with her traumatic experience. When the war ends, Bendu shows bravery in confronting her War load captor, commander cobra (Moses Varney) to ensure that he is brought to justice in the war-torn country, Liberia. Through fictional characters, Shaw addresses the real human cost of war from loss and displacement to trauma, guilt and the quest for justice.

Empirical Literature Review

Disillusionment is essentially waking up to reality. It happens when the shiny perfect version of a dream job, a relationship or a political system clashes with the hard facts. One goes from

holding a false belief to seeing things exactly as they are. Disillusionment became a prevalent theme in literature following World War I as writers grappled with the devastation and trauma caused by the war. Authors like T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf explored feelings of alienation and disillusionment in their works, reflecting the lost generation's sentiments. In the study titled; *The Theme of Disillusionment in African Fiction*. (2024), Sikha and Venegopala write:

African fiction reveals the disillusionment with post-colonial leadership and the failure of independence to deliver meaningful change have become defining concerns in contemporary African literature. African novelist such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiango and Wole Soyinka effectively illuminate the emotional, intellectual, and social despair of a generation caught between the optimism of independence and the harsh realities of corruption, moral compromise, and cultural fragments in post-colonial African societies (2024: 412 – 3)

Likewise, defining commitment in literature could be understood as an approach of



an author, poet, novelist, playwright or composer who commits their work to defend or assert an ethical, political, social, ideological or religious view. A committed writer assigns that importance to the historical context and situates his themes in the middle of significant development of his time. Writers do not live in a vacuum; they are sensitive to the world around them more acutely than others. So their works bear the impacts of their times. They shape their age in spite of political and social forces that influence upon the writers. They are often responsive to these social forces.

Rabkin (1938) makes one clear point about commitment of writers in their works:

The forms of commitment and political alternativeness chosen by writers living in an age of controversy differ. The aesthetic consequences of their choices form a distinctive aspect of the study of literature. Thus, the term "commitment" includes both the conscious involvement of the artist in the social and political issues of his age and the specific political obligations which the artist assumes in

consequence of this involvement (1938: 144).

In this light, commitment can be seen as the fundamental cast of writer's mind and his genuine devotion to a cause and his feeling of being certain about problems or evils in society that lead to disapproval and protest.

In his critical work, *In the name of War: Hypermasculinity in Elma Shaw's Redemption Road* (2023), Daniels examined hypermasculinity in West African war literature. Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity are all recurrent themes in literature and social sciences studies. He applied the Theory of Post-colonialism in the analysis of the novel, considering gender relations in Elma Shaw's post-colonial war novel. The study demonstrates that:

Faulty governance, poor coping strategies and the fear of loaded cultural oppression of males to show manliness in this fictional post-colonial Liberia. These tensions exacerbate the chaos of war as they render the conflict setting in a ripe fodder for violent gender relations.

Similarly, Debusscher and Almago (2016), in their research study titled *Post*



Conflict Women's Movement in Turmoil: the Challenges of Success in Liberia in the 2005 Aftermath claimed that one of the most important challenges for the Liberian women's movement comes precisely from its inability to redefine itself to engage in new battles as international aid diminishes. Yet, women's advocacy has been crucial in bringing peace after fourteen years of conflict as well as electing Africa's first female president.

Taking these tripartite studies into consideration, feminist ideology seems to have formed the basis of their arguments regarding Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road*. Without a doubt, Daniels (2023) decries the cultural patriarchal dominance in Liberia during and post-conflict periods.

Moreover, Debusscher and Almago (2016) affirm that women's movement and its active support has succeeded in democratically electing Africa's first female president in spite of its challenges. This is in contrast to Ballah and Kumar (2025) investigation into the causes of Liberian civil war both the first and the second. They concluded that the primary factors behind the civil war include historical and political grievances, socio-economic decline, ethnic rivalries and manipulation,

external influences. Human rights and legacy of America-Liberian domination. The work is quite related to political science although it highlights some issues which are of interest to literary studies as it relates to Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road*.

The current study investigates disillusionment and commitment that Elma Shaw explores in her novel in order to guide the readers to be able to locate themes through critical thinking which is a key component of reading literature. Thus, discovering theme of the novel would significantly improve readers' textual interpretation, thereby mobilizing people into proper action.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Reader-Response theory as the framework of analysis. Central to the theory is the role that readers play in the interpretation of a text, whether it is a literary work, a painting, a particular character in a work, or even real objects, such as an iPhone. As the name suggests, this lens is concerned with factors that influence a reader's response to what is happening in a text and what message the text tries to get across. According to Miralles (2014, p. 39), reader-response theory



may be traced initially to theorists such as I.A. Richard or Louise Rosenblatt. For Rosenblatt and Richards, the idea of correct, though difficult to attain, is always the goal of the educated reader. For Stanley Fish, the reader's ability to understand a text is subject to reader's particular interpretive community. He contends that interpretive community serves somewhat to "police reading" and thus prohibit outlandish interpretations. In contrast, Wolfgang Iser argues that the reading process is always subjective and there is a dialectical process between the reader and the text. For this reason, Sabharwal (2013, p.78) notes that reader-response approaches cover a wider variety of concerns, so much so that sometimes, the term seems to refer to a chaotic jumble of theories that may or may not have anything to do with each other.

This study, however, applies reader-reception theory from the perspective of what Hans Robert Jauss named "horizon of expectations" of the readers. Bressler (2011, p.78) explains "horizon of expectations as a term used by reader-response oriented critic Hans Robert Jauss to refer to all of a historical period's critical vocabulary and assessment of a particular text. In other words,

the notion of horizon of expectation devised by Hans Robert Jauss is a significative of a collective group of assumptions about genre, aesthetics, and ideology that shape how a reader responds to an individual work of literature. Indeed, German phenomenologist, Wolfgang Iser, uses the term horizon of expectations to refer to those expectations each reader creates concerning what will or may or should happen next in any given text. For Iser, reader's horizon of expectations frequently change to fit a text's particular situations.

Iser and Hans Robert Jauss contend that a text leaves many gaps for readers to fill in to construct meaning as opposed to the determinate elements such as facts and data (Damai, 2026 p. 46). In his book *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), Jauss argues that a text is received by readers based on the existing social, cultural, and political perceptions, which are factors that constitute readers' horizon of expectations when they read a literary work. Additionally, reader's historical period also influences their horizon of expectations. For example:

The way Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll House* was received by Ibsen's contemporaries

regarding Nora Helmer's desertion of her family is different from how it is received in the twenty-first century owing to changes to gender expectations in the world. Similarly, a cultural environment also plays a role in the way readers react to a text. Nora's flirtations with Dr. Rank in *A Doll House* can elicit diverse responses, from sympathetic to critical, from readers based on their cultural norms of how a married woman is expected to behave with a man other than her husband (p. 146).

Recent studies support this theory by emphasizing the importance of reader's previous literary experience, cultural norms and personal expectation in interpreting literary texts. For example, Gollwitzer, Thorwart and Masiner (2018) highlight, "the psychological response to violations of readers' expectations, reinforcing the significance of prior understanding in shaping reception". Horizon of expectations draws on reception theory and hermeneutics to explain the active role of readers in constructing meaning. Without question, Reader-Response theory insists that meanings are

not fixed, and they change based on the reader's personal experiences and background. Bressler (2011) further explicates on the Jauss's horizon of expectations thus:

These horizons of expectations change frequently because at the centre of all stories is conflict or dramatic tension, often resulting in sudden loss, pain, unexpected joy or fear, and at times great fulfillment. Such changes cause a reader to modify his or her horizon of expectation to fit a particular situation. For example, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck declares that he will not tell Miss Watson the location of Jim. He openly chooses to side with Jim against the precepts of Huck's society. A reader may then assume that Huck will treat Jim differently, for now Jim, the slave, has a chance to become a free person. According to Jauss and Iser, the reader has now established a horizon of expectations (2011: 79).

Using Hans Robert Jauss's horizon of expectations, this study analyses Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* to locate or



demonstrate how the author communicate the theme of disillusionment and commitment.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* depicts granny May's death and Bendu's capture during the war. Bendu is still mourning her dead grandmother as she pushes her body with fierce loyalty in a wheelbarrow. She has not been free from that mental suffering due to separation with her loved one, meanwhile a heavy gunfire sounds all over. Thereupon, an armed rebel group just appears at the scene. People scream while attempting to escape the extreme violence. In spite of the distress, which she experiences, the rebel group purposely capture her together with several other women. Below is an extract which makes Bendu feels disillusioned with the aggressive acts against innocent and blameless women particularly herself:

Bendu scrambled to her feet, pushed the wheelbarrow to the side of the road, collapsed beside it and wept bitterly until her eyes were swollen and her jaws hurt. She was crying so hard she didn't see the fighters until they were standing right in front of her. The leaders wore

fatigues and berets. Most of the others with them were a ragtag bunch, but all of them had weapons and some of them were wearing wigs. They were obviously not from the Armed Forces of Liberia... "Who are you", he asked. "My name is Bendu", she replied. Bendu what? "Bendu Lewis", Murmurs in the crowd. "she is a Congo girl", someone said. "Listen to her voice, she's Americo-Liberian". "How come you know my dialect"? the commander asked (pp. 6 – 7).

Drawing on Jauss's horizon of expectation, which is central in his reception theory, the readers may have assumed based on their social and cultural perception that Bendu's captors would treat her differently. Bendu, the bereaved, would be consoled and liberated from any maltreatment and torture through the war which breaks out in Liberia. On the other side, Cuddon and Habib (2013, p 338) comment helpfully on the concept: "the horizon of expectations ... is detectable through the textual strategies (genre, literary allusion, the nature of fiction and of poetical language) which confirm, modify, subvert, or ironize the



expectation of readers.” Readers’ horizon of expectation in reading Elma Shaw’s *Redemption Road* could be influenced by historical period. Historically, “Americo-Liberian” is an allusion in literature. Gray (2021) defines allusion thus:

Allusion as a passing reference in a work of literature to something outside itself such as legends, historical facts or personages, to other works of literature or even autobiographical details”. He further asserts that such allusions rely on reader’s prior knowledge or her patience with book of reference, their effect may go unnoticed by the general reader (p. 2021: 14).

The writer purposely employs allusion to communicate a specific literary meaning reference to group of people who have had a great impact in Liberian politics and political history. They have been governing Liberia for over a century while the indigenous African were deliberately denied political space in the country. For this reason, there have been intense dissatisfaction with this political arrangement orchestrated by Americo-Liberian descendants

and so civil war broke out amid this political imbroglio.

In this light, the expression ‘Americo-Liberian’ alludes to the civil war in order to draw distinction between complex ethnic cleavages vying for political leadership in Liberia. There is a theme of disillusionment exposed in a complex portrayal of characters’ interactions. For example, what motives and inclinations that the antagonists have for capturing Bendu because she is American-Liberian? Bendu becomes disillusioned with her attack. She believes that the different ethnic groups coexisted peacefully in Liberia before the war. People conceal their true feelings to others. This meant that other ethnic groups have held grudges against Americo-Liberians but do not express it. Here, the allusion “Americo-Liberian” needs to be contextualized in the Liberian political history from the readers’ horizon of expectation. More often than not, authors tell a story and allow their reader discover the theme. Plot is simply what happens in the story whereas theme is an idea revealed by the events in the story. On the discussion of the complexity of fictional theme, Child and Fowler (2006, p. 239) disentangle thus:



Traditionally, theme, means a recurrent element of subject matter, but the modern insistence on simultaneous references to form and content emphasize the formal dimension of the term. If we use theme to mean a certain quantity of features in a work (iterative imagery), we are confusing a symptom with a cause. There should not be restricting the loosely formal use of the term “theme”.

Moreover, commitment is the second major theme of the novel which occurs as a result of the first (disillusionment). The two are inseparable. This dominant idea develops and reveals the bravery, courage and resilience which Bendu, the central character, demonstrates in the post-war period. Apart from establishing a non-governmental organization for peace building which represents women's voices, Bendu confronts her former captor and warlord, Commander Cobra. She is motivated by a desire to bring him to justice for his war crimes. Her horrors of war experience are portrayed via the brutal actions of Commander Cobra who traumatizes her life in the

Liberian civil war and its aftermath. Bendu continues to grapple with both physical and psychological scars due to his sexual cruelty, such as rape, murder and widespread devastation of public and personal belongings. After the war, Bendu encounters Cobra, now disguising under the name (Moses Varney). The following excerpt is quoted to substantiate Bendu's commitment:

There, crossing the street and coming toward her was Cobra. Bendu's eyes darted around scanning the area quickly... “ at El-Mason Carry Street” he said, pulling a slip of paper out of his pocket to write his room and phone numbers. Please, don't call me by that war name (TKO-Technical Knock Out) again, “Bendu said. Cobra smiled and handed Bendu the slip of the paper (pp. 62 – 4).

Considering this extract from reader's horizon of expectations, it could be established that Bendu does not scare Cobra as she caution him not to call her with the war-time appellation. She could recall what he inflicts on her, including training her as a fighter and his rapes. Here, there is the use of a metaphorical term “Cobra”



which is an element of imagery which compares seemingly dissimilar things. The term 'Cobra' means a venomous and poisonous snake which attacks and kills instantly. He is linked to vindictiveness by carrying out offensive and deadly attacks on all the Americo-Liberian descents, who Cobra believes they have marginalized his native African people in the Liberian political space. Despite Cobra's atrocities, including family separation in war zones, education, loss of human lives, Bendu reports him to the police seeking for justice thus:

"Have him arrested for what? Lieutenant Tarpeh asked credulously. "And what if he denies the charges"? How do you intend to prove he killed anybody? "I am not the only one who knows him, others will come forward (p. 69).

A close analysis of both the previous and this extracts reveals the theme of commitment and determination to bring about a positive redemption in the Liberian society so that evils of war would be eliminated and peace and justice prevail in the war-torn country. According to Harmsworth (1968), "in literary works, theme is the abstract concept which is made concrete through its representation in

person, action and image in the work" (p. 123). Thus, the degree of abstraction in the term "theme" depends on the nature of the work under consideration. It admits that abstract reference is not possible or desirable to restrict all qualitative usages, because theme implies the extension of a work in a way that other subject matter and motif terms do not.

Although the police fail to arrest Cobra (Moses Varney), he is killed by unknown gunmen in his hotel accommodation. Consequently, the police suspects Bendu for his murder but after a sequence of investigation, she is released. Bendu's effort is a representation of Elma Shaw's commitment in the novel, which Cuddon and Habib (2013, p. 142) postulate thus:

A committed or engage writer (or artist) is one who, through his work, is dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programmes, especially those which are political and ideological and in aid of social reform. In order to achieve this, she needs to detach himself from the book so as to calculate its effect.



Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how Elma Shaw depicts themes of disillusionment and commitment in her novel *Redemption Road*. Bendu Lewis becomes disillusioned with the sudden hostile and deadly attack by people whom she absolutely trust due to the ties of kinship. The situation get worsening as commander Cobra and his rebel group abduct Bendu Lewis alongside other innocent resident and take them to a den of their crimes, immoralities and atrocities in the forest. Having been impregnated, Bendu flees the camp and delivered. She shows her determination, resilience and advocate for justice after the war. Her attempts to bring Commander Cobra to justice and the establishment of non-governmental organizations are cases in point. Hence, themes of disillusionment have been discovered in the novel. However, these themes are presented complexly in a way the reader finds it difficult to identify. The paper concludes that the total knowledge of theme of disillusionment and commitment in Elma Shaw's *Redemption Road* enable the critical reader to realize that native Africans in Liberia did not know how to channel their political grievances, as they ended up taking weapons and guns which ultimately

aggravated their moderate living conditions. Moreover, the Americo-Liberian descent would not have dominated the political space if they had known that could culminate into the civil war.

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