

NIGERIAN PLAYWRIGHTS, CONDUIT FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A FOCUS ON SOYINKA'S *TRIALS OF BROTHER JERO* AND OGBECHÉ'S *HARVEST OF CORRUPTION*

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Abstract

Corruption is one of the most infamous phenomena in Nigeria's social, political and even religious realms. The aim of this paper is to examine the role of playwrights in exposing and ultimately dealing with the problem of corruption in Nigeria. This was done through a content analysis and critique of Wole Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* and Frank Ogbecbe's *Harvest of Corruption*. Government agencies have continued to battle corruption with little or no victory. Through an analysis of the two playwrights' treatment of the subject matter in the selected plays, the

study revealed that Nigerian playwrights are teachers to their readers and audience. The paper showed that playwrights contribute to social transformation through their engagement with the fight against corruption. The study is a contribution to the ongoing discourse on the role of the writer by proving that the writer does not merely entertain but has a responsibility to society.

Keywords: Corruption, playwright, politics, teacher, transformation

Introduction

Many Nigerians tend to celebrate the success that is measured by the wealth an individual accrues irrespective of its source. This is fundamentally what leads to corruption. Indeed, it will appear, as Achebe suggests in "The Novelist as a Teacher", that rather than engage in the fruitless blame game, it is better to ask such basic questions like, "Where did things go wrong?" (43). The Nigerian writer has always sought to lay it bare, to lead the crusade against the social anomaly. The role of the playwright is, especially, quite significant in this sense. There is no gainsaying the fact that lone voices in the nation's narratives on corruption have had significant reverberating effects more than the noise of some government agencies – ironically so. National policies that are aimed at scaling down the high level of corruption have failed in achieving their aims, and corruption eats deeper into the fabric of the nation.

Drama has existed in various forms for centuries, focusing on social and political issues in different societies for various purposes, which include entertainment and religious rites. The didactic function of art has remained central to the writing and staging of plays in modern literature. Nigerian playwrights, through their works, have given much to the fight against all forms of corruption. Most times their works are enacted on stage and in theatres for audiences who may not have the ability or the time to read the written texts. The

playwright, while providing entertainment, brings about re-orientation and attitudinal change by condemning vices and extolling virtues. Soyinka through his works has consistently championed the cause of the common man. He criticizes poor leadership in African States and calls for changes in all facets of African life to enhance nation-building. The significance of the role of literary voices like that of Wole Soyinka is captured succinctly during the celebration of his 76th birthday by Ribadu who asserts that Nigeria, which produced the towering presence of Wole Soyinka, loses a rational argument if it pleads the absence of heroes as the basis of failure ("Soyinka at 76").

The Playwright as a Teacher

A playwright performs a vital role in society. His works, when acted on stage, do not only entertain the audience and by extension the society, but also educate, particularly on issues within one's society. Chinua Achebe in his essay titled "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause" is of the view that.

An African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant, like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (78)

Most Nigerian writers either consciously or unconsciously seem to agree with Achebe's stance as depicted in their works, but some critics such as Sule Egya do not agree with Achebe's view of creating and analyzing texts. According to Egya,

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The novelist who ventures into pedagogy as Achebe has done stands the risk of watering down his craft through authorial intrusion, sociological commentaries, gross over thematization and insufficient attention to the elements of fiction. (197-198)

Achebe underscores the functional theory of literature, which has been a dominant discourse in African literary criticism in his *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. To him, the African writer cannot be unaware of, or indifferent to, his people's plight (78). WaThiong'O, who tends to agree with Achebe's stance, posits that every literary work of art is a depiction of something or somewhere for the reader to know, comprehend and appreciate. He puts it thus:

There is a sense in which no writer of imaginative literature from the very best to the moderately significant can avoid the big issues of the day, for literature, to the extent that it is a mirror unto man's nature, must reflect social reality or certain aspects of social reality. (478)

According to Olaniyan and Quayson:

If the only literary and critical tradition one is familiar with is the African, one could be forgiven for thinking that writers and critics of African literature invented the idea that literature has a function, and that function is to serve society. Nearly all writers, old and young, male and female, subscribe to the idea even if in varying degrees. (101)

Indeed, most African literary works portray or project African environment, norms and tradition. Thus, it can be said that the Nigerian and indeed the African playwright plays an indisputable and crucial role in nation-building. As a vanguard of change and a social crusader, the playwright achieves his aim through satire. The satirist exposes the problems or failures of society and also proffers possible and achievable solutions to the problems. It is pertinent to note that playwrights by themselves cannot create the needed change in the society, but that they facilitate and propel or motivate individuals to make informed decisions that will bring about social change. Achebe in *The Trouble with Nigeria* calls on intellectuals to salvage the country. He puts it thus:

But arduous as the task is, Nigeria's educated elites must understand that they have no choice but to address themselves to it or receive history's merciless indictment...our inaction or cynical actions are a serious betrayal of our historic mission and of succeeding generations who will have no future unless we save it now for them. (53)

Many playwrights through their work have been able to effect attitudinal and behavioural changes in ways that some half-hearted efforts of the leaders of the corrupt system have not come close to achieving. Through a continuous transmission of values in texts and on the stage, they have created a consciousness that showcases itself across generations in new crops of national loyalists, who echo the truth in their enclaves and on some occasions, down the corridors of power. Okey Ndibe in his novel *Arrows of Rain* calls on writers to take their responsibilities towards society as urgent. According to him, the role of every literary writer is to tell his or her stories and "a story that must be told never forgives silence" (97). The Nigerian Playwright serves as a conscience of society. He relates the frustrations, pains, hopes, fears and progress of society to his audience and readers.

So many problems arise as a result of complexities in modern life as change is accelerating, yet the truth remains the only constant. There is a need to be guided in order to cope with the prevailing situation. Emmanuel Obiechina states that, "it is the function of the literary historian to recognize and record and analyse existing cultural tastes without prejudice, establishing the connectedness and underlying unity in the cultural situation" (7). Playwrights are teachers of history who also keep in step with unfolding narratives. Ola Rotimi's plays, *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* give insights into the old Oyo Empire and Benin Kingdom respectively. In *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* through the recounting of the events that led to the conquest of Benin by the English Imperialists, Rotimi has not only documented history but has brought to life the ageless truth of how betrayal can change the course of a people. Similarly, his "*Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*" reveals the perception of politics by the average Nigerian in the quest for their share of the "National Cake"; resulting in the intrigues and manoeuvres involved in the game.

Corruption in Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* and Ogbече's *Harvest of Corruption*

Wole Soyinka shows little restraint as he exposes the

societal ills that have engulfed the country. He portrays the types of corruption that are practised in religious circles and decries their devastating effects on the individual and society. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka captures the proliferation of Churches through unconventional means and how false preachers and prophets defraud gullible, naïve and greedy followers. Brother Jero the main character of the play represents religious charlatans whose views of Christianity contradict the truth of the religion. Brother Jero is materially inclined and refers to his congregation as customers. He uses his knowledge of the Bible to deceive his followers and thwart the truth for selfish reasons. Jero begins this evil practice by outsmarting his master over a piece of land. He makes his master believe that he is helping him. He brags:

“My Master, the same one who brought me up in prophetic ways staked his claim and won a grant of land...I helped him, with a campaign led by six dancing girls from the French territory, all dressed as Jehovah's Witnesses. What my older Master did not realize was that I was helping myself.” (12)

Also, the *modus operandi* for the conversion of people by some religious sects is morally disgusting. Young girls are made to dance, shaking their bosoms. Brother Jero attests that some prophets “gained their present beaches by getting women penitent to shake their bosoms in spiritual ecstasy” (9).

Jero's description of the priesthood as a trade is aimed at achieving personal aggrandizement. He says: “I grew to love the trade. It used to be a very respectable one in those days and competition was dignified; but in the last few years, the beach has become fashionable, and the struggle for land has turned the profession into a thing of ridicule”(9). Without a doubt, Brother Jero's statement has remained an undisputable fact in Nigeria. Preachers and prophets have steadily lost respect. Brother Jero projects a debased version of Christianity and by extension, leadership. His gullible apprentice, Chume, and his other followers represent many people in society. Soyinka, through this portrayal gives an insight into the abuse of religious authority.

Frank Ogbeche on the other hand exposes the deep-rooted corruption that is practised in the public sector. He shows the flagrant betrayal of trust by public officers both elected and appointed, which eventually leads to large-scale embezzlement of public funds. A Police Commissioner who is supposed to defend and uphold the law is himself an accomplice in crime. He sends his

“boys” to give protection to criminals while Chief Ade, the Minister of External Relations and a drug baron, pays him off. The chief gives the Commissioner a large sum of money and says, “Commissioner, if you need more, do let me know. That is for your fuel, I will send something into your account as usual. Just do your best to cover me up, okay? So long as you do your bit, money cannot be your problem” (20).

When the chief asks the Commissioner of Police about the smuggling of his illegal goods, the Commissioner tells him: “Chief, there was no problem at all. Your goods are safely in the warehouse. I directed the DPO there to personally supervise the operations” (20). This is quite distasteful and gives a near-hopeless situation in Nigeria. The playwright however ensures that there is a representation of the few members of the police force who have remained incorruptible. ACP Yakubu vows to ensure that “there will be no hiding place for any golden fish this time” (54). The ACP laments the decay in the system thus:

“How can all these be happening without anybody having the willpower and the moral courage to stand up and say No! I just cannot believe it. For one person to embezzle a whooping sum of one point two billion Naira in one Ministry alone is unbelievable. But how? Don't we have audit department in these Ministries these days?” (22-23)

The Judiciary which is supposed to be the last hope of the common man is also not left out of this systemic rot. Aloho, an employee of Chief Ade, is caught with cocaine and is charged to court. The Judge Justice Odili is visited by the Chief and is promised a bribe of One Million Naira to handle the case. Justice Odili says:

“In fact, I will discuss with her lawyers and the case will be dismissed for want of evidence... your girl will be out, discharged and acquitted for want of evidence. You may even have the ground to sue for defamation of character on her behalf.” (49)

Ogbeche sheds light on institutionalized corruption in the country. Drug business is a racket comprising policemen, customs officers and lawyers, among other government officials. In ACP Yakubu's voice of reasoning, the credibility of the Nigerian judiciary is questioned:

“What is really wrong with our legal system? Have we come to a point where any money-bag or

highly-placed individuals will and can toy with the judiciary and get away with any crime committed no matter how heinous that crime may be? This is ridiculous!" (55)

ACP Yakubu also describes Nigeria as a country of madness which needs an unconventional means of sanitizing it:

"What we need now is to allow madmen to rule this country of madness, since the so-called sane people are without conscience and scruples. Maybe this will bring a new development and ethical orientation towards the reversion of our already bastardized socio-cultural values." (26)

In the end, the optimism of the playwright is seen when all those that are involved in crime, irrespective of status or position in society, got the full wrath of the law as pronounced by the judge:

"As for you, the Commissioner of Police and the Chief Justice, all I can say is that you are a big disgrace to our noble profession. Greed and avariciousness have blinded you against the ethical demands of the profession and you have to pay for your sins. You are both sentenced to twenty years each with hard labour. You must reap the harvest of your corruption. The clerk who violates the oath of secrecy to keep Government's secrets, and was tempted by the mere offer of two thousand naira; though your action has assisted us to unearth a grievous crime, yet the underlying motive convicts you. I therefore sentence you to five years imprisonment. For exposing the crime, I commend you but for receiving bribe, I condemn you for others to learn. Madam Hoha and Miss Ochuole, your love of money and the appetite to pursue it is indescribable. Madam Hoha, from this moment, that hotel of yours should be sealed up as we cannot continue to be operating havens for criminal activity under the guise of beer parlours. Both of you are hereby sentenced to ten years each with hard labour. When you plant, you should be prepared to harvest" (119)

The ending may be a deviation from the norm where corruption is celebrated and crime is covered, however, the playwright through the words of ACP Yakubu, sustains hope for a better society to the end. He says, "We need a rebirth that will lead us into a new dawn" (26).

Conclusion

Soyinka and Ogbeche reflected social reality artistically in two separate plays. They seem to say, through their works, that they are not oblivious to their responsibility in educating their readers and make them understand the nature of Nigeria's problems. Through their plays, they have created an awareness that is geared towards self-evaluation, both for the perpetrators and the victims. The playwrights, though belonging to two separate generations of writers, have focused on the enduring theme of corruption in post-colonial Nigerian literature in their satirical plays. Their goals are clear – to appeal to their readers to eschew corrupt practices and to seek social transformation.

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