

## The Quest for Socio – Political Change and National Development in Irobi's *Cemetery Road*

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### Abstract

Nigeria as a country is currently grappling with social vices that amongst others include high rate of corruption, drug abuse amongst the youths, kidnapping and banditry as well as inept leadership. The country has enormous human and natural resources but remains underdeveloped when compared to some countries in the western world. This paper looks at some factors that keeps Nigeria underdeveloped. It argues that military dictatorship is not a good form of government when compared to democracy which the country currently enjoys. The paper advocates for the reduction of social vices in our society through literary drama which is a medium of information dissemination leading to the growth and development of our society. It also adds to

the body of existing knowledge on how literary drama is used in developing our society. The paper draws from Karl Marx's social conflict theory which argues that as long as inequality exists in our society, there must be conflicting interests, thus leading to change and development. Esiaba Irobi's *Cemetery Road* is used as a paradigm to demonstrate that when employed properly, drama could be used in bringing development and socio-political change in our society. It concludes by telling us that for our society to be good and attain her maximum development potentials, we must eschew all forms of corruption. This is possible by having a good educational system as well as accepting democracy as a better form of government.

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### Introduction

Nigeria gained her independence from the British government in the year 1960. From 1960 to the present day, Nigeria as a country has arguably not achieved its full development potentials due to inept or bad leadership and inadequate enlightenment amongst her citizens. Such inadequate enlightenment leads to a situation where her citizens most often cannot fight for their rights. Due to bad leadership, Corruption, nepotism, tribalism, greed and mediocrity, the country is known to be suffering from epileptic power supply, inadequate health facilities which necessitated the public outcry by the wife of Nigeria's president Aisha Buhari over the poor state of the State House Clinic in Abuja.

Drama is known to be an audio-visual means of communication. It can be watched as a live

performance on an acting area as well as being read from a text. Drama performs functions in the realm of entertainment, education and enlightenment leading to the growth, advancement and national development of the country. Ampe has written that development "changes from one point of advancement to the other" (9). He goes a step further to argue that development "can be studied or understood through the works of artists and their roles" (9). Irobi has demonstrated that drama could correct certain social vices that prevents Nigeria from maximizing her development potentials.

The role of drama as a catalyst for national development and socio-political change in our society cannot be over-emphasized. During the Colonial period Ogunde's drama played prominent role on the need for Nigeria as a country to be granted her independence from the colonial authorities. Corroborating further, Clark as cited in Obafemi notes that "Ogunde was from the beginning actively involved in the struggle for self rule, an involvement which is at his works, but led to several brushes with the colonial authorities" (115). Similarly, contemporary play texts such as *April 1421*, *Rape of The Last Sultan* who are the Nigerian

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authors and many others by Nigerian authors in an attempt at serving as change agents is made up of themes such as corruption, greed, unemployment, nepotism and mediocrity. Such themes are aimed at bringing a form of change socially and politically thereby reflecting social reality. It is against this backdrop that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o tells us that "the product of a writer's pen both reflects reality and also attempts to persuade us to take a certain attitude to that reality" (7). Thus, drama must be seen reflecting social and political reality which when reflected properly, would lead to the growth and advancement of Nigeria as a country.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the writings of Karl Marx in the *communist manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867) which gave rise to the social conflict theory. Marx believes that the only thing that is permanent in life is change. In line with this, the social conflict theory argues that individuals and groups in any given society belong to different social classes. As a result of these social classes, the society is divided into the "Haves" and the "Have-nots". It goes further to argue that conflict is the result of our ever changing society. Marx believes that all historical change and development was caused by a series of class struggles between the bourgeoisies and the proletariats. He observes that:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, Lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (14).

Thus, Marx advocates for a classless society which according to him would bring a new social order which would "institute a system in which all these branches of production are operated by society as a whole, for the common good, according to a

common plan, and with the participation of all members of society... abolish competition and replace it with association" (47). Commenting on Marxism as a philosophy, Gbilekaa posits that "Marxism is a philosophy of praxis which aims at the radical transformation of human reality based on a dialectical interpretation of history" (40).

In other words, Marx succeeds in telling us that as long as there are classes or stratification within the human society, there must be conflict which eventually leads to change and development. Thus, Marx succeeds in creating a platform against which literary drama is used in bringing the desired change which leads to development. Contemporary playwrights use their drama in trying to correct some of those perceived imbalance as seen in our environment. It is argued that the literary work that is produced helps the audience to think from a particular point or angle of vision in order to make the society a better place. In affirming this position, Wa Thiong'o avers that:

A writer is trying to persuade us, to make" us view not only a certain kind of reality, but also from a certain angle of vision often, though perhaps unconsciously... All art aims to evoke, to awaken in the observer, listener or reader emotion and impulses to action or opposition (6).

To this end, Gbilekaa argues that "if the application of Marxist literary aesthetics can bring about a change of this bizarre and obnoxious situation, then it is welcomed" (50). This is what makes drama functional and also seen to perform and fulfill part of its social responsibility to the audience. Along this line, Bhardwaj argues that African writers use their art in trying to transform and develop their society. He tells us why:

African writers are intellectuals and social critics in real sense, representing the conscience of the society. These writers have diagnosed the ills afflicting African societies and devised formulas to restructure societies by transforming the very mindset of the society. For it is the

moral duty of the writer to inspire, educate and guide people to fight against all authoritarian and anti-human exploitative forces... (118).

Commenting further on this, Mohammed Yakubu is of the view that African writers have lived up to the expectation of using their literary works in serving as an agent of change and national development through social mobilization. He observes that "African literature is generally protest bound... African writers are social crusaders. They have used their literary works to express their concern over bad governance in their various societies" (77).

Irobi has several literary works to his credit such as *The Colour of Rusting Gold* (1989), *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* (1989), *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), *Nwokedi* (1991), *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999), *The Fronded Circle* (1999) and *Cemetery Road* (2009). Irobi succeeds in using his drama to bring change to his society; thus, leading to development as analyzed in one of his published plays *Cemetery Road*.

### Synopsis of *Cemetery Road*

The play is narrated using a flash back technique and is written in ten cuts. It opens with the funeral procession of Mazeli. Professor Madubunjoala leads the funeral procession and narrates to the audience how Mazeli accuses him of being an incompetent academic. The first cut opens at Mazeli's apartment. Mazeli rushes into his house panting. He gives Somadina who happens to be his wife a tape and instructs her to hide it. Somadina is confused. While this happens, some military men find their way to Mazeli's apartment instructing him to hand over the B.B.C tape to them. Mazeli refuses and denies knowing the where about of the tape. The military men give him "twenty-four hours to bring the tape to their office or face dire consequences.

The second cut opens with the two British journalists, Douglas and Hazel They produce a documentary film for the B.B.C in conjunction with Mazeli's students. The documentary being produced showcases the lives and the

contradictions in the African society. Douglas comes from the British upper middle class. This does not go down well with Douglas who wants to see a documentary that tends to show Africa as a poor continent. Mazeli insists that the documentary film must show the struggles and resistance of the Africans against an external force. This singular act makes Mazeli to seize the tape and goes home with it. This brings the documentary to an abrupt end.

In the third cut, Mazeli explains to Somadina why the military men are after him through a flash-back technique. Somadina concurs with him and promises to write an article on it in the pages of a newspaper. A masked man appears in their apartment and throws in a tear gas canister which affects Mazeli, his wife and his in-laws who come visiting.

In the fourth cut, Mazeli's mother gives a detailed account of how Mazeli's father was killed by northerners, in a coup. His body becomes dismembered as little Mazeli escapes with his mother and siblings. Mazeli's mother convinces Mazeli to release the tape to the military officers. She tells Mazeli to choose between the tape and his life. Mazeli chooses the tape, his mother has a premonition about his death and bids him farewell. Mazeli remains adamant as his wife promises to stand by him to the very end.

The sixth cut, opens with Mazeli in his office. The departmental secretary by name Mrs. Fatima Akintola enters and narrates to Mazeli how the head of department makes sexual advances towards her and some female students. She promises killing him if she loses her job due to her refusal to yield to his advances. Lawani a long time friend to the Mazelis and the president's personal security officer enters into Mazeli's apartment and informs Somadina that Mazeli is to be placed under house arrest for being a security risk to the country. Lawani tries to rekindle the love he once shared with Somadina who turns down the offer.

Mazeli rehearses with his students a small drama piece which he intends to present to the president and his entourage. As he rehearses, professor Madubunjoala arrives with two soldiers who arrests Mazeli and seize the recorder meant for the rehearsals. Through the help of the



departmental secretary, the students start a demonstration using placards. Mazeli arrives at the state security head quarters. His friend Lawani instructs the officers to signal him as soon as Mazeli is brought into the office, intimating them that he has an interest in the case. The colonel accuses Mazeli of seizing a tape which belongs to the British Broadcasting Corporation and also accuses him of collaborating with fifty young military officers in order to assassinate and overthrow the government. Lawani calls the colonel and instructs them to release Mazeli since the parade is over and there hasn't been any coup. The colonel before releasing Mazeli, injects him with ethanol which according to him, would kill him in installments.

The two British journalists who come on a spying mission are informed by their controller in London that they were supposed to be in Liberia. The controller tells them to come back to London with the documentary tape on the community theatre project. This would help in justifying their trip to Nigeria and save them from losing their jobs. Mazeli returns and meets his students at Kudingi village where they rehearse for the presentation to the president and his guests. He gives Hazel his wrist watch instructing her to go to his house and take the tape.

The final and the tenth cut opens at Mazeli's apartment. Somadina leaves for Kudingi village in search of Mazeli. Douglas enters and meets Lawani. He tells him he had come for the tape. Mazeli enters with his bloodied body. He informs Lawani and Somadina that his call to the security officers could not save him. He tells them that he was injected with ethanol. Lawani tries to stop Mazeli from going for the play production during which he plans to assassinate the president. Mazeli remains adamant. As Lawani tries to stop Mazeli, a knife in Mazeli's hands cuts through Mazeli's chest. Mazeli dies and his students in anger stab Lawani to death. The play ends on a tragic note.

### **National Development and Socio-political Change in *Cemetery Road***

*Cemetery Road* clearly uses the themes of military dictatorship, corruption and greed in exposing the

inadequacies inherent in man and his immediate environment. Mazeli a well trained university lecturer is accused by the ruling military government of trying to overthrow the military regime, an accusation which Mazeli is innocent of in the text. He is not given a fair trial by the military government but is accused on trumped-up charges of trying to plot a coup against the military government. It exposes the inadequacies found in Nigeria's political landscape where the violation of the fundamental right of her citizens is rife. In Nigeria, there are instances where citizens are detained by the Nigeria police force indefinitely without charging them to court. Such action puts the image of the country in bad light and calls for change if the country must achieve its development potentials. Lawani who happens to be the military president's chief security officer narrates to Somadina how Mazeli was framed up. His statement is worthy of note:

**Somadina:** But Mazeli is not plotting any coup.

**Lawani:** He does not have to be, to be executed by the present military government. All they need as evidence is a reliable army or security officer desperate for promotion to mention Mazeli's name and say he saw him talking or drinking beer with the coup-plotters (73).

As a reflection of our contemporary society, one does not need to commit a crime in order to be punished by the government, a fate which Mazeli is known to have suffered in the text. Instances abound where some Nigerians such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, Olusegun Obasanjo, Shehu Yar'adua and a host of others were incarcerated by the military government of General Sani Abacha of plotting to overthrow the government of that time. The intimidations, threats and harassments of these Nigerians did not really put the image of the country in good light. Such actions and inactions of the military government of that time never enhanced the growth and development of the country. Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations due to the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the military government of Nigeria. The play being a reflection of events and happenings in

our environment is indirectly calling for a change in attitude and orientation amongst Nigerians if the country must develop. Such change would enable the country to optimize its leadership and development potentials.

The play calls for an end to all forms of military government in any part of the world, in calling for an alternative system of government, Mazeli tells us why:

**Mazeli:** Of all the professions in the world, and of the classes of human beings, the one that produced nothing, is the military class. The military are an artificial people with synthetic minds living in a metallic world, a world of orders, arrests, medals,.. How do you think such breed of men, with their little vapid minds, can discharge the responsibility of government. How? (84).

Corroborating Mazeli's assertion, military dictatorship is prevalent in different countries of the world such as Libya during the regime of Ghadaffi and the present North Korean government where human rights are being abused and members of the fourth estate of the realm not given the freedom to operate. This same scenario was seen in Nigeria during the military regime of General Sani Abacha who looted Nigeria's treasury by keeping such funds abroad as well as the incarceration of some notable Nigerians. It is in line with this that Nigeria as a country decided to choose a democratically elected government from 1999 to date. All these Irobi brings to limelight in his play. He presents the conflicts and contradictions as witnessed in Nigeria's political landscape. It is in this regards that Nyamdi observes that "The writer is therefore not only a teacher in the retrospective sense of the word, he is also a social seer who identifies and highlights the weaknesses of present day society" (571)

On corruption, the play exposes how corrupt some of our public officers could be. It goes further in telling us that corruption has succeeded in eating deep into Nigeria's various institutions and has proven to be the bane of the country's development. The action of the government official who is sent to compensate the peasants tells us more:

**Official:** Amina Dan Fodio!...

**Official:** Don't you want it?

**Third Peasant:** It is too small

**Official:** You want something bigger? I can give you something bigger. African Oliver Twist. You should have known that a beggar has no choice.

**Third Peasant:** Me, a beggar? (33).

The action of the government official paints a negative image of how some of our public officers could be. They are known to live at the expense of the poor masses. They embezzle public fund and end up not being prosecuted before a competent court of law. Such actions cannot lead to the development and advancement of the country; thus, a call for socio-political change.

In the light of the above, if the nation must develop to its optimal level, the government must strive to close the gap between the rich and the poor instead of widening it by encouraging corruption. Her citizens must not be allowed to wallow in abject poverty. When the masses are taken care of through food security, provision of enabling environment for foreign investors, provision of adequate infrastructural developments; it would go a long way in reducing some of the regional agitations as being witnessed in Nigeria. Examples include but not limited to agitations from the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger-Delta (M.E.N.D) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (I.P.O.B). For socio-political change and development to occur in Nigeria, there should be fairness and equity in terms of distribution of the various resources. Equity and fairness would lead to the reduction of some of the perceived regional agitations in Nigeria and would help in the country achieving its leadership and development potentials.

Irobi's drama succeeds in making a strong case for a strong and effective educational institution if our country must develop properly. Educational institutions are regarded as citadels of learning in the world over. It is an institution where leaders are made, As such, an effective educational system would bring a better society. A good educational institution is made up of quality educators or tutors who end up producing quality graduates that can stand the test of time. This is made possible when

the government in power pays the teachers as at when due and also equipping the various public primary, secondary and tertiary institutions properly. In Nigeria, the Academic Staff Union of Universities is known to be at logger heads with the federal government on issues bordering on poor remuneration and inadequate funding of universities. This has resulted in strike protests by ASUU as a way of making the government to yield to their demands. Such strike protests have only succeeded in producing half baked graduates who end up being a problem to the society, Mazeli's conversation with his head of department explains it better:

**Madubunjoala:** You are not teaching, Dr. Anyanwu. You are indoctrinating the students into your revolutionary whims and caprices. You are turning teaching into a subversive activity and that must stop.

**Mazeli:** It will stop when the government starts paying us our correct salaries. And does it not worry you that three quarters of the lecturers have left this country in search of a greener pasture in the richer countries of the West? Why should we be eating palm kernels when the soldiers shovel 50% of the GNP into defense? Creating military colleges every where. . . the military monsters want to wipe out the intellectual class in this country. And they are using fossils like you. What is the future of a nation without an educational system? What is the future of these students? (77).

Thus, Irobi through his drama reflects the experiences in Nigeria and attempts to provide a way forward by having a good educational institution. It is along this line that Akanmode argues that every literary work that is produced must strive not to overlook the social and contemporary issues affecting the masses. Akanmode sums it up thus:

A literary work is more relevant if it dwells on the consciousness and experience of the populace, reflecting their dispositions such

as sadness, anger, condemnation, bitterness, crave for change and so on. The literary writer must not overlook contemporary\* social and political problems ravaging his society (152).

Again, the play brings to limelight the attitude of some Nigerians who do not have the love of their country at heart. They do not contribute their quota to the growth and development of the country. They allow regional and ethnic sentiments to becloud their sense of reasoning and judgment thereby fuelling regional agitations and secessionist tendencies. In the text, Lawani explain this scenario to Somadina:

**Lawani:** What is important right now is individual survival. And I have survived.

**Somadina:** How can you survive without your country?

**Lawani:** Somadina, I don't believe in this country anymore. And no sensible person I know does, not even the president. Do you know what he calls himself? A political mechanic trying to keep a 1960 British Morris Minor car going. You know what the Morris Minor car is? Nigeria! And right now that car is crawling backwards, downhill, towards the cemetery. Once it reaches there and crumbles, I will take off like all the army generals for New York or London or Switzerland (89)

A recent example in Nigeria is the case of the former Pension Task Force boss Abdurashed Maina who is being accused of embezzling pension funds and declared wanted by Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Such citizens are seen not to have the interest of their country at heart. The play condemns such an attitude and calls for a change in orientation for Nigeria to develop properly.

### Conclusion

Drama remains a medium of information dissemination. The writer draws extensively from experiences within his immediate environment in bringing the work of art to limelight. Playwrights

over the years have been urged by different theatre scholars to be the moral conscience of the society. To this end, the final literary product reflects the various conflicts, contradictions and tensions seen in the society. If our country must develop properly, our leaders must strive at closing the gap between the rich and the poor. It is by so doing that societal vices such as high crime rate would be reduced to the barest minimum as seen from the peasants which saw their leaders living at their expense.

Irobi is one playwright who succeeds in using drama in re-orientating the masses towards achieving a just and better society for all. He tells us that for our society to be better, we must eschew all forms of greed, corruption and mediocrity. We must encourage a good educational system and also accept democracy as a better form of government compared to a military government.

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