

THEATRE AND LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TWO PLAYS

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Abstract

For several years, the most pressing problem challenging the entire nations of the world and Nigeria has been reduced to leadership. The quest for purposeful leadership, unity, economic and selfless political structure has been the concerns of many patriotic Nigerians. Such plays like Femi Osofisan's- *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Kole Omotoso's- *The Curse* support this claim. Their plays reflect on the state of Nigeria's socio-economic problems with the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the present societal upheavals. Based on this outlook, this research paper seeks to critically examine the role of the Playwright in Leadership crisis in Nigeria and discovers that the transcendent nature of theatre as an art, not only shows us the beauty of everyday life, but can also go beyond everyday politics to critically address the problems of the day. By way of example, the selected plays reflect the various ways through which the Playwright exposes leadership crisis and responds to the atrocities of political oppression in the Nigeria space, which by his works creates plays for societal development.

Keywords: Crisis, Leadership, Nigeria Space, Playwright, Political Structure, Revolutionary Alternatives, Theatre.

Introduction

Since no writer creates in a vacuum, the content of any literary creation usually captures a period in history in a given society. Whichever material a writer chooses to use, the most important thing he considers is the content of his style of creation, and realities of the work to his immediate environment. However, because of the realities and the nature of African situation, the African writer cannot afford to sacrifice the urgent needs of sensitization of the populace, through his art, to the ever- emerging myriads of social upheavals prevalent in many African communities.

However, the sad experience of what this socio-political and economic inequality has brought led some writers in many African societies to adopt radical approaches, instigate social revolution as the only way out of the perpetual social incoherence in their creative works. Thus, their work deals urgently with contemporary social issues in Nigeria and with the aim of raising mass awareness of positive revolutionary alternative to armed robbery, student's rampage, class struggle, corruption, fierce anti-capitalism and feminist concerns.

These playwrights, through their obviously different approaches, sensitize the populace for social change through the collective will of the masses.

Consequently, the quest of writers in an African setting is succinctly put in Sofola's inaugural lecture (1995). According to her, the artist creates to:

Head and restore the life of the sick and battered humanity. Create a new vision for growth, renewal, regenerative and edification of man for a wholesome life and better community; mobilize a collective conscience for a particular desired objective. (5)

However, this paper is predicated on the functionality of collective effort. It takes exception to the view that art should be for entertainment only have we maintained that all arts must be an evaluation and criticism of society. As the theatre centre on the plight of man within his environment, writers cannot but take as their subject, such areas as history and leadership. And these are concerned with the way people have fared over time in the light of communal cohesion and overall well-being. Writers all over the world have used historical events as points of discourse in their creative works. It is through these historical facts that are fictionalized, that these writers achieve social vision. Their sole aim is to subject this very history to scrutiny, analysis and interpretation for the present generation.

The Relevance of Theatre in Leadership Crisis

The nature of theatre as a representation of life makes the thought content of a play considered a key facilitator of societal development. Hence, given the pedagogic and sometimes entertaining functions of drama, it is crucial to have within it an idea, experience, and world view that aims at communicating the pressing societal needs. This is what can be referred to as ‘thought’ for without ‘thought’ the playwright’s work is without form or void.

Therefore, the role of the playwright in leadership crisis can never be over emphasized. It draws an inevitable attention to the question of collectivism and social commitment in African literature. The fact remains that it is within these two frameworks that our topic derives its logical sense and clarity. It is imperative to note that any artistic expression that hinders the Playwright from being socially committed needs are not left unchallenged.

However, to some scholars, the question has been whether art is simply to entertain or whether it should combine the pedagogical function; organize, incite and influence? Thus, the answer is equivocal, as our discussion of the views of other writers will show. Bearing this in mind, the conscientization of the spectators is not done at the expense of entertainment alone. In fact, Akorede (1993) in the Aesthetics of Committed Theatre says that:

From primitive times onwards, theater has tried to influence reality to shape it closer to its own desires. Drama has been continuously propaganda against the enemy. Greek Drama inculcated the principal of religion as did the Chinese and Japanese and the liturgical plays of the Middle Ages and Europe. The European Theater glorified the points of view of the aristocracy. The Roman theatre spread the doctrine of the greatest of every individual soul. The naturalist theatre was an address of social reform. (54)

The above assertion is based on the role of Theatre in Leadership Crisis. This is because most people still perceive theatre is a frivolous activity, and a tool for mere entertainment. In this wise, Tracie Utoh (1998) posits that:

The impact of drama is direct and more immediate than other forms of artistic expression. The immediacy and concreteness of drama qualifies it as an instrument for inculcating social and political values and as a means of indicting and correcting social ills such as acts of lawlessness, political thuggery, corruption, sectarian violence and other social malaise of the present Nigerian society. (25)

But it is very sad to note that some artists neglect their immediate society. Thus, the outright negligence of the writers' commitment towards reviving African theatre and achieving an egalitarian African society void of acrimonious leadership. However, on the traditional African theatre, Nzewi (1968) observed that: 'Entertainment was used as a means but not totally accepted as the end product itself. (60). From the messages of their plays Wa Thong'o (1981) reiterates that:

Literature as a process of thinking in images utilizes language and draws upon the collective experience- history-embodied in the language. In writing one should hear all the whispering and the shouting and crying and the loving and hating of the many voices in the past and those voices will never speak to a writer in foreign language. (60)

On the other hand, Osofisan (1995) as a writer had once made it clear that literature can entertain; in fact, it must entertain but it is only the brain-washed artist who is content merely to entertain' (5). Thus, the primary virtue of theatre to me seems to lie in its subversive potential that explosive charge hidden behind the fade of entertainment and which must be tapped, controlled and made to explode for the use of our people and mankind.

Kole Omotoso, like his friend Osofisan is committed in his social vision to socialist ideology and the use of the theatre to express this ideology. He also expresses his commitment to socialism and the condemnation of bourgeoisie existence during mass abjection, hunger and squalor. Omotoso (1977) discloses the Marxist leanings of his creative vision in an interview:

My basic commitment is to writings as a way of life, and also a specific socialist ideology... one of my aims is to be able to awaken the consciousness of those who have been able to make it, to the realization that we can only enjoy what we have made if those who have not made it enjoy being what they are. (25)

But it could be noted that the concept of "art-for-art's-sake" has blindfolded the minds of our artists over their responsibilities to their immediate society. On that note, Dan Izevbaye (1979), a critic commented over the existence of this school of writing in Africa literature. To him.

Many English-speaking African writers accept the notion that African art is functional and on that therefore, the concept of art-for-art's-sake should not be allowed to take root in African critical thought. (28)

On the contrary, John Nagenda (1969), who holds an extremist view of the artist in society is a classic example of this school. Nagenda completely abhors the artist of any social duties

whatever and even quarantines him from the mass of society. However, his lengthy speech is worth quoting.

I want to suggest that dealing with the individual in society is the primary consideration, as far as I am concerned, my part in society is not necessarily to make society better than I found it... And anything, whether it be to stop other people being short or whether it be something less than that, anything that stands in the way of myself having this experience of what is around me I consider to be a buffer between myself and the spontaneous enjoyment of life. (54)

Thus, in the socio-political and economic issues of the present African situation, Achebe (1981) opines 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 the absurd man in the proverb, who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (54)

Theatre should be a place where day-do-day life is transmitted into art, and this art (drama) should relate to the realities and forces militating against societal development. Also, for theatre to appeal to the masses, it has to do away with obscurity. And for a theatre to be a functional one; it must have sense of urgency and immediacy to leadership crisis. The type of theatre in which one can relate to and take something out of. Therefore, the criterion that this paper adopts is that which identifies a dialectical relationship between theatre and leadership crisis and relate artistic concepts to the realization of an egalitarian society that is void of any acrimonious class of brouhaha. Here the artist, as a product of a given society must first identify himself with the realities of his society before he strives for universality.

In an Interview, Sowande cited Olu Obafemi (2001) agrees on the need for a functional theatre in Nigeria and for playwrights to write and produce an obscure play is a dishonest thing to do:

Now, I agree entirely that our society must have a theatre that is functional, almost in a pedestrian sense, that you can clearly understand...The urgency of the need for a functional theatre is so great that a heavily loaded philosophical stuff is a cheat on society...Clearly, let the people understand what you give them because their understanding is a way of improving the social lot. (171)

These Nigerian writers of the oppressed people's politics filled the yawning gap for a combative theatre that could confront the challenges of leadership and of course the ruling class

bravely; and unmask their knaveries and collaborative stance with the capitalists, particularly in their dealings with the ruled. Being African creative writers, they responded with their creative works to varying degrees of issues as they concerned the Nigerian people. In this light Osofisan's- once upon four Robbers and Omotoso's-The Curse give relevant interpretation to the mass desire for positive action to change and transformation, going by the dramatic world of these plays. They succeed in varying degrees to make their plays socially relevant as well as aesthetically valid as their plays expose.

Discussion of the Paradigms

Femi-Osofisan's – Once Upon Four Robbers

The compelling military rule in some parts of Africa had an impact on the writers of this period. It gave rise to a lot of plays that condemned military rule in its entirety. As stated by Akinwale (1993), the generation of writers in this period.

...condemned policies that were obnoxious to the people and praised those policies that were popular with the people. (12)

During this period, there were sporadic incidents of victimization. In fact, this era was characterized by absolute dictatorship, killing of perceived opponents, embezzlement of public funds, profligate looting of the treasury, etc. In fact, as Osofisan (1995) in an interview puts it:

But history has trapped us; and not only by the force of tradition. Also by the kind of government we have been sadden with since independence by the treachery and the colonial powers and continued to hold our people under siege, by the crying needs of the suffering majority of the populace, our theatre is condemned to be political and by that very fact of its political involvement to be subversive of the current entrenched interest. (5)

It is therefore based on the moral, political and economical decadence and of love over social divisions inherent in our present Nigeria that these playwrights in these plays are crying out. For instance, in Osofisan's Once Upon Four Robbers (1970), he states clearly that the greed of our political leaders, especially the looting spree of the soldiers who were then at the helm of affairs of this country, will do nothing else but manufacture more robbers for society. He, however, confronts contemporary reality in 'Once Upon Four Robbers', which is a metaphorical treatment of the phenomenon of armed robbery.

Osofisan (1988) asserts in Once Upon Four Robbers that:

The root causes of armed robbery and other social ills are structural problems that should not be tackled by only legal means. Robbery like poverty, unemployment, inequality and immorality, are products of social (multiplying) maladjustments. Therefore, no amount of public execution will check it. (226)

Also, in the same vein, Odun Balogun (1988) wonders whether a corrupt, immoral, materialist stage has the right to take the life of a citizen who carries the ethics of corrupt, immoral materialism to the logical conclusion of armed robbery? (226). Thus, Osofisan regards the armed robber – Alhaji, Hassan, Angola and Major – as products of an unjust social system. In fact, the social vision of this play can best be understood in the context of Marxist theory (1974) as set out in Marx's preface to the critique of political economy regarding the economic base and superstructures in society, social relations and consciousness. It states that men enter into 'definite' relations according to the 'social production of their life'

The sum of these relations constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which raises a legal and political super structure, and to which corresponds definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and consciousness life process in general. (47)

In the program notes for the premiere of *Once Upon Four Robber*, Osofisan describes the robbers as a tiny part of the Nigerian masses who have been brutalized by social stratification. He attributes the violence of armed robbery to this social structure thus:

Take look at our salary structures, at our sprouting slums and ghettos, our congested hospitals and crowded schools, our impossible markets... and then take another look at the fast proliferations of motorcars, insurance agencies, supermarkets, chemist shops, boutiques, etc. The callous contradiction of our oil doomed fantasies of rapid modernization (P.1 no. 111).

In a Fanonist mode (Fanon 1967), Angola, one of the robbers in the play finds violence inevitable in a capitalist society where too many people ride cars along the sore-ridden backs of the poor (*Four Robbers*, P.21). The salient issue of armed robbery, a grave social malaise in the post civil war Nigeria, is the central theatrical metaphor in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. The enormity of this moral problem in contemporary Nigeria validates the claims of this playwright to social relevance in dealing with it. The armed robbers in this play are the remnants of a tightly organized

band whose coordinator's Corpse had just graced the beach when the play opened. And the most unfortunate thing is that the law hunts those involved without looking at the unjust social system that breeds them. However, the point of optimism in the play is that the economic structure of the country will change, thereby changing social relationships and consciousness as well as social mentality. Major one of the robbers anticipates this social revolution while tied to the stakes where he is going to be "legally slaughtered". He tells the Sergeant:

Yes. The day is beautiful. Your stomach proves it. but main is so fragile, so easy to kill. Especially if he robs and lies and if he wantonly breaks the law. Serge, today that law is on the side of those who have and are in abundance, who are fed and bulging, who have several concubines. But tomorrow, that law will smash the gates of the supermarkets, the homeless will no longer yield to the fear of your bulldozers. (Four Robbers P.60)

Also, men's social relationships are determined by the economic (material) position, and even genetic bonds is said to be accidental. This is because blood relationship no longer counts as a result of class stratification. Thus, this divided class comes out in discussion between Hassan the robber, and Sergeant his half-brother, who will order his killing. Here Sergeant is the hunting class, the wealthy and the powerful; Hassan on the other hand is the hunted class, poor and powerless.

Hassan: You know what's going on everywhere, what's happening to people like us, how can you remain unmoved?

Sergeant: Who said I'm unmoved? Enlisted, didn't I?

Hassan: From one bloodily corner to another, the world getting narrower, shrinking around us, to give a few more bastards more room to get fat.

Alhaji: Go on Hassan tell him.

Major: He enlisted. His stomach grows. As they fatten a sacrificial ram.

Sergeant: Quiet! I signed up for my life. I joined the victors.

Alhaji: So, keep running, beast of prey among the hunting dogs (Four Robbers. P.63)

In the play, we are invited into the conflict of man, that is, to see how man's social being and the way he organizes his material life conditions his thinking. On the other hand, the market woman who clamours at the end of the play for the execution of the armed robbers also belongs to the same class- 'the exploited.' In fact, the argument of the play clearly suggests that to change man's social behavior and attitude, precisely armed robbery, the whole body of politics must be changed. Towards the end of the play, a stalemate is produced enabling a democratic involvement of the audience in resolving the plot. Here, the audience is required to give a referendum having

heard the reasoning of the robbers- the oppressed, and the oppressor (Sergeant and his squad). Thus, reasoning evoked controversy rather than empathy, because the playwright does not merely document reality, but subverts it. The remote history of Oyo and the contemporary phenomena of armed robbery are both treated objectively in an unconventional way to shock the audience into awareness.

Kole Omotoso – The Curse

Omotoso like his friend Osofisan is committed in his social vision to the socialist ideology and the use of the theatre to express this ideology. The playwright's effective treatment on stage effects, sets, props and stage descriptions rather than dialogue to communicate his protest against materialism attests to the public enthusiasm for the first production of *The Curse of May and June* 1975 at Ibadan and University of Ife Theatre respectively.

On that note Femi Ilesanmi (1978) reviewing the play later advocates that the playwright should send copies of the published play to all African Heads of State. This reaction reveals the impact and the social relevance of Omotoso's drama in leadership crisis. (95)

Omotoso (1974) in an interview disclosed his dedication to the laying bare of social reality he embraces matters specific to the peasants: proletarian rather than bourgeois art:

You drive through the villages, and you see this distinction, you see these people whom nobody has ever given any representation of, nobody wants to talk about. Most writers have been concerned with the elite and the elite for me is very empty.... That is why there is this preoccupation with characters who are dejected and rejected and neglected. What makes a woman a prostitute, it is the society.

Omotoso and Osofisan share a commitment to a proper re-examination of society in a way that exposes the need for a revolutionary socialist answer to the problems of quality of the African life. Apart from sharing socialist and literacy Ideology, he also employs curses to deliver a strong political message. Omotoso ones opted for the scrapping of any African heritage that does not contribute to revolutionary change. He specifically calls for institutions of traditional rulers (Obaship, Obishop, and Emirship) to be abolished. This iconoclasm is like a later call for the demystification of deities and superstitions made by Osofisan.

Thus Omotoso (1974) decries any institution which emphasizes continuity rather than change.

Continuity demands change. Change is imperative in the African community today and most of the time the backlog of cultural bias

on side of the elite prevents, in fact sabotages, revolutionary change... The institution of Obaship, Obiship, Emirship and another equivalent do not deserve to exist except in the museum. (273)

However, Omotoso's vision in *The Curse* centers on the idea that no new society can be built in Nigeria unless there is social revolution which destroy completely the existing social structure. He believes that any change which is based on the present values on a capitalist perception will amount to an old wine in a new bottle. Omotoso exposes in the play the monstrosity and dehumanizing effect of the blind class after property and wealth as could be seen in the character of Chief Alagba, a wealthy man, who has lost touch with humanity and now worship wealth and property. He is selfish and distrustful to others and property is the bogey obstructing his vision with torture and oppression. Chief Alagba: Man's genius is best shown in his fabrication of the instruments of torture, punishment and murder. That is the link which clearest points to his self-preservative. (*The Curse*, P.10).

Omotoso's drama expresses the absurdity of the bourgeois system in Nigeria within which it is impossible to develop a proletarian culture. He further advocates that it is only revolutionary approach that can bring about this social transformation. In *The Curse*, he relies heavily on the creation of an absurd social atmosphere reflecting the mechanical and inhuman existence produced by a capitalist social system. Omotoso depends on stage descriptions rather than dialogue to communicate his protest materialism in society.

In this play, not only are the objects presented in a manner that reveals the playwright's disgust for canonization of property, but human beings are presented as robots, mere decors on stage to convey the absurdity of the social situation. The greater part of the play describes stage actions which the playwright uses more potently than dialogue. The author's message and attitude permeate the description of the vulgar lifestyle adopted by the main protagonist.

When the curtain finally opens, we see a flashily furnished sitting room is signified most eloquently by the gold-finish of almost all the furniture. The sitting room is also very highly mechanized, boasting a huge television set, as huge as the director can imagine (*The Curse*, PP.1-2).

Conclusion

On a final note, it has been observed that the artist, through the reality of his works, create plays which strive to maintain and sustain society of all times. And the kind of theatre created by

the artist should be seen as a catalyst of change and concretization. Thus, Ngugi and Micere (1976) echo the same thoughts:

Good theatre is that which is on the side of the people that, without making mistakes and weaknesses, give people courage and urge them to higher resolves in their struggles for total liberation.

However, the play treated in these papers shows that the two playwright's employment of a burgeoning creative theatrical energy, a weapon designated to make emphatic political statement aimed at prescribing a materialist alternative for effecting a change in society through a medium of theatre. Supporting this, Biodun Jeyifo (1981) concludes that:

Theatre practice must probe the historical cultural and ideological roots of the schism and seek to transcend it. (221)

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