

## SOCIO-POLITICAL INTERVENTION THROUGH LITERARY DRAMA IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS (2008-2018)

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### Abstract

Drama in Nigeria transcends its aesthetic and entertainment value to serve as a dynamic tool for social critique, political resistance, and civic education. Despite its transformative potential, drama remains largely undervalued by policymakers and society, resulting in a persistent gap between its possibilities and its practical application in fostering democratic values, social change, and national development. Within the period under review (2010–2018), Nigerian dramatists illuminated issues of corruption, inequality, and systemic oppression through stage and community theatre. Using a qualitative research approach that combines case study and content analysis methods, the study analyzes selected play texts to evaluate their thematic concerns and socio-political potency. Karl Marx's Classical Marxism and Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre theories provide the theoretical framework for interrogating how drama functions as a medium of protest, education, and empowerment. The study concludes that drama in Nigeria, though affected by censorship and limited access, remains a powerful tool for resistance, social critique, and civic transformation when properly supported. The study recommends the use of drama in sensitizing the populace.

**Keywords:** Socio-Political, Intervention, Literary, Drama, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Drama, as a dynamic form of artistic expression, transcends mere entertainment to become a potent tool for social commentary, political engagement, and collective transformation. Historically, it has served as a mirror to society, reflecting prevailing ideologies, challenging oppressive systems, and amplifying marginalized voices.

Drama and politics are deeply interwoven. Just as politics is inherently dramatic, drama often reflects political realities. Dramatists over the years, therefore, have made politics a crucial aspect of their dramatic work. Right from the earliest civilization, this symbiosis of drama and politics has long been recognized as indispensable. The happenings in the society motivate them in crafting works which aim at exposing such problems as well as proffer solutions aimed at reshaping the society. For example, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), exposes politicians who are pre-occupied with embezzling national funds and mocks polygamy with its attendant consequences, *Champagne to the High Table* (2024), uncovers societal greed, class conflict and marginalization. The play symbolically represents human greed through the actions of a female elder who alters her natural form, metaphorically "tampering" with divine creation (23), and *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), the problem of worthlessness. According to Eze:

The suicide squad is a child of depravity, a child of necessity, formed as a means of walking out of the terrain of neglect, poverty and futureless. The members of the squad do not merely want to exist; they want to live and living means having all the paraphernalia of living, namely, good jobs that can assist them to build their own houses, marry and therefore, bear children (34).

In Nigeria, drama was employed to fight against colonialism in the 1940s by the likes of Hubert Ogunde, such work gave their contribution to the fight of independence which was eventually actualized in 1960s. But even afterward, political issues did not fizzle away from the Nigerian domain and dramatists did not shade away from their responsibilities of commenting on them. Politics remains green in the work of the early Nigerian dramatists

like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, James Ene Henshaw to mention but a few. The second generation of Nigerian dramatists followed closely on the heels of their predecessors by commenting on political issues in a bid to navigate its course to a destination of sustainable growth and development of the country. These dramatists included the likes of Julie Okoh, Tessy Onwueme, Ahmed Yerima, Femi Osofisan and so on. The emergent dramatists were not left out in their course towards a reunified cultural state, though largely influenced by the residual playwrights; they produced dramatic oeuvres that call for cultural reawakening to salvage our rich indigenous cultural heritage that is gradually being abandoned. J.P Clark, James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola belong to this category.

Contemporary playwrights like Bode Sowande, Tess Onwueme, Esiaba Irobi, Femi Osofisan, Biodun Jeyifo, Olu Obafemi, Ahmed Yerima, Bakare Ojo Rasaki, Foubiri Barclays Ayakoroma, Emmanuel Emesealu, Emeka Nwabueze, Alex Asigbo, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Charles Nwadike, Uche Nwaozuzu, Victor Dugga, among others use their works to explore issues affecting our immediate society via emphasis on our humanistic tendencies and values to edify human kind, thereby situating our problems as self-caused and the solutions to them as self-solved. In this light, Ododo opines that:

Drama is an investigative immersion into the human psyche and environment to harvest and represent the human condition for crucial evaluation directed to edify the human soul. Essentially therefore, dramatist explores the existence of man and his place in the society. How he struggles to tackle his travails and challenges become concrete ingredients for etching out thematic concerns and teasing out corresponding dramatic actions (20).

The Nigerian political space is one that has been permeated by corruption and greediness right from the first republic after independence through military rule, it was so glaringly overwhelming that Soyinka was compelled to produce *A play of Giants* that criticizes and lambasts military dictators and African leaders who have been overfed with greed, ignorance, corruption and refuse to vacate political seats for another. There have been series of reported cases pertaining to the official misuse of the nation's resources for personal aggrandizement.

### Historical Overview of Nigerian Drama

Drama as an art form has been attributed to Greeks; however, it is worthy to note that every society whether primitive or civilized had drama if we go by definitions. Nigeria as one of the world's societies has her own drama which originated with Nigerian men and women embodying their preoccupations, struggles, successes, failures and their entire way of life. This origin captures the fact that theatre and drama are not separated from the dynamics of society. Thus the need to adapt to environmental challenges compelled man to evolve division of labour along lines of specialization of tasks such as strategic planning, food gathering war and celebration of victory over enemies and so on. These led to rites involving dances which enhanced the achievement of desires through auto suggestion induced by these rituals.

It is this process which some refer to as magic that aided the pre-historic Nigerian to exercise control over the natural forces that determined his existence. Regularity of these rites resulted in their becoming rituals. Later modifications led to changes as there was better understanding of certain mythical phenomena which now became isolated and acted out as drama. Thus Nigerian drama origins can be situated in the various traditional, religious and functional rituals found in virtually every Nigerian community.

However, the evolutionary transition from ritual to drama is difficult to ascertain. For example, Adediji's attempt at a historical development, through quite a milestone, does not fully elucidate the period of this transition. In his treatise, "Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Traveling Theatre", he opines that Sango as Alafin of Oyo in the 14th century brought about ancestral worship which became a festival by the 16th century in which lineage groups presented dances. According to him, the refinement of those entertainment aspects marked strictly for entertainment, resulted in the birth of the Yoruba traveling theatre by 1700. However, interaction with other cultures led to modification of style.

The origins of Nigerian drama are not different from Greek or European drama. In general, Aristotle in his *Poetics* traces the origin of Greek drama to communal celebration of Dionysus which gave place to formal acting. The plays of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus belong to formal and written tradition of drama.

Nigerian societies traditionally celebrated harvest and agricultural seasons with songs and danced for the accompaniment of drums and hours besides the command performance. There was also the tradition of storytelling. Most of the times, the story-teller chooses a story of a mythological character or a historical character whose life and adventure formed the basis of his narration. The story-teller played the role of a central character and the other characters as well. This, he was playing the twin roles of narrator and actor (78).

Unlike a modern play which is time bound and which is governed by classical rules of unities of time, place and action. The narrator lived the role he played, also made the audience identify with the character he represented and thus there was a close relationship between the actor and the audience (48)

### **Drama and Socio-Political Conditions in Nigeria**

The socio-political terrain of Nigeria is characterized by myriads of problems which have made the country unstable for a long period of time. The situation is described by Hagher who maintains that:

There are theatres of wars raging in Nigerian. There are religious wars between Muslims and Christians, Christians amongst themselves, Muslims amongst themselves. There is a war between the men who seek to liberate themselves. There is a war raging between the cattle nomads and sedentary farmers. There are political wars, which we euphemistically call elections, between the aspirants and political parties. There is a war between the indigenes and their perceived enemies- the settlers (210).

Hagher's side of waging wars provides a graphical picture of Nigeria's problems. He sums it up with the most compelling: corruption which he says has effectively colonized Nigeria, determine "the way we think and act, and occupies every aspect of our national life. We are happily and unhappily in the land of endemic corruption (209).

When in 1914, the Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard amalgamated the North and the South parts of Nigeria, little did he know that he was planting a seed whose tree though large will be shaken by boisterous winds of conflicts. The story today has confirmed this as the country experiences one conflict after another ranging from religious to ethnic, political and economic (28). The threats of secession have never stopped coming since the first ended in a civil war in 1967. The Kano riot of 1953 arising due to disagreement over independence advances, the census crisis of 1962/63 over suspected inflation of census figures in favour of the northern region, party and elections crises, and the civil war of 1967 to 1970 over the secession move of the south-eastern part of the country (42). These issues have outlived the country's ancestors as the shadows left behind include principally, a weak Nigerian structure and protracted conflicts of (common) identity.

Today, Nigeria's self-helplessness is more pronounced as civil strife grows by the day. Assessing the country's structure therefore, one will find a mix of nations: itself not a nation but a state. One may wonder why nationalists are rare in the country, and this is the impediment to its development. A common culture is the foundation for national integration and social cohesion, but where a country (like Nigeria) has such volatile ethnic groups as Ibo (or Igbo), Hausa and Yoruba with distinct cohesiveness, her legal entity is questioned in the midst of political and social conflicts (62). The nationhood that inculcates the spirit of unity and nationalism is one crucial element missing from the Nigerian environment.

Presently, Nigeria is battling the insurgency of Boko Haram which had hitherto seized communities, the problems of herdsmen attacks on farming communities are growing under the very nose of the federal Government and no concrete action has been taken by the appropriate authorities. This has created distrust in the minds of the middle Belters who see ethnic undertones in the sluggishness of the presidency on the matter hence the suspected rabble-rousers become the kinsmen. In the Southern part of Nigeria, Niger Delta Avengers are causing mass destruction because they feel they are not getting enough from petroleum which is the major economic issues for Nigerian. In conjunction with the Ibos who are agitating for sovereignty of Biafra. Nigeria is in a state of socio-political quagmires. A solution to all these problems lies on leadership and leadership culture. From the pre-independence era through to independence, post-independent era and the present dispensation, Nigerian has battled with the leadership problems (26).

The leadership style in Nigerian is also not encouraging. The electorates themselves are not helping matters as they are more concerned about their stomach than the integrity of the politicians, thereby electing people that are not fit to occupy the leadership offices they are voted into. The electoral processes through which these leaders emerge are corrupted while electoral malpractices enabled by the masses also aid and abate. The politics of god-fatherism is also another aspect of Nigerian political culture that limits the effective performance of Nigerian political leaders. These socio-political cankerworms bedeviling Nigeria has not passed unnoticed by Nigerian dramatists. These problems have been portrayed and solutions proffered in an attempt to nail them permanently. According to Ukuma and Bian:

It is imperative for drama to perform this function because; Drama cannot do without politics since humanity itself is political in nature just like politics cannot do without drama since politics itself is dramatic. Dramatists over the years have therefore sought to portray issues of politics in their works of art (13).

In the above assertions, politics is embedded in the themes of Nigerian dramatic works with examples as bound in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), It was a subtle metaphor projecting the future of the premature "gathering of the tribes" which actually came to pass with the Nigerian civil war. In Alex Asigbo's *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* (2008) which is under study here, the dramatist comments in the political imprecise and god-fatherism underneath the crime upsurge that permeated the Nigerian socio-political terrain of the 1993.

### **Socio-Political Challenges in Nigeria from 2008-2018**

Nigeria faced several socio-political challenges that shaped its governance, economy, and national stability from 2008-2018. These challenges are summarized thus: President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's prolonged

illness created a major constitutional crisis. His absence from office without officially transferring power led to uncertainty and political tension until Goodluck Jonathan became Acting President in 2010. The period exposed the fragility of Nigeria's democratic institutions and the over-dependence on individual leaders rather than the system. Nigeria continued to rank poorly on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

Public resources were mismanaged, and anti-corruption agencies like EFCC and ICPC were weakened by political interference. Despite promises of reform, the power supply crisis persisted. Billions were spent with little result, reflecting systemic corruption and inefficiency. Groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) intensified attacks on oil facilities, kidnappings, and pipeline vandalism to demand resource control and environmental justice. The government introduced the Presidential Amnesty Programme for militants, which temporarily reduced violence but did not fully address underlying socio-economic grievances. Around 2009, Boko Haram began its violent insurgency after the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, by security forces. This marked the beginning of a long-term national security threat.

Nigeria's economy was affected by declining oil prices and reduced foreign investment, leading to job losses and inflation. Despite being oil-rich, a large percentage of Nigerians lived below the poverty line. Youth unemployment and underemployment were particularly high. The public education sector faced strikes (notably by ASUU) and underfunding, while infrastructure remained poor.

The aftermath of the flawed 2007 elections continued to undermine public confidence in the electoral system. Political maneuvering and intra-party conflicts began, especially within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), as factions vied for power ahead of the next general elections. Recurrent religious and ethnic clashes in Jos, Plateau State, led to hundreds of deaths, exposing deep-seated divisions between Christian and Muslim communities. Tensions over indigene settler rights also grew in several northern and central states, fueling violence and displacement.

The electoral context in Nigeria has been reduced to the battle of the strongest and survival of the fittest. The state has more or less become a tool in the hands of the political elites and their cronies who use the instrumentality of power to attain sectional and particularistic interests and objectives. Elections in Nigeria have become a do or die affair as politicians adopt both covert and overt means to impose themselves on the vulnerable electorate. Ashiru, captured this when he noted that:

Apart from the violent nature of our electoral competition, the contestants for state power also try to undo or outdo one another using all shades of electoral malpractices such as recruiting the juvenile to vote, detaching ballot booklets, duplicating ballot papers, vandalizing voting materials, stuffing of ballot boxes, and outright intimidation of opponents as well as falsification of electoral results (101).

Political violence has persisted and has been changing dimensions in Nigeria due to the insatiable quest by Nigerian politicians and their supporters to win elections at all cost. Between these times, Nigeria struggled with leadership vacuum, corruption, insecurity, ethno-religious crises, and economic hardship, all of which tested the resilience of its democracy and social cohesion.

### **Synopsis of *The Reign of Pascal Amusu***

*Pascal Amusu* is a play that depicts the events that led to the transition from military to civil rule in Nigeria. The dramatist presents how corruption and godfatherism ravaged Nigeria's leadership. *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* dramatizes the "Flaws" of the Nigerian democratic institution which is the recycling of old, visionless and tired leaders by the already corrupt elite who see government and governance as their inheritance (35). The practice has been to simply change the garb and nomenclature, from military Head of State in uniform to President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He displays how selfish and self-interested the leaders are, and not the care about the welfare of the people. The dramatist portrays that those in high class share political positions among themselves and use military power, political power and godfatherism to influence election. The godfathers detect the way government should be run. They select themselves and whosoever they want to be the leader whether the people like it or not.

### **Agitation and Aggression as Strategies for Liberation and Emancipation from Socio-political, Culture and Religious Crises**

The issues of socio-political, cultural and religious crises have been of old in Nigeria. Even before the coming of colonial masters, socio-political, cultural and religious crises had existed in traditional societies in the country (Nigeria). The system becomes a common practice polarized as an instrumentality for administrative convenience in Nigeria from time of colonial administrations. Regrettably, the seed planted 111 years (1914-2025) ago has gradually grown into a monster that is becoming impossible to subdue. The root of this tragic development is the constitutional regionalism and the divide and rule policy of the Colonial Administration. The policy rather than unite the heterogeneous nation like Nigeria, promoted social, political, religious and cultural ideologies that encouraged ethnicity and regional biases. As a result, the freedom and emancipation of masses from the operation and marginalization has been the weapon of agitation and aggression. In the words of Lefebure, many



of the agitation and aggressive action in Nigeria today involve violence. Among the factors that are putting masses into agitation and aggressive behaviour for liberation, religious issue is the commonest. As stated by Thalif, agitation is the systematic use of terror, often violent especially as a means of coercion to achieve freedom.

Agitation involves protest or disrupts acts that are guarded toward change. Anderson, Craig, Bushman and Brad (32), defined aggression as an action or response by an individual that delivers something unpleasant to another person or intend to harm another person. The mechanisms of aggression are often motivated by emotions like fear, frustration, anger, feelings of stress, dominance or pleasure (proximate causes). From what Thalif said, it is observed that agitation and aggression acts are intended to create fear (terror) and are perpetrated for a religious, political or ideological goal and deliberately target to destroy properties and human lives.

Sony in *The Reign of Pascal Amusu* is an example of display of aggressiveness against socio-economic and political crises, suppression, marginalization and oppression on the masses. Filled with anger, he boldly criticizes the action of Amusu for fraud and rigging the election result. In a bid to amend the wrong deed, he appeals to the electoral tribunal. In the same vein, he boldly criticizes the policies of Amusu describing it as anti-people's policies. Hence, the excerpt:

**SONY:** What? But Your Excellency. This is unfair. (46).

**SONY:** How am I supposed to return the party at all cost and not use all means?

And if we must tell ourselves the truth, the party is no longer popular because of you.

**SONY:** Yes, Your Excellency! Thanks to you and your anti-people policies, our party has become an anathema. Was that Sony Aninta's making? (48).

According to Maremmani, Avella, Novi, Bacciardi and Maremmani aggression is defined as a behaviour aimed at opposing or attacking someone (171-173). It may occur either reactively or without provocation. In this, it is understood that aggression is done with the intent to cause positive change, it can be channeled into creative and practical outlets for someone, government or society. Aggression can be direct or indirect.

### **Synopsis of *No More the Taming Hawks***

The playwright dramatizes how the military over thrown the democratic government because of the desire for power. He presented this using the African total theatre tradition of ritual and storytelling narratives. He conveys his message(s) with passion to the nation. Painted on the canvas of the metaphor of flights to depict Nigeria with believes that as a nation, we had a takeoff moment in history. The over taken of power as portrayed in the play likened to the military take-over of power, especially the January 15, 1966 coup led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, in the name of redeeming the image of the nation; since, for him and his team, the nation had been run aground. Just to wake up and discover that the military intervention was only but a worse narrative. In describing the spine of incidents in the play, the playwright whets the reader's appetite thus, on the blurb of the attractive 79-page book, divided into ten parts: the Take off Flights one to Eight and the Landing.

In the present, the King Dove dies... The throne becomes vacant. A dove returns from the defense academy, only to usurp the throne of his childhood friends. He suspends the customs and traditions, disbands the Council of Elders, transforms himself into His Hawk Excellency, the Commander-in chief of the Hawks Forces.

### **Characterization of Corruption, Selfishness and Greediness in *No More the Taming Hawks***

Corruption is a cankerworm that has permeated into the fabrics of African societies. It is a cancerous global phenomenon, which has continued to cripple the developmental efforts of Nigeria. Corruption in Nigeria manifests in the form of misappropriation, bribery, embezzlement, tribalism, nepotism, money laundering, outright looting of the treasuring, and so on. In Nigeria, most of the elected and appointive public office holders and top bureaucrats use their position of authority to actively engage in corrupt practices (Obuah, 32). The siteresources.worldbank.org, defined corruption as a criminal offense undertaken by an individual and organization entrusted with authority for the purse acquiring illicit gain and such active involve influence peddling, bribery, and embezzlement (46). Morris sees corruption as the abuse of illegitimate power to enrich private interest (9). From these definitions it is well explained that any activity involving dishonesty, improper, deviant, criminal unethical behaviour displayed by people in the cause of carrying out their official duties or business transaction is corruption.

Asagbade is a victim of corruption in "*No More the Taming Hawks*". Corruption manifested in the life of the character after the overthrow of regency and legacy of Rohunfade. He becomes drunken by power; his tyrannical policies and selfish tendencies withhold the democratic dividends that should be delivered to the people. Hence, the following conversations;

**KOFO:** The lesser hawks came into the market today, Lasi, and destroyed all our sheds. They said are the task force...yes. On the order of His Hawkcellency, they tore down everything. (41).

- LASI:** Task force? Is that how they want to preach their slogan of change and better life?
- KOFO:** Come and see as they seized goods upon goods, item after item, from the shed owners who could not pack in time...
- LASI:** Did you hear that? our markets are no longer ours. After fire incident, they still will not allow us to live in peace... (42).
- ASAGBADE:** A harvest of hurriedly completed, borrowed or painted projects lined up for our commissioning... We have even recently agreed to the clamour for a good governance tour, sequel to the initial media tour on democratic dividends. Yes, we gave them another promise at the anniversary. And we shall not stay a day longer than necessary (37).
- ASAGBADE:** We promised. We shall not stay a day longer than necessary! (39).
- SARINLE:** Your Hawkcellency? Your love of land wide debates before you took decisions.... Remember the foreign debts and other similar debts on structural adjustment. Now what is so much in respecting their wishes? How long will it take you to release money for all they want, or even release their friends and relatives languishing in detention? (64).
- ASAGBADE:** And what? After respecting their wishes, what follows? You think they will stop at seeing our backs, and not also see our heads bowed in shame? Do you want them to bring disgrace upon our dynasty and those of our children's children? No if that is why you have come, we are not ready to listen. We won't be disgraced... (64).

From the conversations, it is observed that selfishness runs in the blood of Asagbade. His selfish and greed tendencies coupled with his tyrant nature, give deaf ears to the demands of the masses to provide in infrastructural facilities for them. He decides to sit on people's demands, promising and procrastinating even when his council of ministers are advising him to release money for provision of infrastructures to the people. He withholds the demand and embezzles all the money that is supposed to be allocated for infrastructural facilities provision and among others. From the excerpt, withholding of democratic dividends, embezzlement of funds and selfish practices and greediness by Asagbade, are the instruments of corruption which are common in Nigerian leaders.

### Conclusion

The analysis of case studies has demonstrated that drama in Nigeria goes beyond its aesthetic and entertainment value to function as a potent socio-political agent. It reflects societal conditions, critiques political corruption and misrule, educates the populace, and mobilizes communities toward collective action. The works of Nigerian playwrights have consistently revealed how drama can challenge authoritarianism, expose injustice, and stimulate dialogue on governance, democracy, and nation-building.

### Recommendations

Based on the above conclusion, the study makes the following recommendations:  
Schools and tertiary institutions should integrate socio-political drama(s) into their curricula to raise political consciousness among students. Grassroots-oriented theatre should be encouraged as an effective way to reach rural communities in their indigenous languages and cultural contexts.

Playwrights, NGOs, and civic organizations should be in partnership to use drama as a tool for advocacy on human rights, gender equality, electoral integrity, and anti-corruption campaigns. Media platforms (radio, TV, film, and social media) should be used to adapt stage plays for wider reach.

Ministries of Culture and Education should provide grants, organize festivals, and reward relevant plays to encourage dramatists. Policies should be put in place to protect artistic freedom and prevent censorship or persecution of critical playwrights. Workshops and training should be provided to empower dramatists to responsibly handle sensitive socio-political themes.

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The origin of theatre and drama is the focus of the book *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, edited by Yemi Ogunbiyi (1981). This origin captures the fact that theatre and drama are not separated from the dynamics of society. Thus the need to adapt to environmental challenges compelled man to evolve division of labour along lines of specialization of tasks such as strategic planning, food gathering war and celebration of victory over enemies and so on. These led to rites involving dances which enhanced the achievement of desires through auto suggestion induced by these rituals. It is this process which some refer to as magic that aided the pre-historic Nigerian to exercise control over the natural forces that determined his existence. Regularity of these rites resulted in their becoming rituals. Later modifications led to changes as there was better understanding of certain mythical phenomena which now became isolated and acted out as drama. Thus Nigerian drama origins can be situated in the various traditional, religious and functional rituals found in virtually every Nigerian community.

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