

## **A MORALIST DISCOURSE IN NIGERIAN DRAMA AND THEATRE: A CRITIQUE OF OGUNLEYE'S *JABULILE***

**Awuawuer Tijime Justin**  
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

### ***Abstract***

*All the socio-political vices that are actually affecting the development of Nigerian society could be attributed to lack of ethics and morality. In fact corruption, Advanced Free Fraud (419), prostitution, pedophile, robbery, political crises, insurgence and civil unrest, and many more of these are the vices in question. Unless these issues are positively addressed, Nigeria will remain unbearable and hostile for the citizens. To this effect therefore, it becomes a challenge to some of the avant-garde Nigerian playwrights and dramatists to question this ugly experience with the aim of reforming the society morally, using the medieval model of dramatization that was characterized with moral lessons. Paradigmatically, this paper uses Ogunleye's *Jabulile* as a template for critiquing the Nigerian avant-garde dramatists who are morally committed to the economic and socio-political growth of the nation without actually using any ideological insinuations and persuasions.*

### **Introduction**

The unfolding issues within Nigerian have remained a careful evaluation and a critical interrogation of the Nigerian Drama and theatre for the purpose of heralding the moral virtues

and at the same attacking the vices prevalent in the Nigerian society for a general social transformation. The fact thus remains that drama has been widely acclaimed as a positive medium for reflection and mediation of the society, there by upholding the saying that ‘drama is a presentation and representation of life’. So, while drama entertains it also teaches and informs.

This powerful attribute of drama has been used by playwrights over the ages to make constructive commentaries on the happenings in society and thus affect some positive changes in man and his environment. It is therefore remarkable that traditions of literary and theatrical activities in Nigeria have continued to gain momentum in the Nigerian society. This is not surprising because the people understand the truly functional impact of drama and theatre in their lives. This is because, in using drama as a tool for social commentary, the artist is making an “objective evaluation, exposition or the critical assessment of the socio-political conditions in society.” (Ebo 108). Hence, the dramatist is a social commentator and a critic: art, indeed, remains an effective means of representing reality because it has unarguably become instrumental in comprehending and interpreting aspects of society – its inherent dialectics – its realities. “Drama, therefore, as the most social of art forms invariably predisposes the dramatist/artist as invaluable in the solemn task of mirroring these realities” (Chukwu-Okoronkwo 1).

Considering the above insinuations within the context of the functional nature of drama, it may therefore be appropriate to do a reading of the contemporary Nigerian drama from the purview of a Moralistic and Sociological strands. Maxwell Adereth asserts that “literature (Nigerian drama) does more than mirroring the society; it actively intervenes in order to change the society”(cited in Ibrahim B.F. and Akande F.F22). This means that any work of

arts(drama) should always conform to some given social realities; hence the socio-moralist approach remains the most plausible option for the evaluation of Nigerian drama which is a depiction of the existential Nigerian realities. This kind of approach will help readers to discover: the conceptual basis of morality; to discover how moral values are sanctioned, that is, how society maintained the moral system; to also determine whether there is any connection between religious beliefs and morality; and to examine the extent to which the younger generation can understand and subscribe to the moral values.

Thus, the point of take off and focus of this paper will be to identify and analyze the indices of Nigerian drama using an eclectic persuasion of the moral-sociological approach vis-à-vis the textual analysis of Ogunleye's *Jabulile*. Thereby, highlighting and discussing in details the moral discourses obvious in Nigerian drama that is capable of positively transforming the social complexities to a more simple social order which is considered popular and acceptable by the society. It is also an attempt to a reorientation into understanding how these social complexities have exemplified the central contradictions of our current national historical situation.

### **Morality in drama and the contemporary Nigerian society**

Thorough study of the history of western drama and theatre shows that Morality plays during the middle Ages developed independently as moral tales in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century on the Continent and in England. They do not illustrate moments in the Bible, nor do they describe the life of Christ or the saints. Instead, they describe the lives of people facing the temptations of the world. The plays are careful to present a warning to the unwary that their souls are always in peril, that the

devil is on constant watch, and that people must behave properly if they are to be saved. One feature of morality plays is their reliance on allegory, a favorite medieval device. Allegory is the technique of giving abstract ideas or values a physical representation. In morality plays, abstractions such as goodness became characters in the drama. In modern times we sometimes use allegory in art, as when we represent justice as a blindfolded woman. Allegorically, justice should act impartially because she does not "see" any distinctions, such as those of rank or privilege, that characterize most people standing before a judge.

The use of allegory permitted medieval dramatists to personify abstract values such as sloth, greed, daintiness, vanity, strength, and hope by making them characters and placing them onstage in action. The dramatist specified symbols, clothing, and gestures appropriate to these abstract figures, thus helping the audience recognize the ideas the characters represented. The use of allegory was an extremely durable technique that was already established in medieval painting, printed books, and books of emblems, in which, for example, sloth would be shown as a man reclining lazily on a bed or greed would be represented as overwhelmingly fat and vanity as a figure completely absorbed in a mirror.

The central problem in the morality play was the salvation of human beings, represented by an individual's struggle to avoid sin and damnation and achieve salvation in the otherworld. As in *Everyman* (c. 1495), a late-medieval play that is the best known of the morality plays, the subjects were usually abstract battles between certain vices and specific virtues for the possession of the human soul, a theme that can also be found in the Elizabethan age in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In many ways the morality play was a dramatized sermon designed to teach a moral lesson. Marked by

high seriousness, it was nevertheless entertaining. Using allegory to represent abstract qualities allowed the didactic playwrights. According to Edward Wright, the whole question of morality is as involved as human nature itself but the basis for determining morality in the theatre should be one of honest and objective analysis (43). This reasoning is obvious in Ogunleye's dramaturge because of her insight into the lives of her characters and pictures them in their real self. Her philosophy about drama is that it should be capable of preaching for morality and positive social transformation. This stand point is closely linked to Luis Vargas that

The strongly religious ancestry of the theatre is a factor... of greater importance than is generally realized... the poet who wrote the plays, the actors, singers and officials connected with the productions were looked upon as ministers of religion and as such sacred and inviolate..." The festival of the City Dionysia in Athens, Greece, was religious and had "considerable bearing on the character and temper of the classical Greek drama(13-27).

This could be the reason why priests were given places of honour in the theatre. For instance, the priest of Dionysus had a central seat. This was because drama is a potent instrument of socialization and morality. Apart from this, drama is an instrument of thought, a cognitive process, a form of philosophizing in concrete terms. Drama is also an experimental laboratory for the testing of human behavior in given situations (Esslin 20-21). According to Ruth Saw, Aristotle thinks that "we need to be purged of pity and fear because human beings left alone tend to feel these emotions to excess and become less efficient in their daily lives and the effect of drama is of calming and tranquillizing

the citizens so that after the excitement of a tragic performance, they will go home quietly and take up their civic duties again (88-9). In the same direction, Barrault sees theatre as an activity that is “useful to the public, since it purifies and revitalizes human beings” and “reassures them against anxiety and against solitude” (25-6). This is to say that, drama is not a goal in itself but a means to an end which is to influence life by the dramatist/theatrical means.

Thus, the thrust of this paper therefore is to show that drama/theatre goes beyond entertainment, despite the mounting crises that have made some grow afraid of new ideas, preferring to concentrate on craftsmanship and imagination, unrelated to ideas. In rejecting this negation of ideas in theatre practice because they do not necessarily create artists but artists of real size must have new ideas out of which to create. Drama in this discourse, the intention is not to imply that other art forms are not relevant to the humanity; all of them are relevant and have unique effects. Thus, according to Irwin Edman, one of the chief functions of all artists is to render experience arresting by giving it life. The three main functions of art are intensification, clarification and interpretation of experience, and drama and fiction “clarify and deepen for us emotional incidents of familiar human situations”, and make ideas “intimate and alive” (26).

Drama is known for its utilitarian functions by sociologically presenting on stage ‘truth to life/slice life’ for the interpretation by the audience for social change and natural justice in the society. This means that the role of drama to humanity is encompassing as it treats simple and complex issues concerning people as they live in an absurd society, at the same time creating a forum for a rethink and reassessment of the individual self as he

operates in the society. This is the reason why Biodun Jeyifo asserts that

...drama deals at a highly concentrated... intense level with the contradictions of social existence. A dramatic piece which does not, in one form or another, deploy as its organizing structural criteria, a physical or emotional conflict, a moral or spiritual contest of wills, a confrontation between contending principles, is almost inconceivable. Equally important is the fact that drama does not merely subsume conflict merely as its organizing structural motif, beyond this; drama also axiomatically attempts a resolution of sorts, a provisional synthesis in the conflicting pulls within constitutive action...(cited in Ogunleye 9).

This is to say that every piece of drama is worked out within a specific social framework. Therefore the social framework of a dramatic production varies according to the main issues, the ways of interpreting them, the different dramatic styles and traditions and epoch. These variations can be interrogated and juxtaposed with their actual social frameworks and with the transformations they undergo over time. I believe there is some undeniable correspondence and even interpenetration (and occasionally some contradiction) between the two frameworks, even though they always remain distinct. But these conflicts between the dramatic framework and the real social framework are of great sociological interest in the creation of a drama piece.

This goes that sociology of the play text would correspond to the functional relationship between the content (as well as style) of the play and the actual social system, particularly structural forms and social crises. Here the sociology of the text would enter

into the general domain of what can be called the sociology of drama; it would become sociology of knowledge as applied to theatrical performance. Clearly, there are interesting statements which could be made about the relationship between one type of society and the content of the drama.

More to be considered is the reason that drama is another way to show and teach about human behavior because it actively addresses, analyzes and presents the wider psychological, social and ethical conditions of humanity and, thus serves as a potent vehicle for actually helping people with problems confronting them. This reason is anchored on the fact that generally, playwrights just like any artiste is considered to be a redeemer of the society, a preacher, teacher, politician, and as well as a moralist. Therefore, his work is to make sure that the citizenry is put to corrections for a just and egalitarian society devoid of despair and acrimony. To this end, the transformative tendencies of any society via the avenue of drama chiefly lies in the adoption of the moral sociological literary approach to the issues of that given society, as saliently exposed by the artist who is the umpire in the struggle for a veritable society.

In Nigeria for example, playwrights have been facing the challenge of mirroring, reflecting and mediating the socio-political actualities in the society right from the emergence of literary and dramatic traditions. Many playwrights who fall within this realm of the “new voices” in Nigerian drama span across Nigerian universities and are gaining serious recognition in scholarship just like the older classics. These playwrights are experimenting through various themes. Hence this tradition has come to stay in Nigeria so far as these playwrights are endowed and renowned senior lecturers or professors in the Nigerian universities whose

works are as models for students and possibly those specializing in play writing, acting or dramatic criticism.

***Jabulile: Contextual Analysis and the Moralistic Perspective***

I was seriously misrepresenting Ogunyele as a critical feminist as I first encountered her paper presentation during the 2012 World Theatre Day celebrated by the Department of Dramatic Art, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in March. The paper was a discourse about ‘women in Nigerian theatre’. The paper was structured around the context of critical feminism which aroused many arguments. It was because of this presentation that spurred my interest in her dramaturgy.

When I began reading her plays I saw a different approach from the feminist purview to a moralistic angle of reasoning. Having examined the moralistic approach in these plays, I then conclude that to her, drama should be instrumental to the moral transformation of the society. No wonder, her Inaugural lecture entitled; “Thespian and Ceneastes as Engineers of the Nigerian Soul” sees drama as a tool for social change that questions morality and deals with the issue of individuals versus society (Ogunleye 9). This makes one believe in her dramaturgy, where all the characters are presented as normal social individuals struggling to live in a complex society.

*Jabulile* narrates a story of an innocent and careful girl who is morally rich but at same facing hard times without fault of hers. Indeed, the story of the play revolves around this girl, Jabulile who is an orphan; her parents’ death and subsequently her death as a result of HIV/AIDS which is not her making. Just like Jesus in the Holy Bible, Jabulile whose name means Joy (Ogunleye, Preface to *Jabulile* vii) suffers and dies because of her humility and kindness. The joy which her name connotes does not apply in her life time. Sorrow and hate are found to be following her from the exposition

of the play to end. The play as a moral play portrays two symbolic characters; Jabulile representing virtue while Dudu for wickedness. Jabulile first in the play is exposed to hatred as she warmly welcomes her aunty, Dudu as can be seen in their interaction below:

JABULILE: Oh, Aunty Dudu, it's so nice see you. I thought we wouldn't have an opportunity to see before leaving. What of my cousins? Did you bring them?

DUDU: (brushing her aside). Stop shouting in my ears, I wonder why you are so manner less. Is that the way to welcome somebody of my age? Scallywag.

JABULILE: I am very sorry Aunty.

DUDU: Shut up. (P. 6).

This encounter between Jabulile and her aunt is morally wrong. If we are to continue, Dudu does not see anything good in Jabulile. However, all these rudeness from Dudu we still see Jabulile apologizing. Thus, the character of Dudu is a symbol of sadism and evil, while Jabulile stands as an icon of decency and orderliness. In the play, Ogunleye assumes the role of a preacher, where he makes Jabulile a scapegoat. This is simply because Dudu does not hate Jabulile as a person but rather an extension of the hatred which she had for Sindie, Jabulile's mother because of her progress. The arrangement of the conflict and crisis in the play is natural and realistic as far as the present society is concerned.

In their first encounter, Dudu in her usual character is found expressing anger and cold-heartedness over Sindie's status.

DUDU: No no no no. Speak for yourself alone. You can say God has been good to you. You are a nurse; you are married to a well-educated man, a teacher and the most handsome, man

in this village for that matter. Even while in this village, you have been earning a lot of money (p 6).

What a character Dudu is. This statement makes her a jealous woman, envying her blood sister. This is one of the things we keep on witnessing daily in the society; envy, hatred, backstabbing, and many more of these.

In her character, we see Dudu scolding Jabulile as Jabulile is emotionally weeping for the death of her parents that died in a motor accident while trying to relocate to a new place. Instead of consoling Jabulile, Dudu is rather provoking her emotions.

DUDU: You are just wasting your time. Your tears cannot move me an inch. And let me tell you, you cannot kill me the way you used your witchcraft to kill Siphon and Sindie. It was their stupidity that enabled you to harm them. I told them to beware of you and your witchcraft, but they said my mouth was smelling (23).

Before this time we saw Dudu's attitude towards the death of Jabulile's parents. Her concern is to claim what rightly belongs to Jabulile.

DUDU: (Jumps up). There is absolutely no cause for discussion. I am the obvious person to take over all the property and their sweet daughter, Jabulile (22)

Her interest is not Jabulile but the property. That is the reason why she, by the end of the family meeting withdraws his interest in claiming the poor orphan, Jabulile, as she discovers that there is

nothing to claim as property reasoning from Maduna's clarification.

MADUNA: Unfortunately, you seem to have got your facts wrong. The house belongs to the mission that owns the school where Siphon taught for many years. They have kindly allowed us to carry out all the obsequies for our dear departed before they take over for the teacher replacing Siphon.

DUDU: In that case, it will be too much of a burden for me to take care of Jabulile. You know I am a poor woman (23).

Dudu's attitudes represent what people do in the society. They are not prepared to assist anybody. They are self-centered and egocentric such that they are corrupt even within their families. Ogunleye as a product of this corrupt society finds it expedient to put it open to her million readers the wicked nature of mankind. Even the way Dudu apprehends Jabulile on the issue money that her parents might have left is unquestionable. It would have been natural if Dudu is found sympathizing with the condition of Jabulile, on the contrary, Dudu is adding more pains Jabulile's emotional injuries. This can be affirmed in Dudu's words to Jabulile.

Dudu: [viciously]. Put the dam cup down and resume your kneeling position. You want to take all the money that my sister sweated for all her life, without any help from that never do well husband of hers,

you want to take the money and go to your gutter and spend it with your gutter people? (26).

Ogunleye as a moralist, in *Jabulile* trying to question the unethical issues abound and at same time glorify morality in the society through a juxtaposition of the characterizations of Dudu and Jabulile. While Dudu represents viciousness, Jabulile stands for virtue. What is worth understanding here is the nature and characterization of Jabulile who throughout the play we see as model to the young girls in her community and an icon of morality. This can be affirmed in her dialogue with Mamba.

MAMBA: Jabulile, I want to congratulate you on a job well done at his centre.

JABULILE: Thank you Babe. All the glory must go to God. We would not have been able to do much without him.

MAMBA: It has been a miracle for my daughter Zandile to be able to settle down and face something serious in life. Ever since she had to stop schooling due to my poverty, she had almost become a prostitute in the village before you came with the idea of this vocational centre.

JABULILE: I am glad to know the centre is yielding some fruits, Zandile is one of the most dedicated girls here, and she is so talented too.

MAMBA: Hmm. I want you to know that we the elders in this village really appreciate what you are doing here, and we are determined to give you all the support that we can.

The above dialogue is complementary of Jabulile's character. In this conversation, we can deduce that Jabulile is a reasonable and industrious. Jabulile, with all the adversities, she does not involve herself in anything that will destroy her reputation. She remains steadfast and committed to morality. I then question why Ogunleye has decided to make Jabulile fall victim of her tragic end. She is raped just because she wants to please her cousin, Phindile, and with this singular act she is infected with HIV/AIDS which at end leads to her death.

### **Conclusion**

This point of Jabulile's characterization is questionable such that one may ask, is it true that the reward of morality and chastity is death? No, what I realized from the Jabulile is more of a moral lesson to the people especially the teeming youth who are vulnerable to some of the social ills in the society. Considering Ogunleye's dramaturgy, it is therefore expedient to consider morality as one of the social indices that can be interrogated in the contemporary Nigerian drama. A society that is morally bankrupt is bound to be doomed. Thus, a critical reading of *Jabilile* will definitely push one to comprehend the play as a morality play that is an externalized dramatization of a psychological and spiritual conflict: that battle between the forces of good and evil in the human soul. It is this interior struggle that involves the Christian's attempt to achieve salvation, despite the obstacles and temptations that he encounters as he travels through life, toward death.

This paper sees drama working at the very foundations of the formation of consciousness. In doing so, it exceeds and overturns ideology by revealing all of its contradictions and showing where, in our own lives, those contradictions operate. The

human psyche in conflict with itself, struggling to untangle itself from the chains that bind it to ways of being that poison interpersonal, familial existence—it is here that ideology reveals its claws and the tragic suffering entailed in the effort to get free of it. In representing this struggle, moreover, drama submits an audience to a process that awakens them to a psychological and existential experience of all that they don't want to face about themselves and their world. In doing so, drama is creating nothing less than the possibility of a revolution in thought and a transformation of the very terms of perception and feeling.

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