

NIGERIAN DRAMA IN PERFORMANCE AS A PANACEA FOR NATION BUILDING: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The quantum of social problems that have bedeviled the Nigerian nation is alarming. This ugly scenario poses challenges to all human disciplines. Over the years, artists, playwrights, directors and others have engaged themselves on the crusade of Nation building. It is against this backdrop that this paper has tried to look at some of these social problems through critical analyses of select Nigerian drama. In these dramatic works, prevailing social problems, such as gender marginalization, racial prejudice, political impunities, corruption and class prejudices are dramatized to show their effects on the society. Examples derived from these plays are expected to be adopted to ameliorate current social challenges facing the Nigerian nation. This paper adopts content analyses as a methodology. The research concludes and recommends that Nigerian playwrights and dramatists should continue with the trend of exposing the nations many societal ills for purposes of social criticism and nation building.

Introduction

Nigerian playwrights and dramatists have used their works to show between the decay of a state and the betrayal of public trust by those who pretend to be the cultural leaders of the people. A critical look at the different generations of playwrights shows that the intent of the dramatists has been to help in the reshaping of society. Folorunsho submits that: "Thus

drama mirrors life and by this means it has to do with life. With man and society, drama is the enactment of life or mirror of life in a society. It is the enactment of the cultural traits of the society that presents it” (99). Maybe that is the reason why disparity cannot be located between drama and the society till date as Folorunsho argues that: “Thus it is hard to separate drama from society. The source of drama of a society is obtained from the society, it functions to entertain, instruct and warn the society. It records the cultural traits of the society that has it. (99) In conjunction with Folorunsho, Lanre Bamidele opines that:

Literature in its aesthetic form creates a fictional universe where there is a possible verification of reality at the experiential level of man living in society. It could be stated that imaginative literature is a re-construction of the world seen from a particular point of view which we may refer to as the abstract idealism of the author or the hero. (4)

Literature generally is seen as the reality of the world we lived in today. Literature therefore encompasses all the genres in this perspective; drama, prose and poem are all the components of literature. Moreover, it also goes to cover most of the traditional festival in our localities as some of them depict the life of legends and myths of the aboriginal people in any society. It is therefore quiet difficult for one to separate drama from the society, just as one cannot separate mother from her child. Any attempt to separate them then the meaning of drama would be lost. Complimenting this, G.H Bantock quoted in Bamidele asserts that:

All novel and plays and fair amount of dramatic or narrative poetry may not be understood without their

enviroming context because they focus their attention on characters and incidents that bear close parallels to imitation of an action with the highest consciousness of the age in which they are written. (2)

Be it drama, prose or poem, they cannot be understood without understanding the environments that gave birth to them. Their roles in the society can never be underestimated. Any issue raised in them must have direct bearing on the society. This is aptly in line with the assertion of Bantock as quoted in Lanre Bamidele above. The position and contribution of drama in the development of the society is great. That is why arrays of theatre scholars like Bamidele, Biodun Jayifo ,Dandaura succinctly opined that theatre must be at the helm of affairs if the society must grow, because theatre has the potentials of helping the society to develop. Dandaura posits that:

Theatre evolved out of man's desire to carter for the inadequate of nature, hence, to ensure its survival, theatre must continuously champion the development processes of its society and redirect the erring practice of the political actors of its time.
(3)

Dandaura espouses our minds that theatre evolves out of the quest for man to seek for solutions to some natural or artificial problems that have bedevilled man from the inception of creation. It is on this important note that we believe that drama definitely is out to correct or reconstruct the society from different challenges that have bedeviled it.

Social Criticism Explained

The term social criticism often refers to a mode of criticism that locates the reasons for malicious conditions in a society considered to be in a flawed social structure. It may also refer to people adhering to a social critic's aim at practical solutions by way of specific measures either for consensual reform or powerful revolution. There are some countries like America, United Kingdom and even our own Ghana here. Where social criticism of their films are done through the social media (especially television) in order to correct the societal ills. Criticisms of films are done to teach the populace what happened in the films and how they directly relate to the society. And, how it can be corrected through such actions and criticisms. The standpoint of the paper is to advocate for such practice in the Nigerian theatre practice, especially where a play is produced and the audience walk away just like that after the show. The audience should stay and at least interact with the actors and actresses, so such experience can be retained in their memory, and used to help in reshaping or building and reconstructing the nation.

Audience-actors interactions or relationships have been neglected for a very long time in the theatre. They come, watch the performance and walk away. This paper upholds strongly that criticism that will bring interaction between actors and the audience should be imbibed by the Nigerian theatre practitioners and artists to help in building the nation. Issues in the play are analysed, interpreted and discussed for the spectators to go home with indelible messages from such plays and this could be used to reconstruct the Nigerian society. For instance, there was a matinee production of "Tamarisk: The Healing Shrub" (July, 2013) in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri, presented by Theatre Arts department. A

production in the afternoon that some secondary schools students were invited to watch. After the performance, students out of inquisitiveness began to throw questions at the actors and actresses. Questions like, why did you do like this instead of like that? Why did you runaway instead of staying back to defend your action? Why is the woman in veil not dressed to scare people? These and many other questions were asked to aggravate discussions. It could go a long way in reconstructing the minds of the audience towards an egalitarian society.

This trend is highly missing in theatre practice in Nigeria. From the different theatre stages that the researcher has watched performances or productions in Nigeria, the tradition has been after the production we ask our audience to go out of the theatre because viva will be taking place. It is obviously possible that some of the productions might have some pressing issues that may demand clarifications, but once they are asked to go out they move out with such questions, denying them of the right to interact with the actors and actresses.

Let us take a swift look at the Novel *Animal Farm* written in 1944 which is a novel that tells the fable of a farm in which the farm animals revolt against their human masters. It is an example of social criticism in literature in which George Orwell satirizes the events in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. But, when most of us in the literary realm began to explore we discovered that the novel hampers so much on one of our own regimes in Nigeria. The vehement maltreatments meted on their followers by them are acutely captured in the novel, which is one of the crux of this discourse however through Nigerian drama.

The dramatist or the playwright is a product of his own society and therefore concentrates on the representation of the

societal ills and the ways to ameliorating such problems. Emmanuel Ebo captures it that: “the dramatist is a product of his environment; therefore, his play bears both his identity and that of his community. His play also serves dual purpose – entertaining the people and satirizing the society for positive changes” (107). This implies that it is that society that gave birth to his play whether his intent is to entertain or to proffer solutions to societal problems. Ebo reiterates that: “his inspiration for writing sometimes stems out of observation of events and activities as they unfold in the environment” (107). The playwright never gets inspiration in a vacuum, but, gets inspired from the happenings and activities in his society. Ebo posits further that: “Playwright world over use their works to show the ills inherent in their societies” (109). This in line with Utoh’s position that: “Contemporary Nigerian playwrights continue to illuminate the social trauma of their society. Prevailing social problems are issues of nagging concern which receives expository attention in their work” (279).

To this writer, social criticism goes beyond mere representation of societal problems or ills. However goes further to say that issues raised in such plays should be discussed and argued for or against between the performers and the spectators such discussions would make the topical issues remain indelible in the minds of both the actors and audience. The play would go a long way in helping to correct the societal ills because both the audience and actors are members of the society; this is however the primary aims of the playwright. In concord with the above, Osayin affirms that: “theatre is essentially social criticism. And criticism is creative activity ... because of outspokenness of the theatre, it often clashes with authorities” (3). The outspokenness of the theatre is in the discourses that erupt between the audience and the actors in the theatre as they explore the topicality of the play.

Such criticism will help our political leaders to redirect or reconstruct their intentions, thus permitting them, checks and balances in their day-to-day running of the state's affairs.

Reading Selected Nigerian Drama

Drama as Aristotle puts it 'is an imitation of life'; therefore, drama can be seen as a slice of life. Drama is a mirror of the society. Whatever we see in play is unarguably a part of the life. Drama is a copy of the society, because is out to help reconstruct an amiable and accommodating society. Emmanuel Ebo puts it that:

Drama reflects one or more of the intense socio-political, economic, cultural and ideological travails and struggles of the society as seen through the microscope of playwrights, thus showing the class power structure that shape everyday lives... one can conclude that the playwright has shown the efficiency and potentials of drama. (116)

It is undoubtedly truism that no drama is written in a vacuum, there is no drama no matter the size is in no small measure out to help reconstruct the society. As a playwright or artist, you are writing with the aim to correcting the society or presenting the society as it is. Nigerian dramatists have followed this trend closely, the trend of presenting or representing their social issues to the Nigerian populace and beyond.

Based on the above conception on drama, it becomes pertinent that we do a reading of some Nigerian plays to substantiate our argument. Social criticism goes beyond mere analytical presentation of the Nigerian societal issues or infusing them as the thematic positioning of the ills of the society in plays. It is engaging ourselves (the actors and the audience) in discussing comprehensively the topical issues

raised within the content of the play. Like we have posited above that there is no play that is written in vacuum, there must be central and sub-textual message that the playwright consciously or unconsciously intends putting across to the society.

Playwrights over the world have in one way or the other presented their various societies through the art of playwriting. These range from Greek period to this modern period. Their concerns have been to present criticise their immediate society through drama. Playwrights like Sophocles, Euripedes, Aristophanes, Seneca, Strinberg, Ibsen, Eliot, Aidoo, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Emeka Nwabueze, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kola Omotosho, Alex Asigbo, Tracie Utoh and many other European and African playwrights with their avalanche of plays have made concerted efforts by presenting the socio-political issues that are prevailing in their societies. But one thing remains if the criticism is left in the hand of the playwrights alone the impact of the messages would not be felt. Thus, let us take the criticism beyond the play text, beyond the performance of the play text. Let us actively engaged seriously in the topicalities of the play embedded by the playwright, with both the actors, the audience and if possible with the playwright this will enable us to leave permanent message in the minds of the audience than mere watching of the production or sheer reading of the plays.

A Synopsis of Emmy Idegun's *Tough Man*

Tough Man treats the theme of patriotism, integrity, honesty, ethics and selflessness, probity, and responsible leadership in Igala Kingdom. In this play the legendary truth of the past is being made to guide ethical conduct in the present and in the future. The playwright uses the mystery of past

historic personalities like Inikpi , Ame , and Achema to express and promote the theme of ethical and patriotic goals, probity, integrity, and responsible leadership as a way of plumbing the political and leadership experiences of today towards reconstructing a better future in Igala Kingdom. To the core, the play dramatizes the Alapaic beliefs, personified in Achima, an Igala patriot and selfless leader who demonstrated purposeful and people-orientated leadership by living and laying down his life in service of his people.

As the play proceeds, an auto crash has taken place and plucks down Steven Achema in his prime in Efile, the land of the living, from where he transcended to Efojegwu, the land of the dead to meet other beloved patriots and descendants of Igala land. In Efojegwu, Achema is accosted by Inikpi and Ame who lift him up to his feet and offer a seat among them. These three beloved descendants of Igala people engage themselves in a discourse on the purposeful leadership and good followership in Igala Kingdom. As the drama unfolds, Inikpi, Ame and Achema agree to take a look down and watch the activities of characters in Efile, the land of the living. From the echoes of reality in Efile, the land of the living, Inikpi, Ame, and Achema are stunned and bewildered as demonstrated by the sighs, shaking of heads, heads resting on the palms and similar postures. Inikpi, Ame and Achema agree that the future of Igala Kingdom and the people is indistinct. Achema provides reasons for the ugly state of affairs in Efile ; the land of the living.

Achema: A people who have no regard for selfless service and committed leadership can only move without direction and focus.

Inikpi: Oh, the great Igala kingdom, what has become of your greatness?

Achema: The blood of the souls, willingly shed or innocently cut short, has blurred our people's vision.

Inikpi believes that the way out lies on the institutionalisation of selflessness, purposeful and efficient leadership who will spearhead the duty of moving people from submissiveness to active movement and progress similarly. They concur that the present set of political leadership cannot move Igalaland forward because they are alien, not people who have been living among the people so they cannot lead the people to any meaningful and purposeful developments. This is captured accurately by the Citizens:

Citizen II: All these contestants who are based in the comfort of their homes in Sokoto, Kano, Kaduna, or Lagos can never, I Say again, can never feel the way we do and lead us as we deserve

Citizen I: We must always look for alternatives when the appropriate person is absent

Citizen II: I doubt if that alternative will come with ease. All these self-proclaimed leaders who are aspiring to lead us do not know us. They do not understand our problem. They come to Igalaland as aliens, sometimes with all they would need for the brief period they spend with us before they prematurely rush back to their homes in Jos, Lagos, Kaduna, and even Abuja. Fake leaders, and unschooled people in Alapaic philosophy of selfless services to the people (Idegu, 62-63)

This is however correct with the current menace of our leaders who have lived all their lives in the diasporas coming to context with those who have been working in the interest of their people. They come from nowhere, hijacked the positions of authorities perhaps with the influence of their money and

positions. Such issues can be discussed after the production of this play and you see audience going home with impeccable messages that will remain ineffaceable in their minds as they go home. There are other too numerous topicalities in the play that can be discussed for open messages to the audience and others that have come to watch the production.

A Synopsis of Nwadiigwe's *The Installation*

The play opens in a party venue where Nwaora and Julie are celebrating their engagement. Nwaora thanks his guests for coming. He informs them of his forth coming coronation as the crown prince of his community because he is the one that will succeed the present chief of the community, and he will keep them posted as regards the date. This brings us to the end of the party. The next thing Nwaora and Julie park their belongings to go to the village in preparation for the coronation as the crown prince of Umuato community. The chiefs in the village confront Ikenga on his plan to crown Nwaora as the crown prince of Umuato, that that action is an abomination to the land that they are aware of the fact that Nwaora is his adopted child. Meanwhile, Nwaora encounters a drunk in the village who makes Nwaora to see the truth that Ikenga and his wife Ijeoma, are not his biological parents. And he was challenged to go and check for his biological parents. On hearing this he confronts Ikenga to tell him the truth of his biological background which Ikenga veils. Another revelation is Julie his wife, the tradition demands that the first wife of the chief must come from the community this is against the wish of Nwaora because Julie is not from Umuato. Ikenga in his quest to make Nwaora succeed him make efforts to bribe the other chiefs under him. In the expedition of Ikenga to see Nwaora succeeds him they select a wife for him in the village. Julie hears about this and she parks her things and returns to the city. As the play proceeds, some

group of women come to make a plea on behalf of the women, which Ikenga thinks it is the plot of Chika's mother. Chika is his half-brother in the royal family. At this moment Chika that Ikenga sent for, comes in, and he was accused of plotting against his plans, therefore was locked in the inner chambers. However, the elder meet in secluded place in the town to discuss this ugly scenario where their house was divided as Ikenga subsumes some of the elders. The play continues until the coronation proper, the MC opens the ceremony and Prof brakes the Kola nuts. MC gives the microphone to Ikenga who addresses the audience as he is about to call the elders who will perform the coronation some angry youths come in and disorganise the ceremony which leads to the death of a member of the community and makes Ikenga to give the crown to his half-brother: Chika, who will succeed him as the next chief of the community. Though the truth was unveiled as Ikenga tells Nwaora the truth about his biological background and the reason why he does what he did, this brings us to the end of the play as Chika asks Nwaora if he will attend his coronation.

Play Interpretation

From the synopses of the plays above, one will agree with the study that Nwadigwe has done justice to one of the issues that have bedevilled us in this contemporary time. That is to say that he is one of the scholars like Osofisan, Somande, Omotosho, Nwabueze, Asigbo, Utoh and the likes who have critically satirized and lampooned the society through their plays. They portend the future of the Nigerian society with their plays. Nwadigwe scholarly handled this as can be seen clearly from the play. The elders after much plea with Ikenga and he turned deaf ears to them decide to use the youth to disorganise the coronation ceremony. This is a pure Marxian approach to drama which is the major influence in the contemporary Nigerian

drama. Many recent scholars have followed this trend in their dramas. The confrontation between the chief and his advisers marked the genesis of the collective struggle by the advisers:

MADUKA: this is an exception. Everyone here knows that Nwaaora is not qualified for that seat.

IKENGA: Why?

EGBEONU: because of his parental background.

IKENGA: (*rising anger*) What are you insinuating?

OJEMBA: My Lord ... with due respect ... but ... everyone in this community knows that Nwaora is an adopted son of yours.

IKENGA: (*Flares up*) That's a lie. Who told you that? (*The Installation, 12-13*)

From the exchange above, it is obvious that Ikenga because of his own selfish interest wants Nwaora to succeed him by all means. If not, he knows the tradition of the land that it is only the legitimate child that can become chief in the land. Nwadiuwe uses traditional institution to deal with the political situation of the Nigerian society. Even the Nigerian politicians are aware that Mr. A, is not qualify for a particular position, they will insist that he becomes or succeeds because of their selfish interest. Egbeonu confirms that:

E-h-e-e; custom demands that since you don't have any other ...legitimate son, that you pass on the royal throne to your brother's lineage. (13)

Even the advisers told Ikenga that that is against the tradition of the land he still wants to impose his will on the people. But with the swift intervention of the youths of the land his will could not come to pass as they disrupt the coronation ceremony, that would have brought Nwaora to the throne of the land. However, the youths caused the tragic scene of the play to come

to place, because their invasion of the coronation venue was against the wish of Ikenga. Since the advisers pleaded with him and he turned his deaf ears then the only way they could succeed was to use force on him which made them succeed. This is too obvious from the stage direction below:

IKENGA: I thank you all for coming here today. We know why we are here. Today is not for long speeches. In case there are strangers among us, we are here to install my son, Nwaora, as the crown prince who will eventually ascend the throne after me as tradition demands.

(Immediately, a band of masked youths armed with assorted weapons and chanting war song emerge into view. They advance to the arena, displaying combat movements and brandishing their weapons. There is a stir in the crowd. The youths dash off the opposite exit. IKENGA signals to guards who come out with their weapons and man the two entrances to the arena. IFEKA confers with OJEMBA in mime)(58-59)

IKENGA: Without wasting time, I call on two wise men in our land, Ogbuefi Ojemba Ukachi and Mazi Ifeka Ozodi to come forward and perform the coronation.

The elders mentioned here are those elders that sold the tradition of the land away because of what the chief is going to give them as gifts. But their plan was aborted with the intrusion of the youth in the ceremony arena. This is the case with the Nigerian society especially our political scene where candidates are imposed on the people against their wish. For what they will eat, few elders who are in-charge of selecting the next candidate will dump him for that candidate that is influential, thereby

creating catastrophic scenario and environment for their subjects.

The elders, Ojemba and Ifeka, even the chief, Ikenga knew they were acting against the whim and caprices of the people but they went ahead to carry it out. Though, in their own case they were not controlled by the gods and the youths did not leave their fate in the hands of the gods, they took their fates in their own hands and fought against it. And they triumphed because in the end the crown in question was not given to Nwaora but, went to the legitimate owner who is the half-brother of Ikenga. Other issue of degenerative practice against women was also re-echoed by the playwright as explicitly presented by Ijeoma: "I cannot stand here and watch you debase womanhood" (29). The issue of social injustice is re-echoed as the play proceeds, this is one of the societal problems that have bedevilled the Nigerian society in recent times and it is gaining momentum.

Apart from the plays above, there are avalanche of plays written by Nigerian playwrights that satirize, lampoon or critically present one of the intense socio-political, economic, cultural, and ideological travails and struggles of the Nigerian society, with the immense aims of reconstructing the society. There is no play for play sake. For instance, Femi Osofisan observed the Nigerian society around 1989 with the incessant killings of robbers in firing squad wrote his play *Once Upon Four Robbers* to question the place of the soldiers that do the killings. If they too are pure from the sin for which the robbers are been killed. Asigbo tries to satirize the political trends of the society through his play *The Reign of Pascal Amusa*. A quick look at the thematic position of Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No Gender*, espouses our minds to some prevalence contemporary issues like cultism, assassination, ritual murder and others that have become the order of the day in the Nigerian nation. The list of

Nigerian plays can go on and on, is endless. But, for the purpose of this paper we will take a pause here.

Conclusion

With the enormous and vigorous thematic preoccupations of Nigerian playwrights in their avalanche of plays, if social criticism is left in the hands of the critics, those Asigbo refers to as: "...many Nigerians are armchair critics and sirens that quickly compromise once they are settled or threatened in any way" (50) who only do their criticism of such plays on the pages of papers or articles, and during viva after performance by the students in the theatre, the messages in the plays would not be comprehended by the audience and Nigerians at large. But the position of this study is, criticism of plays should be encouraged at the point of presentation; the theatre or any performance venues. Where both the audiences and the actors converge together to interact and share views on the topicalities of Nigerian drama and such message or messages will remain indelible in the minds of both the performers and spectators. Then, we can be rest assured that drama can serve as social vehicle towards the reconstruction of the society.

Recommendations

From the foregoing discourses, it is recommended that playwriting that concentrate on the portrayal of the societal problems and proffering way forwards should be encouraged by both the playwrights all over the Nigerian society.

Directors should look critically into the topicalities of plays before selecting them for the Nigerian stage and for actor's and audiences' consumption.

Playwrights should look into intense societal problems and represent them in their plays with the aim of helping to reconstruct the society especially during criticism.

Above all, it is also recommended that such plays with serious issues that bother on the Nigerian social, political, religious, cultural and economic problems should be selected for performance and their themes discussed comprehensively among the stakeholders in the performance arena. Everyone would go home with permanent messages. Such trend should equally be extended to the Nigerian movies as it is done in other countries like Ghana and Western worlds.

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