

CHANTING SONGS IN PRAISE OF AN OPPRESSIVE LEADER: A READING OF GLORIA ERNEST- SAMUEL'S *THE BEAUTIFUL MASQUERADE*

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<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm.v.15.2.1>

Abstract

Nigeria, the supposedly giant of Africa in recent times has demonstrated that its fragile democracy is really challenged by many problems. The increasing rate of poverty, insecurity and other social and political problems in the country is a pointer that the citizens are yet to benefit from the huge human and material resources domiciled within her enclave. This development has given rise to much tension in the country's polity. Sycophancy is one of the many contributors to the many problems challenging the development of the Nigerian nation. The main objective of this work therefore is to examine the effect of sycophancy on the leader and the citizen as represented in the play "The Beautiful Masquerade by Gloria Ernest- Samuel. Using content analysis, the paper explores the devastating effect of sycophancy and advocates that constructive criticism is more beneficial for a progressive leadership because sycophancy beclouds the vision of leader.

Key words: Leader, sycophancy, oppressive, play, leadership, Drama.

Introduction

Through the reflections of social issues and human experiences, drama showcases the identity of a people within a given society. Thus Schiller opines that "drama is a great school of practical wisdom, a guide for civil living and a key to the mind..."(142).The work of every playwright therefore deals with contemporary social issues, using the content of the play text as a reflection of the socio-political situation of the immediate environment.

From the inception of Nigeria as a country, it has been bedeviled with one form of civil crises or the other, ranging from inter-tribal and boundary rivalries, civil protests, religious conflicts etc. In addition to these, political observers have also identified other key contributors to the country's problems as "colonial heritage... inept political leadership, poverty and alienation, misrule and corruption" (Akintola, 265). In recent times, these crises have taken other dimensions such as large scale armed robbery, banditry, insurgency, kidnapping etc. All these are traceable to poor leadership and leadership policies that may have resulted from sycophancy. It is an established fact that Nigerian politicians and other government officials, including some of their private counterparts, derive joy and satisfaction from flattery and praises. They love worship, titles, awards and other organised recognitions. They hate criticisms and any opposition to their failure and ideas. The daily praises of some of our failed politicians in the pages of newspapers, radio, television, and the social media is a pointer to how sycophancy has taken over the reality in our society. The only sad narrative according to Etim is that:

successive leaders in Nigeria always fall victim to these too familiar tricks not understanding the recurring evidence that leaders who believe every positive thing, they hear about themselves soon realize how their gullibility lead to avoidable failures. (7)

Instances abound in our political arena on the results of sycophancy. There has always been a rain of empty praise on political office holders both during the military era and in the current democratic dispensation in Nigeria. Despite the glaring evidence that General Ibrahim Babangida was manipulating the transition to civil rule program to favour his sit-tight in power agenda, sycophants were handy to blow his trumpet. Some groups like the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) were asking for Babangida to stay for four more years. Similarly, during the time of

General Sani Abacha, sycophants seized the opportunity again to chant their praise. They only succeeded in blindfolding the leadership with propaganda. It will be recalled that it was during this period that a group known as ‘Youths Easily Ask for Abacha; (YEAA), led by Daniel Kanu, coordinated the Two Million- Man march in support of Abacha. They even canvassed support for Abacha to transit from military to civilian president.

With the death of Abacha June 8, 1998, and the coming in of the democratic government of Olusegun Obasanjo on May 29,1999, the narrative seem to be on the increase. Sometime in 2002, prominent Yoruba politicians led by Olabode George visited Otta farm, the residence of President Obasanjo, seeking for his re-contesting for second term. Olabode George is quoted by John Ode thus “at inception, no one believed that Nigeria would be salvaged, but today, it is no more a pariah country. The journey to the promised land has begun in earnest, can we allow a change of captain now?”(17-18).Many other delegations also visited President Obasanjo making the same request. It is worthy of note that some of these delegates were once chanting their song for General Sani Abacha telling him that there will be no Nigeria without him. Thus, on April 25, 2002, Obasanjo despite all odds, disclosed to Nigerians that he will run for re-election as a result of pressure mounted on him. President Goodluck Jonathan is not spared of this sycophantic praise. His administration also witnessed pressures from sycophants both individually and in groups. Prominent among these is Transformation Ambassadors of Nigeria (TAN), who claimed to have collected 17million signatures in support of Goodluck Jonathan’s second term bid.

The current administration of President Muhammadu Buhari is also witnessing its own share of sycophancy. Many solidarity visits have been paid to the president all in the midst of nation wide insecurity, inflation, nepotism, injustice and other agitations being witnessed in the country. A keen observer of Nigerian politics is bound to notice that the motive behind all the solidarity visits is to

prove the convener(s) loyalty to the leader, probably to pave way for more contracts and appointments. Thus, Ahmed Dodo rightly concludes that all one needs to do to be a successful leader in Nigeria today is “just to have a good number of sycophants around you, then you can feel the wonders of sycophant business in the country”(np). Oseji also added that:

Ninety-nine percent of people who hover around our presidents, and governors are sycophants and praise singers and it puts Nigerian politics in trouble because the citizens allow deception, denial, disinformation, diversion, evasion, exaggeration, indoctrination, lying, media manipulation, mind control, propaganda, scapegoating, and smear comparison which are the signs of sycophancy in our political governance. (17)

It is against this back ground that Gloria Ernest- Samuel exceptionally pooled from the Nigerian situation to weave a dramatic master piece in the play, *The Beautiful Masquerade*. The play creatively captures the many issues plaguing the nation as a result of sycophancy, presenting it as an obstacle to effective development. The study provides a succinct understanding of sycophancy and its adverse effects on the leader and the led, advocating for constructive criticism as the sole option for progressive development.

Conceptualizing Leadership and Sycophancy

Leadership is assuming the position of authority with the aim of rendering services to the people. It is about guiding and giving directions to others towards the attainment of their maximum potentials, Davis defines it as “the ability to persuade others to seek defined objectives enthusiastically. It is the human factor which binds a group together and motivates it towards goals” (233).

For Obiefuna, “leadership is the ability to lead. It is the duty of the leader to his or her followers to engage in work/performance for maximal achievement of group/organizational goal” (106). Keating sums it up by stating that “leadership is a motivational service in the sense that it seeks to meet the needs of another or a group by performing needed functions” (13). Leadership involves the ability to exhibit a positive sense of authority because a leader without authority is prone to poor decision making. Good leadership therefore is a necessary determinant for a progressive society. Hence “leadership is meant to play a vital role in all round development of a nation” (Aghamelu, 26).

However, with the recent hike in sycophancy and “praise saying” in the society, leadership roles have been thwarted and channeled towards the selfish interest of a leader and few privileged individuals; to the detriment of the majority of the populace. Pita Ejiofor laments that “unfortunately, between the sorrows of Nigerians and the solution to their problems hangs a thick blanket of sycophancy”(7). Etim defined sycophancy as “a way of wining or curing favours from powerful and influential people through flattery or praise singing”(np). Because of its motive, which is mostly selfish in nature, sycophancy creates an illusionistic picture for the leader, thereby beclouding his judgment and vision. It fills the leaders with distorted information which makes them see their governance' failure and unpopular decisions as laudable. Odeh described sycophants as “political desperados whose sole business in politics is to come together, praise whoever is in power, share the spoils of their mission and disperse to wait for another round of the booty” (17). Sycophancy pollutes the integrity of governance and exemplifies the bane of politics and leadership (Okibe ,154).

After Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the rate of acceleration of sycophancy became quite alarming. However, during the military era, it was observed that it became “a lucrative business with specialty in applauding every policy introduced and projects implemented by leaders (regardless of however good or

bad) as cure to Nigerians problem” (154) Thus sycophancy favours incompetent and unpopular leaders who capitalize on it to boost their self- esteem and sustain their gullibility

Theoretical Frame Work

This investigation hinges on Karl Marx’s Historical materialism. Historical materialism is developed to explain the successive evolution of the society and the conditions of its material life. .Marx argued that the history of society is the history of class struggle that emanated out of an already existing social relations. The fundamental idea governing historical materialism is that:

In the social production of life men enter into definite relationship that are crucial and independent to their will. The sum total of these relations of production creates the economic structure of the society, the real base in which raises a legal and political super structure and forms of social consciousness (Marx 71/-72/).

Max’s notion of society is that it is divided into two classes made up of the exploiter and the exploited, the oppressor and oppressed. It is usually the exploitative and oppressive nature of man that give rise to sycophancy to enable the oppressed /exploited gain favour from the oppressor / exploiter.

.Synopsis of the Play, *The Beautiful Masquerade*

The play *the Beautiful Masquerade* dwells on the recent proliferation of autonomous communities in Igbo land, which is yet to yield the desired benefits to the citizens because most of the agitation for it is based on selfish interest. It promotes the activities of selfish leaders and king makers that exploit the people, capitalizing on their ignorance and intoxication of assumed freedom. The plot of this play is built around the character, Amuche, who, after helping his people to gain autonomous community, was chosen to serve as reagent in appreciation for his

role in the success of the autonomous community struggle. Amuche epitomizes an autocratic selfish leader who allows himself to be intoxicated by power. He surrounds himself with sycophants and commits many atrocities while his followers continue to sing his praises. When the village youths realize themselves, they mobilize to fight him. Amuche takes his own life to escape the humiliation.

Sycophancy in *the Beautiful Masquerade*

Sycophancy as defined earlier is “a way of winning favour from influential people through flattery and praise singing. Sycophants make use of deceptive exaggerations, manipulations and propaganda to achieve their selfish goals. In their desperation to gain recognition, they tend to ill-advice, misdirect and misinform their victim through flattery. This study will however be limited to the effects of sycophancy on the leader and the led which is the thematic thrust of the play.

The first scene of the play begins with the reception organized by the people of Alaike to welcome and appreciate Amauche for his role in their community’s autonomous struggle which liberates them from Amator’s oppressive hold. The people are so intoxicated with happiness that they agree to make Amauche their ruler. The Chief priest cautions against this citing their tradition and customs which holds that rulership in Alaike is purely hereditary. With the influence of some elders, the people persist that Amuche should rule them, regardless of the age long tradition. Amuche seeing reason with the chief priest volunteers to be an overseer of the community. He explains:

Amuche: I have no intension of usurping your throne, people of Alaike. But your proposal a moment ago has set me thinking As a political scientist, I want to make sure that Alaike experiences the best political system possible. ... I am compelled to accept your proposal I will send Ikoku’s son to overseas to acquire formal education, while he is away, I’ll like

to be given the privilege to re-organize this community ... (8-9). (applause from the crowd).

It does not occur to him that when one accepts to rule out of persuasions from external forces, such leadership is bound to be visionless.

It is typical of sycophants to insist that their principal is best suited for a particular job even when it is glaring that such is not possible. Thus as Amuche volunteers to be the regent of Alaike, the youths led by Nwabueze, persist that Amuche is most suitable for king not a regent. The Chief Priest tries to clarify them but he seems to be a lone voice in the wilderness

Chief priest: Youths of Alaike, Amuche has agreed to be the overseer of our community, a regent of sort, not the traditional ruler of Alaike. Let that be clear.

Nwabueze: No, we don't agree to this. Warriors of Alaike, do you agree?

Warriors: No!!!” (9).

Nwabueze knows fully well that Amuche is traditionally not qualified to rule Alaike, but his sycophantic nature makes him to even challenge the chief priest who is the custodian of their tradition. According to Ahmed, Dodo; “sycophants are always driven by greed and selfishness. They are never patriotic although they want to be seen as such” (np). Like all sycophants, the motive behind Nwabueze's overzealousness is not farfetched as he explains to his friends in the village bar:

Nwabueze: Listen, your chief priest is in detention. He will remain locked up until Amuche's installation. Amuche needs this leadership. I smell it from miles, though he pretends otherwise. I need to give him all the services he needs because I need something from him in return (drinks) (14).

Emenike: So this is a case of scratch my back. I scratch your own back” (15).

Nwabueze: If that is what you call it

Emenike: And what do you want from him (15)

Nwabueze: I want to be appointed the leader of Alaike warriors.

Every praise singer does so for one form of gratification or the other. The elders who clamour for Amuche's installation as king are also doing so because they are constantly on his pay role. They are therefore out to convince everyone that Amuche is the best leader Alike could have even as the people have started experiencing his high handedness. The actions of the elders also reveal that their support for Amuche is a parasitic one as Iweka observes:

Iweka: He has brain washed them with money. All except Okwuka and of course you and I (40).

Emenike: Did you look at Idumogu, why didn't he utter a word... what of Odogwu. They all turned dumb before Amuche, why? What power does Amuche possess that has shut their eyes as well as their brain?

Okwuka: That is money power.

The above conversation justifies why sycophancy has become a lucrative business in the political arena. With little gratification, the politicians are able to buy their way out of every situation. Amuche is able to buy the majority of the elders of Alaike to install him as king where tradition forbids.

Sycophants employ deceptive exaggeration, manipulation and propaganda to sustain their proof of loyalty for their victim. Thus when Amuche's crime are revealed, Ichie Onugha tries to defend him at all cost:

Ichie Onugha: ... my mouth is full. However, Idimogo, it is true Amuche committed an atrocity... it is also true that he deserves death. We often ask an eye for an eye, yet we need to remember that Amuche is our sister's child... and our tradition protects any grandchild from

whatever crime or predicament that confronts him. Therefore we need to be cautious of any decisions we may make concerning this case.
(67)

Odogwu: Ichie Onugha, I've never known any grandchild that murdered two of his mothers in his maternal home who is left unpunished (67).

Ichie Onugha: Of course, you know that Amuche did not kill the men himself... somebody did the killing on his behalf. So we should not say that he killed them.

Odogwu: Onugha, what did you say? How can a red cap chief like you be so deceptive? Why are you so unreliable as a chameleon (shakes his head incessantly) you are the worst elder in Alaike...you...

Onugha's intentions is to undermine the decision of the Alaike elders to punish Amuche for the atrocities he committed. Lies, poor advice and misinformation are handy tools used by sycophants to win favour from the gullible leader. Okute advises Amauche in the conversation below:

Amauche: (Relaxes) Good. I need your advice. Our young men are not happy with me. The death of those two are causing much more than I bargained for. Our young men want my installation to be as unceremonious as my marriage ceremony.

Okute: Why did you consent to that? (42).

Amauche: This is not time for blames .Lets think about the problems at hand. The decisions arrived at the meeting include that the chief priest be released and a committee set up to investigate those murders.(43)

Okute: Don't agree to the establishment of any committee no matter their function.

Amauche: What about the release of the chief priest?

Okute: You may grant that, but don't give him the opportunity to do any consultation with the gods. In fact you can destroy his shrine and maybe build a church. When the cricket knows the crime it committed, it dabs white ash around its eyes.(43)

The advice above convinces Amuche to take a drastic decision that eventually leads to his destruction.

Effects of Sycophancy in *the Beautiful Masquerade*

Sycophancy is deceitful, misleading and highly opinioned. It beguiles the masses to believe in fraudulent government actions. According to Oloja, quoted in Okibe, "all people like to be praised as it boosts self- esteem, keep them motivated and happy" (162). Some politicians in Nigeria are simply square pegs in round holes because, just like Amuche, in the play, they are lured into politics by sycophants.

Amauche had no intention of ruling Alaike, not until the people's prompting at the village square. He naturally accepts a proposal from his people.

Amauche: ... I am compelled to accept your proposal. Our society is fast changing, therefore there is need to change with time...(8).

The idea of ruling Alaike is influenced by the praises he received from the people. The Sycophantic support from the people helped Amauche to discover their weakness realizing that he can easily manipulate them to achieve his personal aim. Every sycophant strives to clear all obstacles that will jeopardize the success of the principal. One of the conditions of being a king in Alaike is that the intending king must be married before his installation. Nwabueze being a loyal follower of Amauche is ready to help him cross this huddle.

Nwabueze: Emenike and Uduka, just hold it... Amuche can marry any woman he wants today. All he needs to do

is inform me and the warriors, we will make it happen (14).

Ironically, his woman, Akwaeke, turns out to be the chosen one and being an obstacle to his intention, Amauche has to eliminate him. When unnecessary praise is given to a leader, it bloats his ego and makes him see himself as a demi god even at the point of self- destruction. Amauche, in the play, insists on marrying Akwaeke even when his aunt and foster mother warns him against the marriage because the lady in question is already betrothed.

Ugoye: I know she is a lovely girl. When I saw her, I wished I could convince you to meet her parents. But since she is betrothed to someone else, someone who happens to be one of your men, you should learn to let go.(26).

Amauche: No. Never... I shall not leave Akwaeke, not for Nwabueze, no, over my dead body. (26)

Ugoye: Send her back to her parents, consider the feelings of your people and how they will react to such a terrible scandal and utterances (27).

Amauche: Don't bother mother, go back to your room. (27)

Amauche's desperation in marrying Akwaeke is born out of bloated ego. He believes that Nwabueze is too poor and inconsequential to marry such a village beauty. This he explains to Akwaeke.

Amauche: Akwaeke, let me refund his expenses. A beautiful girl like you should not waste your life with a poor uneducated village hunter... a village warrior. A girl like you deserves to be a queen...(24).

Sycophancy encourages dictatorship. A leader that discovers that his subject are not bothered about his actions will never seek the opinion of the subject in decision making, regardless of whether such decision will affect the subject either positively or negatively. Most dictators are usually a product of sycophancy, Nwabueze realizes this amidst too late:

Nwabueze: Is this how you're going to rule Alaike? Will you be snatching people's wives? Are we encountering another dictator? (26).

Amauche: Yes. I dictate what happens in Alaike. Fool, you championed the cause (27).

Nwabueze: (Regretfully) It is all my undoing. I should have known. Yet, it is not too late...(27)

When there is a conflicting interest in a sycophantic relationship, rivalry, insecurity, etc are entrenched. Amauche has to kill Nwabueze and Uduka to safeguard his interest. This action gives rise to serious tension in the community which threatens the peace and unity of the people.

Conclusion

Indeed, sycophancy as a clog in the wheel of progressive leadership has been re-created in the play, *The Beautiful Masquerade*. Gloria Ernest-Samuel, in her bid to comment on the happenings in the country, Nigeria, encapsulates the various atrocities perpetuated by leaders who in the midst of their misdoings, are receiving praises from their followers. Ernest-Samuel, in accordance with Schiller's assertion that "there are thousand vices unnoticed by human justice but condemned on the stage and also a thousand virtues overlooked by man's laws are honoured on the stage" (441), has exceptionally pulled from the Nigerian situation to weave a dramatic master piece in the play, *The Beautiful Masquerade*. She has succinctly ex-rayed the negative effects of sycophancy presenting it as an obstacle to effective leadership which gives the leader an illusionistic data of followership. This attitude helps in bloating the ego of the leader and in turn metamorphosizes him into a hydra headed monster as seen in the character of Amauche. Because drama identifies with the struggling masses, speaks on their behalf and helps launch an attack on social problems; to checkmate the effects of sycophancy on the development of the society, the paper recommends that

constructive criticism should be employed in place of praise singing, to help the leader have a clear vision of the concerns of the constituency. This will enable him have a thorough and unbiased assessment of the needs and yearnings of the people for a more progressive leadership.

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