



The Function Of Elechi Amadi's Drama

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ABSTRACT

Elechi Amadi is well known across the globe as one of Africa's best story tellers and one whose penchant for traditional stories and unflinching liberal humanist approach to the philosophy of non-utilitarian artistry has remained remarkable. This essay examines Amadi's drama, and tries to ascertain the extent to which his art in that genre depicts the same aloofness to the malaise of the post-independence African continent as his novels do. This preoccupation of the essay is necessitated by the novelist-cum-playwright's seeming reiteration of his non-commitment philosophy through an assertion in which he claim that his plays are absolutely meant to excite laughter in his audience, make them relax, and provide them escape from the problems of their society. The essay tries to ascertain the veracity of the claim through a close reading of the individual plays. While noting that “relaxation” is a basic and universal function of literature instead of a personal property of a single author, the study discovers that because Amadi is not a truly comic writer, he fails to produce in his plays sufficient situations capable of evoking the kind of laughter that could either induce escape from societal problems or drown the seriousness of such predominantly topical subjects of his plays as the Nigerian Civil War, the Apartheid system of government in South Africa, and inter-ethnic mistrust and stereotyping in Nigeria.

Key Words: Function, Commitment, Drama, Relaxation, Escape, Laughter

INTRODUCTION

Elechi Amadi's Art and Philosophy of Literature

Elechi Amadi needs no introduction as a creative writer; he is already well known globally as one of Africa's finest novelists. What perhaps needs exposition is that he straddles the three genres in his literary creativity having written five novels, five plays, one book of poetry, and a collection of science fiction stories. His novels include: *The Concubine* (1966), *The Great Ponds* (1969) *The Slave* (1978), and *Estrangement* (1986), while his plays are: *Isiburu* (1973), *Peppersoup* (1977), *The Road to Ibadan* (1977), *Dancer of Johannesburg* (1977), and *The Woman of Calabar* (2002). His poems are published together with his essays under the title: *Speaking and Singing: Essays and Poems* (2003), and his collection of science fiction is entitled *When God Came* (2011). An interesting fact about the author's creativity is the balance between his prosaic and dramatic outputs, which transcends number to include form: while Amadi's novels are tragedies, his plays are predominantly comedies.

This essay focuses on Elechi Amadi's drama, and its aim is to closely examine each of the five plays to determine their function especially in the light of the author's claim concerning the purpose of his drama. According to Amadi in an interview with Nwagbo Nnanyelike:

I quarrel with people who decide to teach through their plays, and x-ray all the ills of the society. My view is that an average Nigerian is aware of what is happening in the society ... In going to watch a play he wants to relax. But when he is being shown these things which he is trying to escape from, I think it is cruel. In my plays, I want to keep him at peace with laughter so that he may be happy with himself and the world. (qtd. in Koroye, vi)

The above is a reiteration of the author's age-long abhorrence of committed literature. And by committed literature here we mean literature that espouses topical issues in the political and social spheres of a society's development. In Africa, for example, the committed

writer is that whose subject is taken from any of the prevalent socio-political problems bedeviling African nation states from the period of colonial to the present post-colonial era.

While such first generation African writers as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Arma, and those of the succeeding generations like Kole Omotoso, Festus Iyayi and Sembene Ousmane have dwelt on such topical issues as the clash of the European and Africa cultures, failure of political leadership, electoral malpractice, exploitation, class distinction, and corruption in their works and are therefore considered relevant to the needs of the continent, Amadi has held tenaciously to a counter attitude, which considers such literary preoccupations as not just a waste and a demeaning of the revered creative enterprise called literature, but also a form of advertisement and in fact the prostitution of literature. Thus, he compares commitment in literature with sweeping the streets with the broom of gold. He argues, like the formalists, that a literary work should be appreciated for its beauty and for the pleasure it affords, and not for the social problem it is believed to solve, or the lesson which many a critic force in and out of it. This is why he asserts point blank that he is quite simply a story teller who does not deliberately set out in his writings to teach anybody any lessons or to solve any social or political problem, but to create literary works of artistic value aimed primarily to entertain and to give pleasure to the audience.

The author has, therefore, through paper after paper and at every opportunity in private and public occasions, reiterated this position. His first paper on the anti-commitment position entitled "The Novel in Nigerian" was delivered at the University of Iowa, Iowa City and later published in *Oduma* in 1974. It reads in part:

I have no doubt in my mind that the more political or socially committed a writer is, the worse his writing becomes. Some Nigerian novelists hold the other view. Nigerian novelists, they say, should use their tool as a weapon to fight corruption, social injustice and other ills of the country. (36)

Next was "The Problems of Commitment in Literature" published in *Kunapipi* in 1983 and reissued in *Speaking and Singing* in 2003. Here, the same idea is expressed in slightly other words vis:

... we must recognize the paradox that the more immediately relevant to society a work of art is, the more quickly it becomes irrelevant... aesthetics and utilitarianism do not make good bed-fellows. A work of commitment is much like an advertisement...my view is that commitment seriously impairs literary quality...there is something disturbing, even lamentable, in the novelist who squanders his art in decrying a bad government or ushering in an untried political system when it is realized that armies of journalists are doing just this in countless newspapers and magazines all over the globe. The committed novelist should know that as a propaganda tool, the novel is at best inefficient and expensive. It is like sweeping the streets with brooms of gold. (29-32)

Some others include “Demands on the African Writer,” “The Novel in Nigeria” and “The Sovereignty of African Literature” all of which are published in *Speaking and Singing: Papers and Poems*.

This hatred for the deployment of literature for some utilitarian purposes, namely, this idea of committed literature being propaganda or amounting to the prostitution of the revered product of human imagination, is considered in the Africa literary scene as Amadi's philosophy of literature. Equally important is an attitude generally considered as Amadi's liberal humanist approach to the said philosophy. The humanist liberalism consists in Amadi's ability to hold tenaciously to his philosophy and yet not insisting that other writers must embrace it. However, regardless of the doggedness of its practitioners, the ideology of anti-commitment in literary creativity has won itself more critics than admirers across the continent. Among the most critical of this philosophy of aloofness are such foremost African novelists as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. Both – he, a non-Marxist, and the other, a non-Marxist - consider the attitude of disinterestedness by any Africa writer to the socio-political problems rocking the continent, as not just a mark of irresponsibility, but a position totally unacceptable. According to Ngugi, for example:

I believe myself that the African novelist can help in building a place to feel at home. But he cannot do that if he insists on his liberal posture. He must, I think, be committed on the side of the majority whose sudden clamour for change is now rocking the continent. By diving into himself, deep into the collective consciousness of our own people, he can seek the roots, the trends of the revolutionary struggle. (81)

And in the words of Achebe,

“The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of education and regeneration that must now be done in Nigeria. In fact, the writer must march right in front, for he is, after all, the sensitive point in his community” (45).

Scholars, writers and critics in tune with the sentiments expressed in the above extracts do not think highly of Amadi's works, which they believe are irrelevant to the contemporary realities in Africa. Conversely, a handful of critics and scholars have no qualms with Amadi's chosen preoccupation and philosophy, and prominent among such scholars are Eustace Palmer and Ebele Eko. A passionate admirer of Amadi's philosophy and art, Palmer applauds Amadi's unique narrative tendency, which depicts an “alternative commitment” to issues in the traditional society instead of the so-called “big themes.” He also attributes what he considers an unfortunate and misguided underrating of the novelist by critics to the same issue. In his words:

Perhaps the failure to estimate the real stature of Amadi is due to rather mistaken assumptions on the part of some critics of Africa literature as to what African literature in general and the African novel in particular should be about. There seems to be a preference for the novels dealing with the supposedly “grand” themes: the disruption of traditional African society by the imperialists, the clash of cultures, the epic struggle to shake off the imperialist or racialist yoke, the post-

independence malaise and the effort to rediscover values and restructure African society. Ideas about commitment, social realism and critical realism have been bandied about. Of course Amadi's novels are not about any of these things. He has deliberately chosen instead to concern himself with the presentation of pre-colonial traditional African society. This is his exclusive territory. He stands unrivalled as the analyst of traditional African society. (47)

In spite, however, of the disapproval of Amadi's non-commitment philosophy by many a society-conscious African writer and critic, he has been able to carry far the ideology through his novels. Particularly facilitating such success is the novels' settings in the predominantly remote past and milieu devoid of the anxieties of politics and modernity, but preoccupied with the natural interactions of the gods and their human protégés. The big question then is: can the same be said about Amadi's drama? This question is necessary when one considers the implication of the excerpt that necessitated this study – that is, the assertion concerning the role of Amadi's art quoted early in the essay. It must be observed that the excerpt hints at Amadi's philosophy of non-committed art by its insinuation that he deliberately chooses and carefully manages the materials of his plays to create laughter and to afford the audience relaxation and escape instead of teaching them any lessons. It is, thus, obvious that the claim to laughter in the excerpt is absolute, and so does not imply mere spicing of serious drama with comic ingredients as popularized by Shakespeare. The implication, therefore, is that Amadi considers his plays as comedies since laughter particularly, is the main ingredient of that drama type, while relaxation and escape are the possible therapeutic products of sustained laughter. Abrams and Harpham's definition of comedy is quite revealing about its make-up and function. According to them, comedy is:

“A work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our delighted attention rather than our profound concern, we feel confident that no great disaster will occur,

and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters” (25).

Considering the foregoing, the thrust of this essay shall be to ascertain the possibility of Amadi's drama being, like his prose, non-committed - that is, being irrelevant to the political and social concerns of the contemporary African society; and, of course, the author being able to achieve this through strictly managing the resources of his dramatic art to create relaxation, escape and laughter in his audience. The study shall, therefore, be answering the following questions:

1. Are the subjects of Amadi's plays irrelevant to the socio-political concerns of contemporary Africa?
- 2 Do Amadi's plays have the capacity to provide their audience with relaxation, escape from societal problems and laughter?
- 3 Are all the plays of Amadi comedies?

The Function of Amadi's Drama

As already noted, Amadi's plays - with the exception of *Isiburu* which is a tragedy - are comedies, but with a slant towards the romantic. This very fact is alluded to by Koroye when he observes that “the four comedies, which follow *Isiburu* all begin with courtship rites, involving a conflict between two men interested in a woman, or between two women interested in a man, and end in engagements or weddings” (ix). The comedies are contemporary in their subjects matter, while *Isiburu* dwells, like Amadi's novels, in the remote traditional past insulated from modernity. In spite of their being comedies, the plays dwell on serious social and political subjects – subjects which obviously are problems of the post-colonial Africa. *Peppersoup* deals, for instance, with the problem of unemployment among other themes, *The Road to Ibadan* with the Nigerian Civil War, *Dancer of Johannesburg* with the dreaded Apartheid system of government in South Africa, and *The Woman of Calabar* with the Nigerian social malaises of inter-ethnic mistrust and stereotyping.

After *Isiburu*, Amadi seemed to have decided to move away from his traditional Ikwerre milieu to the contemporary Nigerian and African space. Because this meant an inevitable romance with topical themes, the author chose the comic mode with the aim of using laughter

as a tool for dousing the seriousness of the social and political themes. The preference for romantic comedies is obviously because love stories have a way of captivating any audience. The crux of the matter, however, is: does Amadi achieve his aim? Does he succeed in dousing the obviously serious subjects of his plays with laughter thereby keeping them at peace with themselves and the world? And does he succeed in taking the audience away from the immediate worries of their society?

One fundamental fact that bears recognition at this point is the very dynamic character of comedy, which consists in the evocation of laughter for entertainment and in using this laughter as a tool for criticism. These two roles of comedy, it must be asserted, are actually inseparable. It is in the light of this that one Nigerian scholar notes as follows:

comedy's amusing mechanism is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Its serious/didactic function is infused into its entertaining, thus, making it teach/criticise through laughter. Comedy laughs at the ugliness of society in order to improve the social system. (Ngwoke, "Comedy as Social Criticism" 89)

Corroborating this view, another critical opinion describes comedy as:

"a form of drama whose complexity cannot adequately be dealt with by any definition that sees it as aiming simply at exciting laughter," (Britannica, 481).

Similarly, a foremost comic theorist, Meredith alludes to the same interlaced function of the drama. According to him:

Whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them as self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-

sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit ... the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic spirit. (qtd. in Stott, 48)

The foregoing, therefore, nullifies parts of Amadi's claims in the interview excerpt, which suggest that comedy's laughter-evoking mechanism is an end in itself, and that his plays do not teach moral lessons. The truth, then, is that it is difficult to write a play, be it comedy, tragedy, or any other type, that does not espouse a philosophical truth about life and living. This is true about works in all the genres of literature except, of course, those written from and about the moon. It may be true when Amadi says, "I do not deliberately set out to teach through my novels ...," but it is definitely untrue to say the same about his plays.

The topicality of the subjects of Amadi's plays defies any form of suppressive or disinterested dramatization. Often without knowing it, Amadi drifts into overt criticisms of the social ills and political problems that constitute the subjects of his plays. At some points in the plot of *The Woman of Calabar*, for example, Amadi slips into sermonising against the social evils of ethnic mistrust and stereotyping in Nigeria. Through a character, he, on one such occasion, preaches thus:

ACHO: ... it is people who have not left their village who spread all these false rumours about other ethnic groups, especially those whose language they don't understand. You can be sure that some people in Calabar also have unsavoury beliefs about us. I have been to Gold Coast, Egypt, India and Burma. Women are the same e v e r y w h e r e . (I.IV)

The passion exhibited by Amadi in the handling of this twin evil in *The Woman of Calabar* strikes a particular cord. When one reads the author's Forewarning to the play, something about the appreciation of the play as an autobiography begins to play on one one's imagination. According to the Forewarning:

This play is drawn partly from real life. I was trained as a survey assistant at Oyo Survey School. Thereafter, I was posted to Calabar, and yes, my parents were a little disturbed by the posting. But the rest is imaginary. No, I spoke too soon. Friday Soup Night was in vogue in Calabar in the 1950s, and of course Edikang Ikong has become a national dish... All these revelations are potentially hazardous, I know, but let me repeat for the benefit of four-eyed researchers that the story, along with its characters, is pure fiction.

The facts that Amadi does not want to expressed by critics is that he is the Eme in the story; that he is overtly against that social evil the victim of which he has once being, and that he is using the play as the means available to him to criticize and possibly change the evil, which now has now assumed an alarmingly bloated stature within Nigeria.

The realities of Amadi's contemporary plays, therefore, contradict his claims of anti political commitment or anti moral education. Very often, one notices in his plays, that conscious struggle against being tagged a socially committed writer already noted. A reader cannot but perceive that struggle in both the Preface to *Dancer of Johannesburg* and the plot of the play proper. In the Preface, for instance, Amadi asserts as follows:

If Apartheid does not succumb to attacks, it will certainly die of old age. A few decades from now, all the nations of the world, including South Africa, will look back at this monster with the abhorrence and ridicule which the Slave Trade now invokes. *Dancer of Johannesburg* is set against the background of this classic folly of man but the play is not propagandist. It concentrates on the interaction of human beings caught at an imaginary moment in the struggle to eliminate this weird system. The emphasis her is on art, not on politics, and the play should be judged from that viewpoint

Even more ironical is the fact that sometimes the words and ideas expressed in the pre-text notes depict in themselves sufficient contradictions to show the author's internal battle with the forces of his sworn aloofness and those of inevitable commitment to the burning issues of the day. His description of Apartheid as a monster and the bristling assurance that it will be eradicated from South Africa particularly betray Amadi's disgust for that oppressive political system. This, coupled with the fact that the detested monster gets defeated at the play, is an eloquent testimony to the

author's commitment to its total elimination from not just South Africa, but the surface of the earth.

Having by the foregoing, established that Amadi's drama is both socially and politically committed, the essay shall, in what follows, attempt an examination of the extent to which "relaxation" and "escape" constitute the features of Amadi's drama, and the possibility of all of Amadi's plays evoking laughter. The last is important in the light of the understanding that "while laughter comes from delight, not all objects of delight cause laughter" (Hoy, para.5). It must be recalled that relaxation is the first purpose of literature, which is usually couched in such other terms as "delight," "entertainment," and "pleasure." This, therefore, is a general function of literature and not the preserve of a single author. Anyone who picks up say, a novel, a play or a book of poetry to read, invariably wants to relax, in other words, to entertain himself or herself except, of course, that person is reading for academic or other extra-recreational purposes. The same is true about theatre experience. Watching live plays generally, whether they be tragic or comic, affords a live audience some degree of relaxation. Even when the emotions of pity and fear are aroused in the audience by a tragic plot, such emotions, as Aristotle provides, are purged at the end.

Conversely too, reading and watching a live performance of certain plays could be counterproductive. A play whose subject replicates an audience's traumatic experience may not afford him any form of relaxation. This is where the question of "escape" in Amadi's claim comes under scrutiny. Therefore, concerning escape, one may not also agree with Amadi entirely. Amadi insists that he, through his plays, provides for his audience a means of escape from the problems of the society. He suggests in his assertion that he carefully avoids recreating in his plays the same societal problems, which, by going to the theatre, the audience hope to avoid. This task which Amadi claims to have always set himself in his dramatic creativity is actually difficult to realize except of course the subjects of his plays are celestial and purely fantastic. Otherwise, there is no subject matter based on terrestrial events that the human audience cannot relate with. Moreover, the kind of response that a subject matter may elicit from an audience depends on many factors most of which are personal. Therefore, there are bound to be positive and negative responses to the exploration of a single subject in a literary work since different humans differ in their experiences, response to emotional issues, and indeed choices. What makes one person laugh may make another cry, and a

subject intended by an author to afford the audience some sort of escape, may end up provoking counter emotions like pain and cry.

The idea of escape is, therefore, relative and if it is one of the “definitive attributes of Amadi's drama” (Koroye, vi) it is indeed a vague one, because one cannot really escape from the problems of the human world. Looking generally at Amadi's plays, one notices that none can be said to have a subject capable of transporting the audience away from the worries of the human society. However, while all the plays of Amadi dramatize serious human concerns and so cannot be said to provide the audience escape, only *Peppersoup* and *The Woman of Calabar* are handled in a manner that provokes sustained laughter in spite of their subjects. *Peppersoup* partly reminds one of Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, the play, which is considered by many as a classical Nigerian comedy. Part of *Peppersoup*'s hilarity derives from its masterful exploration of some events similar to those in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. These are events relating to the problems of clash of personalities, ideas and interests. There is, in both plays, for instance, the prospect and consequent arrival of a sophisticated woman as wife/lover to a local poor man already saddled with a local wife/lover. In *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, the local cocoa-farmer protagonist, Rahman Taslim Lejoka-Brown is expecting the arrival of a proposed wife, Lizy, who is a young American-trained medical doctor: “MD (Yale), M. Sc (Gynaecology)” (1.6).

Similarly in *Peppersoup*, the poor musician protagonist, Ichela is expecting the arrival for marriage of a sophisticated and highly educated London girl, Mavis. As in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, the progression from expectancy, preparation for arrival of the girl, the arrival proper, the new found flamboyant and pretentious life style of the protagonist to impress the woman, the confrontation between the foreign import and the local woman, and the *Deus Ex Machina* kind of resolution by the warring female factions combine to make *Peppersoup* hilarious, and in fact a classic in its own right.

The Woman of Calabar on its part provides the audience with heart-throbbing if not pratfall experiences. “Laughter,” writes Hoy, “is aroused by objects that are in some way ugly and especially by that from which better qualities were hoped” (Hoy, para. 2). Much of the laughter in *The Woman of Calabar* is aroused by the “ugliness” and folly of Mrs. Akrika, a character from whom better qualities were hoped, and whom the author uses as symbol for the perpetrators of the Nigerian evils of inter-ethnic mistrust and negative stereotyping. Mrs.

Akrika's activities in relation to Calabar women generally, and Adia, her son's fiancé in particular, are so ridiculously and humorously handled by the author that they expose not only her foolishness, but also the hypocrisy that characterizes her actions. Thus, when we laugh, we are laughing not just at her, but also at the ugliness of the idea which she represents. Some of the most laughter-provoking situations in the play are: Mr. and Mrs. Akrika's debate over Calabar girls and witchcraft and her tactlessness in exonerating Sparkles, her old Calabar girl friend and school mate, from the same witchcraft, which she presents as endemic in the Calabar milieu; the mechanical or “Jack-in-the-box”-like (Bergson, 26) application and removal of charms intended to dislodge Adia; Mrs. Akrika's brow-beaten countenance twist at the play's climax occasioned by the sudden discovery of Adia's parentage; and the final merriment following the two friends' consent to the marriage of their children.

As earlier noted, the other plays of Amadi have very little to offer in terms of escape and laughter, and this is quite contrary to Amadi's claims. For example, instead of escape and laughter, *Isiburu* provides its audience with the agony of watching a lovable hero fall under the weight of fierce jealousy, bitterness and treachery of his own slave. The said agony of the audience is hurting because they are aware of the fatal plot against the poor hero, but cannot help him to evade it. Nor is the mysterious resurrection of the dead hero capable of providing the audience with escape and laughter; it certainly will make them happy, but such happiness can, at best, elicit momentary relief and, perhaps, a wry smile.

Koroye pays glorious tribute to the wrestling sport as one of the happiness-inducing mechanisms of the play. The wrestling sport is truly an object of delight, but as noted earlier, “not all objects of delight cause laughter” (Hoy, para.5). The wrestling content of *Isiburu* does not cause laughter because it is only as a background issue. At no point in the plot of the play does the author treat his audience – internal or external – to a real wrestling contest; rather they hear of it from the speeches of characters. The closest the audience's emotions come to being aroused in that wise is when *Isiburu* demonstrates to Agbarakwe how he dealt with his opponents in the past, and when he makes incantations of praise to Ebulu the drummer. Apart from the fact that these scenes are capable only to elicit smiles from the audience, they are short-lived and so cannot serve as support for the claim that the play keeps the audience at peace with laughter.

Furthermore, if laughter and escape are absent in *Isiburu*, they

actually deserve no mention in *The Road to Ibadan*, which I consider the cruelest of Amadi's plays. With its subject as the Nigerian civil war, the play instead of providing escape or laughter, fearfully engages the mind of the audience with its plethora of traumatic events including killings, brutality, stealing, estrangement, dislocation, hunger and starvation. Within a few days from the beginning of the play, Wigo, the heroine, loses brother and mother and becomes the only surviving member of her family unsure of survival. She also comes close to being killed many times. Here is Amadi's dramatization of one of Wigo's experiences which ironically makes him guilty of the same offence of cruelty which he accuses committed dramatists of:

... [Firing begins. There's confusion.]

WIGO: Mama, don't run! Stay! Stay!

[Mrs. Weli begins to run]

MRS. WELI: Oh no, I can't. I can't face these soldiers. [She is hit by a bullet.] Ah-a-a-a, I am hit. O God! O God! Ah-a-a-a. [She collapses.]

WIGO: [Screaming.] Mama! Mama! My mother! Soldiers come and kill me too. I want to die. I want to die-o-o-o. [She turns her mother's face upwards. She is dead. Dokubo goes to her side. She screams again.](1.2)

There is no worse cruelty than bringing back such scenes to the very people who are trying very hard to forget the evil and injustice done them in that war, and to heal the wounds inflicted upon their spirits, soul and body by that very carnage. It could be recalled that it was for the avoidance of reopening such old wounds and indeed possible unpalatable reactions from the victims of the war that some scenes from the film version of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (a work on the same war) were once censored.

Concerning *Dancer of Johannesburg*, one could agree to some degree of *escape*, because such nightclub activities in the play as music and dance are capable of providing enjoyment and merrymaking and catapulting a live audience away from the present world of worries and pain. Yet, it must be noted that enjoyment and merry-making are not always synonymous with laughter. However, only two scenes in the nine-scene play are assigned to club activities. One other scene that may provoke some degree of laughter is that in which the true identity of Matiya, the South African dancer, is revealed. Agreed that all the

characters at the scene and indeed the external audience are stunned at the turn of events, the Police Commissioner's pronouncement on Matiya as a "continental heroine" (3.3) is capable of provoking applause from the audience, and an applause, which is a sign of approval, naturally elicits laughter.

Apart from the few nightclub scenes, the play is serious and becomes even more disturbing when it is first revealed that Matiya is a spy for the white racists in South Africa; and this happens very late in the plot. The subject of mistaken identity could have been a wonderful tool for achieving laughter in the play had it been well handled; but Amadi spoils his own soup with the wrong ingredient. The wrong ingredient meant here is suspense; the wrong handling of suspense. By his wrong handling of suspense in the play, Amadi stifles the its laughter-provoking potential. Amadi mismanages suspense while applying it to the development of the interesting subject of mistaken identity in *Dancer of Johannesburg*. Stretching suspense in the play, Amadi suppresses dramatic irony, which is the foundation of ignorance. Obviously, characters/actors' ignorant response to what the audience know provokes laughter in the audience because such a response/action depicts the characters as ignorant, or downright foolish. For the most part of *Dancer of Johannesburg*, the audience are as ignorant as the characters/actors about important issues one of which is the true identity of the heroine. Were the audience aware all along that Matiya was a Professor of Political Science, the characters/actors' speeches and actions indicating that she was nothing but a professional night club dancer would have been laughable. It would, for instance, have been hilarious to hear Binta say to Bello:

What amazes me is that she does not seem to be your type. You are more inclined to the intellectual type; but a dancing girl! My God, men are absolutely unpredictable. Anyway, I can't stand this sort of thing. [Pulls out the ring in her finger.] Here is your ring and good luck with your dancing girl. (2.1)

Similarly, the following discussion between Ekpo and Bello would have elicited sufficient laughter from the audience:

EKPO: She ought to know you couldn't be serious with a night dancer ...

BELLO: I proposed marriage to her at the nightclub three days ago.

EKPO: [*Whistles*] Brother, you are crazy.... [*Laughs mirthlessly.*] That is what all men in love say. [*Changing his voice.*] Oh, no one knows her as well as I do... Listen, you are my best friend. I should give you advice when I think you need it. I believe you need some now. You have had your fling. Drop the girl now. Suppose – God forbid – she decides to marry you, have you thought of the type of life you will lead with a nightclub dancer? (3.1)

In a similar play, Nicholai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, where the subject of mistaken identity is the main machinery of laughter, the audience are aware of the impostor's personality, but the rest of the characters in the play are not, thus, enabling the audience to laugh at their (the characters') foolish attitudes towards the impostor. The same kind of handling was expected in *Dancer of Johannesburg* since the author intended to create laughable situations out of the subject.

CONCLUSION

Emerging from the foregoing study are several conclusions one of which is that Amadi's theatre depicts have commitment to the social and political needs of his African society. The study has revealed that the very aloofness to social and political themes, which characterizes Amadi's novels, is overtly absent in his drama. This, therefore, means that the alleged plan of the author to drown his serious subjects with comic situations in order to appear non-committed failed, and two reasons could be adduced for the failure. One is that the subjects of Amadi's plays are topical issues and problems that have had serious negative impacts on the lives and psyche of the Nigerian/African people. Two is Amadi's fractional knowledge and poor handling of the rudiments of comedy, due, perhaps, to his rather obvious inclination towards tragic artistry. The task of a comic dramatization of such serious social and political subjects of Amadi's plays as enumerated in the study is obviously herculean. While it could have been realisable for an out-and-out comic writer, it was definitely not for a tragedian like Amadi. As Wilson explains,

“... those with a comic view look at the world differently: with a smile or a deep laugh or an arched

eyebrow”, and comedy “writers ...perceive the follies and excesses of human behavior and develop a keen sense of the ridiculous, with the result that they show us things which make us laugh” (181).

As clearly observed in this study, Amadi is not one with a keen, but partial sense of the ridiculous. This is why it is only in *Peppersoup* and *The Woman of Calabar* that one finds a semblance of ridiculous situations that make us laugh. In the other plays, one hardly finds any situation capable of evoking the kind of laughter that Amadi claims to provoke in his audience. Perhaps, it is the seriousness of their subjects that drown whatever comic particles the author may have brought into them.

It must also be stated as part of the conclusion, that relaxation is one of the basic and general functions of literature whether or not it is comic, and that the issue of escape depends on the subject matter of a literary work, and most importantly, on how a subject is handled. That a literary work is classified as a comedy does not mean that it has an automatic capacity to provide its audience with escape from societal problems. Moreover, not all of Amadi's plays are comedies, and so the sweeping statement of his concerning using his plays to keep the audience at peace with laughter is over-generalized. While his comic craft in *Peppersoup* and *The Woman of Calabar* may be commendable, one is at a loss what business *Isiburu*, *The Road to Ibadan* and *Dancer of Johannesburg* have with laughter and escape. Amadi in these three plays falls foul of the same offence for which he condemns committed playwrights. To borrow his line of thought: in going to watch a play, the Nigerian audience wants to relax. But when he is being shown the treachery and wickedness in *Isiburu*, the brutal effects of war in *The Road to Ibadan* and the betrayal of one's people's struggle for freedom in *Dancer of Johannesburg*, all of which he is trying to escape from, I think it is cruel. One had expected that in all of Amadi's plays, the audience will be kept at peace with laughter so that they may be happy with themselves and the world.

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