

**Drama and Prophecy:
The J. P. Clark Paradigm**

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Abstract

*The utilitarian aesthetic of drama cannot be disputed particularly in Africa as it has since held sway and decked itself out from the genesis of the literary drama of the continent. This is because most African dramatists across the boundaries of critical currents have used drama to treat one social issue or the other. This approach to dramatic creativity is an appropriation of drama as a veritable weapon of social reconstruction. No doubt it is a methodological product of the Marxist aesthetics which is home to theatre of Ideology, commitment and radicalism. J. P. Clark is one dramatist of the first generation of playwrights in Africa whose works were widely read and given scholarly attention. Critics have branded him and his contemporaries like Wole Soyinka as dramatists who are at home in the poetics of metaphysical animism or animist metaphysics. Their works come under severe attack from the critics of Marxist persuasion as lacking ideology, commitment and interprets history as static. With the creation of *The Wives' Revolt* an opportunity has been created to look at his new dramatic work from another critical angle. Thus, this paper examines the appropriation of drama for prediction and prophecies using J. P. Clark's *The wives' revolt* as a reference. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with an exploration of the subject of prophecy. We devote the second section to examining drama and prediction or prophesy as dramatized and portrayed in *The wives' revolt*. The third and final section is the conclusion of the literary investigation which holds that J.P. Clark has*

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used the medium of drama to predict or prophesy socio-economic and political events in Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

Prophecy

The dictionary defines prophecy as 'the foretelling or prediction of what is to come'. Prophecy is that which is declared by a prophet and especially a divinely inspired utterance or revelation. Prophecy is therefore the action and function or faculty of a prophet. A closer examination of prophecy reveals that prophecy when given by the prophet can be near or far. The near prophecy is that which materializes in the lifetime of the giver of the prophecy and when it so happens, it gives validity or authenticity to the far prophecy which may not happen in the life time of the prophet. In no written book is this subject of prophecy adequately treated than the Holy Bible. In it there are the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming messiah, which is the first advent of Jesus Christ which were literarily fulfilled and documented in the New Testament. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus himself read a prophecy concerning his coming: 'The spirit of the lord is on Me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim the year of the lord's favour' (Luke4: 18-19) and in Isaiah the prophecy is made that 'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn'(Isaiah 61: 1-2).

In literature, prophecy is about pointing to what will happen in the future by a writer in and with his work. It has no meaning veering away from what the dictionary and the biblical passages have said about it. The playwright's prophecy is found in his phantasmagoria- The imaginary world he creates and populates with characters. On many occasions, writers consciously or unconsciously foretell events with their works. Countless authors have tried to predict what the world will be like in the future from the imaginative science fiction writings of H.G Wells, Arthur C. Clarke and Ray Bradbury, to the bleak writings of George Orwell and

Aldous Huxley. The influence of these writers on the look and function of technological development cannot be ignored. A notable exemplar of a writer that has made universal impact is George Orwell whose prophetic power is displayed in his classic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which is about the futuristic surveillance of society. The Prophetic declaration of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell has come true in many ways. George Orwell predicted ahead of his time— ironically, the prediction parallels present day society in the U.S and in many ways the story *Nineteen Eighty Four* predicted many truths about present day global society, truths such as illegal prostitution, brainwashing...

The wives' revolt

Considering the question of African writers and prophecy, J. P. Clark is one African, who has instituted himself as a playwright with prophetic powers. The merit of this assertion is drawn from the significations given by his only high comedy, in his pantheon of poetic drama, *The wives' revolt*. The play is a bifacial discourse: it treats sexism and feminism, a universal debate in the world's literary circle at the peripheral level. Thus, it presents Clark as a social realist dramatist. And as an allegory, it dramatizes the age long conflict between the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian Federal Government. It is interesting to note that *The wives' revolt* published in 1990 was first staged in 1985. From 1985 to 2005 when the political reforms conference of Olusegun Obasanjo held, is a period of 20 years. The implication to be underscored is that Clark predicted the historic walk out of the 2005 political reforms conference by the Niger Delta representatives on June 14th in 1985 when he wrote *The wives' revolt*.

In the drama, the story of how the women of Erhuwaren walk out on their men and husbands is vividly dramatized. This is as a result of the allocation of oil money given to the community by an oil company. The men who are in control of the communal government share the money into three parts to the elders of the town, the men in all age groups and the women in their age grades respectively. The men give themselves two parts while the women are given just one part. They consequently

condemned the sharing as discriminatory. The women under the leadership of Koko stage a walk out on the men to bring the men to register their protest and demand for justice.

Clark in this drama paints with predictive colour, mathematical clarity, methodical and clinical precision a representational image of the age long economic dislocation suffered by the Niger Deltans leading to the consistent clamour for self determination and resource control. The walking out of the women of Erhuwaren on their men is likened to the failure of the South-South people's agitation for a significant derivation formula at both the committee level and the floor of the general house. This is precisely the point that packaged Clark as a prophetic dramatist. Clark also gives cerebral political attention to the play by highlighting truths about injustice and human rights violation by the political class in their bid to secure peace. The change of the thinking and beliefs by the men of Erhuwaren about their relationship with women, their wives and the need for both genders to be equally treated is a normative social reconstruction position proposed as an honest contribution to the regional identity struggle, national peace and stability.

J. P. Clark is therefore the literary Joseph of the Niger delta who could and did foretell what would happen in the future. His commitment to the vision of social reconstruction is manifest in the drama. Again in the same drama, Clark re-characterized the thinking of the patriarchal authority of Erhuwaren and makes them to accept the women they have been oppressing as equal partners of progress. Thus in that power packed satiric comedy, Clark gives prophetic indicator to the political reformations put in place the Niger Delta at par with her counter parts in the nation developmentally. At the reclamation beat of the play Okoro the mouth piece of the community and a very strong defender of the patriarchy announces after resolving the conflict with the women of Erhuwaren:

Erhuwaren! Erhuwaren! Listen carefully, all you! Open your ears wide so that you may hear well.

The town has been brought together; all quarters, sections and shades of opinion, as from this moment,

are reconciled and reunited with one voice....
Right now let nobody pour petrol on a fire that is
already dying down in all household ...
It is enough to say that husbands will continue to share
with their wives whatever fortune comes their way.

This resolution at the end of the play suggests very strongly by figurative inference that the Niger Deltans have been taken along by the federal government as equal partners of progress.

Thus the choice of Dr. Good luck Jonathan as PDP vice presidential candidate and his eventual victory and swearing in as Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is a telling outcome of Clark's prediction in *The wives' revolt*. And this is a significant dividend of the Niger Delta clamour for a fair deal honoured by the Nigerian government, the allegorical men of Clark's Erhuwaren community.

J. P. Clark and prediction of Niger Delta women's social protest

Another angle from which the prophecy of JP Clark is seen as dramatized in *The Wives' Revolt* is the use of women as agents of social protest. Except for the interpretations of post-modern feminist scholarship, orthodox wisdom significantly undervalues the role of women as important agency in the discourse of social protest, anomie and other forms of collective political actions (Ukeje 2002: 1). Women have in the past been viewed and treated as non-politicians whose primary constituency is the household. They are also in some ways circumscribed by culture orchestrated by the patriarchy. But today, the wave of feminism has transformed women from the masters of the kitchen to participating in political decision-making affairs of their societies. Historically, women have taken the responsibility to confront instituted authorities and policies that are considered inimical to society.

In Nigeria, no other history of women's political activism can be more telling than the Aba and Egba women's Riot in the then eastern and western Regions of Nigeria in opposition to obnoxious laws particularly those of taxation imposed on them. Recently, women's protest is assuming a new prominence in defining the thrusts and limitations of community

protests within oil producing communities as witnessed in the re-gendering of social protest (2). This is a phenomenon Clark predicted in his dramatic universe some decades ago before it happened in real life.

This section of the predictive power of Clark is justified by the revolt of Niger delta women against the oil companies in the 21st century Nigeria. In the drama women protested against their men for the discriminatory sharing of the oil money given to the community of Erhuwaren. The men by allegorical deduction represent the Nigerian government. It is therefore obvious that their protest was not directed at the oil company. This thinking could flaw any attempt to interpret the women's protest in *The Wives' revolt* as pointing to women's revolt against oil companies in the western Niger Delta. More to the point is that the women in their protest made a case for gender equality and women empowerment. But good literature does not construct a single metaphor in a single work. Since the protesting women of Erhuwaren are the metaphorical people of the Niger Delta and the Niger Delta is occupied and populated by both the male and female gender, Clark may have thought of an epoch in the Niger Delta struggle in which women will be compelled to embark on social protest for the betterment of the society.

The event of women's social protest dramatized in *The wives' revolt* which was written and produced in 1985 received physical manifestation in year 2002. This year is significant in the history of protest by oil bearing communities against oil producing companies and the Nigerian government who degrade the ecology, marginalize these communities socio-economically for perpetual political dominance. It is the era in which the women of the Niger Delta precisely Ijaw and Itsekiri women laid siege on oil producing companies like Chevron Texaco. While the Itsekiri women of Ogorodo took over the Escravos oil tank farm the Ijaw women of Gbaramatu and Egbema Kingdoms under protest occupied four oil flow stations located at Abiteye, Maraba/Otunana, Dibi and Alero Creek belonging to Chevron for eleven days. J.P. Clark assumes the voice of a prophet with his apposite prediction of the women's revolt in the Niger delta.

The same reasons which galvanized the wives of *The wives' revolt* against their men resurfaced in the Niger delta women's struggle for liberation in the Warri district. J.P. Clark must have thought about the strong-willed nature of the Niger delta struggle and the possibility of including women to be part of the struggle. The women's revolt therefore communicates deep-rooted disenchantment with the prevailing social order. The drafting of women to the Niger delta struggle as dramatized in *The wives' revolt* presents Clark as one writer who believes in symbolic interactionism which underscores the fact that the protestation of others affects and attracts potential protesters. Such world revolutionary epochs like the French revolution, the America war of independence and the Black Americans struggle for identity are historical struggles of inspiration. The struggles for a better deal by territories and people all over the world who are oppressed have affiliation with symbolic interactionism. The explanation to be given to this Herbert Bulmer's theory is that women in the Niger delta seen through the prompting of dramatic universe in *The wives' revolt* the women's revolt in life is influenced by the revolt of men and by the deep sorrow and suffering in the region which they share with men. To confirm this theory of symbolic interactionism, it is pertinent to quote the claim of the revolting Ijaw women in the Warri district who decided to take the driver's seat to make the federal government and the oil Companies more sensitive to the yearnings and aspirations of their people. The women argue that in the past:

Our youths used to do this for us but the Government and oil companies would label them as terrorists, mobile soldiers to trail and kill them. But this time around, harmless women are in charge; let us hear their next story. Maybe, they would say we are armed invaders (Cited by Ukeje2002: 9).

In this drama Clark employs the idioms of the peculiar environment of the Niger delta to draw attention to its dilemmas and predicaments in the troubled country called Nigeria. The most politically radical of Clark's themes and rhetoric are to be found in *The Wives' Revolt* (Darah: 2008:7).

This play therefore positions Clark the dramatist as the conscience of the Niger delta region. It indicates quite strongly and clearly that his commitment to writing is first to his society.

Conclusion

We have established the fact that the dramatic medium can be appropriated for prophecies and predictions in society. J.P. Clark predicts the conflicting relationship between the oil bearing communities of the Niger Delta and the Federal Government on account of the crude oil of the region. The conflict over the derivation formula at the 2005 political reforms conference and the walking out of the south-south people due to the unacceptable sharing of the oil revenue is a clear case of prediction. More so, the participation of women in the Niger Delta struggle for social justice and social reconstruction dramatized in *The Wives' Revolt* is another angle to the prophetic pointing of J. P. Clark.

J. P. Clark's writings and their prophetic dividends establish the fact that writers are active members of social reconstruction crusade; they are nationalists and nation builders. Clark's use of drama for prophecies and predictions strongly demonstrate and defends the theory of drama as a tool for the building of the human society.

Note

This paper is based on a privileged information from Professor Clark when we visited him at his country home at kiagbodo in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State.

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