

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS A CRUSADER OF SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION: AN EVALUATION OF SOME SELECTED AFRICAN PLAYS

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Abstract

*No one can gainsay the need for social reform, social advancements and social engineering in our present day society; drama helps in attitudinal change and ethical reorientation. It attempts to change the society and deal with social problems according to the dramatist' perception of what an ideal society should look like. Some of the present societal ills our nation is currently battling with include corruption, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, drug/substance abuse and illicit drug business, incessant strike, dwindled educational standard, youth restiveness, oppression and intimidation of the poor, hypocrisy and deception, insurgency and civil unrest and lots more. This study evaluates the dramatist role as a crusader, vanguard and social commentator in projecting social realities and advocating for a better society by reflecting the dichotomy between the bourgeoisies and the proletariats through their works, as portrayed, be it in the dialogue or by inferences in the subtext. Also the study examines their Marxist ideological standpoint. Hence the following plays were critically assessed; Sam Ukala's *The Last Heroes*, and Femi Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road* and *Once upon Four Robbers*, using the case study and content analysis approach of qualitative research method.*

Introduction

The essence of any work of art is its relevance to humanity and society at large. In other words, every work of art is supposed to chronicle what goes on in the society. Art is never created in a vacuum and an artist does not create outside of the society since art itself is a reflection of the society. The artist conceives the idea he wants to create through his experiences and happenings in the society.

Consequently, the society provides the raw materials that the artist uses to convey his message. The artist is seen as a 'god' while his works are seen as his creations, and such works are meant to be a representation of what the society was at the time of creating them.

This is succinctly stated by Babatunde Lawal:

Art, be it sculpture, dance, drama poetry, architecture, painting, textiles, graphics, and music is much more than its material representation. It is an embodiment of a special intelligence with which man refines his immediate environment, transforming common place materials into something of higher value (1-2).

Drama as an art form, is a mode of human communication, it comes from the Greek word 'dran' which means 'to do'. It is something done and it is concerned with action, with doing and seeing. Drama, according to Taylor (11) is a collaborative group art form where people transform, act, and reflect upon the human condition. Drama holds up a mirror for us to examine ourselves, deepening our understanding of human motivation and behavior.

Dramatists can also be likened to 'town criers' who lampoons social idiosyncrasy in order to make human society and living worthwhile. No wonder Domba Asomba opines that "the theatre has the persuasive power to evoke, to rejuvenate, reconstruct and redirect the mind for positive thinking" (318). The dramatist is meant to highlight the problems inherent in the society, so that the audience can reflect on it and make necessary adjustment, the main reason why theatre is said to be a mirror of the society. The audience watches his/her foibles and strength being enacted and just like one looks into the mirror, whatever you are not comfortable with in your reflection you make adjustments, same applies to the audience. Nwabueze elucidates further:

Dramatist like other serious artists, are involved in tackling the problems inherent in their society. The committed artist must

engage in using his art to make his audience conscious of the shortcomings of his society. He is like a referee who tries to correct those that violate the rules of the game, the game of life. (163)

Social commentary which is the act of exploring, commenting and seeking available means of projecting and tackling social issues with the aim of ensuring and actuating positive change in attitude and behavior of the society members by informing, enlighten and educating them about the happenings in their environment, in order to appeal to their sense of reasoning and judgment; is also a pivotal role of the contemporary dramatist. One the tenets of realism states that 'arts must depict truthfully the real, physical world' (Brockett 383) therefore, in applying this theory, the playwright is meant to observe critically and objectively, contemporary issues and artistically present the happenings around him in his text. What better platform can this great feat be achieved if not through drama? Consequently, this study will look carefully into some select plays that have attempted to make comments on the happenings in our contemporary society.

The Interplay between Drama and Marxism

Marx's analysis of society provides theatre theory and practice an understanding of its relationship with social happenings as it is now insisted that theatre must always be the mirror of all times held up to nature. Marx' theory of surplus and used value clearly defines two classes of people in the society. The labourer and the employers of labour, he observed that the energy of the laborer is always exploited upon for meager wages. This always leaves the employer with surplus value derived from the used value of the labourer. According to Terry Eagleton, Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression. (vii)

Based on Eagleton's definition, it can be deduced that contemporary dramatists are meant to reflect in their creative work the struggles between these two classes of people that exist in the society-the bourgeoisie and proletariat

Hence, the need to have that basic knowledge of the Communist Manifesto written by Marx and Engels which is the first most important

document of orthodox Marxism in it, it was theorized that the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle. The struggle arises as a result of the contradiction between the means of production and its distribution. The wealth of the upper class which is obtained as a result of oppression and repression of the mass of people is the source of the continuous struggle. The upper class in an attempt to sustain their status must continue to amass more of the wealth as well as control the apparatus of state which is an instrument of power. (Spark Note. com NP)

It was envisioned in the manifesto that the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat as a result of the exploitation by the bourgeoisie which will come to its heights and become unbearable for the proletariat, thus, they will lead a revolution. However, this revolution will be of a different character than all previous ones; previous revolutions simply reallocated property in favor of the new ruling class. Nevertheless, by the nature of their class, the members of the proletariat have no way of appropriating property. Therefore, when they obtain control they will have to destroy all ownership of private property, and classes themselves will disappear.

The Manifesto argues that this development is inevitable, and that capitalism is intrinsically unstable. The Communists intend to promote this revolution, and will promote the parties and associations that are moving history towards its natural conclusion. They argue that the elimination of social classes cannot come about through reforms or changes in government. Rather, a revolution will be required (SparkNotes Editors.com NP).

Gbilekaa observes that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' concept of literature is class conscious; "it de-emphasized the metaphysical but lays emphasis on men and their ability to make history". (39) He also defines Marxism as a philosophy of praxis which aims at the radical transformation of human reality based on a dialectical interpretation of history. The aim is to destroy capitalism in order, "to establish a society in which humanity can give free rein to its essential powers, frustrated, denied, postponed and emasculated for so long".(40)

In drama, Marxist inclination can be portrayed in predominant dramatic themes, actions, conflicts, myth and message, songs, dialogue, cultural emphasis, race, gender, sex and socio-political imitation. Playwrights are meant to transcend from being just passive observers of reality but should be actively engaged in not merely entertaining but also challenging the

status quo and leading a crusade against prevalent social, political, religious and economic maladies ravaging the society and seek means to emancipate the society from the hands of the oppressor by raising the consciousness of the masses to their condition.

Lenin's advice to artist on literature as captured by Gbilekaa in his book *Radical Theatre in Nigeria* upholds that 'literature should not be an undertaking that would bring material benefits to groups or individuals. Rather, artists should join other progressives in fighting the cause of the proletariat. In other words, the politically conscious artists should chart the course of revolutionary struggle'. (41). Based on the above statement the rest of this paper will explore, examine and analyze some selected plays projecting and highlighting their Marxist inclination.

A Clarion Call for Societal Reconstruction in *Once Upon Four Robbers*

The playwright uses the metaphor of armed robbery to portray the state of the nation and to make the audience think critically and rationally as to who the real robbers are in Nigeria, exposing us to a lot of social issues ravaging our country. The playwright is not in support of the punishment of death the government put in place then to serve as a deterrent to armed robbers who he believes are 'products of our unjust society' (iv). He opines that the action of the government cannot be justified if certain measures are not put in place first. He explicates:

The legalized slaughtering of the erring members of our society for whatever offence will certainly not bring the restoration of our society to its primordial sanity. Take a look at our salary structures, at the minimum wage level, count the sparse number of lucky ones who even earn it... and then take a look at the squalid spending habits of our egregious 'contractor' land speculators, middle men of all sorts, importers, exporters etc. or take a look at our sprawling slums and ghettos, our congested hospitals and crowded schools , our impossible markets... and take another look at the fast proliferation of motor-cars, issuance agencies, supermarkets, chemist shops, boutiques, discotheques etc. the callous contradictions our oil-doomed fantasies of rapid modernization.(vi)

Nwabueze also shares the same view he puts it thus:

Osofisan seems to argue that armed robbery and other social crimes are products of our social system and cannot be eradicated, or even reduced, through legal means but through a complete reconstruction of the system. (172)

Let's take a critical look at the text. The playwright presents a notorious gang that has wrecked so much havoc, raided big stores and market, wasted lives, spilt blood, stole cars and caused a whole lot of havoc. Yet they are still not planning to quit despite the new decree and the fact that their leader has just been executed. Aafa advises they quit and look for gainful employment, but they argue that it is only the low paying jobs that are available.

The real problem of these people is greed, lust for immediate gratification and this 'get-rich-quick syndrome' destroying today's youth, no one is ready to persevere a bit and work hard legitimately to earn their wealth, no one wants to do the odd jobs but they want easy way out. Aafa sees it as Pride. He says

Your pride! Is that it? The eloquent pride of the masses! Will that feed you, clothe you? Shelter your children? Will it halt the bullets when your backs are tied to the stakes? (19)

The robbers argue that they are not the only thieves but there are some that are in privileged positions but are equally thieves like them if not worse.

...what does it matter? For those not in the privilege position to steal government files, award contracts...alter accounts...swear affidavit...grant sick leaves ...sell contraband...(24)

Looking at it critically one can agree with them that the situation is true of our nation, the crime being committed with pen by government officials far outweighs these robber's atrocity. Aafa promises to help them get rich but they must promise him three things, not to rob the poor, to rob only public places and never to take a human life. He gives them a supernatural power that will enable them to sing and cast a sleeping spell on their victims and then cart away with their belongings. They tried it twice on the market women and it worked and they were able to make away with the women's profit.

From the market women's song, we can deduce some of the social problems ravaging our country like greed and selfishness which makes them to inflate the prices of goods unnecessarily; some even go as far as selling fake goods, contrabands and expired goods to the detriment of unsuspecting buyers. The lyrics reflects their greed

*The work of profit
brought us to this world...
The lure of profit
has conquered our souls
and changed us into cannibals...*

*We make inflation
and hoard away
as much as we may relish
essential commodities
like sugar and salt
like milk and oil
so we can leave the market
each day a-rolling in wealth!*

*The lust of profit
keeps us in this world
this life that is a market,
refuse to join and perish
rebel and quench
For those who spit at gold,
Otosiasinniwaye!*

Ajidahun has this to say about their song:

The song is an indictment on the greedy business men and women in the society who use their ventures to exploit and oppress the masses through hoarding and creation of arbitrary and unjustifiable increase in prices of goods and services. Whenever these people are attacked by armed robbers, they will put the blame on the robbers and on the inability of the police to curb armed robbery in the country whereas they too are robbers and economic saboteurs. The poor die gradually in their hands as a result of their lust for profit and craze for wealth. (119)

The soldiers building the execution platform also discusses some of the social problems. One of which is religious exploitation by some religious bigots, those apostles on the beach, who earn their living at the expense of desperate miracle seekers. In our country today there is proliferation of these fake prophets. Owning churches and prayer houses now is a flourishing business and they have made away with monies and properties of their gullible victims.

Soldier 2: Na religion, you don't know? We have abounding faith in miracles; ask any of the flourishing apostles on the beach. (57)

The platform they are building has been awarded to a contractor who has collected the money but refused to do the job and he will not be punished because he has greased the palm of the necessary people. That is the reason we have so many abandoned government projects in Nigeria, bad roads, dilapidated government buildings etc. More so, some of the contracts that should be awarded to Nigerians are given to expatriate and some of them even bring workers from their country to work for them in Nigeria, while most of our youths are roaming the street without being gainfully employed.

The theme of oppression is evident in the play, the 'tales of the powerless against the strong' but Major envisions that this will only last for a short time because according to him:

By tomorrow, that law will change. The poor will seize it and twist its neck. The starving will smash the gates of the supermarkets; the homeless will no longer yield in fear to your bulldozers. And your children, yes your dainty little children will be here where I stand now on the firing block...(85)

Our nation is full of hypocrites and sycophants and the guilty are always the first that wants to throw stones at offenders. The market women who are shouting that the robbers deserve to die and should be shot, they are equally guilty of the same offence, though theirs is silent and in other forms, which does not also make it justifiable. Their claims:

Mama Toun: how can we live, if profits lower or ceases?

Mama Alice: How shall we survive, if the price control officer refuses to be bribed?

Therefore, their only available means is to rob from their victims-the buyers by hoarding their goods and inflating their prices. Also sergeant and his squad succeed in arresting the gang but instead of handing over all the money recovered from the robber's loot to the government, they silently cornered to go and share without the knowledge of the government. So the question is this who are the real thieves? Ajidahun shares the same concern:

It is ridiculous to see a great number of the people in the society wallowing in poverty while the rich people are openly and arrogantly displaying their wealth without having the slightest

compassion for the poor. This situation breeds crimes. It is absurd for such people who bulldoze themselves to the leadership positions in the society to pass a death sentence on the poor robbers who resort to armed robbery as protest against the injustice and other socio-economic forces in the society. (118)

The playwright has been able to expose us to the anomalies in our society, to come out of this oppression there is need for the oppressed to be united. Hassan says 'we are doomed, my brother and only our solidarity saves us from the cutting of the cord, earth to earth'. The playwright advises that we need to change our attitude and reasoning as citizens and the government should place as a priority the provision of basic needs and amenities and ensure equal distribution of wealth, until all these has been put in place, the hunting down of robbers and their execution will all be mere futility of efforts and may not yield the desired result. According to the playwright, he hopes that the play will:

...change our attitude from passive acceptance or sterile indignation into a more dynamic, more enraged determination to confront ourselves and our lives, else the four robbers will continue to rule our streets. (vi)

The play ends on a stalemate with the audience left to decide who the real thieves are, the robbers or the soldiers, whose back should be tied to the stake for execution? This playwright through his work has been able trigger and actuate the audience' reasoning to take action towards correcting the abnormalities in the societies by enabling the audience to know the root cause of our societal problems, hence our collective and individual roles in its transformation.

Overpowering the Powerful in *Red is the Freedom Road*

This play portrays the struggles, travails and conquest of the slaves who represent the oppressed and their oppressor the king. The slaves who were once princesses, kings, soldiers etc. but now captives and treated as second class citizens in a dehumanizing and cruel way. Ibidun explains their travails:

Our masters have become more cruel with us. Each day their whips cut deeper into our skins. They harness our women to their chariots; feed our children to their god. The men have waited long enough for you. Now the suffering multiplies. They're beginning to lose hope. You have done nothing for them. (117)

The people look to Akanji to liberate them from the burden of slavery, he plans to help by pretending to the king to be in his service as Bashorun, slave prince and commander of the king's force, though Ibidun his wife does not understand it as first but sees it as a betrayal. At the long run Akanji secretly builds a formidable and powerful force amongst his fellow slaves who were once soldiers to fight for their emancipation, he promises to lead them to war '...war! But it shall be the war of freedom! (131)

Some of the soldiers in the play like many people today doubt the potency of war to obtain peace and freedom judging from historical events, the outcome of war never brings peace but bitterness and more bloodshed:

1st Soldier: first you have the revolution, the revolt, or the coup d'état. The killing to end all killing. Oppression to punish oppressors. Detention to banish detention. And every one prepares for peace.

2nd Soldier: but peace never comes. For peace never comes

1st Soldier: neither peace nor prosperity. Not even freedom. For new tyrants mount again. (133)

The oppressed overpowered the oppressor and gained their freedom but Akanji did not survive to witness this new era of change. His last words:

...I have set our men free. Look! They dance there, happy in their dancing. They are the rulers now. I will bring the message home: our men are no longer slaves; I have placed their bottoms on a throne...(137)

Akanji did not die as a coward but as a hero and a martyr sacrificing his life for the freedom of his people. This play is a call to conscientize and wake us up from our laxity and resignation to fate but to take collective action towards being liberated from the oppressed. Paulo Freire is also opposed to this attitude of laxity, he asserts:

...the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires...they prefer gregariousness to authentic comradeship; they prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom. (Freire 48)

That is our state in Nigeria, most of us have grown to be comfortable with our oppressed and dehumanized state and it has graduated from laxity to complacency. In the struggle for humanization Paulo Freire sees a need for 'a radical requirement...they must cease to be things and fight as men and women'. (68). this is also in line with the message of this play that the pursuit of freedom may be bloody but it is worthwhile if the desired change will be achieved at the long run.

Dwindled Educational Standard in Ukala's *The Last Heroes*.

The play depicts a clash between the Academic staff congress of an imaginary Isma University and the prevailing government of the day. The congress embarks on strike to drive home their point to the government. Some of the issues they are agitating for include; underpayment of teaching staff, a professor according to a character in the play is 'on the salary of a cleaner at the bank, of a gate man in the oil industry''(82). Another one is lack of infrastructure for effective research and study. Nnamdi Laments:

...what education are we pretending to have without chemicals in our labs, without books in our libraries? What research can they do in emptiness? What peace of mind could they have when all they see is the cruel darkness of their children's future and the voided legacy of their own existence? (87).

Osawu adds about the deplorable state of the institution and tries to justify the action of the congress:

...we thought we were at liberty to demand facilities for our work-chemicals in the labs, current books and journals in the library, machines and tools in the engineering workshop, equipment for clinical, stationery, chalk, common chalk, more classrooms, chairs, desks, etc. we thought we were at liberty to ask for offices for hundreds of our colleagues who pace the corridors in their free periods. We thought we could ask for minimum furnishing of the few available offices, and for a pay that would enable us live and think a trifle better than beasts. We thought sound education was the key to technological advancement. We thought sound education was a safeguard of our children's future... (105).

This paints a vivid picture of the educational state in our country; most of the government institutions are suffering from gross lack of infrastructure, inadequate academic and non-academic staff, low and

slash of salaries, non-payments of areas and lots more. These and many other reasons have made the standard of education in Nigeria to dwindle. Even the issue of incessant strike has also crippled our educational system and disrupted the academic calendar of so many institutions.

Most of our very brilliant minds and erudite scholars have gone out of the country for greener pastures and the very few patriotic ones that decide to come home are also being frustrated and made to regret their decision. For Prof. Bayo Ibitayo in the play, against the wish and despite the pleas of his family members he decides to quit his job as a promising and valued lecturer overseas to relocate as a patriotic citizen in order to contribute his own quota. He says:

It makes me feel that my colleagues down home aren't patriotic enough. It challenges me to go back to Isma and demonstrate greater commitment to nation building. A thorough research need to be done to determine the causes of the collapse our educational system and the possible remedies. Committed Ismites will be needed to make that study and to apply the remedies. And I want to be counted among them. (98)

The issue of leadership tussle and misplaced leaders is also well captured in the play. Danbaba who is the deputy vice chancellor and also just a senior lecturer but rose to that height as a result of his connections with those at the helm of affairs in the government. Prof Obiora Opara, a renowned Prof. in his field is relieved of his post and in his place, Dr. Sule Danbaba appointed. This very mistake of putting a square peg in a round hole, crumbles totally the institution.

In the second part of the play Danbaba the Senior Lecturer who was the Deputy Vice Chancellor that toppled his Vice Chancellor, succeeds in ruining and crumbling the university system under his leadership.

AMINA: for how many years more will you be vice-chancellor?

ALHAJI: Nine, if there'd still be students. Many students now abandon the university in pursuit of money. Just like you did.

AMINA: I didn't leave the University to pursue money; I left because the University began to stink like an overflowing pit latrine (124).

He sacked all those who were not in support of him thereby losing the most patriotic and erudite lecturers, he also made the former vice chancellor to get a five-year jail term. After sacking professor Ibitayo he offers him a demeaning job as a personnel Officer in his brewery and

continues his oppression, subjugation and bestiality to his subordinates-brewery workers. He handles them with high-handedness, with the least self-esteem. Bayo reveals this about Danbaba:

...he spends the University money like a hen in a tray of corn, eating and scattering...within a year of being vice chancellor on an annual salary of N60,000, he spent N30,000,000 to establish that brewery. (119)

Alhaji Danbaba calls the police to arrest Bayo his worker for an alleged offence, but in a twist of event, he is arrested instead, the policemen happens to be the lecturers he sacked from the university who later joined the police force in order to cleanse the system of the corruption that has ravaged and crumbled the system; these people together with Osawu a former lecturer now in a pitiable condition, Amina his former student now his lover, Nnamdi former student union executive who disguised as a waiter all these while in the brewery. Towards the end of the play, these characters unite together to mete out the right punishment to Alhaji who is now their captive. They metaphorically strip him of his position, conduct a funeral rite for him and wrap his remains in a calico.

The play portrays vividly the oppressive and repressive structure in the imaginary Isma Society. Alhaji who is also Dr. Danbaba a character in the play is a metaphor of the oppressor in the society. The oppressed in the play unites to overpower the oppressor and establish a new order for the society and a “ new law court, the court of true justice” (49), relating it with Marxism which establishes a reaction against the evils perceived in the industrial sector, where the working class is exploited by the owners of private capital. Marx envisaged that workers will unite to overthrow their oppressor and create an egalitarian, classless society in which wealth will be shared equally.

Conclusion

The dramatist is meant to be relevant to his society; he is sometimes seen as a social critic, a commentator, a prophet, a propagandist, a teacher, an educator, an entertainer, a reformer, a crusader, a seer and even a politician. The role of a dramatist has always been a pivotal one to the overall development of his/her immediate society. The dramatist is meant to comment on the issues of his time through his works and he/she can even go further to suggest solutions to the existing problems or predict through the power of his art the future and create a framework for his

desired end result, by either proffering solution, enlightening, mobilizing and “conscientizing” (borrowing Friere’s word) his audience towards joint effort in tackling the problem. Most of all these dramatists mentioned in this work have played prominent roles through their arts in developing, educating, mobilizing and changing the orientation of their target audience positively through their art.

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