

DRAMA AND SOCIAL CRITICISM: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This paper focuses on social criticism particularly unhealthy imitations and corruption among institutions and individuals of governance, financial institutions and individuals. It argues that these malaise is on the rise, and that is detrimental to African and Nigerian societies. It further argues that such imitations are in the areas of language, fashion, music and entertainment. These unhealthy imitations of foreign cultures and corruption have been traced from colonialism to independence. Our African culture has become Eurocentric instead of being Afrocentric in thoughts and actions. Chinweizu observed that Africans have imposed Eurocentric on themselves. According to him "what Europe do, we automatically assume it is a standard we must imitate in order to look like the whiteman. As such, we have lost our ability to define ourselves". This essay explores Marxist theory and textual analytical methodology to examine the dramas of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and Frank Ogbeche's *Harvest of Corruption* in order to expose corruption, and its repercussions on the corrupt persons. This essay de-emphasizes corruption and encourages people to be creative to have a robust economy, and that corrupt individual or group should not go scot-free, and by so doing, Nigeria and Africa would be better and safer places to live in. Unhealthy imitation and corruption could be remedied through self-realization, creativity, morality and upholding our value system.

KEY WORDS: UNHEALTHY-IMITATION, CORRUPTION, REPERCUSSIONS, and
REMEDY.

Introduction

This paper focuses on social criticism in Nigeria, and studies the dramas of Frank Ogbeche's *Harvest of Corruption*, Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, conclusion, and recommendations. Drama is one of the three major parts of literature. The other two are – poetry and prose. They are written and unwritten drama with common dramatic elements such as scripts, actions, stage and audience. Definition of drama is always a herculean task because of the dynamic nature of human existence which it portrays. However, people define drama according to their limit of experience about life. J.C.de Graft defines drama as an art form which seems to cover almost every aspect of social expression..., and capable of drawing on all life for its raw material, but also it does and must utilize the pulsating raw material of actual human bodies, attributes, and behaviour as the sine qua non of its very medium of expression (*African Literature Today*, 3). Drama is a serious play for the theatre, television or radio.

M.H. Abrams takes drama to be a literary form designed for the theatre, in which actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated action, and utter the written dialogue (*Glossary of Literary Terms*, 45). Action in drama achieves a greater sense of reality than either action in the novel or in the poetry. Innocent Nweze defines drama as an art form which converts mental ideas into tangible, through the use of words which lead to positive or negative human and nonhuman actions (*Drama and Theatre in Education* 1). Drama portrays real life events and exposes real human conditions. It invokes images of the past, elaborates on the present and prepares grounds for a better future. The dramas of Frank Ogbeche's *Harvest of Corruption* and Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* discuss corruption, its influences, consequences and repercussions upon the corrupt people in the Nigerian society.

Drama and Social Criticism in Nigeria

What this paper regards as social criticism refers to the playwright's sensibilities and attitudes

to the prevailing issues in his society. The two reference playwrights whose works will be discussed in this study use their own society as the mirror of the larger society. They dig up social issues ravaging their societies and dramatize them to the larger world. Their aim is usually to force a change in social behaviour. Drama takes its themes from the problems associated with human beings, it also uses these problems to criticize society. Drama holds a mirror up to life, and while it uses tragedy to excite our emotions of pity and fear, it utilizes comedy in exposing folly to ridicule and laughter. Since drama takes its subjects from the events that take place in our every day life, it then becomes an effective means of social criticism. The playwright reflects on one or more aspects of the intense corruption, religious hypocrisy, cultural conflict and ideological struggles in a society. African critics like Chinweizu maintains that a writer needs to be committed to the problems of his society, and should try, through his art, to rectify the ills of the society. For him, commitment is a matter of orientation, a matter of perceiving social realities, and making these realities available in the works of art, in order to help promote understanding and preservation of positive change in the society's norms and values (Towards the Decolonization of African Literature, 253). The writer in all parts of the world has always seen himself as the custodian of the moral conscience of his society, as well as the regulator of social behaviour that tells the truth as much as possible, and clears all forms of doubts to the best of his knowledge in every situation.

Obviously, African and European contacts have a lot of merits like formal education, technology transfer and demerit is that Christianity denigrates African culture and introduces individualism in place of collective enterprise. It preaches "selfhood" instead of communitarian relationship which was African identity. Slavery, colonialism and foreign religions resulted in other foreign life-styles in Africa. Ferdinand Chukwuagozie Ezekwonna quotes Bujo who observes that:

African Theologians are aware that something has truly been lost and more are still disappearing. Therefore, the modernity that makes these cultural values to disappear should be the concern for Africa. Because at the end of the day, an African remains an African and a European remains a European as echoed by Senghor who said that "However we may

be influenced by Europe, our realities are not identical (African Communitarian Ethic: the basis for the Moral Conscience and Autonomy of the Individual 220).

It is quite indubitable that every part of the world has a culture which their people cherish so much and assume it to be perfect. As people migrate from place to place to acquire love, a greener pasture, and civilization, their culture also civilizes with them. From migration, culture contact starts by one imitates the other, country imitates another country, and continent imitates another continent. Without social criticism, culture as a living being would stagnate and there would be no cross-fertilization of ideas, creativity and healthy competition. Culture contact operates in different ways, through intermarriages, education, religion, technology, economic ventures and policy transfer. Demian Opata is of the opinion that:

Cultures like individuals need to be open to other cultures, to receive and to give in inter-cultural dialogue. Cultural "purity" is a very dangerous myth that can arrest a people's growth and impose false ideas of superiority on them. It has been generally observed that cultures are much more enriched by borrowing than by invention (African Perspectives in World Culture, 565).

The concern of this paper is that modernity has estranged the family system, and has permitted individualism and undue privacy to have gained grounds in African and Nigerian tradition and culture. This is a threat to African culture which formerly united religious and secular forces as one. Under colonial condition, culture became emaciated and generally lost relevance. Christianity succumbs to the will of God as the centre of every creation, and it talks more about God than human beings. Before the advent of colonialism, Africans balanced her religion to revolve around the well being, meaning and the goal of human life, promoted individual and community interest, and used God as a parameter to judge inter-human relationship and responsibility. Also, Ferdinand Chukwuagozie Ezekwonna posits that:

Africans understand very well why the centre of their activities is on man who is a creature of God. They believe that if people relates properly to one another, they are pleasing God as well as relating to God. This is why African religion talks

more about man than God believing that whoever respects human dignity will find favour with God (African Communitarian Ethic: the basis for the Moral Conscience and Autonomy of the Individual116).

Another aspect of social criticism is on the rapid disappearance of the African traditional or informal method of educating children. This was based on the extended family system where everybody helped in the enforcement of informal education, and children saw their parents, relatives and community as their teachers. This has been toppled by the modern education where children see their parents as ignorant, relatives as strangers and community as a threat, and alien to them. Children no longer see their parents as educators, rather, they see themselves as superior to their parents. With this attitude, it becomes very difficult for children to learn virtues from their parents. As modernity mingles with a traditional village setting, when there is a violation of a societal norm, or taboos are committed, the so-called elders will be at a total loss of how to solve such problems, because they have lost their roots in their own father's land. John Mbiti complements the informal education of the child and says that:

Nature brings the child into the world, but society creates the child into a social being, and a cooperate person. For it is the community which protects the child, feeds it, brings it up, educates it and in many other ways incorporate it into the wider community. The birth of a child is the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives including the living and the departed. Kinship plays an important role here, so that a child cannot be exclusively "my child" but only "our child"(African Religions and Philosophy262).

Mbiti confirms that the community has the capacity to mold and dictate to a child what to do, and what not to do, and how to do it best in order to protect the child, and promote the continuity of life, property and value system in that community. African literature gives a vivid picture of how alienation from African heritage was propagated in colonial schools. Presently, an average African child becomes lukewarm toward respect to elders and lack active participation in community development because less attention is paid to our culture and our

traditional value systems which are presently regarded as being fetish.

Their training in western educational institutions at home or abroad inaugurated an entirely different set of Africans. Edith Ihekweazu quotes Ali Mazuri who says that:

The continent is controlled disproportionately by westernized Africans. European languages are relentlessly on rampage on the continent, destroying or undermining dialect and one local culture after another. Africans are caught up between rebellion against the west and imitation of the west ("The North-South Dialogue-Cultural Dimensions"571).

In many African literature like novels, we find a satire on those characters that have been abroad and come back whiter than the whites. Ihekweazu quotes Henry Robert, Hudson Porempong in Ayikwei Armah's Frangments on his wool suit, and pride, boasts that information about Britain is in the "back of his hand". Like other African novelists, Armah indicts such Afro-Eurocentric's(my own coinage) and says that:

Men who had risen to lead the hungry came in clothes they might have been hoping to use at Governor's balls on the birth day of the white people's queen, carrying cuff links that shone insultingly. In the faces of men who have stolen pennies from their servants in the legal English they had spent their lives struggling to imitate ("The North-South Dialogue-Cultural-Dimensions"572)

Ihekweazu is in line with Ali Mazuri who says that "All educated Africans to a man (and to a woman) are still cultural captives to the west. He asks can there be a return to traditional African values without sacrificing any possibility of a scientific and technical revolution?" ("The North-South Dialogue-Cultural-Dimensions"573).The major dilemma is that our borrowed culture has almost replaced the indigenous ones. Ihekweazu also insists that African travelers to Europe can testify that:

Europe needs education and enlightenment to become a worth-while partner in social criticism. Africans however, have the more difficult and arduous task before them to shed whatever notion is left in their consciousness of European superiority, and to struggle free from the temptation to imitate

and accept whatever Europe throws into their market. The fascination by European fashions and luxury goods is understandable but ruinous. Economic and technological dependency is the main impediment on the African side of unhealthy imitation. Until this is achieved, arrogance on the one, and the humiliation on the other side will continue (“The North-South Dialogue-Cultural Dimensions”575).

The present author frowns at those Nigerians in particular and Africans in general who totally abandon their local content and become over fascinated by European fashions and luxury goods which are expensive to afford. The implication is that such Africans go all out to be corrupt by usurping positions and money meant for everybody in order to meet up with the cost of their expensive new life style. Corrupt people assume to find contentment in amassing wealth. The irony is that prosperity often leaves them discontented and always anxious of looking for more. Being corrupt is evident in a capitalist system where a personal interest overrides a collective interest in a society. In personal and collective interest, the former represents the oppressor and the later represents the oppressed. Marxist's impulse always arises to protect the oppressed against the oppressor as a result of man's enslavement of his fellow man, particularly where the society is divided into the ruling and the working classes. The working class sees to the production and distribution of goods and services while among the ruling class are the captains of industries. The main concern of the Marxist theory is social equality where justice will be administered to people with no regards to class both in sharing the political and the economic properties collectively owned by members of the same society. To accumulate and usurp public positions and fund by an individual or by a group of people rather than using such positions and fund to satisfy the aspirations and needs of the concerned people is the hallmark of individualism and corruption in Nigeria and Africa in general.

The crusade of curbing or stopping corruption remains a scorecard with which international communities substantially judge and assess the performance of any administration. Over the years in Nigeria, governments have made efforts to fight corruption, but it still remains wide spread because,

only few years jail terms and returning stolen funds are not enough deterrents and as such, stiffer punishment is required to stop corrupt practices. Ali Aju-Janga, the Commissioner of Police in Kaduna State ably represented by the Zaria Area Commander Surajo Muhammed-Fana during the October 2019's 4th Multidisciplinary National Conference focused on how to tackle insecurity and corruption. In his review of the Law against corruption, prescribes punishment of the corrupt person (s) ranging from returning the stolen funds to be barred from public offices, life imprisonment to death penalty. He also, urged and charged the country's youth to be at the forefront of the fight against corruption in the nation (<https://www.legit.ng>). His position is in line with the actions and content of the following dramas under study.

The Dramas of Frank Ogbecche's *Harvest of Corruption* and Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* Since independence, Nigeria has been witnessing various forms of religious and moral crisis in our social system. Particularly, the breakdown of social discipline like students' riots, drug abuse and trafficking, religious bigotry, paid assassins, incessant kidnaping cases, cultism, moral decadence, rape, ritual killing, corruption in high and low places, election rigging, vote buying, hate speech, and all forms of disrespect to law and order which result in the emergence of lawlessness, indiscipline and highly insecure society bedeviled by gross underdevelopment, unemployment and dragging the national image to the mud.

Frank Ogbecche's *Harvest of Corruption* mirrors the contemporary Nigerian society marked essentially by high level of unemployment, sexual immorality, bribery, large-scale embezzlement of public funds in official quarters, drug trafficking involving high placed personalities who are supposed to be the custodians of our traditional norms, policy makers and law enforcement officers. He does this through the use of characterization which is a powerful instrument of social criticism in dramatic art. Ogbecche uses such characters like Okpotu who goes to Jabu town and coincidentally runs into Ogeyi who on hearing the demise of Aloho her friend, vows to avenge Chief Haladu Ade Amaka and his cohorts. Ogeyi reports the corrupt minister to the Police Inspectors – Yakubu and Inaku who already have been on a trail of the minister in order to investigate his other

corrupt charges and embezzlement case of one point two billion naira. Inspector Inaku disguises himself and offers a bribe of two thousand naira to the minister's clerk, Ayo who leaks, exposes and dispatches the ministry's sensitive and official documents to him, and other Security Agents who arrest Chief Ade, Ochuole, Ayo, and other accomplices like Madam Hoha, Justice Odilli and Andrew. Wasa High Court Jabu judged the case in favour of the prosecution counsels.

The Nigeria Police and the youths have played important roles in the fight against corruption in *Hangmen Also Die* which exposes the danger of massive unemployment of youths, embezzlement of public fund, election rigging associated with political thuggish violent behaviours, and the quick reactions of youths against corrupt people in the Izon State.

The Federal Government gives three million naira being compensation for the oil spillage which has destroyed Izon citizens' crops, farmlands, homes, lives and property. The three million naira is kept in the custody of Chief Isokiri Erekosima being the Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs with the local government chairmen and the councilors, connived and embezzled the fund meant to better the lives of oil spillage casualties. The Izon youths who also are characters like Dayan, R.I.P., Acid, Khomeini, Tetanus, Tamara, Ibiwari, Yekinni, Dimeari, Orusoso, Ibiaye and Sotonye, adopted the instrument of jungle justice and avenged their corrupt leaders. In the same manner, a die-hard politician: Dr. Ogbansiegbe contests 1983 gubernatorial election in Imo State and fails. He uses aggrieved and violent undergraduates and many graduates with good grades that are unemployed and other idle and hungry youths mentioned above as his thugs to perpetrate massive killings of his political enemies and destruction of infrastructure in his state. The aggrieved thugs in revenge mission, suddenly realized themselves, changed their minds, boomeranged, and trooped into Ogbansiegbe's house and in his parlour, mixed cement with water and commanded him to drink it. He refuses to drink it and they hang him and his cohort Chief Isokiri Erekosima who confesses his embezzlement and refuses to return the money in his possession. In the next morning, it appears as a news headline "Hangmen...Also Die". Characters in the above dramas are easily identifiable in the Nigerian and

African societies. Characterization becomes to Ogbeche and Irobi a powerful weapon of social criticism. They make us to see their characters both as private individuals and people we know very well so that we can easily empathize with them after clearly perceiving their strengths and weaknesses. Quite a reasonable number of innocent Nigerians are either impoverished, or led to their untimely death, or duped, or introduced to criminality in the name of money-making, and false but ostentatious living that leads to corruption.

Conclusion

Drama as an instrument of social criticism is in line with Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Emeka Nwabueze who says that "The committed dramatist uses the medium of drama to criticize the shortcomings of his society as a "sensitive needle" and should register with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions of his changing society" (Readings in African Humanities 190). Harvest of Corruption and *Hangmen Also Die* have exposed inexhaustible corrupt practices, its consequences and repercussions on their perpetrators.

Recommendations

These plays recommend a genuine moral rebirth to be restored by our country through all hands on deck to fight corruption with legislation and implementation of citizens'-orientated policies and relevant laws.

An average Nigerian child should learn a skill in addition to farming and formal education to always engage his mind in profitable ventures in order to be sure of his own daily bread.

A Nigerian child is advised to integrate himself into a communitarian ethic. By so doing, he will be sensitive to his environment, have respect for self, family name, and be afraid of personality scandal, but believing in the proverb that "good name is better than silver and gold".

Functional education where parents and the entire community teach and inculcate morals, taboos and sanctions to the Nigerian child shall be commendable.

A healthy imitation of better people encourages creativity and progress, but merely a ping them is redundancy which leads to idleness, insecurity and corruption.

Again, there is a dire need to create a symbiotic market where the Africans and the white men could favourably exchange their goods and

services to shun complexes. Nigerian over dependency on Europe to get everything should be minimized, and rather, should be creative, hard working and self-reliant.

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