

Nigerian Playwrights and Social Realities: A Study of Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and Paul Ugbede's *Mr. Chairman Sir* as Praxis

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Abstract

Plays by Nigerian playwrights present, represent, expose and reflect the good, the bad and the ugly of the society. Playwrights as the eyes of the society apply all creative antics to critic economic, cultural and socio-political vices and suggest alternatives. However it is worrisome that few people have time to watch these plays in the live theatre or read the play texts hence the contents are not utilized. Adopting the theory of functionalism by Emile Durkheim, this paper examines Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers* and Paul Ugbede's *Mr. Chairman Sir* and come out with the finding that playwrights of Nigerian origin lay bare on Nigeria's social realities in their plays hence are adequate materials for building a better society where peace and justice can reign. The paper concludes that writers and their writings are products of their societies and that their writings are therefore powerful forces among others for attaining an enviable society, hence recommends, among others that plays by Nigerian playwrights that showcase Nigeria situation should be encouraged and made available in all educational institutions and the society at large and law makers should not only read or watch these plays but pay close attention and react to issues raised in the plays.

Key words: Nigeria, playwrights, Nigerian playwrights, Drama and Society, Social reality

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INTRODUCTION

Right from the inception of written literacy in Nigeria, writers portrays the situation of the nation creatively as far as their creative prowess permits. Mention must be made of writers like Wole Soyinka, Olu Obafemi, John Pepper Clark, Ola Rotimi and a host of others who impacts their societies via the instrumentality of creative writing to present and represent the situation of the society, all in an effort to changing it positively. These writers gather their materials from their immediate societies. They react and respond to situations that are either commendable or condemnable and often suggest better ways for the society.

The problem of Nigeria is hydra headed with its strong root in leadership as well as individual members domiciled in the country. Consequently Nigeria as a country suffers persistent challenges in the area of sustainable development. There are problems in all sectors of the society. It is not out of point to assert that Nigeria is capable of self-sustainability judging from available natural and human resource at her disposal. There is no gainsaying that corruption has eaten deep into the structure of the nation. This has become an obstacle against the progress of the nation. Cyprian Stephen asserts that "corruption has become ingrained that the masses don't see the true solution..." (5).

Nigeria's problem does not begin and end with leadership, it goes beyond that and extends to individual followers. After all, leaders are made out of citizens of a particular society. It is against this backdrop that this paper reviews Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers* and Paul Ugbede's *Mr. Chairman Sir* to reveal the facts that Nigerian playwrights adequately capture the reality of Nigeria society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts Émile Durkheim's theory of functionalism. Durkheim's theory of functionalism posits

that all aspects of a society, including institutions, roles, norms, etc., serve a purpose and are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society. The approach gained prominence in the works of 19th-century sociologists, particularly those who viewed societies as organisms.

In the context of this work, functionalism is used to examine how the various elements of the plays, *Once upon Four Robbers* and *Mr. Chairman Sir*, work together to create a cohesive whole and exposes realities. For example, it is employed to analyze how the characters' actions and motivations contribute to the overall theme of subversion and resistance against oppression. Additionally, it is used to examine how the setting and plot elements contribute to the plays' message about societal issues such as armed robbery, public execution, political godfathers and embezzlement of public funds.

It is worth noting that while functionalism provides a useful framework for analyzing these plays, it is not the only theoretical perspective that can be applied to the play. Other approaches such as Marxism or postcolonial theory could also be used to explore different aspects of the work.

DRAMA AND THE SOCIETY

It should be acknowledged that no writing come out of the vacuum. Writings are products of writer's interaction with their respective environments. Drama as the product of the society reacts to current issues in the society. The aim of drama is to change the narratives for the best. The focus of all writers is change for good; for instance in the play, *Achubi*, the author, Ojila Yahaya, complain of the killings of Agatu people of Benue State by herders and calls for government intervention in curbing the anarchy.

Dramatist and their works are commentators and have something to say in all sectors of the society including; economic, politics, education, and so on. Writers in oppressive societies express their desires to be free from oppression and subjugations. A good example of this can be seen in Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and Wa Thio'ngo's *Trials of Dedan Kimathi*.

The society gives birth to its own drama. This implies that dramatist reacts to current happenings or recall historical events aimed at correcting the present and equally give direction to the future. Osofisan affirm that everybody is shaped by his upbringing, and that must surely affect what one write. He further explains:

I come from a poor background, so inevitably I tend to see things from the perspective of the poor. Maybe if I had come from a rich family, I would be seeing things in a different light. But I lost my father at a very early age, and my mother was a destitute. My early life therefore depended on the beneficence of relatives, who were themselves not economically buoyant. Therefore, I sympathizes strongly with the circumstances of the poor... deprivation and poverty have coloured my vision. I can't help it. (137)

This explains why Osofisan's writings tend to confront oppression, suppression and corruption in so many plays he has written. Through dramatic literature, the dramatists reflect on conflicting issues, oppression, anger and disillusionment of their present environment and seek to find solution. Musa Salifu's *The Rebel Soldiers* shouldn't have been written if there were no issues of farmer/herders conflict. His reaction to the burning issue of unwarranted killings of innocent citizens of the country is an affirmation of positive impact of drama in the society.

Osofisan is precise in his views that corruption and the misappropriation of public funds without suitable sanctioning from the relevant institutions, contributes to the hardship and misery of the deprived in African societies. His *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* (1978), *Morountodun* (1982), and *Another Raft* (1988) among other plays portrays this. Osofisan is not alone in this portrayal; Emeka Nwabueze in his *A Parliament of Vulture*, Atu Alachi in his *The Gods are to Blame*, and Paul Ugbede in his *Our Son the Minister* and *Trading Places* to mentions just few adds to these portrayals in their respective drama text.

Dramatists employ the theatre as a working platform through which they not only express feelings and desires but also call the people to collective action aimed at societal freedom and liberation from injustice. Quoting Osofisan, Muyiwa Awodiya report that:

We believe that literature is a weapon, but we are not calling for mere propaganda ... We believe that man can change his society. If we make the right decisions, there is no reason why we should not be able to move our society from its present chaos. This is one of the duties fundamental to literature. (22)

Femi Ogungbesan asserts that drama has long been a medium of creating political awareness. He explain that *Opera Wonyosi* by Wole Soyinka is a play that call for political change in a society that is full of authoritarian and cruel leaders who have no regard for the fundamental human rights of the masses. In as much as drama stands against oppression and tyranny as in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, Akwu Ene'jo's *Breaking the Circle of Silence*, Bakare, Ojo Rasaki's *Once upon a Tower* and a host of others, yet others tend to preserve cultural values in all ramifications. In this category are plays like Sofola's *Wedlock's of the Gods*, Inyanda Samule and Salifu Musa's *The Return of Omachonu* and others. Others celebrate heroes; Felix Ugwuda's *Alapa* and Armstrong Idachaba's *Ameoboni* are good examples.

It is glaring that drama is an instrument of positive change as the playwright in collaboration with the director and actors place the reflection of the society before her just like a mirror. The dramatist thereafter leave the reader/audience with a responsibility; the task to contemplate on what they have read or watched on the stage and then act appropriately.

Drama is an instrument of conscientisation, a tool for

reawakening the critical imagination of the individual to the reality of their existence, so that they can then determine their destinies by themselves. Dramatic performances at the various venues of Theatre for Development (TfD) outings give credence to this fact. In order to reawake the people, the dramatist, raises a clear mirror up for the people to see their realities. When the people see what they are in the raised mirror they adjust and struggle to appear better.

Capping it up, drama play huge role in Nigerian society; it is a tool for social transformation. It reflects the issues of different degrees as they concern the nation. It feed the people with historical knowledge. When a people know their history and how they got to where they are they tend to retrace steps and it is also a vital tool for cultural preservation.

FEMI OSOFISAN'S BACKGROUND

Writing on the background of Femi Osofisan, Awodiya report that "Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan was born on 16th of June, 1946 in Erunaran, a farming village in Ogun State. Orphaned at an early age, Osofisan was irrevocably trained by relatives and foster parent from difference phases of his life" (22).

The report adds that Osofisan got into Government College, Ibadan at the age of thirteen and was depending on relatives to assist on paying his school fees. After graduation from secondary school in 1965, he ventured into acting, and writing. He gained admission into the University of Ibadan in 1966 to read French. Coming from a poor background, he has had to work his way to the top by his hard work and faith in himself and his ability.

According to Ogunbesan, Osofisan speak three languages; Yoruba, English and French. He is a professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan and is a winner of many scholarly awards including Nigerian's highest academic awards the Nigeria national order of merit (NNOM).

Osofisan is one of the Nigeria's most important dramatists and the indisputable leader of Nigeria's second generation of playwrights. He is known for his critique of societal problems and his use of African traditional performances and surrealism in some of his plays. A frequent theme that his drama explores is the conflict between good and evil. Some of Femi Osofisan's notable works include *Women of Owu* (2004), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1981), *Midnight Hotel* (1977), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1976), among others

PAUL UGBEDE'S BACKGROUND

An online interview with the author, Paul Ugbede, availed the researcher the opportunity to get firsthand

information of the author's background. Paul Ugbede has a BA in Mass Communication from the University of Jos, Nigeria and is currently the Director, International Centre for Playwriting Development in Africa (ICPDA). He is the author of several published and performed plays to include *Dropping Palms*, *Raping the Land*, *Mr. Chairman Sir*, *Trading Places*, *Two Characters Undefined* and *Dialing Love*. His articles and short stories have appeared on Waza online, Muwado and Jalada online and his play 'Fire in the Night and other stories' was included in the 2014 Writivism Anthology edited by Sumayya Lee.

Paul Ugbede is the winner of the inaugural Beeta Playwright Competition in 2016. He is also the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Iganya TV (an online television station). He lives in the United Kingdom with his family.

FEMI OSOFISAN'S PLAYS AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Osofisan does not shy away from presenting Nigeria realities in his plays. His works are preoccupied with solving Nigeria's problems collectively. He portrays man as victim of history within the frame-work of the Nigeria's political structures that subject man to all kinds of vices. Osofisan's political ideology has its root in the political history of the country. Osofisan advice that "in order to understand the turmoil in which I construct my plays and against when my plays are constructed, one must first take a rapid tour through the history of my country Nigeria" (51)

In all ramifications, Osofisan's plays mirrors his society. His plays; *Red is the Freedom Road*, *Morountodun*, and *Once upon Four Robbers* among others portrays and mirrors the society as it is. Citing Richard Hoggart, Cyprian posits that "without literary mirror the society would be blind to the fullness of activities around it, as literary forms reveals a lot about the society and the people" (65). In agreement with this position, Cyprian adds that "literature and society are reflected in one another and do act on one another" (71). Osofisan's plays first mirrors the situations of the society to his readers / audience and then go ahead to urge them to take collective stand against retrogressive and stagnating injustice by either individuals or the leadership of the society in a bid to solving their collective problems. Osofisan does not believe in a single hero because to him a single individual has a single voice that does not mostly stand against social injustice.

Osofisan's plays primarily mirrors the Nigeria society in order to speculate present situation, how the present situation should be and what might be. As pointed out above, Osofisan is a writer who is always drawn to social injustice and its victims.

PAUL UGBEDE'S PLAYS AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Paul Ugbede is a playwright who has written several critically acclaimed plays, including *Fela and the Kalakuta Queens*, *August Meeting*, and *Legends*. Ugbede's work often explores themes of social justice, political corruption, and the human condition in Nigeria.

In his plays, Ugbede often portrays the struggles of ordinary people against oppressive systems and structures. For example, in *August Meeting*, he explores the role of women in Nigerian society and their efforts to effect change in their communities. Similarly, in *Fela and the Kalakuta Queens*, he examines the life of Fela Kuti and his fight against political corruption and oppression in Nigeria.

Ugbede's plays also often deal with issues of identity and belonging. For instance, in *Legends*, he explores the experiences of a group of Nigerian immigrants living in London and their struggles to adapt to a new culture while maintaining their own identities.

Overall, Ugbede's plays are characterized by their focus on social issues and their exploration of the human condition. His work provides a nuanced perspective on contemporary Nigerian society and the challenges faced by its people.

SYNOPSIS OF FEMI OSOFISAN'S *ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS*

Once upon Four Robbers tell the story of four criminals who lost the leader their gang to public execution. While Alhaja is in grief the robbers flashback to their past robbery escapades. The narrator appears on the scene as an Islamic Imam and a native doctor put together. The Imam/native doctor reprimands them for indulging in criminal activities. The four robbers (Angola, Alhaja, Major and Hassan) say it is hunger that has driven them into crime since there are no jobs for them even after acquiring education. He offers to help the robbers to get rich and so gives them a charm and tells them that they should never rob the poor but only public places and they should never kill anyone in the process of robbery. He also tells them that they can only use the charm to rob three times and thereafter the charm shall lose its potency.

The robbers attack the village market robbing the market women and soldiers on guard at the market. But, Major double – cross the gang collecting the loot for himself. Major is shot by Sergeant and his men and taken as prisoner. While Major is taken away as prisoner, Sergeant keeps the recovered loot to himself.

Alhaja disguise as a corn seller to seduce and succeeds in convincing the soldiers that Major is innocent. The soldiers abandon the execution platform with the promise to set Major free. As Major is brought in for execution in

chains, Alhaja comes on stage with the other Angola and Hassan to stop the execution. The crowd calls for their head but yearns Aafa as narrator, stop proceedings and ask the audience if the robbers should be killed or not.

SYNOPSIS OF PAUL UGBEDE'S *MR. CHAIRMAN SIR!*

A section of the market was defiled by flood. The assault on their shops and stalls plunged the traders into misery, poverty and gloom. The Unyogba Foundation with the assistance of the state government came to the aid of the people by the donation of four million naira only. The money is large enough to revitalize the broken lives of the people, but the cunning Chief Jekaje who had hitherto installed one of his stooges as the chairman of the Market Union, invented an anonymous character: In this manner, those who are in tatters and tears and needing sympathy are emasculated by obnoxious bureaucracies aimed at strangulating them into silence and further despair.

Seeing the tragedy that befell the people as a means of showing solidarity with them, the chairman is horrified by the insistence of Chief Jekaje, Secretary, Iye Aja, and Revenue Officer that the money given the people be shared as booty. This brought to the front burner the question of sharing formula of state resources.

At the centre of the contradiction and uproar over the fund are Chairman whose conscience is not dry as a bone and the revolutionary Akilaki Adi, a woman who sees through the arrays of the tricks of the bourgeois class and mobilizes the subaltern class, mounting stern opposition against the callous tyranny of the few over the majority. Akilaki Adi leads series of protest against Chief Jekaje which culminated in an unarmed revolution, dismantling the powerful dominion of Chief Jekaje and his clan of vultures who for years have pecked on the flesh and hope of the masses.

ANALYSIS OF *ONCE UPON FOUR ROBBERS*

Once upon Four Robbers is set in a market square, which represents the society composed of people of different orientation and opinion. Femi Osofisan uses the play to respond to the contemporary social problem of armed robbery and the inability of the government to provide reliable solutions. He uses the play to ridicule the powerlessness of the death penalty decree, which is not capable of curbing the pervasiveness of armed robbery in the society until the fundamental factors are addressed.

The play also exposes the irrationality of using death as a weapon of policy. Osofisan's keen vision is put at the service of oppressed humanity. The over-riding theme of the play is that the tool of oppression in human society is created by man, but man is also capable of demolishing it.

The use of armed robbery in the play is a proper portrayal of leadership failure in Nigeria. In the play, Angola, one of the armed robbers says; “like ram, they slaughtered our leader, like a Ramadan lamb” (5). Osofisan wrote in the production note of *Once upon Four Robbers* that slaughtering of the erring members of the society for whatever offering will not bring the restoration of the society to its sanity (viii).

As portrayed in *Once upon Four Robbers*, slaughtering of human being and other crimes are done with impunity. Electoral fraud is a common crime today along with kidnapping for ransom, killing for human rituals, armed banditry and farmer-herders discord, just to mention few. This is a fact about the Nigerian situation today. Hassan, one of the robbers in the play, *Once upon Four Robbers* explains that:

... what excuse do you think I owe you? Everyone has a dream; everyone has a point at which the dream cracks up. I have sworn not to be a slave in my father's land. All I wanted was the right work but everywhere they only wanted slaves. (90)

Hassan meant the dream of becoming rich over night since the beginning of the discovery and boom of oil in Nigeria. Everybody wants to live in affluence; this was captured by Osofisan speaking through one of his characters, Angola. “...too many people ride their posh cars along the same ridden backs of the poor, is there no other way?” (29)

The result of the above is the antisocial norms in the society. There are too many rich individuals whose sources of wealth cannot be explained. Those in the leadership position loot and deprive the poor of social amenities. Hassan (a character in the play) rightly puts it that “all I wanted was the right work but everywhere they only wanted slaves”. Many graduates remain unemployed because they had their mind fixed on white collar job forgetting the fact that education and employment are two different things. With situations like these the people are pushed into crime.

In *Once upon Four Robbers* the fight for survival becomes the order of the harsh realities that embattles the people. Mama Alice, one of the market women that peopled the play is forced to ask, “... but we have to feed our families, haven't we?” (91)

Osofisan has creatively presented what he has seen as product of corruption. He sees the robbers and the market profiteers as Nigerian who has been afflicted by corruption. He posits in *Once upon Four Robbers* that all social vices in Nigeria are due to the way the country is structured both politically and economically. (94)

Crime in the structure of arm robbery and others as captured in the play, *Once upon Four Robbers* by Osofisan is a function of all the elements that make up the society of the play. This is what Durkheim posits in his theory of functionalism; Hassan and the other robbers ventured into robbery because of the lack of jobs. Jobs are lacking as a result of corruption that bedevils the society.

In a bid to curb the robbery government comes up with the policy of death sentence which rather than curtail the evil help to escalate it because the robbers vow to take revenge on the society for killing their leader. That is the harsh reality of the country, Nigeria, as it is right now.

ANALYSIS OF MR. CHAIRMAN SIR!

Mr. Chairman Sir explores themes of politics, power, and the distribution of wealth in Nigerian society. The play is set in a market that has been devastated by flood, and it follows the story of the chairman of the market union as he tries to navigate the complex web of corruption and bureaucracy that surrounds the distribution of aid to the flood victims.

From a functionalist perspective, the various elements of the play work together to create a cohesive whole that is the reality of the country. The issue of corruption for instance has dealt a strong blow to Nigeria as a country. The issue of corruption is dominant in Nigeria. There is hardly a sector not affected by this evil called corruption. There are other forms of corruptions but *Mr. Chairman Sir* stamps and tackles financial corruption. When the money was donated by Unyogba Foundation and the State Government, Chief Jekaje invented the character of the Screening Officer in order to cheat the people of their common wealth:

CHIEF JEKAJE: Idada! Look at them! Hungry things! Come clean market, you will not line up! Now that it is money they want to share...hey! Pursue that beggar from that line! Idada! And who even say they will share the money? After all, it is not all of you will get! (*General reaction*) If you like, open your mouth wide! You cannot fit swallow me! Before we give money, Screening Officer will come from Federal Capital to screen you! (5)

When asked who the Screening Officer is, Chief Jekaje explains that “...he is the eye of the President himself! He is going around the country screening defaulters' commot! He will be here soon.” (5). But the people were not convinced. They sensed the devilish antics of Chief Jekaje and protested.

Going by the functionalism theory, the characters' actions and motivations contribute to the overall theme of resistance against oppression. Additionally, the setting and plot elements contribute to the play's message about societal issues such as corruption and inequality.

The use of synecdoche in the narration of a national tragedy is highly ingenious and one of the play's outstanding merits. The market where the story is set is the symbol of the country, Nigeria, with its political hierarchy rife with godfatherism, enormous corruption, bribery, and misappropriation of public funds. *Mr. Chairman Sir* highlights how the poor masses are trepanned upon by unbearable bureaucracies aimed at silencing them into further misery.

Overall, *Mr. Chairman Sir* provides a nuanced perspective on contemporary Nigerian society and the challenges faced by its people. It is an insightful commentary on issues such as political corruption, social justice, and power dynamics in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Plays of Nigeria origin are not only capable of making the people understand their environment but equally recommend possible solutions to societal problems. The play of interest here (*Once upon Four Robbers* and *Mr. Chairman Sir*) thematically deals with the situation of the country of their origin, Nigeria. Obviously, palpable burning issues are captured in the plays. Osofisan and Ugbede use their plays to call for positive change in the country. Osofisan suggest that death penalty will not solve the problem of arm robbery but rather compound it as the robbers are energized into carrying out revenge for every member of their gangs killed by increasing the tempo of their crime.

Both Paul Ugbede and Femi Osofisan, in their respective plays, calls for foresights and making of right decisions by calling on leaders and the led alike to take actions into solving their problems. The actions of society leaders if not properly checked leads to insecurity and the of security is crucial to the growth and development of Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been established that readers and audiences in the live theatre performances of dramas seems to only read or see these performances in the theater and allows it to die there as mere instruments of entertainment as burning economic issues never allow them to ponder on the themes inherent in the plays and thereafter take possible actions.

Similarly, the general public never have time to pick up and read play texts that are published as reading culture among the elites, except those in the teaching profession, has gone down the drain. Reading is left for students who are mostly forced to read for examination hence cardinal and beautiful recommendations to solving critical issues as raised in the plays either as performances or as reading texts are lost.

In view of the above, this work not only recommends that policy makers should read plays, pay close attention

to issues raised in them and tackles issues raised in the plays to enhance positive change in Nigeria.

Schools and parents alike should make it a point of obligation to instill the culture of play reading in their students and wards instead of allowing them to be constantly glued to their smart phones and television sets since these students and wards are the leaders of tomorrow.

Also, government and its policy makers should endeavor to make policies that are capable of tackling the collective problem of Nigeria since all entities function together; for the problem of insecurity to be curbed government should engage the youths in gainful employment. Similarly, corruption should be tackled from the roots by all agents of government that are responsible for such functions.

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