

**DRAMATIC LITERATURE FOR DEVELOPMENT:  
IMPERATIVES OF NWAMUO'S SAVE OUR LIVES AND  
DURUAKU'S A QUESTION OF CHOICE.**

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**Abstract**

The topical issues of social disparity, deprivation, unemployment and corruption which obviously dehumanize the youth and women recommend a modification of strategy for engagement. Drama which encapsulates the performative arts of the theatre, the fore ground upon which the expressive arts are physicalized, is a useful tool for the social re-engineering that this state of affairs beckons. It is on stage that the songs and tunes of the creative mind, as well as the recorded tears and lamentations of the proletariat are orchestrated. These creative ideas can be re-created and presented before a psychologically famished populace by a dramaturgist in anticipation of a stage production. The deprived masses find solace when drama is taken to them, reminiscent of old tunes sung when time was young and beautiful under the moonlight folktales arena. This paper argues that in a democratic dispensation, the Playwright should function outside the "caged Proscenium" and take theatre to the people adopting the Community Theatre Workshop / Theatre for Development approach. Two plays are here examined: Nwamuo's Save Our Lives and Duruaku's A Question of Choice. Both plays are concerned with the problems of the masses and ways of resolving them.

**Introduction**

Catalysts for change come in different forms and their impact can easily be noticed in the socio-political agitations taking place all over Nigeria and beyond. Dramatists employ diverse literary elements to push their messages across. Drama as a genre of literature occupies itself with the business of man in action. Man being the thematic kernel of drama seeks for his salvation from the society and by so doing purges himself and purifies the society. Akomayo Oko in line with this, defines the duty of a dramatist to his people/society as not merely a chronicler of events but also a reformer and a vision bearer, "who shines through the society the scourging light of purification" (1992:99) by adopting reformative and redemptive measures.

The many challenges facing a social critic in a capitalist hegemony and democratic society have injected in contemporary dramatists a vision for change via subtle application of Marxist aesthetics in their texts. Suffice it to say that while the Aristotelian drama of the fifth century was replete with myths and gods in the affairs of man, modern dramas explore the theme of man and his individual free will in a society. It is therefore in drama that the songs and tunes of the creative mind, as well as the recorded tears and lamentations of the proletariat are orchestrated. The deprived masses- the wretched of the earth, the scorned and maligned, the hands that weed and harvest corn and cassava, find solace on stage when drama is physicalized, reminiscent of old tunes sang when time was young and beautiful under the moonlight folktales arena.

The dramatist is free to choose from the gamut of materials available to address the evident ills especially to beam a torchlight in the direction that will facilitate the emancipation of the

suffering and ignorant masses. Duruaku and Nwamuo use *A Question of Choice and Save Our Lives*; respectfully to skillfully re-enact Nigerian socio-economic, health and employment situations and their ineffectual impacts on the masses.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Ever since *This is Our Chance* hit the stands in 1945, dramatists have sprung with the motif of making their art relevant to the people, especially the common man, by way of addressing social issues. Dramatic literature is an art by which the people recreate their environment and live in it. The very many ills and malaise of the society, the violence and denials, nepotism and anarchy, the class structure and social injustice are the rich-stone of which dramatists coin and develop their art to sustain and solve the problem of man and his immediate space.

Dramatic literature would result to a failed adventure if it does not highlight and draw attention to some anomalies evident in the society. Hence the recurring incidents of the society calls for a more sensitive and proactive dramatic literature whereby dramatists will use their art to recommend correction in the society. It is on the importance of dramatic literature that Nwamuo affirms that

one of the many concerns of drama is to re-create, record and heighten significant incidents and experiences in order to draw attention, for remediation... modern social drama is keeping pace with development in the economic, social and political lives of identified communities. (1996:41)

Therefore, the theatre is more preoccupied with addressing the problems of man and proffering solutions.

Adeniyi (2007:127) asserts that "every creative artist, therefore, tries to articulate his or her convictions and aesthetic ideals for entertainment and pedagogical purposes". Dramatic literature though a fictitious work, is born out of the creative writers concept of a society that he has observed and mapped out creative devices upon which he/she intends to comment on that social issue which traumatizes the populace; hence no arguing the point that dramatic literature resides in the worldview of the dramatist who fashions it for didactic purposes. Again Adeniyi concurs when she quoted Obafemi as saying that

The internal dynamics, content and significance of art must be such that it should help the ordinary people to push history forward through clarity, passion, identification with, and an intervention in, the objective lines and living conditions of the majority of a giving people (2007:128).

That is aptly what the dramatic literatures under study underscore; the importance for the dramatist to administer in his worldview and ideology the new vistas of freedom, the material needs of the populace and provide an intervention for remediation.

If Duruaku (2007: 116) posits that "positive drama should always present alternative or at least show man as yearning for a better society", one may have to frown at the physical blinding of Oedipus because it portrays inaction and closes the door of redemptive action and solely reflects heroism synonymous with the ruling class. Dramatic literature tailors towards answers for a million questions of man. It reveals the ostracized man in struggle to regain his place and also point towards the very many gates to the horizon. Akomayo Oko (1992:100) believes that "The writer-

artist, is responsible to the society as he is one of the few individuals blessed with the discovery of the community's vision".

While Nwamuo(1996: 41) echoes that literature and performance should be made "more relevant to target audiences in order to bring about change in their lives", it is also in the ambiance of the dramatists to sieve from a repertoire of absurdities prevalent in the society, photographically, and manipulate his art so as to effectively achieve in the minds of his target audience a progressive change. It is therefore obvious that dramatic literature is a developmental medium by which the masses can be reached for a positive re-orientation and, Edde Iji (2001: 37) agrees with this assertion when he said that "The dramatic or theatrical medium is a most forceful, compelling and captivative vehicle for the propagation of information...useful to man...it has the capacity to enlighten, to educate, re-educate, moulding feelings as well as human characters".

*Save Our Lives* is set in the Eastern part of contemporary Nigeria, It captures the life of the people of Okpani village. The play tells us that the people draw their drinking water from stream. Akoma, a renowned and respected farmer, prepares for Yam Title taking, and he works assiduously towards achieving that feat. But his painful and swollen leg will not let him. Dr Ofiku, the health officer who postulates that Guinea-worm is responsible for Akoma's legs, advises Akoma to always boil his water before use, but Akoma rejects that advice quarreling that Guinea-worm is a disease that God had sent to the nearby community to punish them for their wicked acts. Akoma's health deteriorates; his two wives become critical bet for Dr Ofiku's intervention, the entire community of Okpani would have continued to drink the Guinea-worm invested

streams without boiling.

*A Question of Choice* is a comment on the socio- economic cum political environment of Nigeria. Set in the eastern part of Nigeria, the play tells the tale of Sam a graduate of Agriculture searching for job after graduation. His brother Amadi implores him to practice farming since that is what he is trained for, but Sam says No! Sam prefers to live in the city where life can be enjoyed, and his dream is to work in an office, not in the farm. Sam visits Osondu his close pal doing a white collar job; he appreciates Osondu's success and intensifies his search for a white collar job. Sam's search opens his eyes to the realities of the society. Based on Sam's findings in the city, he resolved to go back to the village and till the ground as an Agriculturist.

### **Textual Analysis**

*A Question of Choice* reveals the loopholes in the socio-economic policies of the Nigerian Government and the lack of concern for the educational and labour sectors. It is also a satire on urban migration. Its thematic preoccupation rests on productivity and self reliance. The dramatist carefully presents the general trend amongst Nigerian youths, the erroneous value system and the "get rich quick" syndrome, typified in Sam whose quest for the "good things of life" and ignorance compels his urge towards the city for a white collar job:

**Sam:** No! Stay here and mingle with these villagers: rub shoulders with them and be treated like dirt along with them. No! Nobody is going to keep me away from the good life" (*A Question...*:23)

Not just the allure of good life for Sam, but he loathes the village:

**Sam:** I said I don't want to involve myself in the drudgery of primitive agriculture. I can manage a mechanized affair. A fish farm is fantastic (A Question...:36)

Ideally, one would expect that the government would try to provide minimum comfort in the rural areas so as to limit the urban migration by people who ordinarily have no business residing in the city. Going by Sam's education and training his primary area of residence is in the village, this, Amadi laments;

**Amadi:** I spent my hard earned money training him in Agriculture for three good years. Now he wants to sit inside the office instead. Pure laziness (A Question...:7).

Here Duruaku explores the problem of the youths; is it ineptitude or the lure of the city that troubles Sam? Also the dramatist shows his concern on governmental projects with emphasis on urbanization rather than civilization. If the man is not civilized, he will not appreciate the quality of education given to him; education does not spell success but denotes a means to success if applied. Sam is juxtaposed with his illiterate brother Amadi who trained him with the resources made from farming:

**Amadi:** He says that the farming he studied is dirty business...I am a farmer. Without any formal training, I produce enough food crops. Now somebody who spent three long years learning farming methods is saying that farming is dirty business (A Question...:10).

The play actually instigates questions on value system, self reliance and productivity. The developmental imperatives of dramatic literature accelerate developmental consciousness by aptly pricking the travailed minds of the people into taking action. Sam is polarized with Osondu to depict the ostentations of the city and the lure for Sam's migration:

Osondu is standing by his work/dining table humming a tune to the beat of music from a stereo set. On the wall facing him is a poster of a man bent at work in a farm with 'Help feed the nation' inscribed below it. (A Question...:7)

The absence of basic facilities and social amenities in the rural areas is a great concern. The play draws attention to lack of electricity:

**Amadi:** get us a lantern. It is getting dark...

**Sam:** Even the fowls have gone to roost, yet people are reminded of the darkness (A Question...:15).

The play mirrors the society and the tragedy of a nation that is so richly blessed, yet wallows in poverty and joblessness. Ogbonna is used to establish the potentials of Agriculture to the youths, the unemployed agric expert and the government:

**Ogbonna:** why not practice what you read? Why look for an office while so much land is lying waste begging to be cultivated. If you apply your knowledge, you will soon be in money...with mere crop farming, Amadi is fairly well off. Think of the success you will be if you improve on that...what is better than developing your own village...people

are coming out of government jobs to own their own business and you are trying to get into it... someone has to set an example...if they see your success, our youths will come rushing home and here will soon become like town (A Question...:21-24).

Succinctly, the play implores and re-directs the misguided youths towards productivity and genuine efforts to set example and correct the erroneous status quo. Sam ignores Ogbonna's advice and backed with Osondu's persuasion to visit the offices where he dropped his applications, his frantic efforts to secure a white collar job or get a loan facility to operate a fish farm disorientates him and acquaints him with the stark realities of his environment. Sam's experience in job hunting as he narrates it:

**Sam:** No vacancy! The M.D said that he is expecting two Youth Corpers to serve in his firm. He didn't see the need to employ staff that he will have to pay salary" (A Question...: 46).

Osondu's advice to sam:

**Osondu:** It is advisable to go and till the soil. You're lucky to have read a course that can make you independent. I wish I had, then I'd have set an example...if I were you, I will go and work in the farm in the village. Small scale, you know. Just a little effort and you will make a huge success. The town isn't everything (A Question...:48).

It is obvious that the unemployment activities in Nigeria are not made better by the introduction of the Youth Corps Service which

is handled without any clear vision, focus or benefit. While the project of NYSC is on, there is no plan for the Corps members after service, thus it amounts to a waste of resources and time. Sam discovery that the society is corrupt, filled with obnoxious and cocooned policies; nepotistic and double standard personalities realigned his stand and saved himself from his myopic judgments, in his own words, Sam summarized his resolve:

**Sam:** I must have been a fool to waste all this time when I have a better alternative. I've got to go back home and start from the scratch (A Question...2005: 72).

*A Question of Choice* in tandem with developmental imperatives of dramatic literature resolves the conflict warring against the desired goals of Sam by pointing the way forward.

*-Save Our Lives* enunciates the informative and pedagogical attributes of dramatic literature. From the play's preface, the playwright lists his intention of creating awareness of the Guinea-worm epidemic. First, he tells us that:

The World Health Organisation has reported that Nigeria is the World's headquarters of the Guinea-worm disease, as the country accounts for 3 million out of the 140 million victims on our planet...the situation is so bad that a serious threat to life by this endemic disease which attacks the legs, breasts, the scrotum, the tongues and other parts of the human body (3 Plays: 41).

Since dramatic literature tailors towards identification with the

people, their grief and concerns, the dramatist functionality is a positive change effort. The plays thematic concern is wrapped around Akoma's ignorance of the Guinea-worm epidemic and the misconception that such diseases are as a result of a curse from the gods as Akoma affirms:

**Akoma:** Guinea what! Guinea-worm for our village? Nuhu! You sabi di thing you de talk?..Since when Guinea-worm come for our village? Nobi for Amuzu our neighbor them village Nobi there God don take the sickness pepper our wicked neighbours? Na there Dr. Simon for go. Make e no come waste him time here. We no need am here (3 Plays: 47).

The play strives to create an awareness of the spread of Guinea-worm in the land of Okpani. Akoma is a committed farmer who plans to take a Yam title. The people of Okpani village are great farmers and people from township buy agricultural products from the local market. But Akoma's ill health; his swollen and painful legs are slowing him down:

**Akoma:** Erina you no say I de plan to take the yam title in two weeks time...how I come de sick like this...I no know. I no like am....i no fit walk again. See dem don begin swell more and more (3 Plays: 46).

The tragedy of a nation begins when it has less value for the productive age of its citizens. Akoma's ill health poses a shortage in yam output. Governmental interventions are always late. Dr. Ofiku, the health officer sent to the village encounters difficulty

creating the awareness of Guinea-worm because the people are suspicious and apprehensive of governmental projects.

Excerpts of the conversation between Akoma and Dr. Ofiku reveal the rural opinion towards government and her projects:

**Dr. Ofiku:** Thank you very much Chief. I am glad to be here in your town and to help as much as possible towards the eradication of this disease. I believe that with your cooperation Guinea-worm will be a thing of the past in this town:

**Amadi:** Which place you come from?

**Dr. Ofiku:** I come from Akpun, in the North-west district of Kpanje...

**Akoma:** For una place una get river?

**Dr. Ofiku:** Yes...

**Akoma:** Why u no stay for your place fight Guinea-worm...we no get Guinea-worm here...no come bring this politics to take divide us

**Nuhu:** Na so I tell am. E no believe.

**Dr Ofiku:** ...the Guinea-worm is a serious one. It should not be mixed up with politics. It should not be trivialized. It is an endemic disease which is spreading fast within the neighbouring populations. We have ascertained from samples in the area that there is an infestation of all the rivers and ponds around. I have come to work with the people and warn them to steer clear of this scourge by boiling all water from streams and ponds before use.

**Nuhu:** Ezeji! The man say na gov'ment send am.

**Akoma:** Na gov'ment dig the Eru pond for us?

Why them come now say they want look after us?...I beg Doctor, go tell gov'ment say we no get Guinea-worm disease here. Make them leave us alone. (3 Plays: 50).

The import of the above dialogue depicts the state of affairs in the land of Okpani and a reflection of the people's mind. The government plenipotentiary arrived late. The people's healths are deteriorating so also their socio-economic life. Akoma's refusal to boil the pond water before use borders first on ignorance, followed by his resentment towards government's lack of care for the rural areas. Akoma registers the people's grievances against the government before Dr. Ofiku:

**Akoma:** Edon take seven years wey them de dig our land say them want put water for all our five villages...but every day them de build house for town, na for town, people live. Them no live for village. Dat una borehole, water never commot from am for seven years...go tell gov'ment make them leave us alone.

**Dr. Ofiku:** Government is planning to sink a borehole for each village...

**Akoma:** What of roads? I sure say them don tell you say we get stream. But we no fit go fetch water from our stream sake of erosion...we dey pay tax-o. Gov'ment motor de come for our town market come buy the things we produce for our farm-o (3 Plays: 51).

The play stresses the absence of governmental facilities in the rural areas from which the yam and cassava that form the basic staple

food for those residing in the urban areas are produced. Save Our Lives is a cry from the rural communities to the government of the day, stating the obvious pitiable living conditions in the villages and the craze for urbanization in the place of civilization and as Akoma says, "Your gov'ment no care for common people" (3 Plays: 51), but the play reveals the people as a community that is poised to survive given the suggested community development strategies embedded in the text:

**Akoma:** No worry. We sabi to manage our lives. We don begin form community development groups. The youth and age-grade don begin dey meet (3 Plays: 51).

The many concerns of the play apart from Guinea-worm eradication, includes youth empowerment and the yearning for government presence in the rural areas. Dramatic literature leads to further discussions and improvement in the life of man and the society. The people's agitation for a better living is here met from the angle that Save Our Lives tackles the health issues which Dr. Ofiku represents:

**Dr. Ofiku:** Chief, I will take your message to the Government. I am sure some action will be taken soon. The UNICEF and Global 2000 are assisting with medical supplies. In the mean time, please ensure that water used by members of your household is properly boiled and if possible filtered. We will come back shortly with medical supplies for your town (3 Plays: 51)

The thematic crux of the play reveals the people's ignorance.

Akoma and his two wives refuse to adhere to the doctor's warning and continue to use the pond water without boiling; their near-death incidence is saved by the intervention of Dr. Ofiku:

**Dr. Ofiku:** (Notices a worm on Akoma's leg). Oh my God. We are admitting him straight-away. It is more serious than I thought. . Nurse! Arrange to take him to the emergency ward (3 Plays: 62).

*Save Our Lives* comments on governmental inadequacies and the people's ignorance on health issues. It also demonstrate how to abide by the simple first aid instruction that can save the people.

### **Relevance**

Commitment to change, intervention and remediation is among the many functions of the dramatist. The dramatist uses his art as a balm to break the chasm between those in leadership who should better the society and "the scum of the earth" abandoned in the face of harsh realities of an un-cared for environment. Bamidele (2000: 31) agrees that

The crux of the matter on the societal function of the artist viz-a viz his art is that he should strive for the ideal of human perfection. The action should function toward a revolution for life. In this regard art (Literature) should serve a civilizing agent

*A Question of Choice* and *Save Our Lives* set the tempo for reformation, first in value system to redeem the decadent socio-economic values, take measures as to curb the oppressive elements of reality militating against the masses and finally, to emancipate the disempowered via enlightenment and self effort.

Nwamuo and Duruaku have effectively employed the basic elements of drama to project their views and comment on the socio-economic and political affairs of the country thereby empowering the disempowered such as Sam whose former stand was not to live in the village and practice agriculture while Akoma's earlier resolve not to boil his water before drinking led to his near-death incident, from which the people of Okpani village are taught the importance of adhering to the medical tips of Dr. Ofiku for the eradication of Guinea-worm.

Both plays are placed against the backdrop of nation-building using social background in disrepair as an analogue of the actual, and through a mastery of literary devices manipulate a resolution of remediation. While Sam settles in the village to cultivate his own farm, Akoma through illness and pain realize the reality of the spread of Guinea-worm and the importance of Dr Ofiku, even if belatedly. Also song, music and dance are employed by both dramatists as a language of resistance, and to establish presence, mood and atmosphere.

### **Developmental imperatives**

The prevailing views in *A Question of Choice* and *Save Our Lives* in a developmental context reside in their succinct approach to probe the mind of the characters to examine their environment, analyze it as a way of instigating man towards self effort and contribution to his society. By creating structured plots, characterization and conflicts, the dramatists underscore and create awareness of the prevalent societal ills, governmental inaction, and simple promethean patterns of ameliorating the challenges. Since a dramatist committed to his art cannot blind himself and ignore the socio-political drum-beats of his



environment, it behoves him/her to make a positive impact through his art.

Nwamuo and Duraku have commented on the Nigerian society separately, but are united in the venture of the development of man and his society; each decrying the status quo and projecting the need for both the ruler and the ruled to make effort towards nation-building. Both dramatists avoid the usual vehicle of lampoon, ridicule and chicanery, but employ direct discourse, instructive and diverse arguments to enlighten the reader/audience. The dialectics of development for Nwamuo and Durauaku is that the proletariat must not wait entirely for the government to do all, arguing that the individual has a role to play in the development of self and society.

The two plays recommend a self effort approach, productivity and ingenuity of the masses to rise above the rulers' whims and caprices of subjugation and inaction. The masses, in their existential disharmony are urged to strive to survive, by employing available opportunities to achieve the development of self and society.

Most social critics recommend violent revolutionary approaches to counter the oppressors, but these dramatists unanimously recommend contribution by both the masses and the government to ensure peace and productivity. While Nwamuo teaches the people of Okpani village through creating awareness of the endemic Guinea-worm, Duruaku subjects Sam to the hardship of the village and the ridiculous shortcomings of the city to achieve a successful equilibrium.

### **General comments**

The plot structures of both plays are simple, incidental and character developed. In A Question of Choice, the character of

Sam develops as Amadi shares his fears about Sam with Ogbonna, thereby building up his past and present towards his aspirations and that of the playwright. So also is Akoma in Save Our Lives, his conversation with Erina, his second wife, leads us to an expose of the family organigram, the farm and social problems.

The dimension of language in both plays is commendable, considerable and apt for the medium, audience and the reader. While Duruaku approaches his subject matter in simple English language blending the city and the rural, Nwamuo marries the aesthetics of the total rural dwellers with their own colour of language-broken English.

Both dramatists polarize their characters to depict the social system: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In A Question of choice, we observe the rural dwellers as the common people, the wretched of the earth, and the urban as those reflected in Osondu, Meg, Sam, Bank manager, General Manager, Bossa etc. Duruaku presents this people as a mixed bag not totally evil but rather people who are the way they are because of the society. He pitches Sam on both worlds and allows him to access and make his decision. Nwamuo presents a photographic view of the rural dwellers in Akom and his wives, Amadi, and Nuhu in contrast with the plenipotentiary character of Dr Ofiku.

Both plays employ elements of popular theatre: songs, music and dance, to suit the pain and grief engineered by their environment, engaging the mind and the attention of the reader/audience. Duruaku, harnesses the potentials of the farmer in the village (Amadi), arguing that if the youths (Sam) will practice their vocation, they will be more impactful towards the alleviation of poverty, reduce the number of unemployed youths and contribute towards the increase of productivity. The dramatist

drives this argument to the end by placing Sam at the centre of hardship and via experience and suffering achieves success. On the other hand, Nwamuo blows the whistle on the health sector's inaction towards the eradication of Guinea-worm and the need to enlighten the rural dwellers on simple First Aid tips.

Again, the inexhaustible flow of ideas of what Sam (A Question of Choice) can do to make a good living suggest that the average Nigerian is resourceful and can be productive and self-reliant if given an enabling environment to operate. Amadi's heart (Save Our Lives) is stirred to succeed as he strives to actualize his Title-taking ceremony, but the dramatist uses his ill-health to create an awareness of Guinea-worm and institute its eradication.

Onogu and Menegbe (2008:107) advocate for "the need of a balanced view of what is meant by health, especially at the grass roots level" and by extension the virus of unemployment is eaten up by the young and the old. Graduates of more than ten years are still job hunting therefore one wonders what will happen to the millions of youths passing out from the National Youth Service Corps. The orientation should serve amongst others, as a training ground for making fresh graduates job-ready.

Nwamuo and Duruaku's plays are community development models out of which easily, facilitators can develop drama skits with scenario formulations that are enriched with local colour, local problems and communal participation for intervention in the areas of unemployment, health and rural development. Both plays have simple staging techniques akin to any local environment, are adaptable and easily can be re-enacted anywhere within short notice.

## **Conclusion**

Ironically, dramatic literature usually burlesques with contrary tunes of the same song it craves for in a dysfunctional imbalance, but differently, Nwamuo and Duruaku ride on the realistic back of dramatic medium to comment on social malaise in a rich and endowed nation. The paper takes into cognizance the shortfalls of the rulers and their several wrong policies meted against the ruled but concentrate on the need for self-effort. Genuine productivity is endangered when the rural communities are totally abandoned. The dramatists note that lack of adequate preparation to curb health and natural disasters breed progressive cancers that will on the long run, stagnate national effort.

The dramatists sue for collective development of the society. They argue that when leadership fails the people's understanding of their situation and contribution towards nation-building is of great advantage.

Both dramatists have demonstrated their understanding of the psyche of rural dwellers and have attempted to capture their muscular tensions and their lack and appetite for good and productive lives. They have also treated the theme of empowerment, social awareness and productivity differently, but from signifying creative plots, locales and temperaments, arriving at the imperatives of the civilization of the human mind as a prerequisite for development.

Indeed, there is need for artistic pattern in which dramatic literature will not end in the classroom, but will be taken to the people, adapted to suit their local problems and physicalized within their space.

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