

**CORRUPTION AND MINORITY RIGHTS IN A
DEMOCRATIC DISPENSATION:
A Study of *The Gods and the Scavengers***

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Abstract

This study discusses issues bordering on corruption, corrupt practices and minority rights as articulated in the above play. This shall be achieved through the careful appraisal of the conflicts in *The Gods and the Scavengers*, with particular attention to some specific characters and or group of characters, as representation of the factors that engender the malaise in society. This is to determine how the character traits of the said individuals or groups uphold the moral values of a normal society, or deter it, especially in a democratic dispensation, as could be ascribed to the Nigerian environment of today. The hypocrisy of the leading characters, which can be equated to the characteristics of our leaders in Nigeria, shall be carefully exposed. Their pronouncements and subsequent contrary actions capable of undermining a sane society and misdirecting, as well as misrepresenting ideals of democracy shall be pinpointed and appraised. This is to expose the level of violation constituted by such opprobrious conduct and or disposition. Attention shall equally be paid to the activities of individual and or groups that undermine peaceful co-existence and promote divisions to the detriment of national unity. Individuals and groups whose actions are commendable and could serve as models shall likewise be evaluated. Finally the usual twist of resorting to ascribing our failures as a nation to act of the Gods shall be examined with the aim to re-orientate our minds to accepting responsibility for our actions or in-action.

Preambles

In an introduction, to what he entitled, "drama as a social and educational force," John Hodgson (ii) states as follows:

It may seem strange that drama should be considered to be of any use at all other than as relaxation and entertainment. But it is being used, and abused, in many other and varied ways.

The purpose of citing the above statement is not to trace records of abuses, but to point out that the thinking in many quarters even in present day is not different. Hence we set out in this discourse to use the diagram earlier captured in this work to illustrate how all these roles are articulately achieved in the text under study. To this effect the following additional claims from our source gives insight:

Greater understanding of its nature and potential as a means of human inquiry and expression should, however, facilitate the appreciation of its importance and help to enrich the quality of entertainment we ask for (ii).

Having this in mind, we may proceed to consider the varied issues that border on personal and or societal events in our text of study.

The following assertion by Olu Obafemi (168) is a reaffirmation of the relevance of drama in addressing personal and societal issues:

The conscious ideological commitment of the younger dramatists in Nigeria is the significant point of departure between them and the first generation of dramatists in English in Nigeria...

Bakare Ojo, whose work we are treating in this discourse is of course one of those younger dramatists with this ideological commitment. This departure from the African neo-classics whose works are sometimes considered too technical for the non-elites is what makes

the younger generation of Nigerian playwrights to be considered more relevant in sensitizing and conscientizing both the elites and nonelites. This and the topical nature of their works create a more conducive environment to achieve the use of drama to educate. To this effect Obafemi exposes as follows:

They deal with subjects as topical as the phenomenon of arm robbery, students' rampage, class struggle, corruption, fierce anti-capitalism and feminist concern (169).

Against this backdrop we shall appraise *The Gods and the Scavengers*, to determine the topicality of the issues raised in the play. The relevance of the issues to the present day Nigeria, especially our democratic practices shall be examined. It is however, important to say at this point that the playwright did not as it were just delve into reporting of issues. He carefully presents a play, a theatrical piece, which dwells on issues that border on the national agenda. His approach could be likened to the presentation of Bole Butake's strategies as a political playwright, as quoted by Eckhard Breitingner:

I'm not going to say things in a blunt manner simply because I want to be politically committed (3).

With the above statement it is possible to see that the playwright presents a play which entertains, informs, educates and could still educate those who are acquainted with the national agenda. Our source further quoted Bole Butake to have said; "you have to be very careful about what and how you are saying it,

because this country is very unpredictable". So we can immediately adjust ourselves to the opening of this all important discourse on our national issues.

In the prologue which opens with a song, the playwright presents two sonorous voices that announce the state of being as it affects our dear nation, which opinions have at different times described as "nascent democracy' democratic dispensation or political dispensation. In the song, we can immediately sense the vicious circle of our national life, economic underdevelopment and sociopolitical agenda. The rendition states through the lead Singer:

Lead:

Yes it's dawn of a new morning but the promised land is still far away, our destiny is in our hands, we must rise up now else we perish.

Through the above song, not only did the playwright arouse awareness to the un-ideal situation of what people lightly ascribe in all available terms, he equally shows how far we are away from what we should look up to or our expectations as a nation. Likewise, he makes a clarion call to the citizenry to rise up and salvage the situation or we head nowhere. This done in the first stanza, he goes on in the second stanza to sensitize the "populace" urging self reliance and actualization in the following words

Lead:

Why do we shy away from civil struggle?
The heavens help those who help themselves. Our destiny is in our hands.
This is the time to fight all our oppressors.

In this stanza not only is the playwright calling for participation in our affairs, he equally calls for self actualization and resistance to oppression.

This is a confirmation of the revolutionary tendencies of the younger dramatists which Obafemi holds as the distinguishing factor between them and the first generation dramatists. The third and final stanza of the prologue addresses the issues of religious piety and devotion. It is as follows:

Lead:

Why do we shout God as if He
never gave us brain? Why do
we shout the devil like we are
Zombies? In the scriptures all
things were put in our hands.
When we do nothing the gods
do nothing.

The salient points in the above lines are not the mere vilification of any religion or the scriptures, but the call to use our God given senses. This is based on the fact that some of the things we may be holding against God or devil are actually results of our inaction or our short comings in thought. These lines therefore discourage those who want at all times to attribute every occurrence to the 'gods' or devil, depending on what side of the divide we may find ourselves. This is not withstanding whether you believe the Muslim "Allah", the Christian God, Jehovah, one of the gods-the deities of the traditional worshipers or a Buddhist just to name a few.

This theme or call to self reliance, instead of the enslavement of one's mind to the Gods, are equally present in several plays of Femi Osofisan, amongst which are *Morountodun*, *No More The Wasted Breed*, *Another Raft and Esu* And *The Vagabond Minstrels*. In the first movement of the play all necessary endeavours are represented by the scavengers. So among the scavengers, you have the educated or rather the Academics, represented as scavenger 1, the medical profession as scavenger 2,

the farmers scavenger 3, the technician scavenger 4, and the religious adherents as scavenger 5.

These various interests through their songs can be seen to be under the same dilemma, that of being short changed by the powers that be, the political class. The role of scavenger 5 is intended to be anachronistic, in the true sense of the call to be independent and freed from the enslavement to the Gods. This is because the actions of scavenger 5 seemed to break the self will and determination of the other scavengers to free themselves or at least confront their oppressors.

With this representation, you can easily see the stage set between the ruled-the citizenry and the rulers- the political class. Immediately following in movement 2, is a combination of both the ethnic divide which as it is found in Nigeria, determines professional pre-occupations like the cattle rearing, fishing, blacksmithing and farming. The movement of the scavengers from their dust bin environment where they scavenge for sustenance immediately remind us of the Maroko saga during the military dispensation, which Pedro Obaseki captured in his play *Sun set in the Lagoon*.

Similarly the reclaimed property from the scavengers was to become a personal property of those in power. That in itself captures the visionary nature of the dramatist/playwright as these occurrences recently unfolded at the Land allocation probe, where many of those entrusted with our welfare have been found to revoke lands of either the 'poor', "less privileged", or "political enemies", converting same to themselves.

To address the volatile nature of these issues the market is used as a symbol of the all embracing nature of the oppression. Even when the visit of the Honourable chairman to the market was supposed to be a thank you tour, he used the occasion, as is characteristic of the political class, to pour out promises. Soon after, the contradictory nature of our political life is exposed through the

councillors, who see their representation as an opportunity for them to exploit those whose “mandate” they are supposedly exercising. So while Chief Anago promises hell for those found to be corrupt, it is rather found that the entire dispensation thrives on corruption and corrupt activities.

This situation is akin to what has been found to be the characteristic of the immediate past administration in the country. The accusation of collecting funds without executing the projects they are meant for can easily be related with the power probe of the House of Representatives. Andy, the special Adviser to the Chairman seems to be the only sane person amongst the lot. In fact it is through Andy that the actual motive of relocating of the scavengers is revealed.

Against the known culture of compromise in Nigerian political system, Andy proves contrary confronting Chief Anago and subsequently goes on to resign from the cabinet. *** These happenings, especially as it affects the miniature chairman who could be adopted for any of the higher office of either a president, a governor as may apply in our political/ democratic dispensation***. The miniature councillors on the other hand could be the senator, members of House of Representatives of the national assembly or the state houses of assembly. Whichever one, the issues are that their hypocrisy and corrupt tendencies are made bare, which are present in our present democracy.***

The minority issue is well presented through the conflicts between Mallam Maiangwa and Madunagu's subjects. Some of the conflicts carries religious undertone, while others are informed by the usual desire to create a territory for possession. These conflicts are of different dimensions and magnitude. Sometimes they are products of intrigues by the politicians as is shown when the councillors agree to create deliberate destabilization in the polity to avoid being held accountable, especially of the diverted funds meant for different masses

oriented projects.

The playwright having raised these catalogues of problems, carefully weaves a likely way out of the problems. He does this by creating an awareness campaign led by Andy, who by his antecedents appears as a kind of saviour. Having been able to make the various groups to sink their differences and embrace reason, things that make for peace. He showed how under a peaceful atmosphere the people could actually be in a position to choose their leaders by merit. This they did by opting for Andy as their new leader, even while he was not ultimately gunning for that in his peace mission.

This by implication is a clarion call to all in the Nigerian Democratic Dispensation to always examine the things that give rise to conflicts, to be able to always arrive at peaceful resolution. This is a sine-qua-non for an enduring democracy. This in effect is a diagnosed application of the use of drama motivation and material to encourage development and achieve a therapeutic state with free flow in communication in human relationship using the Art, Music, Civics, Religion, relying on the history and geographical endowment of a people, democracy, “government of the people by the people and for the people”.

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