

RECENT NIGERIAN PLAYWRITING AND COLLAPSE OF IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Playwriting and indeed, most forms of writing, are seen as potent weapons for the espousal of views and ideologies. The history of playwriting in Nigeria is an interesting study as it seems that different generations of playwrights, embraced specific ideologies in line with the prevailing issues of each moment in history. Thus, from the plays of James Ene Henshaw that preach love and harmonious co-existence to those of Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark-Bekederemo whose works tried to reassert the dignity and authenticity of African cultures and traditions; through to the period after Independence when attention shifted to the ideology of self rule and the dynamics of inter-tribal relations with writers like Ola Rotimi holding sway to the "oil boom" era which coincidentally also witnessed the apogee of the socialist movement, when playwrights began to make critical comments on the country's socio-political and economic direction as witnessed in the uneven distribution of wealth, playwriting in Nigeria remained largely functional and ideological. This was largely because; playwrights of these eras were seen as either rooting for the Capitalist or the Socialist cause. Recently however, a trend or generation of playwrights is emerging on the Nigerian literary scene. This breed, referred to as "new voices" by Ameh Akoh appear to defy classification along the hard core ideological lines of Socialism or Capitalism. The recent or new breed of Nigerian playwrights appear to be towing the lines of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen who

addressed purely socio-cultural issues of his generation. This paper attempts to study the works of these new breed playwrights in order to discover what makes them different from the earlier generations.

Introduction

The history of playwriting in Nigeria is long and chequered. Without a doubt, it owes its origins to Western influences hence playwrights in the ilk of James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark among others were either writing to impress the colonialists or to stake Africa's claim to having a dignified and authentic history. In either case, these writers were showcasing bourgeois pastime or the travails of the down-trodden but not with (in the opinion of the coming Marxist writers) the requisite commitment. Indeed, so rich and robust did playwriting in Nigeria become that it has since become fashionable to categorize it into generations. Thus, we are said to have;

...the first generation of early post-independence conventional playwrights; the Post-civil war radical playwrights whose subject matter became the then running battle between capitalism and socialism and fronting for the latter in their ideological confrontations, the middle generation which emerged in the dying days of Marxism as praxis, and the new generation which are a product of the last days of military dictatorship in Nigeria and Africa. (Akoh, parr.2).

It is therefore within this category of "new generation" of playwrights that are found works which bear no ideological leanings in the true sense of the word. Thus, the first generation of playwrights was concerned with the re-

affirmation of the supremacy and survival of our indigenous cultures in the face of the damaging effects of colonialism on the people. This is why the plays of this era were “heavily coloured with African life, with a lot of what is called “African tradition” such as religious rituals and translations from vernacular poetry”. (Nwoko 463).

For the second generation, their dominant theme was that of leadership in the newly independent African nations. Indeed, Osofisan describes it as ...”the need to examine the tension between pacifism and militarism, between a politics of free choice and one of coercion...the concern about the failure of leadership in Africa”. (615-616). The succeeding generation was preoccupied with finding an ideology for good governance. Plays like Bode Sowande's trilogy – *The Night Before, Farewell to Babylon* and *Flamingo* aptly describe this search for ideology. This period also witnessed the blossoming of the feminist ideology in Nigeria when female playwrights began to address the issue of female empowerment. The next group or category are those Ameh Akoh has chosen to call, “new voices” or new generation and their “subject matter maybe taken from contemporary social, political and economic realities”. (Akoh 115). Indeed, this generation in the words of Asigbo and Utoh-Ezeajugh, constructs their plays;

... not just along class struggle but along moral and ethical lines... This recent form of radicalism seeks to engender not only political change but also moral and ethical revolution. It does not, as is the wont of the second generation playwrights, stereotype conflicts but, rather it seeks to capture the complexities and motivations behind most selfish actions. This trend is most noticeable in the

works of Sam Ukala, Emeka Nwabueze, Bakare, Ojo Rasaki, Alex Asigbo, and Esiaba Irobi among others. (121-122).

Recent Nigerian Playwriting and Ideology

Playwriting in Nigeria has romanced with many an ideology even as the art itself boasts of those that can be regarded as university wits while others can be called, popular playwrights. Playwriting as an art deals with the intricacies involved in creatively putting on paper in the form of drama, ideas for the edification of man. Ideas in dramatic works can either be real or imagined hence the description of playwrights as visionaries because of their use of past and present events in the task of shaping society. This is why Dandaura insists that the playwright “functions as a visionary who utilizes recent experiences as perspective on both the present and the future”. (179).

Ideology on the other hand is seen by Biodun Jeyifo (575) as “...the form and content of consciousness as it pertains to the relations between individuals, groups, classes, nations and races”. It is therefore a set of ideas or beliefs held by a particular group of people and such ideas or beliefs could influence the way of life of that particular group. Consequently, playwrights as products of society and as artists who are consciously aware of their environment are most times, influenced by the ideological leanings of the society they belong to. As visionaries also, they can propagate their own ideology and use it to influence the society. Being a product of a specific society, his works must reflect that society either as a reaction or an affirmation to trends going on within

it. This is why we insist that drama;

...is created and executed within a specific environment. It naturally interacts with that environment, is influenced by it, influences that environment in turn and also acts together with that environment in the larger and far more complex history of society. (Soyinka 421).

This presupposes that playwriting must reflect or be a simulacrum of events in the society in which it is created. It also means that playwrights should most times betray one form of ideological leaning or the other. This is why Anyagu (38) maintains that;

The art of playwriting over the years has been a creative documentation of issues, events and activities of men and women within a given government. It has always reflected conflicts of interests, ideologies and gender in the process proffering solutions that will ensure harmony and peace within the society.

This is why a historical survey of Nigerian drama will reveal as many ideological strands as there are playwrights. For instance, among the first generation playwrights are those whose ideologies can be said to be the re-establishment of traditional norms and values in the face of opposing views espoused by the colonial forces of "civilization" and religion. These playwrights, among who are Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, Sonny Oti and others;

have made it an important aspect of their work to go back to legends, folklore and history in order to identify what elements were negative and what, positive in African pre-colonial traditions and experience so as to refurbish present attempts to overcome colonial alienation. (Jeyifo 574).

Plays that bear such ideology include Soyinka's *Death and the*

King's Horseman, The Strong Breed and even *The Lion and the Jewel* as well as Clark-Bekederemo's *Ozidi, Song of a Goat* and Sonny Oti's *The Old Masters*.

The second strand of ideological leanings is made up of those playwrights who, having come into prominence at the dawn of Nigeria's Independence were ecstatic and eager to proffer what they considered solutions and ideas for good governance. This group, following a generation of prodigiously creative playwrights has been adjudged as not being "as prodigious as those of the first because they lack fluency and show an anxiety to explain and justify scientifically, the materials taken from African life". (Nwoko 463). Yet, they had an ideology that could be regarded as leftist and welfarist in nature hence their insistence on a government of the people by the people or nakedly put, a worker's government or a socialist state. This leaning made the plays of this era to betray a lot of material dialectics and uncommon desire to have the masses chart their own destiny. Works like Ola Rotimi's *If...*, Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* and *Twingle Twangle Atwyning Tayle* are signposts of this ideological leaning.

The next category of plays in this ideological diffusion is those written during the oil boom era; that is after the Nigerian civil war to the second republic period. The writings of this period had influences from the earlier generations except that their predominant ideology centered on hope and reconciliation for the traumatized nation. There is also, the desire to make a

mark on the global scene especially with Nigeria's rising profile in global politics of the 70's; hence we had plays which subject matter is ... "taken from contemporary social, political and economic realities (sic) but traditional ways of life expressed through rituals, religious festivals, and seasonal activities". (Okoh 115). Coming under this category are plays like Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* coincidentally, the feminist ideology found strong footing in Nigerian writing at this time. Indeed, according to Ewrierhoma, it was the period when "the woman writer exercised the freedom to foreground herself in history, politics, economics, geography, poetics, and so on; to make a point in a Masculinist world". (43). Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and Salami-Agunloye's *More than Dancing* are plays which come under this category.

However, Nigerian playwriting is not all about Capitalist, Socialist/Marxist or Feminist ideology. This can be evidenced from the works of an emerging crop of Nigerian playwrights, who consciously or unconsciously, dispense with issues of ideological leaning in favor of the daily problems of living. Thus, their works treat "issues which border on the challenges towards economic, social and political development". (Anyagu 29). Playwriting in Nigeria has therefore begun to assume a new dimension where ideological divides are collapsing and socio-political as well as economic realities of everyday living are addressed. These issues are treated, not as ideology but as social and man-made problems militating against the attainment of a just and egalitarian society.

Consequently, current Nigerian plays discuss "wide ranging issues that are topical, sensitive and a challenge to nationhood". (Metusaleh 115). Examples abound in Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*, Tor Iorapuu's *April 1421*, Alex Asigbo's *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*, Esiaba Irobi's *Cemetery Road* among others.

NIGERIAN PLAYWRITING AND THE COLLAPSE OF IDEOLOGY

Until recently, most critical works on Nigerian playwriting dwelt on the works of the first and second generation Nigerian playwrights as can be glimpsed from the avalanche of critical works on the plays of Soyinka, Clark-Bekederemo, Rotimi, Osofisan, Sofola, Onwueme, Sowande and so on. While acknowledging that these two generations represented the richness and robustness of Nigerian playwriting, one must also note that the newer or recent playwrights have been bringing the much needed freshness into Nigerian playwriting hence in the words of Steve Inegbe, the ... "younger generation of Nigerian dramatists have been doing some good work". (Parr 4). These new and emerging playwrights need to be given greater attention by literary critics as a form of encouragement especially as it is generally agreed that criticism sharpens the commitment and social vision of writers.

This is because in their plays "they attempt to reach new goals or build on or re/deconstruct old dramatic canons within the ideo-aesthetic boundaries in both language and theme".

(Akoh, parr.3). This is most evident in a work like Alex Asigbo's *War of the Tin Gods* where the major preoccupation was on the deconstruction of the ideo-aesthetics of the older generation of playwrights with the verdict that a new set of aesthetics and in fact commitment is needed to satisfy the peculiar yearnings of the present generation. Also seeking new ways to address our socio-cultural and political realities are playwrights like Tor Iorapuu, Victor Dugga, Tunde Ajayi, Chukwuma Okoye, Musa Dauda Enna, Agbo Emmanuel Ogo-Ochi and others of their ilk who believe that societal problems cannot be stereotyped but must be seen and addressed uniquely as no two situations are the same in the true sense of the word. This is because vice is not restricted to the bourgeoisie; neither is virtue a prerogative of the proletariat. Pursuing this argument further, Akoh says that some of the;

...old masters like Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and Ahmed Yerimah, even Bode Sowande who have written new plays within the last decade have towed the line of the new generation and have dispensed with ideology in order to still remain artistically and socially relevant to their environment... (Akoh Parr. 4).

Examples can be found in Wole Soyinka's *King Baabu*, Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, and Yerimah's *Aetu*.

Dauda Musa Enna's play, *Banquet of Treachery* for instance addresses a recurrent national problem – tribalism, not from the stereotypical ideological point of view a class war but as a human failing that progresses to hubris as a result of consorting with boot-lickers and sycophants. We thus appreciate the Commander's bestialities, not as a racial or

ethnic inclination but as a conscious choice which he makes in spite of repeated warnings from good and upright friends. Along the same lines also, Emma Dandaura's play *Venom for Venom* treats the Niger Delta imbroglio, not as a class struggle, but as an avoidable human tragedy that is brought about by greed and avarice on the part of the Amayanabo and his co-travelers on the road of corruption.

Conclusion

From all indications, one notices that recent Nigerian plays no longer parade ideologies like sirens but addresses societal problems from individual points of view without turning them into group or class vice/virtue as is the wont of previous generations most notably the second generation. Since from all rational reasoning, Nigeria's problem is not caused by a specific class of people, neither is corruption restricted to socio-economic classes, it is not surprising therefore that the new breed of Nigerian playwrights, conscious of their responsibility to the society decided to address issues from angles that see deviance as personal attribute.

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