

"SARO-WIWA'S SARDONIC HUMOURS CAPTURED IN FOUR FARCICAL PLAYS"

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ABSTRACT

The relative specificity of humours as a genre of comedy can hardly be overstressed. Humours' cultural particularity does not however limit their universal appeal or applicability. The same trend is applicable to their therapeutic potentialities. Reiteratingly, therefore, Saro-Wiwa's farcical or Sardonic humours packaged in the four plays, in focus, while wearing basically the Nigeria costumes and addressed in Nigerian pidgin-English vis-à-vis other local comic varieties and lingua colorations are nonetheless appropriate and pungent in attacking, endogenously, the multi-faceted Nigeria's complex socio-cultural and politico-economic exigencies; are rooted in economic crimes and other corrupt practices mostly fueled by get-rich quick mania, complicated by the paradoxes of inequity, injustices, fair play, among other debilitating man's inhumanity to man common to the Nigeria's Socio-political Climes. It is still the contention of this paper that truth endogenously uttered is better contained than that exogenously revealed.

KEYWORDS: Comedic humours, universal appeal, therapeutic.

INTRODUCTION

Kenule Saro-Wiwa does not, now, need any elaborate introduction in the Nigerian Literati. Nor does he, in environmental activism; continental or worldwide, where he had won reverberating awards for his intrepid stance on behalf of Nigerian polluted shorelines or landscapes; thanks to oil exploration, exploitation, land denudation vis-à-vis Niger Delta (Ijuman) deprivation, deprivation and impoverishment. Saro-Wiwa was an indefatigable minority advocate, an outstanding crusader for Ogoni (MOSOP) or Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People's cause; the campaigns for which he was extrajudicially condemned, imprisoned and executed; despite international outcries and condemnations. Saro-Wiwa was not only a novelist, essayist, critic and poet of international repute. He was also an outstanding historian, chronicler, dramatist and media-situation comedian, with his comedy series "Basi and Company (1985 – 88). The essay is made up of two intimately interrelated parts, including the introduction and conclusion.

PART ONE Sardonic Humours

The term, "Sardonic humours", as here captioned, connotes "expression of bitterness or ironic mockery, provoking laughter" and ridicules or derisions (New Webster's Dictionary: 1995: 887). In character with Saro-Wiwa's activism, his comic vision is protest-oriented; protests or satires against what he saw as unwholesome and detestable, with the view to provoking possible therapeutic laughs in favour of deprived human conditions. Saro-Wiwa's comic vision, in the words of Wylie Sypher (1956:47) "fits the test of true comedy", in that it does "awaken thoughtful laughter". Laughter, which Readers Digest characteristically regards as "the best medicine," has also been described by Jorce Mayer, a television Evangelist, as an hour of internal, psychic aerobic exercise that heals, and releases latent spiritual and physical energies. In this regard, hearty, throaty laughs that can be excited by the numerous situational or domestic-oriented comedies of Bil Cosby, Eddie Murphy for example, are invaluable emotional or psychological therapy, which can be more curative than even traditional, orthodox or homeopathic therapies, especially in regards to some mental, emotional, psychological or psychiatric malaises.

The comic vision, here, is also in consonance with Sypher's cryptic typology:

The comic perspective can be reached only by making game of the "Serious" in life. The comic rites are necessarily impious, for comedy is sacrilege as well as release (1956:225).

It is from the above premises of the comic thresholds that we attempt to appraise the comic, exuded from the four farcical plays of Ken Saro-Wiwa, namely, *The Transistor Radio (1972)*, *Bride By Return*, *The Wheel* and *Madam No Go Quench Again*, all agglomerated in the *Four Farcical Plays (1989)*. Each of these plays deals with the serious aspects of life that is endemically Nigerian; in actions, characters and situations, all humorously, but sardonically treated with, no doubt, definite poetic, missionary and dramatic zeal; exuding remarkable attention – conscious echoes. Each attempts to direct the audience's attention to what man could make of his fellow man, charged with all frailties.

The Transistor Radio

Basi and his friend's hovel captures, very graphically, the degree of penuries in the mix of plenty that typified Lagos life:

It is a single room with a bed, a clothes – hanger, a food cupboard on top of which is a kerosene stove, two single cushioned seats. Basi ... in bed... Alali enters ... snoring. Alali ... rummages for food in the cupboard. Basi stops snoring (p.11).

Their petty quarrel dwells on the air of hunger, joblessness and the trials that go with them. For Basi, being down does not amount to giving up on Lagos life, which is reputedly a melting pot. He recounts his strait-jacketed-life and experience in the city: sleeping under Carter Bridge, or rubbish dumps of Isolo, scavenging in the dumps or expecting food remnants from the rich tables, to have his meals, constantly harassed by the wicked, nagging landlady for non-payments of house rents. He had roamed the street for upwards of ten years. Jobless, and ironically fired as soon as employed, as messenger, to do an honest job in a city where the less work you do, the richer you could become... through utter parasitism and other dishonest existences. Since Alali is under his tutelage, Basi has to teach him "how to be smart, to get on in this city" of Lagos, using not only his wits and brain, but much more his tongue so as to survive!

Grass to Grace

It has become common in Lagos that writing applications for employment is no longer of any use. Vacancies are filled without advertisement, or advertisements are deceptive formalities, to cover up employments of cronies or family members. A day in the life of a lucky applicant recounted by Basi, as lessen for Alali, is a graphic portrayal of daily frustrations that typify Lagos-unemployment profile; the story of the Carter Bridge jumper:

He had been in Lagos for three years without a job, money or a house. Many a time, he would go to Carter Bridge and gaze at the lagoon, at the lazy waters flowing peacefully past... it contrasted so strongly with the turmoil inside him. So, one fine day, he took the plunge. The Police rescued him... took him to court. A rich man took him away and gave him a job as a security man (p. 16).

The clincher in the story is that the lucky man, today "drives a car, owns houses, has three or four wives, and will soon be a Governor", a typical story of grass to grace, Cynderella story, a Horace Alger profile; perhaps worthy of emulation by Alali? However, it should be noted as Basi recounts that such ventures end most tragically for most people; while others who flout evidences of riches could be mere brokers, frauds and fakes, for the city is full of frauds, and fakes, conveying an impression of "the more you look, the less you see". Alali is advised to "be a fraud yourself", to get smart. "Never despair. You never know what each day will bring", demanding "courage, courage...", not necessarily "chewing tea leaves for supper on a wet, rainy day..." As Madam, the landlady enters, Basi reenacts one of his regular rent-payment dodging tactics thus, as he tells Alali:

Run! No, come this way. Lie on the bed there. Pretend you're ill. If she asks you, tell her you don't know where I'm gone to. Basi hides under the bed, Alali lies in it, groaning. Enter Madam, brandishing on empty bottle of Saros beer (16 - 17).

Later, Basi reemerges from the hideout to handle Madam himself more craftily, assuring landlady that he would pay up his rent, arrears and all:

... I've completed all arrangements. I'm going to get a job. In fact, it's not going to be a job. It's a business deal. I'm going to earn a million naira. Millions. Truly. A million here and another million in Switzerland. Honest, Madam. You will see. As soon as the deal is concluded, I'll pay everything I owe you to the last Kobo... We'll go on a world cruise. I'll buy you a house at Victoria Island...

In this passage, the author has taken opportunity to make sardonic statements on aspects of the Nigerian factor, building castle in the air; pipedreams syndrome, well-captured in Saro-Wiwa's "Basi and company" comedy series on Nigeria Television in the nineteen eighties. He has also made wry comments on the Nigerian politicians' mania for spiriting the country's wealth away to the banking vaults of Switzerland ala Abacha et al, and purchasing of houses in choicest areas like Victoria Island, and beyond, typifying Alameiyesigha etc; for self and favoured concubines. Defending his hiding-under-the-bed antics, Basi said, altercating with madam landlady;

Basi: hid under a bed? I am a millionaire on-the-make, Madam. I don't hide under beds. I was looking for my pen.

Madam: And your friend, him belly ache, wetin happen to am? 'E stop automatic...

Madam: Lagos life don enter una head... make cunny, play wayo...
Wen you get money, you gi' am to woman...

As Madam departed, Basi coached Alali on the lessons of diplomacy:

Learn the lesson, then. You've got to be clever and smart if you must live. I learnt the lesson trudging the streets of Lagos. You must have your wits about you all the time or you're ruined. You need brains to bargain in the market; brains to avoid the policeman on the prowl for bribes; brains to outwit the con man on the train of a fast deal...

These are street-wise coping strategies and survival measures that a Lagosian would unravel to you as a first-comer or "Johnny just landed". Basi assures the pessimistic Alali that he, Alali would be so rich, he would own one half of the houses in Lagos, with his cars filling the roads, planes the airports, and yachts, the high seas; with inadequate banks to bank his cash. This is the stuff of which the Nigerian pipedream optimism, which I call "hoping against hopes" is made of; but hopes, all the same, as frustration therapies or medicine against despair; call it survival measures. Basi states:

You've got to believed it. I believe it. I'll be rich. You'll be rich. W'll swim in golden pools, ride our own planes, sleep on our wide soft beds, marry several wives... Because the Millions are my business. And to be a millionaire, all you do is think like a millionaire (famous lines from "Basi and Company" TV Comedy Series, where Joe Adigwe was the Basi actor)... I have the millions in the banks....

It is from this dreamland that Basi re-enacts an Eldorado play-within the play, where he is the millionaire in his storey-building duplex, with Alali as his houseboy who needs to be attended to, waited on him, as is familiarly done in wealthy homes here.

For instance, the following slapstick passage is typical of the hilarious play-within the play wherein Basi acted the millionaire, attended to by Alali:

Nonsense! Go and get me wine. And what is this? Fresh fish? Good. I love fresh fish. *Poisson sans boisson, C'est poison.* Understand that. Fish without wine is poison. Ah, good fish... If I'm to eat fish, I want a whole fish. Okay? (Probably, a paraphrase of Achebe's famous line: "if you want to eat a toad, eat a fat and juicy one" (pp. 18-21).

Perhaps, it is in consonance with this assertion that Basi, like many Nigerians, even on the brink, precipice or nadir of their existential contradictions, and apparent hopelessness, continue to dream large, rather than small or more realistically. The dominant refrain of Basi here, as in "Basi and Company" comedy series, therefore, is: "To be a millionaire... Think like a millionaire!"

The Transistor Radio

The title-page, "Transition Radio" derivation is as creative as the comedy derived from the situation that gave the

radio play the name. The jingles that introduce us to this episode of the play is rather refreshing:

Mr. Saros knocking at your door! transistor radios, electric fans and kettles – all yours if you are a Saros man!

It is the advert voice of Dandy and associate, who claim to sell or distribute riches. The wares here are the objects above-named, any of which is to be given out in exchange for any empty bottle of Saros beer found. Coincidentally, however, Madam landlady had forgotten a bottle of empty Saros beer as she departed earlier. Such coincidences have, here, as in numerous instances, provided credible ingredients for the plot structure of the play. Thus in swift exchange for Saros beer bottle the transistor radio as a prize has been presented to Alali and Basi. For Basi, the radio is likely to "fetch us the millions" being dreamed, not for the music pleasure or dance it could afford them the opportunity to exercise. Alali believes that "no good will come of the radio, suggesting its being sold to afford them a chanceful good meal for once, as it could be a stolen commodity that Dandy would rather get rid of to avoid any trouble!

Conman Versus Conman

It is yet another opportunity to create another comic segment out of the new interaction between the duo of Basi and Alali and Josco, a task collector conman:

I am Josco. I'm attached to the Post and Telegraphs Departments as a Licensing Officer. My duty, to ensure that all radios...

Basi: Where's your identity card?
 Josco: Can I see your radio please?

Alali: Here. *Shows Josco the radio.* It's brand new. I want something for it. A hundred naira or the nearest offer.

Interestingly, however, even though it is standard Government regulations to have every radio licensed, Josco as license collector would not mine, if Alali gives him five naira to leave him off the hook or agree to settle in court for two hundred naira! It does not bother Josco whether or not the pair of Basi and Alali are jobless or not. Josco, no doubt, would prefer the bribe option which would go to his own pocket rather than the larger one that is for government, irrespective of whether or not the government is new, and appears messianic in any form, as Alali believes. Basi had all along watched carefully, from afar, trying to see how well Alali has learnt survival measures taught so far. Seeing that Josco was going to outwit Alali, he came to the rescue: introducing himself as "Sergeant Basi of the Criminal Investigation Department Working under cover", Basi charged Josco with taking bribe and trying to steal a radio. Josco has intoned the sentence: "Abegsah" (I beg Sir), pleading forgiveness. Basi seized on this episode: name: Abegsah; occupation: Abegsah; age: Abegsah; address: Abegsah. Very good – now, Mr. Abegsah of Abegsah street, I beg to inform you that I'll have to take you to the police station. The comic, but painful unmasking of Josco came when he sardonically confessed:

Forgive me, Sir. You see, my mother-in-law and her entire family came to my place yesterday. I have no money. What could I do? You know the times are difficult. We must live, somehow. Forgive me, Sir. God will bless you, Sir.

But it is a conman outwitting a conman, as we shall soon see. "In view of your pitiable plight, I will not arrest you", said Basi. "But you must issue the gentleman with license", which as demanded by Josco would cost five naira. It dawned on the duo after the license was issued and paid for, Basi exclaimed:

Holy Moses! I thought, I thought I was smart, but he was even smarter, ... I'm damned if I know enough of this city... (pp. 28-29).

Josco has not only issued a fake license but also returned a false naira not in exchange for Alali's note!

Lagos Life

This incident, particularly, has painted a more realistic picture of the existential conditions, contradictions and operable illusion of the Lagos life for Alali, who confessed: "The wretchedness of their life. The hunger the joblessness...the meaninglessness of their situation" (p.28). Alali feels committed to playing the prodigal son, by opting to return to his village; having fed up with Lagos life and the frustration, despair and disillusionment that characterized the city, with its joblessness, conmanship and related human deprivations and depravations. For Alali, therefore, this harangue is a turning-point realization and comic anagnorisis or denouement:

Listen, Basi, how much can I bear it all? The rain, the hunger, the exhausting/unrewarding search for a job in the offices.... No, it's useless. Shall I be running away from the landlady, hiding under the bed, 'Feigning sickness before her-al my life? For how long shall I have imaginary dinners? Must I resort to duping others in order to live as that "licensing Officer" does? No, it's no life. I've had enough. I must reorder life. I'm going back home (p.30).

At this point, one could be led to conclude that Lagos is no longer a melting pot; at least, not for everybody who experiences Lagos.

Ask why, in the first place, Alali came to Lagos, the retort is; "I thought it would be better in Lagos". For everybody said that, believing that the jobs were going begging here, with the city awash with pleasures... Basi's counterpoint is characteristically sardonic, humorous and deceptively hope-raising:

But Lagos is the place for you, man. With a job, without a job, this is the place of hope. The future lies here, man. I tell you, we'll make it here, suddenly without warning. And then our lives will be transformed. This room will become a palace, we'll own plans... To be a millionaire, think like a millionaire!

But, evidently, Alali's conviction and new discovery is born out of disenchantment with such unrealizable propensities. He would prefer to return to where he would not have any cause to be a fake or fraud, he asserts. Basi, is however here to keeps, he confirms. He is in Lagos for the excitement and pleasure which Lagos ideally epitomizes.

Basi is here for the sheer joy of mingling with people, and for hope. In Basi's assertion, "There may be hunger, but after the hunger", he assures, "there are bright lights, money and music", a part of which he and Alali are entitled. In all, finally, however, the jingle song of Nigerpool! Nigerpool! Win a million naira on Nigerpool! Nigerpool! Which dominates the

air sound like a reawakening call, resonating irresistibly for both the verterate and inveterate hearts. It is no wonder then that Alali succumbs easily to Basi's summon: "come, let's go to the Island... bring the radio. Well' will sell it for staking money, money." We are, therefore, not surprise with Alali's response: "Yes coming. Basi, wait for me, wait", as he picks up the radio and runs off.

Alali's compromise, reconciliation and reconversion to stay put in Lagos is Saro-Wiwa's accommodation of the philosophy of Lagos as the melting pot or pot of Nigerians, intelligential or otherwise. Here, between pipedreams and realization fall their shadows. Here such deceptive hopes act more as tranquilizers or therapies against despair, frustration and disillusionment; perhaps, against otherwise irreconcilable contradictions, bedeviling efforts and achievements.

Wife by Return

Perhaps, by the degree of its intensity, intended or unintended, Saro-Wiwa's *Wife by Return* (1989) is as hilarious as it is grotesque and sardonic in its portrayal of the human specimen represented by the ridiculous characters: Nubari, Madam Du, Visigha and the duo of Adda and Dabo. As a burlesque of the typical Nigerian *nouveau riche*, in an attempt to acquire new status, and gentrification, as a mark of societal arrival, in materialist acquisition, in compensation for dreaming large and acting large, it is in tandem with the playwright's comic vision, articulated in *The Transistor Radio*; all in consonance, again, with the heart and spirit of "Basi and Company comedy" series on television.

Nubari as Nouveau Riche

The coarse background of Mr. Nubari from which status he intends to gentrify is vividly portrayed:

A lounge decorated in very poor taste, with a great number of cushioned chairs... some crude paintings... empty bottles of beer... other alcoholic drinks on a center table...

Nicodemus, Mr. Nubaris servant graphically summarises the on-coming comic panorama and "farcical" fantasia:

My master is proper money-miss road. He was good man before, but since 'e win contract and get plenty money, I think he have gone mad. First, he sack him wife... say she no sabi anything; no fine again. That he must marry new wife, educated woman.

Now Mr. Nubari purchases any good that comes his way. He promises to marry Madam Du's daughter, whom he soon dumps to turn his mind toward importing an English lady to meet his new status taste. So it is that Mr. Nubari has to pick his new English wife from fashion catalogue, "picking fine fine one", he likes, "with fine clothes..." Nicodemus describes Mr. Nubari as "real money-miss road, prouiding like peacock", who has adopted cigar-smoking habit, book reading habit, even "he cannot read proper" but can only sign his name. Mr. Nubari must order new pair of woolen suits, waist-coated, three-piece English suit! (pp. 32-36):

English suit is the thing for this sort of marriage. For one to get into its spirit, a woolen suit, you know, one of the best, to make you feel really warm, the sort of thing they wear over there, smart... and dignify.

To match all these, the shoe polish must be bought at the King's Way Stores. It must be specifically "black kiwi show polish, made in England", to match the new custom-made shoes ordered, with good extra heels.

Now, Mr. Nubari wants a new hair style and must have Mr. Visigha specially for it, to be shaped to specification to match the new hat, to make him look the look of what the English normally wear at home... "Not these common idiotic Englishmen... seen around Nigeria". Thus Nicodemus "must... Must prepare him a cup of tea", though, he had never taken tea before. He must now adopt tea-drinking habit like the greatest tea-drinkers in the world i.e., the English people. Mr. Nubari decides to speak Queen's English: "Go away boy, go away. Fetch me my tea and keep my house neat and tidy".

Mr. Nubari frowns on black tea pot:

Nicodemus! A black tea-pot? Oh boy, you'll be the death of me yet! Must you disgrace me today of all days? Must you? What do you think she'll say if she sees such a black pot in the house?... Just take it away... take it away!... I must get new pots before she arrives. I'm sure they don't have black pots over there... Nicodemus!

It is not far fetched to state that Saro-Wiwa's Nubari with his efforts at gentrification adequately, but grotesquely typifies a Nigerian *nouveau riche*, who could be a rag-to-rich politician, contractor, armed robber or a successful conman (also known as 419er). The most outlandish houses in the highbrow areas of Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna or Kano, or the flashiest, most sophisticated cars; not found even on Los Angeles, New York or Hamburge, on Nigeria's rickety, potholed roads, belong to such opportunistic nouveaux riches. The menia for numerous sophisticated wives, acquired at new prices are parts of adumbrating such new status.

Madam Du's description of Mr. Nubari as "callous, brainless, idiotic, egoistic, rich fool" is an apt caricature of such *nouveaux riches*, quite innumerable now in Nigeria. The following speech credited to Nubari adequately confirms the above assertions:

Go and fetch the talkative fool... I must be absolutely neat, to make the first impression most impressive... Oh, Victoria... yes, her name must be Victoria, though they've refused to mention her name. Oh, but I know these English... very cunning: they call it DIPLOMICY. V-I-C-T-O-R-I-A... (pp. 39-43).

Interestingly, for refusing to marry her young daughter whose marriage to Nubari has been very widely advertised, Madam Du who has not succeeded in getting Nubari to justify the jilting of her daughter departs, saying: "I curse you with curse of an old woman. May you stew in your new wealth. Scallywag." However, Mr. Nubari finally, justifies his reasons for trying to import a young lady from England for a wife:

Nubari states his four reasons for marrying a foreigner rather than the most desirable girl around home; ... because she is properly educated... everybody in their country speaks English... the marriage is inexpensive... her twentieth cousins and great-aunts do not expect me to feed, doctor and educate them... Her mother, my mother, my mother-in-law, will not keep peeping into my kitchen to see how I'm treating her daughter. Finally, these women are good. They know what is meant by love. They hand around your neck, say "Oh, my darling" and such like.

Even though Mr. Nubari does not dispute Mr. Adda's assertion

that "women are a plague", he confesses his real reasons for choosing a foreigner, English lady for a new wife:

... Here we are, busy mimicking these Englishmen. We like their ears, their radios, their televisions, their medicines, their foods, their language, their clothes. We like their system of government and for every busy trying to copy it. But we always make bad copies, sorry copies. Why not get the real things? The authentic piece. So I've gone one better than everyone else. I'm getting the true article. *The original!*

Persistent in building his castle in the air, Mr. Nubari states further advantages of his new marriage: "She will bring with her all those things we've been trying to copy from her people", he says, adding with conviction that she will change our lives for good." He further cautions his company: "... Remember, law and order is the first love of her country..." Already drunk with the drinks supplied, Adda, a realist wonders where Nubari could have met her... an English lady? Dabo expresses his intimate wish: "... I'm looking forward to those half English boys and girls who will soon people the town..."

Nubari as Scarecrow

Meanwhile, the various customs-made wears have started to arrive, delivered by their makers: The tailor comes in with: "a tail-coat, a jacket, what not." He describes the wears as very bad advertisement for me." He describes the wears as "heavy, coarse, woolen thing... the tail coat..." It is Adda, the realist who clinches the paraphernalia: "This man is mad. Wearing that coarse thing in this extraordinary heat. He's mad." Again, Adda adds with a tinge of further ironic ridicule: "... what could be wrong with the richest man among us? ... we simple paupers don't know a thing. A rich man does his things in style", he opines sarcastically, concluding: "When such a man is about to marry an English lady, he must look sophisticated, in dress, and manner of speaking, what not?" It is Mr. Hats, the hat designer, who asserts trenchantly: "that he's going to marry an English lady doesn't mean he has to wear a hat as outlandish as this?" Again, it is Mr. Hats who delivers the rib-crackling lines when he avers: "Ha! Ha! Ha! I've never seen a think like it." For Nubari is now "all done up to a gigantic size", with his "shoes fantastically high, and as for his hat, oh, heavens, ha! Ha!" he intones. Adda continues to add his touch of sarcasm: "A man who's going to marry an extraordinary woman must dress specially for the occasion. The picture of Nubari, the bridegroom to be, as a scarecrow is portrayed by Mr. Hats who guffaws, decisively and mimically:

Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! You needed to see him as I put the hat on his head: and then practicing his antics before a large mirror in his bedroom. Ha! Ha! I'll never forget it (pp. 47-51).

Now, when Nubari emerges, according to the stage direction, it is his servant Nicodemus who opens the laughing gas of ridicule with his reverberating "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! He! He! Oh, Master." Unlike the other members of the immediate audience, Nicodemus can hardly contain himself as the following typical scene indicates:

... Oh, sah, forgive me, I won't laugh ever ag... ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho! ho! he! he! He is seized by a paroxysm of laughter, laughter, falls to the ground and rolls off... The others have managed to hold themselves but they cannot entirely maintain a straight face, all do laugh, though not as boisterously as Nicodemus (p.52).

Most ridiculous to Dabo, Adda, Visigha and others is the revelation that the Postmaster will lead the imported wife, in here to him. Nubari lets the lady cat out of his surprise bag, as he rehearses how he would welcome, in, his new wife, Victoria – age style: "... what do you think? I placed the order by air. The Postmaster brings her in, then I bow to her like so..." Among the aspects which Saro-Wiwa is burlesquing in the foregoing, as mentioned earlier, such as Mr. Nubari's mania for purchases of foreign products, including importation of foreign, at the expense of beautiful Nigerian ladies, is the import propensity or mania, prevalent in his country, particularly among the *nouveaux riches* and other elites.

Grotesque Grand Finale

The welcome song which Nubari is rehearsing to serenade his imported wife, in this regard, is in character; in the manner of an orchestral conductor or chair leader, he grotesquely leads the rehearsal:

My darling is over the ocean
My darling is over the sea
My darling is over the ocean
Oh bring back my darling to me.
Bring back... Oh! bring back.

Oh! bring back my darling to me (p.53)

The grotesque theatrics that accompany the above rehearsals, according to the stage directions, adumbrate the stage-worthiness of the *Wife By Return*. This is only halted, abruptly by the entrance of the long a-awaited Postmaster, to deliver the purported goods: wife by mail, with all the expected dowries. The degree of the grotesquery, epitomized by Nubari, the "fortunate" bridegroom is heightened by the entrance and reaction of the Postmaster, who addresses the groom:

Why, goodness, Nubari, what's the matter? ... Goodness, gracious! What bizarre clothes you're actually wearing. You! Ha! ha! ha! ha! What's the matter?

Adda: Oh, he's going to marry. And he's a rich man, so....

Postmaster: Ha! ha! ha! Wheezing laugh. Well, I'll have a drop on him all the same. Ha! ha! ha! I find the habit rather bizarre.

Nubari, according to stage direction, is in torment! The following wrangles or altercations provide the comic unmasking, of the piece:

Nubari: There is certainly a mistake. I was expecting a wife.

Now you bring just her night-gown and say there's no mistake.

Postmaster: Expecting a wife from the post office? Whoever heard such a balder dash!

Nubari: It's not balder dash. I ordered her myself. From England, through Mr. Harry.

Postmaster: Ordered a wife? What utter rubbish!

Nubari: It's not rubbish. I'll show you what I mean. Wait a minute.

Where's that catalogue?...

In all, the rib tickling or rather the most spasmodic lines here, are the last lines delivered by the Postmaster, who though diplomatic, appears to be rather very sarcastic: "... what was being advertised, in the fashion catalogue, "is this nightgown, not the woman".

He! he! he! Your man made a mistake. He ordered the nightgown, not the woman. They like money, alright, but they don't sell women in that sort of way. Not even the English!

The stage direction, here again, adequately indicates the stage-worthiness of the play as a ridiculous comment on a fool, on parade, resembling, no less, the characters of Moliere's *Tartuffe* or *The Imposter*, or Alcester in *The Misanthrope*, each of which excites our laughter alright, but almost as much pity, in the manner of the avoidable buffooneries. The stage direction is quite directional here:

Nubari is by this time a bundle of confusion, shame and incredulity. He stands erect, the nightgown in one hand, the catalogue in the other, transfixed. Adda takes a mocking, sneering look at him and they all burst into loud, long derisive laughter. Nubari does not move.

As well-established in the foregoing, Saro-Wiwa's comic vision far overflows the boundary of comedy delimited by Henri Bergson, who says, as remarks by Sypher (1965:193) that "comedy looks at man from the outside": "It will go no further." Saro-Wiwa's perception is in consonance with the modern man's perception of comedy as Sypher roundly suggests.

PART TWO

Modern Comic Vision

Sypher's own characterization (1956: 193) is that "The comic and the tragic views of life no longer exclude each other." This view is also in line with Soren Kierkegaard's modern perception of the comic and the tragic as touching one another at the absolute point of infinity, at the extremes of human experience." Imo Ben Eshiet (2000:51) expresses the same phenomenon aptly when he says that in Saro-Wiwa's comedy,

"laughter... is merely a subterfuge for the playwright's assault on social feelings. While laughter is a mask disguising his indignation at, and lampooning of the bewildering state of affairs all around him, the real essence of his method and subject of dramatic orchestration is to force us to brood over the extravagance of contradictions so very prevalent in our society.

Christopher Fry (1962) expresses the same phenomenon, also, very vividly when he asserts: "The bridge by which we cross from tragedy to comedy and back again is precarious and narrow." He continues: "We find ourselves in one or the other by the turn of a thought", concluding that: "a turn such as we make when we turn from speaking to listening."

The Wheel

Saro-Wiwa's *The Wheel* subtitled, A Farce in Six Situations, is another ribtickling play, but also full of sardonic humours, recommended "to be performed by two actors only." At this juncture, it is compelling to define very broadly the term FARCE as applied here by Saro-Wiwa. Farce, according to Sylvan Barnet et al (1962: 197 – 202) is defined within the broad spectrum of the term comedy. Generally, it is a sort of comedy based not on clever language or subtleties of character, but on broadly humorous situations. According to Barnet, Eric Bentley has suggested that farce, like dreams, shows "the disguised fulfilment of depressed wishes." Farce, he says is "usually filled with surprises, with swift physical actions, and with assault; character is unsubtle, being subordinated to plot."

However, "Farce", in the words of Samuel Spewack (1967:5-6), "is not frivolous. Unfortunately, the label has been misused to designate frothy stage vehicles, designed for the

sole purpose of creating transient laughter in the theatre". What we have seen so far in *The Transistor Radio* and *Wife By Return*, and shall soon see in *The Wheel* and *Madam No Go Quench Again*, are in tune with Spewack's rather total picture of farce which he says:

Must entertain uproariously. And it must accomplish this with credible and recognizable real people who are, nevertheless, slightly larger than life. Farce must have an organic structure.

Any farce that one can examine from Aristophane's *Lysistrata* (C367) to Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1981) and Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* (1981) *Who's Afraid of Solarin* (1982) among others, all try to maintain such organic structure.

Political Corruption

No less so is *The Wheel* described as a searing political portrayal of corruption at all levels of Nigerian society (Saro-Wiwa: 1985: blurb to *Four Farcical Plays*). The Term "Wheel" here suggests cyclic turns, of fortunes, which are mostly political and socio-economic, as used. But it could also connote fortuitous and beneficial turns of lucks, regarded by some as the turning point, from bad to good, or vice versa: peripety.

In terms of characterization and political role expectations, the term Chief Minister is used expansively to include the President of the Republic or Governor as Chief Executive of his/her State, or even to include the Chairman of the Local Government in Nigeria's three-tiers government system. As a political portrayal of corruption at all levels of Nigeria society, *The Wheel* is really a searing indictment of Nigeria by One of the most patriotic Nigerians, living dead. Some years back before he became the Secretary of States under the presidency of President George Walker Bush (JNR), General Collins Powel, a foremost African-American whose root might pretty well be Nigeria, called Nigerians, generally, as artful or "great scammers." We all fumed and railed at him. That was also the year that Transparency International, which had our then retired General Olusegun Obasanjo on its Trustee Board as director, rated Nigeria First on its corruption perception index (CPI). A few months back, Financial Times of London indexed that at least 70% of corruption in Nigeria is prevalent in or originate from the Nigerian Presidential Vault, Aso Rock. At each of these occasions, "patriotic" Nigerians would fume and rail, to no avail. Truth is bitter, as evidenced in Saro-Wiwa's *The Wheel*, and other plays under review. Before dwelling on the corruptions portrayed in *The Wheels*, we may still chronicle, briefly, Nigeria's recent rating among the corruption League of Nations as enumerated by Waziri Adio of This Day Newspaper (Vol. 8 No. 2688 of September 1, 2002: page 40):

... In recent times, Nigeria's major year of infamy was the year 2000. Then, Nigeria snatched the gold by coming last in the survey of 90 countries. Yet, there was a build-up to that record. In 1999, Nigeria was rated 98th out of 99 countries, only beaten to gold of graft by Cameroon. In 1998, Nigeria was rated 81st out of 85 countries; in 1997, 52nd out of 52nd countries and 1996, 54th out of 54 countries.

We know already that "in its corruption perception index (CPI) 2002, as Ado remarks, it rated Nigeria number 101 out of 102 countries, beaten to the tape only by Bangladesh. Metaphorically, it may not be to farfetched or unpatriotic to say that corruption is a Nigerian, old or young, predating

colonialism and made more sophisticated by the locust years of the Kleptomaniac Military regimes. Currently, corruption has become much more democratic than democratic polity itself in Nigeria.

Politics as Investment Corporation

However, in Nigeria, particularly, politics is an investment corporation, a joint stock company, with both limited and unlimited scopes of operations or ancillaries. While the limited liability scope applies only to the electorates or the constituencies, the unlimited liability scopes in the realm of unlimited privileges and benefits, thereof, are for the elected; represented in The Wheels by, say, the Chief Minister and the Parliamentarians. This is what the Chief Minister in The Wheel means when he asserts, inter alia:

Our elders have a saying: In taking care of others, do not forget to yourself. Words of Wisdom... I do not mean to forget myself. By no means. Not after spending that much time and money electioneering. Oh, treasury, look after yourself. I will take care of myself and the future... (pp. 58-59).

By the time The Wheel opens, with the Chief Minister gloating over the innumerable congratulatory cards received from the highly-and lowly-placed in the society, general elections had just been successfully completed; with a putative democratic polity ushered in, as shown, by the Chief Minister (Prime Minister?) and the legislature, represented by the Parliamentarian duly elected. The reigns of sycophancy and cronyism that pervade the play is exemplified, as the Parliamentarian, lobbying for a ministerial post:

Suddenly gets up and prostrates on the ground, holding the Chief Minister's ankle. Your Excellency, your humble servant, your very humble servant, reminds you of your promises...

The bribe is negotiated euphemistically, until the right price for the desired office, in the case of the Parliamentarian, where two hundred thousand soldiers meaning two hundred thousand naira, with initial payment of fifty thousand soldiers (naira) is made. Regmarolls and double talks, with the promises of reciprocal exchange of justifying relevant confidence reposed in each order, guarantee of adequate delivery and free hand (*carte blanche*) of running the ministry, are the main oils that smoothen the system of graft thus institutionalized. Just as the Parliamentarian, turned Minister of Commerce and Industry, recounts and celebrates his meteoric rise, he plans how to recoup his investment:

The two hundred odd thousand soldiers for the Chief Minister created quite some vacancy on my premises at the bank... Two hundred thousand soldiers... they all marched to His Excellency's place last night. Shortly afterwards, the announcement was made. And here I am, a most humble servant of the people... you bake the cake, you taste the cake before you serve it, just to ensure that everything about it is right.

What a classic euphemism for misappropriation, en... ezzlement and keptomania quite characteristic of Nigeria public officers! The same pattern of euphemism in the negotiation of the bribe price is repeated in the encounter between the Minister of Commerce and Industry and the Company Director, who becomes Chairman of the lucrative National supply Company after the bribe prices of one hundred thousand cigarettes (N100,000.00) with a guarantee to "have a

freehand in running (ruining?) the company", for according to the Minister will hardly spare his graft-accumulating time to supervise, monitor or interfere in the running (or ruining) of the company. Provided he (the Chairman) would remember to send in some regular cigarettes (graft money or gratifications to the same Minister whose port folio has now more than tripled to that of Minister of Commerce, for Industry and that of Industry respectively. The height of Kleptocracy that characterizes various running of public corporations or companies is epitomized by the now Chairman of the National Supply Company's soliloquy.

What are a hundred thousand cigarettes when there are million of tons of goodies on the high seats to pass through these hands: And you heard the Minister say it: "You have a free hand, absolutely." A hand free to dip into whatever I please and no one will interfere.

The chairman of the Company continues to scheme his strategies for ruining the new goldmine he has now stumbled on, thanks to Bad governance institutionalized:

I bet the Minister for and the Minister of and the Minister by and whoever, else, will be so busy smoking their thousand of cigarettes, they will not want to know what is happening over here.

Shamelessly and opportunistically, the Chairman, rather than planning an honest service which could create positive multiplier effects, previews and schemes his financial empire, through grafts, and how such opportunities could lead to his possible political rise to ministerial position himself, thanks to Nigeria's Money-bag polity!

A hundred thousand cigarettes! Five chairmen will make five hundred thousand cigarettes. And there are Licenses to be issued, Approved Users Certificates... some people are lucky... It's been worth the while... And who knows, the next step could take me to the Ministry itself, and then the cigarettes. Oh, the smokes from my cigarettes should burn the vaults of the Central Bank... (pp. 65-66).

In his turn, the Executive Officer, who wants the position of the General Manager of another lucrative company, after the same position-bargaining rigmarole, agrees to load a seven ton truck of choicest biscuits, another euphemism for large, monetary settlement, gets the chairman's instant commendation and approval: "That's my type of General Manager," who accepts appropriate "Quid Pro quo," "guarantee to manage the corporation as I see fit." Furthermore, the Executive officer, made the General Manager, is told to "manage or damage, you are my man. You have delivered the goods." It is significant to note the Chairman celebrating his success so far, as he declares: "... This is progress! Ye makers of Mercedes, Leyland and Styr trucks, keep your assembly lines open and let the good trucks roll!" (pp. 67-68).

Here, again, Saro-Wiwa is bemoaning, hinting at the import propensity, foreign-product consumerism that has become the stock-in-trade mania of Nigerian *nouveaux riches*, earlier well articulated in *The Transistor Radio*.

Another Turning Point

It is now the turn of the Executive Officer, turned General Manager of the National Supply Company, recapitulating the previewing his own turning point, a position of security where he feels "got it made", with a *carte blanche* on which "I will write the story of my life!", he asserts, elaborating, how he will mine his gold and silvers:

Appointment of staff, appointment of clearing agents, appointment of distributors, transporters. Transport with ten-ton trucks and twenty-ton trailers. Ah, Mr. Chairman, you think a seven-ton truck is something. You haven't seen a thing yet. Ye members of staff, clearing agents, distributors, transporters, be prepared to load my trucks!

The new General Manager paraphrases the well-known Biblical passage reductively: That's the way it was in the beginning. That's the way it is now. And that's the way it shall be for tomorrow... (p. 69). With euphemistic slogan, "time is money", "money is time, interchangeable-commodities" paradigm, "eight thousand minutes (naira) in cash is agreed and received in "brisk and business-like" manner, in exchange for the position of another lucrative appointment, as personnel officer of the supply company, an offer described as "plumb", "delicious" and "sugarplum". The Chief Clerk, now Personnel Officer, exclaims:

The Magic of the padded envelope! Looks like everyone who wants a job has to carry around envelope these days... The way the wheel is turning, it should be my turn to do myself and some bloke... the favour soon.

End and Means

Here, the euphemism applied is a large wad of naira notes called kola; sweet kola which landed the applicant the post of Security Guard in such strategic company, with his own strict peculiar mandates that connote unrestricted tips, called "settlements", in Nigerian parlances for bribes. In this regard, the Security Guard's seemingly impetuous encounter with the Chief Minister out to see the Chairman is quite explicit:

Stooped thief. Stooped thief! Sheef Minista! He! he! he! Sheet Minista! You think say you fit take dat one confuse me? I no care sef if you be sheef Minista. Na Sheet Minista dey give me chop? You wan see Sheerman. You wan see Sheerman. Wetin you wan see am for? Me way I dey for your front, you no wan see me. Na Sheerman you wan see. Why you no wan see me first?

Even though the Chief Minister hypocritically talks about the need for "Ethical Revolution to change the morals of this great country", before the Security Guard, and rails at him: "How debased can you people get?" he fails to impress the Guard until he has to bribe him with just two Naira to allow him in to see the Chairman, his subordinate!

Remarkably, however, the Security Guard, right before the Chief Minister, articulates his won moral principles of transparent operation and ethical accountability, as adequate backgrounds and justification for is little demands, to take care of his wife and six children:

... Alice and de shindren must chop, wear clot, go school, see doctor. And na me dey pay for everytin, plus de bribe to get de job. And de salary no plenty. I tink you understand me, I no de hide my own. I no de hide like Minister, all de big people wey dey hide dem own under table inside room. And I no ax for one thousand, twenty thousand, hundred thousand or million like Big man de do. My own na small tin like one Naira or even fifty kobo. Das all. You give me, I take, you see Sheerman, palaver finish.

Here, the moral and logic of transparency and accountability, predicated on the core of extreme needs vis-à-vis the end justifying the means, in Brechtian terms, "Food Before Moral", are quite clear and appear excusable. The contrast between the little man's need for graft and the bigman's, is crystal-clear. While the former is predicated on live and let live, and latter is rooted on (1) live and you(you) die mode of operations.

The above statement credited to the Security Guard, in this play, epitomizes the psycho-social and psycho-economic profile of the systemic graft or corruption among the lowly-based cadres of the Nigerian society, to wit, categories of security personnel; military, paramilitary, service or ex-service; among other classes of lowly-paid workers, who are usually the children-breeding factories in Nigeria. For the police or soldiers manning the highways, twenty naira, called "Rogers" paid can let off the hook a trailer load of contrabands of any category...

The Most Sardonic

It is not far-fetched to describe Madam No Go Quench Again as the most sardonic, bizarre and mirthlessly humorous of the four plays under review. Briefly, a man named Dona died like yesterday in a motor accident. Dona has two wives, Waale, the senior wife and Ledu, the younger wife, whom he reportedly married because Waale was childless and lack romantic glammers. The coffin is put down in the middle of their one-room apartment; each of them bemoaning the loss of their loved one, denied herself of any food or drink, praying to die instead of surviving their husband. The dead must not be buried until the relatives to whom telegram has been sent to come. It is a nightmare of sleeplessness, hunger and thirst, each wife trying to outcry the other, between half sleep and endless yawning.

The mourning and wake-keeping continue, like this, until a hungry soldier, Kopol stumbles in to find food, even by force of arms. The entrance of Kopol introduces new life of romance. First, Ledu develops a brief romance with Kopol. Soon, Madam Waale, seeing life after all at the end of the tunnel falls, headlong, in love with Kopol, and the woman who used to hanker for death to meet her "beloved husband" in the other world, a husband whom she could not live without, suddenly hates even the mention of death which has not become a no-go, no-mention realm for her again, thanks to the new life of fresh romance with Kopol whom she has fancied, sampled and fallen headlong in "love" with.

Hear Kopol and Waale:

Kopol: Look as all my body de hot sake of you jus sidon near me.

Waale, I lie down near you small. Make I hold you for body. Oh, my dear, you fine I like you.

Waale: Me too, I like you. 'E don tey wey man hold me like dis. Your body sweet me Kopol. But dis your belt and de khaki no gree make I hold you well. Wait. Make I remove my cloth.

Interestingly, Kopol and Waale seal their romance as Kopol swears: "Waale, Waale. Na you and me for dis world". Waale replies: From today till we die" "Amen", replies Kopol (pp. 91 – 92).

Before this flash of sudden romance, Waale has been crying and nausea:

Waale: Oh, God, why you come kill my husband, my one husband? Why you no kill me de same time too?

Ledu: Madam, no talk of die like dat, I beg you.

Waale: Why I no go die. Wetin I de do again for this world wey my husband don die? I must die wit my husband...

Kopof's main job, experience and life story are as bizarre as his new-tuned romance. He is a professional soldier, a corporal, whose main duty is to shoot armed robbers to death. Hear him:

Yesterday, we been shoot four arm robbers. And we bin de wait for the ambulance wey go carry dem body go troway. De ambulance no come. Dem talk say de ambulance broke down. We wait sotey night come reach. No ambulance. Na him all my friend dem say make me I come stay near all dose dead body till dis morning...

It was during that interim that he strays out to forage for food, and finds new love! The consequence if that one of the dead bodies has been stolen and, as military law is, he the dead keeper must be killed to replace the dead body lost at his stance and carelessness. The following preventive measure is therefore as bizarre and sardonic as the whole concert, according to Saro-Wiwa's own description of this play, *Madam No Go Quench Again*:

Waale: I no dey joke. I no go gree make anybody shoot you. because I love you. plus, again, I no wan begin cry again because my man die. So, we go go give dem dead body.

Kopof: But how we go manage now?

Waale: My Dona we die. We go put him dead body with all the others. Ded body na dead body. Abi? Oya, come helep me carry' am from de coffin. Quik! Quick! (pp. 92-95)

It is expected that after accomplishing this grim task, Kopof and Madam Waale continue their bizarre discovery of each other, and the equally sardonic romance thereafter. What a sardonic comic relief! Comic Catharsis?

Communication Handicap

As stated in the blurb of the Four Farcical Plays, *Madam No Go Quench Again*, is a treatment of the classical story of the phoenix in Nigerian pidgin English. It is difficult to suggest why Saro-Wiwa has decided to use the medium of the pidgin to convey this sardonically humorous story; so strictly narrowing and limiting its audienceship. Imo Ben Eshiet (2000:53) has rightly observes that Saro-Wiwa "animates and impacts positively on his audience through his bold innovation and experimentation with linguistic abundance and varieties of the English language spoken in Nigeria". The communication handicap that Saro-Wiwa confronts his audience and readership with, in this regard, is not very artistically or aesthetically positive. Much more so, when he uses the medium of the pidgin wholly as in *Madam No Go Quench Again*; its comic, and rather musical effects notwithstanding.

CONCLUSION

The four plays in this series are united by their respective sardonic humours, uproarious provocation of thought-stimulating ideas, actions, characterization and varieties of other dramatic devices that enliven them individually and collectively or cohesively. The flows of contradictions in human conditions, intrigues, egocentricism, maniacal in various instances, as survival measures or articulations of moral principles, can hardly be over-

emphasised. The degree of comic echoes or effects, driven to the precipice of the grim, the sardonic and, therefore the almost tragic, with the tragic-comic registers can easily be gleaned from a very close reading of each of the plays. It is Saro-Wiwa's deep-rooted concerns for ambivalent human conditions, borne out of his experiences, struggles to cope with the ups and downs; topsy-turvy of life, seasoned by lubricating humours, regarded as medicinal or therapeutic, that account for this rather balanced picture of humanity's coexistential imperatives; contradictions and paradoxes of humanistic and universal phenomena. Truth is no doubt bitter. But the caveat that "the truth shall make you free" is at the root of Saro-Wiwa's comic vision. The purgative or cathartic essence of his sardonic humours; humours packaged in each of the *Four Farcical Plays* can hardly be over emphasized. It is as aspect of his committed activism, and artistic vision; a protest at what man can savagely make of his fellow man or woman, or even of himself. Saro-Wiwa's comic vision as portrayed in his *Four Farcical Play* is not tantamount to washing our dirty linins in the public as some would say. The benefits of the therapeutic essence, therein, overweigh any negative effect deducible. The truth endogenously uttered is better contained than that exogenously revealed.

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