

Political Vision and Creativity in Selected Plays of Contemporary Nigerian Dramatists

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Abstract

This article is a political reading of selected Nigerian plays, namely, Effiong Johnson's *The Fight Has Just Begun* (1985), Chinyere Grace Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko* (1996), Emmy Ikanaba Unuja Idegu's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom* (2013) and Osedebamen Oamen's *Leadership Scale* (2016). The critical effort here links the playwrights' creative imaginations to the reality of their political environment – undoubtedly signifying Nigeria. It is observed that, probably because of the overwhelming power of their political visions obviously inspired by the political realities of their environment, artistic form is sacrificed at the altar of message in the texts. However, the clarity and relevance of the message of these playwrights' works under study exculpate them. The paper affirms, amongst others, that the socio-economic and political conditions of Nigeria depicted in the play texts demand a propagandist art with an urgent message that could mentally liberate and stimulate the revolutionary consciousness in the docile and complacent masses. It concludes that such art, strong in message and regardless of an unimpressive form, cannot be undervalued, especially at this time when narrative knowledge is urgently needed as a third army to dislodge reactionary forces notable for misuse of power supposedly held in trust for the people.

Keywords: Politics, Nigerian drama, Contemporary playwrights, Criticism, Literature.

Introduction

The creative imagination in Effiong Johnson's *The Fight Has Just Begun* (1985), Chinyere Grace Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko* (1996), Emmy Ikanaba Unuja Idegwu's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom* (2013) and Osedebamen Oamen's *Leadership Scale* (2016) embodies a lot of political visions that reveal how drama can be made to serve the needs of humanity. Drama, as well as its parent literature, functions as a means of narrative knowledge and a cultural product invested with a lot of responsibilities. Among other tasks, it depicts the here and now: human beings' relationship with one another, with nature, with the establishment and with their environment. This perspective is the gamut of the import of Aristotle's mimesis in terms of the function of art; and what has made William Shakespeare describe literature as a "mirror held up to nature" (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Sc 2). More significantly, it has indeed been the central focus of the realist, naturalist and modernists' critical discourses in art or literary history, and which also motivated a range of varying political perspectives in the arena of socially conscious critical discourses from Marxism, feminism to postcoloniality.

The exigencies of an era actually assign a social responsibility to art or literature as a cultural creation which turns out to serve humanity. It is from the foregoing perspective that Darko Suvin's view is also relevant to this discourse, by stating that, "theatre and drama, as communal arts, are ontologically political, if politics means the health or sickness of the community which determines all human relationships in it" (p. 311). From Suvin's definition of political drama, a sense of the inescapable political visions in art is palpably captured. It is one where art responds to some of the basic aspirations of humanity, namely, survival and security, and from which political readings of texts draw their significance as well.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o affirms this political literary concern explained in the foregoing when he yokes literature with politics as both being "about living humans, actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying ... organising people in history of which they are its products, its producers and analysts" (466). Further, wa Thiong'o asserts that "the changing relations of production including power relations is a whole territory of concern to a writer" and that "politics is part and parcel of this literary territory" (p. 47). Also, Nadine Gordimer has described fiction's relationship with

morals and politics as one that is inevitable; and that if her creative works and those of other writers served legitimately the politics they believe in, it is “because the imaginative transformations of fiction ... help people understand their own natures and know that they are not powerless” (pp. 115, 121).

While interpreting Roberto Bolano’s novel, *2666*, Paul Martins Eve sums up the responsibility of a political reading as a response to texts that “thematically represent ethical and political issues” which “intersect with the interests of the academy [the critics, literary scholars, or the entire enlightened community]” (p. 87). Eve’s definition of the purview of texts that are themselves social and political critiques and the interpretation/evaluation of them in like manner, is a process which involves the creative writer and the interpreters of his works. It is significantly a reminder of the duty that the creative writer and the critic owe to their age, which they do not neglect in order for society to undergo transformation for the good of all. Using his art for the uplift of humanity in whatever manner or approach is a unique responsibility bestowed upon the writer by talent or the gift of hindsight. Though experience or formal training, or both, may sharpen his talent or creative abilities and add quality to his production, he is a story-teller, chronicler, historian, visionary, social commentator and critic. The creative writer, like other artists (visual and performing), is an alarmist but with a cause. Consciously or subconsciously, he or she acts as the conscience of the society through his/her art, which, according to Bakary Traoré, “reveals the truth to man’s conscious mind through tangible medium” (p. 64). Literature and politics have had very cordial relationship, have influenced one another and determined by each (Hisham M. Nazer, par. 3). One of the reasons for this, Nazer rightly affirms, is because literature has the “potential to reach the very private parts of our lives and incept ideologies ... that are powerful and hence full of diverse potentials” (par. 3).

Observably, since the incident of African colonial history and later postcolonial experiences, the continent has not had a dearth of writers who use their arts to interrogate societies and political structures in order to reveal the ‘rotten underbellies’. The disillusionment resulting from mass exploitation has escalated in frightening dimensions due to the failure of Africa’s own disappointing sons and daughters who took over the reins of political

power from the former colonial masters. In the African continent, it is a general belief among many of its intellectuals that social and political realities have been characterised by lack of significant progress, disillusionment, deprivation, insecurity and poverty. All this has always been attributed to leadership insensitivity, ineptitude, corruption, greed, sit-tight despots and lack of economic and political visions to stir the continent in the required direction for growth as well as for economic and political stability. These problems have constituted the subject-matter of many African creative writings in poetry, prose and drama.

Africa's earlier dramatists, namely, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ebraheim Hussein, Athol Fugard, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, etc, have written political plays which critique post-independence African societies. Their works either depict and condemn the lingering and suffocating neo-colonial structures and fervour or satirize pervasive corruption, mass poverty and lack of purposeful leadership. These writers have also condemned the blind enslavement to foreign political and economic systems at the expense of the collapse of indigenous values. They have depicted the plunder and squander of national resources and the commonwealth by the typical African sit-tight home-bred despot and his clan of plunderers, their local fawners and foreign supporters. They have ridiculed the hypocrisy, superciliousness and docility of the emergent African elite; and portrayed the plight and helplessness of the urban poor as a result of irresponsible political leadership.

However, selected works of these contemporary playwrights - Johnson's *The Fight Has Just Begun*, Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko*, Idegú's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom* and Oamen's *Leadership Scale* - are the focus here. These playwrights may not have the artistic refinement of the older ones mentioned earlier. However, their plays are also very relevant for the clarity and relevance of message. This fact appears to underscore their motivations and the societal need for narrative knowledge at this material time of Nigeria's contemporary political and economic reality, necessary to raise the level of mass consciousness against political malfeasance and social injustice. An interpretation of the selected works under certain sub-headings below will further relate the creative imagination in the selected plays to the underlying political visions in them.

Plays' Synopses

The title of Johnson's play, read in full, "The Fight Has Just Begun," is in fact suggestive of a looming conflict between two royal families, the Ekarikas and the Ettes. A member of each royal family is supposed to rule for seven years, and it will be the turn of a member of the other lineage to rule for the same tenure. Edidem (King) Ekarika's tenure is ending and the only survivor of the other royal family, Imo Ette, has been rightfully announced as the next successor of the age-long tradition of the Mobio people; but the serving monarch whose reign is terminating soon is determined to hold on to power in violation of the community's time-tested traditional democratic arrangement. His fear and also one of his flimsy excuses is that he has corruptly misused the resources of the people and failed them, and if he surrenders power to another, he may be prosecuted along with his team and go to jail. Ayara Ekarika, a former ruler of the land, who is an uncle to the serving King Ekarika, declines support for his nephew and his ruling team. Ayara tells the king: "You have no one but yourselves to blame for this corruption and misuse of office and the betrayal of Mobio's trust" (*The Fight* 7).

Knowing he has become unpopular for his failure and would definitely not get the support of the people to hold on to power, King Ekarika decides to use brutal force to retain the crown, and concoct an elaborate plan to eliminate all those who are likely to stand on his way. The first person he eliminates is Udobong, the local activist and uncle to the named successor to the throne, Prince Imo Ette. He instigates the local army to violently truncate the coronation ceremony, and to silence other dissenting voices. The local guards attack Akpaisong, the traditional staff bearer who officially crowns the king in order to seize the staff of office from him. King Ekarika is determined not to deliver the crown to the successor during the coronation. Eventually, his plans fail and he and members of his family are killed in the violence he started.

In Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko*, the political canvas is depicted differently. This play's plot centres on the motif of a corrupt and half-baked politician cum business man and his cronies in government manipulating democratic instruments, such as electoral process and party politics, to retain legitimacy and political power over the downtrodden and the working class. They buy crowd of cheerers at political rallies; prevent people from voting according to their

consciences. They are ready to rig the outcome of electoral results in their favour, and use security agents to perpetuate violence in order to instil fear in the people and secure their power over the people. In fact, the 'Lion' in the title of Okafor's play is a metaphor referring to Alhaji Chief Baba Bogus-Bogus and his Progressive People's Party (PPP) in control of government and political power in the fictional Nigeria represented in the play. Chief Bogus boasts about this appellation in his haughty Pidgin, which reflects his poor educational background: "... I be di lion of seventy seven states plus Africa ..." (*The Lion* 10). The opposition group is the "Iroko" in the play's title. The opposition group's name is Young Africans' Movement (YAM) whose members have taken to the trenches in a guerrilla war to topple the corrupt and inept government that Chief Bogus' PPP has foisted on the land and its people.

Idegu's play, *Beloved*, recalls recent history in Nigeria fictionally recreated as 'Odolu'. It attempts to recreate the seeming stalemate or looming national crises resulting from the prolonged ailment and eventual demise of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua between November 1999 and May 2010. Apart from the politics played over his ill-health then, also re-enacted in the play, it attempts to represent/recreate national controversies and the bitter internal conflict which divided members of the President's ruling party as to the need to invoke the enabling law which would make his vice to immediately succeed the ailing president pending his recovery in order to avoid a prolonged power vacuum perceived at that time. The playwright leaves many of the details of this incident but focuses on his perceived reason for the unnecessary politicising of the ill-health, the tension it generated in the nation and the seeming stalemate in governmental activities. He attempts to anchor the reason for all this on the determination of a particular region to retain their old political dominance over other regions.

In Oamen's *Leadership*, the first paramount ruler of Agbonland, King Ikhehi, fails to responsibly utilise his power and therefore loses his life. Before his avoidable death, he refuses to heed the warning of the town's teacher and his wife on the need to legislate on stopping the citizens from defecating on the public refuse ground, and instead order them to dig private latrines in their homes. The initial fear of the teacher and his spouse that there might be a possible outbreak of cholera from this unhygienic mass attitude still occurs and claims

the lives of many citizens of Agbon including the life of the monarch, Ikhehi. His first son, Prince Omogbe, is crowned king after his father. He immediately makes an official pronouncement for all the citizens of Agbon to stop using the public refuse ground for passing excreta, but that they should rather dig latrines in their homes for use. The sanction for any violator/offender is twelve strokes of the cane to be administered in the public. The new king's mother is the first and only person to break the law. She is caught by the teacher who has been empowered by the king to ensure public compliance. Power and leadership are therefore put to test as the citizens are eager to know whether King Omogbe would enforce the law he has enacted regardless the fact that the culprit is his mother. Omogbe enforces the law to the amazement of those who doubted his integrity. After his mother receives the first stroke of the cane, he removes his royal robe and takes the remaining eleven strokes on his back for his mother.

Political Power and Tropes in the Plays

'Political power' is understood in the context of this discourse as "power that is routed through authority, which constitutes a performative act" (Mark Haugaard, p. 1049), acquired through democratic, coercive or hereditary process in order to lead a people; and by 'tropes', it is understood here as the playwrights' figurative use of language to achieve special effect or meaning (M. H. Abrams 96). The belief of New Critics that "literature is metaphorical and symbolical" (Frank J. D'Angelo, p. 32) is hardly contestable. The literary artist always finds himself/herself instinctively using tropes as part of his/her creative tools, which, in fact, according to D'Angelo, "represent the power of the imagination in its effort to grasp the world figuratively" (p. 34). The playwrights under study here have uninhibitedly captured their visions of political power, its misuse and the contention for it in figurative language and dramatic action such that the reader or audience inescapably perceives it.

Political power therefore, its misuse, covetousness and the fierce tussle for it are in fact the recurring motifs underlying dramatic action in the plots and language of Johnson's *The Fight Has Just Begun*, Okafor's *The Lion and the Iroko*, Idegu's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom*. In Oamen's *Leadership Scale* though, power tussle is not what drives its plot, but the integrity or credibility of the paramount ruler is the

central issue, which is on trial in the play – this is, in fact, where the play derives its title. Further, it is clear in the first three plays that the quest for power by two contending groups will result in the dislodgement, dominance and control of one over the other, even if one of the opposing groups claims its motivation is altruistic or an entitlement. In Oamen's *Leadership*, there is no contention for political power between opposing forces; the people cannot remove the monarch even if he is an insensitive ruler, because in the society of the play, political power rests ultimately in the potentate, not in democratic processes. The monarch in the play has absolute control over his subjects. He is the law giver, the enforcer and arbiter. The emergence of the ruler/political leader in Oamen's *Leadership* is hereditary, and not by election as it is in Okafor's *The Lion* and Idegu's *Beloved* nor is it by rotation within two or more ruling or royal lineages as in Johnson's *The Fight*.

While the geographical setting in *The Lion* is undoubtedly Nigeria as indicated in the large map of the country in one of the protagonist's (Chief Baba Alhaji Bogus-Bogus's) office, the fictional towns in the other plays (*The Fight*, *Beloved* and *Leadership*) signify Nigeria through the indigenous tribes and cultures depicted. It is right therefore to conclude that it is the different perspectives of the realities of Nigeria's political life, historical or political incidents, as the case may be, that obviously motivated the playwrights' creations. The realities include abuse of power, official depravity, leadership failure, endemic and worsening poverty among the class of the underlings, mass disillusionment and frustration, corruption, misuse and embezzlement of the common wealth, sit-tight despot even at the face of failed leadership and the use of brutal force and all kinds of strategies deployed by a despot to entrench himself in power.

Johnson's *The Fight*, as indeed declared by the playwright at its title page, is a "metaphor for modern dictatorship" (*The Fight*, p. i). The play was published in 1985. Historically, there was no situation in Nigeria before and at the time that corroborates the incidents in the play. And the playwright does not provide any historical background as the inspiration behind the play's plot. It is therefore safe to infer that the playwright is imaginatively illustrating with his story the reason for the emergence of dictators in every society, especially as, at that period of Nigerian history, the country was continually administered by 'sit-tight' military dictators who refused,

and always had flimsy excuses, to not hand over power to a democratically elected civilian government, except when they were forced out or such a despot died in office. Johnson's *The Fight* suggests that when political power is acquired by an unscrupulous and inherently corrupt leader who is bereft of ideas to lead, power becomes a deified tool of intimidation and oppression, not a privilege to make positive impact on society. Such a leader and his team lose their humanity. They become ferocious at the threat of being dispossessed of that political power and its trappings. King Ekarika reveals so much of the terror he has become in his determination to not relinquish power as evident in the altercation with his uncle, Ayara: "I am more deadly than the death you fear for tomorrow. I have set men to arrest confusion by its wings and if after all this arrangement death still desires to show its ugly head, then it will become inevitable ..." (*The Fight*, p. 41). Ayara's warning to King Ekarika is prophetic of his end: "A stubborn cock learns his lessons in the soup pot. My prayer is that the innocent will be spared, because heads may roll" (*The Fight*, pp. 41-42). There is no doubt that King Ekarika is the tenor in the metaphor of the "stubborn cock", who learns his lessons too late when he is consumed by the hot "soup pot", which is one of the metaphors in the text signifying the unnecessary violence arising from his desperate self-succession bid. The figurative is understood in this context as a fitting political imagery for all dictators in the mould of King Ekarika.

Nigeria had a fair share of such dictators like Ekarika in the era of military administrations during which time this play was published. Some African countries still experience them till date, where rulers have remained in power for decades while sometimes organising and manipulating electoral processes to give their governments some form of legitimacy. The mass of the people are always further dehumanised by these dictators through a rigged democratic process that seems to legitimise an oppressive hegemony which engenders corruption, mass disillusionment and stifles growth. In Okafor's *The Lion*, the conversation between Amali (one of the leaders of YAM) and Ada (Chief Bogus' confidential secretary and later YAM's new convert), the former simplifies the aspiration of the opposition group: "... YAM ... is out to clear the filth in this country" (*The Lion*, p. 21). The Movement's supposed spread and grassroots support are also expressed in the conversation, and Ada

using the “Iroko” metaphor to signify YAM’s strength and popular support.

- Ada: Eh-e. This is fascinating and frightening at the same.
It means that they [YAM members] are everywhere.
- Amali: The roots of our movement are very deep and wide.
And still growing.
- Ada: Like the Iroko the people will surely take over the
government. (*The Lion*, p. 22)

Chief Bogus who represents the face of the wielders of power and whom Amali describes as the “empty PPP man” and the “thief in a heartless party” (*The Lion*, p. 20) is the zonal President of the party, who corruptly acquired his money through the country’s oil resources. The play also hints at the flattery and foreign aid from Western governments (the former imperialists) for the corrupt rulers of the fictional African State, which adds to their claim of legitimacy. These foreign governments and their agencies are signified by the personality Bogus occasionally refers to as “my big friend, Oyibo-Bank-Pepper”, who calls him “di power of Africa” (*The Lion*, p. 10). This suggestion in the play, though not developed, being a flaw in the plot, however points to the reality in Africa, which is, that, the former imperialist powers and their agencies have unknowingly or knowingly fanned political corruption and glaring abuse of power of African leaders by giving them all kinds of supports. It is a situation that perceptively makes both parties formidable allies against any resistance by the deprived African masses and the revolutionary class of elite who purportedly champion the cause of the down-trodden.

The Lion deploys the elements of exaggeration and contrast in the delineation of its major characters and in the realisation of its dramatic action and conflict. For instance, though how the uneducated Chief Bogus acquired his wealth, whether legally or illegally, is not clear in the play, but, probably because of his wealth, he assumes zonal leadership of the ruling party and wields enormous power that puts the law enforcement officers and other security agents under his beck and call whenever he wants to subdue his real or imagined political enemies. The character Dele is a school teacher who pretends to be Bogus’ hatchet man and speech writer but secretly works for the underground guerrilla group, YAM, seeking to topple Chief Bogus and his men from power. Ada, who

was an award winning best student in her high school days, is the confidential secretary of Chief Bogus and cannot realise her higher education dream because she lost her parents at a very young age. Due to the threat of losing her job, she ends up being Chief Bogus' girlfriend. Amali was Ada's classmate in high school and a university student who abandons his education and parents for YAM's struggle and militancy; her parents are in the same party with Chief Bogus and believe in the same ideology as he does. The backgrounds of characters and their motivations are exaggerated against any literal sense of verisimilitude in the depiction of 21st century Nigeria, which undoubtedly and overtly is the fictional country in the play. When the exaggeration of characters and events in *The Lion* is understood from the playwright's likely artistic urge to entertain and parody arbitrary use of power and political malfeasance in the country, it becomes a highly functional trope wherein the author's political vision is also discernible. The contrast in the play's major characters, in terms of their status, privileges, motivations and ideologies, helps to foreground the forebodings and subsequent political conflict. The element of contrast in the play's characterisation complements an underlying artistic aim to depict power contention, which is characteristic of many political narratives.

However the nature of the political visions expressed in the two plays discussed in the foregoing is different from those in the recently published Idegu's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom* and Oamen's *Leadership Scale*. Just as these two recent plays are not similar in their dramatic forms, so is the concept of political power conceived differently. Idegu's *Beloved* adopts a polemic style to advance action, and to agitate for political power rotation between regional components of a country. It is also observed in the play that the quest for power rotation in the pluralistic and multi-ethnic fictional 'Odolu' society is not necessarily for the enforcement of democratic ideals such as social justice and equality but for some personal and egoistic reasons. Oamen's *Leadership*, on the other hand, stresses the fact that a responsible power holder inspires the confidence of his subjects; and that, it is a recipe for quality leadership. Understanding Idegu's *Beloved* from its subtext, the insistence of the region where the ailing president came from to want to retain the presidential seat and continue to wield political power over other regions of Nigeria called 'Odolu' in the play, is parochial, and not necessarily for national

interest. This is discernible from one of the several quarrels in the Elders Council's meetings between Elder 1, who represents the "Desert zone of Odolu kingdom" (*Beloved*, p. 10) – perceptibly the Northern part of Nigeria – and Elder 2, representing the riverside zone of the fictional republic:

Elder 1: (Getting up) Just try us. Did you hear me? Try us and we will show you and your clan, and in fact the other clans, supporting your evil desire, that we dictate what happens in this kingdom. Let no one deceive you because you can only move around a pepper tree, you can never climb it.

Elder 2: (Getting up too) Tell your people also that when you stay too long on top of your feces, flies will begin to recognize your anus. Go and tell them that like the nose that does not smell its own odour, your people have over stayed their relevance. Odolu kingdom does not belong to you alone. It belongs to all of us. ... (*Beloved*, p. 29)

The images of "a pepper tree", "feces" and "flies" are among the striking metaphors that immediately signify prolonged retention of 'political power' to the reader/audience within the context of the conflict between parties contending for power in the play. Idegu's play in fact advances its dramatic action through polemics with characters that have no specific and defining names and characteristics but general ones such as Citizens 1 and 2; others are the 'Leader of the Council of Elders' and the 'Elders' who in the play represent different regions of Odolu kingdom. The citizens represent the ordinary masses including the intellectuals who comment on political events and criticise governmental activities at any public or private forums. Sometimes such citizens are as parochial and insensitive as the politicians: they take side with their favourites and preferences and defend them oblivious of their politicians' self-interests and clear lack of political vision. The Elders in the play can be likened to Nigeria's real life politicians always elected by the masses. They eventually do not come up with any meaningful legislations that can impact significantly on the lives of the masses who voted for them, except to ramble and quarrel over regional power rotation for their personal benefits, not for the improvement of the economy and social infrastructure that would

benefit the masses and enhance the general well being of the people at the grassroots and urban settlements. The allegorical significance of the characters is such that they convey a meaning beyond their literal function to imply the underlying political vision in the play. This validates the play as an artistic representation of both the historical fact of power shift struggle and contemporary political agitations in Nigeria.

In Oamen's *Leadership*, the teacher and his wife, on one side of the pole, signify enlightenment, knowledge and refinement. But old king, Ikhehi, and his council of chiefs represent the opposite of the pole – primitiveness, ignorance and crudity. The new king, Omogbe, represents integrity, which the play impliedly projects as the ideal of responsible leadership. For the people of Agbon, the emergence of King Omogbe signals hope for the future and a new beginning of progress. One pervading irony in *Leadership* is that the class of the elderly, which folklore and indigenous traditions accord a great reservoir of wisdom and self-control, acts contrary to expectations with their perverse actions and failure to identify a simple solution to an imminent problem that is already threatening society and may destroy it. The play may appear to depict a simple pastoral life, but it is one whose political vision is unmistakably prominent. For instance, the play suggests that, it is the visionary and quality leadership of the hegemon in control of political power that can bring social transformation and uplift. This must be rooted in the equality of all before the law without any 'sacred cows'. Obedience to the law must flow from the head. The leader, his team and family must lead exemplary lives for the masses to emulate, for society to adjust positively and for the system of things to work for the good of all. Infractions from the top are the first to lay the foundations of anarchy, injustice, social and cultural decadence.

At the point a ruler realises that he holds power in trust for the people and acts according to the wishes of the teeming majority, he wins their confidence and love. The systems expectedly regulate properly. In *Leadership*, King Omogbe seems to embody these tenets of true political leadership as he states:

I cannot work against the people who crowned me king. For those who argued that I should not shield my mother, you are right, because justice must prevail. Those who insist that I should shield my mother are also right because my family

deserves protection. However, not against the aspiration and good of Agbonland ... please hold your emotions for only by such actions that you are about to witness shall the land be made good ... (p. 63)

In *Leadership*, after the king has subjected his mother to receive the punishment prescribed by the law and receiving some of it for her, Chief Abure subsequently warns: "... if the king could not spare his mother and himself, he will not spare any other that violates the law of the land" (p. 65). It is therefore expected that the people will obey because exemplary leadership makes official proclamation more sacrosanct in any sane society. That is also when power hegemony translates to responsibility and mass acceptance. Agbonland, which is the fictional kingdom in *Leadership*, and the play itself, are a political allegory of Nigeria when conceived against the play's reference to official corruption, leadership immunity and errant abuse of the rule of law, all of which King Omogbe is determined to stop in the society of the play as evident in his final speech:

... before you go, bear this in mind, if leaders and the led will subject themselves to the law of the land, peace will not elude the world. Every leader is sitting on a leadership scale which does not require immunity to manage but subjection to the law Do not be so amazed at what I did, that is what every leader who intends to fight corruption must do in Agbonland. (*Leadership*, p. 65)

There is no doubt that 'Nigeria' is the signified - the referent for "Agbonland" - as the play was published in 2016 at a time in the country the ruling political party claims to be fighting corruption as part of its aspirations in governance. In reality many of the citizens are yet to see the impact of the ruling party's claims because of what they see as government's double standards in the so-called fight against corruption. Also, Nigeria is a country where statutorily key political leaders such as presidents, governors, and their deputies, are immune to legal prosecution for corruption charges while they are still in power.

The play, *Leadership*, obviously implies that a society saddled with an insensitive and reactionary ruler, such as the former King Ikhehi, is blighted and will continue to experience decay and collapse of social values. It is a visionary, an equally pragmatic and impartial

leader such as King Omogbe that a society requires to develop and rise above regressive elements and chart the course of progress, social security and peace. The play also signifies the contrast in the impact of the two types of political leadership on society with the use of the symbol and imagery of a dung hill full of excreta whose smell permeates the whole kingdom, mass suffering of the outbreak of cholera and the resulting deaths of many characterising the reign of Ikhehi on the one hand, and the absence of all such signs of rot and despair under Omogbe's reign, on the other. The demystification motif evident in the play in which King Omogbe drops his royal regalia and abandons his status just so as to subject himself to receiving the other eleven strokes of the cane on behalf of his mother, may be hyperbolic, but from a didactic sense it illustrates the need for everyone regardless of status and class to submit to the law for peace and order to thrive in a society.

Propaganda as Form in the Plays

The term propaganda is sometimes conceived from a negative perspective because it connotes "ideas or statements that may be false or exaggerated", which are intended to promote or support a political cause (A. S. Hornby, p. 935). It also, however, conveys a sense of persuasion and manipulation of public opinion for or against an idea, hence, George Orwell, believed that propaganda shapes the form of every book because "aesthetic judgments are always coloured by ... prejudices and beliefs" (p. 152). Orwell thereafter affirmed that "all art is to some extent propaganda" (p. 276). In so far as Orwell sounds very believable, propaganda is a technique and form of the overtly political art, and the four plays discussed here are no exceptions. Propaganda manifests differently in creative works with political contents. It is subtle in some plays such that the artistic dexterity of the playwright hides it, while, to other playwrights with less control, it dominates the dramatic medium and swallows any promise of a great art. The former method is a better art than the latter though.

Actually, the power of propaganda in literature in terms of persuading and manipulating the reader/audience, according to A. P. Foulkes, is "its capacity to conceal itself, to appear natural, to coalesce completely and indivisibly with the values and accepted power symbols of a given society" (p. 3). Nonetheless, propaganda

is a natural and human political instinct, which subconsciously influenced the creative imaginations behind the plot structures of the four plays selected for discussion in this essay. It is an underlying principle determining the advancement of the plays' plots and their resolutions. For instance, in Johnson's *The Fight*, the conflict between the two opposing royal families – one, which represents the agitation for a much desired change in government that is expected to bring hope and transformation to society, and the other camp representing a reactionary hold on power to the detriment of traditional values, economic and social progress – leads to a catastrophe. The camp supported by the people and author's unconcealed political ideology, eventually triumphs. The reverse, however, is the case with Okafor's *The Lion* where the revolutionary groups in guerrilla war against the oppressive forces and their agents in and outside the corridor of power, fail at another of their attempts to dislodge their enemies (the so-called anti-masses elements) from their stranglehold on power. Some of the key guerrilla leaders are arrested, while some escape the superior firepower of the government forces, but not without the play's final actions and verbal declarations suggesting that the defeated group is unyielding, and the struggle promising to continue as revealed in the following final dialogue.

Dele: Connect the links, the struggle continues
 Soldier: Shut up!
 Dele: You can shut me up but the word is spreading. It is
 holding firm like the Iroko. The action is on. ... (*The
 Lion*, p. 56)

Ada, a new convert to the revolutionary YAM group also declares to Chief Bogus in the very last words of the play: "Yes! (Shoots out right hand in victory sign). The struggle must continue (blackout)" (*The Lion*, p. 57). In Idegu's *Beloved* and Oamen's *Leadership*, the propaganda form is also prominent. For *Beloved*, the superior arguments of Elders 2, 3 and 4, all from other regions of Odolu kingdom, and their overwhelming number, against Elder 1 the only representative from the desert region in the Elders' Council is triumphant just the way the author of the play obviously wants it. It is also the same way Citizen 2's dominance in the arguments and conversations between him and Citizen 1 encapsulate the playwright's ideological stance on the matter of power rotation in

Nigeria. The views of the victors represent, perhaps subconsciously, the playwright's bias and sympathy for the trendy political agitation against power dominance of the core North in Nigeria, even till now. At the end of the play, *Beloved*, the aspirations of all the other Elders, except Elder 1, and those of Citizen 2, are fulfilled with the Leader from the Riverine region of Odolu (supposedly from Southern part of Nigeria) emerging as the ruler of the fictional kingdom. The subconscious political goal or propagandist aim of the playwright is therefore achieved in his drama. The satisfaction is symptomatically revealed at the end of the play in some of the final submissions of one of the seeming playwright's stand-in characters, Citizen 2: "Look my good friend, it does not matter what the situations on ground are, one thing is certain, Odolu Kingdom is greater than any individual, clan or group of clans. We will come out of these challenges a better, united and progressive Odolu Kingdom" (*Beloved*, p. 96).

The plot of Oamen's *Leadership* glaringly manifests in line with playwright's tendency to foist his personal political philosophy through drama on the reader/audience. In this case, Oamen's concern is simply what distinguishes a true political leader from a bad one. To achieve this, incidents and actions coalesce to discredit the reckless, inept and visionless King Ikhehi – the author's imaginative creation – for the epidemic bedevilling Agbonland and causing many deaths. The subsequent former king's death ushers in his vibrant, visionary and responsible son, Omogbe, who becomes the new king. At the end of the play, Omogbe passes the test of a true leader through an exaggerated demystification of his royal status and his humility before the people. The king's rectitude as a leader is the author's message and he concludes the play with the words, which obviously read like an extract from a pamphlet on leadership training: "... before you go, bear this in mind, if leaders and the led will subject themselves to the law of the land, peace will not elude the world. Every leader is sitting on a leadership scale which does not require immunity to manage but subjection to the law ..." (*Leadership*, p. 65). In this play, the plot structure is typically built along a subtle propagandist technique of agitation, indoctrination and triumph of the author's ideal over a politically anomalous trend in his Nigerian reality, which the reader/audience is persuaded to accept.

All political plays have a propaganda plot and form. Propaganda as a form manifests as agitations between two contending forces or ideas with authorial sympathies through language, imageries, symbols and character delineation leaning toward the camp that represents the underlings of society, the deprived group, the heroic figure of society or the populist perspective. The contention between the opposing or contrary forces or ideologies leads to complications and conflict and most times to the eventual triumph of the camp of the masses or populist ideology which enjoys the playwright's sympathy. This is the underlying structure of the plays discussed here. It is common in many, if not all, political plays. Language, imageries, symbols, characterisation and plot incidents are artistically manoeuvred to influence reader and society and to ignore circumstances and considerations that may present the disfavoured camp in the dramatic plot in a sympathetic light. The nature of political plots in their stylistic manipulations is evidently a manifestation of a propagandist art which tends to render it "a rhetoric of exclusion" and "a sentimental appeal to a reader's political beliefs" (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 962).

Conclusion

Politics as an essential human affair has been aesthetically significant as a subject-matter to drama, and literature in general, because issues of survival and security have been fundamental to man's existence. It is one major way art can fulfil its cultural and social responsibility in a society and be useful to humanity. Aesthetic representations of human conditions are not only good for entertainment but should also be corrective and produce ethical and pedagogical values that are transformative individually and collectively. In Nigeria, for instance, where conditions of human existence are dehumanising and disillusioning due to systemic failure, corrupt and visionless political leadership, dramatists, as well as other creative artists, have urgent and great responsibilities to depict and jettison the stark realities in their artistic endeavours for the greater good and for social transformation. Anything and everything will be useful in addressing and condemning inequalities, social injustice, insecurities and abuse of power in any society bedevilled by the aforementioned social ills. Art must collaborate with conventional media (electronic and print) and the new media (the internet) to reveal the rotten underbelly of society,

and also become suggestively and persuasively corrective. Art can become propagandist, subtle or loud, in a stifling environment, even when the artistic merits in terms of form are submerged. However, all art is relevant if it satisfies a humanistic need.

The four plays selected for discussion in this essay are some of the creative outputs of some of Nigeria's unsung dramatists. Their plays discussed here may not be considered great drama due to some of their structural flaws, especially in the two recently published ones, Idegu's *Beloved Odolu Kingdom* and Oamen's *Leadership Scale*, but the clarity of the political visions in them gives high value to their art. Idegu and Oamen have the advantage of subsequent editions to improve on their play texts. The four plays are however relevant because the depiction of the contemporary socio-political realities in Nigeria is undoubtedly the inspiration behind the creative imagination in the drama. The meanings conveyed in them are the kind of message that Nigerians of this era will easily and happily relate with. Art as a source of narrative knowledge should therefore always integrate social and political visions for it to be more functional.

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