



**Maltreatment, Greed and Self-Centeredness in Myke VaGraam's
Play *Some Mother's SONS***

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Abstract

This paper investigates the plight of the poor masses in the play *Some Mother's Sons*, a post-apartheid play of South African setting. The manner in which the ruling class maltreat and brutalise the masses gives the author some concerns hence the play. In the midst of these experiences the masses struggle to free themselves from exploitation, oppression and subjugation. The play further exposes the extent to which some leaders abuse the powers vested in them. This experience can be likened to what exists in most African nations. The leaders exploit the ruled to their advantage in their quest for wealth at the expense of the poor. The recent aftermath of The Gambian 2016 presidential election readily comes to mind. Also, the Nigerian electoral experience is not left out. The attitude of oppression and maltreatment by the leaders give rise to various protests expressed by the ruled world-wide, this is a common behaviour among the oppressed. The Marxist theory which reflects the class conflict will be used to address the issues raised in the play. The play concludes with the opinion that, protest and possibly violence remain the alternative means to addressing the various forms of intimidation, maltreatment, slavery among others that trail the common man in the societies of the world.

Keywords: Poor masses, Oppression, Ruling class, Protest, Struggle

Introduction

In addressing issues in the play *Some Mothers Sons*, it would be apt to have a clear understanding of the key words in the title of the paper namely; maltreatment, greed and self-centeredness in regard to the circumstances surrounding the characters in the play. These words are a reflection of the happenings in post-apartheid South African society. Maltreatment mean different things to different people. Majority of persons look at it as a cruel

or inhuman treatment of a person or group of persons in the society. Maltreatment takes place in different forms, for example: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, economic-power abuse, social abuse among others. The emotional neglect, physical and power abuse, will thrive more in this paper as some characters in the play are victims of these. Greed stands for a selfish or excessive desire for more than is needed or deserved, especially, of money, wealth, food, or other things such as greed for power. While self-centeredness is an adjective describing a person egoistically obsessed with himself or herself; this behaviour is very common among the leaders of the oppressed as shown in the play.

Myke Van Graam captures the reality of his environment that is the post South African society, in the play *Some Mothers' Sons* selected for this paper. There is unending violence and protest in the play that make characters in the play revolutionary in their consciousness. This reminds us of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* where the animals have to protest against Napoleon and other bigger animals in the farm who ascribed to themselves authorities above the rest of the animals in the farm. This attitude led to the protest and the revolution that took place in the farm.

Maltreatment has informed the writings and works of most post-colonial African writers. Violence and insecurity become the order of the day as the leaders are unable to meet up with their electoral promises and basic needs of the citizens, for instance, lack of employment for citizens has sent most of the youths to the streets as they see criminal activities as the only means of survival. At this point, the Nigerian experience readily comes to mind. Youth restiveness has become more regular than before just as value for human life no longer exists in their minds and kidnapping and doping are now the order of the day,

Thus, subjugation, repression, alienation, and exploitation of the masses resonate in the works of most post- colonial apartheid writers. This paper sets out to investigate the revolutionary trends in Vaan Graam's play to properly situate the play. The theory that will inform this paper is the Marxist ideology, especially, one which is based on the condemnation of the economic class, that is, the master servant relationship between the rulers and the ruled or that of the bourgeoisies and the proletariat relationship. Hence, 'any social or political philosophy or ideology derived from the thoughts of Karl Marx is known as Marxism. The socialist ideology of the followers of Karl Marx are radical, revolutionary, political, philosophical that aims at capturing state power, introduce dictatorship of the proletariat, and

then, progress to communism. They advocate that social services exist in socialist countries because everybody has equal right to social amenities like medical care and education among others. Farah, B's (1977) opinion may be relevant here when he states that, "Marx saw in history a continual conflict between two main classes, between the people who own the means of production and people who provide the labour force ..." (125). Chidi, A. (1989) views Solomon Maynard's attestation that Marxism is the "symbolism of dialectical conflict, of drama, of the unity of opposites of revolutionary change" (21). The Marxists' view is based on the teachings of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engel. Abrams M. (1981) posits that Marxist inclination 'reflect the class conflicts, contradictions, crippling economy, intellectual conditions and alienation of the individual human being...' (179). This theory will help to properly situate issues raised in the play.

Synopsis of the Play *Some Mothers' Sons*

The play is a canvas against oppression, maltreatment, intimidation and their likes experienced by citizens in Apartheid South Africa. Political leaders in most African countries are not interested in maintaining the welfare of the ruled neither are they interested in maintaining law and order, nor peace. All these result to constant violence in the society. One may not be wrong to liken this view to what abounds in contemporary Nigerian society. It is no longer news that violence is the order of the day in every part of the Nigerian society, especially, in the North East part of the country, where human lives mean nothing to some members of the society.

This play reflects the violent nature of human society as exemplified in Apartheid South Africa. It portrays contemporary neo-colonialists as worst than the real colonial masters. Killings, crimes and all manner of brutalities abound in post-colonial South Africa. Such incessant violence is notable in societies, where injustice reigns. This is why the theory of Marx and Engel is important and relevant in this paper. They affirm that, where the common people are not fairly treated, they should move towards revolution in order to usher in a new social order. This remains the only way for those threatened and maltreated to better their ugly situation.

This is why Visu, Braam and other activists in the play seeing the depth of insecurity and dehumanizing situation they find around themselves daily, stir the consciousness of other ordinary citizens, try to locate the source of their tribulation so as to fight man's inhumanity to fellow man. Violence as a major theme remains dominant in the writings of post-apartheid South African

writers. Mac Donnel posits that “violence stands as the most conspicuous and functional means of control” (38). Those in leadership use violence to tame and clamp down their citizens while the citizens adopt violence as a means of transcending the whims and caprices of the leaders. The Gambian experience rings a bell.

Vusi Mataboge is a community leader, union activist as well as a human rights lawyer. Braam is also a lawyer. They remain the voice of the people. Corruption has been another motif that gives rise to all manner of crimes. Doctors who visit detainees that are badly battered only testify that there is nothing wrong with them in order not to incur the wrath of the ruling class. People take laws into their hands and kill others.

Sounds of gunshots always rend the air. There is anarchy as killing abounds everywhere. Braam states that statistics indicate that “twenty thousand murders a year, and less than fifteen percent convictions. Thousands of children and women raped every year and less than ten percent of the perpetrators are brought to book”(88). Within seconds, human beings are slaughtered like animals. Kupoluyi (2006), stresses that “the major problems revolve round the monsters of corruption and impunity... highly endemic disease that has infected virtually every aspect of our national life” (148). Every facet of the society is rotten; police cannot guarantee the safety of the citizenry. Vusi states that the government has detention to keep activists and protesters off the street (85). Burns (1943) writes that:

In primitive society there was no state but when human society became divided into classes, the conflict of interest between the classes made it impossible for the privileged class to maintain its privileges without an armed force directly controlled by it and protecting its interest (63).

Engel is of the opinion that “this public force exists in every state, it consists not merely of armed men but of material appendages, prisons and repressive institutions of all kinds”77). Only white people are sheltered and free from violence while black South Africans are subjected to all manner of violence and intimidation. Despite the fact that apartheid has been abolished, the blacks still suffer brutalisation as revealed by Braam thus“ ...we are brutalizing our humanity. How can you stand there while people are being

set alight? How can you just watch as they cry and burn to death... we are creating a generation of young people for whom life is cheap. For whom it is cheap to take the life of another" (95).

The people are psychologically traumatized and frustrated because of the dehumanizing nature of their milieu which offers no respite to the common man. Vusi, another character in the play tells Braam that a comrade of his died in prison by hitting his head on the wall thirty seven times and commits suicide by hanging himself with his shoe laces (85). This action depicts frustration and hopelessness. This also brings to bare the statement of Ngugi wa Thiong'O (2013) when he posits that "the African writer... becoming an integral part of the African evolution, has no choice but of aligning himself with the people, the economic, political and cultural struggle for survival... he must be part of the song the people sing as they once again take up arms to smash the new colonial states..." (164).

In a society where the government is not interested in the welfare of the citizens that voted them into power, criminal activities flourishes. This is why Braam tells Vusi that he buys a gun despite the fact that he "signed the office petition for a society free of guns" (74). Braam is forced to buy a gun because of constant attacks of robbers in his domain. He laments that "for the third time... they broke in while we were asleep and after we had put up high walls" (75). In order to protect himself and his family from the robbers who try to make a living in a harsh and hostile environment, Braam shoots them. Two are dead while one is seriously wounded and as a result of this, he is detained. Constant robbery depicts the theme of poverty and insecurity. Citizens steal in the midst of plenty. This is why Amuta, C. (1989) stresses that "Literature should be used as a tool for dismantling unjust economic structure mounted by the colonialists, neo-colonialist and the African puppets to wield their hegemonic influence on the proletariat and impoverished masses ..." (96). The author of this play, like every other South African writer, criticizes the callous avaricious and corrupt post-apartheid leaders.

This play serves as a medium through which to canvas against the unjust attitude of the leaders against the ruled. To this end it would be apt to consider the views of Kanu (2011) that "Literature had been seen as a social force that mobilizes and conscientizes. It is a weapon that champions use to chart the cause of the oppressed. It is equally a veritable tool for transformation" (118). On his part Nnolim, C. (2012), enthuses that 'what unites our writers is utopia-their single minded quest for a just and

egalitarian society, free from oppression by both external and internal masters" (161).

Braam states that they are out of 'apartheid's frying pan into crime's fire" (84) as they are entrapped into thuggery, rape, killings and all manner of evil" (84). One is only safe if one is of that political class with their body guards. The citizens are betrayed by their leaders all through the play. It is difficult to get any activist out from detention. Vusi affirms that "they have closed every hole in the law to stop even great lawyers from getting people out" (85). It is bad government and greed and self-centeredness that account for the injustices and violence that characterises the play.

Braam boast of pumping Van Jaarsveil "full of bullets till he bled like a sieve..."(86). This depicts anger in a man who is psychologically hurt. Violence here becomes a weapon of retaliation in an attempt to gain freedom. Braam who happens to discourage Vusi from appearances, as the play progresses appears before the court on account of shooting and killing two people in cold blood, justifying his action as trying to purify his society. To him "corruption and injustice must end, things can't go on like this" (91). Laying credence to fighting neo-colonialists Vusi laments "you have lived all your life in the shelter of apartheid. You know what it is like to move around freely, to go to the school of your choice, get the best job that you want ..., freedom, but I know that I am prepared to give everything to get there" (98). Vusi represents the determined oppressed, ready to gain freedom.

Graam depicts in this play, the severe weakness of South African criminal justice system. Visu and Braam express their disgust with the depth of violence both in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The playwright condemns the atrocities and inadequacies of post-apartheid South Africa. The playwright seems to appeal that in order to forge ahead and nurture a vibrant democracy and form a positive identity, there is the need for truth, accountability, negotiation and justice. The aforementioned bring to bear the role of a writer in nation building.

Violence in *Some Mother's Sons* is an aftermath of subjugation from post-apartheid leaders who try to maintain their interests as exploiters by widening the gap between the governors and the governed. It is Max in Richard Wright's *The Native Son* (1940:500), who posits that the leaders "take what people own and build up power. They rule and regulate life. They have things arranged so that they can do these things and the people cannot fight back". There is the issue of identity, this feature is seen in the activities

surrounding the daily lives of characters in the play, it depicts who they are as a people.

Visu tells the story of how thirteen people are killed in a protest. There is going to be a mass burial. The people are looking for Visu and other comrades. The police rallied round the city to stop their victims from escape. They move from door to door checking their victims. Visu comes up with the idea that he will hide in a coffin while the hearse will transport him out of the city. This incident reinforces the theme of insecurity. Incidentally, the police find out that he wants to leave the city in a coffin and promise him that one day, he will surely leave the city in a coffin. Burns emphasizes that the state sets up the armed forces and the police in order to maintain the existing order (20).

With this revelation, Visu is really traumatized as he asserts; "that's been greater mental torture for me than anything else... I have been betrayed" (96). As Visu continues to contemplate on the issue of the person who leaks information about him to the police, Braam tells him that the informant cannot be a white man. This shows that the problem of the South Africans during the period of post-apartheid is not the white man or colonialist but the blacks meaning that the blacks are against themselves this is why Braam states that "nobody gets a fare trial" (97).

Newspapers are also prohibited from publishing the activities of the activists. Unlike Braam, Visu is a black man who vows to fight with the last drop of his blood to achieve victory.

When Visu is seen in the coffin, he is accused of being part of the people who carried out bombing at the Victoria military base. Visu is out to carry out the revolutionary struggle for freedom in his statement above. He states that despite independence, black South Africans are still going through hell as no single day passes without them experiencing one form of violence or another.

This play is a stand point to the pitiable condition of the helpless and intimidated South Africans in the hands of their traitors. The play is also a pointer to the Nigerian experience in the hands of its leaders in military and democratic regimes. The personality of the playwright is seen in the character Visu; this is because, later in the play he realises his vision. The government has used death sentence to kill most of the comrades. Braam

tells him the danger of his continuous struggle while he states in defence that “this is a war, people die in a war” (97).

In conclusion, this paper reviews the common man’s longing for a true and democratic society. Violence which abounds in the play is used as a technique to achieve freedom for the common man. *Some Mothers’ Sons* depicts a society in disarray; poverty, unemployment, armed robbery, violence and to bring it down to the Nigerian environment, militancy, boko haram and kidnapping. To ensure Visu’s safety while in detention, Braam promises to effect his release through public pressure as he plans to circulate his pictures around the world to boost international pressure and ensure his safety (98), while still in detention, Visu encourages Braam to kidnap and torture the children of Van Jaarsveld as he does torture many mother’s sons. Visu however suffered emotional fatality and as such “spent a lot of time in counselling” (100).

Finally *Some Mother’s Sons* is a symbol of the lives of many post-colonial black South Africans, who protest and lament against oppression and exploitation in post-apartheid South Africa. They resort to violence as a vehicle for man to free himself from fellow man’s inhumanity. His vision is that with unity and perseverance the wickedness of the ruling class could be changed or minimized as violence begets violence and peace begets peace. The message of the play is clear and direct as unity among the oppressed, the maltreated, the manhandled and the exploited could dislodge the high handedness, the insensitiveness and impudence, which the leaders exhibit. The Nigerian experience is not too far from what the play reveals, especially, with the present administration. Some members of the society who are non-members of the ruling party but whom the party sees as a treat are unjustly punished by either through unwarranted imprisonment, detention or other forms of harassment. It is suggested that with fairness, accountability and negotiation, an ideal democratic nation could come into being in the black man’s world.

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