

Visionless Leadership and the Urgency of Resistance: A Perspective of Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit*

Uwem Affiah and Gloria Worugji

Department of English and Literary Studies

University of Calabar, Calabar-Nigeria

uwemaffia@yahoo.com

08027640749

ajieleeme@yahoo.com

08035085285

Abstract

This paper examines the issue of visionless leadership which has plagued African countries since independence and has caused the entire continent to remain in the backwaters of underdevelopment. Though the paper is a literary analysis of the play, which is its primary text, it will review scholarship on bad, rudderless, visionless leadership, drawing from literature, history, sociology and political science. Also, though the play is clearly set in Nigeria, its contents are as valid for Nigeria as they are for the whole of Africa. Therefore, the paper will examine the texts by attending to leadership styles, patterns and structure in Nigeria and on the African continent. The play used as primary text is Niyi Osundare's *The State Visit*. Now and then, a two-pronged thrust approach will be applied. In other words, evidence from the text will be examined either through deductive or inductive investigation and consequently subjected to diachronic and/or synchronic analysis. Evidence from the text show that the playwright believes that resistance against visionless leadership is urgently needed. This paper will point that out, making it a focus on the social functions of drama. Since an inter-generic approach will only serve to enrich the paper, whenever and wherever necessary, materials from other genres will be explored as long as they will throw more light on issues

Background

In the years immediately preceding and proceeding from independence, many Nigerian and African writers were cultural nationalists. This is quite understandable because at that time, considering the large scale displacement of Nigerian and African culture by the foreign cultural practices

of the colonialists, cultural nationalism was urgently needed. Chinua Achebe, James Ene Henshaw, Amos Tutuola, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kwesi Brew are some of the writers who can be mentioned in this regard. There are many others. We can think of Achebe's recreation of Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, James Ene Henshaw's portrayal of clash of cultures in *This Is Our Chance* and Kwesi Brew's lamentation over the washing away of African religious practices and beliefs by the Whiteman's religion in the poem "Lest We Should Be the Last" as some of the works in this mould. Even Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* will fit in here.

Not too long after independence, the people realized that the high hopes and expectations that they had were nothing but a mirage. This realization brought with it, the ugly scepter of post independence disillusionment. The factors responsible for post independence disillusionment are ample, including but not limited to: enduring poverty, lack of basic amenities such as power, water and housing, lack of health care, lack of access to qualitative education, unemployment, rising and biting inflation, etc. Indeed, the list is endless.

The masses of Africa have had to suffer all of these largely due to visionless leadership among others. The result, for literature, is that it has been forced to move from socio-cultural affirmation to social criticism. Most writers strive to be relevant. It is doubtful if relevance can be achieved by neglecting contemporary socio-political problems. After all, as Simon Umukoro puts it, "drama like other art forms undeniably reflects ways of ordering the society in which it is based" (1994:11).

Affirming the basics for contemporary relevance, Augusto Boal avers that drama as a work of art:

...always appears in answer to aesthetic and social stimuli and need... a consequence of the social conditions of their time, of their public (1979:173).

Boal contends here that a work of art is not created in a vacuum. It is a product of the social conditions of its time. Wilbur Scott strengthens the validity of this contention when he avers that:

Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the product not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space and

answering to a community of which he is an important (and an) articulate part (1962:179).

The above assertion is hinged on the fact that social forces inescapably influence the work of art. Every work of art seems to be a response to social stimuli including time and place.

It is almost trite, indeed, it has become a cliché, to say drama informs, educates and entertains. Hence, Osayin asserts that wherever and whenever theater flourishes, there is enlightenment and life (1983:3). This underscores the social functions of drama which many playwrights exploit. Thus, they articulate socio-political issues among which is the problem of visionless leadership and the urgent need to resist and change such leadership wherever it may exist, for the good of society.

Drama informs and educates. This means it provides knowledge and takes away ignorance, and knowledge, they say, is power. Knowledge arouses the right kind of response. Kalu Uka states that the dramatist should purposely and calculatedly evoke the desired response from the people (2002:40).

Eric Bentley maintains that serious minded and committed playwrights should engaged in the search of the human essence – that humanity which abhors evil and adores truth – and find the key with which to unlock the right response from the audience, which is to rise against the rape of the people (1994:909).

In the face of horrible living conditions and low life expectancy in Africa, occasioned by visionless leadership, the playwright owes it a duty to enlighten the people on their condition and awaken them to resistance. Emeka Nwabueze asserts that:

The playwright is aware that a major frontal attack on the masses without a clear revelation of their unfortunate predicament would hardly yield the much desired awareness and revolution. He, therefore, picks up the sensitive issue... and uses it to appeal directly on the masses (2003:145).

Every playwright has to find ways to get readers and audiences to respond to his ministrations the way Mark Anthony did during Caesar's burial in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Considering the pitiable state of African nations and their citizens arising from the havoc caused by visionless leadership, no committed writer can overlook this issue. Chinua Achebe posits thus:

It is clear to me that an African writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the continent will end up being completely irrelevant like the absurd man who lives his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (1994:11).

Nigeria, indeed, the entire African continent, has had to endure visionless misfits as leaders. These are men and women with no idea or ideas of how to move nations forward and better the lot of the people. They abuse the rare privilege to lead given them by God, and concentrate on squander mania and self aggrandizement. Arthur Nwankwo captures it this way:

Since the capture of state power and its employment in the selfish amassing of resources are considered the ultimate trophies to be won in the brute contest of guts, the winners simply privatize the system and consider the perpetuation of themselves in power as their natural birthright (1990:64-15). Grotesque as this may seem, it is one of the dominant characteristic of visionless, inefficient, self-serving leaders.

General Yakubu Gowon is one of such visionless and self perpetuating leaders. He is known to have shamelessly said his country's problem was not lack of money but how to spend the money. In a very senseless mode, he instituted the Udoji award – a programme by which money was shared to civil servants for no reason. Under him Nigeria missed the chance to have laid the foundation for enduring growth. Ibrahim Babangida is said to have squandered \$12 billion being windfall from oil revenue which accrued to his country during the gulf war even as he squandered billions of naira on a never ending political transition programme which he knew was leading to

nowhere since he had no intention to quit office. There is a long list of such leaders all over Africa, past and present.

In Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* a theatre group decides to bring the crisis of the farmers, revolt to the awareness of the community. Titubi's group knows what impact this could have and so disrupts the performance. This shows that drama, when used properly, is a powerful means of achieving socio-political engineering and reconfiguration. This is what Niyi Osundare sets out to achieve.

Biographical Sketch of Niyi Osundare

Niyi Osundare was born in 1937 in Ikere Ekiti in Ekiti state of Nigeria. He initially studied at University of Ibadan, Nigeria, before proceeding to Leeds University and then to York in Toronto, Canada, for his graduate studies. With more than ten collections of poems published and four plays he is better known as a poet.

He is known for his biting satires which criticize visionless leadership in Africa. He does not only identify the problem, but he also proffers the solution. He recommends that the people should, as a matter of urgency, resist visionless leaders and force them out of office.

His writings portray him as the voice of the voiceless, a writer who is always on the side of the oppressed and exploited masses. The volume of his writings coupled with his steadfast commitment to the people have made him a dominant figure in contemporary African literature of English expression and won for him international acclaim as well as several literary prizes, awards and honours.

The State Visit: A Synopsis.

The events of the play are set in an imaginary African country called Yankeland. All the events arise from preparations being made the state visit to Yankeland by the head of state of a neighbouring country, Wilama.

It is a biting satire which interrogates visionless leadership, ineptitude, corruption, authoritarianism, ignorance and sundry vices which are responsible for the backwardness inherent in African countries. After the narrator prepares us for the events to come, the play opens with a cabinet meeting chaired by the despotic leader of Yankeland simply known as Head.

The cabinet meeting shows us the lack of vision, ineptitude and tardiness of the Head and his ministers. While the nation grovels under serious socio-

political problems such as drought, decline in national earnings, discontent among the populace, with a good percentage of its citizens living as destitutes; while old people, students and workers suffer and there is so much evil in the land, all they can think about is to divert the 600million arina maize fund to prepare for a state visit. This is even against the sound advice of the Minister of Finance, the only saying member of the cabinet.

Next we encounter the four beggars. The tales of woe about their lives which they re-count are instructive regarding the problems in the land. In the face of these, the government plays to the gallery.

By the time the cabinet reconvenes to receive reports from various individuals regarding the progress made with the preparation for the state visit, the only saying voice in the cabinet, the Finance Minister, has been sacked. With reports from ministers, Professor, the Medal Smith, and the Colonel, we have no doubt regarding the magnitude of insensitivity of the government.

This is followed by the rally where the old man, worker and student, present the misery of members of their groups and the society at large. Of course, the gathering is termed illegal by the authoritarian regime which uses the police force to disperse them. In the ensuing confrontation between the people and the agents of government, a number of people are left dead, including policemen.

The play ends with the return of the narrator, who reminds the people of the issues and challenges facing the nation and which are raised in the play. He states that this is only the beginning of the opposition to visionless, inept, insensitive and authoritarian government.

The State Visit: A Rejection of Visionless Leadership.

The State Visit is a biting social satire critical of and which exposes the malice of visionless leadership which has held African nations down.

For most of the play one is tempted to believe that transnationalism can be applied to the text. Yankeland is a fictitious country; it can be any African country.

However, when the currency is known as “arina”, it is not hard to see the affinity with the Nigerian “naira”. In addition, the beggars - Sule, Etim, Obi and Abeke - are, with little or no doubts, Nigerians.

Some scholars have concluded that the Head bears semblance with Nigeria’s late General Sani Abacha. Okunoye (2010) asserts that the play “critically exposes the inadequacies of African military dictators”(232). This opinion corroborates the view expressed above, regarding the semblance with late General Sani Abacha.

It is important to note that General Sani Abacha died in office in 1998 while the play was published in 2002. We do not know, however, when the playwright began the writing of the play. It is still possible that the seeds leading to the play were sown in the Nigeria of the Abacha’s regime.

Furthermore, the reference to Yankleland as the land of two rivers seems to be a veiled reference to Nigeria. Considering all of these, one might be hard put to give a transnational reading to the play.

In spite of all of these, a cursory examination of the leadership issue on the African continent shows that the play is as valid for Nigeria as it is for the whole of Africa. It is also as valid for military dictatorship in Africa as it is valid for those who claim to be democrats – they all manifest the same visionless, inept and intolerant leadership. It is for these reasons that we can safely say that the issues which the play interrogate are generally applicable to many African countries. Therefore, the issues that are raised in the play are better understood from this perspective even if one were to, in the course of analysis, exemplify with specific African cases. As if it is a natural corollary, visionless leaders are corrupt and greedy and without doubt, naturally inept and inefficient. These will in turn breed opposition and dissent. Often times these inept and visionless leaders are intolerant and respond to opposition and dissent with suppression. Intolerance and suppression make resistance imperative.

The narrator prepares the ground for what we are to expect when he says:

...this land is rich in everything but the wealth
is in the hands of few kings and queens.
The only possession the people have in
abundance is poverty (*The State Visit*:10).

He goes on to mention some of the ills and vices in the land: luxury liver for the rich few, bribery and corruption, broken promises, looting of the public till, smuggling, fake and over-priced contracts, hoarding, extortion, etc. the masses of the people are suffering. There is drought and shortage of food.

In the face of all of these, the government is about to host the Head of Wilama who is about to embark on a state visit to Yankeland. So after the extensive presentation by the narrator of the rot and madness which are the hallmarks of governance in Yankeland, we are confronted with the cabinet meeting which has only one item on its agenda-the visit of the head of Wilama.

In his opening speech, the head exposes his ignorance, irresponsibility and ineptitude. He plans big for the impending state visit. Of what use is the state visit to his people?

The Finance Minister tells the cabinet:

...you should be asking how much all together we have in the treasury. The decline in the production of cocoa, coffee and tea has depleted our national earnings. Add to these the drought and famine of recent months... we are barely managing... (*The State Visit:14*).

Clearly these are not the best of times financially for Yankeland. Government income has dwindled. There is drought and famine. If the state visit must take place, the budget for it ought to be modest.

A week before the cabinet meeting, Yankeland had five hundred million arina in its coffers. Without the knowledge of the Finance Minister, the Head withdrew three hundred million 'arina' from there.

Head: Finance, how much do we have for this visit?

Finance: I don't know... but I know we have two hundred million arina altogether in the treasury.

Agric:... I thought it was five hundred million arina last week

Finance: Ask the Head. He drew three hundred million arina three days ago without my knowledge (*The State Visit:15*).

If this isn't the height of being irresponsible then I wonder what will. To cap it all, he casually informs the cabinet that the money was used to buy a jet fighter from a friendly country (*The State Visit: 16*).

Is Yankeland at war? No! At this point in time was the purchase of a jet fighter necessary? No! Was it bought to please the friendly country? Maybe. Only an irresponsible and visionless leader would do that.

In order to achieve a grandiose state visit for the visiting head of Wilama in the face of dwindling resources, the Head directs the Finance Minister to:

Head: Borrow it from a friendly nation. Take it from America... (*The State Visit:17*).

This is clearly typical of irresponsible and visionless governments in Africa. They plunge their nations into other rounds of slavery and neo-colonialism through debts. The consequences of owing Western creditors are known. A beggar and a debtor nation is enslaved. Finance puts it thus:

Finance: Our Masters. Debtors and creditors are never equals. Debt, debts. Debts eat away our freedom. Debts enslave our future (*The State Visit: 18*).

Could it have been worse than it is? If we consider Agric's response to Finance's opinion stated above, the honest answer is, no! Listen to Agric:

Agric:... what future are you talking about? The future is not the problem now. When it comes it will take care of itself. Let us eat and be merry today. Why should we bother about tomorrow? You

can only grab what you see (*The State Visit:18*)

So, the government has no future plans. Eat! Grab! That is what matters now. To hell with tomorrow.

The Minister of Public Morality then goes to the ridiculous extent of canvassing for the simplistic and naive idea of just printing the required money. Many African despots, thoughtless and rudderless, have had to do this, like the late Idi Amin of Uganda did.

This proposal is only rejected because External Affairs, who appears to be the most intellectually endowed member of the gang of looters, opines that it was not a wise idea to print more money. At this point Public Morality suggest that the maize fund should be used to prepare for the state visit.

Public Morality:... what about the maize fund?

Agric: O hoo! The six million arina saved for the maize project.

Head: Oh!Oh!... transfer the entire amount to the welcome project.(*The State Visit:18*).

At a time when there is drought and famine and hunger, money set aside for a food project is to be used for welcoming a visiting head of state.

The well being of the people and the progress of the nation are the last things the leadership thinks about. Impurity and violation of the rule of law are the order of the day. The cabinet members are sycophantic and corrupt. They encourage the Head and are in league with him in criminality. They kowtow to his every whims and caprices. They invite our disrespect for them as they can lay no claim to self respect.

Yankeland, like most African countries, feeds on corruption. Office seekers make huge deposits. The perverse traditions of patronage and booty sharing and an absolute lack of transparency and accountability are some of the defining characteristics of government.

One would have expected to hear cabinet deliberate an issued that would move the nation forward, tough on and improve the lives of the citizens. Listen to Finance, for example:

Finance:... already this year there has been a short fall in the production of food as a result of the protracted drought.(*The State Visit:27*).

As Finance tells us still on page 27, in the face of this and as hunger continues to devastate the land and people, leaders in government have no qualms diverting the food relief fund to organize a jamboree called state visit. The rulers have turned to liars, saying one thing while meaning the other and ensuring a long painful suffering and starvation for the people (*The State Visit: 27*).

Again, as it is typical with visionless despots, rather than think about the reasonable advice of Finance, they decide to assassinate him:

Ext. Affairs: Yes. We shall devise other means of doing away with him without appearing to have done so... we call that sanitized elimination

Head: I agree with you, External. That bastard has boldness to challenge our authority (the state visit: 29).

The government is not only visionless, but is run by megalomaniacs. In portraying this, the playwright shows an acute sense of the African political environment.

We find visionless leaders who are bereft of ideas that will move their nations forward but are, in spite of this, power drunk and full of an exaggerated sense of self importance.

Evidence in the text seems to suggest that all the hue and cry over the state visit is about satisfying the ego of the Head. For the purpose of the visit he commissions a Medal Smith to decorate his coat with medals. The coat is so decorated from top to bottom that the weight of the medals makes it difficult for anyone to be able to hold the coat aloft for any length of time

A government that discusses sleeping partners for visiting heads of governments at cabinet meetings is one that has obviously descended into the lowest of abyss. There is no plan for the people. The strengths of such inept and opportunistic leaders is that of treasuring looting and violation of human rights while basking in sycophancy and vanity. Every single decision and action taken, without exception, shows the insensitivity and folly of the government.

As in Africa, so it is in Yankeland. The government is not only visionless but it is also incompetent, corrupt, greedy and intolerant. He knows little or nothing about leadership. Government bribes those who criticize and offer opposition to its recklessness and rascality. It is intolerant of opposition and wastes no time in eliminating, via assassinations, those that dare to oppose it.

In spite of these, one of the fulcrums of the play is the urgency and necessity of resistance. Niyi Osundare does not only paint a picture of gloom, he also proffers urgent resistance as a remedy to visionless, corrupt and intolerant governments in Africa.

The theme of resistance is introduced from the start of the play. The Narrator, while introducing the story says we must know that silence and acquiescence are the tonic of oppression (*The State Visit*:11). He advises that rather than flatter the leaders, the people should kick (*The State Visit*: 12). Okunoye opines that the play reads as an urgent call to action. The principled and uncompromising stance of Finance, which is maintained until his sack, the bold, courageous and fearless confrontation of the painter, the resistance of the beggars who confront agents of the oppressive government and the utterances of Old Man, Worker and Student at the protest rally, all show that the play is a call for action and resistance.

The fact that these acts of defiance and resistance run through the play from the beginning and are not just reserved for the end show that the playwright calls for urgent resistance.

Dramatic Aesthetics and Thematic Development in *The State Visit*.

Drama is literature and literature is creativity, it is artistry. The meaning of literature is in form. By distinguishing literature from other disciplines, it ensures that literature is not religion, political science or sociology. It is important, therefore, to consider some of the elements of form used by Niyi Osundare in *The State Visit*. In doing so, we are not only looking at them for

their own sake but would like to see how they contribute to the overall thematic development of the drama. The drama in the view asserted here, interrogates visionless leadership with its attendant problems of corruption, greed, intolerance, and suppression.

The play is a biting satire on the issue of visionless leadership. The dramatist sets out from the onset to expose this as the bane of contemporary African leadership. The dramatist uses the narrator to influence our responses to the play. Indeed, he hides behind the narrator to make his personal comments with the intention of swaying our judgment of the text to what he wants, namely, an enactment of the rot we have been told about earlier by the narrator. As a satire, the play evokes laughter on occasions but primarily it arouse thought on the fundamental issues raised

Though not extensively used, the play makes use of a narrator. A narrator would normally act as a commentator on the events of a play as well as make suggestions and offer advice. Writers use the narrator to say their minds without being seen as the one speaking. The narrator in *The State Visit*: comments on the state of affairs in Yankeland.

He calls attention to the focus of the play and in the process asserts that what follows will only confirm what he has already told us. When he appears again at the end of the play he comments yet again on what we have just seen. He calls it a short chapter of a long dream. He notes that the people have spoken and the guns have answered. He insists that there is something in the human spirit that cannot be silenced by guns. Speaking through the narrator, therefore, the playwright calls for resistance as the narrator says the story has not ended with the end of the play. We can see that the narrator is used to concentrate our attention on visionless leadership and the urgent need for resistance.

The characters represent two strata of the society – the powerful (the haves) and the oppressed (the have nots). The ruling class who are the haves oppress the masses who are the have nots. There is no middle class and this is not surprising. The harsh conditions occasioned by misgovernance have wiped out the middle class in most African countries.

The powerful live in grandeur and opulence. They corner the common wealth and concert it for personal use and then unleash visionless leadership on the masses whose lives is nothing but a tale of woes and misery as typified by the beggars, old man, worker and student. Interestingly and quite realistically too, we find a member of the powerful and ruling class, the first Finance Minister, who has a conscience and elects to be on the side of the people,

the oppressed. For this he is sacked. Equally, we find members of the oppressed class who elect to stand with the oppressors, the policemen. This is a realistic portrayal of the societies we are dealing with.

The portrayal of the two classes brings to the fore the issues of visionless leadership and the need cum call for resistance.

Characterization is accentuated by the plot of the play which is linear. The entire play is centered on the preparation for the state visit of the head of Wilama which leads to protest and demonstrations.

The play opens with the cabinet meeting which has as its agenda the impending visit. In this act we see the powerful - the rulers, and we see how visionless they are when, for instance, they decide to use the maize fund to prepare for the state visit. We see how insensitive the leadership is. In the next act we come in contact with the beggars, the oppressed masses. There is a sharp contrast between the two – the powerful and the oppressed. This is made more evident by the fact that there is no intervening act between these two acts.

What follows is the demonstration by workers and students. The demonstration is against a state visit that has caused the government to misuse the food fund. Even the discussion among the beggars is focused on the state visit.

Okunoye avers that contrast is a favourite aspect of Osundare's style (2010:235). This is not surprising considering his fame as a poet. In talking about characterization and plot, we have already noted the contrasting portrayal of the leaders and the led. Even then, it should be pointed out that while the leaders are shown discussing how to waste the nation's resources, the led are contriving how to survive. The contrast between wastefulness and struggling to survive cannot be missed. Characters like Agric, External Affairs, Public Morality and Professor are shown to be sycophantic self-seekers. Against people like Finance (the First Finance Minister) and Painter who are bold, courageous, honest and selfless the contrast is heavy. The crucial point, however, is that while the hypocritical sycophant evoke despair, disillusion and despondency, the contrasting characters of former Finance, Painter and the others give hope.

The use of humour is preponderant in the play. This is to be expected considering that the play is a satire. Humour is the transport for satire.

Through humour, satire denigrates and ridicules. In *The State Visit*, the Head, External Affairs, Agric, Public Morality, Cornel and even Professor through their utterances bring forth issues to be satirized. Their utterances during cabinet meetings reveal shallow-mindedness, insensitivity, corruption, greed, intolerance, etc, all issues that the play satirises. The utterances in question are full of humour.

The language is effective but simple, straight-forward and easy to understand. Proverbs are richly used with sentences punctuated here and there with Yoruba expressions in what can be said to be code mixing.

Songs are used to underline the message of the play – visionless leadership and the need for resistance. Songs have the tendency to quickly sensitize and conscientise people and mobilize them toward a course.

Perhaps, this explains the use of songs in the play. The songs by the demonstrators have a utilitarian purpose. They emphasize the defiance of the people and their resolve to resist the visionless and oppressive regime.

Conclusion

Drama is meant to entertain. It is also meant to enlighten. *The State Visit* enlightens and sensitizes. It is aimed at mobilizing the people toward resistance. There are strong evidences that the fictitious Yankeland might be Nigeria. Even if that is the case, the issues raised therein are transnational. They cut across the continent. It should be seen and understood in that context. These issues have held the continent from the path of development.

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