

POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT AND INSECURITY AS SOURCE MATERIALS FOR PLAYWRITING IN A PANDEMIC ERA

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Abstract

It is obvious that era of pandemic is normally characterized by avalanches of challenges. Apart from health issues that are particular during the period of any pandemic, the affected society is usually faced with socio-economic and political problems as the people strive to overcome the plague through different means. For instance, since the advent of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the existing wave of socio-economic issues such as poverty, unemployment and insecurity in the country have increased. However, playwright as an artist depends on a number of sources like human experiences amongst other things for the construction of his work. Therefore, this paper investigates the rising cases of poverty, unemployment and insecurity during the time of Covid-19 in Nigeria; on the other hand, the paper interrogates the need for Nigerian playwrights to see the aforementioned problems as source materials for playwriting. In other words, the paper adopts evaluative and descriptive research methodology to examine how the issues of poverty, unemployment and insecurity in Nigeria during Covid-19 can serve as source materials for playwriting. The results show that the socio-economic experiences generated by Covid-19 can bring about emergent themes in playwriting. Amongst other things, the paper concludes and recommends that like other parts of the world, Covid-19 has caused a lot of economic and social issues; thus, the Nigerian playwrights should use these socio-economic realities to expand the size of the Nigerian literary drama and theatre.

Keywords: Poverty, Unemployment, Insecurity, Pandemic, Covid-19, Playwriting.

Introduction

Globally, Covid-19 has generated a number of challenges since its advent in Wuhan, Republic of China in December, 2019. Apart from the high number of deaths that have been recorded as a result of Covid-19, the pandemic has equally affected all activities of man across the globe. Many economic, social, political and religious activities have at one time or the other been shut down due to the fear, anxieties, threat, and health related issues created by the dreaded pandemic. Like other parts of the world, Covid-19 has caused serious damages to the living conditions, and the socioeconomic

activities of Nigerians in the recent years. The first case of Covid-19 in Nigeria was reported on the February, 27, 2020 in Lagos State. Thereafter, more cases were reported in many states across the country including Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. This is because Covid-19 can easily be transmitted through human interactions, droplets and contaminated surfaces, and it has the potentials to remain in the air for some hours. Considering the rate of the spread of the virus, the Nigerian government adopted some of the global practices for the prevention of Covid-19 which include lockdown among other measures. The principle of lockdown forbids Nigerians from travelling to other countries of the world, and as well prevents people in other countries from coming to Nigeria during the pandemic. This aggravated the socioeconomic condition of the country. For a country that is badly managed and faced with avalanche of socio-economic and political challenges, Covid-19 can be said to have worsen the plight of its citizens as many saw the pandemic as an opportunity to pillage Nigeria's commonwealth. According to Achor and Onaivi:

... The Nigerian political gladiators are self-enriching, corrupt and so on, prominence is not given to decision making and the implementation of policies that will bring about the advancement of entire economy that will benefit all... With this in place, the Nigerian economy is bereft tangible growth and development, living the Nigerian socio-economic terrain at the mercy of near absolute infrastructural lack and decay, high unemployment and exchange rate, armed robbery and terrorist attacks, kidnapping, pipeline vandalism, hunger, poverty and the like. (99-100)

Indeed, as a result of poor leadership structures amongst other factors, the Nigerian nation has been faced by so many economic crises which have over the years fuelled a number of social vices such as armed robbery, kidnapping, terrorism and banditry. Unfortunately, these socio-economic realities took a worst dimension in the era of Covid-19. This is because half of Nigeria's population are outfield workers and are not able to work from home. As such, Covid-19 makes a number of Nigerians to lose their jobs and sources of income, thus, making them vulnerable to economic hardship. This situation equally increased the rate of crime waves across the country.

However, it has been acknowledged that, "Arts play significant roles in various forms; arts have been deployed to address traditional and contemporary problems that plagued the society" (Segun 156). The artists usually make use of available socio-economic and political realities of their societies to talk to their people through art forms like plays, dance performance, painting amongst others. Hence, the socio-economic challenges

such as poverty, unemployment and insecurity created by Covid-19 in Nigeria can be seen as source materials for Nigerian playwrights.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that underpins this work is Instrumentalism which was originally introduced by Pierre Duhem in 1906. Since its introduction, the theory has been relevant in a number of fields. In the field of arts, Instrumentalism is basically concerned with the content of an art work rather than the structure and composition. Through the lens of instrumentalism, the best art works are those that convey a message or shape how we see the world. Unlike other art theories, instrumentalism posits that art is good when it functions as a tool to influence or change society. The implication of this theory for our paper is that there is a relationship between the focus of this paper and the major thrust of the theory which says that the best art works are those that portray issues that are confronting man and his world. As a result of Covid-19, the Nigerian nation has been faced with increased rate of poverty, unemployment and insecurities. Applying the principles of Instrumentalism theory closely with playwriting practices in Nigeria will go a long way to solve a number of socio-economic and political issues confronting the nation in the era of Covid-19 and thereafter.

Covid-19 Experiences within the Nigerian Space

According to World Health Organization, Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Coronavirus. Most people infected with the Covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The first case of Covid-19 was reported in Wuhan, Republic of China in the 2019. The pandemic is highly deadly and it has the capacity to spread very fast among human beings. Thus, since 2019 till date the various has spread across almost all countries of the world including Nigeria. The first case of the pandemic in Nigeria was reported on the 27th, February, 2020. Like other parts of the world with the records of the pandemic, Covid-19 has not only created health related issues in Nigeria, but it has also generated avalanches of socio-economic issues across the country. That is why Madubuike, Festus, Nwobi, Iwu and Oguttu observed that:

Since Covid-19 spread at a fast rate, individuals from vulnerable health systems and poor socio-economic backgrounds are particularly at risk the majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are faced with prolonged health system vulnerabilities due to civil wars, post-military

autocratic delayed reforms, corruption, and the emigration of physicians/health workers and other skilled professionals. Nigeria is a concerning example of a vulnerable health system, and according to the healthcare system corruption rating among Anglophone West African countries by Transparency International, Nigeria ranks the worst. (par. 8)

Indeed, due to leadership failures among others, Covid-19 era can be best described as one of the worst periods in Nigerian history. Nigerians are not only faced with health issues, but they are also faced with high rate of hunger and general hardship. For instance, the lockdown policy which forbids people from going out and carries out their socio-economic activities has impacted negatively on the majority of people in Nigeria who feed and survive only by what they earn daily. The situation becomes worse owing to the fact that social welfare packages or palliative assistance provided by the government for the most vulnerable people in society were not enough and the methods of distribution were faced with corrupt practices. However, Achebe says that, "... economic deprivation and corruption produce and exacerbate financial and social inequities in a population, which in turn fuel instability" (250). That is exactly some of the issues in Nigeria during the pandemic. As a result of economic hardship and loss of job, many issues of insecurity were reported across the country. According to Alfakoro:

It is glaring that the outgrowing rate of insecurity in Nigeria amidst the novel corona virus is so devastating and has also gained bad name to the country.... Robbery and other killings have been carried out within the period. Among them are the attack in Isanlu Yagba East Local Government of Kogi State leaving a DPO and seven other police officers dead. Also the killing of Funke Olakuri, daughter of Afenifere leader, communal crisis in Lamurde Adamawa state which lead to the death of twenty-three people. Another communal crisis in Onisha, Ebonyi were four people lose their life's, sectarian violence on June 4 in Guma, Benue leading to death of five people another in Bali, Taraba state where eleven life's were lost, on the 3rd of June 2020, gunmen killed three people in Kajaru, Kaduna state. ISWA fighters also killed six Nigerian soldiers in Konduga, Borno. Abduction in Shiroro, Niger state by gun men on June 1st. (4)

Apart from the above aforementioned insecurity cases, since the advent of Covid-19 in Nigeria, complain about attacks by hoodlums and other criminal elements have been on the increase across the nation. These situations,

like has been acknowledged earlier are due high rate of unemployment, poverty and general economic hardship facing the people during this era.

Issues of Poverty, Unemployment and Insecurity in Nigeria

The term poverty has diverse meanings and has taken different dimensions within the last three decades. Some aspects of the term emanated from social, political, economic, philosophical and religious dimensions that have altered the world history" (Chukwuka 18). However, by a way of a simple definition, poverty can be seen as a state of being poor and deficient of the necessary requirements for living. A society that is plagued by poverty has no basic amenities and resources that can guarantee good quality of life for its citizens. According to Nwagwu, poverty is the inability of someone or group of people to obtain the minimum level of income needed to purchase the basic necessities of life. This makes it difficult to attain the basic standard of living, and subsequently creates low quality of life and lack of control over one's life and future (268).

In the same vein, Olaitan in Nwagwu defines "poverty as the scarcity of human basic needs for existence. Therefore, one is considered poor when the fellow does not possess sufficient materials needed for normal existence" (268). Going by these definitions, Nigeria can be said to be a poverty-free nation considering its numerous material resources needed for normal existence. According to Ationo et al:

There is no gainsaying that Nigeria is blessed with immense human and natural resources that can make the country one of the most successful countries in the world. Before the oil boom, Nigeria was amongst the world's leading exporters of agricultural products like cocoa, rubber, groundnut, cotton and skin. In 1956 oil was discovered in Oloibiri, modern-day Bayelsa, Nigeria making the nation one of the oil producing countries. Apart from petroleum, Nigeria has other natural resources such as coal, limestone, lead, zinc, iron ore, tin and many others. (1)

As a result of the socio-economic issues facing the country in the midst of its wealth, the authors further lament that, ". . .but the question remains, with all these wealth why is Nigeria still rated amongst the ranges of those with high level of low standard of living, with decaying structures?" Many factors are responsible for issues of poverty in Nigeria; in fact, issues of poverty in Nigeria have a very long history. Nwagwu traced it to the colonial legacy inherited from the British colonial administration (268). It follows that "the Nigerian vicious circle of poverty has its origin from the colonial domination and control of all means of wealth creation. It is noted that virtually all aspects

of economic activities were reserved for the colonial masters, while Nigerian natives had clear restricted roles to play in wealth creation" (Ugwuh cited in Nwagwu 267). Indeed, it is true that the origin of poverty in Nigeria can be traced to colonial exploitation, but what has Nigerian leaders done since independence till date to elevate Nigerians from poverty? Virtually little or nothing has been done to save the people from poverty due to nation's poor leadership structure. The Nigerian nation, According to Nwagwu:

...Has been characterised by elements of dictatorship, human rights violations, and corruption. From the early independence days till date, corruption has been embraced by political leaders upon which the present political leaders built their ideologies of absolute monarchy and dictatorship. For instance, the military took over the leadership of the nation because of corruption but alas, the level of corruption witnessed during the military regime cannot be over mentioned. (40)

Chudi affirms that "...the criminalisation of the state and pollution of civil society must be squarely laid at the doorsteps of the political military whose members saw political office as a short route to riches, they set the tone, and the rest of the society followed..." (81). Indeed, corruption in Nigeria has a long history, and it has had disastrous impacts on the nation in a number of ways. Achebe observes that: economic deprivation and corruption produce and exacerbate financial and social inequities in a population, which in turn fuel political instability. Within this environment, extremists of all kinds, particularly religious zealots and other political mischief-makers find a foothold to recruit supporters and sympathisers to help them launch terrorist attacks and wreak havoc in the lives of ordinary citizens (250).

This has been the situations facing Nigeria over the years. As a result of poverty and unemployment, issues of insecurity have been on the increase in the country over the years. Observing the condition of insecurity in Nigeria, Erinoso in Nwoke posits that, "as far as security of life and property is concerned in Nigeria today, neither the individual nor the state appear to be at ease. . . the reason is because of bad and weak governance..."(246). In addition, Idris affirms that "safety and security of lives and property are necessary for the development of the nation. The increasing volume of crime in both rural and urban area has become an issue of great concern in Nigeria. Many factors lead to this condition, including... poverty, unemployment ... and living in squalid conditions in the rapidly growing cities..." (66).

The Artist and his Society

One of the major features of human society is social issue. Thus, there is no society that is free of social issues. A complete society houses a number

of people who in one way or the other interact among themselves and their environment. Often their interactions generates social, political and economic problems. Each of these problems has potentials to cause damages to the living conditions of man and the general wellbeing of the society. Hence, world over, throughout history, man has always been struggling through different means to handle problems in the society. One of the means that has been used to address societal problems over the ages is arts. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica cited in Peter and Omoregie, arts is:

The use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetics objects, environments or experiences that can be shared with others, it may also designates one of a number of modes of expression conventionally categorized by the medium utilized or the form of the product, thus we speak of painting, sculpture, filmmaking, music, dance, literature and many other modes of aesthetics expression as arts and all of them collectively as the arts. (45)

The above definition, among other things, acknowledges the fact that arts is important in the society. Through its different modes listed above, it expresses and addresses several issues in the society. For the society gives birth to the artist who grows to observe the values introduced to him and he has the burden to guide his/her society back to these values. Like other societies across the globe, Nigerian society has been bedevilled with a number of challenges over the years. In other words, Nigeria has been faced with burning social issues such as imperialism, colonial economic exploitation, corruption, nepotism, tribalism, and insecurity amongst others over the years. The efforts Nigerian playwrights and dramatists have made to curtail the aforementioned issues can never be emphasized. Ukperi argues that "Nigerian dramatic literature stands at the forefront of literatures that highlight the nexus that exist between art and society. This interconnection continues to emerge through various styles and modes adapted by playwrights as they address socio-political and socio-economic neo-realities in their environment" (458).

Indeed, Nigerian playwrights like Wole Soyinka, J. P Clark, Zulu Sofola, Ola Rotimi, Esiaba Irobi, Femi Osofisan, John Iwuh, Emmy Idegwu, Charles Nwadigwe, and Ahmed Yerima, among others have over the years used the avalanche of socio-political, cultural and socio-economic events in Nigeria to create plays that address the nation's problems for national peace and development. Their works have lifted their societies and humanity in general. Therefore, for an artist to be effective in the sensitization and conscientization of his society effectively, he/she must produce works that are socially relevant, he has to portray and interpret the historical issues of his time

thereby creating awareness within the society of social, economic, and political issues that needed to be addressed.

However, Nigeria like other countries of the world, in recent time has been faced with a number of problems as the result of Covid-19. These problems ranges from increased in poverty rate, unemployment and loss of jobs and their related consequences like growing rate of insecurity. All these can serve as sources of play creating; that is, the Nigerian playwrights like their counterparts across the globe through their creativity can use the Covid-19 experience in the country to create plays that revolve around the problems, and in a way suggest solutions to the problems. According to Instrumentalism Theory, the values of art, play in this context, is not in the structure of the work, but in the context. For a writer reflects and interprets his society and by extension, provides warnings and guidance that can shape the society. Ahaiwe also affirms that, "the major objective of a writer is to communicate his ideas to the audience. As a creative writer, he creates aesthetics, entertains, informs and also educates the people..." (376). Hence, the Nigerian playwrights writing within the frame of Covid-19 owe the nation duties of producing plays that explore the plight of the people in time of a pandemic.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected the needs for Nigerian playwrights to use the socio-economic issues created by Covid-19 as source materials for playwriting. It equally emphasises on the needs for them to take part in the fight against Covid-19 in the country. Covid-19 has in the recent times increased the existing rate of poverty, unemployment and security in the country. The dramatist as the watchman of the society therefore, must use his/her artistic work to conscientize the people on the dangers of this deadly pandemic for healthy living, socio--economic progress and national development.

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