

BEYOND ECONOMIC RECESSION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE UNEMPLOYED IN OKOH'S *WHO IS AFRAID OF JOB INTERVIEW*

Rowland C. AMAEFULA

Department of Languages, Linguistics, Literary Studies & Theatre Arts
Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo
Ebonyi State, Nigeria
Email: emy4real2004@gmail.com

Abstract

*Recent studies on unemployment and Nigerian drama focalise a specific narrative: economic recession kindles joblessness. Straying from existing scholarly works, this research argues generally that any developing economy incurs stagnation or recession. Whereas stagnation signals unimproved or optimal economic growth, recession indicates a consequence of economic policy error. Economic recession explains a situation whereby the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) recedes in negative figures in two consecutive quarters, and manifests on paperwork. Therefore, it does not directly result in unemployment. Adopting the textual analysis approach which facilitates the revelation of underlying meanings in a script, this study critically examines Julie Okoh's **Who is afraid of Job Interview** for other factors that generate unemployment in Nigeria. The ignorance of university graduates on interview ethics combines with their largely theory-based knowledge to worsen the menace of unemployment in the country. Thus, the study concludes that, beyond Economic Recession, unpreparedness and lack of social skills required at interview sessions play contributory roles in generating joblessness in Nigeria.*

Introduction

Unemployment (or joblessness) occurs when people are without work and actively seeking employment. It refers to a situation wherein an individual is unable to get a job despite being able-bodied, qualified and willing to work, as in the case of young university graduates. According to Scott and Marshall, unemployment is "the state of being unable to sell one's labour-power in the labour market despite the willingness to do so" (675). Unlike economic recession which explains a situation whereby the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) recedes in negative figures in two consecutive quarters, and manifests on paperwork, unemployment has a direct bearing on the unemployed.

The problem of unemployment has posed a great challenge to many countries (both developed and developing). In recent times, joblessness in Nigeria has become widespread, cutting across all facets of age groups, educational strata and geographical entities. Hussain and Nadol record that,

One peculiar feature of the unemployment problem in Nigeria is that it was more endemic in the early 1980s than any other period (*a la* official

statistics) ... for instance, the unemployment rate rose from 4.3 percent in 1976 to 6.4 percent in 1980. Though it recorded some marginal decline between 1981 and 1986, the rates were relatively higher than what obtained in the 1960s and 1970s (15).

Continuing, Hussain and Nadol explain that this development was as a result of the “lull in the economy” and high import-dependency of most manufacturing enterprises (16). Indeed, the trend forced many companies to operate below installed capacity, causing most of them to shut down or retrench a significant proportion of the work force. Till date, companies continue to shut down operations in Nigeria and, as a consequence, the country continues to witness a rapid increase in the unemployment rate.

Presenting its unemployment report for the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2016, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) provides the details of how 3.67 million Nigerian become unemployed in one year (Olasinde 1). “Also, the number of unemployed Nigerians rose from 7.51 million at the beginning of October, 2015 to 11.19 million at the end of September, 2016” (Olasinde 1). These troubling statistics on unemployment signals reduced productivity and decreased contribution to the economy because jobless people spend less.

Unlike in America where the government still gives unemployment compensation to the unemployed, the Nigerian experience, however, is entirely different. Jobless Nigerians are not paid stipends for sustenance by the government. As a last resort, therefore, some of them who cannot contain their state of despondency take their situation to the extreme by indulging in social vices, all in a desperate bid to eke out a living. Certainly, this mindset of depositing one’s creative energy in anti-social activities ends up constituting terror to the society at large.

The seriousness of the unemployment menace has attracted government attention over the years. Therefore, employment generation has featured prominently in successive budgets of the Federal Government. This has led to the establishment of several government parastatals (whose primary assignment is to generate employment opportunities) in addition to the creation of institutions such as the Industrial Training Fund (ITF), to drastically reduce the problems of unemployment and underemployment. The adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme also led to the establishment of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) whose major charge was to generate employment opportunities with emphasis on the development of entrepreneurship and self-employment.

In addition to the aforementioned, Jamiu informs that the federal government, in recent years, has come up with different employment provision agencies/programmes which include: the Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure; the Better Life for Rural Women/Family Support Programme; the development of Small-Medium Scale Enterprises; Poverty Alleviation Programme; the Peoples’ Bank of Nigeria; the Community Banks, Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES) and Youth Enterprises with Innovation (YOU-WIN) (7). The most recent Federal Government intervention on job creation is the N-Power programme. Continuing, Jamiu laments that, “these initiatives have only scratched the surface of the unemployment problem; they have not significantly

improved the situation” (8). More depressing is the fact that many youths are stranded and locked outside the nation’s economy. This trend, indeed, is a recipe for social unrest and disaster.

It is for the foregoing that this study examines factors – beyond economic factors/recession – which give rise to unemployment, using Julie Okoh’s *Who is afraid of Job Interview* as a miniature Nigeria.

Theories of Unemployment

Since this research effort focuses on Nigeria, and employment in the country rests in the hands of both private individuals (or entrepreneurs) and the government, studying the theories of unemployment vis-à-vis the labour market shall be based on both the private and government employers. In other words, this research shall depend on economic theories on unemployment to unravel the possible causes of unemployment in the production unit of the labour market. Conversely, sociological theories shall be reviewed to examine the causes of unemployment in government-owned institutions.

According to Keynes, unemployment is an involuntary phenomenon. It is “a basically cyclical” experience “generated by the deficiency of aggregate demand” (74). In expatiation, Keynes theorizes that capitalists (or entrepreneurs) hire workers and invest to produce output “when the expectations about the economy and profits are favourable and optimistic” (75). This implies that entrepreneurs’ will to invest is dependent on the probable clemency of the economic atmosphere. In grinding the Keynesian theory to the thinness and translucency of plane glass, this researcher views it as predicating the cause of unemployment on deficiency of aggregate demand. The idea is that if expectations about the future of the economy are favourable, the entrepreneurs would have the entrepreneurial confidence to make investments which would, in turn, culminate in the employment of labour. Inversely, if the future of the market is bleak, capitalists would withdraw from or reduce investments. The causal effect of this is that there would be no employment of labour. At the very best, the already employed would be laid off – unemployment.

Comparable to the Keynesian theory of unemployment is Schumpeter’s theory of the Business Cycle. Although Schumpeter’s theory of the Business Cycle is not synonymous with unemployment theory, its relationship with joblessness constitutes its essence to this study. According to him, “Various innovations which create more new jobs relative to job destruction represent the basic forces beyond the increases in employment and the decreases in unemployment” (25). This theory is based on innovation as a pre-requisite for employment creation: when entrepreneurs find something new such as the production of a new product, a new market, a new service or a new method of production, they become inclined to investing to materialize such innovations. Expectedly, other entrepreneurs will imitate the trend and, of course, labour and materials will be employed to produce the new items. The foregoing implicates an increase in wages and employment and a decrease in unemployment, since innovations create employment; “new innovations create a situation whereby employment creation outweighs employment destruction” (Schumpeter 26).

From an antithetical standpoint, however, it is immediately apparent that lack of new innovations stagnates the labour market and, consequently, retards the employment

rate. Once the labour market stagnates, the adverse implications become numerous. Prominent among such numerous adverse implications is that there hardly would be any vacancy for fresh graduates of tertiary institutions and skill acquisition centres, regardless of the fact that graduates are constantly churned out from such institutions on an annual or quarterly basis.

Among the economists that have theorised on unemployment is Hobson. He propounded the doctrine of under-consumption as the cause of unemployment. Hobson says that,

If income is equally distributed amongst the populace, there is the tendency for the rich in the population to save a large portion of their own income because they are already supplied with the bare necessities of life. This saved income will be invested in plant and machinery and raw materials to produce consumer goods. This will in turn increase the output of consumer goods with a corresponding increase in the demand for them (qtd. in Krugman 7).

The assertion above implies that over-production of consumer goods with an attendant under-consumption of same leads to unemployment. Therefore, in the next round of production, the entrepreneur will be compelled to reduce production. The underlying meaning here is that reduction in production would equally amount to reduction in the number of employees, in the next round of production – retrenchment and unemployment. As the production continues, the next round of production is more likely to require an even lesser number of employees than the second. As the production progresses to its fourth and fifth cycle, the situation could degenerate to chronic unemployment.

Akin to Hobson's theory of under-consumption is Veblen's theory of overproduction. Veblen argues that, "the basic motive behind production is to achieve a reasonable profit" (qtd. in Mouhammed 5). Vinning further explains that the concept of effective demand is implied in Veblen's statement that the difficulty of overproduction is a question of prices and earnings (qtd. in Mouhammed 5). According to Mouhammed, the difficulty is that not enough of a product can be disposed at fair prices to warrant the running of the mills at their full capacity", and fair prices, according to Veblen, mean "prices that will repay the cost of production of the goods and leave something appreciable over as a profit" (6). A further interpretation of the Veblenian Business Cycle proves that deficiency of effective demand results in little or no profit. As a consequence, the next round of production cycle would necessitate the retrenchment of some employees – unemployment.

Having attempted a review of some economic theories on unemployment, we shall investigate the causes of unemployment in government-owned sectors. This section shall rely heavily on sociological theories, such as, Functionalism and Marxism. Functionalism is a sociological theory that was popularised in the 19th and 20th centuries by Emile Durkheim and Parsons, respectively (Haralambos and Holborn xiv). Functionalism views the various parts of society as interrelated and, taken together, they form a system. To

understand any part of the society, therefore, the part must be seen in relation to the entire system.

At its simplest, function means effect. Thus, the function of the family is the effect it has on other parts of the social structure and on society as a whole. In practice, the term function is usually used to indicate the contribution an institution makes to the maintenance and survival of the social system (Haralambos and Holborn xv).

A typical example is that a means of producing food and shelter may be seen as a functional pre-requisite, since without food and shelter, members of society cannot survive. The implication of the foregoing is that every sector of the society must contribute to the totality of the society lest there would be a disconnect between the organs of the superstructure. In other words, “every pattern has consequences which contribute to the preservation and survival of the larger systems” (Ritzer 214). From a functionalist viewpoint, the society is regarded as a system that is made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. Consequently, each part would affect the other parts and the society as a whole. The minimum requirement of every part is a certain degree of integration; a certain degree of compatibility; a certain degree of co-operation.

If the educational system is faithful to its function of imbuing young ones with requisite skills for contributing to the society through working towards production, then it follows that optimal production can be achieved for the benefit of the entire system. The explanation to the functionalist theory is that social order can be achieved when the disparate parts of the society carry out their functions creditably. Once there is a lacuna in the performance of a sector’s function, it automatically follows that other sectors would be negatively affected. The key words in functionalism are consensus and compatibility.

Theoretical Framework

In the context of this research work, the failure of government to spark off innovations that would kindle the absorption of fresh graduates can be equated with its failure to guarantee that the basic needs of the citizenry are met. Similarly, the failure of the education sector to instil in students the basic skills that would make them employable can be regarded as a breakdown in a sector that is capable of ruining other sectors. Indeed, half-baked graduates are most likely to perform below expectations, if employed. The result of this anomaly would manifest in institutions working below installed capacity. It is from this kind of faulty social set up that such corrupt practices as god-fatherism, tribalism and favouritism draw their inspiration.

Due partly to the decline of the functionalist theory on account of its trivialisation of conflict, several conflict theories began to spring up. One of the most popular theories is Marxism which gained popularity in the 1970s. Marxist theory derives its name from the theorist, Karl Marx (1818-1883). While acknowledging his many writings and philosophies, this study shall only concern itself with the aspect of the social system, not necessarily the whole of his works. Marxist theory stipulates that:

in order to survive, humans must produce food and material objects. In doing so, they enter into social relationships with other people. From the simple hunting band to the complex industrial state, production is a social enterprise. Production also involves a technical component known as the forces of production, which includes the technology, raw materials and scientific knowledge employed in the process of production. Each major stage in the development of the forces of production will correspond with a particular form of the social relationships of production. This means that the forces of production in a hunting economy will correspond with a particular set of social relationships (Haralambos and Holborn xv-xvi).

The argument in the explanation above is that the forces of production and the social relationships of the production form the economic basis or infrastructure of the society. “The other aspects of society, known as the superstructure, are largely shaped by the infrastructure” (Haralambos and Holborn xvi). The reflection of an anomaly in a sector on the products of the sector and, by extension, the entire society conforms to Marx's position that a change in infrastructure reflects in the superstructure (Haralambos and Heald 71). The implication is that any change in the infrastructure will produce a corresponding change in the superstructure. Thus, the political, legal, and educational institutions, etc. and the belief and value systems are primarily determined by economic factors.

It is in this frame of mind that this study shall examine the changes in infrastructure that have resulted in unemployment in the Nigerian society – the superstructure. Relying on the play under study as a microcosm of the Nigerian society, this study shall analyse the portraits of the unemployed in Nigerian drama, using Julie Okoh's *Who's Afraid of Job Interview* as a case in point.

Synopsis of Julie Okoh's *Who's Afraid of Job Interview*

Daniel, an unemployed first class graduate, receives a letter of invitation to an interview in a firm. On informing Moses, his friend, of this development, the latter tutors him on the extra-academic techniques needed to pass a job interview. In the end, Daniel applies all the social skills Moses teaches him and becomes more confident than ever before. A highly pedagogic drama, *Who's Afraid of Job Interview* reveals the salient points in an interview process, which a bulk of Nigerian graduates are unaware of.

The Representations of the Unemployed in Julie Okoh's *Who's Afraid of Job Interview*

Okoh's *Who's Afraid of Job Interview* is a graphic manifestation of the theatre dictum which emphasizes drama as a tool of pedagogy. In the words of Afolayan, “plays are carried along by dialogue – conversation that reveals habits and gives insights into character traits...” (77). This section shall therefore, pay close attention to the dialogue of the play under study, as a means of unravelling the representations of the unemployed.

Beginning with the opening scene, the stage direction states, thus:

Daniel, a university graduate, has been looking for a job for the past two years... he has just gotten another letter of invitation (to job interview). He is not enthusiastic about it. He goes to his friend, Moses, an Executive Director in a company. The latter gives Daniel some information on how to prepare for and participate in a job interview (Okoh 2).

Daniel made a first class degree in the university. However, his securing a job is dependent on the “information on how to prepare for and participate in a job interview” (Okoh 2) that he receives from Moses. This is not only paradoxical but also calls for questioning the worth of Daniel’s first class university degree. His uninformed status portrays the unemployed as a bunch whose misfortune is rooted in ignorance. The social relevance of Daniel’s ignorance is located in university students’ obsession with making good grades, at the expense of personal development. Hence, they graduate ignorant and ineffective in the labour market. According to Daniel, “I’ve attended several job interviews these past two years... how am I sure that this is not going to be another waste of time?” (Okoh 6).

The pessimism of Daniel highlights him as a victim of the kind of education he acquired in the university. Even with his glowing results, He is grossly naïve and oblivious of that fact that “Job interview requires more than intelligence. You need to acquire certain basic tools for handling the process” (Okoh 7). Without Moses’ intervention, Daniel would have remained jobless with his first class degree as a burden to him. His condition proves that good grades do not guarantee a good future in a country that has become of a cesspit of corruption and misrule. This stance coheres with the views expressed in “Five Major Causes of Unemployment in Nigeria” thus:

Corruption is a cause of unemployment in Nigeria because when those in government who are to use public money for building more industries are busy embezzling the funds for their selfish use, the result is massive increase in unemployment rate. When corruption is taken as a normal routine, functions which are to be performed by three or even four persons are taken up by one person (who) collects all the salaries meant for the three or four persons (2).

This results in the evolution of the “ghost-worker” syndrome – a situation where non-existent workers’ names are included in an institution’s payroll for the selfish benefit of an individual or group. As a consequence, inefficiency and unavailability of employment opportunities reign. No doubt, this anomalous trend constitutes a breakdown of the functional system and its attendant adverse effects on the entire superstructure.

The situation above plays a contributory role in rendering redundant one’s training in the university. Hence, Daniel’s inability to secure a job in spite of his lustrous academic harvest. This is reminiscent of Irobi’s *Hangmen also Die* wherein seven Nigerian graduates with varying academic degrees (including Ph.D.) metamorphosed into terror in their neighbourhood, on account of unemployment. They once hoped that life would get better but such hope vanished too soon as frustration accosted them squarely. According to them:

Acid: ...Then the years went by and we graduated.
Dayan: (*Turns*) And we started looking for jobs.
Chorus: No jobs.
R.I.P.: (*Vehemently*) We have no jobs.
Acid: Therefore we have no money.
Dayan: Which means we cannot marry.
R.I.P.: And consequently cannot have children.
Chorus: We are the rejects of the world...
Chorus: Our job in this nation is to look for jobs (Irobi, *Hangmen* 45-46).

An attempt to reconcile the fact that Moses was Daniel's mate who travelled abroad to study, with Daniel's apparent gullibility and ignorance, reveals an appalling portrait of unemployed Nigerian graduates. In other words, the drama bespeaks the unemployed in the play as products of third world countries' universities wherein a boatload of theories supplant practical matching skills that are desirable in the labour market. Suffice it to say that the authorial voice from whom Daniel learns of tips on participating in a job interview is a product of a Western university. This researcher is constrained to accepting that attending foreign universities automatically places one above one's contemporaries. After all, students in Nigerian universities equally engage themselves in extensive and rigorous study. Therefore, Daniel should be held accountable for his incompetence on one hand, while the quality of teaching that goes on in Nigerian universities should also be considered, on the other. Interviewer I and Interviewer II buttress the point on the state of Nigerian universities and link it to the incompetence of Female Candidate and Male Candidate I, thus:

Interviewer I: Is this a classroom? That speaks loudly of our educational system. There are so many graduates everywhere. But they can't discern the difference between their right and left hands.

Interviewer II: What do you expect? Strike today, strike tomorrow, our universities end up producing graduates with half-baked knowledge.

The foregoing implicitly portrays the unemployed as helpless victims on a double account: Nigeria's educational system that is essentially theory-based and the absence of industries or platforms that provide the opportunities for individuals to ply their skills. Consequently, this study calls on the Ministry of Education to review the nation's educational system to ensure that university education is linked with the satisfaction of the needs of the labour market. That is, training should be aimed at imbuing students with practical matching skills that would make them desirable in the society, upon graduation. The current unemployment rate can be mitigated if courses of study are designed to accommodate extra-disciplinary knowledge, such as, tips on securing job opportunities; tailoring a standard curriculum vitae; and participating in interviews, among others.

Much as this study encourages government to establish industries with funds accruing from sales of crude oil, the need to marry theoretical and practical knowledge in university education remains an important means of making university graduates employable. The opportunity cost of neglecting practical or theoretical knowledge is the creation of a lacuna that can collapse the functional system. Indeed, such anomaly in the education sector is bound to have ripple effects – including unemployment – on the superstructure.

Conclusion

This study has examined the concept of unemployment and the portrait of the unemployed in Nigerian drama. Accepting drama – Julie Okoh’s *Who’s Afraid of Job Interview* – as a miniature world, the researcher critically examines the play under focus for other factors that generate unemployment in Nigeria. The ignorance of university graduates on interview ethics combines with their largely theory-based knowledge to worsen the menace of unemployment in the country. Thus, the study concludes that, beyond economic recession, unpreparedness and lack of social skills required at interview sessions play contributory roles in generating unemployment in Nigeria. Students should be trained in the university to be relevant to the needs of the society, in order to make them attractive to employers.

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