

EXPLORING POTENTIALS OF THEATRE FOR ECONOMIC PLANNING AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM JULIE OKOH'S *THROES OF LEADERSHIP*

Ifeyinwa UZONDU

Department of Theatre Arts
Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education
Owerri, Imo State
Email: Ifeyinwauzondu@yahoo.com

Abstract

*Economic recession and quest for survival are major issues that threaten the existence of an average Nigerian presently. Change is a constant variable in every society, particularly in that which strives to fulfil human needs. Hence, the attitude of people towards adaptation and change management is usually daunting. Suffice it to say that, it takes committed and visionary leadership to accomplish a propitious economic change in the society. This involves re-orientation of the people into adopting proactive measures and values, with sophisticated skills and highly motivated workforce. This paper uses Julie Okoh's **Throes of Leadership** to substantiate this fact. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the academic conversation about the way out of the prevailing economic recession. The work uses mainly content analysis of the selected play text to show that leadership is about making positive differences, by creating a climate in which people turn challenging opportunities into remarkable success. Julie Okoh posits that the travails of leadership goes beyond mockery and dissatisfaction from the people, but the ingenuity and practice of a leader to mobilise and transform values into action, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity, and risk into innovations. Thus, the process of engendering change demands the institution of sound economic policies to diversify the nation's mono-product economy.*

Introduction

The relevance of a playwright is seen in his ability to create and recreate without ambiguity, the events and issues that led to certain agitations and remarkable challenges of the people within his environment. Creative works are naturally inclined to those physical and emotional problems that touch the social fabrics of the masses. Therefore, the values of most playwrights are traceable to the contexts within their immediate environment; which are often represented by offering human characters in situations and conflicts that project socio-political struggles of man. As such, literary critics and writers over the ages have presented their thoughts, and have shown considerable concern regarding the state of their societies in writing.

Suffice it to say that creative works have often represented the conscience and voice of the people through various means of expressions. In other words, creative arts

reflect the social realities and aspirations of the world around the playwright. Adeoye succinctly captures this when he posits that:

Arts mirror the society, especially the society from which it grew, by so doing; it summons the viewers or the arts connoisseurs to necessitate a change in the status quo by responding to what it sees (6).

Man, as a social and political animal, has constantly desired change and development, with the aim of fostering harmonious relationship with his fellows. The issues of man and his socio-political inclination cannot be divorced from corrupt practices. This is so because; politics and corruption are intertwined, as the former begets the later. Therefore, one can unequivocally state that, since politics is the dominant issues of man in his social environment, and corruption the aftermath, the two concepts cannot be separated from each other. This substantiates the reason why most creative works are thematically and predominantly based on the issues of politics and corruption. Instances can be drawn from Emeka Nwabueze's *Dragon's Funeral*, Julie Umukoro's *Marriage Coup*, Esiaba Irobi's *The Other Side of the Mask*. Femi Osofisan's *Who is Afraid of Solarin* and Rasaki Ojo Bakare's *The Gods and the Scavengers*, to mention but a few. These plays portray, in no small measure, the themes of human struggle and agitations for change in the social system.

Obviously, theatre has always been identified as a potent weapon for communication, conscientisation and sensitisation of the masses, by mirroring and reflecting on the social challenges of man. As an expressive and dynamic art form, theatre is always alive to social realities of the people and has served significant functions in projecting and protecting the fundamental human rights. Hence, some writers in Nigeria have used their creative enterprise to express and expose the ills in the society, creating the need for effective management of the nascent democracy of the country. In affirmation to this fact, Iyama and Obire observe that:

Nigeria's democracy is one achievement that is partly credited to playwrights and theatre critics who acts as watch dogs and social crusaders in the society. Through their various works they were able to protest against autocratic system of government under the military rule, which denied the people their fundamental human right to express themselves and have a voice in matters concerning them as citizens of a nation (83).

Indeed, theatre is a sophisticated expression of basic human needs which is borne out of the instinct to imitate or to project stories and create meanings through narrative and metaphoric paradigms. Beyond the façade of entertainment, theatre focuses on a better humanistic value experience, which practically helps in shaping and restructuring the prevailing challenges in the society. Chijindu Mgbemere argues that:

The shape, outlook and presentation of theatre reflect the yearning of the people. It is these attributes that bestow on the theatre the role of a

vanguard, a watch dog, the barometer of the society and a major factor in nation building (425).

In essence, playwrights aim at creating their dramatic works to be interpreted through theatrical medium. Hence, theatre and drama are two familiar words, but invariably distinct. These two words require further explanations in the context of their operations; since they have important consequences with regards to the objects and issues at stake. Within the context of this study, theatre can be described as the complex phenomena associated with the performer-audience interaction, which is the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. While drama on the other hand, is that mode of fiction designed for stage presentation; constructed according to a particular dramatic convention. In other words, theatre is limited to what takes place between the performers and audience, while drama indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction. These two terms go together and are always in mutual agreement with each another, since theatrical performances are devoted to the representation of the dramatic fiction.

The society and theatre have come a long way and both complement each other to provide a way forward. The society offer creative direction to drama in both literary and performative spheres. The growth of theatre and its impact on the society therefore depends largely on a healthy artistic intellectualism that will promote change, and not the type that creates grounds for polarisation and clash of supremacy with unnecessary attention and vainglory. In this era of economic crisis and recession in Nigeria, the theatre should be a dependable tool for socio-economic change. No wonder Ngugi Wa Thiongo asserts that,

A writer responds with personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensitive needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. Thus, the same writer will produce different types of work, sometimes contradictory in mood, sentiment, degree of optimism and even world view. For the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by history (cited by Aondohemba 64).

It is based on this sentiment that this study takes a cursory look at the struggles, deprivations and economic degradation of Nigerians, and aligns them with the theme and theatrical performance of Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership*. This study believes that the resolution in the play directly or indirectly provides an escape route to the economic crisis in Nigeria and equally creates the need for adaptation to the present realities and effective change management.

An Overview of the Nigerian Political System and the Need for Social Change

The term social change can be described as a significant alteration of social structure which affects the life of the people positively or negatively. Social structure involves the pattern

of social action and interaction that encompasses norms, values and cultural phenomenon. Change can be seen as variations or modifications in any aspect of social process, pattern or form. It can also be described as any modifications in established patterns of inter-human relationships and standard of conduct. More so, change is a natural phenomenon in human's continual existence. As man develops and progresses in social connectivity within and outside his environment, the desire and consciousness to make remarkable achievement and reach the zenith of his goals is heightened and also threatened by social change. Therefore, change is ubiquitous in every society.

Since Nigeria got her independence on 1st of October, 1960, the country has experienced severe social, political and economic instability. The issues of military dominance, predominance and prolongation of military rule; with associated corrupt practices which undermined due process, rule of law, transparency, accountability and efficiency in government, among other factors contributed immensely to the stunted growth of the country. Agbefe observes that:

During these years of military rule, Nigeria is plagued with socio-economic and political uncertainties, societal decadence and damage, institutionalised violence and ethnic strife, destruction of the rule of law, the accentuation of ethnic, religious and cultural polarisation of the country's stunted institutional development, grinding poverty, corruption, weak governance and a range of other pathologies (127).

As a point of fact, military rule in Nigeria was characterised by authoritarian leadership and extreme dictatorship that brought about hunger, frustration and deprivation of fundamental human rights. Consequently, Nigerians rejected military rule and ushered in democracy with the election of a civilian president in the person of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, who assumed leadership on 29th May, 1999. Yet, no significant changes have been recorded so far. One of the perceived reasons could be that some of these leaders are either military turned civilians, with military mind set and dictatorship, or are under the influence and tutelage of god fathers, whose personal interests must clash with that of the masses. There is no gainsaying that the governance of Nigeria has been hijacked by conscienceless leaders, who do not have the interest of the masses as a top priority. As such, their visionless road map has kept the country in perpetual hardship and lack of trust for the future. According to Tignor as he opines that:

Nigerian political history since independence from Britain in 1960 has been a circle of authoritarian military regime with episodic interregnum of civilian government. Rental politics in Nigeria has been characterised over the years by the dominance of electoral machinery, comprising largely of wealthy former military officers and their civilian business cronies (cited by Mbachaga 50).

Notably, the independence gave rise to massive rural urban migration, which led to a drastic change from agriculture to industrialisation, political power tussle between the

regions and later geo-political zones. These changes have not been in favour of the common man; rather, only those at the corridors of power have gained immensely with multiplicity of riches, while the ordinary man has remained in abject poverty. As such, the masses have been preoccupied with these struggle for daily survival, with little or no difference in the lives of individuals and the society in general.

The question that begs for answer is: Can this pretentious and vicious act of leadership maintain the tempo of positive change in Nigeria? If the desired answer is no, then this study is unequivocally stating that, for any intended change to occur in Nigeria, an honest, visionary, dynamic and skilful leader must be elected. This will go a long way in repositioning the mind-set of the people; to believe that such a leader has the capacity, zeal and possible ideas that can drive the change in the system. Obviously, positive change in the society can be achieved with a systematic set of ideologies that will reflect the feasibility and desirability of the people. This demands policies that can interpret the past, make meaningful the present and portray an ideal future. It had been argued elsewhere that,

The primary policy objective of any meaningful and worthy administration should be based on growing the economy and improving the standard of living of its citizens. A nation's economic growth and development can only be determined by the quality of its human capital, viable monetary policy, functional institutions and infrastructure, which are attributes of good governance. There is no doubt that Nigeria's economy has not experienced any appreciable transformation since her independence in 1960, as a result of failed visions and policies of different administrations. It is morally right to plan or set target, but one thing is to set the target and another is to achieve it (Uzondu 17).

Economic planning and change management requires the recognition of institutions responsible for human capital, which should be funded, equipped, and managed to enable them produce skilled manpower to manage the affairs of the nation. Alternatively, it equally involves re-orientation of the people into adopting proactive measures and values, with sophisticated entrepreneurial skills and highly motivated workforce. Therefore, without proper recognition and integration of institutions capable of stimulating economic change, good monetary policy, vision, transparency and accountability, Nigeria's economy will continue to diminish, with high level of poverty, unemployment, collapsed infrastructure, wrong value, poor attitudinal practices and crimes.

Synopsis of *Throes of Leadership*

The play, *Throes of Leadership*, is one of the over 20 plays written by Julie Okoh, a professor at the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt. With plays like *Mask*, *Edewede* and *In the Fullness of Time*, among others, Julie Okoh, in the analysis of Barclays Ayakoroma, "has over the years become a very prolific dramatist"; and that,

apparently, her transfer from the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics to the Department of Creative Arts (now Department of Theatre and Film Studies) at the University of Port Harcourt appeared to have fertilised the ground for the creative fecundity of this professor of playwriting and dramatic literature (8).

The play, *Throes of Leadership*, is a true life story and a framework that discusses the historical events, that culminated into social and political crises in the leadership of the then Vice Chancellor of University of Port-Harcourt. As the political head of the institution, the Vice Chancellor suffers criticisms and humiliations in the course of his administration, as a result of the economic crisis of the nation; where monthly subventions for salaries and allowances were not enough for staff salaries and allowances. The administration witnesses lots of deprivations and sufferings that cause disaffections and tensions between the leader and the lead. In the midst of the crisis, the Vice Chancellor succeeds in alleviating the sufferings of his people through strategic planning. He encourages his people to rather adopt proactive measures, by diversifying their potentials into more profitable ventures, rather than waiting endlessly for government intervention. Adhering to the admonition of the Vice Chancellor, the people became less dependent on government through their various entrepreneurial skills, which in turn boost their social existence and the economy of the nation as well.

Throes of Leadership is an apt description of the socio-political and economic situation in Nigeria presently, as played out in University of Port-Harcourt scenario. At one point, it paints a picture of the struggle of the people who have been rendered hopeless and ineffective by the manipulation and long neglect by government. At another point, the people see the Vice Chancellor as the course of their problems. The play teaches that conflict is a natural phenomenon which must find some expressions in communicable forms. But when they are not properly managed, it may snowball into social disorder that may be expressed through conflict, violence and restiveness. The play equally teaches the need for a leader to be selfless, transparent, visionary and committed to the course of his people. These are some of the qualities of the Vice Chancellor that paved a way for conflict resolution and transformation of the society as established in the play.

The Themes of Economic Planning and Change Management in *Throes of Leadership*

Throes of Leadership is Julie Okoh's statement on the travails in leadership. Leaders arise in every family, society and organisation in large and small, simple and complex situations. In fact, in every historical period and every part of the world, a leader must emerge to take the lead. The play discusses catalogues of issues and restiveness that shows that leaders are often at risk of being threatened, insulted, humiliated and tormented by all sorts of cruelties and unprecedented behaviours by the aggrieved followers. Leaders are often subjected to criticisms and blames when the going is rough, even when they are not the remote or immediate cause of the ugly situation.

The play is simple, devoid of complex settings and movement in its social message. However, there is no doubt that the play succeeds, even partially in the presentation of the human dimension of the struggle and the aspect of being proactive, which most people

either ignore or take for granted. An important effect of Julie Okoh's social vision and artistic preoccupation of portraying the emotional hangovers, attendant pain and suffering of the struggle is that the work does not hang in the air, but subtly hits at dialogues and moderations as antidotes and emotional purgation to the issues and challenges facing both the leader and the people.

It is the contention of this paper that, it is not enough for writers or dramatists to just mirror the prevailing social and political contradictions within an environment, but should deploy their creative weapon directly and coherently, in the process of sensitising, conscientising and preparing the people for actions capable of stimulating positive change in the society. The plots of the play are sequentially arranged, and link to each other. This makes it easier for the audience to understand the lines of argument without contradictions.

Principally, the period of this play was the dictatorial military rule of Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (1984-85), which was characterised by severe starvation, deprivation and strict measures on allocations that should be used to run the affairs of higher institutions and other government agencies and parastatals. Salaries and allowances were not enough for worker as prices of goods and services were skyrocketing on daily basis. This can be substantiated in the following dialogues:

- VC:** On the issue before us, please remember no one runs a university with empty hands. At the root of any administrative success is the provision of funds and sound management. All the problems you have enumerated can be easily resolved with adequate funding.
- Dean Hum:** The University of Port-Harcourt is owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Do you mean that the Government has not been providing funds to run this university?
- VC:** The grant has been inadequate. It can't keep up the growth in undergraduate enrolment. Besides, for some time now, the grants from Government have dwindled. Moreover the remittances are often delayed. We are always in panic as pay day approaches. The bursar has to source for fund from anywhere; otherwise, staff will go on strike over delay of payment of salary (13).

The Vice Chancellor and the Deputy Vice Chancellor made it clear to the people that there is need to diversify their potentials into other profitable ventures to augment their salaries. Though, it was difficult for them to adapt to the new realities, but they certainly discovered that they could do some other things, apart from waiting for salaries monthly. This is established in the following lines:

- DVC:** Colleagues, let us look at the situation before us objectively. For example, most of our official cars need repair. But, where is the money to repair them. The Nigerian educational system started to decline since the beginning of the 1980s. The economic collapse of the period also greatly hurt the scholarship community. Moreover, the military rulers look upon the universities with deep

suspicion. Hence, the funding of the academia is not one of their priorities (14).

VC: We can't wait for Government forever. We must do something on our own to move the university forward. You and I, all of us have a stake in this matter. This is our university. I am only the head. When the head goes down, the entire body goes down with it.

DVC: The vice Chancellor has spoken clearly. This is a challenge to all of us

Dean Hum: A big challenge indeed.

Provost: Sir, thanks for explaining this situation to us. We shall put our hands together and come up with proposals on how to generate fund internally (15).

This sudden awareness and the will power to adhere to the advice of the VC and his Deputy to adapt to the changes in the society by diversifying their potentials brought certain level of comfort and contentment in the people. Most of them stayed away from idle gossip at the staff club with frivolous spending and womanising, and divert their energies in more profitable ventures such as agriculture, poultry farming, fish farming and many more. The following dialogues substantiate this fact:

Lecturer I: (*Shaking hands.*) Old boy, long time, no see. How now?

Lecturer II: Struggling! Just struggling to survive.

Lecturer I: I know, the economic crunch is whipping everybody. That is why you don't see me again at the staff club.

Lecturer II: Staff club! Who can afford such luxury these days? The economic crunch is biting everybody.

Lecturer I: But, I hardly see you on campus. I have come to your house twice, you were not found. So, what's happening?

Lecturer II: One is trying to earn extra money to keep body and soul together, under this austerity.

Lecturer I: Is that so! Please tell me more about it.

Lecturer II: Since I don't want to die of hunger, I now do part time job at Ella fish farm.

Lecturer I: How about our friend Patience, I hope he is well?

Lecturer II: Everybody is struggling to survive. I heard he now uses his old car as taxi in the evening to make ends meet (52).

Throes of Leadership is a true reflection of the past and current situation of Nigerian society of Buhari's military and civilian regimes, where people are struggling for survival as a result of the recessive economy of the country. Indeed, people always want the easy way out of their difficulties. When any visible threat is perceived, it may snowball into catastrophe if not properly managed. Despite the vision, simplicity and sincerity of the Vice Chancellor, he was at first made a laughing stock by his colleagues and his people in general. This made him to almost give up the fight of changing the social system in

University of Port-Harcourt, but he held unto to his positive ideologies. His perseverance helped him to pull through the challenges of time.

The only solution proffered by the playwright is for people to engage themselves in life coping skills which may be a palliative measure in a recessive economic system to make ends meet. At the end of the play, the Vice Chancellor was exonerated from the plight of the people, as the proactive measures adopted by individuals helped to transform their lives and the society as a whole. This can be defended by the dialogues between the VC and the market women that visit his lounge:

Woman I: Our able and capable Vice Chancellor, please, walk with confidence. Walk with reassurance. Walk tall with your shoulders high in the sky, for the women of the three communities surrounding Uniport are here to pay you a courtesy visit.

VC: Why do I deserve this visit?

Woman I: We come with joy; we come with gratitude on behalf of our communities. Our husbands send their greetings. Our children send their appreciations. Our elders send their best wishes. They all thank you for your foresight, for bringing joy into our families. For bringing wealth into our homes. And for bringing peace into our communities. Does a person whose belly is full complain of hunger? (56)

The dramatic performance was not limited to the use of dialogues; rather the director employs various dramatic techniques such as storytelling and flash back to propel the movement of the dramatic action in the play. Okoh proves that leadership challenge goes beyond mockery and disaffection from the people, but on how a leader mobilises his subjects to get things done in an extraordinary way. She proves that leadership is the practice and ingenuity of a leader to transform values into action, vision into realities, obstacles into innovations, separateness into solidarity and risks into reward. It is about making positive difference in the workplace and creating the necessary climates in which the people can turn challenging opportunities into remarkable success.

Conclusion

The play, *Throes of Leadership* by Julie Okoh explores to a great extent, the travails of leadership. This is made possible through the historical and political linkages that bedevilled the Vice Chancellor of University of Port-Harcourt. Okoh proves that leadership demands positive ideologies and strategic planning that can propel positive economic changes in the society. These are the major preoccupations of the play, where the Vice Chancellor is finally exonerated and celebrated for his ingenuity; after suffering varying degrees of insult and humiliation from his subjects. The leadership challenges of the Vice Chancellor were enormous, but his honesty, transparency and hard work helped him to excel.

Having raised a catalogue of issues in the play, *Throes of Leadership*, Julie Okoh carefully weaves a likely way out of the problem. This by implication is a clarion call to everyone to always examine those issues that give rise to conflicts and strive to proffer solutions in order to arrive at a peaceful resolution that will make the society a better place. In essence, play productions activate the audience sensibilities into imaginative exercises that enable them to relate the subject under study to life occurrences. Within the ambiance of drama, the audience travel with the plot, creating an ample opportunity to investigate into the character and their actions. In the course of this exciting dramatic performance, they advance into the thematic pre occupation of the play, into a higher pedestal, thereby gaining knowledge and skilfulness at the resolution of the play.

Throes of Leadership stresses the need for selfless and visionary leaders who will put the need of the people before their personal needs. The play teaches that an average human being have more than one potential, which could be diversified to suit any giving circumstance. It teaches the need for people to be proactive and sensitive to their environment as well. It offers the best solution to people living in a distressed economy. Presently, Nigerian people are facing terrible times as a result of the recessive economy occasioned by devaluation in oil production. A mono economy has never helped any family, society or nation. The play creates awareness and establishes the need for Nigerians to develop and improve multiple intelligences and potentials, which could be diverted into more profitable ventures that could help to stabilise the economy of the nation.

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