

NIGERIAN PLAYWRIGHTS IN SEARCH OF CHANGE: JULIE OKOH, ALEX ASIGBO, TRACIE UTOH-EZEAJUGH AND EMMANUEL EMASEALU EXAMINED

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Abstract

The concept of change has been described as a constant phenomenon that is inevitable in any given society. Although change can be from negative to positive dimension or positive to negative dimension depending on the management approach and the intension of the change agent(s). The clamour for change from atavistic cultural practices to a friendlier and development driven culture; dictatorial leadership to a democratic/ people oriented leadership; corrupt and tribal/ethnic attitude of citizens to accountability and transparent citizens' orientation; marginalization to collective bargaining and resource control amongst others have preoccupied the pages of different plays of Nigerian playwrights. From the plays of established playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima to even the plays of amateur voices yet to be exposed by critics, a lot on positive change for a well-developed and better Nigerian appears not to have yielded the desired target due to several factors. Some of these factors include; poor reading attitude of Nigerian citizens and leaders who are expected to implement the concepts in these plays, poor perception of the citizens on the potentials of theatre and drama and inability of some of these plays to meet the audience through performance. This study applies the content analysis method to examine the change mantra in selected plays of Julie Okoh, Alex Asigbo, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Emmanuel Emasealu.

Introduction

The philosophical statement(s) embellished in the creative work of an artiste cannot be too far from the realities of his immediate environment. This informs why playwrights in Africa have continued to commit their ink to restructuring their society with the aim of achieving the desired positive change. Nnolim describes the creative writer as one “who wears more than one garb; he undertakes to be of definite use to his society and humanity” (1). Describing the source of ideas of the artist in general and the playwright in particular, Effiong Johnson writes “A playwright does not write in isolation. He writes to express the

pricking of the buffeting circumstances in which he has found himself cobwebbed and trapped” (27).

Change which deals with transition from one level to another is described as a constant phenomenon that is inevitable. Change occurs in all strata of human endeavour be it biological, economic, social, political or religious. However, change does not have a permanent direction as its direction most times is usually conditioned by the management principles and the administrative prowess of the management agent. According to Tim Creasey:

Change management is the process, tools and techniques to manage the people-side of change to achieve the required business outcome. Change management incorporates the organizational tools that can be utilized to help individuals make successful personal transitions resulting in the adoption and realization of change. (2)

He further comments that, Change Management (CM) refers to any approach to transitioning individuals, teams and organisations using methods intended to re-direct the use of resources, business processes, budget allocations, or other modes of operation that significantly reshape a company or organization. The motivational force for Nigerian playwrights from James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Osofisan, Bode Showande, Sony Oti to the more recent Henry Bell-Gam, Barclays Ayakoroma, Irene Salami, Ben Binebai and Edward Imo has been to attain the needed change that will bring about development in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The efforts of these creative artistes are a concerted search for change in the right direction. This work is aimed at analyzing the change advocacy in selected plays of Julie Okoh, Alex Asigbo, Tracie Utoh-Ejeazugh and Emmanuel Emasealu. These playwrights are carefully selected for this study due to their thematic preoccupations that fit into the thrust of the study. Apart from the thematic contents of their plays, their gender disparity and generational similarities in the playwriting scene make them relevant for the study. For example, Alex Asigbo and Emmanuel Emasealu are male playwrights whose creative works reechoes the change mantra whereas Julie Okoh and Tracie Utoh-Ezeazugh are female established playwrights whose works have not stopped calling for the needed change on the fate of women.

Change Advocacy in Selected Plays of Okoh, Asigbo, Utoh- Ezeazugh and Emasealu

The change phenomenon of the aforementioned playwrights is succinct and of direct bearing to the realities of the Nigerian state. It is important to state that Julie, Okoh, Alex Asigbo, Tracie Ezeajugh and Emmanuel Emasealu are products of the third generation of Nigerian dramatists, which Adeoye is of the view that Ahmed Yerima is the leading figure. For the avoidance of doubt, the third generation of Nigerian dramatists according to Julius-Adeoye:

Is defined not by nationalism or mythopoeic ethos. They are not particularly interested in revolutionary aesthetic or Marxist cantos but in individual survival strategies. However, hardly any of the plays by the third generation's playwrights deviate from what Ameh D. Akoh refers to as "the burning issues confronting postcolonial transitory state of Africa or Nigeria. (254)

Among the female playwrights of the third generation, Julie Okoh stands tall in her search for a redefinition of the woman in the society. The change advocacy in her plays is the amelioration of women from the shackles of cultural and chauvinist extremities. She has consistently and repeatedly questioned the position of women, which for her is defined by men. From *Mask*, the issue of infidelity is portrayed in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Okosun. Okoh in this play calls for a change in the attitude of husbands against their wives. She appeals for a replacement of infidelity with faithfulness, love, care and total commitment to the marital union. In her opinion, when a man is unfaithful to the wife with a flirtatious lifestyle, the end product may be a total collapse of the family which is very important to the development of every nation. In an attempt to secure her home, Mrs. Okosun went diabolic by acquiring a charm, which leads to the collapse of her husband. This act can be avoided if men learn to be faithful to their women and endeavour to play their parts as loving and caring husbands.

Another play that readily comes to mind is *Closed Doors* where Okoh calls for a change of perception to the concept of rape, early pregnancy and child abuse in the society. Through a baby factory called "Goodwill Nursing Home", Okoh paints a picture concerning the ordeal of rejected females who in an attempt to find solace exchange their babies for daily breads. In *Closed Doors*, the doors of the society controlled by men are permanently closed against Amina, an 18-year girl who suffers abuse in the hands of an Imam and herdsmen, Eki suffers sexual abuse in the hands of her boss who immediately applies the rule and she was relieved of her job. Same with Bola and Tracie.

The same issue of change is dominant in *Mannequins* and *In the Fullness of Time* where Adudu is repeatedly presented to be as an epitome of the perception of men that must be changed concerning women. Adudu's perception of women like most Nigerian men is captured thus:

Rises slowly as if in pain). I know women very well. They are wonderful creatures. Give them everything they are never satisfied. In addition, they want to possess you completely. Yet, they want their own freedom. If you refuse to listen to them, they become jealous, petulant, and crabby. You cannot even step out an inch before they begin to protest. Then, they start to whine, whither and shrink. Why can't women understand that by nature man is superior to woman? What a man can do, a woman can never do it. And as such they can never have equal rights. It is not my fault that fate blocks their ear to common reason. *(Gazes into the distance)* Ah! How stupid women are! *(Going back to his previous seat)* Very, very stupid... (34)

Okoh's call for change in all her plays is very clear that women are suppressed, victimized and denied of their rights due to their gender and must apply all legal means to untangle themselves from these oppression tendencies. In her plays such as *Our Wife Forever*, *Who Can Fight the gods*, *Edewede*, *Trials*, *Closed Doors*, etc. she has consistently presented a refined and self-assertive woman that questions the status quo of the African culture. Edewede in *Edewede* is one of such female characters Okoh uses to call for a change in the practice of circumcision, one of the oppression weapons of culture against women. In her expression, Edewede charges the women to resist circumcision because it is an indirect attempt to interiorize them due to their ignorance. She recalls thus: "Our mothers practiced circumcision because they knew nothing about anything. Except the laws and taboos imposed on them so that from childhood, they learn to be shy, silent and docile until they see themselves as objects for men's pleasure" (37).

Apart from the issues of tradition and culture, Okoh also calls for a change in the stereotyping of women as kitchen materials. Some Nigerian men including the current president of Nigeria Muhammadu Burhari see women as belonging to the kitchen and not in the public spheres. This is clear in Okoh's *Trials* where Sotonye and Ibisio battle for supremacy in their matrimonial home. For Sotonye,

the wife's place is in the kitchen to prepare his food and accept orders from him as the man of the home. However, Ibiso the redefined character that functions as Okoh's voice in the play feels otherwise. In her expression of persuasion to her husband and the society at large she argues:

Didn't our grand-mothers and great grand-mothers do so?
They went to farms and to markets far away from their
homes only to come back, sometimes, very late at night.
Some of them even went fishing in the high sea only to
return after many days of absence. Our history book tells us
about Queen Kambassa of Bonny. She was a great warrior
and she had a formidable army which she led personally
into war against her opponent... How did she acquire all
that wealth? Is it by babysitting her husband and children at
home? (18)

Apart from recalling the place of women beyond the kitchen, Ibiso advises her husband in particular and other men in general that the barrier that kept women outside the shores of public functions, economic and political participation is over and that a new dawn is on. In her lines she expresses thus:

My dear, open your eyes and look around you. The barrier
between the place for men and for women is crumbling
down. More and more women not work outside their
homes. They earn good salary equal to that of men... You
would have heard about Dora Akunyili... (24)

Similarly, Asigbo in *War of the Tin Gods*, *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*, *Once upon a School* and other plays x-rayed the issues of purposeful leadership and followership as panaceas for the needed development of his immediate environment, Nigeria. In *The Reign of Pascal Amusu*, Amusu the eponymous character is painted as a dictator that has no equal in the plunging of the Nigerian economy into poverty. He is so drunk in power that he does not wish to allow others come into it. Like many past Nigerian military leaders who have through one coup or the other ruled this country Amusu feels it is his birth right to remain in power directly or indirectly. In his boastful speech, power-drunk Amusu declares: "You see what I mean? We own this country. In fact, Odibo, for serving me diligently these past years I am going to make you governor of your state whether your people like it or not" (26).

Asigbo is bothered that the ideology that the youths are the leaders of tomorrow is impossible if leaders begins to recycle among the old hands. Without meaning to cast aspersion on any past leader, Nigeria from independence till date has had only Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who came outside the recycled landlords of Nigeria presidency. From the Olusegun Obasanjo to the Umaru Musa Yara'Adua and currently Muhammadu Buhari, our leaders are very familiar and rotational among the so-called owners. Amusu's following expressions attest that Asigbo is very direct and bold in his satiric comments on the leadership recycling in the country. According to Amusu in the play: "But seriously things have decayed in this country. All the infrastructure I left during my last reign have all degenerated... and to make matters worse, all these criminal rulers that came after me have looted the treasury of the nation to stupor" (13).

In *Once upon a School* Alex appears to be too direct and somehow historical as the characters in the play, the setting, language and dramatic actions are verifiable incidents in his undergraduate days. Prof. who is the Head of Department is tyrannical and vindictive against his colleagues over promotion and insists that his students must direct his plays as part of their practical exams. This is typical of some theatre/performing arts departments where some lecturers force students to direct their poorly written plays. In some cases, they fail students who dare disobey their orders. Asigbo's self-examination of his profession and field of service presents him as a true playwright that speaks to issues irrespective of his concern. In his plays, he calls for a revolution that will correct these leadership failures in all sectors of the Nigerian society

For Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, her consistency has positioned her to be an extraordinary writer that is unbiased and committed to attitudinal change by women in their quest for equality in the name of feminism. Her critical works from her first experiment *Who Owns this Coffin? And Other Plays* She has maintained a stand that is painful and unacceptable to some braggart as she maintains that ' whoever goes to equity must go with clean hands. For her women who must correct men and call for equality in the political and social spheres must not participate in the crime some unscrupulous men are into.

Asigbo's description of Utoh-Ezeajugh's ideological commitment as a new breed of feminism is very revealing on her change mantra thus: "Tracie Chima Utoh, an up-coming woman writer who, it appears, is not content to follow the crowd in declaring either for or against feminism" (3). Similarly, in his preface to *Who Owns this Coffin? and Other Plays*, Femi Osofisan is bold to unveil her when he observes that:

Chima is a playwright who will not shy away from the reality, however painful and who is not afraid to challenge conventional wisdom ...Against a background of feminist activities, now all too familiar, in which female writers indict and vilify men for their prejudices against women, Chima surprisingly chooses to be different. Her attack is directed in *Who Owns this Coffin?* Not against men, the usual targets, but, in fact, against women who have set out to make a career out of their feminism. Chima bitterly reveals and denounces the opportunism of these mercenary women in our society. She shows how, through hypocrisy and cant, they usurp and divert the struggle, muffle the genuine voices of protest, and even kill off the true heroes. Thus, hers is a bold and welcome voice of caution at a time when the universal struggle for women's rights threatens into just another gambit for self-enrichment. (9-10)

One is totally in agreement with the above refined scholars and extends further that in the African soil of playwriting, Tracie is rare and will remain influential to upcoming playwrights who wish to distinguish themselves from the crowd. Interestingly, *Who Owns this Coffin* and *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* are models to her critiques on opportunist and misguided so-called feminist crusaders on the African soil. While in *Who Owns this Coffin?* She comparatively presents two sets of women. The genuine ones with the ideal motive to redeem women from poverty and place them on a comparative advantage with their male counterparts and another set who weep up sentiments to achieve their selfish desires through the mantra of women liberation.

The genuine group in this play is objectively led by Chief Sijuade, a widow, businesswoman and the vice president of National Council for Women Societies, Mrs. Jaja (Shop Owner/Secretary of Dynamic Dance Group) and Mrs. Tansi (Nurse and Member of the Dynamic Dance Group). This group as crafted in the play, are committed to the plight of the rural women who are in dire need of empowerment through education and entrepreneurship. The other group comprises of Madam Ekwutosi (single parent/ former member of federal constitutional conference/president of the dynamic dance group), Mrs Amtu (Local Government Chairperson/member of the Dynamic Group) and Hajia Binta (Principal/ Treasurer of the Dynamic Dance Group) who use their positions to loot and weep up sentiments in the name of feminism.

This division of purpose is what we see in the play as clearly expressed by the Narrator in the Prologue thus:

It therefore becomes disheartening to observe cracks on the walls of the women's movement, long before the hurdles have been crossed and set goals accomplished. Periodic infighting and general dispiritedness among some of the women's organizations has prompted keen observers to ask in perplexity; do some militant liberationists speak only for themselves or the silent majority too. (17)

Tracie's dramaturgy calls for change in this misguided self-centred women liberationists as championed by Madam Ekwutosi and her cohorts. They are all soaked in the river of corruption and without recourse to the ideals of true African women. In an attempt to secure their respective political ambitions, they run to Chief Sijuade to weep up sentiments that they are being fought because they are women. However, Chief Sijuade disappoints them by rebuking their allegations and denying those help. In her position, she laments thus:

Hajia, I do not think that any woman or man for that matter, wants to pull you down. You are simply reaping the fruit of your corrupt practices. I must say am very disappointed in you. If I had not been part of the panel that investigated your case, I would not have believed you are capable of committing such atrocities. (55-56)

In *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, a group of disgruntled and misguided politicians is paraded with a view to calling for a re-examination of the so-called feminists who are politicians. Prominent among the disgruntled politicians are Chief Irene, Funmi, Mairo, Ene and Ifeoma. These women are metaphorically presented as mad wives who set anti-social and anti-marriage rules all in the name of their selfish ambition. To express her supremacy in her matrimonial home, Ene rains insult on her husband before her friend thus:

(stands-offish.) Welcome yourself, foolish man (pointing)
Look at the clock. Is this the time your mates clean the house?
Lazy idiot! (Ene expresses her disgust and then marches to a settee. as the other women move towards the settee, Funmi ...)
(22)

For Emasealu, his attempt at using plays to advocate for change may have come very late considering his contemporaries in the theatre industry. Born an actor, trained as a director and metamorphosed into a director-playwright, Emmanuel Emasealu formerly known as Oga boasts of over ten plays lying cold in his personal folder but has published *The Gardeners* (2008) and *Nerves* (2010). These two plays have not only attracted the interest of scholars but directors have repeatedly produced these plays due to their multi-thematic preoccupations. *The Gardeners* projects the issues of power tussle, class differentiation, cultism and communal clashes dominating third world countries like Nigeria. *The Gardeners* is highly episodic as three in one drama. First is the plot that establishes the conflict of a befitting burial for the late King Ataome Idaomi between King-elect Chief Titus Udo, a wealthy businessman and chief Idoroma Ogete, the spiritual leader of the people of Uneme. The second conflict is between two cult groups, the Wild Cats and the Rough Riders over supremacy on campus in respect to the Student Union Government Election. The third plot the romance between Obaseki, son of Idoroma Ogete and leader of the Wild Cats confraternity and Georgia daughter of Chief Titus Udo. The story examines the disunity and the subsequent bitterness that exit in the Nigerian society.

As part of the change agenda in the *Gardeners*, Emasealu among other things calls for a change in our attitude towards the deceased. For him through the character of Udo, a burial ceremony for those that have served the community as traditional rulers should be a means of tourism and a development driven platform. In his declaration, Udo expresses thus:

...all I know is that in France, from where I have just returned, in America, Britain and in other civilized countries every great occasion is an opportunity to sell the country to the international community. World cup soccer competitions, the Olympics, great sociocultural happenings and the visit of great foreign personalities are moments of national rebranding. *The Gardener* to use the expression of Effiong Johnson is not necessarily a protest staged by disgruntled and dissatisfied farmers over a breach of contract in their employers' vineyard. It is rather a multi-thematic construct showcasing brute power play, crude cult displays, despair and passion. (6)

One important change ideology that Emasealu advocates for in *The Gardeners* is that of inter-communal and intra-communal marriage as a panacea for peace in

the society. In spite of the rancour that dominated in the play from parents to children, the two reveal families of Chief Titus Udo and Chief Ogete, their children Georgia and Obaseki were granted their marriage interest. Otokhodie declares in the resolution of the play thus “but you will do one thing: take Chief Titus Udo’s daughter as a wife and you have found that loyal and trusted slave (Georgia moves to Obaseki. They embrace. Blackout)” (102).

In his one act play, *Nerves*, Emasealu examines the uses and abuses of nerves expressed by the young and the old alike. In *Nerves*, the nerves of Babatunde Thompson, father of Tokunbo is put to test as through the counselling of her lovely sister Sander his only daughter’s (Tokunbo) proposed marriage with Philips Ayeni, president of the student union government is vehemently opposed. Similarly, the nerves of Tokunbo is subjected to cross examination as she brings in her lover Philip Ayeni to her aunt’s house under the guise of Hannah just to secure their matrimonial future. For Philips and Sander their nerves are expressed as both in their different official capacities (school Management and Students). In his foreword to *Nerves*, Bell-Gam exposes that “*Nerves* forcibly harps on the need for the development of an emotional bond or friendly relationship between children and parents in order to engender trust and promote mutual understanding as they share each other’s concern” (7). Indeed, Emasealu’s *Nerves* calls for parental trust and confidence in the choice of spouse by their children. The play which calls for family understanding, care and parental responsibility however, cautions over-ambitious and exuberant youths that there is the need for them to apply caution in their attempt to make rash and brash decisions. The tragic end of Philips and Tokunbo in their stiff-necked desire to disobey their parental counsels.

It is important to state here that Emasealu’s search for change as experimented in his two very topical plays *The Gardeners* and *Nerves* is multidimensional. In each of the plays, the Nigerian state is metaphorically presented with issue of unemployment, poverty, inequality, communal clashes, ethnic reveries, poor educational structure, youthful exuberance, gender inequality and over-ambition. For him these issues must be addressed for the country to achieve the desired development

Conclusion

From our observation in this study, Nigerian playwrights are in agreement in the search for change. However, the manner and commitment is what differentiates them in the dramatic scene. Perusing through the efforts of these selected playwrights and others on the Nigerian soil, their contributions are unique and very educating. However, their efforts appear more like a futile search that

produces nothing. If not how will one feel that of over ten plays by Okoh on the subjugation and victimization of the female gender and the different theories that feminists have advanced on the need for the women to be properly positioned yet the number one man of the country still feels that the place of the woman is in the kitchen and the ‘other room’ as he calls it. In the same manner, one feels pained that of Tracie’s readable and very entertaining plays on misguided and betrayals of the feminist cause by some selfish women, women are still fighting themselves. Those in the political sector are still soaked in corruption without responding to the plight of the rural women. In fact, most of those who echo feminism these days are wives of politicians, governors, house of assembly members, political appointees or educated women seeking cheap relevance.

Asigbo’s search for purposeful leadership through the trench is very sad as Nigerian leaders both in the political and academic environs have refused to heed the call of repentance. Even the satirized characters rather laugh and continue because they lack shame of what confronts them. The same is the case that confronts Emasealu who feels his directorial works are not far reaching enough due to the limited audience yet his call for an end to internal and external rancour and clashes appears to have given the perpetrators another style from he plays. In spite of the globalization and the so called civilization, undergraduate are still into serious campus cultism while parents still reject marital interest of their children because of class or tribe.

Interestingly, one should not feel that this paper is calling for playwrights to stop writing since their intentions are yet to yield the desired results but that there is the need for critics to advocate for a serious reading culture in the Nigerian state. Importantly, therefore, Nigerian playwrights must not be deterred with the present realities that appear to be demoralizing but must continue to search for change to engender the needed development in Nigeria. The day our playwrights find what they are advocating for, writing will cease but the more we are confronted with challenges the more our playwrights will continue to search for this change.

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