

THE ROLE OF PLAYWRIGHTS IN ESTABLISHING DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: A STUDY OF SELECTED PLAYS

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Abstract

The prevalent condition in human existence has given rise to the understanding and interpretation of cultural patterns and interpersonal relationship in the society. This is because humanity is dynamic and as well complex in nature. The complexity indeed comes as a result of perceptions which need to be examined following the foundation that gives meaning to diverse compositions of expression and manifestations of those challenges that militates against them. Drama has the potential of instituting and championing ways of life which ultimately translates to a slice of life and consciously de-emphasizes certain negative processes in favour of humanity as a tonic for development. The playwright on the other hand crafts and gives life to his imaginations through his writings to aid development. This study aims at probing the various efforts of the Nigerian playwrights through the medium of drama in establishing democratic culture. The objectives are to inform the Nigerian politicians on the drawback towards democratic culture and to seek the way forward to avert the hitches. The research adopts the content analysis of the qualitative research methodology with insights derived from Karl Marx's Conflict Theory as a framework suitable for the analysis. This paper posits that the undue aspiration of the political class and their allies to seize national power and retain it at all cost in order to expand their wealth is the setback on achieving democratic culture. It is therefore construed that theatre plays a functional role in establishing democratic culture. To this end, the absence of undue aspiration in the democratic system is a panacea for peace, unity and ideal progress in any given society. The researcher therefore submits that there is a need for adequate consciousness, sensitivity and above all, collective responsibility for a better society.

Keywords: Democratic Culture, Cultural Pattern, Complexity, Humanity and Dilemma

Introduction

The core value of democracy is anchored on establishing its culture for sustainable development. The idea of democracy derives its moral strength from two key principles: Individual autonomy and equality. The United Nations support democracy by promoting human right, development, peace and security. The Nigerian society is somewhat bereft of the aforementioned, however, the playwrights come into the limelight to inculcate the need for the democratic culture in order to redefine the society.

The dilemma in the democratic system of Nigeria has become a fundamental phenomenon that has a considerable damage in the development of the country. This gives a complete glimpse on dehumanizing or more appropriately, disorganizing others, so that they no longer think of their better futures but rather treat them as objects to be manipulated. The rate of conflict in Nigerian society nowadays is alarming because democracy is not thoroughly proficient. It has been infiltrated with politicians who are characterized by callous act, discourteous attitudes filled with empty speeches and conduct full of pride, all in the name of politics. These and many others have caused a lot of sufferings on the facet of life and resulted in anxiety, frustration, sorrow, distress to mention but a few. The quest to confront the dilemma in question has brought people into conflict, aggression and struggle for survival. This has hindered the growth and development of human and material resources in the society. Many individuals including scholars consequently have tried all they could to stem the tide of the menace but to no avail. If positive steps are not taken, we may consequently not have a society that is ours any longer.

From one political administration to another, the glory of the nation has dwindled to storytelling with little or nothing to show for the vast natural and human endowment conferred in the land by the Almighty God. It is beyond doubt that Nigerian government ranging from 1960 up till now has pandered to corruption and this has brought about agitation and conflict from various aggrieved individuals in the society. The aforementioned corruption is liable to cause continuous conflict as being experienced in Nigeria today.

This is evident as a result of several factors which cut across such issues as ethnic diversities in which individuals seek to represent their various ethnic groups in government. With all these representations based on cultural demography, conflict is prone to take the centrestage, resulting to exploitation, embezzlement or corruption as expressed by Titus Mamadu, when he opines that:

The Nigerian politics is geared towards acquisition of wealth and not in the true sense of patriotic service to the nation. Before elections are done, politicians go to any extent to secure power and achieve their political ambition. During the time for their campaign rallies, money is displayed and people are bribed while others are paid heavily to assassinate their fellow human beings (74).

Some politicians in Nigeria have over the years become desperate and daring. They indulge in thoughtlessness and greed in their use of power which consequently make them more intolerant of opposition and criticism. This conflict orchestrated by the politicians has been a source of inspiration to the playwrights to furnish their timely drama which is in turn stage before the audience.

To achieve their undue interest, these politicians manipulate the youth to accepting them as the cornerstone for their survival. This serves as a bolt from the blue to many individuals who join the train to become like their master or in some cases outdo them. The notion is well captured by Olu Olagoke who maintains that: “if the citadel of justice is corrupt, what will happen to the body politics? It will be completely rotten and collapse” (32).

The critical question that comes to the mind at this juncture is “what role has the state played in establishing democratic culture?” Through a critical examination of theoretical underpinning of the roles of drama and playwrights in establishing democratic culture in Nigeria, this research will provide responses to the above. It will further explain how Nigerian politicians who ascend to leadership position through corrupt means find it difficult to fight corruption, thus creating a big gap in governmental process, because they lack the integrity, leading to setbacks in establishing democratic culture in the general society.

In many communities in Nigeria, drama has been staged to ensure certain changes for effective development in the society. For example in community theatre or theatre for development, drama has been used as effective tool to raise awareness, create sensitivity and/or consciousness in the life of the people to bring about changes. In fact, it has been a very vital tool in the hands of theatre artists who strives for a better society. Drama puts the audience in a frame of mind to think carefully about what they watch, to become involved with the characters on stage; to love what these characters love, fear what they fear and suffer what they suffer. In drama, the exact image of the society is created. Drama serves as the mirror and medium through which societal problems are diagnosed and solutions proffered in an attempt to get people informed, educated and entertained. The expectations placed on drama have been that of a dynamic instrument for speedy change from any issue that militates against the people.

No country can develop in an atmosphere of rancor, acrimony or ill-will. Nigeria would have been one of the leading economies in the world but its movement has been anti-clockwise owing to the fact that monumental resources are channeled into security votes, conflict resolution and reconstruction as a result of the recurrent dilemma in the country. It is in the light of the above that this research contends that one of the major ways by which democratic culture can be established is through the use of drama, replicating issues captured as veritable raw materials. Therefore, it is against the backdrop that the research examines the roles of playwrights in establishing the democratic culture.

Theoretical Framework

This work is hinged on Karl Marx's Conflict Theory, which holds that social order is maintained by domination and power rather than consensus and conformity. This implies that those individuals with wealth and power try to hold onto it by any means, chiefly or otherwise by suppressing the helpless victims. Conflict theory has been used to clarify a wide range of social phenomena and the roles of drama in establishing democratic culture can be of no exception. The theory is suitable for this study because it deals with conflict, invasion and tension as the case may be. It however divulges that the dilemma in Nigerian democratic system boils to the quest for political office which is predicated on the antique accumulation of wealth. It is therefore necessary to take

cognizance of the fact that the inability of those in authority to establish good governance for the essence of growth, development and mutual co-existence through deliberate and articulated policies is the basis to the dilemma in Nigeria. The above have tremendous implications on the drift which gives rise to regional sentiment; ethnic crisis, communal catastrophe, religion conflict, class discrepancy, clash of interest, unemployment, kidnapping, insecurity, poverty, dejectedness and death. This, theoretically, implies that there is a need for democratic culture because democracy emphasizes a kind of government that has the interest of the people in mind.

The Playwrights and Democratic Culture in Nigeria

It is pertinent to state here that the role of playwrights amongst humanity have become very imperative in establishing the democratic culture in every courteous society. Playwrights over the years serve several functions in the society but the political function is very paramount as far as this study is concerned. The playwrights become obliging due to the capacity, to create dramatic plays to improve the quality of life by bringing pleasure, sharpening the perceptions, increasing sensitivity in humanity to the surroundings, suggesting morals and social values that should take precedence over materialistic goals.

Ola Rotimi, one of the outstanding playwrights in Nigeria uses his play to draw nexus between politics and the people involved. In his play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, he portrays certain issues liable to establish democratic culture as the issue revolves around his immediate society. The play is a satirical comedy that provides hilarious laughter but the laughter is directed at a very important social issues and failings. The butt of the satire is politics and politicians of the First Republic in Nigeria typified by Rahman, Taslim, Akinjide, Lekoja-Brown, alias Di Major. He suddenly joined politics because it is the passport to eating a large share of national Chin-chin.

It is beyond doubt that any society whereby the leaders consider their gains more than the interest of the people, the democratic culture and sustainable development become a mere propaganda. It becomes an irony in the eyes of the people that their leader, Lekoja-Brown rules his people with lies and force as seen in our secular society this day. The playwright uses the play to depict the situation in our contemporary society as to raise sensitivity and consciousness in the life of the populace. They flaunt promises in the play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* as thus:

God made us
 We made good life
 National Liberation Party
 Shall make you free
 Our government shall preserve
 Your father's houses
 You bear the children
 We pay their schooling
 You too can chop life
 Just vote NLP
 Like Prophet Muhammad
 Our government
 Will come to you
 We will give you
 Freedom of birth
 And life as rich as
 Rolls-Royce (ix-x)

In *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Rotimi exposes the insanity involved in politics in order to redress certain issues that militate against the society. He brought into focus a kind of politics that revolves around a husband and wife as opponents to showcase how politics can create a division even between a husband and wife, regardless of the affection that dwells between them. There was also a show of feminism, a situation whereby the husband considers himself as absolute because he is a man and the head of the family. He has forgotten that the democratic culture does not encourage such claim in all respect.

It is imperative to note that playwrights use drama as a medium to communicate to the audience to enable the society to grasp the message with ease. Indeed, the playwright makes it palpable that the best way of achieving democratic culture is through creating the nexus among the people involved. To this end, drama portrays a fictional world which in its basic details can stand as the analogous to a real world. Its antagonism, its variant depictions of culture, its dependence on 'conflict', 'social organization', 'institution' and 'roles', especially, in establishing the democratic culture, knits the effort of the playwrights coherently. This is what George Lucas probably implies when he opines as thus:

Drama deals with human destinies... and in particular upon such as arise from men's antagonistic relations with one another and from these alone. But drama deliberately stresses this exclusiveness. This is why the individual destinies are conceived and presented in such a social way. They give direct expression to general destinies, destinies of the whole nations, wholes classes, indeed whole epochs (130).

Rhythms of Insanity in the same vein portrays the complexities surrounding leadership in the secular society to establish democratic culture. In most cases, the leaders carry out a lot of propagandas just to convince their followers meanwhile what they have at the back of their minds are extremely different. The playwright expresses his concern on the infiltration of hoodlums, who instead of sticking to the ideal way of life, take to violence and other social vices that are detrimental not only to them but to the general society. In the thematic preoccupation of the play, the Nigerian Democratic culture is epitomized on the parts of two friends to drive home the message about why politics is seen by many individual as a dirty game. It is said that power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely. These friends (Leproga and Suffritus) who were childhood friends promised themselves to turn the society to a better place, if given the opportunity in their lifetime as political leaders. However, Leproga could not keep to the promise when he becomes the president. This breed's conflict between them as Suffritus reminds Leproga hence:

Suffritus: You left the path we were treading, we were very good friends to the extent that we called ourselves “personal person” right from the university to NYSC days. Leproga we have vision, aspiration... dream of changing the face of our dear motherland. We swore to rusticate or rather eliminate all corrupt beings.

Having done with the advocacy on the needful, he tries to move away as someone who is disappointed at his friend, hoping for a positive alternative but the president's murder squad stopped him (25). Despite everything, Suffritus seized to give up. Thus he says;

Suffritus: Martin Luther king Juniour, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey and others were lone voices yet they got to the apex of their struggles.

Leproga: (*Reply angrily*) You will not smell that apex... (*He lowers his voice*) Today is my happiest day, the day I will eternally remember, the day I sent my friend to the Great beyond.

Suffritus: (*Shocks*) Haspolitics so made you an insane villain that you rejoice in killing your friend?

Leproga: (*Laughs hoarsely*) You brought this calamity on yourself. I tried to recall you from the misleading road that led you here... I offered you six different ministerial posts for six consecutive times. I tried to bring you into my party, all in a bit to pull down the intoxicating blanket of political darkness from your eyes. You bluffed and insult me (*raises his voice*). Now, you have unfounded impetus to talk of politics and insanity, I will kill you, your dream, aspiration and feverish visions (43-44).

The above accentuates the roles of drama and playwrights in establishing democratic culture in the contemporary Nigerian society. No wonder, it is said that if you cannot beat them, join them! Suffritus being a

patriotic fellow gives deaf-ears to the political dogma and insists on the rightful alternative and at the long-run meets his fate. Of course, Leproga would not like to face the realities, so he kills Suffritus (his supposed bosom friend), rapped Suffritus' wife and brain-washed Suffritus' only begotten son by giving him a ministerial appointment to seal his ego from avenging the death of his parents...

The playwright's thematic preoccupation in this discourse opines that any politics that has reached the level of friends killing themselves regardless of their primordial nexus is barbarism and as well is in equal effect to insanity. He therefore refers to such action as rhythms of Insanity which in turn serves as the foremost title of the play. Sylvester Nwokedi enjoins the general society to uphold a sense of responsibility in turning against alluring corruption of any kind, knowing that money is not everything. His target is to foster democratic culture. Drama is used here by the playwright to reposition the societal view of life; not to cling tenaciously to material and immoral earning, like in the case of Leproga and his entourages who sabotaged the hope of the nation in establishing democratic culture in Nigeria.

Insights of Other Playwrights on Democratic Culture

Drama amongst other arts is perhaps the utmost latent weapon standing out as a humanizing force because much of it asks us to enter imaginatively into the lives of others, so that we may understand their aspiration and motivations. Through drama, we understand who and what we are and see ourselves in relation to others. It is for this reason therefore that drama serves as a dynamic mirror or a practical watchdog of the society that cannot afford to steer clear but strive to create critical insight into the root causes of the social maladies, troubles and dilemma/confusion in the general society, so as to provide solutions to the problems therein. Drama serves as an indispensable instrument, socio-political transmitter of culture or an economic product since its inception.

The Playwrights have come to function diversely as moral voices, committed preachers and hydra-headed watchdogs of the ruler and the ruled. This function goes a long way in addressing dilemma over democratic culture in Nigeria. The functionality of drama is vast such that even the government cannot escape it. This is because; the playwrights are always part of the experience and therefore mirror objectively what they see in the society in order to enable the masses to see reason for perfect transformation. It is in this view that Dandaura Emmanuel explicates as thus: "A playwright is a member of the society so naturally; his artistic sensibilities are shaped and sharpened by socio-economic conditions and political happening of his time" (2).

From the foregoing, it is beyond doubt that playwrights have engaged themselves time without number just to achieve the target goal. In the early sixties, precisely, 1960, Wole Soyinka wrote a play, *Dance of the Forest* which speculated that Nigerian was not yet ripe for independence and that if given the freedom, the result may be like a dance of the forest. More so, John Pepper Clark wrote *the Raft* suggesting that the nation was already afloat with violence. These and many others dole out the evidences that playwrights through their dramatic literature function succinctly in alerting individuals, especially, those in authority on the negative impacts of the dilemma in the democratic culture across the globe. Since conflict forms the basis of every drama, the theory is adopted to interrogate the research in order to reposition it for a better tomorrow.

In our country, Nigeria, beginning from the era of independence up to date, there has been high scale of conflict in the democratic system. This has taken the outward appearance of electoral malpractice, money politics, electoral confrontation and use of ethno-religion in order to influence the voting pattern of the electorates. It is tacit that politicians most often employ ferocity in the democratic system as one of the strategies during election to achieve their self-aggrandized quests. These desperate and power drunk politicians habitually sponsor unemployed youths and stark illiterates to manipulate election result to their advantage. The aforementioned at the long-run hinders the process of democratic culture and consolidation in the given society. This ample opportunity which has been taken for granted, needs cognizance, provided the democratic culture is paramount because the candidates and parties are respectively representing the varying interests of the populace. The implication of not allowing a democratic culture to function is enormous in its entirety. This is emphasized by many playwrights who peep through the same direction to grasp the obvious that democracy is mystified by the politicians nowadays as a panacea, magic potion or universal remedy to aggrandizement. This is probably what Julie Oko in her play titled; *A Haunting Past* typifies as asserted by the principal

character in the play below:

Chief: It is because in this country, they know how to kill talent and innovation, only to encourage mediocrity. I know. I know. Life can be a barrel of disappointments, sometimes. But ain't nothing that can tear at a man like losing a big dream. It's like a part of you is gone. You feel hollow inside you. Got it?

Lots and lots of questions begin to run through their various minds as they could not bear it any longer, so they begin to chant their slogans in the drunken spree:

Chief: NDP!

Chorus: The people's party!

Chief: The people party!

Democracy is intended to gear peace because it is the government of the majority yet the intense nature of corruption for political power has aggravated conflict which is associated with democracy. The politicians nowadays have become desperate and daring in taking and retaining power and more intolerant of opposition, criticism and efforts at replacing them. These prevailing situations in Nigerian Democratic system are often captured into dramas by Playwrights to sensitize the populace in order to rein in the excesses of the prevalent time. Olu Oba femi lays tremendous emphasis on this as thus:

In a direct way of re-interpreting history, away from the tragic reformist and idealist dimension, these dramatists... take on both urgent and topical matter that plague society and open up discussion with their audience as to how best to come into new self and collective liberator awareness (7).

It is sad to take cognizance of the fact that our nation, Nigeria with all the riches bestowed in it has been ridiculed and relegated to the background because of greed and selfishness of some politicians. Despite the huge potential, the country has been bedeviled by series of political unrest from the first republic which claim the life of millions of people including the innocent ones. The playwrights mirror issues in their countless dramatic plays to edify and correct the society involved. As a matter of fact, the rife are often captured by the playwrights, furnished and x-rayed as a slice of life before the audience to create consciousness and raise sensitivity among others. This attests to what Sola Afolayan and Ade Adesoke mean as thus:

The Nigerian drama has always been an avenue through which people weigh the performance of the ruling class. It has since remained a tool for appraising or condemning the class. It is also a means of mobilizing people to support or reject a particular government. Theatre practitioners have refused to bulge in their antagonistic reactions to unsavoury political realities. They continue to respond to their immediate socio-political environments which have experienced instabilities that have often truncated the people's dream (112).

This is made lively when Obafemi asserts on the essence of literature as a panacea to human awkward situation as thus:

Literature reflects, represents the reality of the world across age and time. It is not just a work of imagination aimed solely to give pleasure but it contributes more concretely and more materially to the creation and appreciation of the human condition (72).

As emphasized above, theatre has double aim of instructing and entertaining the society. The playwrights use entertainment to motivate as well as mobilize the audience into the target goal which has to do with correcting the populace on the social ills. With the aforementioned, the roles of drama and playwrights in establishing democratic culture become conspicuous. The negative motive which serves as a viable instrument to furnish the playwright's workshop at times replicates itself because the representatives consider their interests as opposed to that of their subjects. The roles of drama and playwrights in establishing democratic culture become paramount as it bears nexus with the need to confront the dilemma in our contemporary society. Playwrights use drama as a medium of theatre to sensitize the populace about the dilemma and the way forward. To reckon with the above, Tar Ahura in his play, *Tor Yatar* portrays the social vices which are in line

with the security challenges in our country, Nigeria as follows:

- Yatar:** Keeping this place secure is by no means an easy assignment. You have to be firm and punitive. Our people mess up all democratic processes with too much talking.
- Dr. Harga:** You can trust me, your Royal Highness.
- Yatar:** Now, your first assignment is to get rid of Bonji and Mnguean. They will face necessary torture in detention.
- Dr. Harga:** In which case I will charge them with treason against the Royal Household and get them arrested. They will face the necessary torture in detention.
- Yatar:** You have started on the right note, doctor. And with your training in transcendental psychology you should be able to look at a person and know whether or not he is planning against us.
- Dr. Harga:** Leave that to me, your Highness.
- Yatar:** I attach the greatest importance to your appointment.
- Dr. Harga:** And I shall not fail you. (*Dr. Harga leaves*)
- Yatar:** We shall now feel sufficiently safe (16).

The only way for a society like ours to achieve a sustainable democratic culture is to discard the dilemma of corrupt, ineptitude and criminal minded politicians. If not, the society will continue to stage the same tragic drama, using the same stock actors with decadence, devoid of the resolution. Scholars, most especially, the playwrights have been trying to proffer theoretical approaches to the challenges that serve as drawback to democratic culture, to no avail. They explain through drama so that the people can see the picture clearly and understand new concept. By linking the people together, appropriate action in changing their societies for better are proffered.

Drama projects the vision of the society to fight certain ills of dehumanization and oppression. It provides ways of avoiding and solving social problems of the society. Looking at this view, Brecht notes that; “the theatrical spectacle is the transformation...” (101). Drama emphasizes creating awareness, consciousness and sensitivity. In other words, it reveals and exposes the truth to stimulate critical reality into the audience to see a need for social change amongst others. To understand drama is to understand reality. Again, Brecht looks at reality as:

Discovering the casual complexes of the society unmaking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule it right from the standpoint of class which offers the broadest solution of the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught emphasizing the element of development making possible the concrete and abstractions from it (109).

Brecht further advocates that “to master reality means we shall use every means old and new, tried and untried derived from art and elsewhere to render reality to men in a form they can master!” (110). Drama being an art-form can be used to render reality to the people. On the issue of mastering it, appropriate measures should be taken, like the issue of language. It should be in a way the rural folks can also understand because the idea of change must start with them. Since drama, through its performance has always been an instrument of conflict management, it will be the option. Thus, the role of the drama as an interventionist mechanism cannot be