

DRAMATIZING DYSFUNCTION: JULIE OKOH'S *THROES OF LEADERSHIP* AND THE ANATOMY OF IRRESPONSIBLE GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The study interrogates the crisis of leadership and the pervasive culture of irresponsible governance in postcolonial Africa through a critical examination of Julie Okoh's Throes of Leadership. Situated within Postcolonial and Marxist theoretical frameworks, the research explores how Julie Okoh dramatizes the disintegration of ethical leadership and exposes the socio-political contradictions that underpin postcolonial governance structure, this research critiques the narcissistic proclivities of political elites and the disquieting complacency of the masses amid systemic collapse. Through a deconstruction of the play's dramatic structure, character interplay, thematic configurations, this research demonstrates how Throes of Leadership operates not only as a reflective commentary on Nigeria's political malaise but also as a penetrating critique of the broader patterns of leadership failure across Africa. The play accentuates the tragic paradox of leadership as both a beacon of hope and an agent of ruin a platform envisioned for transformation that has degenerated into a tool of oppression and moral decay. Moreover, this study examines how the apathy and passivity of the governed facilitate the entrenchment of corrupt and ineffectual leadership. At its core, this study underscores the indispensable function of literature in unmasking socio-political decay and promoting civic awareness and responsible leadership across Africa.

Keywords: Rulership, Administration, Decay, Despotism, Consciousness.

Introduction

Democracy has attained a central position in global political discourse, evolving into a universal reference point across both liberal and illiberal societies. Its ascendancy derives largely from the belief that it constitutes an indispensable precondition for social progress, economic development, and the sustainability of the polity, standing in stark contrast to military authoritarianism. Democracy - conceived as a political order that, privileges equality, inclusivity, and the protection of individual liberties- has ascended to the status of the world's foremost governing paradigm. Often framed within liberal or republican traditions, it symbolizes a universal ideal of legitimate authority. Yet, its translation into practice remains uneven, conditioned by divergent histories, cultural imaginaries and material circumstances.

In the African context, numerous scholars argue that western democratic paradigms require contextual adaptation - the incorporation of indigenous political traditions and value systems-to effectively confront persistence challenges such as poverty, conflict, inequality, corruption, environmental degradation, and ethnic fragmentation all of which undermine the continent's developmental trajectory. They contend that the uncritical transplantation of foreign democratic models, divorced from indigenous socio-political realities, has exacerbated governance failures in Nigeria and across Africa. In his analysis of post colonial leadership, Effiok Uwatt (2005:375-417) highlights that African writers and scholars:

Reflects on Nigeria ambivalent attitudes of historical situations as well as on the patriotic and unpatriotic circumstances of public figures such as treasurylooters, parasites, deceitful politicians, traitors, wealth acquirers, the scourge of tyrants and their wormy sins.

Effiok Uwatt submission thus aligns with the understanding that African post colonial literature functions not only as art but also as a form of resistance, documentation and cultural expression. This integration of storytelling with societal dynamics underscores the power of literature to mirror, challenge and reshapes the worldviews of both the oppressor and oppressed. So, literature of post colonial writers help to construct narratives that both reflect and critique post colonial identities, colonial legacies and the struggle for self-definition.

Theoretical Framework

This scholar utilizes Postcolonial Literary Theory and Marxist Literary Theory to explore the political, social, and economic foundations depicted in Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership*. These interacting analytical frameworks offer a deeper understanding of the connection between historical colonial legacies and the ongoing challenges of governance in postcolonial African nations, especially Nigeria.

Postcolonial Literary Theory

Postcolonial literary theory offers a framework for analyzing literature that grapples with the lingering effects of colonial rule including the reproduction of power hierarchies, cultural alienation and identity crises. In the African context, this theory critiques the ways colonial history has shaped post independence governance and societal dysfunction. Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* dramatizes these postcolonial tensions where leadership becomes a mirror of collective aspirations.

As Edward Said asserts in *Culture and Imperialism*, postcolonial literature often emerged as a counter-discourse to the imperial narrative, exposing the fractures within nationalist ideologies and the failures of post-independence governance (Edward Said, 1993:95). Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* embodies the counter-discursive practice by portraying African rulers who perpetuate neocolonial structures under the guise of independence.

Furthermore, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* provides a crucial basis for understanding how the post-independence elite, having inherited the colonial state apparatus, reproduce its oppressive tendencies. Frantz Fanon observes that "the national middle class discovers its historical mission: that of intermediary (Frantz Fanon 2004:152). In *Throes of Leadership*, the ruling elite embody the intermediary function, caught between colonial legacies and capitalist accumulation, thereby enacting political irresponsibility masked as democratic leadership.

Marxist Literary Theory

Marxist Literary Theory complements the postcolonial lens by showing the materialist and class dynamics at play in African governance. Marxist literary Theory views literature as a social product that reflects and contests the economic structures of its time. Marxist Literary Theory is particularly relevant to Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* which depicts leadership as both a class function and a mechanism of economic exploration and exploitation.

Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* states that “literature is part of the ideological superstructures, deeply entwined with the economic basis” (2002:3). This perspective allows for an interpretation of Julie Okoh’s literary text as an ideological criticism of the ruling class’s betrayal of the masses. The characters’ manipulation of state power for personal enrichment echoes what Karl Marx describes in *The Communist Manifesto* as the bourgeois class’s subordination of political power to serve capital interests (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels 2008:18).

In addition, the Marxist concept of false consciousness is instrumental in analyzing how leaders in *Throes of Leadership* manufacture consent and suppress dissent. Louis Althusser’s theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) as discussed in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” illuminates how institutions such as the media, religion and education are deployed to maintain hegemonic control (Louis Althusser 1971: 143). Julie Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* illustrates these mechanisms in operation, revealing how governance becomes a theatre of illusion rather than a site of transformation.

Synthesizing the Theories

The interplay of postcolonial and Marxist perspectives enables a nuanced criticism of governance in *Throes of Leadership*. While postcolonial theory uncovers the lingering colonial legacies and the mimicry of imperial forms of power.

Marxist literary theory exposes the economic structures that underpin such mimicry. Together, these frameworks help decode the anatomy of irresponsible governance portrayed in the play – a governance marked by elite complicity, class antagonism and the betrayal of nationalist ideals. In essence, Julie Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* serves as a political allegory that evaluates both the colonial roots and capitalist mutations of African leadership. The fusion of postcolonial and Marxist literary theories allows this researcher to dissect not just the surface symptoms of imperial domination but the class-based exploitation that sustains these dysfunctional systems.

Dramatizing Dysfunction: Julie Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* and the Anatomy of Irresponsible Governance in Africa

The principle of democratic governance is predicated on the authority vested in the government by the populace. In a well-functioning democracy, the general will of the populace supersedes individual aims and inclinations, ensuring decisions are made for the common good. It is important to recognize that democratic systems manifest in diverse forms across the globe, shaped by the unique historical and cultural experiences of each society. This diversity underscores why Western models of democracy as exemplified by those in Europe and the United States of America, may not be entirely suitable for certain African nations, given their distinct colonial histories and struggles for self-governance. Consequently, it is imperative for each society to cultivate a democratic framework that aligns with its specific needs and values.

Julie Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* is a searing portrayal of the conflicts and adversities endemic to post-colonial Africa. It is essential to acknowledge that Nigeria, akin to numerous African nations, is grappling with poor governance attributed to the exploitative behaviours of its leaders who misappropriate available resources, consequently impeding the advancement of the populace and their nations.

While Julie Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* is set within a university campus, its narrative point out that systemic misgovernance is widespread across African societies. In these contexts, leaders who ought to serve the populace often adopt authoritarian stances, displaying negligent governance that exacerbates the hardships faced by the people. The playwright uses her play as a political weapon exposing the rotten underbelly of governance in the African

societies. In this play, the concept of governance is redefined through complex interplay of characters and decadence of governance as perceived by the masses:

- VC:** If I may ask, how is the administration responsible for the condition of things in this university? I've been reading the nonsense being peddled in *The Commentator about my administration* (19).
- DEAN SCIENCE:** Did you hear that? Life on campus is dead! Completely dead! Yet, he calls the lamentation of staff in that newsletter nonsense. What nonsense! Arrant Nonsense! (19).
- PROVOST:** (*To the Dean of Science*): Be calm! (*To VC*) Sir, the crux of the problem now is that the supply of electric light is very unsteady. The generators are virtually dead due to old age. We cannot longer work in our offices. Neither can we work at home. There's no place on campus conducive again for serious academic work (20).
- DEAN EDU:** Sir, no academic activity can be done without constant supply of electricity (20).
- DEAN SOCIO:** New programs have been developed by the various academic disciplines. But sir, there are no new classrooms to teach them. Lectures are now held under trees, with students sitting on handkerchief or newspaper spread on the grass (20).

It can be inferred from the foregoing that effective responsive governance is unlikely when unaccountable leaders dominate positions of authority. Consequently, in a democracy, the expectations of the populace are high, as they anticipate tangible benefits from such a system of government. However, when those in power fail to meet these expectations, public disillusionment is inevitable. In Nigeria and many other African nations, politics is often regarded as battle for survival. For many post-colonial leaders, politics and governance are merely tools of manipulation used to advance personal interests at the expense of the general populace. It is either they secure electoral victory or they plunge the nation into chaos, rendering it ungovernable for their opponents. In extreme cases, the loss of lives and destruction of properties mean little to them, so long as they retain power.

Many rulers particularly leaders with military backgrounds often implement inappropriate strategies in national administration when they are elected or appointed to positions of power:

- DEAN MGT:** That's right. In 1983 when Buhari took over power, the Nigerian economy under Shehu Shagari was undergoing a severe structural crisis aggravated by world oil market glut. Unable to obtain foreign exchange to import raw materials and spare parts, there was industrial stagnation in the country. Inflation accelerated rapidly. The country's GDP fell woefully. Despite promises to salvage the situation, the economy slide into recession during Buhari's term as president, so much so that in 1984, he declared that the government was broke (26).

The rulers frequently overlook or fail to recognize that military-style approaches to leadership may be unsuitable or ineffective in a civilian society. The reader notes that democracy could not flourish under the VC's leadership due to the chaos and disorganization he introduced into the administration of the university. Similar to his political counterparts, he employed inappropriate methods in his governance. This ultimately resulted in frustration and a sense of disillusionment among the stakeholders:

VC: (*With anguish:*) Everything is collapsing! Personally, I have tried all I can to rescue this university without success. Now, I feel the wrath of injustice, the angst of defenselessness, the agony of defeat. Again I feel the smell of blood, of decay, and of man's inhumanity to man, just as I felt towards the end of the Civil War. Biafra was falling. I was in the middle of it when all its fronts were collapsing. Opobo province under my administration had fallen to the Federal troop. I went searching for the Commander-in-Chief. What a journey? What a risk? (65-66).

The theme of administrative incompetence is vividly portrayed through VC's inability to manage the university's affairs. His poor decision-making, particularly the reckless investment in a failing bank reinforces a deeper crisis of leadership. Instead of prioritizing the needs of the institution, he exhibits executive incapability and engages in petty conflicts, typifying the dysfunction that often characterizes misgovernance in broader structures:

VC: Well, I thought I could earn some quick money for the university. So, I placed the money in a fixed deposit. But shortly after, the bank had some problems and the money got entangled. As soon as I heard about it. I wrote to the manager to retrieve the money. I have had several discussions with him. But, that was before the bank was closed down (53).

Judging from the events in the play, it is evident that the VC's actions and inactions have profound consequences for the university. This reflects a leadership crisis similar to that seen in Nigeria and many other African nations, one that undermines the effective functioning of democracy.

Disenchantment is also a prominent theme in the play. Disheartened and angered, the students channel their frustration by vandalizing university properties. Their reaction mirrors that of citizens in a failing democracy – those who once placed their hopes in transformative leadership, only to be met with incompetence and neglect. As with the electorate in many African nations, the students' high expectations give way to disillusionment, revealing a deep crisis of faith in leadership and governance:

LECTURER III: That's right. Last Friday night, our students went berserk as if possessed. They destroyed the entire official vehicle parked at the VC's Lodge. They went to the administration block and smashed all the glass windows. The decorative plants and flowers around the building were all hued down. They even

attack the police station on Alu road junction. Right now, there is no police station there, again (49).

LECTURER II: As if that was not enough, on Saturday morning, they made a coffin. Inside it, was the effigy of the Vice Chancellor. Reaching the car park in front of VC's office in Delta Park, after dancing round the coffin and performing some rites, they set it ablaze. That was when soldiers moved in from town. Tears gas flooded the whole environment. Students were ordered to vacate the campus at once (49 – 50).

For the people of Nigeria and, by extension, much of Africa post-independence self-rule has largely failed to fulfil its promises. Instead of progress and prosperity, the continent has witnessed widespread discontent, driven by the irresponsible and often self-serving leadership of its post-colonial rulers.

Amid widespread disaffection across the African continent, the masses continue to yearn for responsive governance, yet their hopes remain unfulfilled. This enduring frustration has given rise to a substantial body of post-colonial African literature that articulates new visions of resistance instilling in both characters and citizens the imperative to revolt, resist and overthrow their oppressors.

Conclusion

From the evidence gathered throughout this study, it is apparent that Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* offers a powerful portrayal of the irresponsible governance typical of post-independence African rulers. This depiction aligns closely with contemporary African literature's persistent criticism of widespread mismanagement across the continent.

Julie Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* reveals people deeply traumatized by the neo-colonial attitudes and oppressive practices of the rulers echoing the disillusionment found throughout modern African narratives of resistance and reform.

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