

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA AS VEHICLE OF TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Transformation as an agent of progress is supposed to manifest in life and other means in the form of change. In whatever dimension it surfaces, its expected output is change. A metamorphosis is the remedy in our nation (Nigeria) especially as events unfold for the worse as at present due to many reasons. Some of these include; political, religious, social, economic, moral, poverty and others which seem to drag the nation into slavery. Every society seeks for meaningful progress which when non-existent, turns to chaos or anarchy. Such is the direction this nation is headed towards unless drastic measures are taken and prospects put in place. This paper seeks to view the setback of transformation in the past and its attendant failures. The theory of Marxism which highlights class conflicts, contradiction, crippling economy, intellectual conditions and alienation of individual human being is useful in exploring Arnold Udoka's two plays. Long Walk to Freedom and Rainbow over the Niger and Nigeriana are the text used to explore African literature and transformation. The paper recommends ways to bring about transformation which includes change in attitude and character formation.

Keywords: Transformation, attitude, self-discipline, tolerance and patriotism

Introduction

Nigeria as a country is plagued with many shortcomings in almost all spheres of life. This is evident in the chaotic manner things are managed and run administratively. Issues of poverty, political molestation, religious bigotry,

tribal discrimination, immorality, social disorder and others are issues which other positive values subsume. All these arise from unpatriotic attitude, indiscipline, greed and selfish desires of all and sundry. Unless drastic measures are taken, the country is bound to crumble. Transformation is the solution to this downfall if all the citizens are to salvage the country for all hands must be on deck.

The *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary and Thesaurus* defines transformation to mean, “a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone so that that thing or person is improved”. Transformation is thus, the ability to see and know the type of change you need which is critical in attaining success. A number of contemporary literatures have taken a protest stance as a vehicle for transformation. This is not only for art’s sake but for the fact that African writers have taken the stance of social crusaders. They have used their literature in diverse ways to elucidate bad administration as obtained in different societies. Literature has thus assumed an agent of change in all spheres of life. It is to this that Odion allude that, “nowadays, drama, apart from being didactic has now become a tool for social advocate” (56).

The organisation and power structure in a society may either have a positive or negative effect on writers. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in ‘Writers and Politics’ states that, “the writer as a human being is a product of history, of time and space” (477). It is for that the Marxist saw in history a continuous conflict between two main classes: those that own the means of production, and the people who provide the labour force. This could be likened to the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, or the government and the governed. The thematic structure of the selected texts revolves around Marxism as masses are deprived of their legitimate privileges and rights.

Chinua Achebe in the 80s enunciates on the unpatriotic and headless direction our leaders (Nigerian) are headed for when he writes that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership ... the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership (1).

It is for this reason that this paper seeks to look at African literature and transformation using the Marxist approach to explore Anold Udoka’s *Long Walk to a Dream* and *Rainbow over the Niger*.

Synopsis of *Long Walk to a Dream*

Elders of Peteke kingdom which comprises four clans: Abari, Ogiri, Guma and Ware, meet at the Chief priest (Odum’s) shrine to decide on the fate

of their land which is impoverished by oil spillage. The elders plan to honour the invitation of Senator Ibinabo who represents them in the city. While the elders plan their visit and issues to discuss, the youths (POGWA BOYS), equally meet at their hideout to also plan a revolution. The youths' intention is to use violence to demand and seek for justice. Wariboko (Chief Pere's son) who leads the youths stalls his fellows against violence.

Both elders and youths scamper for safety when bomb blasts suddenly erupt while working on a solution to their situation. A Catholic Priest (Monsignor Ekaikaw) is brought in wounded from the blast. He is later given first aid treatment by the Chief Priest. The appearance of the youths in the midst of this confusion leads them to demand for blessings from the elders as approval of their planned activities. The youths' immediate plan is to stage war against their exploiters and usurpers (the oil gang/ company) who have now reverted to overthrow them from their ancestral land.

The elders admonish the youths to be patient and to tread with care. They (elders) solicit for peace, dialogue and due process to resolve issues. The phone call to the president via Senator Ibinabo ends the scuffle. Master Cockeye, Wariboko and Chief Pere sum up their demand for restoration of the polluted land, create employment opportunities for indigenes, increase in the standard of living. A positive response is given by the president but a few youths refuse to put down their weapons (guns). They choose to keep things (weapons) handy in case the government fails to meet their demands.

Synopsis of *Rainbow Over the Niger*

Five men meet at the capital of their nation to discuss the problems affecting them, their country and to seek for solutions. Boni (Bone Cracker Fyneface Whiskey), the convener, represents the marginalized professions of arts. Mallam Danladi is the advocate for the 'Talakawas' (the poor) and he is from the North. Chief Ogbuefi Obi Iheanacho, represents the market people. Chief Owonikoko Alade represents the farmers while Mr Ekpawd Etogobod is the protagonist of the Coastal People Forum. Each of these men present their frustrations which consist of marginalization, poverty, displacement, insecurity and emotional instability.

Mrs. Fumilayo and Mina Pepple barge in on them to exercise their rights as women and shareholders in national issues. The women express the unfair treatment men mete out on them. Other issues are child abuse, child molestation and trafficking. After listening to them, all present reach a consensus to work together as a Non-governmental Agency (Rainbow over the Niger). Their major objective is to serve as representatives of all the country's region. They resolve to service humanity and to create awareness for change.

The elders' submission is for self-reliance, equity in justice and patriotism which are means to achieve their collective aim.

Transformation in the selected texts

Transformation shall be viewed from the economic, social and political angle for a better presentation of issues.

Economic Transformation

The independence of African countries and Nigeria, in particular, brought about the development of both human and mineral resources. Yet, neither the country's natural resources nor the accumulated profits are evenly distributed. The result is marginalization of the majority by few individuals who benefit at the expense of major stakeholders. Greed and selfishness has led Nigeria to backwardness as no tangible development is made. It is to this kind of situation that Austin Asagba cites Femi Osofisan who attests that:

... Although, so much has changed, and is changing all around us, nothing really in Africa has changed. Take away Namibia and the release of Mandela, and you find that our continent has remained backward, static and decaying... and the principal reasons for our backwardness are still very much the same A treacherous leadership and the elites and their allies still gobble up the wealth of the land, leaving the vast majority in abject poverty (17).

The negligence of duty by the rulers to the ruled has led to lack of transformation. This situation has led people to protest and revolt against exploitation.

Social Transformation

Lack of trust and patriotic action from both elders and youths is a setback to social transformation. The youths in *Long Walk to a Dream* exhibit this tendency of which the elders are quick to notice. Etete, a youth voices this idea when he says; "That is the challenge. They don't seem to trust our efforts at all" (48). The moment there is doubt in governance, there is bound to be insecurity, lack of progress, change or any form of transformation. The question Mimi asks also is, "Do our people believe in us? Do they trust us?" (48). The numerous promises made by politicians during campaigns make the people distrust them. This because the politicians never keep their campaign promises. They lure the masses with promises only to break such promises when they gain political offices. The little efforts made by a few individuals is made ineffectual by selfish reasons.

The attitude of both the rich and the impoverished toward transformation is devoid of commitment. The attitude to change is thwarted by fear and conservatism and this creates a serious setback to transformation. Unless the people depart from the old ways by opening up to present challenges, no viable progress would be made. Worthy to note of transformation, we must be ready to accept education if our lot need improve.

Child abuse is another issue that requires urgent attention for change in the society. Funmi and Mina in *Rainbow Over the Niger* express fear in the manner by which guardians handle their wards. Scars are inflicted on wards as corrective measures, while others are used as slaves. After citing examples of a few child abuse cases, they question their colleagues:

Should these children not be in schools learning? Now, men, you tell me, will the future of this society be in the hands of hordes of illiterate and deformed slaves? Some, like this one (*Presents a photograph*) do not even have hands any more to carry the future (41).

With this instance, more confusion is created about the future of the abused children and youths of this generation. Boni, thus, calls for a meeting and expatiates on its essence:

Yes, before you barged in, we were at the point of electing persons to run this coalition of ideas, information, knowledge and service to our people. We go by the name *Rainbow Over the Niger*. We want to dream of change and positive change for all from the coast to the arid lands (46).

As explained in this excerpt, the title of the play *Rainbow Over the Niger* foreshadows the central idea of the work. The important thing to note about *Rainbow Over the Niger* is the inclusion of women in the transformation process. This is a welcome idea as women constitute the nation and have significant roles to play in administration process. Mina's closing remark to the vision is loaded with an admonition for optimism, determination and selflessness in the pursuit of their transformation carrier agenda. She elaborates:

... The work before us is intimidating and frightening. Since we have chosen to speak for our people, we must continue to see it as a selfless duty. As this is the cause we have chosen for ourselves to bring about a lasting change, we must be ready to pay the price that goes with it. All the actions, utterances and choices we have made today, tell me that we shall succeed because we are focused. Let us at no time mistake this gathering for a political party; we are not; but a body to bring about

development at the grassroots even with our little resources of ideas and funds (48- 49).

Marxist theories have often used literature as a standpoint to reveal the inequalities inherent in their societies. Michael Abraham's view is of particular interest to this paper when he states that, "Marxist criticism is concerned with the economic class and ideological determinants of the way an author thinks and writes" (504 of Chidi Amuta). This paper is interested in the way issues are presented by the playwright as it affects the society.

In Udoka's *Long Walk to a Dream*, Chief Pere expresses the effect of marginalization and exploitation on his people (Peteke Kingdom). He avers that, "... I have a presentiment of something I cannot lay my fingers on. Like her, we are all ill, sick, despised, ignored, maltreated and with a bleak future. And if treated, she can get well, again ..." (30). Through characters, the pain of the people is exposed by Udoka, as expressed by the Chief above. The characters in *Rainbow Over the Niger* equally lament the people's exploitation by the elites. Danladi laments the exploitation of the 'Talakawas'; Ekpawd bemoans the state of the land, environment and people of the Niger Delta which has been polluted and damaged as a result of crude oil exploration. Other characters also have their woes to express. Mrs Pepple and Mina stand to fight for women marginalization in all areas and the child right act.

Political Transformation

Charles Bressler in elucidating on Marxism asserts that:

All working men and women can free themselves from the chains of social, economic and political oppression if they will only recognize individuals, controlled by an intricate social web dominated by a self- declared, self- empowered and self-perpetuating social elite (118).

This is an encouragement for individuals (especially the working class) to rise up, not just in protest in action, towards transformation. Master Cockeye in *Long Walk to a Dream* relays his peoples stand to the President when he enunciates that, "We have resolved to stand together, fight together and transform this land ... if lasting peace must come, first, we demand justice; second, we demand justice; and third, we demand justice" (87). The collaborative effort emerged here is justice and equity for an egalitarian society.

The attitude of god fatherism stifles and stagnates. In *Long Walk to a Dream*, Odum addresses the elders and speaks of an optimistic move in the right direction to leadership. He tells them: "Well, we are searching for ways to get out of this shameful situation. Someday, we shall get out of this" (18). This is the spirit that is determined to accept change with hope and certainty. It is not

ready to remain pessimistic. Nevertheless, Odum elucidates further saying, “That’s the politics of nowadays my son. You as a godfather must have a protégé; then secure power and authority and ensure continuity of the career of both the godfather and the protégée” (23). This is an admonishment from Odum, the Chief priest of Peteke kingdom to Wariboko, the supposed successor of Chief Pere. But, Wariboko refuses god- fatherism arguing for an allegiance to their fatherland rather to an individual:

... We are passionate about the now and the future of the land of our ancestors and our motherland. .. No one, and I repeat, no one should allow himself or our mission to be hijacked or bought over by anyone, group of persons or personal ambitions for whatever reason (44- 45).

Change requires self-denial, selflessness, self- determination and the spirit of tolerance. This is what is needed in each of us. It is this quest for change that inspired a contemporary artist to preach against using meeting periods as an educative, informative and enlightenment process.

The concern for poor administration in Nigeria has been expressed by scholars especially in the Arts. This goes to depict the patriotism of these scholars as they contribute their talents to enlighten the masses for transformation. Nigeria gained her independence 59 years ago; yet, owing to bad leadership the country is still backward and underdeveloped. Over 50% of the country’s population is illiterate; poor infrastructure, unavailability of job opportunities, mismanagement of funds and resources and so many social vices still abound in ever growing proportions. In the whole, the majority of the masses live slightly above the poverty line. These problems are compounded by a lack of transparency in governance, improper management of available resources, amongst other factors. Mohammed Yakubu writes about this when he states that, “The basic reason for this is bad governance that is the inability of the leaders to synthesize the various parts of a government machinery (resources) to perform meaningful, credibly and acceptably” (78). The selected texts for this paper proffer ways to bring about a change of attitude in leadership and governance.

The ability to know the type of change one needs is critical to becoming a success. Dean Anderson and Linder Ackerman view transformation from the business angle. According to them, transformation has to do with changes and there are three types. They go further to state that plan, strategies and degrees of application are modes of transformation. They also state that a common reason for failure is that “leaders inadvertently use approaches that do not fit the type of change they are leading”.

The literary artist does not only dwell on the political or exploitative aspect of the people's lives. Ngugi further explains that:

The extent to which the writer can and will help in not explaining the world but in changing it will depend on his appreciation of the classes and values that are struggling for a new order, a new society, a more human future, and which classes and values are hindering the birth of the new and the hopeful (476).

It is this challenge that the African literary artist battles with and will continue to until the needed transformation is achieved. It is also this hope and determination that has continued to dominate the thematic occupation in literary works.

Sola Balogun in *NBF News* comments that, "Rather than bring relief to the region, the long talk and many debates by government and oil companies have only elongated the suffering of the people aside fuelling conflicts and disaffection in the entire land". Balogun passed this comment during the performance of the *Long Walk to a Dream* by the National troupe of Nigeria at the National Arts Theatre, Lagos. The play proffers apt elimination to the problems of the Niger Delta. As an encouragement to all and sundry, Mr Gamaliel Onosode, who is the Chairman at the command performance of the play, *Long Walk to a Dream*, opines as reported by Sola Balogun that:

In the past we have talks but little progress is made. There is need to resort to dialogue as opposed to violence. This is a big challenge not just to Niger Delta but to humanity in general ... I urge all of us as citizens of Nigeria to play a constructive role and be part of the solution to Nigeria's problems.

Mr Onosode's admonishment is important as this is a clarion call for all to join hands to bring about change. He further reminds us as Ovwe Medeme reports in the *Daily Independent* that, "the coming together of politics and religion represents a reminder that life is one ... And there is a thin wall between the two". *Long Walk to a Dream* offers dialogue and tolerance as a way towards a peaceful resolution.

Conclusion

No people or nation is able to successfully accomplish a transformation agenda without good governance. This can only be achieved when change is openly welcomed. Our ability to be disciplined, patriotic and selfless in our service to humanity, are values necessary for transformation. It is also expected of leaders to lead by example. The absence of this has often led to bad governance. Fear of failure and conservatism does not bring about

transformation but backwardness. Our choice to equally elect credible leaders will help to ensure progressive governance. Most of all, individuals are expected to embrace self- discipline, patriotism and diligence to ensure the realisation of a peaceful and a worthwhile transformation goal.

Recommendations

1. The re- orientation of self and national values.
2. The inclusion of citizenship education into school curriculums at all levels of education. This will help to build a sense of patriotism in individuals.
3. The “Change Begins with Me” and the “War Against Indiscipline (WAI)” are ways to ensure strict compliance with change and order in the society.
4. Security agencies to rise up to their duties of ensuring discipline and punishment of offenders.

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