

Theatre as a Tool for Addressing Nigeria's Socio-Political Questions: A Critical View of Olu Obafemi's (*The New Dawn*)

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ABSTRACT: A critical analysis of OluObafemi's *The New Dawn* in relation to Theatre as a tool for addressing Nigeria's socio political Questions will be looked into. This is to enable the reader to have an indept look at the various ways by which violence can be the best option to address social ills such as deceit, corruption, deprivation, injustice just to mention a few. Therefore, one can see Olu Obafemi in this text as a young dramatist, critic and actor that has done immensely in the field of theatre, just like Soyinka, Osundare, Sofola, Osofisan and so on has done in the literary circle.

Key Words: Theatre, Social, Political, Socio-Political and New Dawn.

Introduction

Arguably, every nation of the world, whether developed or developing has her own national question. This could be probably due to the fact that we live not in a primevally pure world, but in a world that is known and has been transformed; a world where everything has as it were, been given a human angle, a world permeated without attitudes towards it, our needs, ideas, aims, ideals, joys and suffering, a world that is part of the vortex of our existence, (Heget, 1927). Taking a glance round the world and her activities, Iji (2004) records that "The Britons continued to experience and cope with monarchical anachronism, continuing into the third millennium, soccer hooliganism, religious differences vis-à-vis racial and racialist imbroglios replicated in the hydra headed Northern Ireland question ... the American question include crisis cross of racism race and racialist induced violence and judicial prejudices while Germany can hardly excuse itself of the incubi of xenophobic, unemployment of its employable population, and other socio political malaises. Russia has its endemic food insecurity, incurable alcoholism" ...

African countries are not left out of such problems that could be regarded as their national questions. These are endemic and debilitating to national developmental imperatives as they gag the citizenry in the neck continually. The Nigerian social political questions include the endemic corruption profiles vis-à-vis imperative of retribution and restitution with the allied efficiency in the management of public affairs or commonwealth, poverty acceleration implicated poverty alleviation or eradication programmes. There is the North South dichotomy implicated in the need to rotate the presidency and other key rulership or leadership position, (Iji 2001). Another problem is the lack of social amenities; some parts of the country are being neglected in the area of physical development. This is one of the main reasons for the Niger Delta problems and assaults on foreign expatriates. All these and many more are undoubtedly plaguing the socio political development in Nigeria.

Theatre

As a discipline, theatre arts can be regarded as a very conscientious tribunal. Drama as a genre of literature is so immediate, practical and highly communicative of the three basic genres of literature. Drama, by extension, theatre is a work written to be performed on a stage before an audience. It uses excited action or series of actions to illuminate life. Theatre therefore, since it entails drama, music and dance, could be regarded as a potent tool that sensitizes the awareness of the people about the going on in society. It is a tool that seeks loud ovation on the part of the audience about the knotty intricate societal issues.

This paper focuses attentions on the theatre as a tool for addressing the Nigeria's socio political problems. It offers a good and viable opportunity to use the medium of theatre to decry Nigeria's socio political woes. Thus, an attempt is made at using OluObafemi's *The New Dawn* to evoke such critical appraisal.

Theatre and the Nigerian Society

Olorunsomo (2006) Sees theatre, in its age long self-ascribed roles “as a societal vanguard of cultural propagation and transmission, information and education through the medium of entertainment. He says further that ‘theatre has not failed in the history of mankind, east or west to sound the prophetic warning bell when human operators entrusted with the destiny of a nation are about to take or are taking decisions that will affect the collective”. J.P. Clark Bekederemo in his play *The Raft* (1983) warned the civil war gladiators of the dire consequences of not sitting down to a round table conference to settle their differences. Hubert Ogunde of the popular theatre in Nigeria experienced the sword of Damocles of the ruling class when he used the piercing arrows of theatre to satirize the government of the day. Ogunde theatre banned in March 1964 from performing throughout Western Region by the Western Region Government for staging of *Yoruba Ronu* (Yoruba make a rethink). Also, Ogunde Theatre was banned in Kano May, 1950 for staging *Bread and Bullet*. He was equally arrested and charged to sedition (Clark, 1980). All these point to the efficacy of theatre and its effects on the Nigerian audience. According to Nwosu (2004) “The multisense appeal, characteristics of the theatre has the capacity to engage and appeal to all the sense at *the* same time”.

The above opinion of Nwosu is the harbinger of the predicament faced by the Ogunde Theatre. The two plays that led to the ban were used to address Nigeria’s socio political issues during and after the colonial era. In summary, *Bread and Bullet* was banned. According to Nwosu “it was likely to incite the people since the play was based on the Enugu shooting incident” *Yoruba Ronu* was banned due to “its effect on the government of the day” (Clark, 1980).

Since the commencement of theatre as a field of study in the University and Colleges of Education theatre has been an important tool for highlighting social ills in Nigeria. The contemporary theatre practitioner up till today have not rested in satirizing political and societal issues that affect the growth and development of the country. Umukoro (1994:pg.67) observed that “While there predecessors deal with the Universal verities and metaphysical such as the part psychic search for the meaning of life and death in Soyinka’s *The Road* (1965), the young deal with urgent contemporary social problems in Nigeria like the armed robbery phenomenon in Osofisan’s (Once Upon Four Robbers, 1980). Students’ unrest in Sowande’s *Night Before* (1974) and the Obscenity of Undistributed property in Omotosho’s (The Curse, 1982).

The New Dawn and the Nigerian Socio-political Questions

Analytically speaking, the play *The New Dawn* can be used to advance a position on the socio political questions of the Nation. Price, jealousy, maladministration, insincerity to one another, abuse of power and position in Nigeria (as a nation) constitute one field of opinion why the nation is still hopping towards socio political stability, even after four decades of independence. Doki (2002) opines that “Jealousy and price are two viable factors which do not permit dependency... jealousy is a destructive vice which only seeks to destroy”. This perhaps explains why Dele’s (a young man in his twenties) old boss would always see him as a threat and therefore should wait for his (Dele) time.

Maladministration and the abuse of power are another socio political issues. People in higher positions in public and private establishments use their positions to castigate those placed under them. The delay their promotions disappeared during such exercise only to re-appear afterwards. This is revealed in the conversation between Tayo and Dele when the old boss tries to explain the reason for his lateness to their scheduled meeting.

Tayo: Why are you so late? You know how important today is?

Dele: Forgive me old boy. I’ve been trying to tell my fat old boss why it is unnecessary to keep people’s promotion files under His carpet to gather dust (p.63).

Another question facing the nation is that of insincerity. This is very obvious in our daily and business transactions. This insincerity could be said to have evolved from the womb of corruption which could be linked to poverty and in most times, to covetousness. Corruption is the order of the day in both private and public sectors. Olu Obafemi used the traditional process in selling “emu” (palm wine) to drive home his point. He artistically weaves it into the dialogue between Alade (a character in the play) who tries to make other characters see that he is not protected from the social malady of “ten percent” which has remained as self-legalized atrocities in public places. This is illustrated below.

ALADE: I am a victim of ten percent too through Iya Elemu...

AINA: You Egbon? O ti o. Impossible.

ALADE: She breaks the morning dew, kegs and gourds in her basket and comes to the farm. She collects the fresh undiluted, sharp like sharpened knife morning drought. I know she adds water now and then.

AINA: The ten percent?
ALADE: She takes the “emu” contract which she sub-contracts to the drinking shacks.
TAYO: Who also adds water? By the time the palm wine gets from your factory through the contractors, Iya Elemu...
DELE: And to the emu parlours in town...
ALADE: Emu has become water, pure water no trace of the fluid that was Obatala’s undoing (The New Dawn, Pp. 71-72).

The question here is “can Nigeria purge herself of corruption”? Government employees are also involved in this national plague. The professional atrocity of the medical officer is used by the playwright to expose this act. Drugs that are meant to be given to patients grow legs and walk out of public hospitals to private ones owned by government employed medical officers. These medical officer thereafter prescribed the drugs for patients who are now directed to the stores to buy at outrageous prices. This is revealed in the dramatic actions of some of the characters in the play.

DELE: Have we got any antibiotics, pro biotics or neo biotics in the pharmacy?
AINA: No doctor, but, but? I think...
DELE: No but anything. The simple truth is
We don’t have, final. (Facing the patient)
So you see man, we’re doing our job, and As
they say, our reward is in heaven.
TAYO: (writing in pain) Egba mi o, my belle
Save me doctor ... please.
DELE: Shut up. I can’t manufacture drugs can I
(thinking)? But there is one thing... We can still
help you... Take this prescription to Siwaju Chemist. It is the only chemist in this
State that stocks the drug (The New Dawn, Pp. 73-74).

This creation of artificial scarcity is a phenomenon that is rocking our government owned hospitals. This act is tantamount to sabotage on the parts of our medical practitioners in public medical homes. Governments’ effort to provide good medical facilities is hereby stabbed in the face. Another salient question to be asked is, who can save the nation from these socio economic and political maladies?

The playwright condemns both the politicians and the elites for not doing something to restore hope. This is also revealed in the dramatic actions of the play in the conversation between.....

AINA: We are not party of the emperor’s Arrogance and morbid brutality.
FARMER: No, you are not. What did you do to uplift and commemorate the worker’s strike forty years ago?
2ND YOUTH: Or the Agbekoya that revolted against the oppression of the masses?
TAYO: Not so much that is obvious (The New Dawn, p.91). However, the Elites too are also victims of oppression?
AINA: But we suffered exile
DELE: We lost our jobs
FUNKE: We decamped from politics
TAYO: We have no mansions
AINA: We never made professorship and Vice Chancellorships (The New Dawn, p.91)
Moreover, the playwright leaves the solution in the hands of the youths.
1ST YOUTH: To Save Office
2ND YOUTH: Then we can be rid of this dust of death and witness the birth of a new day (The New Dawn, P.93).

The question is “which youths and what youths? Are the youths themselves not culprits in this socio political dislocation? Let us consider the involvement of the youths in the numerous religious crises. Are the youths not the field fighters? Political thuggery is constituted by the youths. Who are the principal actors in the Niger-Delta crisis? How can the perpetrators of evil reconstruct the nation? The real socio political question is “which particular group is to be used in social reconstruction and political reformation”.

It is the opinion of this paper, therefore that value re-orientation is what Nigeria needs and then we can be rid of this dust of death and witness the birth of a new day... (The New Dawn P. 93).

Conclusion

With the position of Olu Obafemi in this play, it would be asserted that all the questions raised in the foregoing have its effect on the central argument, that is, the production and distribution of wealth, power sharing and freedom. Thus it becomes the contention by the paper that value re-orientation is the tonic that can put Nigeria on the right channel of socio political stability. This message can be preached via the use of the theatre as a medium.

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