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Nigerian Playwrights and the Question of Leadership: A Focus on Some Nigerian Plays

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Abstract
Literature, as a discipline, is cross-disciplinary. It cuts across every aspect of human life and has become a means of tackling issues that are beneficial to man as a social being. Nigerian playwrights have utilized this medium to express themselves on the issue of leadership in their societies. The major preoccupation of this paper, therefore, is to explore how Nigerian playwrights, through their works, expose the issue of leadership. Being a qualitative research, the population of this study comprises all Nigerian plays, and with the use of postcolonial theory of literary criticism, three African plays by three Nigerian playwrights deliberately selected to cover, at least, two of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria namely: Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*, and Dochie Ilechukwu's *All Honourable Men* are analysed. Through the exploration of characters and certain incidents in the plays, it is discovered that bad governance, corruption, and greed have become synonymous with leadership in Nigeria. This study advocates for good governance which can explicitly or otherwise bring unity and progress in the country.
Keywords: literature**,** leadership, bad governance, corruption, and postcolonial

Introduction
Literature is a key form of art through which people display their culture. It is a domain of art that deals with imaginative and artistic writings, speeches, and songs that deal with society and other

human experiences. This it does by mirroring the society and artistically representing images by means of the use of suspense, comic relief, imagery, symbols and other literary devices with particular emphasis on creativity, emotionality and form. Literature thus, becomes a vital tool in exposing various societal shortcomings. It instructs the mind of the reader, serves as a window to the world and an effective instrument for national consciousness, integration and development. Eneojoh (2013:163) asserts thus:

> Literature in spite of being an abstraction of reality, a recollection of the artist's imagination and fantasies still serves as a vehicle of aesthetic and didactic values of any given society, within the context of specific and shared experiences as well as a mirror of the society and what this society represents.

The nature of literature as a social tool has been well utilized by literary artists who use their works to enlighten, educate, and inform the general public on issues that border the society. In modern times, literature has become one of Africa's major contributions to the intellectual world, as African writers have continued to shine in the literary world. These Africans have exposed and questioned several contemporary issues in Africa or as it concerns Africans both at home and in the diaspora, and one of the issues they have queried is that of leadership.

Many nations in Africa, since their independence, have been inundated with crises as a result of poor or absence of leadership because the notion of leadership demands the capability of managing an entity effectively. It connotes the identification and solution of the challenges of a given group of people or an organisation. It is, therefore, pertinent that government at all levels should be able to exhibit good leadership ideologies. The concept of leadership, according to Obi (2003:42), "has as many definitions as those who have defined it." This is birthed by the fact that the phenomenon is too complex and flexible. However, leadership is

the process of influencing, directing and coordinating the activities of a particular group. A leader ensures a strong and compliant structure when he is able to control, regulate, and synchronize the activities of a particular group. It, in other words, entails that the leader brings his personalities, motivation, competencies, and legitimacy to a situation or state of affairs. As Ezenwagu (2022:122) sums it, "leadership is concerned with overall alignment of visions, goals, values and culture".

Nigeria, since independence, has been in quagmire of poor leadership. The nation's leadership is devoid of empathy and commitment to the masses as professed in 1983 by the late Professor Chinua Achebe. In his words, "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership … the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of the leadership" (1983:1). Masciulli, Mikhail and Knight (2009:3) affirm that leadership is "an essential feature of all government and governance: weak leadership contributes to government failures, and strong leadership is indispensable if the government is to succeed." This is to say that government and leadership are interwoven; a strong leadership upholds a government, whereas a weak one brews disaster.

Theoretical Structure

Since leadership, with a particular reference to Nigeria – a nation that has continued to bear the brunt of colonization – is under study, postcolonial theory is deemed suitable. This theory has a multidimensional approach. It is the responses of the colonized to their imperial experiences presented in the form of narratives, drama, poems, essays, and arguments that have constituted and culminated into postcolonial theory. Abrams and Harpham (2009:277) also state that it has to do with the "analysis of the history, culture, literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other

European imperial powers". Okoye (2013:1) has it that it is "made up of and portrays the sentiments, culture and cultural behaviour, perceptions, etc, as a result of the colonial power's characteristics, culture, norms, worldview and the subsequent tensions, mixes, outcrops, etc, that manifest as a result of the colonial encounter". In other words, this theory does not only take care of the colonial experiences of the colonized; it equally deals with neocolonialism – a newer form of colonialism where there is an indirect use of economic, political, cultural, or other forms of pressure to control or influence former colonies. This theory, in other words, equally deals with the problems that have emanated since the independence of the colonized nations.

Methodology

This study is qualitative research. This type of research involves working with texts, images, or sounds. Because the data for this research are literary texts, this research method is considered suitable. The population of this study comprises all Nigerian plays, whereas the sample of the study is made up of three Nigerian plays. The three plays are deliberately selected to cover, at least, two out of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The study is library research. The specific data for the research are the narratives and descriptions made in the various plays by their authors as well as the utterances and actions of various characters in the texts. Critical works on the three plays are also consulted.

Textual Analysis

The plays under study – Nwabueze's *A parliament of vultures*, Rotimi's *Our husband has gone mad again*, and Ilechukwu's *All honourable men* satirize Nigerian leaders who see political offices as profitable ventures. These playwrights indict Nigerian politicians on the problem of poor leadership which has engulfed the nation thereby hindering the progress of the country. They

satirize these leaders who substitute governance with pleasure. As Ujowundu (2010) asserts:

> Satire serves as a vehicle for social criticism as it censures in an ironical, derisive, sensuous, abusive or jesting manner the conducts and actions of people in society. As an instrument of attack, a satire has been a medium of exposing and condemning individual or collective misdemeanor and social ills (p. 43).

The playwrights, therefore, expose and condemn the despicable acts that have guzzled the progress of the nation. They portray characters whose lifestyle is contradictory to what is expected of them as leaders. Their aspirations into the position of leadership lack the purpose of service to the masses.

According to Emelone (2020:22 – 23):

> … a leader needs to possess a deep understanding about the feelings and thoughts of those whom he leads so as to be able to really consider their perspectives. He should also be committed to the people and the nation at large and should lead by example. By so doing, a leader displays a sense of responsibility.

The majority of the leaders, as portrayed in the texts under study, absolutely ignore the feelings and thoughts of the masses; they are both irresponsible and undedicated to the populace, and that is antonymous to good leadership and governance. They bring themselves above other citizens and as such behave however they desire. Nwabueze's Madam Omeaku is a typical example here. Even at home, she disrespects and intimidates her husband because of the leadership position she finds herself in. This is evident in the following dialogue between her and her husband:

> **Omeaku**: … Do you know I can invoke the powers of a husband and stop you from continuing in politics?
>
> **Madam**: Who do you think you are talking to? Eh? Invoke the powers of what? Do you call yourself a husband? Husband for mouth! Do you know the duties of a husband? Do you think you can fight me? All I need to do is to make

> a few connections here and there and you are finished. And let me tell you, it takes more than a heavy wind to uproot an Iroko. (Nwabueze, p.14)

In the play, Mr. Omeaku, the two honest parliamentarians, Dr. Parkers and Mr. Otobo who are never given any opportunity in their attempt to salvage the people and are eventually arrested and charged with treasonable felony, represent the Nigerian masses who are intimidated by their ruthless leaders represented in the play by Madam Omeaku and her cohorts in the assembly. Going further on the issue of bad governance exhibited by these politicians, the president's speech showcases the lordship of the government over the masses. His dialogues and the responses to the journalists portray a great degree of insensitivity and callousness. He veraciously affirms that considering the position of leadership as a service to the people is wrong. In his words, "the master-servant relationship is more of a verbal thing than actual reality… and anybody who refuses to accept this truth needs to have his head examined by a psychiatrist" (Nwabueze, p. 93).

This reveals the unwillingness, on the part of government, to provide good governance to the people and those who criticize this shrouded brutality on the masses are described as "disgruntled elements… who are jealous of those whose bread god has buttered by placing them in positions of power and authority, and of course, the good things that go with them" (Nwabueze, pp.94 – 95). As asserted by Erunyeluchukwu (2019, p.5), "the interview in the play granted by the president exposes the gross indifference displayed by people with powers in Nigeria". The playwright makes a case for the poor masses whose experience of governance and leadership is both painful and horrendous.

Similarly, Ilechukwu makes the same case in *All honourable men*. He presents a parliament where insensitivity to the plights of the masses is synonymous with governance. Although these parliamentarians agree that the country is grappling with the issue

of insecurity and many other challenges such as inadequate health facilities, theirs is not to salvage the country but to travel out of the country "to relax frayed nerves". Bamaiyi, one of the house members has his wife booked for a caesarean section in Qatar, and while in that country, he needs to "cool off after the hectic electioneering campaigns" since that is impossible in Nigeria because of the "level of insecurity here [and] one has been sleeping with one eye open" (Ilechukwu, p.14). The house, immediately after its inauguration, proceeds to twelve weeks of recess with a mouth-watering recess allowance which comfortably takes care of the hospital charge of Honourable Bamaiyi's wife, and also offsets his family's hotel bill in Doha, Qatar.

Ola Rotimi, in *Our husband has gone mad again*, equally hint at this point of the insensitivity of those in authority over the plights of the masses. The play satirizes the ideological misfits and opportunists who shamelessly parade the political landscape of contemporary African society. The play tells the story of Rahman Taslim Lekoja-Brown, a former soldier who takes to politics with an unpatriotic intention which is to get his cut of the national cake. This goes to show that before Lejoka-Brown's declaration to join politics, diverting public funds to individual coffers for some incongruous reasons has been the obtainable fact among politicians and government officials. He, therefore, desires to join politics only to have his own share of the public fund without giving any consideration to the masses which should be the utmost reason for government expenditures. As Rotimi (2006, p.4) puts it, "Politics is the thing now in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You want to chop life? – No, no – you want to chop a big slice of the national cake? – Na politics".

Bad governance takes its root from both greed and illiteracy. Greed is deduced as the reason for people's participation in politics and this is seen through the character of Lejoka-Brown in Ola Rotimi's *Our husband has gone mad again*. In *A parliament of vultures* and

All honourable men, both Nwabueze and Ilechukwu, respectively, present parliaments that constitute a greedy majority. In the words of Affiah (2012, p.376):

> The overriding motivation for most public office seekers is the 'get rich quick' malady. For the public office holder in Nigeria, it is himself and his family first and last. The rest of the people can burn to ashes or rot in hell for all he cares.

These parliamentarians, as Affiah maintained, do not uphold democracy as a system of government for it is in the legislative arm of government that the masses experience "democracy in action in the form of debates, and considerations of motions, resolutions, and bills" (Affiah, 2012, p.383). The playwrights expose incidents of corruption playing out in the legislative chambers. They portray the majority of the legislators as those whose sole intention of getting into power is to enrich themselves through any available means.

These legislators are depicted as greedy men and women who consider only themselves worthy of living a good and comfortable life. Rotimi's Lejoka-Brown joins politics to have his own share of the national cake. Nwabueze, in *A parliament of vultures*, begins his story of greedy legislators with Mr. Brown's piece of advice to Madam Omeaku to leave her neighbourhood to another one befitting of an honourable member since her social class has changed. These men divert public funds, such as those allocated to education, into their personal consumptions and acquisitions. Ilechukwu, in *All honourable men*, mentions recess allowance for parliamentarians who embark on twelve weeks of recess after having just one sitting since their election into the chamber.

The playwrights under study seem to unanimously assert that Nigerian politicians, by no means, have the interests of the poor masses at heart. They join politics for selfish reasons, and the country remains in a helpless quagmire just as depicted in their

plays. Rotimi's Lejoka-Brown abandons his cocoa farming for politics just to take his slice of the national cake; Nwabueze's Madam Omeaku quits her hotel business and ventures into politics for "financial security" (Nwabueze, 2011, p.9), whereas Ilechukwu's illiterate Honourable Bamaiyi joins politics only to boost his CV. These three characters are portrayed by the playwrights as illiterates who are so unfit for either the office they intend to acquire – as with Rotimi's Major Brown – or with the ones they already have. Consequently, their businesses in politics are not for the good of the masses; they are so incapacitated and have absolutely nothing to offer. Their aims only revolve around the spheres of selfishness and greed. As much as there are few good politicians in the system, the bad eggs that are the majority are always determined to pull them down. In the words of Nwachukwu (2020, p.1209), with a particular reference to Nwabueze's *A parliament of vultures*, the playwright "satirizes the way and manner the illiterate politicians look down on their fellow politicians who want to promote transparency as a good quality of administration". This is evident in the attacks on Dr. Parkers and Mr. Otobo, the two men who are mindful of the masses' interests. They reveal to the press the embezzlement that goes on in the parliament, and argue that "the Parliament is not a secret society. It's absurd that the parliament should mask its activities from the same people it purports to be representing" (Nwabueze, 2011, p.88). Again, Dr. Parkers is attacked whenever he exhibits his expertise and professionalism in the parliament.

His presence becomes a clog on a wheel for the greedy and selfish parliamentarians that they ruthlessly push him out of their way. This division of the good versus the bad that plays out in these plays portrays the cliques formed among Nigerian politicians. While a clique is intentional about the good of the masses, the other is not, and at the same time, plot ways to ensure that the good ones do not succeed in their masses-oriented agenda. It becomes a

war of the corrupt versus the incorrupt, and corruption is a vice motivated by greed (Affiah, 2012).

Corruption, as a phenomenon, that has dishonesty as its typical feature, is rampant in many societies of the world especially on the African continent. It is, according to Ekiyo (2005) in Iyanda (2012, p.38):

> the unlawful use of official power or influence by an official of the government either to enrich himself or further his course and/or any other person at the expense of the public, in contravention of his oath of office and/or contrary to the conventions or laws that are in force.

This definition is well exemplified in the characters portrayed by Nwabueze and Ilechukwu in *A parliament of vultures* and *All honourable men* respectively. Nwabueze tells of Habamero who works the fake reverend Jossy's way into parliament. Jossy is to wear his sauterne all the time as that "will lend credibility to our programme" (Nwabueze, 2011, p.24); a factory worker who has no academic certificate is designated a professor so as to make a political party look intellectual; the returning officer in the election that sees these men and women into the parliament has his school certificate examination written by Mr. Brown's cousin. Rigging Mr. Brown and his cohorts into power is his little way of expressing his gratitude. These strategies are put on the ground to enable these parliamentarians to use their official power and influence to enrich themselves at the expense of the public.

They roll out allowances for themselves and see anybody against their moves as an enemy who should be pushed out of the way. In Rotimi's *Our husband has gone mad again*, Lejoka-Brown's marriage to Sikira, the daughter of the president of the National Market Women's Union, is a means of securing the votes of the women, and marrying an educated Liza is a means of raising his status in the society. This is Lejoka-Brown introducing Liza, his American wife:

> Ladies and gentlemen, I have pleasure in introducing to you this evening, the chairlady of this august occasion… She is the one and only Dr. the Honourable Mrs Elizabeth Lejoka-Brown M.D. (Yale), M.Sc. (Gynacolology), wife of the one and only Federal Government Minister of Agriculture and Housing, Mister the Honourable Major Rahman Taslim Akindele Lejoka-Brown, ON, MHR, Esquire! (Rotimi, 2006, p.29)

Furthermore, the parliamentarians in *A parliament of vultures* prefer the use of Ogbunabani as an instrument for swearing in their members instead of the popular way where "the Bible is the traditional instrument" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 57) and instead of swearing to honestly and diligently discharge their duties as members of parliament, they swear to conceal their atrocities. It is Habamero, the speaker who administers the ritual to members:

> Now, let us repeat what we have sworn before Ogbunabani. Anyone here who reports any other member to the journalists, or who accuses another member of any offence without going through the chairman, anyone who talks evil about anyone here, especially with regard to financial gratification, may Ogbunabani rub that fellow with ash. (Nwabueze, 2011, p.59)

The parliament, with this form of oath-taking becomes a cult where the engagements of the members are held as top secret.

As a result of poor governance experienced by the poor masses, revolution becomes the only resort. Nwabueze, in his play, presents some undergraduates and unemployed youths who stand against those who have turned their leadership positions to a money-yielding venture. Also, the action of the leader of Save Our Democracy Pressure Group as presented in Ilechukwu's play and the Sikira's emergence as the party's flag-bearer as presented by Rotimi are other forms of revolution. The authors are of the view that revolution is the last hope of the poor masses, and the demonstration of Nigerian youths against the president's economic

reform which took place in the first ten days of August, 2024 is a proof to this fact.

Conclusion

Whether it is individually like the individual characters in the plays, or collectively as they are in their various political parties, politicians and government officials have presented themselves in a manner that the general masses have lost hope in them. They exemplify the exploitative few who live off the poor masses. Exploring some characters as well as some incidents in the plays showcases individuals and political parties who are metaphors of bad governance, corruption, and greed. It is the aim of this study to advocate for good governance, which can help in fostering unity and progress in the country.

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