



Drama and Social Reconstruction: Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures in Focus*

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the role of drama as an instrument of social reconstruction. The paper posits that drama, at any given time, mirrors the social situation of any given place. The playwright is not only influenced by the society; he also influences it. Through the revolutionary works of the playwright, which focus on and criticise such evils as corruption, injustice, nepotism, bribery, economic sabotage, oppression, power-mongering, human degradation, cultural and mental colonialism and anti-democratic practices, the society may be persuaded to cultivate principles of good governance. The paper is an analytical study of Emeka Nwabueze's A Parliament of Vultures. Content analysis of the work is made. The findings reveal that drama is indeed a veritable instrument of change and a potent force which promotes nation-building.

Keywords Social reconstruction, democratic habits, self-aggrandisement, corruption, parliament

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Introduction

Over the years, drama has been identified as a potent instrument of social change. It is a medium through which the ills of society, such as bribery and corruption, injustice, nepotism, human trafficking, economic sabotage, oppression, etc., are criticised with a view to effecting the desired social change. In other words, it is believed that the works of dramatists that satirise societal ills can go a long way in purging and cleansing society of its political and socio-economic filth. This can be achieved by exploring themes that border on the prevailing conditions of a society, and their focus is mainly on irregularities in all aspects of societal life. In the words of Agho and Egele(2019, p. 222), “themes bordering on socio-political, economic, religious and cultural issues form the bedrock of the literary writing of most writers.” In other words, literature is a part of society. It derives a lot of inspiration from the society.

General Overview of Political Leadership in Nigeria

Nigeria became independent in October 1960. This signaled the evolution of self-governance and, indeed, the emergence of the First Republic. In the wake of the euphoria of Nigerian Political independence, good promises were made, and better prospects were offered to the masses by the new political class. They include a commitment to equal opportunities and greater equality in the standard of living and developmental opportunities in education, health and employment (Obiechina,1993,p.121). Commenting on the poor political engagements of the first crop of Nigerian politicians, Ayo Akinwale says that their performance was nothing to write home about. He further posits that greed, corruption, tribalism, intrigues, betrayals and carpet crossing characterised Nigerian politics. (Ayo Akinwale, 1993,p.19).

The new Nigerian political leaders that

stepped into the shoes of their colonial masters had failed to make good their promises. The average person's standard of living did not get any better. In certain situations, the impoverished masses began to bear a bigger burden. Since most young men who were just somewhat literate moved from the countryside to the city in quest of better employment opportunities, there was an extremely high unemployment rate in the metropolis. The nation-building difficulties were beyond the capabilities of the new political class, which also failed to deliver moral and civic leadership. After independence, the governmental apparatus collapsed, causing instability that was accompanied by violent coups and countercoups. (Obiechine, 1993, p.121).

It became necessary, therefore, for Nigerian writers to address these issues consistently in their writings. Drama and the novel have been used primarily by writers to highlight the flaws and irregularities within the neo-colonial system, which as it were, reproduces the mechanisms of colonialism. Thus, literature has not only been employed to characterise the abuses of power by the ruling elite class, it has also addressed the concomitant problems of political instability, corruption, and such endemic social ills as unemployment, poverty and prostitution (Agho, 2000: p. 17). The writers also accused the post-independence Nigerian leaders of being venal, corrupt, and deficient in vision. The writers also depict Nigerian leaders as greedy and self-indulgent individuals motivated by personal gain rather than a commitment to providing effective governance” (Affiah, 2012: p. 375). *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe, *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara, *A Parliament of Vultures* by Emeka Nwabueze, *Kongi's Harvest*, *A Play of Giants*, and *King Babu* by Wole Soyinka are just a few of the works that capture these images. These plays highlight the politicians' various points of view. For instance, *A Parliament of Vultures* addresses the corrupt political culture exhibited by the new breed of Nigerian politicians, whereas *Kongi's Harvest* depicts the conflict between a contemporary authoritarian government and the traditional

system it replaced. Kongi attempts to seize Oba Danlola's spiritual power in an effort to gain both political and traditional authority. Telling the Oba to carry out the custom of presenting him with the yam harvest in a public ceremony essentially amounts to giving the cunning politician the spiritual power of the traditional monarch. In Soyinka's view, politics is a game whose success stems from devious manoeuvres and cunning polemics, whereas tradition is a spiritual endeavour that grows out of a people's cultural foundations. (Nwabueze, 2005: p. 26-27).

Socio-Political Satire in *A Parliament of Vultures*

A satire is a critical work on societal ills. It ridicules human beings by exposing their socio-political, religious, legal, and other weaknesses. Satire has also been described as an ideological weapon that reflects and refracts society. It is used as a weapon to fight against the irregularities and abnormalities in society and to bring people back to the world of reality where laws and order are maintained (Sosanya and Mabawonku, 2022,26). *A Parliament of Vultures* by Nwabueze is a scathing critique of Nigeria's socio-political problems. The play makes fun of Nigeria's weak political culture, which permits illiterate and morally bankrupt individuals to hold prominent positions of leadership in the government. As a potent instrument of change, *A Parliament of Vultures* exposes different forms of corruption and hypocrisy that precipitated the ever-growing polarity in the post-colonial Africa's socio-political landscape (Anyachonkeya, 2011: p. 125). Nwabueze, in *A Parliament of Vultures*, lampoons corrupt Nigerian politicians who are enmeshed in bribery, embezzlement, fraud, nepotism, media corruption, and election violence, much like Chinua Achebe does in *A Man of the People*. (Obasi et al, 2021, p.8).

Emeka Nwabueze, in this play, unapologetically paints a picture of the irresponsible and unpatriotic parliamentarians

who dominate the political landscape in Nigeria. Nwabueze describes the unpatriotic parliamentarians as vultures. Without a doubt, this is a fair assessment of the lawmakers. They resemble the ravenous, vulpine vultures that prey on humans and scavenge them until they perish. The parliamentary vultures scour the masses until they die, and they also make sure that even the corpses are completely devoured.

A vulture is a dirty and loathsome bird of prey. In most African communities, it is regarded as a bird of evil omen. It is taboo to kill or eat such a bird. It is in the light of these, therefore, that the playwright uses the term vulture to symbolise all the evils associated with the parliamentarians in Nigeria. A few of the lawmakers in *A Parliament of Vultures* who are deeply involved in socio-political ills are Habamero, Reverend Jossy, and Madam Omeaku. Madam Omeaku is an illiterate and uncultured woman who sells food and liquor on the street-side. She wangled her way into the parliament through corrupt and crooked means. Her presence in the parliament shows the level of socio-political decadence in Nigerian politics. The picture painted here is that of a highly decadent society where requisite qualifications and relevant experience are not considered determinants when seeking political positions. Rather, it was a matter of who outwits the other by any means, such as the ability to slander, blackmail, buy more votes and rig the election (Aniago, 2017, p.69). Madam Omeaku, having been declared the winner in the rigged election, attempts to introduce her daughter to her amorous lifestyle as a way of positioning her on the path to her kind of prosperity. She attempts to manipulate the speaker into purchasing a new vehicle for Nkechi, her nineteen-year-old daughter, and a school dropout. However, Jossy promptly steps in and advises her thus:

Jossy: Let's not rush into it. Let's give it a thought. Let her use taxi for the moment. (Vultures, 31).

Madam: Why? She needs her own car Without any further delay, Habamero, the Speaker of the House, approves Madam Omeaku's proposal and a brand new Honda Accord is given to Nkechi. (Vultures, p. 31).

The parliamentarians are portrayed here not only greedy; they are also spend-thrifts looking for avenues where they would squander their loot. Their plan for a thanksgiving service is merely an opportunity to show off and squander the nation's hard-earned money. This is clearly illustrated in the following discussions:

Habamero: Let's discuss the thanksgiving vote, then. Brown: I suggest ten million naira.

Madam: For what? Are we teachers? This parliament cannot afford to be as miserly as teachers. Nonsense! (Vultures, P.71 of).

Habamero concludes the debate thus: You have seen Honourable Otobo, that ten million will not be enough to take care of this business. The bulk of the money will be disbursed through the payment of inconvenience allowances to members for attending the thanksgiving service...I therefore, approve the sum of two billion naira for this purpose. Approved?

All: (except Otobo and parkers) Approved! (Page 71). The members keep pushing for material possessions and financial accumulation. The scenario that follows captures this.

Habamero: ...We have to be very careful. Many of us will soon start building houses in our villages.

Brown: And in the nation's capital.

Jossy: What's wrong with building abroad? London, Amsterdam, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago (Vultures, p. 75).

Legislators with this kind of avarice and corruption are incapable of passing legislation that will improve the lives of the populace or promote sound administration. The parliament cannot lead the country to the promised land since it is not just inept but also lacks vision. It's time for such a parliament to change.

The Play as a Means of Social Reconstruction.

Drama is a veritable means of social reconstruction. Nwabueze uses his theatre of commitment to fight for the liberation of the masses. One of the modern Nigerian plays that parodied the political scheming that permeates legislative discussions in Nigeria and throughout Africa is *A Parliament of Vultures*. By setting Madam Omeaku against the moral voices of the Parliamentarians and using the polarising dramatic style, Nwabueze exposes the bad traits of the typical Nigerian politician, such as gang mentality, greed, selfishness, squabbling, and materialistic tendencies. (Nwosu & Nwosu, 2018, p.162). Madam Omeaku manages to secure the impeachment of Mr. Otobo, the parliamentary secretary, by using every tool at her disposal. She then seizes control of the post and utilises it to influence other members of the house, who naturally benefit from their illicit gains. She works toward her goal of becoming a landowner in several of Nigeria's largest cities and beyond. She also wants to send her kids to study overseas because she believes that formal education in other nations is superior to that of Nigeria. This way of thinking is representative of Nigeria's elite leaders, who don't give a damn about the need to adequately support and develop the country's educational system.(Obasi, et al, 2021,7).But then things take a sharp turn as the parliament is besieged by irate young people protesting, who then gather the lawmakers and tie them up with ropes. This stance is innovative. Perhaps, this is Nwabueze's strategy for Nigerian societal rebuilding. Similar to Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, which warns of the causes of post-colonial disillusionment in African countries (Ene-Orji, 2018, p. 39), Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* appears to be a cautionary tale for Nigerian politicians in general as well as parliamentarians against unethical political actions that could eventually spark violence or even a full-scale revolution. This demonstrates how political theatre fights unjust social, political, cultural, and economic conditions in any particular country. According to Nwabueze, a radical step like a revolution might be the answer to all of Nigeria's socio-political issues.

Reconstruction is all about change for the better. Nwabueze's play probes the minds of the people and makes them re-examine themselves and take positive steps to cultivate democratic habits. To accomplish this, Nwabueze employs such characters as Dr Parkers, Mr Otobo, and, to a lesser extent, Mr. Omeaku. These characters' job is to constantly remind the corrupt Speaker of the House, Habamero and his allies, Madam Omeaku, Bob Brown, and Rev. Jossy, of the atrocities they are committing against the country. During one of their "parliamentary meetings" before parliamentary sessions, Chief Omeaku wanders into their meeting, listens to their corrupt discussions and comments thus:

Mr. Omeaku: So this is what you people are doing? This is my nation's parliament at work. Do you know what you people are? You are vultures! This is a parliament of vultures. Eating my nation to death leaving nothing for the masses to quench their thirst (*Vultures*, p. 31).

Nwabueze reveals the extent of Nigerian politicians' avarice, corruption, and plundering of public coffers by applying the social function theory. In addition to highlighting these unhealthy tendencies among our leaders, Nwabueze goes so far as to categorically denounce the insane desire for worldly prosperity. Such harsh criticism is required to save Nigeria's failing political system, which promotes high levels of cooperation among those holding political office in order to recycle and maintain one another's incumbency. For example, the party chairman confers with the speaker of the house to name Chief Anu Mpama, an ex-convict, as chairman of the Radio and Television Board. Mr Otobo expressed his deep disapproval of this heinous conduct when he declares:

Otobo: Objection, Mr chairman. Please. This man, Anu Mpama, was detained and tried by the previous administration for

embezzlement of public funds (*Vultures*, p. 78). However, the House Speaker Habamero, who disregards the voice of reason, says:

"...the party chairman has nominated, and approved the appointment of Chief Anu Mpama to head this organisation" (*Vultures*, p. 78).

Mr Parkers echoes Otobo's criticism, advising caution and highlighting the need for integrity in the process of choosing board chairmen.

Parkers: I suggest that care be exercised in choosing those individuals. We owe this nation a duty to ensure that there is enough money to justify their existence. And this can only be ensured by the appointment of men of honesty and integrity, if we want to improve the economy of this impoverished and economically raped nation (*Vultures*, p.73).

This well-articulated speech targeted at changing the corrupt mindset of the members of parliament falls on deaf ears. The parliamentarians are bent on destroying the economy of the nation. Unfortunately, these lawmakers are meant to watch over the operations of the executive. Rather, they exhibit all the undesirable traits that they are meant to suppress and betray the confidence of the public. Indeed, they are morally incompetent to carry out their duties. No country can advance significantly if its lawmakers are of this kind. It is nonetheless a truth that many advanced cultures insist on placing qualified individuals in appropriate positions. Regretfully, things are not like this in Nigeria. In Nigeria, nepotism and political favour are popular. Even worse, certain really important and powerful posts that should go to the most capable and qualified applicants are not being spared. The playwright, therefore, calls for social change as a solution to the problems placed

before all Nigerians.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have been able to establish, among other things, the fact that drama can be used as a means of social reconstruction. We have also established that *A Parliament of Vultures* is a committed drama used by the playwright, Emeka Nwabueze, to fight for the emancipation of the masses. The play reveals all the socio-political evils committed in the parliament with the aim of effecting democratic changes that will further enthrone good leaders who will offer Nigerians good governance. In this drama, Nwabueze has succeeded in bringing the general public's attention to a revolutionary and constructive substitute for social degeneration. This is what the protesting youths represent. They are agents of change. They want to put an end to oppression, an end to squander mania, an end to corrupt practices. This is a revolutionary imperative aimed at bringing the desired socio-political change in Nigeria.

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