

THEMATIC THRUST IN AFRICAN DRAMA: A SATIRICAL INTERPRETATION OF SOYINKA'S *KING BAABU*

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Abstract: *The paper discusses socio-political indices in African drama: A satirical interpretation of Soyinka's King Baabu. The objective of the paper is to expose the evils of the military in government as shown in the primary text and to explore satirist approach as inherent in King Baabu. In this respect, satire is employed as a theoretical frame work upon which the paper is hinged. The method of the analysis is analytical glued with the aim of discussing the socio-political indices inherent in the drama text. The findings show that dictatorship, selfishness, greed, bribery and corruption etc are responsible for dictatorship in the African post-colonial era an instance which was witnessed in Nigeria during military rule. The paper concludes that military government should not be encouraged in African states because of its inability to embrace democracy. The paper further recommends that African states should embrace democracy as it gives room for masses to air their voices.*

Keywords: satire, military rule, dictatorship, democracy. African states.

Introduction

Literary work is a creative art that goes beyond the interpretation of literary text but rather it tends to give a rooted interpretation of the writer's mind set, ideology and further cross examine the political, economic, religious and socio-political terrain of the society in question. Literatures is a product of ideology. Every work of literature is noted upon an ideological interpretation of either the play wrights' mind or the society under study. Based on this assumption, Ngugi (1998) opines that a literary work is a "... Set of ideological assumptions about a society and relation between human beings" (23).

In buttressing the above opinion, saint Gbeleka further asserts:

The contemporary Nigerian playwright bears a mark of ideological commitment and patriotism. The text of his play will variably reflects the socio-political situation under which he writes. His themes and subject

matters naturally emerge from issues within his domain (3).

The above assertion aligns with the presence of ideology towards interpreting, explaining and examining a society. In this case, since literary works are borne out of ideology, then no work of literature can go beyond the writer's ideology.

Apart from the ideological issue, it is pertinent to say that literature also influences people's perception about politics and how to bring about political change. It is therefore a difficult task to separate literature from politics. To further support this notion, Ken Saro-Wiwa (1999) is of the notion that:

Literature most serves society by steeping itself in to politics by intervention and writers most not merely write to amuse or take a bemused critical look at society. He most plays an interventionist role (81).

On the above bedrock, the paper tends to showcase the relevance of literature in African countries that are consumed by political issues such as mal-administration, dictatorship, administrative selfishness, greed among political leaders and excessive bribery and corruption. On this note, African writers have taken the lead in the struggle towards nation building, national development and the act of building a strong literary network toward creating modern democratic societies and vehemently kicking against dictatorial post-independence regimes in African states. On this premises, literature has been an extra-ordinary tool towards influencing institutions in post-colonial Africa.

It is pathetic to air the view that in Africa, most literary critics were made to face humiliations, discriminations, apathy and dehumanization while few of them were killed. Example, Christopher Okigbo met his untimely death in 1967 during the fight for Biafra's independence, Wole Soyinka was detained in 1966 for his positive contribution towards the political stability, peace and transcendence of Nigeria, Ngugi Wa T'iongo who happens to be a literary giant in Kenya was detained by Jomo Kenyatta's government and Ezekiel Mphahlele was made to go on exile by the South African government.

In *King Baabu*, Soyinka satirically presents a socio-political atmosphere of an African state (Nigeria) that has been wallowing in post-independent military subjection, oppression, political charlatanism, post-colonial terrorism and other socio-political cankerworms. This calls for a drastic and positive change for the revival of the souls of the dying masses who are always at the reviewing end.

Soyinka is a critic and a writer who never leaves a stone unturned against injustice. He also has an uncompromising stand against unacceptable situations in the society.

Soyinka uses satire as a literary tool towards bringing about societal transformation as well as exposing the evil behaviours of men. With the use of satire, Soyinka in *King Baabu* presents a mockery of military leadership, exposes military political incompetency, moral decadence and egoistic tendencies of leaders in Nigeria which serves as case study.

The paper discusses the African post-colonial

terrorism, as exemplified in *King Baabu* and satirically fetch out the indices of African post-colonial terrorism. The paper further presents socio-political realities in the Nigerian society, exposes the ills of military in politics and testifies that truly Nigeria is entangled with military terrorism.

Satire: A Theoretical Framework

The word satire gained its root from a Latin word known as *satire* and it further metamorphosed into *satura* which means *medley* or *mature*. In accordance with history, satire is connected and popularly used in folk culture in ancient communities where the work of art is being promoted (Brockett and Ball, 2007).

Bal et al (2009) is of the opinions that satire gained its root from the ancient Greece which happens to be the home of theatre. During satirical plays, political leaders were mocked on stage and their political roles are questioned whether or not they meet up to standard (231). At this stage, satirical plays were with the motive of triggering people's reactions and called for responses from the audience.

As one of the inevitable literary tools, satire has been given different definitions according to diverse literary critic and scholars and also depending on the argument at hand. Few of these definitions shall be examined below:

Bamidele (2001) defines satire as:

....A dramatic form in which human views and follies, abuses or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule with intent to bringing about improvement (41).

The above definition sees satire as a literary method of criticizing social vices with the use of mockery, ridicule and scorn with the aim of imparting a lesson to the society and also correcting the societal ills.

Satire is a broad literary term that encompasses different elements like sarcasm, ridicule and irony (Sigh, 2012:65).

In the words of Sigh (2012), satire is any:

...Literary form in which vices or follies are ridiculed. It often emphasizes the weakness more than the weak person. Satire usually proposes moral judgment and serves a corrective purpose: swift's

satire of human pettiness and bestiality. Irony, sarcasm and satire make mockery of something or someone (65).

The above definition is in line with the opinion of Bamidele (2001) who further stress the fact that satire is for a correctional purpose. This implies that the mockery which satire creates is for the purpose of positive or objective criticism with the aim of bringing up a change into either political, socio-political and religious behaviours which seems to lack moral ingredients in the society. According to Singh (2012), apart from satire, other synonymous nomenclatures include “burlesque, caricature, sarcasm, and parody” (65).

In buttressing the above, Hornby (2000) further describes satire as

....“a way of criticizing a person and or investigation which uses humour to show their faults or weaknesses” (12).

From the above view, satire is seen as a literary weapon that criticizes individual and the socio-political institution created for the purpose of correcting certain behaviours that are unethical, immoral, and anti-social against which can destroy the society. Towards rendering a supportive literary hand to the above opinion, Iwuchukwu (2019) strongly commented that “any literary work which holds up a society to ridicule or shows the foolishness or weakness of an idea or custom and towards its attitude of amusement, content or scorn” is called satire.

Using the scholastic and critic lens, Bal et al concludes on the note that 'satire, the use of ridicule, irony or sarcasm to lampoon something or someone, is derived from the Greek burlesque –an artistic composition designed to generate laughter' (2009:231).

From the above scholastic definitions of satire, it can be summarily deduced that satire is a strong literary tool that is used in diverse form of literary work in order to mock, scorn, make fun of particular groups of people or person with the use of humour.

Interesting to note, Singh (2012:68) upheld the believe that satire assist to a great extent towards raising and creating awareness about issues affecting the society and it therefore becomes a strong literary weapon in both graphic and performing arts. Satire is further used to draw the

attention of people in the society to both particular and wider issues in the societies and to be able to do it perfectly, it uses wit (Singh 2012: 68).

There are two forms of satire and these are: Direct and Indirect satire. To expatiate further, Abram (1984) is of the opinion that:

Critics make broad division between formal and In-direct satire. In formal satire, satiric voice speaks out in the first person that is “I”, may address himself either to the reader or else to a character within the work itself who is called the adversaries (168).

In his explanation, Abram noted that there are two types of formal satire and these are: Horatian satire and Juvenalian satire.

In Horatian satire, characters are normally witty, urbane and tolerant in nature and they display more of amusement than indignation at the view of human follies.

Juvenalian satire on its own is characterized with a character who is a moralist and who makes use of unique public style of utterance in order to correct errors and anti-social vices that are dangerous to the society.

Indirect satire is a literary weapon that embraces direct address. This is a popular feature of fictional narratives. At this juncture, the object is the satire are characters that made themselves coupled with their opinions to be ridiculous by the narrative style of the author.

Thematic Thrust in African Drama: An Exploration of Soyinka's King Baabu

Politics have been a dominant factor in literature from the inception of Greek theatre, Roman theatre and Medieval theater to the contemporary literary period. Contemporarily, politics has been an inevitable theme in virtually most literary productions and writers cannot avoid to discuss it because 'A writer has a choice' (Ngugi Nwa Thiong'o 1981:xi).

It is interesting to note that drama is a tool for political renaissance. In Nigeria and other African countries, drama assist to restore sanity, to rework, re-invent and re-brand the vacuum in our democratic process. As part of the Black – African consciousness movement, Olu Obafemi is of the view that:

The theatre/Drama has equally proved to be very instrumental in other struggling nations of the world, where theatric/dramatic productions companies and dramatists have openly confronted the ruling class, challenging them and sometimes dialoguing with the power that be on economic, social and political rejuvenation... (ix).

The above view of shows that dramatic works go a long way towards challenging the excesses of political leaders and also is used to curb terrorism in African post-colonial leadership.

To further support the above view, Femi Osofisan (2007) calls for the need to embrace artistic relevance in the face of African post-colonial terrorism by the political and military groups. He further opines that:

History has trapped us; and not only by the force of tradition, also by the kind of government we have been saddled with since independence by the treachery and travesties of the ruling class which have succeeded the colonial powers and continue to hold our people under siege and by the crying needs of the suffering majority of the populace... if we must change our societies, if the theatre (indeed, all generic forms of literature, oral and written) must fulfill its vocation as agent of progress, the dramatist (writers) who create it have no option but to pitch their camp on the side of the common people and against the formidable agent of ruling classes (88).

Wole Soyinka is a seasonal literary writer and a critic who obviously believes in literature as an instrument of change and has persistently been pitching his camp with the masses in the protest against homemade tyrants and dictators in the post-colonial African political milieu.

Sociopolitical indices take different faces in Soyinka's *King Baabu* which will be critically examined one at a time. In the first instance, political exploitation is a socio-political index towards bad and undemocratic government. In *King Baabu*, Soyinka show-cases the masses attack on the military's political exploitation and call for a return to democracy. The play recounts the hurdles

of General Sani Abacha who happens to be a dictatorial and autocratic leader in Nigeria.

In the play, Soyinka satirically exposes the government of a corrupt leaders and other political tyrants in government.

In the play, Soyinka presents a picture of a newly independent country as Guatu which symbolizes the successful coups in Nigeria. Baasha Bash (the major character) is a military leader who leads a coup with the help and assistance of Marriya who happens to be his wife in order to hijack power from General Potipso. Bash has a successful coup, he emerged as a political leader, crown himself and referred to himself as 'King Baabu'. He uses a rigid constitution to govern his people which assists him to hold on to power for a long time forgetting his promises for a democratic state which never sees the light of the day.

It is disheartening that the masses that dethroned General Potipso and his dictatorial government becomes slaves to a new dictatorial government of King Baasha Bash.

At this level, Soyinka uses humour to present an explosive political force and an African political scene that is characterised with despotism and lust for power of an average African ruler called 'Baasha Bash'.

Another notable thematic thrust in the play is the military wasteful spending and corruption. The play displays the rate at which corruption and wasteful spending by the military rulers grow wings at all time. One could imagine the claim of Baasha Bash that 'my ministry budget fifty million dollars for fertilizer to turn off golf courses into juicy farmlands' (Soyinka, 16). This gives a clear cut insight into the wasteful spending of military leaders on irrelevant things. It is disgusting that Baasha Bash intends to spend 'fifty million dollars for fertilizer' while other government sectors are suffering from lack of fund or insufficient funds. Basha Bash promises to pay into Potipoo's account in Swiss as a preparation for his retirement even when Potipoo will be changing from military leader to a democratic leader in the name of pension, power and authority.

Baash: Your pension matter, c-in-c. You leaving office for democracy, not so? You not beginning to think of pension or you going for retirement on chicken - feed army pension? Is fifty-five my general, you give me swiss account number (Soyinka, 17).

The above exemplifies to the wasteful attitude of our military leaders. Potipoo's change from military leader to a democratic leader by still performing the same function of a leader in the same state means the issue of pension should have not risen. If Potipoo succeeds in becoming a democratic leader, then he stands to enjoy both the pension and his salary at the same time which will be detriment to the masses. At this level, Soyinka is making a clarion call on political leaders who are involved in such corrupt behaviours to desist in the interest of the masses and the nation.

Furthermore, unfulfilled promise of democracy is another thematic thrust which Soyinka vehemently kick against and satirically call for truth, unity and justice at all time. King Baabu' satirizes the military in politics and points accusative finger on military leaders who swim in the ocean of empty promises.

General Potipoo promised a transition to a democratic government which he failed to keep until the unexpected palace coup flushed him out is the office

Baasha Bash at the resumption of office as a military leader, had a broadcast and he promised to fight against enemies of democracy and further ensure that democracy is given to the masses but at the end of the day, the promise never see the light of the day. This attitude diplomatically exposes the unfaithfulness of military leaders.

Military leaders makes empty promises before becoming leaders and when they succeed, they become dictators and tyrants. Masses do suffer under dictatorial and tyrannical regimes of the military.

Lastly, the play show-cases lust for power as another socio- political index that bedevil African societies. Without biasness, the lust and love for power exist among African political leaders. African politics is dominated with lust and love for power while cabals who emerge from power have been matched by their capacity to display sadism and superstition. African political leaders like Samuel Doe of Liberia, Idi Amin of Uganda, Mubutu Sese Seko of Zaire, J.J. Rawlings of Ghana, Gen. Sani Abacha of Nigeria etc are all examples of tyrants and dictators.

In the play, Baasha Bash takes over political power through coup de 'tat, changes into civilian government and finally crown himself as King Baabu. King Baabu's relationship and visits to priests and the Marabouts focus on how to stay in

power indefinitely and on how to secure the love of the people. The soothsayers told Baabu to desist from foreign ladies but he refused and unfortunately, Baabu slept with one of them which caused his untimely death.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is glaring that Soyinka uses satire to expose socio-political ills like greed, corruption, bad leadership, embezzlement etc. and seeks to redress the excesses of the military in politics. Exploring Nigerian political terrain as a case study, the play tends to agitate for a relative prosperous state and lay to rest all features of dystopianism which has served as hindrances towards achieving a successful democratic state.

Soyinka uses the text (*King Baabu*) as a tool towards creating socio-political awareness, socio-political transformation and making social sanity a thing of renaissance. The application of satire towards the exploration of the primary text goes a long way to display the writer's emotive power towards challenging new oppressors in the society and to further imitate a political and economic re-organization of the African society in the interest of the oppressed masses.

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