

**AFRICAN PLAYWRIGHTS AND THE POST-COLONIAL SOCIETY:
A STUDY OF EMEKA NWABUEZE'S *A PARLIAMENT OF
VULTURES* AND ESIABA IROBI'S *HANGMEN ALSO DIE***

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Abstract

Writers, like preachers, write to moralize as well as criticize the ills in the society. Their major aim is to recreate and correct using their pens which speak great volume against the moral decadence dominant in the society and the world at large. African playwrights write on several inherent issues dominant in the post-colonial society of which corruption takes the lead. This study examines corruption as one of the pre-dominant issues in the post-colonial society and as a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the society in the works of two West African writers namely EmekaNwabueze's *AParliament of Vultures* and EsiabaIrobi's *Hangmen Also Die*. Satire as a tool is employed to mock these corrupt leaders who have done more harm than good as well as their level of ignorance in governing the masses. This paper can be x-rayed through the critical lens of Post-colonial theory, Marxism and Eco-criticism. This paper also reveals the effects of corruption as it subjects the masses to poverty, oppression, hunger, depression and even death. Activism is seen as a revolutionary tool among characters in both texts. The selected texts are used as channels for mocking leaders who employ various corrupt practices to oppress the people without taking cognizance of their plight, while aiming for a better and corrupt free society.

Keywords: African Playwrights, Postcolonial Theory, Marxism

Introduction

The history and the making of many parts of the countries of the world is a history rooted in deep and long years of colonialism and slavery (Asika, 423). In other words, most parts of the world have experienced colonialism, slavery, or imperialism with Africa not being an exemption. According to Ifejirika, "Colonialism means the forceful occupation of a people's land, or territory by a stronger and more developed country and unauthorized control and administration of such a weaker state by a more influential state"(135). Most African countries were colonized by the whites who were interested in exploiting them while expanding their political tentacles and imposing their culture and religion on the colonized states. These countries were seen as the weaker or inferior states who should count themselves lucky to be colonized by them. Colonialism had a great influence on the colonized states while

leaving behind indelible marks. Religion and culture of the colonial masters were embraced wholeheartedly. This they said made us civilized, but what about other negative effects of colonization? The colonizers were only after their selfish goals. Although many nations have moved on and have successfully shoved off the ashes of colonialism, there is no denial that colonialism left behind some negative practices and conducts among which is Corruption.

The prefix “Post” attached to colonialism simply implies after colonialism. Post-colonialism is defined as the academic study of the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands (Okoye, 1; Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia). In other words, it is concerned with the looking back at history the period of colonialism and the effects or consequences of the colonial masters. Post-colonial literature justifies this definition with their writers focusing on the effects of colonialism on the people, a reclaim of their identity and the bid to recreate a better society. Jonathan Spivak, HomiBhabba, Nestor Garcia Cancili, Stuart Hall, GayatrikSpivak, amongst others are principal theorists of *hybridity* who are concerned with the effects of mixture upon culture and identity (Okoye, 3-4). This may take various forms; Linguistic, Cultural, Political, racial, etc. For Instance, in Africa, the coming of the white man had an impact on the culture of Africans. Religion, Language, formal education, and other cultural practices were new and a bit strange but nevertheless was adopted and imitated consciously and unconsciously. There was a clash in culture and identity. The principle of *Orientalism* by Edward Said raises questions about colonialism, imperialism, and construction of the ‘other’ with an intention to study what happens when one culture is dominated by another. As earlier stated, the post-colonial theory, Marxist theory and Eco-criticism are applied in analyzing the aforementioned texts. Satire, used in ridiculing or mocking human vices or weaknesses is employed by the writer to criticize the selfish and evil practices of these corrupt leaders in our contemporary society.

African writers like journalists, have a strong inspiration to write plays from their experiences. They write generally to tell the experiences of Africans, their dealings with the whites during colonialism and issues being experienced after colonialism(Post-colonial issues). Their literature is usually imbued with despair and anger at the state of their nation and leaders who replaced former colonial oppressors. The people have a lot of expectations from their leaders after gaining independence but are disappointed at the exploitative nature of their leaders who are very corrupt, self-centered and greedy. Their main aim is to acquire wealth thereby complying with the get-rich-quick syndrome, without considering the poor citizens who are eager to feed and survive. But the people not only suffer. What about the environment?

EsiabaIrobi's *Hangmen also Die* reveals an exploitation of not only the people of Izon state but also the environment. The notion of "the rich gets richer" and "the poor gets poorer" is cemented on corruption where injustice takes the lead. A society where the rich oppresses the poor and the have's suppressing and exploiting the have's not. The Marxists are against the exploitation of the poor for self-enrichment and in most cases take violent revolutionary movements in order to be heard. Ifejirika opines that "there is a class-struggle and distrust which leads to socio-political conflicts" (187). Eco-criticism is employed by the writer to critically examine the effects of exploitation and the unquenchable quest for wealth on the environment. Human beings and aquatic animals are not also exempted in the share of environmental injustices caused by corrupt and self-centered leaders. They are either exposed to hazardous substances or subjected to having little or no chances of survival owing to their polluted environment. This gives rise to activism and sparks off conflicts, protests and revolts that eventually lead to revolution and an expected change.

African playwrights like NgugiwaThiongo, Wole Soyinka. EmekaNwabueze, Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo, Sefi Atta, Olu Olagoke and others wrote using their works to conscientize the masses and the leaders against corruption, a plaque that has built its web round societies while even infecting the unborn. Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the people* and AyikweiArmah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* are good examples of post-colonial novels that clearly expose the corruption that has engulfed the African society. The selected novels are discussed below to further expose different levels of corruption.

A Post-colonial Discourse of EmekaNwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* and EsiabaIrobi's *Hangmen Also Die*

Corruption is defined as a dishonest or illegal behaviour especially by powerful people (such as government officials or police officers) (Meriam Webster Dictionary). EmekaNwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* portrays a society that is governed by corrupt leaders. Nwabueze describes them as "vultures who eat the nation to death leaving nothing for the masses to quench their thirst". These leaders are described as selfish, hypocritical and materialistic vultures inhuman attire. The insatiable desire for money and wealth leads Madam Omeaku to politics. She sees politics a game where the national cake can be shared and the fastest means of making money. In her discussion with Nkechi, her daughter, she expresses her regrets over her marriage to Mr. Omeaku, a teacher whom she feels is below her standard after she is made a member of the House of assembly. She expresses thus:

Madam: I married your father when my eyes were not yet open. In those dark days, what does a woman know about the choice of an ideal man? But why should you ask me such a question? Eh? Who gave

mother impetus to ask me such a foolish question? What gave you the audacity to ask your sweet mother such a senseless question? (8)

Her regret knows no bounds when Mr. Brown, a political colleague expresses his disappointment at the filthy, unventilated and congested nature of the buildings in Madam Omeaku's household.

Brown: ... I had a rough time finding this place. The houses must have been numbered by someone with a peculiar way of counting. The whole place is so congested. And the inhabitants look like hungry folk. The whole place is filthy and

Madam: You see that is what it takes to marry a bush man for a husband. (9)

Her disregard for her husband is as a result of her great desire for money and comfort. She shows ingratitude to her husband who started a business with his gratuity of thirty –five years spent as a primary school teacher. Madam Omeaku creates an image of an irresponsible wife and wayward mother. Nwabueze's satirizes politicians like Madam Omeaku whose major aim of being a parliamentarian or a leader is to enrich themselves and their generations to come no matter what it takes. She is not perturbed about her daughter's happiness or safety when she encourages her to become a prostitute, just like she did to her first daughter, so that she gains favour from her colleagues.

Get-rich quick becomes the desire of these politicians who believes that politics alleviates them from poverty. Mr Brown's response to Madam Omeaku when he asked for a very chilled drink justifies his aim to be in the parliament.

Brown: Madam, I prefer it on the rocks.

Madam: I'm sorry, Mr Brown. Our fridge is not working. The compressor is bad.

Brown: Too bad! (Sips the drink). That's why you have to support me in my quest for the chairmanship of the purchasing committees of parliament. In a couple of months you'll have enough refrigerators to give as presents to your friends. (10)

A society where ignorance is celebrated and illiterates govern the people. What then will be the fate of such a society? Madam Omeaku sees education as irrelevant and boasted in ignorance. She considers her husband a failure who can't provide for the family. She advocates for whom you know than what you know.

Madam: ... You're an educated man, but you can't even maintain your family. With your education, have you ever

given us a decent life? ... I've worked my way into a position of authority without education.... (20)

Mr. Omeaku feels disappointed at his wife's behaviour. He wonders why a roadside food seller should become one of the country's lawmakers. He frowns at the lawmakers who encourages prostitution and contributes to the malfunctioning of the family system. Her victory over Mr. Barrister Umehto become a member of the house, indicates what money can do and how election is conducted in the country. She emerged victorious with the assistance of MrAsili, her campaign manager, who convinces the crowd and later throws money at them. Hypocrisy is demonstrated in the play by Rev. Jossy. He is not really a priest but is given a title to earn credibility from the voters. Some religious leaders are only concerned about their welfare, not even about the people's salvation. To earn the people's trust, they give themselves noble titles thereby deceiving and defrauding the masses. According to Mr. Brown,

Brown: Yeah, Prof. Prof. He was a factory worker in London. We asked him to take that title in order to make our political party look intellectual. You see, our people are obsessed with titles. He doesn't have a certificate. (11)

This is corruption. The masses are deceived with an intention to exploit them. Rev. Jossy and Dr. Parkers are men of integrity who are against corruption. They represent some good leaders who yearn for a better nation but are rather blown out like tiny flame. In other words, whosoever stands in the way of these leaders or oppose their intentions are forcefully arrested or silenced forever as seen in the play. "And after the Presidential press conference, we shall arrange for their replacement. They are going to be put out of circulation for a very long time". (92). In the play, their corrupt colleagues deceive them by giving them a wrong time and collecting the minute book from Mr. Otobo who gets carried away by Nkechi and her friends. This leads to Madam Hoha being the new secretary. A secretary who can't read nor write, but is rather helped by Habanero in the pronunciation of some words.

The parliament, a place to run the affairs of the nation, becomes a hall of touts. Parliamentarians of low integrity and class, who delight in abusing, tongue lashing and even fighting themselves. Madam Omeaku is seen holding Dr. Parker's coat while he struggles to free himself (46). The question is: Is this what should be done in a parliament? Important issues are not discussed for solutions to be proffered. Rather, they discuss their personal and family problems, practice fetish rites, allocate unnecessary allowances and vacation fees and so many other meaningless things that lack substance. An oath is sworn by the parliamentarians so that no member shall expose their corrupt practices. Habanero states the condition of the oath sworn.

Habanero: It's concluded. Now, let us repeat what we have sworn before Ogbunani. 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.(59)

Two billion naira is signed by the speaker of the parliament, Mr. Habanero, for inconvenience allowances, purchase of expensive clothes and hiring of music group for the thanksgiving service. How can a nation grow or develop when money is spent on selfish desires and needs of these leaders appointed by the people to lead them. A parliament that lacks decorum to discuss important issues. Is that a parliament?

The playwright mocks these leaders who delight in sleeping around with young girls thereby encouraging immorality and prostitution. It is very appalling that these parliamentarians encourage this illicit act, pay huge sum of money to these girls and even accord some positions to some of them who didn't merit it. The likes of Nkechi, who becomes the president's press secretary because of her mother's conviction and immoral lifestyle. Their plan of making Madam Omeaku the secretary is made concrete with Nkechi distracting Mr. Otobo and making him come late, coupled with the difference in their meeting time. While planning to honour the thanksgiving invitation from Members of St. Bottle's church, Rev. Jossy inquisitively asks about the 'girls', with Mr. Brown giving asoothing answer to his question with Madam Omeaku supporting his answer. He expresses thus:

Jossy: What about the girls? How do you plan to procure them for the party?

Brown: Thank you for that Reverend. The Chief of Protocol, whose responsibility this is, has already taken care of that. All he has requested from the committee is ten air-conditioned vehicles and a modest sum of one million naira fuel the vehicles to collect senior girls from University campuses, and take them back after the party.

Madam: ... Furthermore, my daughter, Nkechi, has been contracted to bring the younger generation of aspiring senior girls, the young school leavers, popularly known as Jambites. We're yet to receive their estimate. (85)

The play also ridicules the "poor man" who seizes to criticize corrupt leaders when given a piece of the "national cake". Mr. Omeaku is a typical example. He becomes subtle and meek and respects his wife even stooping to the level of running errands for her. He doesn't criticize or condemn the government

any longer and so is not concerned about others. In Madam Omeaku's conversation with Mr. Brown, she narrates thus:

Madam: Are you telling me? My husband is a typical example. Since he started cruising in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes, and living in a large estate, he has learnt to respect me. Now he treats me like a queen, and his family members believe I'm the best thing that happened to them. (102)

Madam Omeaku laments over the state of the universities in the country, deeming it unfit for her children to attend. Yet, she is a parliamentarian, a leader, a lawmaker. What an irony! She boasts that by being a member of the parliament, she has acquired houses in choice locations in the country, and can afford long holidays in choice spots in any part of the world. Revolutionary actions are taken by agitators, who storm the parliament and round up the parliamentarians as they attempt to escape from the building. This group of militants rush into the House and ties the Honorable members while singing war songs. These youth patiently wait for the government to alleviate poverty and create a better nation but rather their hopes are dashed. The University system suffers neglect by these leaders who show no interest in providing infrastructures, putting an end to recurrent strikes, extortion, curbing secret societies as well as the general management of these universities. Rather, they prefer to send their children abroad to study. Madam Omeaku, is a typical example.

EsiabaIrobi's *Hangmen Also Die* narrates the ordeal of people of Izon state. The play exposes the tragedy of unemployed youth, an exploited environment, the suppression of the poor and the common man, corrupt leaders and their practices and an unjust society. Set in the Niger Delta in an imaginary Izon State, the play narrates the tragic story and experiences of Nigeria nation after colonization.

The Nation is faced with corruption, suppression and oppression from the haves', leaders, the rich and the privileged. Obviously, an adverse effect is expected, as an action leads to another. The youth become violent as they are unemployed, helpless and confused. Instead of granting them jobs, the 'Big Men' use them as instruments to fight their political enemies. They indulge in stealing and other destructive activities. The people of Izon State experienced poverty, hunger and death. Blessed with oil, one of the natural resources that is currently the mainstay of the economy, this region suffers exploitation and extortion which constitute in a substantial dimension, retardation of healthy prospects and gradual imbalance of the eco-system in its entirety. The water, air, fauna and flora are gravely affected in all ramifications, with human beings not being an exemption. Compensation fees, though very little are given to these leaders who should distribute them equally to the affected

victims and the people in general. But, rather these leaders spend it on their selfish desires and wants. Chief Erekosima, is a typical example of a corrupt leader who isn't considerate but is entirely self-centered. Three million naira is given to him but rather he gives one million naira to the councilors in Kalabari Local Government, another one million to the chairmen of all the local government and the rest in renovating the palace, the coronation party, paying his children's school fees and bribing his god-son PeketuluboDaminagbo, the Chief Superintendent at Prison Headquarters, Port Harcourt. This bribe is to placate some eminent citizens from his Local Government Area, who were threatening to write petitions to the Federal Government when they heard that he confiscated the compensation money. He prefers to send his children to study abroad than in the local universities in the country. His response goes thus:

Erekosima: The standard of education in this country has fallen. ...so badly that the only things our universities produce are criminals, hooligans, armed robbers, thieves, villains, cut-throats, hangmen, like you. (114)

What an irony! This man was a parliamentarian of the first republic and an ex-senator of the second republic and an aspiring gubernatorial candidate. These leaders are not concerned about improving the educational sector in their country, but rather send their children abroad to study. Chief Erekosima understands politics to be the art of survival (self-oriented) to him; morality does not come into it. These corrupt leaders are full of pride and insensitive to the plight of the poor masses seeing them as 'creatures of the swamp', 'crabs', 'periwinkles' and 'mudskippers'.... A definition Chief Erekosima gave.

Ibiaye, a native of Amakalaka becomes a victim of the oil explosion. He becomes blind after he swam in a river which he didn't know was dangerous. This he has done to save his life and that of his family while fleeing from his village. He narrates to Tamara, Orusoso and Sotonye, the Chief's wives during the coronation ceremony:

Ibiaye: It was one morning, we woke up to see the sea heaving. The sea was roaring, its face black with anger. On it's blue surface was something black. Something thick and pungent, something like mud. But it was oily, oily like petroleum jelly. It surged like lava from the armpit of the ocean until it embalmed our little creeks. Covered it. Conquered it. Cordoned off the mouth of the fresh water spring from which we daily drink. Our plants began to die. Our roots to rot. Our seeds shriveled. ...So we swam. On the shore. But little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the film of rancid crude oil where we saw our faces as we swam. ... On the first day my eyes were only itching. The next day I scratched throughout the

night. Three days later, I could no longer see the sunlight. My eyelids were swollen. And my hosts said the nearest hospital was at Port Harcourt. And where was the money for the speed boat fare to Port Harcourt? And where was the money for the hospital bill? (97)

Similarly, the oil explosion has negative effect on aquatic animals, farmlands, plants, water, making it unsafe to drink and even on human beings as it leads to the death of many. Families are displaced and many are rendered homeless. Ibiaye's sons are employed by the foreign companies to plant the mines in the bottom of the sea and they later died in action. It is pertinent to note that menial and demeaning jobs are only fit for the indigenes or natives of the land. One of Ibiaye's sons dies of a ruptured hernia while trying to plant a large iron grid into the swamp.

Dimeari, the young graduate yearns to join the Suicide Squad. He believes joining the gang will be revenge to the society that denied him a right to good living by keeping him unemployed. The suicide squad is made up of seven unemployed graduates amongst whom are masters degree holders, a doctorate degree holder and an ex-policeman. They revolt against the injustice meted on them. They believe that revolution must be on terrorism, violence, bloodshed and terror not until Tamara, Dimeari's mother confronts and challenges to divert their energies into fighting a social cause that will bring economic liberation to the oppressed masses of Izon state. She convinces them to rise against Chief Erekosima and retrieves the compensation that is for all. She further stresses:

Tamara: Why then are you hiding here among these cowards. These rejects of the earth. These mudskippers. These periwinkles. Your mates in other parts of the world are guerilla fighters, fighting for the liberation of their country. Haven't you heard of the Red Brigade of Italy who kidnapped their Prime Minister and murdered him because he could not find them jobs? ... young men dying for their land. Here you hide in the bush and burgle people's houses in the night. Petty thieves. If you are destined to be thieves why don't you become big time thieves instead of pickpockets picking the fleas from the armpits of the poor. A man has three million naira belonging to you in his house and you are here choking on crumbs of bread. What kind of young men are you? (85)

Tamara is seen as very brave and a revolutionary who with the help of the suicide squad kidnapped Chief Erekosima, who represents other leaders. Literally, these leaders hang the masses daily with suffering, oppression and pain and so the suicide squad's decision to hang Chief Erekosima on behalf of

other leaders is a clear expression that one day they too will feel the pain being meted on the masses and will also be hung.

Yekinni, the hangman on discovering that he is being used by the government, decides not to kill the suicide squad members even if it requires being sacked. Formerly a fisherman, Yekinni believes his new position as a warden will change his poor status. But the case is the reverse when he gets to Port-Harcourt and becomes a hangman while being paid a meager sum of ₦198. This is not enough to cater for him and his family. His stubbornness and disobedience towards the warden, Doctor and the Chief Superintendent is a form of revolution against the corrupt system of governance and signifies his total resolve for justice not minding the consequences. It is pertinent to note that corruption doesn't just exist in the government or among authorities but also among the enforcers of the law. The collection of money from Chief Erekosima by Chief Superintendent Peketulubo Daminagbois a clear instance of the reality. Their responsibility to curb corruption and crime is reversed and most times remains a fallacy. When bribe is collected, the guilty is set free while the innocent suffers and wallows in pain and anguish.

African writers generally reflect on various aspects of human experiences and project a vision towards the amelioration of the harsh living conditions of the people. This is a continuous effort to stop environmental degradation specially geared towards ending the marginalization of the native inhabitants.

Conclusion

An early response to the cry of redemption geared towards curbing this menace that has eaten and is still eating deep into the fabrics of the society will be the beginning of freedom, economic development and growth of every nation. This remains the role of writers who are concerned about the general wellbeing of the masses, country and the world at large. Corruption leads to insubordination and injustice, which tragically leads to violence that invariably has death or long suffering as its resultant end.

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