

SOLO DRAMA AND THE ETHOS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN 21 CENTURY NIGERIA: A FOCUS ON MBAJIORGU AND BINEBAI

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Abstract

Solo drama as a subgenre of drama is different from stand-up comedy, performance poetry and monologue in poetry. It is usually a full-fledged drama. It is one-actor oriented where the lone actor takes the risk of taking up all the roles in the theater and still achieves the total effects of theater on the audience. The above is nothing but a sole proprietorship situated in the ethos of entrepreneurship for self-survival. The solo actor as an entrepreneur takes all the decisions in the whole performance all alone and in addition to the functions of art guns for self-preservation especially in this 21 Century Nigeria where corporate existence is facing bleak future. This paper focused on Mbajiorgu and Binebai as examples. Keywords: one-man theatre, entrepreneurship, morality.

Introduction

Solo drama, no doubt, is nothing but a fictionalized story about life dramatized on stage by only one actor who represents all other characters in front of audience. That definition is confirmed by scholars like Patris Parvis in his *Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* who defines solo drama as a “play with single character or at least a single actor who may take on several roles. And that such plays focus on one individual and explore his innermost motivations, subjectivity and lyricism... (6) In comparison with the usual multiple characters orientation, Parvis’ definition of solo drama is in the opposition. Parvis’ enunciation of solo drama reminds us of the history of solo drama that started with one actor called Thespis during the thanks-giving ceremony of the Greek god, Dionysius around 6th Century B.C. Reference to the history of solo drama from Emeka Nwabueze is germane at this point as he affirms that,

..The major activity of the vintage season was to assemble to give thanks to the god, Dionysus... In the middle of this presentation of activity one of the chorus members mounted the altar stone assumed the role of the god about whose activities the chorus had assembled to recount. Stepping out of himself and assuming a character... this sole actor impersonated and imitated the hero instead of singing about him... the man who performed this historic act was Thespis, the Greek artist credited with the discovery of drama... the first actor... the first writer of tragedy. (11-12)

This article among other things, contemplates how drama with its recorded beginning in solo dramatic art is now overshadowed by multi-cast orientation creating the impression that solo theatre or performance has never been there before. As Nwabueze argues,

Soon after this marvelous and innovative performance, other Greek artists began to imitate the performance aesthetics of this extraordinary artist (Thespis)... since then, this art has grown considerably, acquired different forms and has come to mean different things to different people. (12)

In analyzing the trajectories of solo drama down to our present day Nigeria which the solo actor finds as better drama alternative for survival, Nwabueze adds that it was not until 18 Century that,

The earliest example of monodrama was created ... and it is entitled *Pygmalion* by a playwright named Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But we must note that it was at the

beginning of the 20th century that great actors reduced multi-cast plays to the vision of one character ... (325)

Just like the prodigal son, the 21 Century Nigeria solo actor in his solo drama enterprise responds to the clarion call of the socio- economic and artistic realities of his days for self-continuity. The 21 Century Nigeria solo actor in his Avant-garde / theatre of revolt decides to reclaim, assert himself in the scheme of things by using his solo drama business to campaign against corruption, bad leadership, social vices and then for money making which is not in discordant with the meaning of morality since morality includes making money genuinely. The 21 Century Nigeria solo actor may have suffered unemployment, neglect, leadership failure, negative effects of corona virus and economic stiffening in his immediate society and is now left with nothing than his bare body as an actor.

In such situation above, the voice of Jerzy Grotowsky re-echoes in him, reminding him to reject the toga of “rich theatre” and opts for the cutting down “all non-essential scenery, costumes, and props to create the so-called poor theatre where the only focus was the unadorned actor”. Such voice also reminds him of the most essential tools in theatre which are his body and at least one person as audience thus,

can the theatre exist without costumes and sets? Yes, it can. Can it exist without music to accompany the plot? Yes, it can. Can it exist without lighting effects? Of course. And without a text? Yes; the history of the theatre confirms this. In the evolution of the theatrical art, the text was one of the last elements to be added. (983)

Flowing from the above, it means that the solo actor even with only his bare body can use it to create employment by indulging in the practice of solo drama to make money. Thus, Grotowski asks, “but can the theatre exist without actors? I know of no example of this”. The above voice trickles more and more thus, “can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance...” (982) Now, with the revival of solo drama in the 21st Century Nigeria, this article conceptualizes this one-actor theatre to a large extent as one-actor business with the fundamentals of entrepreneurship as observed in the works of Mbajiorgu and Binebai. As a solo actor left with the barest theatrical props but in most cases, only with his bare body, usually explores the “empty space” with his skills in improvisation is empowered to stage his presentation anywhere.(Grotowski,983)

It should be noted that solo drama enjoys the privilege of being performed anywhere whether in a kitchen, car, beer parlour, bedroom etc. Therefore, anywhere can serve for solo actor to make money. So, the orientation of “empty space” in solo theatre encourages solo drama to be staged just anywhere. The above also reminds us of the meaning of setting according to M. H Abrams and G. G Harpham when they argue that,

the overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical times and social circumstances in which its action occurs, the setting of a single episode or scene within the work is the particular physical location in which it takes place.(330)

The above concept of “empty space” in solo drama enterprise makes mono drama extremely mobile that it can actually take place anywhere. In situating the meaning of solo drama proper in the domain of entrepreneurship, it simply means that the lone actor takes the risk of taking up all the roles in the theater, and with his minimalist orientation, reduces the theatrical props to the barest, in most cases, his body is what he is left with thereby reducing cost and maximizing outputs. Yet, he still achieves the total effects of theater on the audience with the aim of self-survival. What is observed from the above is that in solo drama, the solo actor is heavily influenced by the philosophy of Minimalism and in his entrepreneurial tendencies, solely decides bearing in mind the risk as per the success or failure of any work to be invented or among the existing written works of art, to be re-invented into the sub-genre: solo drama. For Aham Anyanwu, the followings must be present in any entrepreneurship and they are: proprietorship, decision making, innovation, risk, profit and loss (89).

Therefore, an entrepreneur from a general meaning is someone who owns, organizes, invents or re-invents a business endeavor for self-survival and takes up the risk connected thereto. So, in considering the four functions of literature and more which the lone actor with the fundamentals of entrepreneurship in his solo drama outputs must attain, we think towards the popular argument between Socrates and Plato. For Socrates, art should be for art's sake while for Plato, art should be for morality sake. Jasper Onuekwusi corroborates the functions of literature thus, "literature [art] provides enjoyment, entertainment, information, education and excitement" (1). In the two arguments above, Plato's is very much received and has formed the kernel in literature [art] till today. Similarly, among the four or five functions of literature [art] today, the aspect of morality seems to be the most canvassed.

Morality according to S.L Salwan and U. Narang means, "belief or ideas about right and wrong, good and evil and about how people should behave. It shows the degree to which something is acceptable" (233). If we push the meaning of morality further in the 21 Century Nigeria, it invariably includes the idea of making money and making such money legitimately. No doubts, the conceptualization of making money genuinely is highly acceptable in all human societies. Hence, the solo actor in his solo drama endeavor is an entrepreneur very much conscious of genuine self-survival as part of morality in his society.

As a lone actor in his orientation of theatre of revolt who is free to experiment with ideas, his one-man theatre now encourages his creative power of the individual's survival in the economic mess like ours. Now, in the spirit of an entrepreneur, he begins to decide which work to be created, re-created or better still, invented or re-invented at the same time, striving to achieve morality. The Nigerian solo dramatists like Mbajiorgu and Binebai with their entrepreneurial tendencies, create a one –man theatre respectively. In the ethos of entrepreneurship, Binebai takes the risk to create his one –man theatre when he tells us that,

I tried to establish a pattern of solo drama tradition that has its roots in the Ijaw cultural background and other ethnic groups in the Niger- Delta. This tradition is drawn from the story telling tradition of the Ijaw people. Stories are told in Ijaw land to dance, music and mime yet the story teller does not enter into dialogue with those who sing and dance... (393)

The entrepreneurial skills in Binebai's art are showcased as witnessed in the above when he creates and stages the one – man theatre that has the blend of Ijaw oral tradition. On the other hand, Greg Mbajiorgu in his innovativeness creates and performs the first full-fledged one-man theatre in Nigeria, appropriating his Igbo tradition. In doing so, Mbajiorgu tells us that

... I listened to folk tales told by my mother... my elder sister thrilled me with moonlight tales. ...I grew to love folk tales... All these experiences have no doubt contributed to my development as a solo performer... In that part of Igbo land, we have notable minstrels... (338)

Mbajiorgu on further comment about his invention of the first full- fledged one- man theatre in Nigeria as he thrives to attain morality in his society, tells us that, "You now understand why the history of monodrama in Nigeria is traced to my experimental solo text – *The Prime Minister's Son* (1991), a much later development" (394).

The Prime Minister's Son

(A cemetery beside a local church. On stage is PRIME MINISTER'S SON in a completely tattered outfit dirging as he advanced towards his mother's tombstone.)

PRIME MINISTER'S SON: (*Dirging.*)

Keduz' Ife m g' erne? Uw'agwu go m' ike Keduz' Ife m g' erne?
Uw'agwu go m' ike Abum onye na-enwero onye ona-echekuwbe
Keduz' ife m g' erne? Uw' agwu go m' ike Keduz' ife m g' eme?

Uw' agwu go m' ike Keduz' ife m g' eme? Uw' agwu go m' ike What shall I do? I am tired of life What shall I do?' I am tired of life I am one who has no one to turn to What shall I do?(1-3)

(PRIME MINISTER'S SON cries passionately as he stoops beside his mother's tombstone.)

As we are, so she was. As she is, so shall we be.

(Sits beside the tombstone) But why, mother? Why?

Why did you leave me this way? Now that you are gone,

what is the essence of my life? Come and take me along with you. Mama, please come... (11-12)

The above presentation is obviously a one –man theatre where the solo actor through improvisation could stage his drama anywhere just like in the above by merely assembling heap of sand in form of grave and then places a cross on it which serves as tomb of the late PRIME MINISTER'S SON's mother. The one –man theatre continues when the PRIME MINISTER'S SON continues thus, *(Dirging in tears as he turns, facing the audience.)*

Keduz' ife m g' eme? Uw' agwu go m' ike .Keduz' ife m g' eme? Uw' agwu go m' ike.

My friends, and countrymen, my sorrowful and melancholic tale goes beyond my tears of misery. For more than sixteen years, Ezinma, Emenike and I lived peacefully, a happy family, until last year... (5-8)

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as EZINMA: Sir, thank you very much.

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as PRIME MINISTER: You're welcome. What's your name?

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as EZINMA; Ezinma!

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as PRIME MINISTER: Ezinma, you're very beautiful.

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as BLIND WOMAN: Thank you my son. May your days be long! (12-14)

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as BLIND WOMAN: I lost my eyes and my husband during the civil war. Since then I have been roaming the streets with my only child, begging for alms...

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as PRIME MINISTER: You mean this beautiful girl has no real hope of surviving?

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as BLIND WOMAN: We're war victims. My daughter and I are among the few survivors of the tragic air raid that almost wiped out the entire Umuala village during the Nigeria/Biafra civil war.

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as PRIME MINISTER: Why didn't you seek refuge in your maiden home?

PRIME MINISTER'S SON as BLIND WOMAN: Such a place does not exist. In the above, we notice a complete one –man theatre where the solo actor takes the risk of playing all the roles in the play by impersonating all other characters which he achieves through ventriloquism in order to reduce cost and maximize outputs for self-survival. For ventriloquism, Mbajiorju maintains that,

Ventriloquism is a well-known mimetic technique that was used by the ancient Greek soloists for interpreting multiple roles. This vocal characterization technique required by the single actor who is interpreting multiple roles can only be appreciated in a performance and not in a text. (67)

In his enunciation of this language technique in every one -man theater just like Mbajiorju above, C.B Davis argues that,

Masked actors, puppeteers, storytellers, monolinquists and other performers who signify multiple identities with the voice usually rely on systems of difference that reveal cultural codes for class, ethnicity, gender and socially typed personality of the speaker... (qtd in Mbajiorju, 67-68)

Davis is believed to have marked out two types of vocal modulation that are associated with ventriloquism namely: vocal transformation and acoustic perspective thus,

Vocal transformation designates a change of voice that is in contrast either to the speaker's normal voice or other assumed or imitated voices, while acoustic perspective is the principle behind not only the voice-illusion or the distance ventriloquism but also the auditory signification of space and movement in a sign system. (qtd in "background", 67-68)

Similarly, monopolylogue which is another language technique that enables the solo actor to achieve believability in his one- man theatre is defined by Charles Mathew as, "One man having the monopoly of words in a series of dialogue with himself". (qtd in "background", 67). The above mentioned ventriloquism and monopolylogue are in sharp contradiction with dialogue which usually applies in the normal multi-cast plays is explained by Nwabueze thus,

the word dialogue derives from the Greek word "to converse" This means that there ought to be at least two speakers for dramatic dialogue to thrive. Dramatic dialogue involves the exchange of speech between two characters, the thoughts of a single character; and conversation between several characters in a play. (104)

Consequently, in this one- man theatre, the lone actor performs all the roles in the play while retaining his part as the protagonist which eventually enables the author to reduce cost and then maximizes profits .In another situation just like Mbajiorju, Binebai in the impulse of entrepreneurship creates a one- man theatre where the theatrical props are reduced to the barest and here only the body of the lone actor is what is left and where all the decision, risk, roles are taken by the solo actor all alone for money making in favour of the author.. Like *The Prime Minister's Son* above, *My Life in the Burning Creeks* showcases the above qualities thus, (*At the public square in Gbaramatu in one of the creeks of the Niger Delta, a dirge ... a fairly tall black skinned youth of about thirty years comes out to the deserted public square. He is wearing a blue jean trousers and a faded T-shirt*):

PEREWARE:

What does life mean to you (Pointing to someone in the audience) Enjoyment? Does it mean the same thing to me? The endowment of life is partial. Some people are born with silver spoon some have silver spoon entrusted unto them. And there are others born with silver spoon. But the gods deny them the right and privilege to feed with the silver spoon. If life is not partial, why is it fair to some people and foul to some others? Yes!...

(*Physical effects of fire flames*)

For many years my people stood against Subjugation. One day, three low flying helicopters came to my land and we all gave a wave of welcome as our kingdom was in a Festive mood...(56-58)

(*Faint sound of helicopters as Pereware waves briefly and stops short...*)

Oh! My God.What has come over me? I have started this story wrongly. Please bear with me. Let me start from where the creator of my story started it.

(*A brief song to usher in the narration. The song continues in the background, fading progressively as Pereware speaks*)

I graduated from one of Nigeria's prestigious universities and was posted to Kano for National Youth Service. My friend, Abubakar, from Sokoto State who read Islamic and Arabic Studies was posted to Delta, My own state, and was further posted to Chevron at Escravos where he served and was retained there at the Public and Corporate Affairs unit. I returned from Northern Nigeria after service without a job offer. On getting home, I thought I could get a better job in the petroleum industry where I have a sound degree and a full body of knowledge... Year in and year out I applied. But no positive result came. . . .(7)

(*Physical effects of fire flames*)

For many years my people stood against subjugation. One day, three low flying helicopters came to my land and we all gave a wave of welcome as our kingdom was in a Festive mood...

(Faint sound of helicopters as Pereware waves briefly and stops short...)

Oh! My God. What has come over me? I have started this story wrongly. Please bear with me.
Let me start from where the creator of my story started it.

PEREWARE: But Abubakar, how do I make it when I don't have a Godfather? I need the job, would you take me to a godfather who can offer me the job?

PEREWARE as ABUBAKAR: The bitter truth is that you need to become a Muslim and truly bear a Muslim name before the assistance can come.

PEREWARE: What? I did not bargain in life to change my religion
And my biological identity because of a job. This is a devastating experience.

(Pereware soliloquizes)...

PEREWARE as WENETUA: It is obvious, Pereware. History reveals that this area has struggled for social justice consistently. A history of political activism that dates back to the 18th Century. Our ancient leaders who opposed the colonialists were dethroned, killed or sent abroad to die. ... like King Jaja of Opobo, King Frederick Koko, the Ofrima Lekeleke of Nembe... The struggle against corporate irresponsibility, state corruption, balkanization, poverty, neo-colonization and bio-regional damage has transformed our land of beauty into a roaring and burning zone...

PEREWARE as WENETUA: Pereware! What are you doing at home?
Let's go out, I have found a job for us.

PEREWARE: A job! Hope you are not kidding?

PEREWARE as WENETUA: This is real man!

PEREWARE: That's good news, Wenetua. May you be blessed for removing my sorrow.

PEREWARE as WENETUA: What are we friends for? Let's go before others take our chances.

PEREWARE: I left my mother in the care of Rita and went with Wenetua to the arena. You see, the long quest for job did not offer me the wisdom to ask Wenetua what kind of job was available for me until we got to the arena. I realized that it was the job of a political thug that I was for. Yes, it was election season and politicians needed all the support to win elections. I said to my friend: Wenetua, is this the job you asked me to come and do?

PEREWARE as WENETUA: This is the only available one for now. Your sitting at home won't put food on your table or give you money to solve your numerous problems and challenges of life. Reason with me, my friend. Your mother is sick. We need to raise money anyhow to save her life...

PEREWARE: At the arena, we were attacked by political opponents. In fact we were at the middle of a deadly game of survival, so we threw stones in self defence. That day I returned home exhausted but also smiled home with some good money to take care of my mother's health. I was happy and I shouted aloud: with money life is goooooood! No wonder, the Holy bible says "money answereth all things..."

Just like what we encounter in *The Prime Minister's Son* above, we equally witness another one –man theatre where the solo actor applies the technique of improvisation and is able to stage his drama anywhere just like in the above by simply causing a physical effects of fire flames in the open market square to conjure a typical Niger –Delta environment with gas flaring in the minds of the audience. The simple realization of fire flames on such open place as the stage is enough to make the audience suspend their disbelief that they are actually not in the Niger-Delta area.

Flowing from the above, we notice that the protagonist assumes all the roles in the play by impersonating all other characters, and at the same time, retains his role all in the bid to reduce cost and then as one man business, creates employment for him in order to make money. Such one –man theatre created in the reductionist tradition no doubts exists with inherent tendencies mainly to make money mixed with arts in the hands of solo dramatists like Mbajjorgu and Binebai.

Conclusion

So far, one notices that solo drama as a sub-genre of drama in our society today seems to be a re-discovery in the world of drama. It is not a staggering point to say that such one-man theatre fashioned in line with the ideal of “less is more” otherwise known as Minimalism, among other things, is recreated in the impulse of entrepreneurship seriously needed in the contemporary Nigeria in consonant with the meaning of morality in our society. Such one-man theatre as noticed above operates with the tendencies of profit making for self-survival among other aims in the hands of solo dramatists like Mbajiorgu and Binebai. It is less expensive to cast, mobile and suitable for only one person to carry out thereby serving as readily means of engagement for theatre practitioners amid serious unemployment in Nigeria today.

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