

EXAMINING NIGERIA POLITICAL CULTURE USING IGBO SATIRICAL POEMS: A LITERARY TOOL FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

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Abstract

The study looks at the many challenges the Nigerian populace go through in the hands of bad ignorant leaders. This means that this paper is not about discussing political regimes rather it is about x-raying the dividends of bad governance that the citizens of Nigeria are already used to. After 1999, when true democracy and better standard of living were least felt in Nigeria, some Nigerians may not comfortably say if they still know what dividends of democracy are. Yet new leaders are elected at every given time with promises of making the situation better for their citizens. Politicians come with empty promises just to be given a chance to loot the country's economy. These promises are speedily forgotten immediately elections commence; not even after elections. This paper tries to reflect on several times Igbo writers had used their works to satirize the political culture of the country with hopes that politicians would change for good. To do this better, the descriptive method of analysis is adopted. It is discovered that if a greater number of political leaders in the country read these satirical works, there will be great changes in the way Nigeria is governed, after all the major role of satire is to right a wrong. It is recommended that political leaders find time to read write-ups about their government from the people they rule, organize series of *vox-pop* from time to time in order to hear from the people and then know how best to better their lives.

Keywords: Nigeria, Political, Culture, Satire, Igbo writers

Introduction

It may be safe to say that most Nigerian citizens may not be able to say exactly when last they felt a sense of belonging as citizens of Nigeria. In some countries, citizens are cared for by the government. Some unemployed persons are paid a certain amount of money from time to time while other basic amenities are provided for them too. This is not to give validity to unemployment but a way government uses to let its citizens know that it's the government's responsibility to provide jobs, at least to a larger extent but where it fails to provide same; it gives citizens something to hold on to. One may argue that the population of these countries cannot be compared to that of Nigeria hence the reason not to even consider such as an option in Nigeria. However, the Nigeria citizens still deserve some basic amenities from the government. After all, the resources of the Nation belong to the people.

In Nigeria, sadly, most times nothing is given on merit. Education and housing which form the basic aspects of the needs of the citizens are never the rights of the people rather they are for the privileged, those who can afford it from their own sweat and mainly those who have mighty people in mighty places. The citizens labour to provide their needs themselves. Surprisingly and ironically, these citizens still pay a certain amount to the government which is supposed to care for them. These payments are regarded as internally generated revenue for the government. It makes up the economy of the government. In fact, a state is measured by how much it is able to generate either monthly or annually. The civil servants are not left out. They pay their taxes from any little money earned; in fact, before a civil servant gets his or her monthly salary, the tax for that month would have already been deducted. Tax payments are supposed to be a way for the government to generate money for infrastructural development. However, this is not the case in Nigeria. Political leaders divert these monies once collected. Some governors even appoint miscreants as task force members to help collect these payments from mostly traders. The result is that the money collected end up in the wrong hands and the infrastructure to be developed remains under developed or not developed. Citizens go as far as constructing roads, markets, bridges and other basic amenities to lessen their sufferings. These are also amenities the political leaders promise to provide if elected into power. No doubt, there are a handful of slightly honest politicians who at the least deliver on thirty percent of their manifesto but the weight

of the many politicians who do not remember their promises once elected not to talk of delivering on them hugely out-weighs the good ones. As a result, the citizens see no good in their leaders. In fact, any Nigerian leader who appears to be genuine would have the citizens asking if actually he or she is human. This is because the people are used to hardship caused by corrupt political leaders.

To expose and reawaken the spirit of the citizens to rise up to the challenge of taking back their country, literary writers device the use of satire in their works. This is to tell the citizens clearly what is happening and to make them understand that the politicians will not stop in their lootings except the people stop them. This study shall then look at these behaviours of these political leaders in some Igbo satirical poems.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the functionalism theory as its theoretical framework. It is part of the socialism theory deeply rooted in the works of Emile Durkheim during the end of the 19th century. Durkheim was interested in knowing how the various sections of the society work together to ensure that the society stands. This means that every section of the society has a stipulated duty it performs for the citizens and the society at large. Describing this, Wajim and Shimfe (2020:589) posit:

Functionalism interprets each part of society. Society is more than the sum of its parts, rather each part of the society is functional for the stability of the whole society...the parts all depend on each other for the effective functions of the society as a whole.

This summarizes what a true society should look like. It also stresses indirectly the importance of delegation of duties for effective functioning of all the parts. The stability of the whole society is primary. Unfortunately, this is not the case in a typical Nigeria setting where the elected political leader selects and appoints close relatives, friends and godfathers who do not have the right qualifications into key government positions. A case of putting round pegs in square holes. As a result, the system will collapse because key positions are manned by very incompetent individuals and this will definitely result in total failure of the society and pose a very big problem for another government. So, while other countries are developing their country, Nigeria spends time and resources trying to fix the problem the previous government created and before long it becomes a chain problem. This goes further to create problem for the smooth running of the society and its people at large. Wajim and Shimfe further illustrated how a working society should look like. Thus;

For example, the government or state, provide(s) education for the children of the family, which in turn pays taxes on which the state depends on to keep itself running. The family is dependent upon the school to help children grow up to have good jobs so that they can raise and support their own families. In the process the children become law-abiding, tax paying citizens who in turn support the states. If all goes well, the parts of the society produce order, stability and productivity.

This is a typical functioning society where every section of the society understands its duties and carries them out accordingly. As earlier mentioned, tax is meant for infrastructural development in a civil society but in Nigeria, it is a reserved source of income for a selected privileged few at the detriment of the citizens. Just like Wajim and Shimfe added, ‘...if all goes well, the parts of society produce order, stability and productivity’, the stability of the country depends on the smooth functioning of all the sectors. Of course where every resource is available, stability and productivity will be evident. Sadly, all do/did not go well in Nigeria as the citizens are constantly waking up to new life challenges, ranging from high currency exchange rate, high transportation rate at all levels, general high cost of living, presently scarcity of petroleum products despite being an oil producing country and subsequent removal of fuel subsidy; then surprisingly, scarcity of cash. Functionalism captures the entire stability of the society as dependent on the various sectors in a society. These sectors include the schools, family, churches, age/peer groups etc. These sectors including the family, are supposed to be handled by competent hands, if not so the entire system will collapse. This is exactly the case of Nigeria.

Nigeria political culture as earlier mentioned is pitiable. This is as a result of mostly having incompetent personnel handling very sensitive positions. An average Nigerian with an average level of expertise

sometimes may not be put where he is needed rather a total novice in the field will be 'planted' in that position. This has been the norm in the political setting of Nigeria. Jatula (2019:198) captured it thus;
Access to political office is a privilege not a right. Politics and political decision making are the business of politicians and not of the public. Although the public expect politics to enhance human development, in reality, such expectation are largely unmet.

This in particular is the anchor base of this study. The empty promises politicians make just to get themselves in power. Ignorantly the people do not know that they actually hold the power to deny these corrupt politicians access to power but unfortunately they have been brainwashed. Instead these politicians go the extra miles to make sure that they get in power for fear of becoming insignificant in the political circle. Citing Anazodo, Agbonu and Uche in Jatula (2019:199);

Nigerian elites are unwilling to yield to authority, limit their privilege and curb their power for fear of reprisal and economic backlashes. Politics is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Moving further Jatula explained that some privileged few see politics as a means to amass wealth for personal gains. He said;

Politicians and elites dictate and are not dictated to by public opinion. They reject demand for inclusive and representative politics and as such, retain power for personalized financial gains. It is often the case that politics is used practically.

This is what Wajim and Shimfe mean when they said '... if all goes well...'. Obviously if power is retained in a small political circle, of course the system will collapse. This is the point functionalism tries to uphold. When elected officers reject inclusion of the electorate in the decision making of what concerns them, it shows a total state of anarchy. The electorate will lose faith in the elected and this will threaten the peace of the state. Therefore, it is very important that political leaders allow the elected to have a voice in the affair of the state.

Unfortunately, the opposite is the case. In Nigeria, those who speak out and oppose the high handedness of the government are arrested, jailed or killed. Others will choose to remain mute for fear of facing the same fate. The result is that the system remains the same. In the Igbo culture, there is a popular saying that says, *alụ gbaa afo ọ bụrụ omenala*. This literally means if an anomaly stays for too long, it becomes a norm. Nigerians have experienced bad governance for too long that they no longer see it as a bad situation. They have practically adopted this style of governance to the extent that even if there are genuine politicians with genuine ideas they question if such a person exists. This is a pure case of getting used to a really bad situation. Furthermore Okeke and Ugwu (ND) argued that political leaders have no regard for its citizens even in the constitution. They wrote;

It has been argued in many quarters by Nigerians that the current 1999 constitution which was derived from the 1979 constitution is an apparent lie against Nigeria's citizens as the introductory part of the constitution state 'we' while the citizens of the country were not part of the constitution making process. Rather the constitution was a product of a few persons selected by the military.

This shows that the problems of the citizens of Nigeria lie in the Nigeria constitution. It is clear that those who made the constitution knew exactly what they were doing. It is also not surprising that some of them who were part of the constitution making process as far back as 1979 and 1999 respectively, are still part of the government presently. This means that as long as these people are still in power, the citizens will continue to suffer except if the satirist exposes these hidden facts, in order for the citizens to say, 'enough is enough', only then will these political leaders do the needful'.

Satire as a Positive Literary Tool for Righting Wrongs

Satire has always been a tool used by literary artistes to bring a problem to the fore. It could be a bad behaviour of a particular gender, bad governance and so on. In fact, satire only deals with righting a wrong. It aims to achieve a positive change from a bad situation. Harris (2004:36) explained satire as 'a literary manner, which blends a critical attitude with humour and wait to the end that human institution or humanity may be improved'. This means that satire does not just use harsh words, it also lightens the situation with the use of light words with the singular aim of improving the situation. He

moved further to add that the aim of satire is to focus on the problems in the society. Ngugi (1972:8) upheld;

It is the duty of a satirist to set certain standards of a society and evaluate the society based on these standards. A satirist then lampoons the society when the expected standards are not upheld. This is why satirist is seen as a defender of communal norms and virtues.

This summarizes the role of a satirist and satire itself. It is the mouthpiece of the people. This is to say that a satirist is a member of the society being oppressed to have known how badly the people are treated. Moving further Adenigbe and Alugbin (2020:321) added;

Satire is a means through which prevailing irregularities and moral excess of a person or a group of people, a race, an institution or even a nation are exposed to ridicule. Follies and vices are held up to ridicule by the satirist by unmasking them. Although the subject matter is often comic, its objective is not merely to evoke laughter but laughter for corrective purposes.

Satire while exposing the ills in the society does so in a funny way. This will in turn evoke 'laughter for corrective purposes', that is to say that while it's evoking laughter, it is not just for the concerned to laugh and move away rather to laugh and work towards solving the problem at hand. This is why Adenigbe and Alugbin add that the aim of satire is to focus on the problem in the society. On the other hand Abrams (1957:153) said,

Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it scorn. It is different from comic in that comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire...uses laughter as a weapon against a butt existing outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation or even the whole race of mankind.

Again, it has been established that satire evokes laughter even as it draws attention to the problem of the society. Mbunda-Nekang (2016:365) agreed that satire is the use of irony, sarcasm or the like to denounce or deride vice and folly. Adding to this, Hight (1962:26) summarized by adding that satire destroys individuals and groups in order to benefit society as a whole. This means that satire uses comedy and scorn to right a wrong.

Analysis

It has been established that the Nigerian people are used to bad governance. They live at the mercy of the politicians. Its citizens provide basic amenities for themselves even though the politicians promise them heaven on earth at the point of election. Some of them say what cannot even be possible even with all the resources needed for that at their disposal. Yet, the people keep believing that the situation will change some day. This section therefore discusses the Nigerian culture as the ills and empty promises of the politicians to the populace. It shall discuss how Igbo literary writers use satire to present these vices with a view of initiating change and bring about a better living condition. Just as Mberede (2020:28) rightly pointed out, 'literature, especially, African literature has been used as tools for social change. This could be done through plays, satirical writings or drama etc'. One of such poems is a poem titled 'Naijiria' in *Ije Uwa*.

Okedjadi in *Ije Uwa* (2003:20-21) described Nigeria as a country with all the resources needed to develop it but for the corrupt politicians, it has remained a dungeon for its own citizens. The author captured its beauties thus:

Naijiria
Obodo mmanu anu
Mmiri ara ehi na-eru n'ime ya
Akunauba ka Eke ji choo gi mma
Ala oma bukwa ugwu nye gi
Naijiria, obodo oma
Ugegbe Afrika ji ahụ uzo
Ezi umu gi Naija na Benue
Ekunyela anyi mmiri ndu

Nigeria
The Land of honey
Milk flows in it
God beautified you with wealth
Good land is but an honour unto you
Nigeria, a good land
The mirror with which Africa sees
The path of your children Niger and Benue
Have given us water of life.

In the above verse, the author extols the beauty of Nigeria. Its abundant natural resources which could have been enough for even generations to come. The author refers to Nigeria as the 'mirror with which Africa sees'. Africa is a continent. It is bigger than Nigeria, of course has other countries in it. So, for the author to refer to it as 'a mirror for an entire continent' only means that it is exceptional in every sense. However, regardless of its rich endowments, Nigeria has been subjected to bad politics which in turn turned its citizen to slaves in their country. Untold hardship is legitimately a culture for the people. The political promises have almost turned to a popular anthem to the people because they already know what the politicians would say. Okedjadi still captured the scenario this way in the same poem;

... Ndị ọchịchị nchigbu
Unu eteela anyị unyi n'ihu
Fonfoju akpa bụ egwu ọkụkụ na egwu ọgbugba unu
Ndị kama ọ ga-adọ n'ite
Ka ọ dọrọ n'afọ
Chei unu bụ anwunta
Unu amikpọla mmadu ọbara
Nti unu dizi ka nke awọ Ụjuru mmiri afọ.
Afọ unu dizi ka ite mmiri
Onye rie, ọ ga-erifokwara onye ọzọ
Ndị oke ọchịchọ!
Unu hiwere amuma di iche iche
Ọ bụ nke gi?
I nyere ndi ụwa na-atụ n'ọnu aka
Onye ka o rukwaranu aka?
N'akpa unu ka ha bachara
Ndị ọchịchị nchigbu ndoonu!

Bad Leaders
You have Smeared Our Faces with Charcoal
Looting is your anthem
Those who prefer to swallow all
Than allowing others have them
Chai! You are mosquitoes
You have sucked our blood enough
Your cheeks are like that of a frog
That drank too much water
Your bellies are now like a pot of water
He that has eaten, would he keep for another to eat?
Greedy People
You gave different promises
What for?
To help the needy
Who got the help?
They all entered into your pockets
Bad leaders sorry!

The author painted a picture of the sorry state Nigerian leaders have reduced the country to. It is so glaring that even toddlers feel the impact. The author referred to them as ‘mosquito sucking the blood of her citizens’. This connotes the helplessness of Nigerian citizens as is the case of ‘mosquitoes’ on its victim. The verse also points towards the empty promises of the greedy politicians stating that even the share meant for the poor ends up in their pockets. This appears to be the reality of Nigeria. The author likened them to frogs that drank excess water while their bellies are likened to a pot to show how deeply they have squandered public funds. Unfortunately, it is the Nigeria political culture. Furthermore, the author again in another poem titled ‘pòlìtikìs’ (politics) described politics as a concept that corrupts politicians. Okedjāđ (2003:46) summarised politics thus:

Pòlìtikìsì
Nđoròndorò ọchichì!
Egwuregwu nke dī n’ikuku ugbua
O mere ihe daa ụjọ
Egwuregwu nduhie
Onye baa na ya
Ọ mụta ịgha ụgha na ịgho ahụgho
A na-ekwu maka taa
Ọ na-ekwu maka echi
Pòlìtikìsì
Ihe so ubọchi agafe
Ihe so gị karịrị akarị
Nkwafu ọbara na iri ngarị
Okwu ụgha na ịla akụ n’iyi
Politics
Leadership tussle!
The play in the air now
The corrupt one
Deceptive play
Whoever enters into it
Learns to be cunning and treacherous
Always ambitious
Politics
That, which passes by with the day
Accompanied by lots of things
Killings and bribery
Lies and waste of economy

Again, the author captured the political culture of Nigeria. Looting, political assassination, bribery are a few of the many features of the Nigerian political culture. The author sees Nigerian political promises as empty and frail. This she captures when she says ... ihe so ubọchi agafe (that which passes by with the day) Citizens would question electricity that lasts up to eight hours uninterrupted whereas other developed and developing countries are working towards having a permanent electricity. Nigeria, ‘the eye through which Africa sees’ is still battling with having a steady power supply. Sadly, it is the naked truth.

Ifeka in Ifeka, Nsolibe and Ezechukwu (eds) (2010:60) tried to capture Nigerian politics/ leadership as an irony. The author pictures the idea as a bunch of similar and familiar people saying one thing and doing another. In her words,

Ọchìchì
A sị na ọ bụ onye kwuo uche ya
Nđị kwuru uche ha, anya ahụghị ha
Nđị no n’iyi ma were asọ na-asa ihu
Ha si na ihe ga-adị mma
Ma ugbua, ọ bughị otu akụ ilu si ada
Ka o si atọ
... Onye anaghị nsọ ga-eche na ọ dī mma

Mgbe o na-ege redio na televishon
Uzo niile dizi ka ebe a gbara ute
Mmiri pompu na-agba esepu aka ...
Mmanu ugboala adaala n'onu ahia
Ugwu akwukwu buzi n'efu ...
Ego otu nwaanyi akwuna
Na-esoghari ya, na-eti mkpu ochichi
Bu ugu onwa ndi nkuzi mahadam
Mmadu ise ka o na-eri kwa izu
... Ha si na o buri ogaranya
...Biko gwanu ya
O nwee ihe o chezo
N'obi Gogmenti
Ya gaa weghara ya
Na ochichi ya ejula
Ma mmuo ma mmadu afo
Leadership/Governance
They say it is democracy
Those who exercised it, they have not been seen
Those who are in the ocean yet wash their faces with spittle
They said things will be better
But now, not all that glitters is gold
...One who is not close would think that all is well
When one listens to the radio and television
All roads are tarred
Water supply is steady
Price of fuel has reduced
Education is free...
The weekly allowance he gives to the prostitute
Who sings his praise
Is salary for five university lecturers
... They said he is originally rich
... Please tell him
If there is anything he forgot
At the government house
Let him go and take it
Because both the living and the spirits
Are tired of his leadership

This gives a clearer picture of the rich enriching themselves the more syndrome in Nigerian political culture. Most of her leaders are either self-made billionaires or come from a wealthy family. Some are sponsored by billionaires to run for political offices in the country. The result is that they will owe allegiance to the godfathers who facilitated their victory, thereby looting the country's funds to enrich these selected few. The author also cajoled the type of democracy practiced in Nigeria pointing out that people are afraid to speak up since those who did so initially are either kidnapped, arrested or killed hence they are not seen /found. In this state, the looter continues to loot recklessly because no one dares speak up for fear of being killed. There is also the fact that most leaders in the country are involved in philandering and pimping; a situation where someone is contracted to provide the opposite sex for to politicians to satisfy their canal urge even while in office while civil servants in the state and/ or country wallow in penury. They rich-getting richer in politics syndrome is no longer news as earlier stated. Such, is and has always remained the modus operandi of the Nigerian political culture such that the populace would question a political office candidate without a wealthy background. The vice has lasted for a long time, long enough for the Nigerian citizen to begin to view it as a normal occurrence hence her culture. The author therefore recommended that the leader should be told to leave office already as his/her government brought untold hardship on the people. The fact is, when a corrupt leader manages

to leave office, another fairly corrupt leader comes in power and with time, becomes even more corrupt than the predecessor. Such annoyingly is the trend in Nigerian politics.

Another author captured the Nigerian political leaders in a similar way. In the same way, the author uses satire to express dismay at the leaders. Anagor in Ifeka (ed) (2014:19) viewed the leaders like this;

Ndị Ochichi
Oku latriki na-enwufusizi
N'obodo anyị a niile
Okporo ụzọ dīcha nnoo mma...
Umụ akwuwọ na-aguzi akwukwọ n'efu
Ndị ogbenye bizi n'ụlọ nke aka ha
Lezie ka orụ si agbara pụsukọọ
Aka azu buzi akukọ ochie.....
Obodo anyị agbanweela dī mma
Aguu laa kpmkpam...
Ha kwere anyị nkwa
Lezie ka ha si mezu ya n'egbughi oge
Okwu ha na-atọ ilu ilu
The leaders
Electricity is wasting away
In all of this our land
All roads are tarred
Students now study free of charge
The poor now live in their own houses
See how employment is in excess
Bribery is now an old story
Our land has changed for better
Hunger has been eradicated entirely
They made promises to us
See how they fulfilled them without wasting time
Their words taste bitter bitter

Again, this author summarized the contemporary Nigeria political culture as a culture of lies. Presently almost all the promises made by politicians are forgotten immediately after the election and sometimes forgotten before the election begins. They tend to render such promises valueless once they are sure they have successfully secured the masses' trust. The author satirizes these evils in order to draw the public's attention to this scam and enlighten them on the need to be careful in choosing their leaders. It also aims to let the bad politicians know that the people are already aware of their wickedness.

Recommendations

Politicians are also human beings from different family backgrounds and upbringing and as such, they are bound to make certain mistakes here and there. However, political leaders are also bound by the law and the virtue of the political offices they hold to make sure that the people who elected them do not suffer. This is because if they do, they will in turn attack the leaders and before long, there will be dangerous uprisings. At the end, the poor masses are killed, public structures destroyed and then they will eventually be rebuilt with tax payers' money. This will then hinder the development of the society and country. So why not avoid the cause of the problem at all cost? Why not do the right thing and let everyone live in peace? This paper suggests that it is high time citizens began to hold elected officers responsible for their actions. It also suggests that politicians chip out time to listen to the cry of the masses either through satirical publications, feedback boxes, public complaint commissions and the likes, and endeavor to make life easier for them for only then will there be peace in the Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study did not look at Nigeria political culture as a process where regimes change and new regime comes into power. Rather, it looked at the topic as a situation whereby citizens of Nigeria adapt to the harsh living conditions political leaders make them go through. They have so gotten used to the harshness that whenever there is an election, majority of the electorate do not bother to guard their votes

because it is expected to be business as usual. However, literary writers with the use of satire, expose these anomalies to enlighten the masses and encourage them to protect their country while also letting the leaders know that the people are watching. This is done with the hope that the leaders will change if these leaders read these works and meditate on them, certainly there is going to be a great change.

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