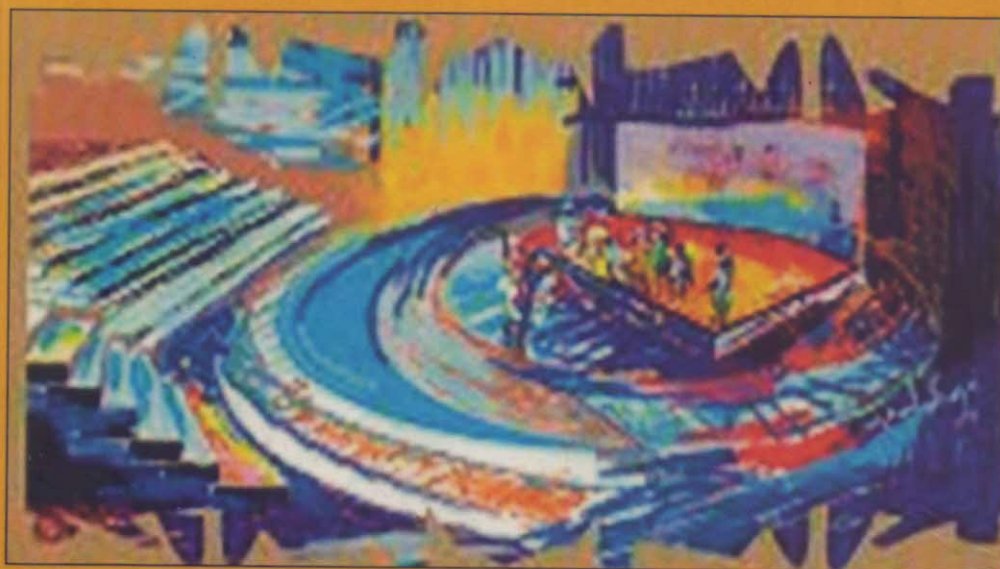


UNCOMMON ARTISTRY

UNDERSTANDING BAKARE, OJO RASAKI'S
DANCE, DRAMA AND THEATRE



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**Drama in its Social Context and the Kaleidoscope of
Oppression in Bakare's *Once Upon A Tower***

By

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Introduction

There is no gainsaying in the fact that drama has become part and parcel of the Nigerian state. This genre of literature emerged using the approach of satirising the management and managers of the Nigerian political, religious, social and economic affairs. Nigeria in its chequered history particularly since independence has witnessed diverse challenges ranging from the unfaithfulness of her leadership in the daily running of her affairs symbolised in the features of man's inhumanity to man, dog eating dog, economic failure, and the institutionalisation of corruption by the political class.

The impact of all of this, is social disintegration. In the midst of this, the writer defies what Kolawole refers to as "the depiction of society from an aesthetic distance" (Kolawole; 1994:223) and concentrates on the redemption of society from its pontificates. This in the words of Guegelberger (1989: 35), it is:

The justification of the normative prescription of the artist as conscience to society is anchored on the functional integration of the traditional African artist to his society.

The Context of Drama and Sociology

The preoccupation of drama is the value it adds to the social frame. This is not from the perspective of,

the study of audiences, nor does it by definition always involve number-crunching and file filling positivistic, or scientific, methodologies. Second, the idea that a sociological approach to performance, is defined by its reference to dramaturgical theories of society is woefully anachronistic. (Shevtsova, 2009:211)

Rather, the concept of drama and sociology promotes and enhances utilitarianism of drama in society. This hinges on the belief that art of drama ennobled, brings sanctity to society bedeviled by all kinds of social menaces resulting from the insensitivity of the leaders to the condition(s) of living of the led. The ability of drama to probe social disorders explains the affinity of literature and society. The Brechtian theory of didactic theatre concisely explains the social implications of drama. It further posits that the relationship between literature and society is expressed when:

The stage began to instruct, oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat packing industry, became subjects for theatrical portrayal. Choruses informed the audience about facts it did not know.
(1968:680)

Perhaps in a way, the sociological drama could take shelter in what is referred to as "the popular theatre and radical aesthetics (Bhadmus, 2008:231). His reference to popular theatre and radical aesthetics suggests the use of drama to discuss various issues in the social strata.

Kaleidoscope in Literature

If art were to influence society, its promotion of the aspirations of the people should be its concern. It is obvious that those aspirations are apparently impeded by certain forces. The Machiavellian paradigm might be very useful in this connection. Machiavelli identifies certain variables such as "Modern Absolution, Machiavelli's Interest, Moral Indifference, Universal Egoism and the Omnipotent Legislator" (Sabine and Thorson, 1973:311-330) as the factors inhibiting the accomplishment of people's social aspirations. We may not necessarily go into the details of the Machiavellian theory, but it suffices to sum up the same, that social contradictions are a product of individual interest aggregating in what Kolawole refers to as "the crux of leadership failure in Africa" (1994:224). According to him, this failure is inevitable when leaders could neither accurately nor faintly give account of their stewardship to their subjects, what he

refers to as the "violation of the Stewardship theory" (224). The Stewardship theory is also parallel to the Dependency and Interdependency theory in which context, certain segments of society would naturally fall into the category that rely on leadership for direction and directives which should not make them victims. By the same token, other segments are there to provide leadership which should also not make them tyrants. More often than not however, what we find in this supposed plausible interrelationship is the bastardisation of the whole framework particularly by the leadership category. This is prosecuted through kaleidoscope of methods symbolised in oppression. This kaleidoscope manifests in alienation, corruption, monopoly of all kinds, terrorism, insurgency of various types, hypocrisy, economic diversions, opportunism, etc.

In summary, kaleidoscope in literature is a deliberate attempt by the writer to expose the multi-faceted degrees of complexities in social relationships regarding the desired individual and corporate advancement.

The Kaleidoscope of Oppression in *Once Upon A Tower*

Visible in this play is oppression as a central motif upon which other issues of thematic concern are raised. *Once Upon A Tower* published in 2000 is crafted into Twelve Movements through which the playwright consciously exposes the downward trend of the social frame using the University system which was once a tower but now a thrower (destroyer) as a setting. One may wonder how versatile could the use of the University system as a platform to discuss vital social and economic problems be? But the result is soon revealed in the fact that products of the system would inadvertently become the managers of the affairs of society. Besides, as evident in the play, the University is structured in such a way that it symbolises a microcosm of the larger society. In addition, the University universally is known to be the ivory tower, the peak of learning, and learning is acquired to manage society. Hence, any default in that critical sector of social economy is the beginning of a major set-back in society as exemplified in the relationships of the characters in the play.

Pathetically, characters in these plays embody what Machavelli refers to as universal egotism as each of them failed woefully to fulfill, the needful. Six levels of conflicts are represented in the play. Each level has its intrigues resulting in the birth of a social structure falling from grace to grace metaphorised in the literal expression "Once upon a tower" (Bakare, 2000:1)

Corruption which is one of the strongest levels of the conflicts that pervaded the play, is openly associated with the VC and his team of looters. The assessment of the success of the convocation ceremony ignited by the VC himself is a further display of the negation of the supposed 'hope' of that generation. There is nothing worthy of congratulations in the convocation. The products of that episode leading to the ceremony represented by Pedro neither added any value to themselves nor society. Rather they became nuisances to and destroyers of society, in which the council members sooner or later had their own share of the nemesis.

The Emir's remarks, "I am sure he will give us another term. He will believe we are doing the job well"(7) "Doing the job well" is a metaphor to describe these characters' versatility and incongruity in looting. There is nothing inside the setting to reflect the literal doing the job well but rather all indications reflect their failure in the provision of leadership model to the incoming generation. Furthermore, the gullibility of these characters is shown in their quest for another term in office. Again, the rhetoric, "Another term to do what?" This quest for another term to perpetrate further evil receives an instant disapproval as "three hard-looking gun wielding half masked men briskly enter the office in various forms of jumps". (7 & 8) The appearance of this terrorist group showcases the climax of the conflicts in the play. Two interesting but instructive scenes are worthy of evaluation. The first is that of the celebration in the office of the VC and the second is the appearance of the terrorist group to mete judgment on the looters and to confirm that "for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians

6.7b, Holy Bible, King James Version). Let us assess the dialogue below:

- VC: What ... what for God's sake is going on here?
What are you people and what are you looking for here?
- Pedro: *Leader of gang.* You and them. But I can see the main culprit is not here – Professor Kurunbete Ijakadi the Provost of the Medical College ... and we strategically chose today and this hour for this operation ... why others not here especially the Provost – not here?
- VC: *Moves towards Pedro confidently:* Can you now leave since your target is not here?
(Maito-one of the gun men-gives the VC a powerful feet –sweep-kick from the rear.VC falls heavily. Maito places the nozzle of pistol on his ear)
- Maito: No we are not leaving Mr. VC. You will do yourself some good if you don't behave like a hero here. We are here for business. Feel this ... it is no toy (7&8)

The episode here is a complement of retributive judgement. The boys including Pedro brought up by the system rose up to fight it. That kind of fight was avoidable if the right had been done earlier. Little did the culprits know that the result of their maladministration would soon be released. The ill-treatment given to these heavy weights' by those hoodlums, validates the philosophy of the negation.

The VC and his team as the trainers of Pedro and the anonymous others were negative and not nebulous in their dealings with their students. The VC as the head of that institution all through was too indifferent for comfort in the affairs of students and staff to the point that inside his domain, he was not able to control the

excesses of the lecturers in his employment. This criminal apathy was deployed by the VC in order to give room for his trade of looting, notwithstanding the state of the students under his tutelage. The devastation he and his council members including the lecturers that were tricked into the scene by the gunmen were subjected to, was deserving. It is so, because that was a pay – back and in a more violent way. The instruction given and acted on the stage is a validation of the Brechtian archetype of didacticism.

From the middle of Movement Two to its end, the playwright with clarity of purpose cleverly makes all the major players in the misrunning of the affairs of the University have a taste of their mismanagement and this was with hardness and great psychological and physical trauma.

Another level of conflicts that is quite germane to our understanding of the intrigues in the play is the hostile relationship that existed between Professor Kurumbete and Dr. Akitkitori. The Professor who is also the Provost of the Medical College, believes in his life “provost-ship” of that arm of the institution. Besides, he sees himself as the only career gynaecologist that-ever existed and that would ever exist. He vehemently and openly resists Dr. Akititori’s ambition of becoming a gynaecologist. The Professor sees this as a threat. To forstall the realisation of Dr. Akitikori’s unexpressed ambition, the Professor puts a lot of pegs on his way with the principal being intimidation and brutalized him.

Prof.

Kurumbete: *(Addressing these members of staff who have by now, taken their seats)*

I am definitely not going to stand
akimbo and watch you rats turn
that department into lawless place.

Remember, that as the first gynaecologist
scholar and consultant this country
has produced I founded that department

when I came back from Europe after my studies ... otherwise I will make you cocky and opinionated fools, pay for your stupidity. Now good day and leave my office. (18)

The above is a display of tyranny, egoism and self aggrandisement to the full. The effects of all of the self praise in the above address were not said to promote the existence of the College, but rather were meant to perpetrate oppression and dominance over his colleagues. The sharp reaction of Dr. Akitikori to the Professor's address is the beginning of the trouble that the former had with the latter. and that negatively affected so many occurrences in the play. Indeed, the making out of Pedro as an eminent and out spoken individual has its root in this incident. Consider this again:

Akitikori: No way, if you lily-livered blokes have nothing to say, I Akitikori Ona Ofun Ogbeegun eja, have something to say. Prof. I object to your approach to this matter...But all you could do was to riot acts to us like babies, insult us, call us names and send us out of your office. (18)

One may not want to sympathise with the Prof. for receiving this kind of response from his subordiante simply because he let loose the cat from his hiding. He ought to have presented his case more maturely and decently to his professional colleagues and that would have earned him a better recipe from them. He would have behaved better than that, however, his ego got the better of him. Leadership it is said, is earned and not won. Any attempt by the Prof. to force leadership on his junior officers received further resistance.

The emergence of Professor Bola, a senior member of staff of the College brought a kind of comic relief to the whole scenario between the trio of Professor Kurumbete, Dr. Akitikori and Dr. Ugolo. As a progressive senior colleague of Dr. Akitikori,

Professor Bola fulfilled the leadership role desirable in an ideal social setting. He told Akitikori about the conference and workshop sponsorship for Mid-Level Colleagues in his area (24). This on its own brought succour to Akitikori and doused the tension that has pervaded the scenario in the play from Movement One to Four.

Unfortunately, this delight soon became a lamentation as Akitikori fell victim of a set-up of a purported rape that eventually sent him out of his job. The narrator says captures it thus,

Dr. Akitikori's office. He is marking some scripts. A knock on the door.

Akitikori: Yes come in (*Miss Julie enters. She is gorgeously dressed*).

Julie: So I decided to come in and borrow one of your books.

Akitikori: Which book is that?

Julie: Yes Sir

Akitikori: Okay (*As Akitikori stands up turns towards the self to bring the book*)
Julie grabs his trousers from behind and pulls it downwards with a great force leaving the belt and zip torn... Before Akitikori could recover, Julie had torn her own blouse and skirt as she shouts):

Julie: Hee!... everybody help..... help this man wants to rape me oo – help (etc) (35)

This was the beginning of the end of the road for Akitikori. Afterwards, the security men rough – handled him and he is thrown out of job.

Pedro confirms this as he says:

So that way, the hand that was to mould me was cut off. Akitikori was thrown out of the

University. You empty head (*Yemi*) became my major teacher and in your complexities of ignorance you taught me the nonsense that has now ruined my life (37).

The final level of conflicts through which the complexities in society are portrayed in the play is the one that featured Senator Abdul Rahaman Ikeanobi, the gluttonous, greedy and gullible father of Khadijat.

The complications found in this level of conflicts are masterminded by Senator Abdul Rahaman Ikeanobi and prosecuted by Pedro. The whole episode started with the oppressive father of Khadijat who attempted to force an husband on her against her wish. The reason behind this was purely economic.

Senator: ...You are now grown up, graduate just finishing the youth service programme. The only thing remaining, my dear is to entrust you into the hands of a capable husband.

Khadijat: (*Screams*) Daddy, save me this heartache please. You mean you are actually going ahead to force a man on me? A man I had never met?

Senator: Khadijat don't scream at your father. This man is not completely unknown to you. It is the same man I have always talked to you about, Chief Ogbuefi Alexandra Chukwuma.

Khadijat: (*Screams*). Daddy... stop it. I have told you I have made my choice (43).

The above is just a demonstration of the oppressor syndrome characteristic of the capitalist motif. Irrespective of the affinity that exists, the oppressor would always want to have his way.

The real motif behind this scenario is what Khadijat herself exposed as she says:

You lie Dad, you lie. Your insistence that I marry that fool is not to give me any quality future though that is what you have always said. But I know your real agenda (*Faces the audience*). Ladies and gentlemen please be our judge. My Dad here is the Chairman House Committee on education at the Senate. He uses his position and his party affinity with the minister to corner ninety percent of the contract awards on education matters. But because of his position as Senator he cannot operate as a contractor openly. So he uses a dummy called Chief Ogbuefi Chukwuma as a front. And they share the proceeds fifty-fifty. My father feels cheated that a mere front is collecting as much as fifty percent, but could not dislodge Ogbuefi for political and security reasons. That is why he wants me to marry Ogbuefi so that part of the fifty percent Ogbuefi collects will still recycle into my father's pocket. (44)

The above highlights the ulterior motive that informs the pursuit of Senator Abdul Rahaman. The question that often comes to mind is that in the context of the Senator, what does he want to make of all the economic accumulation. The family is sizeable enough to be run with minimal funds. Again, Khadijat, the only child whom he should work to see to her success is destroyed by the inordinate ambition of this deadly father. His uncontrolled insatiable ambition leads to the tragedy that befell Khadijat. That tragedy was unnecessary if the man was sincere even in his dealings with his only daughter.

Conclusion

We shall conclude this paper by applauding the craft of the playwright in using various literary devices to great aesthetic effect. There is a heavy deployment of musical accompaniment, particularly songs by the playwright in form of satire to catch the

attention of the audience on the need to have a proper perception of the thematic concern in the play.

Right from its take-off, Bakare introduces music to echo all the happenings in the play. The import of this music as a crucial element of culture could not, but appeal to the sensibility of the people in matters that affect them.

Once Upon a Tower is a dramatic piece that has come to be part of the band – wagon of literary tradition classified as “the popular theatre” (Bhadmus, 2008:231), whose aesthetic concern is to use drama to evoke social transformation.

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Ostensibly a thorough work on the contributions of one of the leading lights of contemporary Nigerian Theatre... the essays in this book lay before us Bakare's vision covering a wide range of subjects in dance, drama and theatre.

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