

LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

QUEST FOR HUMANE DEVELOPMENT



Editors

Oyeniya Okunoye

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**LITERATURE
AND
POPULAR CULTURE**
QUEST FOR HUMANE DEVELOPMENT

A Book in Honour of Professor Abubakar Aliyu Liman at 60

Editors
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Introduction

National identity is a broad spectrum in the discourse of identity and as such defies a singular perspective. National identity, on a general note, is a way of identifying with someone or something. It is also a means of "belonging" or "unbelonging" to a group. National identity is operationally described as a distinct sentiment one shares with a group of people notwithstanding one's status. It is a shared notion of belonging to a community of people in terms of self-perception, responsiveness, and conduct. As such, the notion of national identity is no longer in the sense of national unity but rather individual, political or ethnic affiliations. This is however, perceived as negative, especially in the light of unity and security. The complexities of its interpretation are compelling and engaging so much so that it has become narrative themes for writers, especially, playwrights who draw upon it to raise critical questions about the significance of national patriotism in times of national insecurity, conflicts and public distrusts.

Consequently, playwrights engage the idea of national identity to create awareness about the challenges of underdevelopment in the post-independent Nigeria, characterised by mismanagement, looting of government treasury, power tussle, treason, hatred, favouritism, corruption, violence, bigotry, and religious extremism among many others. Thus, successive governments in Nigeria since independence have tried to promote and foster Nigeria's national identity through cultural and economic stabilities, appropriate management of government resources and infrastructures, free and fair elections, politics, justice

and equity but to no avail. This has prompted many scholars and playwrights to interrogate these issues. For instance, Wole Soyinka in *Dance of the Forest* exposed the socio-political issues confronting Nigeria post-independence and established that Nigerian as a nation was not ready of independence. Another prominent Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi in the plays *Once upon Four Rubbers*, *Esu and the Vagabond Mistrals* to mention a few, draws attention to the level of corruption which has riddled leadership in Nigeria and indeed Africa. He emphasizes this situation where those who are elected to protect and provide for the poor turn out to be "robbers" and looters of public treasury to enrich themselves and their cronies.

Similarly, Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*, which is the primary text for this study interrogates issues of morals decadence, insecurity, religion, corruption, civilization and politics. Although disappointing, the play exposes corruption as the common denominator amongst Nigerians, rather than factors such as language, religion, culture or struggle. It is against this background that National Identity and Drama are explored in Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* using Neo-historicism as theoretical framework.

Neo-historicism, National Identity and Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*

Neo-historicism is a literary theory propounded by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980's and gained widespread influence in the 1990s, according to David Mikics (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_historicism). Michael Delahoyde opines that to understand any literary work, one needs to take cognizance of the author's social and cultural background as well as ideology (<https://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/lit.crit.html>). He notes that New Historicism seeks to:

find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. New Historicists concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a "truth" but a "cultural construct") reflected in a given work (<https://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/lit.crit.html>).

In essence, history goes beyond the records; it is presented in a multifaceted dimension of contemporary evolution of inflexible concepts. Harold Aram Veesser in his essay *The New Historicism* 1989 (xi) introduced some features for new historicism as follows:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature
5. ... that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.

For the discussion in this chapter, all the features proposed by Veesser above will be adopted in defining identity and vice versa. To this end, it may be argued that an author's social, political, and economic background are factorial influences in his or her literary representation, while a critic may interpret based on his/her assumption and perception. Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* captures the situation in Nigeria shortly after independence and how the government of the day was overthrown by the military regime and ended up in what may be described as the oppressed becoming the oppressor. To buttress this point, Osofisan's preface/introduction to *Midnight Hotel* added that Shagari's regime was:

a prelude to something far [. . .] more sinister, to a season of immeasurable pain. The soldiers came back to power, and since then it has been a steady descent into hell. Life has become precarious; death and violence stalk our every footstep. Hunger and squalor, diseases and agony are everywhere on the street. It has become a veritable struggle to stay alive and remain human" (v).

However, the democratic government was reinstituted in 1999 and many thought the military era was over. This does not mean that the military will remove their 'Khaki' and put on an 'Agbada'. In his *Midnight Hotel*, Osofisan puts:

Our politicians, coming to government after decades of military rule, had betrayed us through their recklessness and greed... many things of course are going wrong. Contentment is still a rare commodity among our people; groans and wailings are almost everywhere; squalor and disease and hunger are still rampant" (v & vi).

These political, economic and social upheavals are reflected in the historical journey of Nigeria. This is also confirmed by Osofisan: "that is our own historical burden; we must accept it, however painful, however unfair we may think it is" (vi).

Bad Leadership and Corruption as National Identity

Osofisan in his play subjects the status of national identity and institution to ridicule in order to conscientize the society and perhaps redefine the template of the nation's identity as discussed in the subthemes below. It is important to note that the playwright wrote on the situation during the first republic. However, the same issues are still prevalent in Nigeria today. Nigeria's identity has been hugely battered and now reduced to that of corruption, bad political and religious leadership. Many Nigerians who venture out of the country have lost their dignity, resulting from the negative image which events of lawlessness, dishonesty and corruption have projected to the outside world. We have government dignitaries who are involved in criminal acts of money laundry without regards to the consequences of their action. Osofisan expresses his view through "The Song of a Faraway Land" in his *Midnight Hotel* thus:

... All these leaders knew
Was to wreck the land and do such killing and
looting and dance around, and give no ear, while the people groaned
everywhere ... Oh the winners are laughing now and storing riches in
the banks abroad: ... (83-84)

Corruption has been an issue since post-independence Nigeria and is still a serious vice plaguing Nigeria today. During President Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure, Peter Odili of Rivers State and Alamiyeseigha Diepreye of Bayelsa State, both former governors, were involved in money laundering and were caught. The same "law" that caught them released them in the name of "Immunity" because

they were serving governors and therefore, "they are untouchable". Other vile activities are captured in *Midnight Hotel* especially the ones in the Parliament like bribing before contracts are awarded in kind and cash irrespective of gender, religious background and affiliations of the members of parliament. As Awero, a female member of parliament, declares to her prey who is feeling reluctant to yield to her advances,

Awero: I'm giving you a big chance by bringing you here. As the only female member of the Capital Projects Committee in the House of Assembly, I'm giving you an unfair advantage over other competitors to prove your competence. And here you are, trembling, when I am not.... I'm telling you its regular practice in parliament. All the male MPs are doing it, even to their nieces and cousins! Everyone in our Contracts and Awards Committee is taking some member of the opposite sex somewhere or the other before jobs are given out ... (22)

This exemplifies the trade-offs and corruption which go on in government by officials who are meant to cater to the needs of the people. It also vividly captures what citizens go through before getting jobs. In Nigeria, we have graduates with good grades buying jobs for thousands and millions of naira when they are expected to be offered jobs on merit. Graduates and well deserving candidates sit for examinations and/or interviews and results are switched in favour of the highest bidder. The situation has become so bad that it has become impossible for public office holders to leave office without being tainted by acts of corruption. People are no longer celebrated for holding good values but rather are seen as being odd when they decide to be good.

Politics as Investment and National Identity

Nigerian politicians have also created a perception about Nigeria's politicking as an investment, to which they reimburse themselves when they eventually get to power. This view has terribly affected national identity. As a result of this action over time, Nigerians also engage in selling their votes during elections because they believe that politicians will loot the country's treasury to reimburse themselves once they are elected into office. As such, the only opportunity to get

something from the politicians is by collecting money from them in exchange for votes during elections. This notion is depicted by Femi Osofisan in a scenario involving Awero and Suuru in *Midnight Hotel*, which led to a song rendition by the song master thus:

The world is a market place, they say
 And so is Parliament
 So don't bring us your lament unless you are willing to pay
 ... We made our own investment
 When we came to campaign
 So there's no need to bargain
 About our reimbursement" (23).

This verse explains why most of the Senate members and members of the House of Representatives in Nigeria today get constituency allowances which are diverted for their personal use. Also, most governors get their monthly allocation, and other non-statutory financial resources like distribution of excess crude account, bailout funds, disbursement of Paris Club Funds and the distribution of the Abacha loot. All these are meant to better the lives of the citizens, but politicians have rather found a new means to enrich their pockets, leaving the masses impoverished. This act most times leads to deterioration of the citizens's health and sometimes death. These candidates have a "dream as messiah" to come into power to end the people's hardship, as the "Song of Mister Stupid" by Osofisan puts it:

Mister Stupid, he had a
 dream Elections were
 coming...
 ... He would be the light to his land:
 Where the poor folks lived
 He would go and sing his song
 He would bring hope, bright delight,
 And chase away the terror of night ... (50)

Seeing the sliver of hope from various campaigns from these politicians, the electorates feel they have gotten one of theirs to relieve them of their burden "but

alas! ... He went to a loser's lane" (50) as Osofisan describes the situation. The fact still remains that these politicians from the grassroots are elected from their various zones as trusted representatives who will at least help in improving their living conditions. These sets of politicians get the votes of their constituents but after getting to power, they change their attitude in favour of their class only. Furthermore, our politicians have made their political seat a monarchical system of government, where after their elongated tenures they plant their sons, daughters and blood relatives and afterwards they themselves become godfathers who control "who is to be" and "how long a person is to be in office". Alatise thought his integrity as a one-time Head Master and proprietor of Paulinus Grammar School would earn him his election success. Little did he know that he was not popular because he did not spend recklessly as the other candidates did; so the election was rigged. He expresses his regret in these lines thus:

Alatise: "... No wonder I lost. Ignorance is a far more widespread disease than I imagined". "... Well, my friend, I can't say I blame you. You were obviously born into it A dog may be well fed on rice and *garri*, but bones are still its favourite food!" (41).

This implies that the masses will hardly change their mindset about how elections should be conducted in our society. Despite all the campaigns and awareness about the dangers of votes selling, people still indulge in it because of the level of poverty that has become customary in the land. The politicians know this is viral and use it as a potent weapon against the electorates who do not have a choice but to succumb in order just to survive, thereby undermining their future.

Election Rigging as National Identity

Rigging of election is one of the most critical challenges facing democracy in Nigeria today. It is fascinating to note that this situation has persisted since the first republic. Osofisan captures this succinctly in his introduction to the play *Midnight Hotel* thus:

When I first wrote the play, during the last days of Shagari's civilian government, the country was not bitter yet. Our politicians, coming into government after decades of military rule, had betrayed us through their recklessness and greed; ... A new and better dispensation, we believed, was coming ... However, we were wrong. Those Shagari days were only a prelude to something far more sinister, to a season of immeasurable pain. ... Life has become precarious; death and violence stalk our every footstep. Hunger and squalor, diseases and agony are everywhere on the street. It has become a veritable struggle to stay alive, and remain human (v).

If as at 1970's and 80's Nigerians experienced these from one system of government to another, then, it means the corruption has become systemic and a drastic change needs to take place. It is so painful to say that since the inception of the current democratic system we are operating in Nigeria, elections have been so unfairly conducted either by the electoral commission or the candidates. It is either there are incidents of ballot box snatching, killing, insufficient election materials or election rigging. Alatisi puts it clearly that his election was rigged despite his "resounding speeches" (40); he also declares himself as "... defeated Gubernatorial candidate- defeated through rigging, mind you!" (40). However, this deliberate act of rigging is obvious in Africa and most especially in Nigeria but not only common to the black continents but all over the world.

Political Blackmail and Sabotage as National Identity

Blackmailing is a common tool used by the opposition party to misrepresent the public image and progress of the rival candidates. In the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, the All-Progressive Congress came up with a lot of stories to falsify the People's Democratic Party's Candidate and vice versa. This amounts to bringing up issues that were not relevant. For instance, Atiku's ancestral link was traced down to Cameroon, a neighbouring country to Nigeria. All these were done just to create distractions. Suddenly, the incumbent president was said to have not met the requirement to be President of Nigeria; and this was traced to the secondary school where he took his O'Level examination, the results of which were said to have been fake. Former president Olusegun Obasanjo was said to have his lineage traced to Cote d'Ivoire. These are some among many of the

issues of political blackmail which are experienced in Nigeria. In our primary text, *Midnight Hotel*, Awero tells Suuru about her plans to blackmail him because she sees that all the tactics employed to put the pastor down proved abortive:

Awero: what took you so long, you imbecile! You clumsy fool! By now, in Parliament, we could have passed six bills! My whole life is ruined, all because of you!

Suuru: what? (*He stands dumbfounded*) ... (*Recovering*) Is this a joke Awero? Or you've forgotten that you planned this whole trip?

Awero: You aren't ashamed of yourself? Me, the wife of your friend. Luring me to a hotel because of a lousy contract! All because [...] my husband's away! (61)

All these antics are just to make the pastor fall into her trap and to use it against him. These tactics are common with those who seek favour or pleasure with somebody or something but cannot get it; they device a means to get it at all costs. No one would have believed Awero brought the pastor to the hotel for a pleasure of one night; rather the reverse appeared to the case, because she tricked him.

Insecurity and Insurgency as National Identity

It is no news that the globe is in war and insecurity has become the order of the day. Fear of the unknown inhabits every human's heart as mutual suspicion holds sway. Ironically, the security agencies are supposed to guard and guide but they raid, maltreat, destroy property and violate the innocent masses while we put our lives in their hands. Osofisan exposes some of their despicable acts in *Midnight Hotel* where Alatisé's girls ran up to the soldiers room in fear and thinking they will be secure, seeing they were security men; instead, they were defiled and exposed to the harsh world deceiving them with material things as they were vulnerable. In Bose's words, "the soldier, he was so kind! Papa, how easy it is to earn money in the city! We should have come long ago!" (79).

The Vulnerability of Women as National Identity

Women are often referred to as weaker vessels therefore, prone to be victims of most violations and exploitation. It is so unfortunate that most women now use this vulnerability as a tool to commercialize their sexuality as Jimoh puts it: "sex is the best commerce in this city" (80). Jimoh also describes the escapades of sophisticated women in the urban settlement in his words:

Jimoh: ...This is Lagos, man, and in Lagos, sex is business!
Quarter-naked women, halfnaked women, fully naked
women, women about to be naked; women who have
always been naked; women who will die naked – all is
money in this city! Big money! ... (12)

Osofisan also expounds their adventures thus:

Lagos Women, ...
She knows where the oil boom goes
But she'll never tell, oh no
...She goes to Europe frequently
And when she comes down from the skies
The men of Customs prudently
They turn away their probing eyes
...She goes to social occasions
Her arms and feet all draped in gold
Her skin of strange
pigmentations She
has her lovers'
manifold ...But
she'll never tell, oh
no,
That the price was paid, you know
For this superb parade
In a little escapade
At midnight hotel
For that is where the oil boom goes (13 & 14)

These excerpts illustrate what some women do with their bodies, trading beauty for sex and material possessions. It further explains what and how most men deposit their loot and lavish it on strange women. Most men see women as pets or items of luxury and relaxation and will empty their accounts just to have a taste of them. What is viewed as national identity in women's vulnerability is the fact that when a woman calls for help, she gets the response of "what can you offer too?" It is quite unfortunate that in recent times, most women will even offer their bodies as payments even before any man asks.

Thus, Femi Osofisan's use of hotel as the setting of his play serves as a metaphor for the Nigerian society. This is because the hotel serves as a melting pot for all kinds of people and cultures. People with different intentions good and bad all come and go from a hotel. As such, it presents a perfect metaphor for x-raying the moral failure and social corruption in the Nigerian society, where laws are relaxed, where corruption and evil deeds have become a source of livelihood and where bad conduct is rewarded publicly with political appointments. Also, a part of the title of the play "Midnight", symbolizes the evil, and deception inherent in human nature and the time when these activities are carried out.

Conclusion

National identity is understood to be the sense of belonging to one state or to one nation governed by the ensembles of laws and institutions that protect the members. But in our case, the distinctive ensembles that bind us as a nation are corruption and unpatriotic nature of the citizens, which have historical antecedents. This is not a thing of national pride. To this end, Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* raises consciousness about the significance of national patriotism and challenges the postcolonial legacies of individualism that characterize independent, communal Nigeria, thus:

We'll chase these exploiters, the
people said: But look at who they put
in their place! ...
A once-familiar time
That thugs came to power
And the people lost their rights

The concept of national identity and How Nigerian identity can be restored in every administration" retrieved from <https://www.grossarchive.com> on the 27 July, 2019.

Veesser, H. Aram (ed.). *The New Historicism: Introduction*, p. xi. Chicago: Routledge, 1989.