

Social Dysfunctionality and Satirical Reflection in Ahmed Yerima's Selected Plays

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Abstract

The social relevance of drama cannot be undermined in the quest for an ideal society. Perhaps, the perception of a layman to drama may be sacrosanct on entertainment; however the functionality of drama transcends beyond entertainment owing to its usage in disseminating information. While drama is a means of education especially on socio-political and cultural issues concerning the inhabitants of a society, it also provides analytical skills to correct societal ills. It is noteworthy that playwrights in Nigeria and by extension Africa are using their plays to question social anomalies in their societies with the view at advocating for a sane society. They have assume the role of social commentator in uncovering and attacking social offenders hence turning them to satirical butts in order to bring about a better society. To this end, the paper examines the improper social activities and relations in Ahmed Yerima's *Dami's Cross* and *Atika's Well* (2009). It also dissects the playwright's use of satire in projecting and correcting the inherent social abnormalities or atrocities in the plays.

Introduction

Starting from Aristophanes' *The Clouds* written in 423 B.C, *The Warps* in 422 B.C, to the works of Horace and Juvenal, George Orwell, Chinua Achebe, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima amongst other writers, drama is seen as a means of shaping the society through its satirical engagement. This enlightens people and make most of them act accordingly as it engages the peoples' sensibilities to see the dangers involved in greed, dictatorship, wastefulness, stinginess, racism, corruption, and materialism. Satire as a technique employed by writers is used to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society. While the main aim of satire is to criticize and ridicule the society, it is also create an avenue through which the societal civilization is not threatened. As it is, satire can be regarded as one of the most effective source to understand a society through its engagement in social criticism. This is mirrored in Ngugi (1993, p.56) that

Satire takes, for its province, a whole society and for its purpose, criticism. The satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. He invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to poor decision and ridicule on society's fallings. He corrects through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter.

This shows satire as an art form which is intentionally meant to ridicule and at the same time criticize the society in order to make positive changes where need be. However, satire as a literary form employs different avenues in its mode of presentation. These avenues include the use of humour, allegory, caricature, burlesque, parody, farce, lampoon, irony, exaggeration and sarcasm as the case may be. While sarcasm is seen and taken as the most effective mode of satire due to its biting and cutting expression, it also gives a bitter scorn or taunt directly on the subject of discourse. This corresponds with Ivins (1996, p.34) that 'satire is traditionally the weapon of the powerless against the powerful'. While satire has dramatically developed into an advanced

form of literature, it is still contributing immensely to the correction of societal ills and imperfection through its subtle means of ridiculing. Little wonder Ahmed Yerima in an interview with Adeoti (2010, p.121) sees that to experience any form of social change, 'a new playwright must look at his society, in fact he must not think locally, he must look at issues, how they affect politics and he must relate them to world politics. . . a play is not supposed to find a solution, but it must suggest alternative ways'. This shows Yerima as a playwright who observes that he upcoming artists/dramatists must write plays that center on the Nigerian political issues in order to educate and provoke people that will create the positive social changes needed. Nevertheless, the function of satire is endless but this paper takes the listed below as the important ones that makes up a satirical play

- i. Satire reflects on the society
- ii. Satire mirrors the society
- iii. Satire inspires and educates the society
- iv. Satire creates a perspective change through understanding the flaw of a person
- v. Satire exposes injustices at various level of the society
- vi. Satire reveals hypocrisy of an individual or a society
- vii. Satire promotes collaborative efforts of the society
- viii. Satire persuades people to make corrections where need be
- ix. Satire helps in the change of policy(ies), such as government policies
- x. Satires speaks to peoples' conscience for reflection

However, this paper analyses two works, *Dami's Cross* (2009) and *Atika's Well* (2009) of Ahmed Yerima in order to bring out the functions of a playwright as a satirist.

Literature review

The relationship between art and the society cannot be ignored in the field of theatre sociology. Considering the saying that 'art is society and society is art', this study becomes imperative. This implies that drama either as a dramatic text or performance cannot be separated from the society because the content and context are products from the society. Drama is used to represent the happenings, events and activities of the society that produces it. Aristotle in his *Poetics* contends that 'drama is an imitation of action'. Atanda (2013, p.440) shares this view, noting that "drama mirrors what goes on in the society. Drama is action. This mimetic action as an imitation or representation is a replica of human attitude, even in its abstract form". It is obvious from the foregoing that human action or attitude is not happening in and from a vacuum rather it is influenced by the society.

In his assessment of the function of theatre in a society, Arinde (2012, p.137) observes that "theatre...enacts peoples' way of life and the response of the people to the phenomenon within their environment as well as examination of social behavioural pattern of the people in the society". While adding his voice, Obafemi (2001, p) notes "the role of the artist, apart from the obvious one of entertainment, is to dedicate himself at whatever risk to his person to unbridled truth and satirisation of social ills". Obafemi's perception dovetails into challenging the playwrights to use their plays in correcting social wrongs bedeviling the presence of a sane society. These amongst others include killing, rituals, corruption, exploitation, oppression, kidnapping and armed robbery. It also subsumes issues concerning moral decadence, economic oppression and cultural barbarism. It is therefore no news in the Nigeria theatrical sphere that some playwrights are regarded as socially committed artists. They are referred to as functionalist playwrights because their agenda is using their plays to project and address social vices with a

view at bringing about better environment for all citizenry. However, their approach is divide into two; critical realism and social realism. Critical realism means the social vices is projected without a solution while Social realism uncovers social ills with a solution which is usually the revolutionary approach. Consequently, our concern is not on Marxist ideology but the use of drama for unveiling and correcting social atrocities that are serving as deterrent to viable human society. The playwrights of the functionalist school agree with Bamidele (2001, p.28) that they must not:

Keep silent when all around (them they) hear society that in its hour of crisis all of its elements should justify themselves by their works. Therefore, to respond and to justify that art in times of society can contribute to great social concern of managing the world; the artists sometimes see their role as that of political leaders or leaders of opinion or that of a seer, a priest and a hero.

Either a critical analysis places a dramatic text in functional school or not, one fact remains sacrosanct that every plays especially Africa plays have their social functions which could be cultural or political. Zerbo cited in Idachaba (2008, p.21) observes that;

African art has never been art for art sake. It is for the most functional art. An art that was part of the principal arts works of the society, that has its aim and objective, the augmentation of the vitality and potential strength of the social body. It has for example been said that African art is utilitarian.

In this regard Atanda (2013, p.439) adds "the societal function of an artist is premised on their works, what they think, what they say and the perceptible influence of their works on the society and mass people".

Consequently, in order to dramatise the social wrongs, playwrights adopt various dramatic techniques in projecting and correcting the social offenders and victims. Usually, the genre of comedy and satire are employed which best serve the vision of the playwright towards the play. Satire is an offshoot of comedy used to ridicule and criticize a behavioral pattern with the use of humour while comedy is to chastise human behavior with the aim to amuse them. Therefore, playwrights have dexterously employed satirical humour in propagating for a sane society. In his exploration of Osofisan's dramatic technique in the chattering and the song, Otafemi (2001, p.184) says that:

An important element of dramatic technique in the play is the use of satirical humour which characterizes all the actions and dialogues. Osofisan draws from the great sense of humour of the Yoruba to build his play. But beneath this humorous surface is a strong undertone of serious and compelling instruction, a scintilla of truth inject into the audience bloodstream.

The above explains that Osofisan adopts humour which is an element of satire to criticize the satirical butts without failing to pass across the message of the play to the audience or readers alike. He also added that Ogunde uses his art to inform as well as expose deviant behavior in the society in an entertainment fashion (p.37). Agreeably, Ogunde through his theatre uses satirical approach to question and correct anti social issues. Prominent among his theatrical exploitation in this regard is *Yoruba Ronu* (1965) which was used to sensitize the then feuding Yoruba leaders Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Chief Ladoke Akintola over the affairs of the western region. The play was premiered in the presence of Akintola, the then premier of the western region who however felt offended with the content of the play hence ban the play for public

consumption. As a result, is it glaring that drama is a vital tool in condemning and correcting cavalier attitudes which are plaguing the peaceful coexistence in the society.

Yerima on Satire and the Nigerian Society in *Dami's Cross*

The play *Dami's Cross* is a satire whereby thematic thrust hinges on corruption and socio-political issues. Yerima analyses the political and societal ills in the Nigerian society which includes; power struggle, corruption, bribery, insensitivity of Nigerian leaders to the plight of the citizens, prostitution, betrayal, injustice etc. While Yerima's plays have been classified into historical plays, social plays and religious plays, all these classifications revolves round the society to advocate for the commoners who lack political or social power. This falls in line with Ikechukwu (2013, p.1) assertion that

Writer has metamorphosed into a visionary, a soldier, an agent of social change, using his writing as a weapon. . . . transforming their society and its conditions, arousing men from their apathy and servile sentence, delivering them from the shackles of enslaving tradition, religion, dogmatism and political dictatorship, . . . raising their ideals like a banner, like a light for the people , and pulls of a revolutionary change, that leaves society wiser and progressive.

Society is constantly changing which necessitate the need to educate people to fight against corruption and any form of injustice that might hinder the progress of a society. This is one of the reasons that playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Ahmed Yerima, AbdulRasheed Adeoye, etc are writing to reveal the social vices that need to be corrected. However, the two works of Yerima under analysis reveal Musa (2002, p.46) observation that a 'playwright is a creative artist who is often guided by inspiration or the environmental condition of his society to write'. Yerima uses his works to awaken the peoples' consciousness in order to liberate them. While literature may differ from one society to the other, the function of literature remains the same. This reflects the culture of people, its good and bad,

hopes and downfalls, its problems and aspirations which lingers on to make the society move on. Nevertheless, the issue of social change and social crises are two major things Yerima does not treat with levity in his works.

In *Dami's Cross*, Yerima presents Dami as a character with greed and self-gratification who sells the community land not putting into cognizance what other citizens feel and how it will affect them. Ironically, Yerima allows Dami to make good money from the sold land but did not live to enjoy the wealth he accumulates from his avarice nature. As Dami sells off the land and his people are dislocated, Yerima reveals Government's indifferent nature to displaced people while referring to Gbagyi people who are the original owners of Abuja land that has become one of the most beautiful places in Nigeria of today. In the text's author's note (2009), Yerima notes he uses the play to ask and analyse what plans government have for the original owners of the Abuja city land, how the Gbagyis handle the coming of the new strangers, how the strangers affect their everyday lives, their beliefs, their sensibilities and their persons and how both parties are relating to the rapid changing world. To answer one of the above questions is the comment of Santu who describes her new boss with the following

SANTU: Too much book can fatten a woman. They call her Doctor. Not of people, injections and black buttocks, but of books. Big round spectacle, with her little, tiny, biddy eyes. No Gbagyi woman will look like that in a thousand years. Not with all the yam pounding, pepper grinding, earth digging. . . not to talk of the men climbing. . . and child backing. . . (p.10)

The female academic to the Gbagyi women is seen as an alien who needs to trim down her stature, take part in lots of domestic works and reproductive actions. Apart from the feminist view which is noted in the play, the need for women to come together is needed, the need to take part in politics is important for them to contribute their own quota to a society that breeds them.

Sequel to the revelation, the family had empowered Atika to avenge his death. They perform the ritual of the act of vengeance to destroy his killers. However, the revelation makes them criticize their action, believing that his death is well deserved. Interestingly, the playwright through the characters of Idapa and Daggu ridicules the irrational decision and action Africans make when mysterious death occurs in their family. In most cases, there is no serious investigation before empowering the dead to avenge his death. Atika uncles blame their action and mock him after recognizing the truth:

Idapa: I see our foolish, dead son chewing a mournful of rubbish, thinking it is good food. *Heeyah!* I see the gods jeering and laughing. He should have stayed where the gods placed him. Now, see how twisted, trampled and muffled his disjointed face looks. Even in the land of the dead, it is like his stay on earth, he plays the fool ... the self-acclaimed jester. *Hoosha!*

Daggu: May the gods forgive us ... I think we gave the wrong man the cutlass of vengeance, we should have given him a cake of black soap to cleanse himself first. Oh, where is Otibaba? Let him hurry, we need to sweep this place clean ... it stinks (p.88)

Meanwhile, the visit of Otibaba, the priest of death unveils other social vices imbibed by the deceased which contributes to his death. Atika defies moral values which are situated in the society. He rapes his cousin Ruka who eventually gives birth to a set of twins. He however takes an oath with her to keep the issue a secret, pledging that he will ensure the well being of Ruka and the twins. But after building a new house rejected her and the twins. Ruka however alleged of his death but she denies the allegation.

Ruka: I did not kill him, father, I swear, my hands are clean.

Otibaba: But you made offerings at the shrine of the river goddess and urged her to kill him.

Ruka: No. I urged her to avenge my pains.

Otibaba: Your pains?

Ruka: He raped me. Then, asked me to keep quiet about the incident. We took an oath of secrecy by the river and invited the river goddess, Ole, to be witness to our oath. He promised to love me till death and take care of our sons. On my part, I was never to tell anyone the truth. Then ... he went and married ... and he said he did not want my children and me around him anymore (p.94)

Deducing from the above, it is glaring that Atika and Ruka are social criminals. Firstly, Atika rapes her: an act that is known as incest which is however abominable in many African societies. Secondly, Ruka also projects herself as a culprit for taking an oath to keep such a taboo a secret. This means if Atika had not treated her bad coupled with his death the truth might not be discovered. Consequently, the conversation between Ruka and Odede subtly reveals her personality. Odede reprimands her for getting pregnant out of wedlock. She speaks of her disgust to Ruka waywardness and uncaring behaviour using language with satirical undertone.

Odede: Foolish children. That is what you both are. Having children as if the new times and its hardship make no meaning to you. Stupid children. Ruka, you are a good girl. My favourite niece but the way you open your thighs at smile of each man, breaks my heart. Like your mother you live on dreams. See what happens to her. My brother Dagu, your father cries each day. When he was sick to the point of death, no one knew where you were. I am sure you were. I am sure it was in the warmth of one of your faceless lovers (p.66-67)

According to Ezenwanebe (2008, p.201), Africa artists are very much interested in the preservation of Africa culture. However, Yerima through this play exposes some practices in Africa that are barbaric such as the ritual for the act of vengeance as performed by Atika family which tends to take innocent lives if not for Otibaba's intervention. The playwright also dramatically exposes the effect of curses, a feared phenomenon even in contemporary times among Africans. It is a spiritual means of punishing offenders in the society. However, some people adopt it to punish their perceived enemies even when such person does not hurt them.

According to professor Adeoye Lambo cited in Obafemi (2001, p.208), in his psychiatric practice in Nigeria discovers that spells, curses and incantations have been the genesis of much

serious psychological disturbance in individuals necessitating some psychotherapeutic measures. Similarly, in the Yoruba world-view, it is believed that a mother must not use a curse against her offspring because such curse will definitely come to pass. It is no news that most mothers in Africa especially in the southern part of the country, curse their children for committing any mistake or offence which they can easily correct via other means. Yerima therefore makes a copious example of this abnormality through Odede who curses Atika after evicting her from his newly built house for alleged witchcraft. Dagù explains thus:

... I warned her but she did not listen. A mother does not use her mouth to curse her own child. She forgot their blood is still mixed even after the cord has been cut. But one little incident our sister would curse. This reminds me of my mother. She would say that she was afraid to say one bad word to a child because when evil spirit passed at that moment, they took such curses to the evil god (p.83)

But after Atika's death she accuses people of killing her son forgetting her irrational action by cursing him on the grave of her husband. After the ritual of vengeance her brothers ask if she is involved in Atika's death but she claims to be innocent. To prove her innocence, she almost turns herself naked only for Dagù and Idapa who prevent her from another feigned curse. However, despite her actions Otibaba pronounces her as a culprit:

Otibaba: Now, your sister. Where is she?

Dagù: She ran to the river. We ... we fear she may lose her mind.

Otibaba: She will be alright. But ... she ...

Dagù: Had a hand in our son's death?

Otibaba: Yes. She cursed him. He hurt her and she went to grave of her husband and cursed him. Oh woman ... she let her anger take over and she awakened the wrath of the dead.

Idapa: Did that kill him?

Otibaba: No. The father's spirit took pity on him when he found too many hands on his neck already. Yes. A growing baby calabash bends his neck to show the palm

wine tapper to tie the rope, but Atika had a big fat neck full of contours and curves and he bent it too low for all to tie their noose (p.92)

Otibaba discloses that Atika's death cannot be associated to an individual but many people who he has offended through his heinous actions. However, Ahmed Yerima uses the characters in the play to question some other behaviours that are perceived as deterrent to the social wellbeing and relations in the society. The characters ridicule and criticise one another as a way of showing their disapproval for their actions which in one way or the other have adverse effect on them. The playwright brings to fore issues like abandonment, adultery, looting and exploitation. It is a popular in African society for children to abandon their parents. Therefore, they become beggars on the street. We have seen situations whereby children abandon their parents in most cases the mother saying she is a witch. This also makes family members and relatives to avoid associating with the woman. However, after her death, those abandoned her will emerge for burial ceremony. Ahmed Yerima therefore portrays the issue but in another dimension. Odede suffers similar abandonment therefore she says this after Atika's death.

Odede: My son dies, and I become the love of everyone. Now, people care about where I will sleep and what I will eat. Soon, they will care about how much longer I will live.

Ruka: You are our grandmother. The heartbeat of this family. Surely, we must take care of you.

Odede: The way you did when Atika urged by his beautiful queen, sent me out of this house.

Also, Odede ridicules the sacred visitors who according to the tradition must visit the deceased house to perform rituals and also feast. But Odede sees them as nothing but hungry people who under the disguise of tradition exploit them. She shows her detest thus:

Odede: What else can they do? Hungry vultures, all of them. Pot-bellied vultures. See how they have eaten all the food, the fattest of my son's goat, with the stupid excuse that my son died. Vultures!

Ruka: Ha! Odede ... you speak bad of the sacred ones ...

Odede: Sacred ones my foot ... they take instead of giving (p.63)

Through Odede, the playwright is of the opinion that family of the deceased should be giving moral, social and economic support rather than disempowering them as the case of some traditional dictations. As a matter of fact, Islam also preaches that the deceased family should be empowered financially in order to belittle their mind against their loss. This will make them happy and also brings about peaceful coexistence and foster relationship between them and the people in their community.

Conclusion

Yerima's plays are satirically crafted to present the hypocrisy, dubious, corruption, greed, inhuman nature of men who care less of others in a society that ought to belong to all. The two analysed plays reveal the individuals who are self-centred with no regard for their fellow men. Therefore, this study concludes that it is expected of playwright to assume the role of a social commentator in correcting social abnormalities in the engagements of the people towards one another and the society at large. This means the role of playwrights in the society according to Augusto Boal cited in Nnenyelike (2012, p.108), "is pedagogical because they engage in intellectual and imaginative construction, recollection and portrayal of their societies". From the foregoing, it is apparent that the playwrights must be aware that their responsibility is beyond using the play as a form entertainment but to educate and instruct on the events and issues in their domain.

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